

# The Jews Rejected and the Gentiles Received: Anti-Semitic Attitudes in the Geneva Bible, with Particular Reference to Matthew

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## Introduction

The study Bible that sits on my desk is a heavy volume. Alongside the biblical texts it holds a wealth of supplementary information: maps, diagrams, articles, footnotes, marginalia, parallel scripture references, and so on. The publisher claims that this study Bible will answer ‘the how, why, and what of the Bible’ and states that the *New International Version* constitutes ‘today’s most read, most trusted modern English translation.’<sup>1</sup> These twenty-first century marketing claims have clearly evolved from the opening pages of the Geneva Bible of the English Renaissance. The Geneva Bible, we read, has been: ‘Translated according to the Ebrue and Greke, and conferred with the best translations in diuers languages. With most profitable annotations upon all the hard places, and other things of great importance.’<sup>2</sup>

The Geneva Bible, being, as McGrath describes: ‘the Bible of choice for English-speaking Protestants,’<sup>3</sup> in many ways, became the blueprint for future translations and editions of the Bible. Its success was largely due to its innovative design. For example it was the first English Bible to utilize numbered verses that were clearly set out on the page, and also the first Bible to use italics to indicate the text that translators had added for the purpose of rendering a clear interpretation in the English vernacular idiom. Perhaps the most striking feature of the Geneva Bible however lies in its inclusion of marginalia, annotations, maps, and so on, designed to aid the reader’s Bible study and thereby facilitate the reader’s personal relationship with God, thus promoting an ideal which was central to Reformation thinking. But the annotations do much more than shed light upon the ‘hard places’; they also elucidate the annotator’s Calvinistic theology, political anti-Papacy and also prejudicial anti-Semitism.<sup>4</sup>

This paper aims to examine the expression of anti-Semitic attitudes in the marginalia of the Geneva Bible. The paper falls into two parts. Part 1 briefly addresses some of the issues of anti-Semitism and examines how those issues fit within the historical framework of the Renaissance biblical tradition. Part 2 focuses on a number of texts and their annotation from the Book of Matthew, for the purpose of illustrating how anti-Semitic attitudes were expressed by the Geneva Bible

translators.

### **Part 1: Anti-Semitism in the Renaissance Biblical Tradition**

Anti-Judaism is not rooted at the center of Christian doctrine, but it was often present in Christianity's traditions. Reading what some of the Fathers of the Church-Chrysonstom, for example-say about the Jews, you can only be filled with horror.<sup>5</sup>

Jasper and Prickett describe the Bible as a 'book in exile' writing that 'not merely is it not in its original language; it is also uprooted from its original territory.'<sup>6</sup> The majority of the canonical texts are works of Jewish literature that, since their adoption into the Christian canon, have for the most part, been read and studied in languages other than their originals.

The production of the Geneva Bible during the Renaissance of the 16th Century, arose out of the Reformation belief that Holy 'Scripture was the key to faith.'<sup>7</sup> As the Bible lay at the core of Reformation theology, it became of paramount importance that there should be accurate and trustworthy Bible translations. To aid the production of vernacular translations, Reformation biblical scholarship looked beyond the Latin Vulgate to the Scriptural texts in their original languages. Greek and Hebrew scholarship thus took on increasing importance. Reformation exegetical study of the Hebrew Scriptures, however, was purposefully applied in a non-Jewish way, as Reif gives account:

The early leaders of the Reformation gave expression to their theological ideas very much by way of Biblical exegesis and when converted Jews with Hebraic insights could be joined to the cause, so much the better. If Jews remained loyal to their own rabbinic traditions, they might still be permitted to function as 'language teachers' in limited contexts but their understanding of the Old Testament was severely flawed, particularly since they rejected an essential tool for its valid interpretation, namely, the New Testament.<sup>8</sup>

Running counter to this new awareness of the importance of Hebraic Studies remained a tradition of Christian anti-Semitism and hermeneutical presuppositions that have perpetuated anti-Semitism within the Protestant Church. One such presupposition, still widely held among Christians today, assumes that the 'Old Testament' can only be properly interpreted and understood through the lens of the 'New Testament,' the 'Old Testament' being 'incomplete, insufficient without the fulfilment of Christ.'<sup>9</sup> The 'New' understood as superseding the 'Old' and ultimately Christianity superseding Judaism.<sup>10</sup>

Supersessionism refers to the Christian doctrine that Christianity has the fulfilment of Judaism, and therefore has superseded Judaism. Supersessionism has worked to dichotomise the dialectical structure of biblical prophetic thought. One commentator states with regard to biblical prophetic thought that: 'its affirmative side, of forgiveness and promise was assigned to the Christian church, while its negative side, of divine wrath and rejection, was read out against the Jews.'<sup>11</sup> Supersessionist attitudes underpin much of Christianity's anti-Semitism, which, throughout its history, has manifested itself in some horrific events. Anti-Semitism has deep roots running throughout the history of Christianity and resided with particular prevalence amid Medieval Christendom, when: 'the image of the Jew became increasingly negative as they were defined as the diabolical enemy of Christendom and associated with heretics, witches the minions of Antichrist, and the devil.'<sup>12</sup>

The Reformers of the 16th Century inherited this medieval image of the Jew. Indeed, Martin Luther, the most influential Reformer, theologian and Bible translator remains infamous for his racial and religious anti-Semitism. His pamphlet *Von den Juden und ihren Lügen* (On the Jews and their Lies), published in 1543,<sup>13</sup> has been described by Johnson as the 'first work of modern anti-Semitism, and a giant step forward on the road to the Holocaust.'<sup>14</sup> In the pamphlet Luther advocates the persecution of the Jews, suggesting that their synagogues and schools be burned, homes and prayerbooks destroyed, rabbis forbidden to teach, and property and money confiscated.<sup>15</sup> Luther, who had a profound influence on Tyndale and Coverdale, extended his anti-Semitic writing to ridicule rabbinic exegesis stating that: 'in their commentaries and Talmudic expositions they set forth many puerile and silly things concerned with these precious and profound matters.'<sup>16</sup>

The far-reaching influence of anti-Jewish prejudice permeated Biblical exegesis and consequently Biblical translation and interpretation. In her book *Upon the Dark Places*, Rashkow successfully demonstrates how English Renaissance biblical translators manipulate the Hebrew texts in a number of ways to encompass Christian doctrine:

Firstly, by their word choice, marginalia, annotations, and woodcuts they, provide an overlay of Christian interpretation. Capitalizing on those parts of the source text which are problematic, they infuse their new texts with Christian dogma. The new text is not to stand on its own, but rather is intended to be a reference point for Christian theology. The narrative is read as a basis for additional commentary in the New Testament, to which the reader is consistently referred.<sup>17</sup>

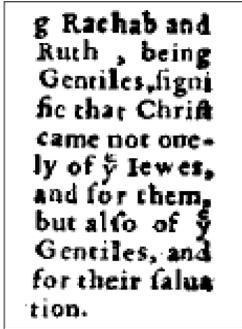
Rashkow's evaluation runs true of the Geneva Bible's New Testament also, where

the translator's word choice and particularly the annotations, greatly influence the readers interpretation of the text. With these points in mind let us now turn to an investigation into the factor of anti-Semitic attitude in the pages of the Geneva Bible itself.

## Part 2: Anti-Semitism expressed in the Geneva Bible's book of Matthew

Discrimination can be expressed in many forms, some more subtle than others. So corresponds the case of the Geneva Bible's 'Holy Gospel of Iesus Christ, according to Matthewe' where anti-Semitic themes are woven in and around the text. Matthew's Gospel has historically been interpreted to raise antipathy toward the Jews, even to paint Jews and Judaism as the enemy of Christendom, and the annotations of the Geneva Bible inherit this position against Judaism.

The first example of an anti-Jewish annotation in Matthew comes alongside the genealogy [Matthew 1.5] where the side-note draws attention to the Gentile ancestry of Jesus and relates this to the Christian soteriological understanding that salvation extends to the Gentiles also. The note reads: 'Rachab and Ruth, being Gentiles, signifie that Christ came not onely of ye Iewes, and for them, but also of ye Gentiles, and for their saluation.'<sup>18</sup> (Fig. 1)<sup>19</sup> The inclusion in the genealogy of the four non-Jewish women: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and Bathsheba (the wife of Uriah) stands certainly unexpected and significant. Stendahl writes that these four women 'represent an "irregularity" in Davidic line, an irregularity which is [ ... ] overcome by God's recognition of them as Davidic descendents: exactly by the irregularity the action of God and his Spirit is made manifest.'<sup>20</sup> Their inclusion in Matthew's genealogy therefore has a greater purpose than to demonstrate that Jesus has Gentile descendents, it forms part of Matthew's apologetic as to the nature of God's intervention by Jesus' engraftment into the Davidic line. This holds significance because of the connection between Jewish Messianism and the redemption of Gentiles.<sup>21</sup> Matthew's apologetic therefore intends to encourage Jewish/Gentile relations,<sup>22</sup> and certainly not promote a doctrine of supersessionism. In addition, Rashkow observes how the Geneva Bible's marginalia accompanying the book of Ruth transforms that book into a 'prelude to the book of Matthew' by 'directing the reader towards the New Testament by cross-referencing the genealogy of Jesus.'<sup>23</sup> By drawing attention away from the Jewish-ness of Jesus and placing emphasis on 'Gentile' (as is the case with the annotation adjoining Matthew 2.2 and the story of the Magi) the annotation has the effect of



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Fig. 1

elevating the importance of the Gentiles whilst demoting the importance of the Jews. This shift of attention away from Jew and onto Gentile, although rather subtle, sows the seeds of anti-Semitic thinking clearly far removed from Matthew's original intention; sentiments which grow and intensify throughout the book, and eventually lead to the proposed rejection of the Jews. For example, in the annotation adjoining Matthew 21.43 (Therefore say I vnto you, The kingdome of God shalbe taken from you, and shalbe giuen to a nation, which shall bring foorth the frutes thereof ) interprets the biblical text as referring to the Jews and Gentiles - the annotation reading: The Iewes reiected & the Gentiles receiued. (Fig. 2) Indeed the text does imply that Jesus' words were aimed at Jewish religious leaders (a theme addressed in the following paragraphs), but the text does not refer the Jewish people as a whole.

In the annotations accompanying Chapter five we encounter the idea that Jewish teachers have falsely manipulated God's Law. In Jesus' teaching on the Law he says: 'Ye haue heard that it hath bin said, Thou shalt loue thy neighbour, and hate your enimie.' [Matthew 5.43] The side-note claims that 'hate your enimie' was 'added by the false expositers ye Pharises.' (Fig. 3) Brown in the famous nineteenth century *Jamieson, Fausset and Brown Bible Commentary* echoes this idea that 'hate thine enemy' has been added by 'corrupt teachers.' Further to this he adds the anti-Semitic comment: 'No wonder that the Romans charged the Jews with hatred of the human race.'<sup>25</sup>

The accusation that the Jews were guilty of tampering with God's Law and Word was common and was often cited for explaining discrepancies between the Hebrew text and the wording of the Latin Vulgate. As the earlier author of the preface to the Douay-Rheims Bible writes: 'But the ancient best lerned Fathers, & Doctors of the Church, do much complaine, and testifie to vs, that both the Hebrew and Greke Editions are fouly corrupted by Iewes and Heretikes.'<sup>26</sup> In the light of modern biblical scholarship this accusation appears unreasonable, but if we consider the importance that the Reformers placed on the Scriptures, we can see how serious an accusation is being made. It arguably would have had a great influence on how people read the Hebrew Scriptures.<sup>27</sup>

The Pharisees are again attacked in the annotation adjoining Matthew 12.30: 'He that is not with me, is against me: and he that gathereth not with me, scattereth. The side-note states that this verse is pertaining to the Pharisees declaring: 'that they

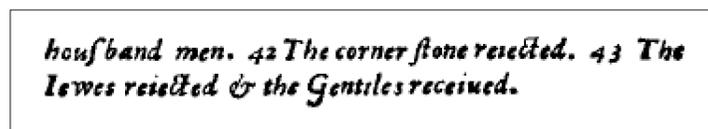


Fig. 2

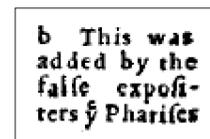


Fig. 3

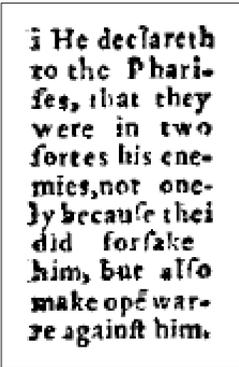
were in two sorts his enemies, not onely because thei did forsake him, but also make open warre against him.' (Fig. 4) The Pharisees are often portrayed as opponents of Jesus throughout the Gospels (Mark 3.6; 7.1; 10.2, Matthew 23; John 11.47). Being deeply concerned with the interpretation of the written and oral traditions of the Torah, the Pharisees were arguably the natural intellectual opponents of Jesus. As such they play an important role in the Gospel narratives, something that narrative criticism has done much to illuminate. Powell perhaps represents a rather extreme position in the broad spectrum of narratological approaches, but he illustrates this point well:

The religious leaders in Matthew's narrative do not stand for any real people in the world *outside the story*, but are constructs of the implied author designed to fulfill a particular role *in the story*. Regardless of whether they were modeled after real people known to the real author, their current function as characters in a story is not referential but poetic. They are emblematic of the forces of evil that God through Christ is able to overcome.<sup>28</sup>

In addition it seems of vital importance to recognize that the author of Matthew is obviously a Jew well versed in the Hebrew Scriptures, and an individual who quite naturally employed Pharisaic modes of thinking and highly probable that the author was indeed a Christian Pharisee.<sup>29</sup>

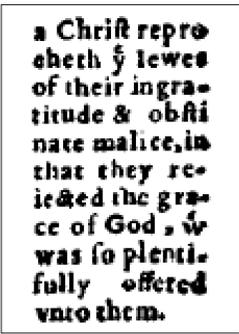
Evident throughout the Hebrew Scriptures runs a tradition of Jewish self-criticism - the rhetoric of early Judaism, which has contributed both to the narrative in the Scriptures and to the extraordinary preservation of Judaism throughout the ages. The author of Matthew follows in this tradition and therefore anti-Jewish sounding texts within the gospel need to be considered in the light of this notion of Jewish self-criticism.

Another example of a verse understood to be referring to the Jews can be found in Matthew 22.3 (And sent fourth his seruants, to call them that were bidde to the wedding, but they woulde not come.) The side-note reads: 'Christ reprooeth ye Iewes of their ingratitude & obstinate malice, in that they received the grace of God, which was plentifully offered vnto them.' (Fig 5) Here the tones become very severe, with the Jews being accused of 'ingratitude' and 'obstinate malice'. This annotation is followed by the



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Fig. 4



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Fig. 5

annotation accompanying Matthew 22.7 (But when the King heard it, he was wroth, and sent foorth his warriars, and destroyed those murtherers, and burnt vp their citie.) which reads: ‘God punisheth extremely suche ingratitude.’ (Fig. 6)

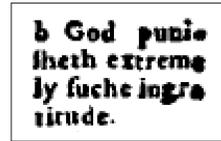


Fig. 6

This annotation implies that the *Jews* will be punished for their ingratitude, a theme further developed in the annotation adjoining Matthew 23.35 (That vpon you may come all the righteous blood that was shed vpon the earth). Here the annotation states that ‘Christ meaneth that all their race [Jews] shal be punished, so that the iniquitie of ye fathers shal be powerd into the bosome of the children which resemble their fathers.’ (Fig. 9) Matthew 23 is perhaps one of the most problematic texts in the Gospels for its severe condemnation of the Pharisees. However, as Levenson writes ‘many scholars would reject any suggestion that the passage is an attack on Jews or Judaism.’<sup>30</sup>

This notion of ‘curse’ is further developed as Matthew turns to the Passion narrative: ‘Then answered all the people, and saide, His blood be on vs, and on our children.’ [Matthew 27.25] The annotation clearly interprets this verse to lay blame for Jesus’ death on the Jews: ‘If his death be not lawful let the punishment fall on our heades & our childrens, and as they wished, so this curse taketh place to this day.’ (Fig. 7) A striking discrepancy between the text and the annotation can be observed in the duration of the blood guilt (interpreted as a curse). The text mentions two generations ‘our heades & our childrens,’ the annotation however claims that the curse is upon every generation of Jew. This interpretation of the passage is by no means unique to the Geneva Bible, but the value it holds as a Biblical annotation remains highly questionable. It mimics Julian of Norwich’s inclusion of this accusation in her *Long Text*, despite it not being part of her ‘showings.’

I saw the Passion of Christ in several different showing [ ... ] and although I felt

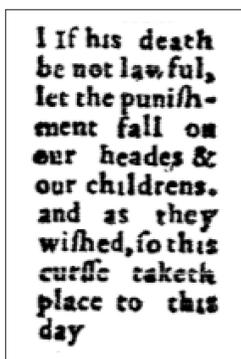


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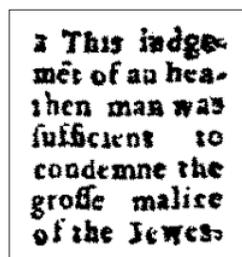


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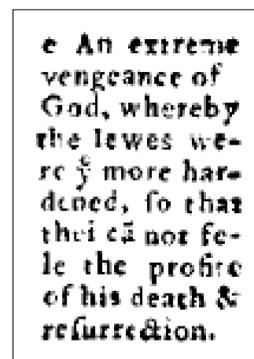


Fig. 9

some of the sorrow of our Lady and of the true friends who saw him suffer, yet I did not see the Jews who did him to death specified individually, although I knew by my faith that they were cursed and damned for ever except for those who are converted through grace.<sup>31</sup>

The relationship between anti-Semitism and the Passion narrative received much public attention this century with the release of Mel Gibson's controversial film *The Passion of the Christ* in 2004. In the movie Gibson includes the text of Matthew 27.25, spoken by the crowd in Aramaic. However he chose to remove the subtitles that translate that line from the final cut, presumably to ease some of the accusations that the film was anti-Semitic made before the film's release.<sup>32</sup>

The term 'malice' that occurs, as previously examined, in the annotation for Matthew 22:3 is repeated in the annotation for Matthew 27.54: 'When the Centurion, and they that were with him watching Jesus, saw the earthquake, and the thinges that were done, they feared greatly, saying, Truely this was the Sonne of God.' The annotation reads: 'This iudgment of an heathen man was sufficient to condemne the grosse malice of the Iewes.' (Fig. 8) The annotation thus again accuses the Jews of malice and speaks of their condemnation. It ignores the fact, however, that the text does not ascribe the statement to the Centurion alone, but also to those with him, presumably also including the Jewish observers of the events. The reaction of 'greatly fearing' and the confession that Jesus was the 'Sonne of God' is very obviously, and importantly, a group experience. The repeated accusation of 'malice' therefore constitutes a gross perversion of the author's original intent.

The final example of anti-Jewish annotation in Matthew accompanies verse 28.15 that refers to rumours spread amongst the Jews regarding Jesus' resurrection. The annotation calls this: 'An extreme vengeance of God, whereby the Iewes were ye more hardened, so that thei can not fele the profite of his death & resurrection.' (Fig. 9) The annotation therefore suggests that this is part of God vengeance and punishment on the Jews by hardening them against accepting Jesus' resurrection, which is a proposition not addressed by the text at all. Perhaps this annotation, like many others, reflects Calvinistic predestination and exclusivism, yet it is certainly foreign to the author's intent. In his *Dialogue with Trypho* Justin Martyr (AD100-165), addressing this same verse claims that the Jews dispersed the story by means of special messengers sent to every country.<sup>33</sup> Justin's anti-Semitism is a separate issue, but the anti-Semitic legacy of such works like *Dialogue with Trypho* has had a devastatingly long lasting impact on Christendom. The text of Matthew 28.15 certainly acts to make a distinction between 'the Jews' and Matthew's faith community, who are arguably a group of first-century Jewish Christians, but it does not speak of God's 'vengeance' in the slightest.

## Conclusion

Post-Holocaust Christians are forced to re-evaluate traditional readings of the biblical texts that have been used to promote or even preach anti-Semitism. The few annotations examined briefly in this paper, highlight a thread of anti-Semitic sentiment woven through the very fabric of this important milestone in Christian publication - a thread that forms part of horrifying fabric of the Holocaust. Modern scholarship has done much to demonstrate why anti-Semitic interpretation of biblical texts is fallacious, as McKnight writes about Matthew:

Matthew's Gospel, however harsh and unpleasant to modern sensitivities, is not anti-Semitic. It is, on the contrary, a compassionate and vigorous appeal to non-messianic Judaism to respond to the Messiah.

Yet what is deeply concerning is the question of how far this modern understanding actually filters down to the lay Christian and into Churches, where traces of Christianity's anti-Semitic history are still very evident. Levenson observes that 'attacks on rabbinic Judaism are deeply embedded in [Christianity's] formative texts and not easily dismissed.'<sup>35</sup> The annotations examined in this essay prove that historically Matthew's text has been interpreted in an anti-Semitic way. It is hoped that this paper demonstrates how these editorial interventions are actually misinterpretations, deliberate misinterpretations, of Matthew's text. Modern exegetical study recognizes the fundamental importance of examining the biblical texts 'through Jewish eyes and Jewish historical experience,'<sup>36</sup> but as Rashkow notes, for Renaissance scholars 'all agreed it should not be read 'Jewishly.'<sup>37</sup>

The question arises, however, as to why this essay should focus upon such a negative aspect of the Geneva Bible as anti-Semitism, when there are so many commendable and positive points in this seminal translation of the Scriptures. The Geneva Bible has been politicised in many respects, due to its turbulent historical location, and it is important that Christians do not gloss over the undesirable elements of our religious heritage, but rather confront them.

It may be the case, as Edward Flannery asserts, that the Church's long history of anti-Semitism has 'been torn from Christian (and secular) history books.'<sup>38</sup> But, it is a page in Christian history that is indelibly printed on the hearts of the Jewish people. Ignorance of the Church's history of anti-Semitism denies the Christian's self-understanding. Anti-Semitism has tragically tried to sever Christianity from its Jewish heritage and in doing so has ignored Jesus command to 'love'. As Flannery also asserts: 'The sin of anti-Semitism contains many sins, but in the end it is a denial of Christian faith, a failure of Christian hope, and a malady of Christian love.'<sup>39</sup> This

sentiment is poignantly echoed in the writing of Elie Wiesel: 'I think that Christians have to try to understand what has happened to the Christian tradition. After all, Christianity is a religion of love. What happened to love?'<sup>40</sup>

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- 33 Justin Martyr, *Dialogue With Trypho*, Roberts-Donaldson English Translation, URL: <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/justinmartyr-dialoguetrypho.html> [accessed: 05.05.2006]
- 34 McKnight, Scott, 'A Loyal Critic: Matthew's Polemic with Judaism in Theological Perspective,' in *Anti-Semitism and Early Christianity: Issues of Polemic and Faith*, Ed. by Evans, Craig A. and Hagner, Donald A. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993) p. 78.
- 35 Levenson, *op. cit.* p. 17.
- 36 *Ibid.* p. 17.
- 37 Term used in: Rashkow, *op. cit.* p. 55
- 38 Flannery, *op. cit.* p. 1.
- 39 *Ibid.* p. 259.
- 40 Weisel, Elie, quoted in Schuster, E & Boschert-Kimmig, R., *op. cit.* p.101.