Sabrina Zirkle

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DH Project Story

The Value of Creating an Improved Digitized Geneva Bible

Examining several of the most popular digitized versions of the Geneva Bible reveals the ample room to use the techniques of digital humanities (DH) to create a more robust and meaningful exploration of the text. This work speaks to issues of religious freedom, the English Civil War, Protestant Reformation, and the development of anti-monarchal sentiment in British culture. Because the commentary and historical context of the work holds a central place in its value to the literary canon, it could be intellectually rewarding to create a reading experience in which the commentary, context, and textual body are more closely linked. Improving the quality, functionality, accessibility, and user experience of the Geneva Bible would help readers create new scholarship and better understandings of the impact of this work.

During the 1560s and 70s, a group of men living in Geneva under John Calvin's society worked together to create a translation of and commentary on the Bible in English. The authors strived to create an accessible Scripture for the English people (Danner, 8, 11) and promote their Reformed, Calvinistic theology. Calvinism emphasizes the depravity of mankind, the role of Jesus's mercy in personal salvation, and the importance of doing good works as a sign of being chosen by God. As Marian exiles and refugees fled persecution for their beliefs, the authors drew parallels with the nation of Israel's struggles in the Old Testament and their current plight (Danner, 5, 14).

Additionally, a major goal of the Geneva Bible aimed to instruct Elizabeth toward godliness in her role as an enlightened monarch (Danner, 14). Yet James I and even Elizabeth herself disliked the translation, believing it to be too seditious in tone and (Fulton, 488). According to the Geneva Bible's commentary on Micah, the authors believed "the best condition of the people, when they can choose, by common consent, their own shepherds; for when any one by force usurps the supreme power, it is tyranny” (Calvin, note 149). Many Puritans, including those who immigrated to the Massachusetts Bay colony, also used this Geneva version. During the English Civil War (Serak), Cromwell's soldiers received pocket Bibles that derived its materials from all but one of the texts from this translation. Although the King James Bible reigned by the end of the 17th century in English culture, textual research suggests that about 19 percent of the KJV is derived from the text of the Geneva Bible (Serak).

Despite the relevance and importane of the work, most digital versions have shortcomings, including the ones offered through the [EEBO](https://search.proquest.com/eebo). They feature multiple versions of hard-to-read scanned PDFs of the old documents uploaded directly to the database. One website actually entitled the [Geneva Bible](https://genevabible.com/) only has a text-based document with no hyperlinks, navigation, additional resources, or a user-friendly way to read the commentary. The [Internet Archive](https://archive.org/details/TheGenevaBible1560/page/n1) has the best edition, but it is still lacking in features that are beyond a basic PDF-reader program. There have been attempts in the past to create a strong textual resource of the Geneva Bible, but it appears that the [project](https://blog.logos.com/2013/06/the-geneva-bible-is-coming-soon-to-logos/) failed due to a lack of resources.

After examining the current situation of the digital manuscripts, I propose several improvements that could be made in accordance with DH principles. First, a critical edition of the text ought to include historical and social context to explain the factors that influenced the translation process from Hebrew and Greek. Digital Humanities can help readers practice close reading by employing tools that excavate meaning through the careful analysis of word choice, grammar, context, recognition of literary devices, and references (Burdrick, et al., 39). For example, James 2:6 includes the phrase "by tyranny", a phrase not found in the King James Version or in more modern translations. This piece of information would be worth including into a critical edition because it changes what the verse means in relation to other texts. Both Calvin and the Geneva Bible's major authors, Whittingham and Anthony, incorporated their concerns about governmental tyranny into their various writings (Danner 13). Knowing about the political climate of the mid 1500s can help readers understand how the text relates to other literature and philosophies of its era.

Secondly, creating critical editions of texts has always been a goal of humanities studies, and today's versions can portray any possible ambiguities and differences of opinion on the subject through the use of technology (Burdrick, et al., 35). Using a critically digitized text would allow for the integration and comparison between the manuscript with other texts, such as the KJV Bible or John Calvin's personal writings. It would be insightful to see to what extend the authors' and the Calvin's theological viewpoints differ. While textual analysis programs excel at finding large-scale patterns, the indicated patterns may or may not contain significance (Rommel). Therefore, DH scholars still have a responsibility to evaluate the results of such an analyasis.

While the general revolutionary tone of the work has already been observed, DH tools like sentiment analysis could be employed to highlight specific sentences that fit into this broader theme. Sentiment analysis, also called opinion mining, is a natural language processing function that can detect how the author feels about a particular subject. It can differentiate between subjective and objective phrases, explicit verses implicit opinions, and positive verses negative connotations (Sajid). However, ensuring that the program uses parameters that scholars can agree upon will facilitate better outcomes. When people perform sentiment analysis manually, they only agree on the sentiment of a piece of text about 60 to 65 percent of the time (Sajid). Perhaps an opinion mining program could be useful in standardizing criteria for a sentiment, but it could also obscure the diversity of interpretations on a text. Either way, running sentiment analyses on its body text and co-textual documenters could offer quantitative perspectives to complement existing scholarship.

Another goal for creating an updated, more robust textual version of the Geneva Bible includes improving user experience through techniques like hyperlinking and improving the integration of the commentary with the main text. Few, if any, of the most common versions that I observed used hyperlinks and simply listed where one could go find the reference. Since the Bible will often refer back to earlier portions of its own contents, incorporating links to other appearances of phrase could facilitate a smoother navigational flow. Digital humanities excels at the tagging of intertextual items such as people, places, themes, and other occurrences while displaying textual nuances and explaining how something relates to other texts (Burdrick, et al. 36).

For the Geneva Bible, the electrically charged and controversial nature of the commentary is one of the main reasons it retains its relevance to our body of literature. Most literary works are more than just a series of verbal statements and include notes, prefaces, or illustrations (Manning). By integrating the commentary more closely with the text, whether through an optimized page layout, hyperlinks, or other digital strategy, readers could get more quickly to the information they find valuable to their analysis. Organizing and tagging the text of the commentary through computational means could also help researchers observe and analyze what the authors thought about a particular issue, such as predestination, good works, or the love of God.

Finally, a strong DH version of the Geneva Bible ought to find a way to capture the material features of the original copies without sacrificing the readability and accessibility of the text. Since the format in which a message is delivered impacts its meaning, having the option to toggle between an easy-to-read and a more authentic page design might be useful. The presence of letters like the long "s" and other archaic typefaces can slow down a reader (Stower, 53). While using modern, digital-friendly fonts can get a user to the analysis and interpretation of a text more quickly, there is something to be said about retaining the look and feel of the original version that places the work more firmly within its historical context.

By using DH techniques, practitioners can create a more integrated, navigable, and research-friendly version of the Geneva Bible through the use of hyperlinks, digital layouts, searchable text, historical context features, and sentiment analysis. The features that make the text unique and valuable, such as the commentary and alternative translations from Greek and Hebrew, will be easier to observe, analyze, and interpret. A richer version created with users in mind could improve how we think about this work and how it impacted important moments in Western history.

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