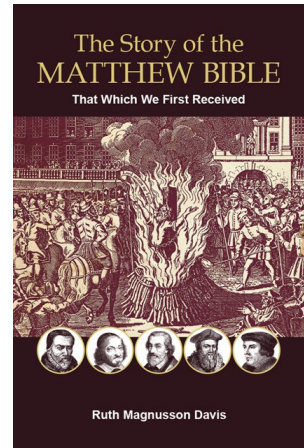


The Puritan Rejection of the Tyndale/Matthew Bible

By R. Magnusson Davis, founder and editor, New Matthew Bible Project

People understand for the most part that the Roman Catholics did not like the Matthew Bible when it appeared in England in 1537. But why did the Puritans reject it, and the Scripture translations of William Tyndale and Myles Coverdale?

The full story of the making of the 1537 Matthew Bible, along with a good look inside this little-known Reformation work, is in my book, *The Story of the Matthew Bible*, available online and through book stores. Briefly, the Matthew Bible, also known as Matthew's Version, was first published in 1537. It was the work of three Englishmen. William Tyndale translated the New Testament and the first half of the Old from Hebrew and Greek. Myles Coverdale translated the other Scriptures and the Apocryphal books, working mainly from the German (Lutheran) Bibles that were newly available. John Rogers then compiled their work, added commentaries and study aids, and oversaw production and publication. He published under the pseudonym "Thomas Matthew"; hence the name.



It is little understood nowadays that the Matthew Bible ("MB") was an early Anglican Bible. By this I mean that it was made in the same spirit as the Book of Common Prayer, the Thirty-nine Articles of Religion (formerly Forty-two), and the Homilies to be read in the Church, which were all drafted for the young CofE between 1549-52 under the oversight of Archbishop Thomas Cranmer. Cranmer was also instrumental in obtaining Henry VIII's licence for the MB to be used in the Church.

Perhaps the least understood thing of all about the Matthew Bible is that not only the Roman Catholics, but also the Puritans disapproved of it, and also its daughter version the Great Bible, which was a minor revision. This article is a preliminary examination of the Puritan rejection. By the end, readers should have a sense of the surprising extent of it. Also, some of the differences between the Mathew Bible and the 1560 Geneva Bible, which was written by and for the Puritans, will be clear. A more complete examination will follow in Part 2 of *The Story*, God willing.

The Matthew Bible was made for use in the young Church of England

After the Act of Supremacy in 1534 confirmed King Henry VIII to be head of the Church under Christ, Cranmer, along with Thomas Cromwell, laboured mightily to build up the new CofE. One of their challenges was getting English Scriptures into the Church. John Rogers, who was well aware of what was happening, published his Bible to meet that need, and to act as a comprehensive teaching resource for a public that was woefully uninstructed in the Christian faith.

The Matthew Bible reveals what historian George Park Fisher called “that reverence for antiquity and the ‘Primitive Church,’ that interest in the fathers, and deference to patristic teaching, which had belonged to the English Reformation from the outset.”¹ In his commentaries, Rogers often referred to the teaching of the Church fathers. His doctrinal notes were confirmed in Cranmer’s Articles of Religion, such as those that argued against purgatory or defended salvation by grace alone. There is little if anything that is in opposition to the Prayer Book or Articles of Religion. (I say “if anything” because I hesitate about Rogers’ sacramental theology.)

The MB also contained the Church Calendar along with an Almanac to calculate the dates of moveable feasts for the years 1538-57. Rogers, as Coverdale and Tyndale had also done, simply assumed that life would be organized around the Calendar and traditional worship services. At the back of the volume was a “Table ... Wherein ye shall find the Epistles and the Gospels after the use of Salisbury.” Tyndale had the same thing in his 1534 New Testament, and even translated the traditional Old Testament passages for reading on the “holy days,” as he called them.

These features of the Matthew Bible, together with its calm though not dogmatic acceptance of episcopacy and the general tenor of its teaching, fit it for the Church that Cranmer built.

But not everyone appreciated it. Like any good Anglican, the Matthew Bible found itself caught between the Roman Catholics and the Puritans.

The Roman Catholics objected to the notes

The Roman Catholics especially resented Rogers’ Protestant notes and commentaries. To appease them, and to settle an English Bible once and for all in the Church – or so it was hoped – Thomas Cromwell commissioned Coverdale as chief editor to work on a new Bible. The Matthew Bible was chosen as the base for a minor revision. Coverdale got to work with his usual dispatch, and in 1539 we received the Great Bible, which became the official version of the young CofE.

My review of the 1540 Great Bible shows that, except in the Psalms, Coverdale kept most of John Rogers’ chapter summaries, with only minor changes. Summaries identify the main message of each chapter, and are important teaching and interpretive tools. They prepare the reader as he approaches the text. By this means, the Great Bible retained some good teaching from the MB. But there were no marginal notes. Even Rogers’ helpful explanations of Hebrew idioms in the Old Testament were omitted. Cromwell desired no notes in order to avoid occasion for controversy. However, as time would tell, this left a vacuum of instruction that the early Puritans, hostile to the CofE, were swift to fill with their notes in the Geneva Bible. And they changed a lot. Furthermore, their notes helped to foment great controversy. As it happened, the Puritan controversy was behind both Queen Elizabeth’s decision to commission the Bishops’ Bible and, later, King James’ own version. They each hoped to displace the troublesome Geneva Bible and diminish its influence.

The early Puritans

A note on terminology: when I use the term “Puritans” for the authors of the Geneva Bible, I mean it in its classic, original sense. It refers to those zealous men who felt called

to “purify” the Church and restore it to its “true” state. The Oxford English Dictionary records the first written use of the word in 1565,² but it was certainly in use before then. A nascent Puritan spirit was manifest in the 1540s in London, but grew in Geneva in the next decade, when the Protestants went into exile during the Marian persecutions.

The Puritans began with attacks on externals – vestment, ceremony, images, and so forth – but soon took aim at the CofE Prayer Book, governance, and Calendar. This was inextricably tied in with their postmillennial doctrine and their mission to grow the Church in power and glory.³ There can be no question about the Puritanism of the authors of the Geneva Bible. Condemnation of ceremony is frequent in their notes, and the groundwork is laid for a Presbyterian form of Church government, postmillennialism, and the rest of the Puritan platform. They may also be considered Calvinists, because they were followers of John Calvin, and I have seen his influence in their commentaries. But it is as yet unclear to me (and not necessary to understand for my purpose here) the extent to which Calvin may have influenced their extremism. He died in 1564, so was certainly alive when they published, but it may be that they were more radical than he.

In any event, the complete Geneva Bible was published in 1560. There is no doubt in my mind that the major reason for its publication was to advance the Puritan cause. It was intended to assist in cleansing, restoring, and making converts to the True Church. Indeed, had the conservatives foreseen the difficulties it would cause, they might rather have tolerated Matthew’s version than suppressed it. It could have checked the Puritan influence.

The Geneva Bible attack on “outward things”

Ceremonies were an especial target of the Geneva notes. I did a computer search of the Psalms in the 1599 version and found notes to the effect that ceremonies are impure (note on Psalm 4:5), and do not belong in New Testament worship any more than candles or “lights” (33:2). They are nothing in respect of real spiritual service (40:6). Numerous comments disdain ceremonies and traditions as “outward” and hypocritical things. They stress that ceremonies were appointed for a time under the law, but under the gospel have been abolished (81:1, 138:2).

The Matthew Bible, on the other hand, accepts ceremonies without question. True, the Matthew men were concerned that ceremonies be rightly regarded, and not abused or needlessly multiplied. The meaning must be clear to the congregation so that the people can participate meaningfully with mind and heart. Tyndale expressly approved of ceremonies in the Church because, as he put it, they “preach” Christ visually, in a way that words cannot.⁴ See Rogers’ simple acceptance of a Lenten tradition arising from the tearing of the temple veil when Jesus died:

Matthew Bible note upon Mark 15:37: This veil that tore in two pieces was a certain cloth that hung in the temple dividing the most holy place from the rest of the temple, as our cloth that is hung up during Lent divides the altar from the rest of the church. The tearing of this veil signified that the shadows of Moses’ law were to vanish away at the flourishing light of the gospel.

But consider how the vitriol in the Geneva Bible summary on Psalm 50 might have affected the people:

Geneva Bible summary of Psalm 50: Because the Church is always full of hypocrites which do imagine that God will be worshipped with outward ceremonies only without the heart: and especially the Jews were of this opinion, because of their figures and ceremonies of the Law, thinking that their sacrifices were sufficient. Therefore the Prophet doth reprove this gross error, and pronounceth the Name of God to be blasphemed where holiness is set in ceremonies. For he declareth the worship of God to be spiritual, whereof are two principal parts, invocation and thanksgiving.

See how lead-in summaries can be used to teach or deceive, to instruct or corrupt! They set the interpretive background for the reader. By way of contrast, below is what Rogers wrote on this Psalm. He does not soft-pedal the prophet's condemnation of false self-righteousness. That would be unfaithful to the text. But note the difference in tone and emphasis. See also how he saw a promise of the gospel that was missing from the Geneva version:

Matthew Bible summary of Psalm 50: He prophesieth that God will call all nations of the earth unto him by the Gospel: And that he will require the confession and praising of his name, and not sacrifice. And how greatly he will abhor them which boast themselves to be religious and holy, and are in deed nothing less [no such thing].

Many Geneva notes also insist that musical instruments have no place in the Church. On Psalm 92:3, which calls for praise with harp and strings, there is a note, "These instruments were then permitted, but at Christ's coming abolished." At Psalm 150:3, which calls for praise with trumpet, viol, and harp, the note says, "Exhorting the people only to rejoice in praising God, he maketh mention of those instruments which by God's commandment were appointed in the old Law, but under Christ the use there-of is abolished in the Church." This teaching



The Puritans attack Church furnishings.

inflamed superstitious fears, and people began to attack and damage church organs. Irony reigned supreme during the Puritan Interregnum, when ordinances were passed requiring organs to be destroyed as "Monuments of Idolatry and Superstition."⁵

However, music was never an issue in the Matthew Bible.

Puritan attacks on priests

The Puritans detested anything that smacked of Rome, including the priestly office. Consider the 1560 commentary on Revelation 16:2, the noisome botch that fell upon people who had the mark of the beast:

1560 Geneva Bible note on Revelation 16:2 This was like the sixth plague of Egypt, which was sores and boils or pocks: and this reigneth commonly among Canons, monks, friars, nuns, priests, and such filthy vermin which bear the mark of the beast. [Note removed in 1599]

How might this have poisoned people against their priests? Rogers never indulged in such invective. True, he had a note protesting abuses of clerical office, but that is quite a different thing and should offend no sincere person:

Matthew Bible note on 1 Timothy 3:1, as updated in the October Testament: *A bishop* is as much as to say one who sees to things, who watches over: an overseer. When he desires to feed Christ's flock with the food of health – that is, with his holy word, as the bishops did in Paul's time – he desires a good work and the very office of a bishop. But he who desires honour, looks for personal advantage, is greedy for great revenues; who seeks preeminence, pomp, dominion; who wants more than enough of everything, rest and his heart's ease, castles, parks, lordships, earldoms, etc. – such a man does not desire to work, much less to do good work, and is anything but a bishop as Saint Paul here understands a bishop.

Rogers' note accepts Anglican polity. The objection against covetous clergy simply protested the state of affairs at the start of the Reformation, and is reasonable. Rogers also seemed concerned to avoid any strife about offices and titles. In a note on Titus, he wrote, "Bishops and elders is all one, and an officer chosen to govern the congregation in doctrine and living." Good governance under episcopacy was fine by him – indeed, was what he expected – as long as it be faithfully discharged.

Therefore, Matthew's Version might have served as a soft foil against the Puritan influence. But the Roman Catholics wanted none of it, and so it was replaced by the Great Bible. This appeared to satisfy the conservatives, at least for the time being, but not so the Puritans.

Puritan attacks on the original translations

Moderns often assume the Geneva Bible was a close cousin to Matthew's version, but nothing could be further from the truth. Its eschatology, ecclesiology, Christology, and more, departed in ways great and small from the Matthew men and early Reformers such as Martin Luther. It taught a different form of "Protestantism." Furthermore, it is also widely assumed nowadays that the Puritans were superior scholars, and that they improved and corrected Tyndale and Coverdale's translations. Indeed, this is what they told us. This is what they wanted us to believe.

The Puritans entered onto the field after Tyndale, Coverdale, and Rogers had won (and died in) the battle. English Scriptures had been accepted in England and established in the Church. Though Mary sought to put them down, in the end she did not succeed. But the Puritans also sought to put them down, for their own reasons, and eventually did succeed. From their exile in Geneva, they took up the soldiers' work and claimed they could do a better job. They began to work on a new Bible that would assist to reform the English Church. The idea was also, no doubt, to replace the Great Bible and use their version in the Church, just as it came to pass in Presbyterian Scotland.

Though Coverdale and Tyndale were of the same generation, and Coverdale was in fact still living, the Puritans characterized their work as immature, or from "the infancy of those times." In the 1560 preface to the Geneva version they demeaned the original translations, saying they "required greatly to be perused and reformed" – that is, they must be reviewed and corrected by the Puritans:

Preface, 1560 Geneva Bible: We thought that we should bestow our labours and study in nothing which could be more acceptable to God and conformable to his Church than in the translating of the Holy Scriptures into our native tongue; the which thing, albeit that divers heretofore have endeavoured to achieve [i.e. Tyndale and Coverdale], yet considering the infancy of those times and imperfect knowledge of the tongues, in respect of this ripe age and clear light which God hath now revealed, the translations required greatly to be perused and reformed.⁶

Here are two justifications for “reforming” the original translations. One is the alleged infancy and imperfection of Tyndale and Coverdale’s work. What temerity. The second is the divine Puritan “light.”

The Puritans changed the Scriptures

Space does not allow for discussion here of the Puritan “reformation” of the Scriptures (it will be undertaken in Part 2 of *The Story*). In essence, with many fair-sounding words they criticized Tyndale’s and Coverdale’s translations as unfaithful to the apostolic intent. They said the Scriptures needed to be “restored,” and the soldiers’ work was somehow lacking in “integrity.” They characterized their own work as more “reverent.” Their wrongful criticisms and pious appearances won over many people:

1560 Geneva Bible Preface: Now as we have chiefly observed the sense, and labored always to restore it to all integrity: so have we most reverently kept the propriety of the words, considering that the Apostles who spake and wrote to the Gentiles in the Greek tongue, rather constrained them to the lively phrase of the Hebrew, than enterprised far by mollifying their language to speak as the Gentiles did. And for this and other causes we have in many places reserved the Hebrew phrase, notwithstanding that they may seem somewhat hard in their ears that are not well practiced and also delight in the sweet sounding phrases of the holy Scriptures. Yet lest either the simple should be discouraged, or the malicious have any occasion of just cavillation, seeing some translations read after one sort, and some after another, whereas all may serve to good purpose and edification, we have in the margin noted that diversity of speech or reading which may also seem agreeable to the mind of the holy Ghost, and proper for our language.¹

There are two things we may note for now. First, as the Puritans proceeded with their “corrections,” they followed an extreme form of literalism which adhered to grammatical as well as lexical Hebrew idioms. This they claimed was most reverent because it “followed the propriety of the words.” Second, they acknowledged that their approach darkened the Scriptures and made the Bible “hard in their ears that are not well practiced.” In other words, it was no longer plain for the ploughboy, as Tyndale wanted. Of course, neither was it plain for the doctor, the homemaker, or anyone else who had neither the time nor the talent to become “well-practised” in ancient Hebrew. But it was reverent!

However, I do not doubt that the real motivation was that the existing Bibles did not assist the Puritan cause, so the Geneva revisers needed to find fault. They also needed to establish themselves as biblical authorities. And so they took in hand, first Tyndale’s

¹ Ibid.

New Testament, and then the Old Testament of the Great Bible, and “perused and reformed” them.⁷

The Puritans changed the notes

The second reason the Puritans gave for making their Bible was that they had received a revelation of “clear light” from God. What was this light? They do not say, but the massive number of commentaries relating to prophecies of the Church – a theme that is nowhere to be found in the Matthew Bible, but which is everywhere in the Geneva version – tells me their new light was their postmillennial doctrine. This also explains why they went against Tyndale in the dispute about the translation of ‘ecclesia,’ and rendered it ‘Church’ instead of ‘congregation’ – thus ironically taking the Roman Catholic side.

Closely bound up with all this was the Puritan conviction that they were the prophets, “reformed” Protestants, who would restore the Church. With the sword of their mouth (and whatever else it might take⁸), they would destroy Antichrist; that is, the papacy. This the Reformation had failed to accomplish, but they would do it, and in a future millennium the True Church would be perfected.⁹ They saw such prophecies everywhere in the Old Testament. Where Rogers saw Christ, they saw their Church – or at least, like any good Roman Catholic, could scarcely see Christ without their Church.¹⁰ Below are only two examples from among hundreds:

Chapter summaries, Isaiah 2

Matthew Bible & 1540 Great Bible: Of the coming and death of Christ: and of the calling of the heathen.

Geneva Bible: The Church shall be restored by Christ, and the Gentiles called. The punishment of the rebellious and obstinate.

Chapter summaries, Psalm 87

Matthew Bible: He praiseth the heavenly Jerusalem, that is, the congregation of the faithful, unto which he prophesieth that very many shall come of [from] all nations. [The Great Bible did not contain summaries upon the Psalms.]

Geneva Bible: The holy Ghost promiseth that the condition of the Church, which was in misery after the captivity of Babylon, should be restored to great excellency. So that there should be nothing more comfortable than to be numbered among the members thereof.

The Puritans were confident that they were the chosen ones who would restore the New Testament Church, then in Babylonian captivity under Rome. (Thus they misunderstood and misapplied Martin Luther’s insight.) To effect the divine restoration, the Puritans believed that all things “Romish” must be overthrown – and that included the young CofE with its idolatrous ceremonies, its Book of Common Prayer (which the Puritans regarded as a “popish dunghill”¹¹), and its unenlightened Bibles.

Obviously the purpose and teaching of the Geneva version were of a very different spirit. The Matthew men intended only to give us God’s word as plainly as they could. They were fighters for truth. The Puritans, however, were fighters for the True Church. Indeed, they were like the Roman Catholics in their zeal, except that now the holy war went from “Mother Church vs. Heretic” to “True Church vs. False Church.” Their Bible

was an important weapon in their arsenal. They filled it with notes and teachings promulgating their new interpretations and doctrine, and in the course of it also changed the vast majority of Rogers' chapter summaries.

The Puritans changed the page headers

To return one last time to the issue of ceremonies, and to illustrate how thoroughly the Puritans remade the Bible, observe how they took care even with page headers. Earlier headers made generous mention of "Ceremonies" in the book of Leviticus, but the 1560 Geneva avoided this:

Page headers in the book of Leviticus:

Bible version	'Ceremonies'	'Sacrifices'	Other or blank
1535 Olivetan	17	0	4
1537 & 1549 Matthew Bible	23	0	2
1540 Great Bible	15	2	8
1560 Geneva Bible	5	8	15

Does the Puritan bias against ceremonies explain this difference? It may seem a small matter, and we see that Coverdale himself used a greater variety of headers in the Great Bible. But the war against ceremony and tradition was important to the Puritans. It is possible that these page headers reveal a reluctance to give too much place to ceremony.

Thus the Matthew Bible and its daughter version, the Great Bible, were caught between two Churches. The RCs worked against it quite openly, but the new Protestants by more subtle means, including "reverent correction."

Conclusion

The Matthew Bible is essentially a traditional Anglican book. Though, as Myles Coverdale said, "There is no man living that can see all things, neither hath God given any man to know everything,"¹² Rogers' notes were (I contend) excellent, despite a few that I question or dispute. They were of a reasonable and genuinely reverent Christian spirit. The Scriptures are rich in spiritual food, Christ-centered, amillennial, and in accordance with the Prayer Book creeds. Furthermore, though the translations are older than the KJV, they are easier to understand due to their plainer style, and are also free of the Puritan influence.

Under unrelenting pressure, however, and besieged on all sides, the Matthew Bible was suppressed. I find that modern academics and Bible historians are almost universally under the Geneva spell: they admire the Matthew men as heroes of the faith, but accept the Puritan condemnation of their work. Their catchy, starry-eyed mantra, oft repeated in history books, is "Geneva was humming with scholarship." Coverdale's work is dismissed as unworthy of serious consideration because he did not translate directly from the biblical languages, though he certainly had some knowledge of them. Instead, he worked from other men's translations; that is, he used German Bibles that he trusted.¹³ The manifold irony of this, however, is that the scholars who thus dismiss

Coverdale have confirmed that the Puritans also worked from other men's translations: they used the very English translations they condemned.¹⁴

In the end, God will judge the Bibles that we have received – both the first, blood-bought translations and all the revisions.¹⁵ In the meantime, the original Scriptures were so preserved in the King James Version that the Holy Spirit has used them mightily. When that Bible is read in the Church, we are still hearing in good measure the voices of Tyndale and Coverdale as they spoke to us in Matthew's version almost five centuries ago.

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MORE READING:

See how the Geneva Bible changed Psalm 23 and removed the doctrine of the Word:

<https://goo.gl/35P9k3>

See the Geneva losses at 1 Peter 1:18 on the Revelation of Christ through preaching:

<https://goo.gl/13gJTK>

ENDNOTES ...

¹ George Park Fisher, *History of Christian Doctrine* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1909), 355.

² Oxford English Dictionary online, s.v. 'Puritan.' The quotation: "1565 T. Stapleton Fortresse of Faith f. 134v 'We know to weare in the church holy vestements, and to be apparailled priestlike semeth..absurde to the Puritans off our countre, to the zelous gossellers of Geneva.'" Accessed March 20, 2018.

³ See Nick Schoeneberger, "The Biblical Case for Puritan Postmillennialism," for a brief summary of their doctrine: <https://purelypresbyterian.com/2015/12/12/the-biblical-case-for-puritan-postmillennialism>. Accessed May 2, 2018.

⁴ See for example William Tyndale, *An Answer to Sir Thomas More's Dialogue*, ed. Henry Walter, Cambridge: Parker Society, 1850 (facsimile; Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2006), 59-60 and 97.

⁵ A resistance to music in the Church was fomenting before the 1560 Geneva Bible was published, but in the 1570s it took off. It is difficult to imagine that the Geneva Bible did not contribute to the trouble. See <http://soundsmedieval.org/library/130302-removal-of-organs-from-churches.pdf>. Accessed May 5, 2018.

⁶ Preface to the 1560 Geneva Bible. (Reproduced in 1599 Geneva Bible, modern spelling Tolle Lege edition, beginning at p. xxvii.)

⁷ As to the Geneva sources, see S. L. Greenslade, "English Versions of the Bible," *The Cambridge History of the Bible*, Vol. 3 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963), 156-57; see also F. F. Bruce, *The English Bible, A History of Translations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1961), 86, and Daniell, *Bible in English*, 284, 296. The Puritans published their revised New Testament in 1557, and a further revision of it along with the rest of the Scriptures and the Apocrypha in 1560.

⁸ In their 1560 dedication to Queen Elizabeth, the Puritans exhorted her, by reference to Old Testament examples, even to "slay ... whosoever would not seek the Lord ... whether he were small or great, man or woman." Lest the Queen be reluctant to follow this counsel, they wrote, "If

these zealous beginnings seem dangerous, and to breed disquietness in your dominions, yet by the story of King Asa, it is manifest that the quietness and peace of kingdoms standeth in the utter abolishing of idolatry, and in advancing of true religion.”

⁹ Schoeneberger, “Puritan Postmillennialism.”

¹⁰ There are related issues in the Geneva Bible, also apparently the fruit of postmillennialism. One is that New Covenant promises are sometimes associated with the Lord’s second coming, not his first. Also, the “kingdom of Christ” refers not to his reign in the hearts and conscience of his faithful people, but to his reign in the Church, which is closer to Roman Catholicism.

¹¹ The 1572 Puritan *Admonition to the Parliament* accused the prayer book as “an unperfected booke, culled & picked out of that popishe dunghill, the Masse booke full of all abominations.” Walter Howard Frere and C. E. Douglas, eds., *Puritan Manifestoes: A Study of the Origin of the Puritan Revolt*, London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1907 (facsimile; Delhi, India: Facsimile Publisher, 2013), 16.

¹² “Myles Coverdale unto the Christian Reader,” prologue to his 1535 Bible, *Remains of Myles Coverdale*, ed. George Pearson, Cambridge: The University Press, 1846 (facsimile; LaVergne, TN, USA: BiblioLife, LLC), 14.

¹³ Coverdale confirmed this in his preface to his Bible. He could not have been ignorant of the biblical languages. After all, he had worked closely with Tyndale and also worked on the Great Bible. However, his comments indicate that he respected Tyndale and Luther as the masters of direct translation.

¹⁴ See note 7. True scholars do not take someone else’s lousy work, patch it up, and proclaim it to be their masterpiece of reverence and scholarship. This is what the Geneva Puritans did. But through this device, God preserved much of the original translations.

¹⁵ Including my own. God be with us.