

The First of the First Authorised English Bibles

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Woodcut of the execution of William Tyndale, from John Foxe, *Acts & Monuments of the Christian Church*

In the years 1536-1539, the battle for the Bible was finally won in England. The five soldiers in the front line of this battle were William Tyndale and Myles Coverdale, Bible translators, their friend John Rogers, Archbishop Thomas Cranmer, and, lastly, Lord Thomas Cromwell, who was then chief minister to King Henry VIII. God placed them all strategically in time, place, and office, so together they could work to bring vernacular Scriptures to the country. Between them, and with Henry's hard won cooperation, these men took the field with three whole English Bibles: Coverdale's of 1535, the 1537 Matthew Bible, and the 1539 Great Bible.

Historians disagree about which of these Reformation Bibles may justly be called the *first authorised* English Bible. Some assert firmly that it was the Matthew Bible,¹ but others say only the Great Bible was ever truly authorised.² So which was it, and why the confusion?

The Matthew Bible

In 1537, the Matthew Bible arrived in England, probably from Antwerp where it is believed to have been printed. This Bible contained the combined translations of William Tyndale and Myles Coverdale. Tyndale's translations comprised the New Testament and first half of the Old, being all he was able to complete before he was imprisoned in 1535. Coverdale supplied Scriptures for the balance of the Old Testament and Apocrypha, except three Apocryphal books that Rogers took from other sources.³ Rogers compiled these translations, added reference and study aids along with over 2,000 notes, and proceeded to publish the world's first English study Bible. The epithet 'Matthew Bible' derives from the

title page, which stated that the Scriptures were translated by 'Thomas Matthew.' The dedication to King Henry was also signed by Mr. Matthew. In fact, this was a fictitious name, used to conceal Tyndale's authorship, because the King had banned his works.

A copy of the Matthew Bible was given to Cranmer, the Archbishop of Canterbury. He examined it, and then wrote a now widely-quoted letter to his fellow Reformer Thomas Cromwell:

Cranmer letter to Cromwell, August 4, 1537: You shall receive by the bringer hereof a Bible in English, both of a new translation and of a new print, dedicated unto the King's Majesty, as farther appeareth by a pistle unto his Grace in the beginning of the book, which [i.e. the dedicatory epistle] in mine opinion is very well done, and therefore I pray your lordship to read the same. And as for the translation, so far as I have read thereof, I like it better than any other translation heretofore made; yet not doubting but that there may and will be found some faults therein, as you know no man ever did or can do so well, but it may be from time to time amended.

And forasmuch as the book is dedicated unto the King's Grace, and also great pains and labour taken in setting forth of the same, I pray you, my lord, that you will exhibit the book unto the King's Highness, and to obtain of his Grace, if you can, a licence that the same may be sold and read by every person, without danger of any act, proclamation, or ordinance heretofore granted to the contrary, until such time that we the bishops shall set forth a better translation, which I think will not be till a day after doomsday.⁴

Cromwell acted swiftly, and the King agreed to receive the Matthew Bible. It was the summer of 1537, and a historic moment.

Coverdale's Bible

But the fact is that over a year before, early in 1536, the King had welcomed Myles Coverdale's Bible into England. This pioneering work was translated mainly from Martin Luther's German version, with reference also to other translations, and contained the Scriptures Rogers took into the Matthew Bible to supply the lack from Tyndale. Printed in Antwerp in 1535, after it arrived in the country, it was presented to Henry for review, and he gave it to some advisers for their opinion. However, when they accused it as having faults, he was reluctant to cast it aside:

"'Well,' said the King, 'but are there any heresies maintained thereby?' They answered there were no heresies that they could find maintained thereby. 'If there be no heresies,' said the King, 'then in God's name let it go abroad among our people.'"⁵

When Henry permitted Coverdale's Bible to be bought, sold, and used in the Church, it was also a historic moment. A momentous moment. Now, after centuries of darkness, and all the vicious persecutions of Lollards and Lutherans, England first received the word of God lawfully in her own tongue.

It was, therefore, Coverdale's Bible that broke the enemy's line of defence. However, his accomplishment is often overlooked. For example, take the famous story about Tyndale's last words before he was garrotted and killed in Brussels. The execution took place in October 1536. According to John Foxe, Tyndale's last prayer was, "Lord, open the King of England's eyes." It is commonly held that this was a prayer for English Scriptures, and was answered the following year when the King allowed the Matthew Bible to go forth. However, the fact is that by October 1536, Coverdale's Bible had already been circulating

for months. Therefore, either Tyndale did not know this, or his prayer has been misunderstood.

The Great Bible

Not long after the reception of the Matthew Bible, Henry desired a new version in order to appease the conservatives, who were complaining about the existing ones. As a result, Cromwell commissioned Coverdale to revise the Matthew Bible. Coverdale added back into the text certain familiar, well-loved, and innocuous verses from the Vulgate. These were considered to rest on slim authority, however, being later interpolations into the original manuscripts, so he marked them with brackets and different font. He also, with some prejudice to sense and semantics, employed a more literalistic approach. This revision, known as the Great Bible, was published in 1539, and successfully established English Scriptures in the Church. The enemy was now fully routed, and the field was clear.

How did the King authorise the different Bibles?

The inscription on the title page of the 1537 Matthew Bible tells us that it was

Set forth with the Kinges most gracypous lycēce.

In modern spelling, this is, “Set forth with the King’s most gracious licence.”⁶ But, did this licence mean the Matthew Bible was really “authorised” by the King, and if so, was it the first so to be? The answer lies in how the noun ‘licence’ and the participle ‘authorised’ were used in the early 16th century. A peek into the title pages of the three Bibles also assists understanding.

Licence: In the early modern English period, ‘licence’ meant simply ‘leave’ or ‘permission.’⁷ Nowadays, therefore, we might say the Matthew Bible was “set forth with the King’s most gracious permission.” But as we know, the King had previously permitted Coverdale’s Bible to go forth, and the title page of the third edition states that it, too, was set forth with the King’s licence.⁸

Although a licence (or ‘permit’) for a new book was usually evidenced in writing,⁹ and one might have expected it for such controversial books as these, it was not necessarily so. In the case of the Coverdale and Matthew Bibles, there appears to be no such thing. Indeed, it is a matter of record that Richard Grafton, one of the printers of Matthew’s version, beseeched Cromwell to issue confirmation of license under his privy seal, but Cromwell refused.¹⁰ Grafton was therefore obliged to content himself with the self-proclaimed declaration of licence on the title page.

Authorised: (1) In an old, specialized sense, authorised meant “set up as authoritative, endowed with authority,” which is now a rare use.¹¹ **(2)** A second, more ordinary and common meaning is “sanctioned by authority,” or officially sanctioned.¹² This latter sense is, of course, very close or equivalent to the former meaning of ‘licensed.’ This melange of semantics helps explain the confusion that results when ‘authorised’ is used with respect to the reception of the Bible in England.

The title page in the fourth edition of the Great Bible, printed in 1541 (earlier editions were silent), says it was “auctorisid [authorised] and apoynted by the commaundement of oure moost redoubted prynce and soueraygne Lorde, Kynge Henrye ... ”¹³ Without doubt, “auctorisid” was used here in the old, specialized sense. Nowadays we might rather say it

was *commissioned and appointed* for use in the Church. Of our three Bibles, only the Great Bible was authorised in this special way. However, it is also correct to say that the Coverdale and Matthew Bibles were authorised, if we mean simply that they had received authoritative sanction.¹⁴ In fact, they were not only sanctioned, but in 1538, before the Great Bible was printed, both Cromwell and Cranmer issued injunctions requiring English Bibles to be placed in church lecterns, and directing clergy to read them, and also to encourage the people to read them:

Injunctions given by Thomas Arch-Bishop of Canterbury, to the Parsons, Vicars, and other Curats in his Visitation, kept (*sede vacante*) within the Diocese of Hereford, Anno Domini 1538.

I. FIRST; that ye, and every one of you, shall, with all your diligence and faithful obedience, observe, and cause to be observed, all and singular the King's Highness Injunctions, by his Grace's Commissaries given in such places as they in times past have visited.

II. *Item*; That ye, and every one of you, shall have, by the first day of August next coming, as well a whole Bible in Latin and English, or at the least a New Testament of both the same language, as the copies of the King's Highness Injunctions.

III. *Item*; That ye shall every day study one chapter of the said Bible, or New Testament, comparing the Latin and English together, and to begin at the first part of the book, and so to continue until the end of the same.

IV. *Item*; That ye, or none of you, shall discourage any lay-man from the reading of the Bible in English or Latin, but encourage them to that, admonishing them that they so read it for reformation of their own life, and knowledge of their duty; and that they be not bold or presumptuous in judging of matters before they have perfect [mature, sound] knowledge.... [etc.]¹⁵

When the above and similar directives from Thomas Cromwell were issued, only the Coverdale and Matthew Bibles were available, and parish records reveal that both versions were purchased.¹⁶ Though it is sometimes said that the 1538 injunctions had the Great Bible in view, it seems likely that their premature issuance, before the Great Bible was printed, was intended to assist Rogers' and Coverdale's publishers to dispose of their remaining stock before the Great Bible cornered the market. As well, of course, there can be no doubt that Cromwell and Cranmer were genuinely impatient to advance the knowledge of God's word.

In conclusion, it must be acknowledged that, in the ordinary sense, Coverdale's 1535 Bible was truly the first authorised English version, while in the special sense, it was the Great Bible. However, this does not in any way diminish the significance of Matthew's version, which, as the base for the Great Bible, proved and preserved the joint witness of Tyndale and Coverdale.

To avoid confusion, given the ambiguity of the word 'authorised,' it might be best to simply avoid it when discussing the treatment of early English Bibles by the King. We may speak of Coverdale's and Rogers' as licensed, which is understandable, though archaic, and of the Great Bible as the appointed version. But in the eyes of God, man's licence, permission, or appointment count for nothing, except when he uses it, as he did in the early 1500s, so that the people could freely have his word again.

¹ A notable example is Joseph Lemuel Chester, who included this claim in the title of his book, *John Rogers: The Compiler of the First Authorised English Bible, The Pioneer of the English Reformation, and Its First Martyr* (London: Longman, Green, Longman, and Roberts, 1861). The claims that Rogers pioneered the Reformation and was its first martyr are more than a little fanciful.

² See David Daniell, *The Bible in English* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2003), 17.

³ Historians typically report that Coverdale's Apocrypha was missing the Prayer of Manasseh (or Manneses), and so Rogers translated it himself (e.g. see Daniell, *Bible in English*, 196, and Mozley, *Coverdale and His Bibles* (note 4), 148). Some historians add that he closely followed the 1535 French translation of Pierre Olivetan (See S. L. Greenslade, *English Versions of the Bible in The Cambridge History of the Bible*, Vol. 3 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963), 150. However, my own comparison of the Bibles has revealed that Coverdale's Bible was also missing two other Apocryphal books that Rogers incorporated in Matthew's version: "Baruch the Prophete / with the Epistle of Jeremye" and "The song of the .iii. children in the oven." Olivetan had these books also, and may have been Rogers' source or guide.

⁴ From J. F. Mozley, *Coverdale and His Bibles*, first published in 1953 (Cambridge, England: James Clarke & Co., 2005), 125. Other versions of the letter add: "And if you continue to take such pains for the setting forth of God's word, as you do, although in the mean season you suffer some snubs, and many slanders, lies, and reproaches for the same, yet one day He will requite altogether. And the same word (as St. John saith) which shall judge every man at the last day, must needs show favour to them that now do favour it. Thus, my lord, right heartily fare you well. At Forde, the ivth day of August. [1537] Your assured ever, T. Cantuarien."

⁵ Quoted from Fulke in Mozley, *Coverdale*, 113.

⁶ The graphics are from 1537 Matthew Bible, *Matthew's Bible*, (Massachusetts: facsimile, Hendrickson Publishers Inc., 2009), title page.

⁷ *Oxford English Dictionary* (online), s.v. 'License', definitions 1.a and 2.a as at August 10, 2017.

⁸ A. S. Herbert, *Historical Catalogue of Printed Editions of the English Bible 1525-1961* (New York: The American Bible Society, 1968), 17. The first two printings do not show this statement on the title page, per Herbert. He catalogues the third printing just before Matthew's in 1537.

⁹ *OED*, s.v. 'License', definition 2.a.

¹⁰ Historian J. Lowndes speculates that Cromwell refused to confirm Matthew's license under his privy seal for fear of "the handle that he might thus give to his enemies against him, in case the translation should afterwards be found fault with." John James Lowndes, *Myles Coverdale* (London: Samuel Bagster, 1838), 83.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, s.v. 'Auctorise/ Authorise', definition 5.a. at Aug. 3, 2017.

¹² *Ibid.*, definition 3.a.

¹³ Herbert, *Catalogue*, 32.

¹⁴ However, it needs to be acknowledged that Matthew's license did not remain intact for long. The years following Cromwell's fall in 1540 saw an intensifying reaction against the reforming movement, and in 1542 a list of prohibited books banned "The Table, glosses, marginal, and preface before the epistle of St. Paul *ad Romans* of Thomas Matthew's doing." The Scriptures were permitted, but the rest of the Matthew Bible was out of favour. Parliament also ordered that all annotations and preambles in Bibles should be cut off or blotted out, and as a result many Matthew Bibles were defaced. Therefore, while we may say that the Matthew Bible was authorised when it arrived in England, the facts are that it was partly 'unauthorised' a few years later. It also happened that

Coverdale's New Testament became an outlawed book, though, in supreme irony (as was the case also with Tyndale's New Testament), it lived on in whole Bible versions everywhere. A cause of its banning may have been that it included Tyndale's prologue to Romans.

¹⁵ Bishop Gilbert Burnet, *History, Reformation of the Church of England.*, Volume I, Part II, 265-6. (Updated 'conferring' to 'comparing,' 'afore' to 'before.')

¹⁶ Mozley, *Coverdale*, 173.