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### **JOHN ROGERS AND THE BIBLE**

By T. B. Fowler

One of the lesser known Reformers and Bible translators was John Rogers. Rogers played an important part in the events which helped to determine the religious destiny of the nation. True, it was Miles Coverdale who was entrusted with the task of preparing the translation of the Bible intended by Henry VIII as his specific and wholly personal gift to the Church and the people. But Coverdale's version was based upon the work produced by Rogers under the name of Matthew, reaching its completion in 1537.

Rogers was on terms of friendship with Tyndale whom he had met at Antwerp, and when in 1535 the latter was betrayed and led off to prison and the stake, he handed over to Rogers his incomplete translation of the Old Testament.

#### **Version of the whole Bible**

Already an ardent convert to the Protestant faith, Rogers found in the responsibility with which he was entrusted the very stimulus needed for the development of his scholarship and industry. He had not, perhaps, the same strong simplicity and homely vigour of style that enabled Tyndale to establish a standard of biblical translation into English, but what he lacked in this respect he made up for in clearness of insight and understanding.

The task of preparing for the Press an English version of the whole Bible, including Tyndale's translation of the New Testament which had been issued ten years earlier, absorbed his energies for the best part of a year.

Tyndale's manuscript of the Old Testament extended no further than the end of the Book of Jonah. Rogers did not use it in its entirety, but relied on Tyndale's translation only from the second book of Chronicles. For the rest of the Old Testament and the Apocrypha he borrowed from Miles Coverdale, whose text he adapted to his own requirements, while the "Prayer of Manasses" in the Apocrypha was an independent version of his own from the French Bible printed at Neuchatel by Pierre de Wingle in 1535.

All the time the production was being advanced the general apprehension and alarm excited by the persecution of Tyndale was uppermost in the minds of the Protestants, and the suggestion is that by way of precaution against attracting the same direct attention on the part of vindictive enemies, Rogers adopted the pseudonym "Thomas Matthew".

#### **Basis of the Bishop's Bible**

So it happened that Roger's Bible appeared with the title: "The Byble whych is all the Scripture in whych are contayned the Olde and Newe Testament truly and purely translated into Englysh by Thomas Matthew MDXXXVII, set forth with the Kinge's most gracyous Lyce(n)ce".

The volume, containing 1,110 folio pages, double columns, was printed in black letter type. The printer was Jacob von Meteren, of Antwerp, who introduced a wood engraving of the title, together with a drawing of Adam and Eve, from the actual blocks used in the Dutch Bible, printed at Lubeck, in 1553.

The Dedication, as much a concession to the vanity as to the arrogance of Henry VIII, also bore the signature of “Thomas Matthew”, and, as a consequence, after the appearance of the publication Rogers became known as “Rogers alias Matthew”.

Besides Coverdale, other Bible-makers made free use of Rogers’ publication, and proof of its far-reaching influence was afforded by its liberal adaptation by the compilers of the Bishop’s Bible in 1568, an issue which paved the way for the classical English translation represented by the “Authorized Version” of 1612.

In spite of rivals, Rogers’ Bible enjoyed a wonderful run of popularity. Two extra editions, one in five volumes, were published in 1538 and 1540 respectively, and of the latter no existing copy is known. Again in 1549 there were two reprints, and the last publication was made in 1551, when Edward VI, Henry VIII’s son by his third queen, Jane Seymour, had been on the throne for four years.

### **Original Commentary**

One of the distinguishing features of Roger’s Bible was the Preface, occupying twenty-six folio pages, including not only “A Kalendar and Almanack” for eighteen years from 1538, but an “exhortacyon onto the Studye of the Holy Scripture”, and “A table of the pryncypall matters contained in the Byble in whych the readers may fynde and practyse many commune places”.

Taken in conjunction with the original marginal notes, the prefatory matter gave the whole publication the characteristics of “a dictionary, a concordance and a commentary”.

There had been earlier examples of concordances. As far back as 1244 a certain Hugo de Sancto Caro, with the assistance of other Dominican monks, had made a Concordance of the Vulgate, while a Greek Concordance of the New Testament and Septuagint was prepared by Euthalios of Rhodes about the year 1300, only to be lost.

No commentary on the English Bible had, however, previously existed, and Rogers’ innovation was welcomed though its value was lessened by the provocative nature of some of his notes and additions. He would have done better from a general point of view had he restricted himself to simple elucidation, supplying an obvious need, instead of allowing himself to drift so deeply into controversial issues.

As it was, while he provided a profitable inspiration for future commentators, he only made himself a marked man.

### **Martyrdom at Smithfield**

While, after about fourteen years’ absence, he returned to England with sympathies steadily crystallizing into the sternest Calvinism, he became immediately absorbed in current conflicts. It is true, reality had been given to Wycliffe’s dream of wider popular knowledge of the Scriptures, but the old enmities remained, and Rogers was in no mind to shirk what he regarded as his responsibilities.

At St Paul’s Cross he denounced the misuse of the properties of the suppressed monasteries. His refusal to comply with the regulations respecting the use of vestments led to his suspension from the divinity lectureship at St Paul’s. Three days after Queen Mary’s arrival in London he boldly condemned “all pestilent popery, idolatry, and superstition”.

At the instigation of Bonner, the Bishop of London, he was removed to Newgate. Then, when brought to trial, Gardiner sentenced him to death as an excommunicated person and a heretic, brutally refusing his request to be allowed to see his wife.

On the morning of February 4th, 1555, he was led to the stake, but not before Bonner had formally degraded him from the priesthood by directing his canonical dress to be torn piecemeal from his shoulders. Rogers was burnt alive at Smithfield.

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