Penn’s “Matthew” Bible (1537)

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Abstract

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Penn’s “Matthew” Bible (1537)

[Ed. Note: This is the first part of a series by participants in the Rare Book School course on “The Bible and Histories of Reading,” taught by Peter Stallybrass with the assistance of Lynne Farrington, on a single bible at Penn: The Byble, which is all the Holy Scripture: in whych are containeyd the Olde and Newe Testament, truly and purely translated into Englysh by Thomas Matthew (Printed in Antwerp by Thomas Crum? for the London Booksellers Richard Grafton and Edward Whitchurch, 1537), STC 2066, UPenn RBC Folio BS150 1537]

In the Summer of 2016, Philadelphia hosted four courses for the Rare Book School, three of them held in the Kislak Center on the 6th floor of the Van Pelt Library. The participants in the seminar on “The Bible and Histories of Reading” worked on a wide range of manuscripts and books in Penn’s collections, from fourteenth-century books of hours to nineteenth-century salesmen’s sample bibles (used in door to door book-selling, promoting the “same” bible in different bindings and with a variety of illustrations and additional materials at a wide range of prices). But the group also worked on the history of one particular bible from its printing in sixteenth-century Europe to its arrival in the USA in the nineteenth century. The specific copy that we studied is a “Matthew” Bible, printed in 1537. The bible is so named because it claims on the title page that it was “truly and purely translated into Englysh by Thomas Matthew.”
But who was “Thomas Matthew”? It was already known in the sixteenth century that the name was a pseudonym. John Foxe wrote in the 1570 edition of his Acts and Monuments:

“thou hast louing reader, to note and vnderstand that in those dayes there were ij. sundry Bibles in Englishe, [p. 1402] printed and set forth, bearing divers titles, and printed in diuers places. The first was called Thomas Mathews Bible, printed at Hambrough, about the yeare of our Lord. 1532. the correctour of whiche printe was then John Rogers… In the translation of this Bible, the greatest doer was in dede William Tyndall, who with the helpe of Myles Couerdale had translated all the bookes therof, except only the Apocripha, and certein notes in the margent, which were added after. But because the sayd William Tyndall in the meane tyme was apprehended before this Bible was fully perfected, it was thought good to them whiche had the doyng therof, to chaunge the name
of William Tyndall, because that name then was odious, and to father it by a straunge name of Thomas Mathewe, John Rogers the same tyme beyng correctour to the printe, who had then translated the residue of be Apocrypha, and added also certeine notes thereto in the margent, and thereof came it to bee called Thomas Mathewes Bible.[1]”

If “Thomas Matthews” was a pseudonym, was it the pseudonym of Tyndale or of John Rogers? Both had reason to conceal their names while the translation was in the making, but in 1537, when the bible was printed, Tyndale had already been executed as a heretic. Although Tyndale’s name would have made the book impossible to market in England, it was Rogers who had the more immediate reason to conceal his identity, given that the fate of this revised translation was by no means assured. Moreover, Rogers was repeatedly referred to during his later prosecution for heresy under Mary Tudor as “John Rogers, alias Matthew.” The initials “I R” (“I” and “J” being the same letter in the sixteenth century, so presumably standing for “John Rogers”) are printed from large and elaborate woodblock letters below “An exhortacyon to the studye of the holy Scriptures gathered out of the Byble” (sig. *4).
Such fine and elaborate woodblock letters as these were not being cut in London, which was far behind Antwerp in terms of printing technology in the sixteenth century – and it was indeed in Antwerp that the bible was printed. In 1534, Rogers had arrived in Antwerp, where he was appointed chaplain to the English merchants at the English House. William Tyndale, who had already translated the New Testament from Greek into English (1526), as well as the Pentateuch from Hebrew into English (1530), was at that time living in the English House. Even after his arrest in 1534, Tyndale continued to work on the parts of the bible that he had not yet translated, above all the historical books. But it is probable in our view that he had support from other biblical scholars, including Rogers, and there has been perhaps too great a tendency to attribute most of the new work to Tyndale alone. In addition to his work as co-translator, Rogers added prefaces, marginal notes, cross-references, and chapter summaries, largely drawn from the French translations of Lefèvre d’Étaples and Pierre Robert Olivétan that Martin de Keyser had published in Antwerp (1530, 1534, 1535). If it is the work of Rogers that the elaborate “I R” initials point to, it is above all his biography that the Penn copy of the Matthew Bible celebrates through the later additions pasted into it.

By the nineteenth century, when Penn’s copy was brought to the United States, “John Rogers,” whose identity was deliberately obscured except for his initials in 1537, had become a household name – nowhere more so than in New England. John Singleton Copley painted a portrait of him in 1759, which was donated to the Massachusetts Historical Society in 1854. Several further copies of Copley’s painting, with the inscription “Martyrio Coronatus, 4 Feb. 1555” (“crowned as a martyr, 4 February 1555”), were also made. An early painting of Rogers also hangs in the museum of the Worcester Historical Society.

—I R,” standing for “John Rogers”
A lithograph of this Worcester painting was pasted into the front of Penn’s Matthew Bible in the nineteenth century. The lithograph was printed with the following text:

“John Rogers the Martyr; The Coadjutor of Tyndale: who under the name of ‘Thomas Matthew,’ translated in part and revised the Text, from the Hebrew and Greek, arranged the Canon, compiled notes, summaries, a rudimentary concordance and commentary, and published, August 4, 1537, the first Authorised Version of

The description above helps to account for the specific interest in John Rogers in North America, since not only was he a “puritan” who had suffered martyrdom for his beliefs but his namesake Thomas Rogers (in fact, unrelated) could be directly connected to the founding colonists. Thomas Rogers, a member of the English separatist church in Leiden, did indeed move to New England, but it is unlikely, although not impossible, that he brought a painting of John Rogers with him.

Probably at about the same time that the lithograph of the Worcester painting was added to the Penn bible, another depiction of Rogers was pasted in on the following blank leaf. This second portrait is an engraving by the Flemish draughtsman and engraver Crispin van der Passe (c1565-1637), who began working in Antwerp, but, as an Anabaptist, fled from the Counter-Reformation city to Cologne in 1589, before fleeing again to Utrecht in 1611. The two images on the blank leaves at the beginning of Penn’s “Matthew” Bible are clearly intended as author-portraits: even though their texts relate primarily to Rogers’s martyrdom, their positioning asserts Rogers’s role as “author” of the “Matthew” Bible.
Below van der Passe’s engraving is a Latin couplet by the Dutch antiquarian and humanist, Arnoldus Buchelius (=Aernout van Buchell), together with his "AB" monogram:
"IOHANNES ROGERSIVS MART:

TE PIETAS ALIUM JANE HINC ABDUXIT IN ORBEM

MARTYREM VT ET PATRIAE REDDERET INDE TUAE. AB"

["John Rogers, Martyr. With you, John, piety has been drawn away from here to another world [i.e. heaven], restoring you to your fatherland as a martyr. AB"]

Buchelius (1565–1641) was from Utrecht, so presumably the engraving was done between 1611, when van der Passe arrived in Utrecht, and 1620, when it was published in Henry Holland’s Heroologia Anglica.

It was not, however, such sophisticated representations of John Rogers that turned him into a household name in America. On the contrary, they are themselves testimony to the fame that he had already achieved because of his prominent place in the single most popular children’s primer in colonial America. The New-England Primer, of which perhaps five million copies were printed before the American Revolution, gives an extraordinary and striking prominence to Rogers not only as the author of a long poem that he supposedly wrote shortly before his execution but also because of the woodcuts in nearly every edition that depict him being burned to death in front of his wife and children. Here are three such images from Penn’s small collection of primers.[3]
Like so much of the greatest Christian art prior to the Renaissance, these images for children are resolutely anachronistic. Very occasionally, one finds a soldier wearing armor who might indeed have come from the sixteenth century. But the great majority of these cuts show an eighteenth-century clergyman, an eighteenth-century wife, and eighteenth-century soldiers. If the cuts are dated, it is because they continued to be used for decades after they were made. But the stress is upon the present: yes, John Rogers was executed in 1554, but it is also happening right now.

The caption, on the other hand, insists upon historical distance, including the specific date of Rogers’s execution:

“Mr. John Rogers Minister of S. Sepulchers Church in London, was the first Martyr in Queen Maries Reign, and was burnt in Smithfield, February the 14. 1554. His Wife with nine small Children, and one at her Breast followed him to the Stake, with which sorrowful sight he was not in the least daunted, but with wonderful patience dyed Couragiously for the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Some few days before his Death he writ the following Exhortation, and sent it to his Children.[4]”

There follows a long poem, actually written by John Bradford but always attributed to Rogers in the primers. It begins:

GIVE EAR MY CHILDREN TO MY WORDS,
WHOM GOD HATH DEARLY BOUGHT,
LAY UP HIS LAWS WITHIN YOUR HEARTS
AND PRINT THEM IN YOUR THOUGHT.

The significance of John Rogers when the Matthew Bible was printed in 1537 was nothing compared to his major role in colonial America after his martyrdom and his textual resurrection in *The New-England Primer*. Penn’s Matthew Bible inscribes both Rogers’s early pseudonymous history and his later prominence in North America as a Protestant martyr.

It is important to stress that the two images of Rogers were only pasted in centuries after the bible’s supposed editor, “Thomas Matthews,” had been interpreted as a pseudonym for John Rogers. From this perspective, authorship is part of a book’s paratext – an ascription made by readers, editors, publishers, printers, historians and bibliographers. To put it another way, authorship is retrospective rather than a point of origin, even when such an ascription is correct. Penn’s Matthew Bible is itself a striking example of such a retrospective authoring, transforming a bible compiled by the unknown “Thomas Matthew” into a bible made by a man who, due to the hundreds of editions of and extracts from John Foxe’s “Book of Martyrs,” had been established as among the most famous of Protestant martyrs.

Despite the added author-portraits of John Rogers, Penn’s Matthew Bible offers alternative narratives about the bible’s authorship. It was undoubtedly William Tyndale who was both the major inspiration in the sixteenth century for the translation of the bible into English and also the translator who laid the major foundations for all subsequent Protestant translations up to and including the King James Bible in 1611. And it is surely his crucial role that is marked by the “W T” that appears at the end of the Old Testament, the initials cut for the same alphabet as the “I R” of “Iohn Rogers”[3] :

Images of Rogers’ death together with the caption and the poem appear in most *New-England Primers*, although with a surprising variety of small differences, including the number of Roger’s children and the date of his death. We take the text above from the first version that we have discovered of the caption and
At the same time, the Matthew Bible suggests two quite different starting points for the “authorship” of the printed book. Most but not all books require texts, although fifteenth- and sixteenth-century texts are often drawn from dead writers (Cicero, Augustine, Petrarch, Wyclif), including, of course, the unknown authors of the biblical texts that Tyndale and Rogers were translating. But even if living writers produce manuscripts, money is required to turn them into printed books, and substantial quantities of money to turn a manuscript into the 1,500 copies of such a substantial book as a folio bible. There is simply no way that either Tyndale or Rogers could have even begun such a massive task without major financial backing. This may have been forthcoming in the first instance from Thomas Poyntz and other rich merchants in Antwerp who were active among the Reformers. But at some point, two London booksellers, Richard Grafton and Edward Whitchurch, decided to play an active role in financing and selling the new translation. There was only one complete English bible on the market at the time (Miles Coverdale’s) and Grafton and Whitchurch had no hand in it. There was every chance that an “improved” translation would supersede the previous one, particularly if the publishers could get royal support. Grafton accordingly paid £500 towards the printing of 1,500 copies by Thomas Crum in Antwerp. The role of Grafton and Whitchurch in the making of
the bibles is marked by the initials "R G" and "E W" from the same woodcut alphabet as the "I R" and "W T" of Rogers and Tyndale.

Two letters that Richard Grafton wrote to Thomas Cromwell reveal how precarious the publisher believed his investment to be.[5] In the second of the letters, Grafton is concerned that other printers will reprint "the same work againe in a lesser [i.e. smaller] letter, to the entent that they maye sell their lytle bookes better chepe." He begs accordingly for a privilege of a minimum of three years during which time no one else will be allowed to reprint the new translation, "for my whole lyuynge lyeth hervpon." Failing the granting of such a privilege, Grafton requests Cromwell to persuade the king to require that every clergyman should own a copy and that "euery abbaye" should have six copies.

Money alone was not the issue. Equally important was authorization. Indeed, from the perspective of the sixteenth century, the "author" could be considered to be the person who "authorized" a book – and for Grafton, authorization came in the first instance from Thomas Cromwell, who in turn required the
authorization of Henry VIII. By early August 1537, the king had already seen a
copy of the new edition, with its dedication to him. So for the first time ever, an
English monarch officially licensed an English translation of the bible – thus
making the Matthew Bible the first “authorized” version. On 13 August, Thomas
Cranmer, the Archbishop of Canterbury, wrote rapturously to Cromwell, thanking
him that “your Lordeship at my request hath not only exhibited the Bible which I
sent vnto you, to the Kingses maiestie, but also hath obteined of his grace, that
the same shalbe alowed by his auctoritie to be bowght and redde within this
realme... [Y]ow have shewed me more pleasour herin than yf you had given me
a thowsande pownde.” It was, of course, possible to sell books secretly,
smuggling them into England, but that was both dangerous and unlikely to be
profitable on a large scale. 1,500 copies of a bible could only be distributed if
there was active political support for such an enterprise – support that came in
the first instance from Cranmer and Cromwell, but that required the imprimatur
of the king.

How important the king’s “auctoritie” was for the bible “to be bowght and redde
within his realme” is revealed by a letter from Grafton to Cromwell on 28 August
1537. Consolidating his relation to his patron, Grafton sent Cromwell six bibles
“as my symple gyfte.” But in exchange, he requests that the license that the
king has granted be officially “lycensed vnder your preuy seale.” Such a license
“shuld be a defence at this present and in tyme to come for all enemyes and
aduersayes of the same.” Grafton was equally concerned for his political safety
and his financial profit – and with good reason. Clearly, given the dedication of
the bible to Henry VIII before he had even seen the book, editor and publishers
alike had wagered on its being approved, no doubt with the support of Cranmer
and Cromwell. Such is the implication of the letters that appear below the
dedication to the king: “H R” standing for “Henricus Rex.”
These two letters are, of course intended as a compliment to Henry VIII. Yet they can also be appear as profoundly shocking. First, they put the king on the same level as the translators (Tyndale and Rogers) and the publishers (Grafton and Whitchurch), since the letters for all their initials are drawn from the same woodcut alphabet, with no differentiation in size. Second, they are both presumptuous and premature – as if the king had already given his approval before he had even seen the book and its dedication to him. But we do know that the dedication was already printed when the king examined the bible, because Cranmer explicitly referred to it when he sent a copy to Cromwell, who had promised to show it to the king.[6]
But there is a crucial point that has not to our knowledge been previously addressed. Most copies that we have seen of the Matthew Bible, including the copy at Penn, have the following words at the bottom of the title page: “Set forth with the Kinges most gracious lycence.”
It is inconceivable, however, that the copy that Henry VIII saw and approved already contained such a license. The “H R” at the bottom of the dedication was at least the kind of flattery with which Henry, like every other monarch, was familiar. But it would have been a treasonable offense to claim a royal license prior to the granting of it. There are, indeed, copies of the Matthew Bible in which the license does not appear.[7] And it must have been such a copy that was presented to the king.

But this opens up the question of whether the title page had already been printed in Antwerp with the license, trusting that the license would come through, or, on the contrary, whether most of the title pages were added after the king had approved the bible. A more complete examination of surviving copies may help to provide an answer. At the same time, there is a striking feature of the title-page licenses that we have seen: the variability of the color in which they are printed. Penn’s copy is printed in black ink, but some other copies are printed in red ink. John Foxe had clearly seen copies with the license in red, because he writes:

“after [the Matthew Bible] was imprinted and presented to the Lord Cromwell, and the Lord Cranmer Archbyshop of Caunterbury, who lyked very well of it, the sayd Cromwell presented it to the kyng, and obteined that the same might freely passe to bee read of his subiectes with his graces licence: So that there was printed vpon the same booke, one lyne in read [i.e. red] letters with these wordes: Set forth with the Kinges moste gracious licence. [our italics]”

Sometimes, red ink was simply decorative, as in the very title of the Matthew Bible: “¶ The Byble / which is all the holy Scripture: in which are contayned the Olde and Newe Testament, truly and purely translated into Englysh by Thomas Matthew.” But in calendars, it was crucial for marking “red letter days” – the most important feast days of the Christian year. And it is striking that Foxe
specifically notes the significance of the red ink in the printing of at least some of the licenses.

— Henry VIII’s “lycense” in red ink. Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary

The license was, as Richard Grafton fully realized, the precondition for the success of the Matthew Bible.

The connection between “authorizing” and “authorship” was to be grotesquely magnified in the printing of the revised Matthew Bible – namely, the Great Bible of 1539. The printer’s copy for the Great Bible undoubtedly consisted of printed sheets of the 1537 Matthew Bible with manuscript revisions by Miles Coverdale and others. Whatever revisions were made to the text, by far the most striking change between the Matthew Bible and the Great Bible was in their title pages. The title page of the Matthew Bible, as we have already seen, pointed towards a pseudonymous translator: Thomas Matthew. But the woodcut that surrounded the title page asserted a radically different notion of the bible’s “author”: namely, God. The woodcut was copied from an illustration attributed to Erhard Altdorfer that first appeared in a Lutheran Bible in 1533 (Lübeck: Ludowick Dietz). The general design, now generally called “The Law and the Gospel” or “The Allegory of Law and Grace,” was devised by Lucas Cranach in 1529 following a program laid out by Martin Luther. In the 1537 version of this design, the left half of the design depicts the Law, beginning with God the Father handing the Ten Commandments to Moses at the top left.
The right half depicts the Gospel or Grace, with Christ, the word made flesh, descending as a baby with a cross over his shoulders to the annunciate Mary. At the bottom of the woodcut, Moses hands a bible to Adam, who is flanked by John the Baptist on the viewer’s right. Both Moses and John point towards the crucified Christ on the right, below which Christ rises from the tomb to triumph over death.

If Henry VIII licenses the bible, God as both Father and incarnate Word is its true author. Compare this to the title page of the Great Bible.
Title page of the Great Bible (1540), Penn
God, it is true, is still at the very top of the page, but he is now squeezed into a tiny space above the central figure of the seated Henry VIII. And it is the king himself who distributes the Word of God, “verbum dei” being printed on the bibles that he hands to Thomas Cranmer on the viewer’s left and Thomas Cromwell on the right.

And what do Henry’s Christian subjects at the bottom of the cut learn from the bible? “VIVAT REX” and “GOD SAVE THE KINGE.”
To conclude, William Tyndale initiated the project of translating the bible into English and was executed as a heretic. John Rogers, under the pseudonym of Thomas Matthew, edited the translations of Tyndale and Coverdale, and would in turn be executed as "John Rogers, alias Matthew, a seditious preacher." Thomas Cranmer and Thomas Cromwell, who, with the publishers Richard Grafton and Edward Whitchurch, were the prime movers in the licensing and sale of the Matthew Bible, were in turn executed. To put it another way, when it came to translating the bible into English, the price of not being anonymous was often the price of one's life. "Authorship," to that extent, can be considered in two radically different ways: as the "authorizing" by God or king; as the compulsory naming of those to whom a text can be attributed in order that they may be punished.
Nowhere are these antithetical notions of authorship more apparent than in the transformation of Henry VIII from the punisher of Protestants to the “author” of an English bible and in the transformation of Thomas Cromwell, without whom the Matthew Bible would never have been “bowght and redde,” into – no one. On 10 June 1540, Cromwell was arrested and imprisoned in the Tower. This was the beginning of his unnaming, as he was systematically stripped of his titles: Lord Privy Seal, Lord Great Chamberlain, Earl of Essex. Henceforth, he was to be known only as “Thomas Cromwell, cloth carder.” On 28 July 1540, without even a trial, he was beheaded. Some time after his execution, the title page for reprintings of the Great Bible was altered: the coat of arms that had identified Cromwell by the titles that he had acquired, printed below his depiction as he distributed the bible, was erased.
1 John Foxe, *Acts and Monuments* (London: John Day, 1570), pp. 1401-2. Foxe is wrong in dating the 1537 Matthew Bible to 1532, but he rightly notes that there were two complete bibles in circulation (the other one being Miles Coverdale’s 1535 edition).

2 The engraving was cut out of Henry Holland’s *Heroologia Anglica* [Arnhem: Printed by Jan Jansson at the expenses of Crispijn van de Passe and Jan Jansson for Henry Holland, London, 1620], where it is inserted between pp. 157 and 158.

3 There are much larger collections of primers in the Free Library of Philadelphia and the Library Company of Philadelphia.

4 Images of Rogers’ death together with the caption and the poem appear in most *New-England Primers*, although with a surprising variety of small differences, including the number of Roger’s children and the date of his death. We take the text above from the first version that we have discovered of the caption and poem (although without the image), which is Benjamin Harris’s *The Protestant Tutor* (London: Printed for Benjamin Harris, 1679), pp. 43-51.

5 The letters between Cromwell, Cranmer and Grafton are all printed in Alfred W. Pollard, *Records of the English Bible: the Documents Relating to the*

6 Thomas Cranmer to Thomas Cromwell, 4 August 1537: “you shall receyue by the bringer herof, a Bible in Englishe, both of a new translacion and of a new prynte, dedicated vnto the Kings Majestie, as farther apperith by a pistle vnto his grace in the begynnynge of the boke, which, in myn opinion is vert well done, and therefore I pray your Lordeship to rede the same” (Pollard, Records, pp. 214-214).

7 The Folger copy has no license, but we have not yet made a systematic study of existing copies. Many of the copies no longer have their original title pages according to the census in Harold H. Hutson and Harold R. Willoughby, "Decisive Data on Thomas Matthew Problems," Journal of Bible and Religion, 6, 2 (Spring, 1938): 77-82 and 121-128, 123-4. Of the 48 copies that they record, 21 have the title page missing, in one it is mutilated, and in one the license has been added in manuscript. For five copies, there is no information and seven other copies are recorded with missing leaves, without specifying what those leaves are. In other words, 21 of 36 examined copies are missing their title pages.
Fantastic study on an extremely rare bible. I think I remember hearing only about a
dozen still exist and of those only about few are all original and complete including
the original title page. One interesting note about this printing was the printer’s
error in the book of John. They forgot to change the marginal heading from Luke on
one page. As far as I have been able to tell, every single copy of an original 1537
Matthew’s bible still in existence has this error. It seems it wasn’t caught and was
likely present for the whole run. Printing was still a very new technology during that
time and printing errors were more common. Sometimes this marginal heading error
in John is crossed out and corrected in hand script, and sometimes there is no
correction at all.
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