Using a Collection to Discover Reading Practices: The British Library Geneva Bibles and a History of their Early Modern Readers

Femke Molekamp

Early English Printed Bibles and Reading

During the reformation in the early sixteenth century, the Bible was translated and printed in English so that the scriptures might be directly available to the individual. With the accession of Queen Mary to the throne, however, the printing of English scriptures was banned and Protestant reformers were forced into exile on the Continent, where there were reformist strongholds. The Geneva Bible was the work of Protestant exiles in Geneva. As Calvin presided over the Genevan church at this time, these origins of the Geneva Bible, along with the flavour of its accompanying marginal notes, mean that it has been strongly associated with Calvinism. The Geneva Bible was first printed in Geneva in 1560, and from 1575 it was printed in England, by which time Elizabeth I had restored the nation to Protestantism. It is worth briefly tracing here the relation of the Geneva Bible to the English printed bibles which came before it. The Geneva follows in the wake of bibles drawing on the work of Tyndale in Henry VIII’s reign. Matthew’s Bible of 1537 was a completion of Tyndale’s project of translation, undertaken by John Rogers using the pseudonym Thomas Matthew. This was the first complete bible in English that seemed aimed at facilitating private reading of scripture by a wide readership as it offered printed marginal notes and summaries of chapters to aid interpretation. As such it was an important model for the Geneva Bible, which likewise sought to guide reading and expound ‘hard places’. In 1538, however, Henry VIII banned books containing printed marginal notes. The Great Bible, first printed in 1539, was commissioned to provide an alternative English translation of the scriptures without marginal notes. It was indeed great in size, suitable for being chained to lecterns in churches, where it was not only used in services, but could also be consulted by the public.

The Geneva Bible furnished the individual with a very different style of bible-reading. It was commonly printed in a smaller format, packed with diagrams, charts, prefaces and printed marginal notes designed to guide and facilitate the reading of the scriptures. Approximately 150 editions were printed in England between 1575 and 1644, the reigns of Elizabeth I, James I and Charles I. The longevity of the Geneva Bible’s publication attests to its enormous popularity, even after the ‘Authorized’ King James Version came out in 1611, and despite the fact that it was never officially sanctioned as a church bible. Of these 150 or so editions around 110 were complete bibles, listed in Darlow and Moule’s Historical Catalogue of the Printed Editions of Holy Scripture.1 Of these editions the British Library has 80, with a collection of 106 complete Geneva Bibles in total. This substantial representation of recorded Geneva Bible editions provides a corpus large enough to warrant using it to

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investigate early modern readership of this bible version. A survey of the material features of these books, including differing paratextual material across editions, and owners’ annotations and bindings, aids the reconstruction of a picture of the relationship between these books and their owners, both men and women. It yields information as to how the act of reading is inscribed in these texts, what kind of readership this version of the bible was trying to fashion, and how readers responded to their Geneva Bibles.

The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries saw growing rates of literacy in England in what nonetheless remained only a partially literate society. Precise figures for literacy rates during this period are problematic since the term ‘literate’ cannot yield a single meaning here but opens up a diverse and stratified array of possibilities, which correlates at least in part to class and gender. It is also the case that many people possessed some reading skills but had not learned to write. Reading was taught before writing and so a poorer education might cover the first, but not the second, stage of literacy. Thus we can question a commonly cited measure of literacy used by David Cressy, which rests on the loyalty oaths of the 1640s, in which 70 percent of male subscribers, and 90 percent of women, use a mark instead of a signature to affirm their declarations. However, it is the case that women received an inferior education and along with lower social classes were generally likely to have been least literate, although noble women enjoyed a more privileged education. At the top of the literacy hierarchy sat those with the benefits of a good humanist education who had been taught to read and write from a young age, and had been carefully instructed in grammar and rhetoric. In taking an owner of a Geneva Bible now in the British Library to exemplify such an education we might consider the diarist and scholar John Evelyn (1620–1706), who began learning Latin and writing at age four. Those at the other pole of literacy who engaged with the Geneva Bible would have been illiterate men and women who had the Bible read to them. Such aural readers must have ranked among the early modern readers of the Geneva Bibles in the British Library collection, but of course they have left no traces of their names behind. Many shades of literacy are likely to have existed between these poles. The influence of the print culture was such that few could eschew the written word, and so many of those who could not write might still have acquired some basic reading skills, even if their education was poor. It is precisely this variety in literacy capacities to which the Geneva Bible had to respond, as I will go on to discuss a little later.

Material Aspects of the Geneva Bible

The Geneva Bible was most popularly printed in smaller formats: quarto and octavo, so that it was handy and portable, although folio editions were also available. Indeed the portability of the Geneva Bible is nicely brought out by the following lines a reader wrote in his octavo New Testament, now in the British Library:

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If this be lost or left behinde, 
    yet knowe 
That William Rigbie doth it 
    truly owe 
if it be soe good Reader be my 
    frend 
it to restore or els me 
    notice send  1636
Will Rigbie

The Geneva was the first English bible to divide the scripture into verses, for the ease of reading. It also contained extensive printed marginal notes to aid the reader, as well as other diagrams and prefaces explaining how the scriptures should be read. It was available in both roman and black letter type. It was thus a bible intended to make the scriptures accessible to the widest possible range of readers.

The task of addressing a wide spectrum of readers spanning the social hierarchy and of securing appropriate reading of the scriptures across this range was not, however, a simple matter. Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century concerns about readers of vernacular scripture, stemming from translators of scripture, theologians, clergy and monarchs alike, focused on a myriad of different aspects of the reading public. The entry of scripture into oral culture was felt to pose risks of sedition and heresy arising from public discussion of the Bible. There were anxieties about class and gender in relation to qualification as a reader; likewise there were misgivings about both the too educated and the undereducated reader. Much of this is of course closely affiliated with anxiety surrounding the general burgeoning of a reading public, as the printed word gains ubiquity and the book trade booms. A comparison of the paratextual material in different editions of Geneva Bibles in the British Library collection reveals that the translators carefully organized the vast array of reading aids and supplements across the various editions in order to target different editions at different kinds of readers, and to supervise their reading act. Before looking at individual readers themselves, it is therefore worth considering, first of all, what kinds of reading experiences this Bible attempts to create.

The Geneva Bible is renowned for its roman quartos, as these made the scriptures newly accessible to the reading public with a portable bible in a modern typeface. However, from 1578 Geneva Bible editions were also printed in the older typeface, black letter. Of the British Library’s collection of 106 Geneva Bibles, 35 are black letter editions, both quarto and folio. There are a further 12 black letter editions listed in the Historical Catalogue of the Printed Editions of Holy Scripture, which the British Library does not have. The black letter Genevan quartos proved very popular, which can be explained by their appeal to the common reader. While roman type began to overtake black letter during the seventeenth century and is easier on a modern eye, black letter would have been easier to read for a semi-literate Elizabethan and Jacobean society. Black letter was used for children’s reading aids: the ABC, Lord’s Prayer, Catechism and Psalter, which formed the standard complement of texts for learning to read, were all usually printed in this typeface. The Geneva Bible was the first bible to be printed in roman type, and black letter had thus far been the norm for many readers. While roman type was often used for classical or humanist texts, it was black letter ‘which English printers traditionally used for vernacular texts (especially those for the popular market).’ We can make the broad assumption, therefore, that black letter appealed to the less educated reader when roman did not.

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7 *The New Testament*, etc. (1610), BL 1004.b.6.(1).
There is a striking difference in the kinds of reading aids or paratexts in black letter editions as compared with those in roman type. There are some supplementary texts which are contained in almost all editions (except in octavo editions as they are too small): the marginal notes, an address ‘To the Christian Reader’, the diagram ‘Howe to take profite in reading of the holy scriptures’ and the two tables which offer an index of ‘proper names’ and a concordance. However, it can be seen that some aids which appear only in black letter editions are of a far more discursive and instructive nature than some of those appearing only in roman editions. For instance black letter editions alone have the easy-to-follow ‘Certaine questions and answers concerning predestination’, the explanation of ‘The summe of the whole Scripture of the booke of the olde and Newe Testament’ and the ‘Glossary of strange names’. 

Fig. 1. Paratext found in black letter quarto Geneva Bibles, ‘Certaine Questions and Answeres touching the doctrine of Predestination’. BL, 1560/1333.1, sig. *iir.
The glossary was added, presumably, ‘for feare of troubling the simple readers’ with abstruse and difficult-sounding (often Hebrew) names. Early modern England witnessed both an increase in literacy and a burgeoning of English vocabulary. Matching the growth of expressions naturalized into the English language thanks to the reaches of humanist learning, the translation of the Bible into English necessitated the invention of a theological vernacular. The black letter quarto anticipates the challenge this might pose to readers, and compensates with an index of ‘all the English words, conducting vnto most of the necessarie and profitable doctrines, sentences and instructions, which are to be found in the olde and newe Testament’. In addition Archbishop Cranmer’s preface to the Great Bible (1539) warning the reader ‘I forbid not to read but I forbid to reason’, is printed in some black letter, but not in roman, Geneva Bible editions.

Many of the aids which occur only in roman editions are designed more for the reader’s broader education and diversion than for their theological instruction, such as the chart showing ‘The cycle of the sunne, and the cause why it was invented’, the calendar with the ‘declaration of the golden nombre’ and ‘A Description and Successe of the Kings of Ivda and Iervsalem’. Such charts and calendars are the typical material of almanacs, which were a popular educational tool in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

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11 As expressed in the prefatory address ‘To the Christian Reader’.
It is also significant that when new translations of the New Testament became available, these replaced the original translations in roman type editions, but not in black letter editions, except for a few folios, even though the Geneva Bible was also being printed in black letter until 1616. According to Darlow and Moule. Roman quartos from 1587 onwards use Lawrence Tomsen’s new translation of the New Testament, and from 1599 they have Franciscus Junius’s new translation of Revelation with extensive, intensely anti-papist, notes replacing the original ones. Thus we can observe that the reader of the roman quarto was being offered the latest in Continental biblical scholarship along with a full arsenal of cosmological, historical as well as instructive paratexts, while the black letter reader was being carefully educated in the basics of bible-reading and theology. Using its supplementary texts, then, the Geneva Bible launched itself at a range of readers.

In almost all editions of the Geneva Bible, readers would have been confronted with a diagram entitled ‘How to take profite by reading of the holy scriptures’, before reaching the Old Testament. This complex chart outlines seven principles of reading which branch out to enumerate several subcategories for each, which in some cases then lead on to a bible reference. The principles stress the importance of prayerful preparation to read, and of understanding the purpose of the scriptures. Then, for the technical process of reading itself, the diagram specifies the need to consider both ‘the coherence of the text’, including ways it which can be cross referenced, and ‘the maner of speach proper to the scriptures’. Lastly, for further elucidation of the scriptures, the reader is urged to seek appropriate persons to explain them; also to seek applied interpretation when listening to sermons; and also to ‘reade interpreters if he be able’. These last directives demonstrate awareness of the barely literate reader, who may indeed be hearing this bible through someone else reading it. This kind of reader is nonetheless put through linguistic as well as spiritual training by this bible, in being urged to attend to ‘the maner of speech proper to the scriptures’ and ‘the coherence of the text’.

The paratexts of the Geneva Bible, and their organization in different editions, served multiple agendas. They had to both enable and guide private reading. They had to take into account the co-existence of oral and literate culture and train the less educated reader, whose literacy skills might well be wanting. The Reformation did of course have the highest interest in literacy in order to obtain reform and salvation through reading. At the very least, the Protestant insistence on scripture as ‘the spiritual food of man’s soul’ to be experienced and understood by the individual, both promoted literacy and strongly encouraged bible-reading at home, something which it was the duty of mothers to enforce as part of the home education system. The bible-reader inspired by the holy spirit as he reads, Cranmer stressed, was ‘altered and transformed into that thyng, whiche he readeth’. A range of possible reading practices emerges, then, for this portable bible packed with reading aids. A literate reader might have read the Geneva Bible in solitude and silence. A gentlewoman might read together with her chaplain, as Lady Margaret Hoby (bap. 1571, d. 1633) records...
Fig. 3. Prefatory diagram 'How to take profit by reading of the holy Scriptures', BL., L.8.a.7.(2.), sig. ¶ 5v.
in her diary. Hoby also mentions how she ‘reed of the bible with some Gentlewemen that were with [her]’. The more exclusively male domains of the study and the college library were other spaces in which the Geneva Bible might be read. The less literate, or children and servants, might hear the Geneva Bible read aloud, as it was the duty of the master, or frequently the mistress, of the house to read the Bible to the household.

One association with illiteracy in early modern England was a greater propensity to sectarianism. The seventeenth century witnessed a proliferation of Protestant heterodoxy. While a bible like the Geneva solicits, aids and attempts to control a single congregation of readers, it is worth considering the sheer range of Protestants comprising a possible readership at this time. Keith Thomas has found evidence, from the failure of sectarians to sign their name on the marriage register, that sects often attracted illiterates. Certainly during the period it was feared that illiterates were particularly vulnerable to sectarianism. The church and state harnessed the printing press as a means of religious control, directing a huge volume of instructive material, from proclamations to homilies, at the reading public. Illiterates were harder to influence by this means and were identified with the potentially volatile sphere of oral dissemination of beliefs. It was in the interest, therefore, of the translators of the Geneva Bible to design a bible with aids that catered for the less literate reader lest he or she succumb to one of the many sects that were denounced as ‘heresies’.

Unlike any other bible, the Geneva Bible caters for a wide stratification of literacy skills, as discussed, with editions in both roman and black letter. It also makes plenty of provision for mnemonics as a learning aid for the semi-literate since ‘there is … evidence to suggest that people who could not rely on writing as a means to storing information or as an aid to memory developed quite strong mnemonic powers in compensation.’ The address ‘To the Christian Reader’ points out to the reader how the versification of the text acts as an aid to memory during the reading process. Likewise, the ‘arguments’ which are the small summaries of each book and chapter, prefacing them, are described by the translators as serving the function that ‘by all meanes the reader might greatly further aswell for memorie, as for the chiefe point of the page’. In addition to the ‘arguments’, there are also headings to each page, where ‘the chiefe point of the page’ again appears in a memorable form. These headings occur at the top of the page in large print, consisting of a few words which pick out a pertinent theme in the scripture below. Significantly, the headings, perhaps more consistently than the marginal notes themselves, have a noticeably reformist inflection. The range of mnemonic devices in the Geneva Bible bears a recollection of recent widespread illiteracy and an awareness of readers still possessing relatively weak literacy skills. In binding its aids to the needs of struggling readers and offering such people ways to read, the Geneva Bible is therefore acting as a project to enhance literacy for the sake of salvation, to harness and control a diverse readership.

We can see therefore, in examining the supplementary texts of the Geneva Bible, that this bible was not a single text. Editions were designed to differ considerably depending on whether they were black letter, targeted at the lower end of the market, or roman, targeted...
at the educated reader. In both cases the spiritual life of the reader, and his or her interpretation of the scriptures, are carefully mediated by a collaborative range of paratexts. This much can be gleaned from examining the full range of the editions present in the British Library collection of Geneva Bibles.

**Signs of Readership**

Scrutiny of each copy in the collection furthermore yields significant details of the actual readership of these books, and ways in which readers responded to the composite of texts which make up these bibles. Early modern owners, identified by marks they have left behind, are wide ranging. They include, for instance, a puritan clergyman William Leigh (1550-1639) and his wife, Anne Bromley, the daughter of Sir Thomas Bromley, Lord Chancellor 1579-87; Susanna Beckwith (c. 1600), noblewoman; the illustrious diarist John Evelyn (1620–1706) and James Stanley, 7th Earl of Derby (c. 1649). These are just some of the readers whose biographies are discoverable, and thus they are positioned within something of a social elite, at least in terms of education. Other annotations, even where named and dated, often in poor handwriting, rough syntax and flawed orthography, belong to less educated readers who remain obscure, but whose imprint these books bear. There are of course inherent limitations in examining a single collection for the information it yields about readership in general of a period. The provenance of these books is not representative of the full range of readers and it must be borne in mind that those early modern readers who possessed the resources and skills to write in their bibles represent a relatively privileged group. It tells us little, for instance, of aural readers who had this bible read to them. However, despite these limitations, it is worth pointing out that the early modern owners and readers of these books are an interestingly heterogeneous group nonetheless, just as the marks they leave in their bibles range well beyond the scholarly notes made by certain readers, to include a greater array of scribblings, from simple prayers to accounting sums.

Readers who were able to write have marked over half of the books in this collection with marginal or prefatory annotation. These interventions often endorse the printed marginal notes or mark off passages to remember; occasionally they also challenge parts of the text. In many bibles in the collection, the underlining, circling or annotation of passages and marginal notes reveals readers affirming the reformist flavour they find in the texts. One reader can be seen responding to the Calvinist doctrine of the reprobate and the elect. Circling a verse which reads ‘Prove your selues whether ye are in the faith: examine your selues: knowe ye not your owne selues, how that Jesus Christ is in you, except ye be reprobates’ (2 Corinthians 8. 5), the reader has written, ‘God’s mercy to petinent [sic] sinners’. Another reader has learnt well from the diagram ‘How to take profite by reading of the holy Scriptures’, which stresses the principle of application of God’s word. He or she has circled a marginal note to Exodus 13. 24, which proclaims that ‘Neither dignitie nor multitude haue authoritie to passe the bounds that Gods worde prescribeth’ and has also circled the printed note to Jeremiah 23. 29: ‘it is not sufficient for Gods ministers to abstaine from lies and to speake the word of God: but that there be judgement in alleaging it, and that it may appeare to be applied to the same purpose that it was spoken’. Another reader has underlined a passage prohibiting icons (Deuteronomy 5. 23), as well as the injunction ‘thou shalt not suffer a witch to liue’ (Exodus 21. 18) and texts which specify the subjection

24 *The Bible*, etc. (1576) BL 3052.c.10; *The Bible*, etc. (1597) BL 464.c.5.(1.); *The Bible*, etc. (1603) BL 1214.c.2.1; *The Bible*, etc. (1589) BL Eve.a.122.(1); *The Bible*, etc. (1605) BL 3035.p.8.

25 *The Bible*, etc. (1579), BL C.51.g.8.

26 *The Bible*, etc. (1595), BL 3005.r.3.
of women and children to men, such as Exodus 21. 4: ‘the wife and children shall be the master’s’, and Peter 3.5–6 which stresses the subjection of wives to their husbands with Sarah and Abraham as exemplars. The emphases placed by this reader, then, demonstrate standard reformist views as to religious conduct and the family.

Readerly annotation often engages both the text of the scripture and the printed marginal commentary. A striking instance of this can be seen in a bible where the reader places a cross against Proverbs 28. 1: ‘The wicked flee where none pursueth but the righteous are bolde as a lyon.’ The reader also puts a cross next to the printed marginal note to this verse, which reads ‘Because their owne conscience accuseth them’. The reader uses this note to interpret the verse, and writes next to the verse: ‘ane evill conscience persueus them’ and next to the printed note: ‘That is ane good conscience exhorts them’. Both handwritten remarks are marked by a further two crosses so that four crosses in all surround the verse, marking four intersections of text and interpretation. The underlining, circling or marking of passages and notes with crosses is very common in the bibles of this collection. Sometimes underlining seems aphoristic, at other times it appears simply to be a way of the reader keeping her place, and possibly even expressing emotional emphasis, as she read. What is clear is that for owners of these bibles who could read them fluently for themselves, endorsing, challenging and amending the texts was an integral part of their reflective reading process.

The diagram at the front of most editions of the Geneva Bible ‘How to take profit by reading of the holy Scriptures’ exhorts the reader to combine reading with prayer. The first principle of the diagram commands ‘Earnestly and vsually pray to God that he might vouchsafe to / Teach the way of his statutes / Give vnderstanding/ Direct in the path of his commandments’. The second principle likewise instructs the reader to ‘Diligently kepe such order of reading the Scriptures & prayer as may stand with his calling and state of life’. In the British library collection of Geneva Bibles there is a range of instances of readers writing prayers, or exhortation to prayer, into their bibles. The bible which belonged to the Catholic, aristocratic Howard family in the seventeenth century contains a number of prayers written in a mid-seventeenth century hand on the flyleaves. If this particular branch of the many limbed Howard family was indeed recusant this may stand as an interesting testimony to the exceptionally wide distribution of the Geneva Bible, which was not confined to reformist circles as is sometimes mistakenly assumed.

The most substantial prayer, and that which is the key preparatory piece to approaching the scriptures, reads:

O Lord god forgive my sinnes & prepare my harte to the profitable readinge and heavenlie […] worde, give me o Lord faythe to believe it, wysdome to understand it, obedience to practise it, and diligence to continewe in it, move my hearte o Lord god with thy holy Spirite that I may meditate and delight in thy Lawe (day & night) to thy Glorye & my soules health, Grant this most mercifull father, for thy deare sonne above saviour Jesus Christ his sake: Amen.

The prayer applies well the paradigm described by the diagram ‘Howe to reade’: the bible must be approached with faith and left with ideas and intentions as to how to apply its messages in daily life. Geneva Bibles quite often had the Book of Common Prayer bound in with them, as the British Library collection demonstrates, with 22 bibles having the Book of Common Prayer bound in. It was not unusual, then, for a reader to have the familiar

27 The Bible, etc. (1579), BL C.51.g.8.
28 The manuscript family history notes in the bible indicate that this book belonged to Grace Howard (d.1630), wife of Robert Howard of Burston, Norfolk (d.1640).
29 The Bible etc. (1582) BL C.110.g.18.(1).
30 The ESTC records Books of Common Prayer bound in with Geneva Bibles.
liturgy of set prayers available to them as they read their bible. However, the prayers written into their bibles demonstrate private, personally composed, prayer as the individual soul prepares for, or responds to, the holy word. Such insistence on the conjunction of reading with prayer finds its way also into an address to the future reader, written by an anonymous late seventeenth-century owner of another Geneva Bible in the collection. The writer parallels preparation for bible-reading with pious preparation to receive the sacrament of the Eucharist:

Reader Whosoever thou art that turneth over these aged leaves pause an instant, and consider well is it onely for thine curiosity or forr the saluation of thine immortall soule. This Boke contayneth the Bread of Lyffe which whosoe handleth with uncleane handes it shall turne to his owne destruction, butt if it be with an holie desire to profit by the truth of the Gospell, & faithfully to follow the onely God it shall be vnto thee a restorer of Lyffe, and a suretie of eternall Salvation May the grace of are Lord be with you allwaies - Amen

There is a striking concern for progeny here, in the address to later generations who will find the leaves ‘aged’. The owner is considering his or her bible within the framework of its provenance, and tending spiritually to those who will handle it in its future trajectory. This resonates with the annotations to another of the bibles in the collection, by its late sixteenth-century owner, Susanna Beckwith. There are, interestingly, numerous annotations by early modern women across the collection. Susanna Beckwith was an aristocratic Elizabethan who dedicated her bible to her daughter (also her namesake) who would inherit it, and provides advice as to how to read it, in the form of both an address and an original poem. Her emphasis in the address is on prayerful, meditative reading, and the application of faith to unlock the meaning of the scriptures:

Susanna Beckwith my deare childe I leaue the this booke as the best jewell I haue. Reade it with a zealous harte to understand truly and uppon all thou readest either to confirme thy faith, orto increase thy repentance…

These instructions are extended in an original poem which Beckwith has written on a blank leaf at the front of her bible, opposite the translators’ address to Queen Elizabeth. Weaving in biblical quotation, two stanzas of Beckwith’s prefatory poem reiterate the importance of reading the scriptures prayerfully:

Reade not this booke in any case  
But with a singles eye  
Reade not, but first desire Gods grace  
To vnderstande thereby.

Pray still in faith, with this respect  
to mortifie thy sinne  
that knowledge may bringe god effect  
to frutifie therein.

Reading is not to be an exclusive intercourse between the reader and her bible; it must include God’s intervening grace received through preparatory prayer. In less educated households a bible might not always be for reading and yet still occupy a
powerful role as object in the home. Popular superstition sometimes treated it as a household talisman to counter evil spirits or as a charm to cure the sick by fanning the face of an ill person with its pages. Taking over from books of hours, the bible also commonly served as a place to log family histories of births, deaths, marriages and baptisms. Twenty-four of the one hundred and six complete Geneva Bibles at the British Library bear these kinds of records, with readers recording this information in their bible up to the mid-eighteenth century. In one bible there is an account of the smallpox suffered by the owner’s relatives, dated 1749. In another Susanna Beckwith has underlined Isaiah 66. 13 which speaks of Jerusalem as a mother giving suck to God’s people and next to this verse she has drawn a hand pointing to her records of the birth of her two sons. Bibles were also used for working out accounts, as frequent sums scribbled in show. One reader wrote: ‘March the first day 1645 Owd of Mrs Barnard the some of 1 shiling and six pence which I have to pay to here againe’. There are frequently children’s drawings in the bibles too. The appearance of these quotidian scribblings demonstrates that the bible was a greatly familiar, often open, household object. The extra-religious entries could also reflect the expense of paper during the period.

Just as the design of the Geneva Bible appears conscious of its less literate audience and aims to promote literacy, so readers can be seen using their bible as a site to improve their reading and writing. The scriptures would have been a standard text for practising reading, not least because Protestantism designated it as crucial to each individual. As well as using their bible to learn fluent reading, these kind of readers frequently copy alphabets, or parts of them, into the book, and sometimes copy out a few words from a biblical verse, or paratext, to practise forming letters. Juan Luis Vives, in his influential conduct book The Instrucion of a Christen Woman (in English translation, 1529) recommended that for handwriting practice women copy out passages of the bible. While children and semi-literate men doubtless frequently made use of their bible for this purpose, Vives prohibits women from using any other text for this end. The British Library collection has twelve Geneva Bibles in which alphabet or writing practice is present. In one black letter quarto the reader has copied out an italic minuscule alphabet in a shaky and messy hand, suggesting he or she is not proficient in handwriting. In another a child scrawls in a seventeenth-century italic hand, ‘James Sparke His Book Colchester Essex Nearly 13 yeares of age wrote bad’.

Around forty percent of the bibles in the collection have sixteenth- or seventeenth-century bindings. These range from luxurious goatskin bindings with elaborate gold tooling and gilded, gauffered edges at the top end of the market, to very cheap reversed sheepskin bindings at the other end. One or two readers have their initials displayed on the binding, such as John Evelyn. Quite a high proportion of the bibles have trade bindings. As David McKitterick points out, few bible bindings of this period, quarto or folio, tended to be very elaborate, but rather ‘the usual decoration was blind-tooled, restricted to fillets and one or two rolls and ornamentals’.

In a corpus of the size of the British Library collection of Geneva Bibles, we can begin to generalize from these observations, to reconstruct an early modern readership of the Geneva Bible, and reading practices associated with it. While readers can be seen following the

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32 Cressy, p. 51.
33 The Bible, etc. (1598), BL 3051.cc.6.(2).
34 The Bible, etc. (1597), BL 464.c.5.(1).
35 The Bible, etc. (1602), BL 3052.cc.9.
36 Sig. 9.
advice on ‘How to take profite by reading’, Geneva Bibles also demonstrably played multiple roles in addition to presenting the scriptures, even for the same owner, such as that of family heirloom, site of family history, prop to enhance literacy, paper for accounts, supernatural healer, or place to inscribe prayer. From the perspective of the British Library collection, early modern men and women can be seen fashioning both themselves as readers, and their bibles as objects of daily life.