

## TRANSLATORS OF THE ENGLISH BIBLE

### JOHN ROGERS

With one exception all the men chiefly responsible for the translation or promotion of the first six editions of the Holy Scriptures in English in the 16th century were put to death. Tyndale was martyred at Vilvorde in 1536; Thomas Cromwell, who helped to promote the translations of Coverdale, Rogers and Taverner, was executed in 1540; John Rogers, otherwise known as Thomas Matthew, died at the stake in 1555, the first victim of the persecutions in the reign of Mary; and Cranmer, who helped to secure the authorisation of Matthew's Bible and the "Great Bible", died in the flames at Oxford in the same year. Coverdale, whose life and liberty were more than once threatened, alone survived to continue his ministry in the reign of Elizabeth I and died at the age of 81 in 1569.

Among these distinguished servants of God the editor of "Matthew's Bible" is probably the one who is the least remembered today, but his place in the history of the English Bible is of the highest importance. Bishop Ryle justly remarked of the translators that Tyndale received the credit he deserved, Coverdale rather more than he deserved — and Rogers much less. In his "Facts and Men" Ryle concludes his brief biography of Rogers — "He left behind him a name which ought to be held in honour by all Protestants as long as the world stands".

In the "*Annals of the English Bible*" Anderson expresses some regret that the 300th anniversary of the English Bible celebrated in 1835 to commemorate Coverdale's Bible was not postponed until 1837 to mark the anniversary of the translation that underlies all subsequent translations up to the Authorised Version. He gives Rogers the credit for "the introduction of Tyndale's Bible to his countrymen, so peacefully, easily, and effectually accomplished, after all the blood and turmoil of the past".

#### **With Tyndale at Antwerp**

John Rogers was born near Birmingham about 1500 A.D. and studied at Pembroke Hall, Cambridge, where he was contemporary with Ridley and Bradford, when the preaching of Latimer began to be heard there. His reputation for learning brought him to the notice of Cardinal Wolsey, who made him a Junior Canon of "Cardinal's College" (Christ Church). He was soon afterwards ordained, but held no charge until in 1532 he became incumbent of a London Church, from which he resigned in 1534 to become Chaplain to the Merchant Adventurers in the English House at Antwerp, where William Tyndale was then residing.

A year or two later Rogers married Adriana de Weyden, a relative, probably a sister, of Jacob van Meteren's wife. According to Copinger the Bible edited by *Rogers* under the name of *Matthew* was printed by Van Meteren in Antwerp in 1537, but this is not known with certainty. At Antwerp Rogers would have become acquainted with Grafton and Whitchurch who financed the printing of his Bible.

Rogers was in contact with Tyndale for only a few months before his betrayal and arrest, but a close bond seems to have been established, and Rogers was able to give some assistance to Tyndale in his literary labours. Rogers has been described as the "literary executor of Tyndale", and Demaus confirms that "there is no reason whatever for disbelieving the uniform tradition which affirms that before his death Tyndale had completed the translation of the Old Testament to the end of the Books of Chronicles. . . and that this part of the work was transmitted to Rogers and printed by him along with Tyndale's Pentateuch and New Testament in "Matthew's Bible".

#### **His ministry in Germany**

As a married "priest" and friend of Tyndale, Rogers would not have been safe for lone at Antwerp, and shortly after his marriage he moved to Wittenberg in Germany, where he was in close touch with Lutheran divines, particularly Melancthon, four of whose books he translated into English. Melancthon's letter recommending him to the Lutheran Church at Dietmarsh in N.W.

Germany introduces him simply as “Master John, an Englishman”, and the name of Rogers and a reference to his martyrdom are to be found in the archives of Dietmarsh.

In 1543 Rogers became pastor at Meldorf and was Superintendent of the District of Meldorf until the spring of 1548. He is described as “a godly and zealous man, who preached with singular piety on the end of the world and the nearness of the last day.”

### **The Reformer in England**

On the accession of Edward VI in 1547 Rogers returned to England and lodged for a time in the home of Whitchurch, where in August 1548 he wrote the preface to Melancthon’s book — “The Weighing of the Interim”. During Edward’s reign Rogers received many marks of favour from those in authority, but his courageous advocacy of Protestantism marked him out as an early victim in the persecutions which followed in the reign of Mary Tudor. In 1548 he became Rector of St. Matthew’s in Friday Street, in 1550 Rector of St. Margaret Moses and Vicar of St. Sepulchre, where he joined with the wardens in destroying the rood-loft, and in 1551 Bishop Ridley made him a Prebend of St. Paul’s and also appointed him to the lectureship in divinity in the Cathedral. There are also indications in the writings of Ridley that he made Rogers one of his chaplains.

When Mary came to the throne an order of the Privy Council required Rogers to keep to his house and described him as a “seditious preacher”, and on January 27th, 1554 he was sent to Newgate prison, where, according to Bishop Hooper, “he was treated worse and more vilely than the veriest slave.” Almost exactly a year later he was condemned as a heretic, and the sentence against him accused him of teaching “that the catholic Church of Rome is the church of antichrist; also that in the sacrament of the altar there is not, substantially nor really, the natural body and blood of Christ”. He was condemned to death, degraded by Bishop Bonner, and burned at the stake at Smithfield, the first of the Manan martyrs, of whom his fellow martyr Bradford said, “He broke the ice valiantly”.

### **His testimony at the stake**

Shortly before his death he managed to send a message to Bishop Hooper who was also in prison, and it seems that Rogers thought they would be burned together — “there was never little fellow better would stick to a man than he would to Hooper.” At Smithfield one of the Sheriffs asked if Rogers would recant, and he replied, “That which I have preached I will seal with my blood”. When the fire had taken hold upon his legs and shoulders, as one feeling no hurt, he washed his hands in the flame as though it had been cold water, lifting up his hands to heaven until the fire consumed them.

The French Ambassador Noailles wrote — “This day was performed the confirmation of the alliance between the Pope and this kingdom, by a public and solemn sacrifice of a preaching Doctor named Rogers, who has been burned alive for being a Lutheran, but he dies persisting in his opinion, his children comforting him in such a manner that it seemed as if he had been led to a wedding.”

Rogers wrote a detailed account of his examinations by the Roman Catholic Bishops and concealed it in his prison quarters. When his widow came with their son Daniel to collect her husband’s belongings they found the papers hidden in a dark corner under some steps, and Foxe printed them all in his “Acts and Monuments”. Daniel was then about 13 years old. He studied later at Wittenberg under Melancthon and also at Oxford, where, like his father, he acquired a reputation for learning.

### **His last letter from prison**

A few days before his death Rogers wrote from prison, “Desiring the prayers of all Christ’s true members, the true sons of the unfeigned catholic church, that the Lord God of all consolation will now be my comfort, aid, strength, buckler, and shield; as also of all my brethren that are in the same case and distress, that I and all they may despise all manner of threats and cruelty, and even the bitter burning fire . . . and stick like true soldiers to our dear and loving Captain, Christ, our only

Redeemer and Saviour, and also the true Head of the Church. For this I most heartily, and at the present with weeping tears. . . beseech you all to pray; and also if I die, to be good to my poor and honest wife, being a poor stranger, and all my little souls, hers and my children. . . “

His wife and their “little souls”, eleven children, met him on the way to Smithfield and witnessed his death at the stake, the first in Mary’s reign to show that the grace of God was sufficient to sustain a believer even in the fire.

### **Rogers the editor of “Matthew’s Bible”**

Foxe relates that at Antwerp Rogers was in company with that worthy martyr of God, William Tyndale, and with Miles Coverdale, and that “in conferring with them the Scriptures he came to great knowledge in the Gospel of God insomuch that he cast off the heavy yoke of popery. . . “Any direct contact with Coverdale must have been brief, for Coverdale was in England while Rogers was in Antwerp. Rogers produced a composite Bible incorporating “The New Testament yet once again corrected by William Tyndale”, which had appeared in 1535, together with Tyndale’s Pentateuch of 1530, and the books from Joshua to 2 Chronicles, prepared from Tyndale’s manuscript, which may have been passed on to him by Thomas Poyntz, Tyndale’s former host at Antwerp. For the rest of the Old Testament and the Apocrypha Rogers followed the work of Coverdale, which he completed by his own translation of the Prayer of Manasses, apparently based on the 1535 French Bible of Olivetan.

Rogers was known as the friend of Tyndale, and in order to conceal Tyndale’s part in the work, the new Bible was put forward under an assumed name, as “Truly and purely translated into English by Thomas Matthew”, in the hope that in this way the Bible would be more acceptable to Henry VIII, who had been bitterly hostile to Tyndale.

### **Cranmer’s commendation of Rogers’ work**

Thomas Cranmer wrote to Cromwell in August 1537 asking him to use his influence with Henry to obtain a licence “that the same may be sold and redde of every person withoute danger. . . until such time that we, the Bishops, shall set forth a better translation, which I thinke will not be till a day after Domesday”. Cranmer added, “As for the translation, so farre as I have redde thereof I like it better than any other translation heretofore made”. When he heard a few days later that the King’s approval had been given, Cranmer wrote again to Cromwell, “You have shewed me more pleasure herein than yf you had given me a thowsande pownde”. Accompanying a further six copies of the Bible Grafton sent a letter to Cromwell referring to Cranmer’s joy on hearing of Henry’s consent — “the tydinges thereof dyd hym more good than the gyfte of 10,000 pownde . . . “ “Matthew’s Bible” then went forth, “with the King’s most gracious licence”, including Tyndale’s prologue to the Epistle to the Romans, based on Martin Luther’s, and Protestant marginal notes, some of which wert borrowed from the French reformer Olivetan and the commentaries of Pellican. The preliminary matter included a “Table of the principal matters contained in the Bible”, extending to 26 pages, also translated from Olivetan. The margins contained about 2000 notes, some written by Rogers, some by Coverdale, and many by Tyndale, Luther, Pagninus, Erasmus, Lefèvre and Bucer. Many of these notes are sufficiently controversial to make one wonder why Henry did not insist upon a version without marginal commentaries. “An exhortation unto the study of the Holy Scripture, gathered out of the Bible”, signed with the initials of John Rogers, is the only direct reference to the one who was chiefly responsible for the compilation of the volume.

Anderson emphasizes the exercise of God’s providence in over-ruling the obstacles and opposition, so that Cranmer overcame his timidity to make his bold request; Henry quietly accepted a Bible containing the work of Tyndale; Cromwell’s hostility to Tyndale’s work was also overcome; Tunstal, who would have stood against it, was afraid to come to London because of the plague; the Bishops of London and Lincoln remained neutral; Gardiner, who would have persuaded Henry to reject the Bible, was in France; no sessions of Parliament or Convocation were held that year; and

the result was that this compendium of Protestant translations and annotations was actually approved and authorised by the King little more than a year after the martyrdom of Tyndale.

Grafton brought only one Bible with him as a specimen, and his servant followed with more. The first went to Cranmer, and the next six as a gift to Cromwell, "For your Lordship's moving our most gracious Prince to the allowing and licensing of such a work, hath wrought such an act worthy of praise, as never was mentioned in any chronicle in this realm ..." Grafton then pleaded with Cromwell to license the Bible under the Privy Seal, which Cromwell at first considered unnecessary, but Grafton explained that he had spent a vast sum on the printing of 1500 books, and he feared that corrupted "pirate" editions might be printed on the continent, especially "by Dutchmen . . . which can neither speak good English, nor yet write none", and that poor quality paper, poor type, poor ink, and poor proof correction would undermine the reliability of the English Bible.

### **Scholarship and Protestantism of John Rogers**

"Matthew's Bible" shows evidence of more advanced knowledge of Hebrew than Tyndale's, and its learned editor quotes Rabbinic authority, rejects unauthorised additions in Coverdale's Psalms, and translates Hallelujah — *Praise the Everlasting*. He put Hebrew letters before the sections of Psalm 119, where Coverdale had the English forms Aleph, Beth, etc. He explains technical words in the headings of the Psalms, refers to the Chaldee paraphrase of Job 6, Rabbi Abraham on Job 19, and Kimchi on Psalm 3. "*Selah*" is carefully explained — "This word, after Rabbi Kimchi, was a sign or token of lifting up the voice, and also a monition and advertisement to enforce thought and mind earnestly to give heed to the meaning of the verse unto which it is added. Some will that it signify *perpetually or verily*." In the Song of Solomon he introduces the various sections, *The Voyce of the Church; Christ to the Synagogue; The Spousesse to her companions*; using some of the headings from Wyclif's Bible. Rogers also prefixed the letters of the Hebrew alphabet to the verses of Lamentations to show the alphabetic arrangement.

Characteristic examples of the more robust Protestant notes are found accompanying the text and the preliminary matter; e.g. on *confession* — "Judas which confessed hymselfe to the prestes of the lawe and not to God is damned"; on *purgatory* — "It is not in the Bible, but the purgation and remission of our sins is made us by the abundant mercy of God"; on the Apocrypha, the preface asserts the inferiority of these books to the canonical books. Many of the notes are not controversial, e.g. "The chief duty of the Sabbath is to minister the fodder of the Word to simple souls, and to be pitiful over such as laboured sore all the week long.. ." (*Jeremiah 17*).

Woodcut illustrations appear before each chapter of Revelation similar to those in the second edition of Tyndale's New Testament, and the illustration on the title page, attributed to a pupil of Albrecht Dürer, was taken from a German Bible published a few years before.

Among the authorities there is much disagreement regarding the place where *Matthew's Bible* was printed. Fox and Strype say *Hamburg*; Lewis — *Marburg in the province of Hesse*; Mombert was sure that it was printed in *Marlborow, that is Wittenberg*; Levi says "Matthew's Bible was the first *printed in England*"; A. S. Herbert — "Conjecture points to *Antwerp*". This conjecture is supported by good evidence, for Grafton sent specimen copies of the Bible to Cromwell by the hands of a servant who had just arrived *from Flanders*. Although Darlow and Moule tentatively named Cromm of Antwerp as the printer, Copinger is more probably right in naming Van Meteren of the same city. There are indications that the work was delayed by lack of funds when the printing had proceeded as far as Isaiah, and Grafton and Whitchurch shared the financial responsibility for its completion.

### **Influence upon subsequent English Versions**

Because of the highly controversial matter in some of the introductions and notes, Cromwell commissioned Coverdale to revise the whole work, suppressing or toning down the more provocative material. This revision was approved by the King on the recommendations of Cranmer and Cromwell, and became known as the "*Great Bible*". The second edition with a preface by

Cranmer, is often referred to as "*Cranmer's Bible*", but he was not personally involved in the actual work of revision. These Bibles and the *Geneva Bible* of 1560, the *Bishop's Bible* of 1568, and the *Authorised Version* of 1611, all built upon the foundation provided by *Matthew's Bible*.

This Bible was the crowning fruit of a generation of competent and devoted scholarship in England, France, Germany, Switzerland and the Netherlands. Its chief translator, its chief reviser, its chief advocates, and many of its first readers, died in the flames of the martyrs' fires, but their work lived on to be used under God's blessing for the spiritual enlightenment and enrichment of English readers throughout the world for more than four hundred years. The Authorised Version has been rightly commended for its fidelity and literary excellence, and its translators humbly acknowledged their own debt to those faithful and godly men who laid the foundation so well in the previous century. Among those "wise master-builders" John Rogers occupied a distinguished place, and his enduring work is worthy to be kept in remembrance with thankfulness to God, the Divine Author of the Word.

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