Decisive Data on Thomas Matthew Problems

DECISIVE DATA ON THOMAS MATTHEW PROBLEMS

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→HE FOURTH CENTENNIAL OF the first licensed English Bible has passed almost unnoticed. Yet the Thomas Matthew Bible of 1537 exhibits three major points of distinction which entitle it to conspicuous consideration at the present time. It was the first English Bible to be specifically authorized by royal license. It became the primary English version of the Bible. It preserved the only rendition we have of William Tindale's translation of the historical books of the Old Testament.

In addition to these major distinctions, three minor points may be cited, which are not inconsiderable. The Thomas Matthew Bible of 1537 was the best equipped of the early English Bibles with helps for actual use. It was distinguished in iconography and decoration; and it was singularly accurate as a piece of printing.

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The genuine first title of this earliest licensed English Bible¹ was composed as follows, with the italicized words set in red type:

The Byble / which is all the holy scrip = /ture: In whych are contayned the Olde and Newe Testament truly / and purely translated into En= / glysh by Thomas / Matthew. /

The name Thomas Matthew appeared also on folio 6 verso at the end of the dedication "To the moost noble and gracyous Prynce Kyng Henry the eyght /." It is still a matter of periodic debate who this Thomas Matthew was. No prominent reformer and translator of that name is known from this period. A familiar view, promulgated by C. Anderson in his Annals of the English Bible (1845), and occasionally reiterated, is that Thomas Matthew was a financial backer of the printing enterprise. This, however, cannot have been the case; for we have the Grafton-Cromwell correspondence of August 28, 1537, indicating that Richard Grafton, grocer, and his partner Edward Whitchurch, were the ones who provided the necessary funds for printing this edition of 1500 folio Bibles.² In recognition of their business acumen their initials, R. G. and E. W., were printed with lavish flourishes and intricate interlaces on the verso of the title-page to Part II of the Bible.

Another recurrent opinion regarding Thomas Matthew is that he was a real person and the actual editor of the version that bears his name. The latest statement of this view may be read in The English Bible under the Tudor Sovereigns (London, 1937), by Dr. W. T. Whitley, who devotes a separate and somewhat incoherent chapter to the Matthew Bible.3 His argument amounts to this. There was a Thomas Matthew, a

²British Museum, Cotton Ms. Cleopatra E. V., fol. 325. Alfred W. Pollard, Records of the English

¹The general title to the Thomas Matthew Bible, reproduced as an illustration in this study, is rendered from the copy owned by Mr. Oliver R. Barrett of Chicago and Kenilworth. Grateful acknowledgment is here recorded to Mr. Barrett, not only for kind permission to reproduce the title page of his excellent exemplar, but also for the generous loan of his copy for exhibition and study.

Bible (Oxford, 1911), pp. 219-222.

Bible (Oxford, 1911), pp. 219of Colchester and Matthew's Bible of 1537." Cf. J. F. Mozley, William Tyndale (London, 1937), Appendix E, "Thomas Matthew," pp. 354 f.

member of the first town council of Colchester, who was interested in Bible study; but who was not mentioned in Colchester records during the year just before the appearance of this Bible. The inference is that he was on the continent in 1536-37 attending to the publication of the Bible called Matthew's.

Unfortunately these data fall miles short of proving that Matthew of Colchester was responsible for the Thomas Matthew Bible. There is nothing to show positively that he was in Antwerp or on the continent in 1536-37. Having previously been a fishdealer in London, he may have been there instead. Furthermore there is next to nothing to suggest that he had the requisite linguistic equipment for such an editorial task as that of making a new version of the English Bible. Demonstrably there were other men named Thomas Matthew living in England at this time, and their home town records do not show specifically that they were there in residence in 1536-37. It does not therefore follow that they, one or all, were in Antwerp that year superintending the publication of the Thomas Matthew Bible.

Nor does this line of argument touch the strong considerations in favor of identifying John Rogers, the protomartyr of the Marian reaction, as the Thomas Matthew of this Bible. An almost conclusive circumstance is the fact that repeatedly John Rogers was officially referred to as "alias Matthew," from the time when he was first put under restraint in the middle of 1553 until he was executed early in 1555. The order in council of August 16, 1553, read: "John Rogers, alias Matthew, a seditious preacher. is ordered by the Lords of the Council to keep himself as prisoner in his house at Paul's."4 In the minutes of the proceedings against him he was twice designated as "Johannes Rogers, alias Matthew." Finally in the sentence pronounced by Stephen Gardiner, Bishop of Winchester, he was four times denounced as "te Johannem Rogers, alias Mathew."

Subsidiary considerations in favor of identifying Thomas Matthew as John Rogers are these: Immediately contemporary and subsequent writers, Bale and Foxe and Strype, connected the protomartyr closely with this version in one way or another. Moreover, Rogers' intimate association with Tindale in Antwerp, just before the latter's arrest in 1535, would naturally lead him to carry forward this enterprise. Also the conspicuous and ornate initials "IR" at the bottom of leaf 4 recto in the Bible with its "exhortacyon to the studye of the holy Scrypture," are most reasonably interpreted to designate John Rogers.⁷ Altogether the case for the Marian protomartyr as the editor of the Thomas Matthew Bible remains unshaken.

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The admirable woodcut of the general title in the Matthew Bible of 1537 was bordered below by this portentous sentence, printed in plain black in the genuine form of the title: "Set forth by the Kynges most gracyous Lycēce."

Thus was publicly signalized the reversal of the royal policy regarding the circulation of the vernacular Bible; the former policy of suppression was now replaced by official encouragement and licensing. Applied to the Thomas Matthew Bible the royal license was

⁴J. L. Chester, John Rogers (London, 1861), p. 113. ⁵British Museum, Harleian Ms. 421. Fol. 40.

Foxe, Actes and Monuments (1563), pp. 1029-30. ⁷Dr. Whitley's alternative references of these initials to either "Johanna Regina" or Johann Ruremonde are alike unconvincing.

⁸On the title page of the Coverdale quarto Bible of the same year the identical formula of royal license was printed in red with a slightly variant spelling: "Set forth with the Kynges moost gracious license."