

Grand Prize Winner, Piece of the Past Essay Contest, 2020

The Knightley Family Bible: Faith Throughout the Years by Hannah Gentry

In the library of the Dunham Bible Museum, there is an old, scuffed, Bible with a golden emblem on it and the letters “S” and “K” engraved into the leather-bound cover. Dating back to 1577, the Knightley family Bible, a copy of the Geneva Bible, is a symbol of the sacrifices that English Protestants made in the wake of religious persecution. When Mary Tudor was crowned the queen of England in 1553, her rule attempted to reverse the English Reformation and persecute those who supported it. This led to the Marian Exile, which was the exodus of English Protestants fleeing the continent and settling in other, safer countries. This political shift in England ultimately became the catalyst which inspired the English exiles living in Switzerland to produce their own Bible in 1560. The Geneva Bible’s history reveals the faithful devotion that the Protestant scholars had for understanding the word of God, and the Knightley family Bible similarly reveals a family sharing the same desire to learn and grow in their Christian faith.

Elizabeth Knightley was the niece of Jane Seymour (Henry VIII’s third wife) and Richard Knightley was close to the court of Elizabeth I and present at the execution of Mary, Queen of Scots (HBU). The Knightleys were very religious people who emphasized the importance of their faith. Within the first few aging pages of their Geneva Bible, there is an excerpt about the sin of man signed by Richard Knightley, two different genealogies titled “The ages of all my children,” and a brief record written by Elizabeth Knightley about the baptisms of her children and those who were witnesses. Handwritten on several pages is also “the summe and content of all the holy scripture, both of the olde and newe testament” and “a prayer to be saide before we begin to reade the scripture,” assumed also to be written by Elizabeth. Both are

copied from supplements found in later editions of the Geneva Bible. These pages filled with marginalia show that Richard and Elizabeth intended for their copy of the Geneva Bible to become the Bible that their entire family would use for generations to come. In a time before government records and because paper was scarce back then, families would record their own history inside of their Bibles, and the Knightleys seemed to take pride in doing so.

After the Knightley's genealogies and their other marginalia, the title page introduces the Bible as "translated according to the Ebrewe and Greeke, and conferred with the best translations." Below this inscription is an illustration of the Israelites preparing to cross the Red Sea. Written along the edges is the verse "Great are the troubles of the righteous; but the Lord delivereth him out of them all" (Ps. 34:19). This picture is symbolic of how the English exiles viewed themselves, as people in trouble waiting for the Lord to deliver them back home. Amidst their unfair circumstances and homesickness, the Protestant scholars in exile were patient and determined to create their own Bible. The Geneva Bible was the first English Bible to incorporate study aids—such as woodcut illustrations, summaries, liturgical calendars and foldout maps—within the pages. The translators included these aids because "the importance and complexity of scripture have always necessitated guides to its interpretation" (Ingram 29). The team of translators in Geneva included many historical figures, such as William Whittingham, with the Protestant scholars also working under the general direction of Miles Coverdale and John Knox and under the spiritual leadership of none other than John Calvin, who founded the Republic of Geneva (Craig 40-2). Together, they worked tirelessly to make a Bible that became a symbol of their Christian beliefs and helped others to understand how to best interpret the Bible. Furthermore, "The social importance of Scripture was recognized by William Whittingham and his fellow translators at Geneva," and they added marginal notes to try to explain social

principles contained within the Bible (Greaves 94). When the Geneva Bible was finally published in 1576, the team's efforts paid off and it went on to become the first mass-produced Bible available to the general public who previously could not afford a custom-made Bible.

The Geneva Bible was immediately well-received, and readers began to prefer it over the Great Bible, much to the disdain of King James. Because of the Geneva Bible's Calvinist and Puritan annotations, it was disliked by pro-government Anglicans of the church of England and by King James, who said that the Geneva Bible "contained some notes very partiall, vntrue, seditious, and sauouring too much of daungerous and trayterous conceites" (Craig 41). In an effort to replace it, King James commissioned to have an Anglican Bible made to replace the Geneva Bible so that the views of the reformers would no longer influence the people. Thus, the King James Bible was created in 1611, but it did not immediately replace the Geneva. In fact, the Geneva had become "the household Bible of the English" (HBU), with many families reluctant to switch to a different translation and preferring the language contained in the Geneva. Even after the ban of producing Geneva Bibles in England was issued in 1616, the printers in Amsterdam continued to print new Geneva Bibles under the guise of them being made in England during the year 1599 when, in actuality, they were made decades later (HBU). There is evidence that, like many others, the Knightley family continued to use their beloved Geneva despite the pressure coming from the government.

Placed on the inside of the front cover is a newer genealogy not written by the Knightleys but by a different family, which dates to as late as 1787. Of the names written, two in particular stand out: Admiral Cornthwaite Ommanney and his wife, Martha Manaton. Presumably descendants of the Knightleys, the Ommanney's continued the tradition of writing a genealogy in the Bible, which reveals that the Geneva must have continued to be the Bible that they used as a

family a century later. Cornthwaite Ommanney's eldest son, Sir John Acworth Ommanney, was a Royal Navy officer who later was promoted to commander-in-chief at Devonport in 1851 (Hiscocks). He passed away in July 1855, and his wife, Frances, passed a few weeks later (Hiscocks). After his death, the trail of who uses the Bible runs cold and nothing more is known of the family's relationship to the Geneva. Now, the Bible is preserved in the Dunham Bible Museum as a remarkable piece of religious history.

The Geneva Bible's creation is a story of perseverance and determination. From the English exiles devoted to translating scripture and to the hands of the Knightley family holding onto their copy and passing it down, the Geneva has become a symbol of faith both on a larger scale and an individual scale. Despite its age, the Knightley family Bible is still well intact and shows signs of being handled with great care and much love. The family desired to learn from scripture under the guidance of the Geneva translators and took their devotion seriously. Now, the Bible serves as a museum piece that reminds us of the sacrifices made by Christians to spread the word of God. Despite the turmoil of political changes, the Lord will deliver his children from hardships so long as they have a faithful, dutiful heart, and this Bible stands as a physical representation of that deliverance.

Works Cited

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