

# Introduction to the Facsimile Edition

The 1537 Matthew's Bible is rightly seen as a key step in the sixteenth century development of the English Bible. It was published in a time when the English language was still in its formative stages, and the Latin Vulgate was the Bible authorized for use by the Roman Catholic Church. Latin was the language of the upper class, so the Scripture knowledge of the uneducated was largely limited to what they heard during the Mass.

The advent of the Matthew's Bible meant there was a complete Bible in English, the majority of whose text resulted from a fresh translation of the original Hebrew and Greek into the emerging English tongue. Assessing the importance of the Matthew's Bible necessitates understanding the context from which its contributors—and their work—sprang.

## WILLIAM TYNDALE

Born in Gloucestershire and educated at Oxford (B.A. 1512, M.A. 1515), William Tyndale afterward continued his studies at Cambridge. Employed by Sir John Walsh as tutor to his children, Tyndale translated Erasmus' *Enchiridion Militis Christiani* (*The Christian Soldier's Handbook*) into English for his employer. This book's promotion of the idea that studying the New Testament was the individual Christian's responsibility may have inspired Tyndale to pursue translating the New Testament himself. It was during Tyndale's service to the Walsh household that John Foxe recorded this famous exchange:

Master Tyndall happened to be in company of a learned man, and in communing and disputing with him drove him to that issue, that the learned man said: 'We were better be without God's law than the Pope's.' Master Tyndall, hearing that, answered him: 'I defy the Pope and all his laws'; and said: 'If God spare my life, ere many years I will cause a boy that driveth the plough shall know more of the Scripture than thou dost.'

In 1523 Tyndale traveled to London to seek permission from the Bishop of London, Cuthbert Tunstall, to translate the New Testament into English. When Tunstall denied his support the wealthy merchant Humphrey Monmouth stepped in. However, Tyndale sensed that opposition to his work made his remaining in England unsafe, and he fled to the Continent in 1524. The following year Tyndale's New Testament was completed and printed in Cologne, but the Senate of Cologne banned its further publication. Settling next in Worms, Tyndale saw his first edition printed in 1526. Smuggled into English ports in bales of cloth, this New Testament—the first ever in English from its original language—was wildly popular. The laity read and studied it in defiance of the religious hierarchy, which sought to seize and burn as many copies of the book as possible.

Tyndale learned Hebrew to prepare for translating the Old Testament. His Pentateuch appeared in 1530, followed by the Book of Jonah in 1531, and a revised New Testament in 1534. He completed translating the Old Testament historical books from Joshua to 2 Chronicles before his arrest in Antwerp in May 1535. Tyndale was charged with heresy and his books were confiscated. After sixteen months of brutal imprisonment, a secular court tried him on the testimony of theologians. In October 1536, he was convicted, strangled (as a mark of his status as a scholar), and his body was burned. His last words at the stake, "Lord, open the King of England's eyes," were a plea for Henry VIII to permit the publication of the English Bible.

The phrase, "no Tyndale, no Shakespeare" is often quoted to illustrate the impact that William Tyndale's work had on the English language. Tyndale rendered the

Scriptures in ways that made the most of the emerging tongue. Simple, direct, and clear, the Tyndale New Testament featured many phrases whose striking language resonates down to the present day. These include, “In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth” (Gen. 1:1), “Let there be light” (Gen. 1:3), and “In the beginning was the Word” (John 1:1). Central New Testament terms like “congregation” and “elder” were the product of Tyndale’s work. Indeed, so well-accepted were Tyndale’s renderings that they accounted for over eighty per cent of the 1611 King James Version’s New Testament text.

### MYLES COVERDALE

Myles Coverdale was born in York in 1488, and was ordained priest in 1514. An Augustinian friar, Coverdale lived in his order’s house in Cambridge. Exposed by his reformist prior there to the teachings of Martin Luther, Coverdale left the Augustinians early in 1528 and became a secular priest. In this capacity he preached against the worship of images and transubstantiation. Threatened by Church authorities for his dangerous teachings, Coverdale fled to Antwerp, where he lived until 1535.

As in the case of William Tyndale, a successful merchant underwrote Myles Coverdale’s work. Strictly speaking, Coverdale was not so much a translator as he was an adapter: he knew neither Hebrew nor Greek, but relied upon “five sundry interpreters” in Latin, English (including Tyndale’s New Testament), and German as his source texts. C.S. Lewis famously remarked that, compared to the noteworthy sixteenth century scholar-translators, Coverdale was “a rowing boat among battleships,” whose gift was that of selecting the vocabulary used in his Bible.

The Coverdale Bible was first printed in 1535. Coverdale followed Tyndale’s lead when it came to many New Testament terms, but coined others, such as “saving health” and “lovingkindness”. Memorable phrases from the Coverdale Bible include, “By the waters of Babylon we sat down and wept when we remembered Sion” (Ps. 137:1), and “Seek ye the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is nigh” (Isa. 55:6). Reprinted in London two years later, the Coverdale Bible was the first complete Bible to be printed in England. It featured the Apocrypha between the Old and New Testaments. While this first edition was dedicated to Henry VIII, the monarch had not given license for it to be printed.

Perhaps Myles Coverdale’s greatest contribution to the history of the English Bible was his translation of the Psalms. Following minor modifications for use in the Great Bible (1539), Coverdale’s Psalter appeared in the 1549 Book of Common Prayer, where it remained in use throughout the worldwide Anglican Communion, until the 1960s.

### JOHN ROGERS AND THE MATTHEW’S BIBLE

After John Rogers earned his B.A. at Cambridge in 1526 he became rector of a parish in London. Eight years later he moved to Antwerp, where he served as chaplain to the English merchants living there. Rogers joined William Tyndale’s circle of acquaintances. Attracted to Reformist thought, he left the Roman Catholic priesthood and married.

Following Tyndale’s death John Rogers assembled and had printed in 1537 a Bible in English. This volume contained, for the first time as part of a complete Bible, all Tyndale’s printed translations: the Pentateuch, Joshua through 2 Chronicles, Jonah, and the 1534 New Testament. Rogers used the Coverdale Bible for the portions of the biblical text that Tyndale had not translated. Finally, he translated the Prayer of Manasseh and added marginal notes, a church calendar, an article encouraging Bible study, a summary of the chief doctrines of the Bible, and a concordance.

A unique feature of the Matthew’s Bible is five pages with large ornamental initials

that are scattered throughout it. These include: IR, for John Rogers; HR (Henricus Rex), for King Henry VIII; and RG and EW, standing for Richard Grafton and Edward Whitchurch, merchants who financed the printing and shipment to England of 1500 copies of the Matthew's Bible. Most notably, at the end of Malachi are found WT, a tribute to William Tyndale.

Tyndale was anathema to the English crown, so the new Bible could not carry his name, spelt out. Consequently, an editorial sleight of hand was employed on its title page, which stated:

The Bible, which is all the holy Scripture: in which are contained the Old and New Testament truly and purely translated into English by Thomas Matthew.

In all probability this “neutral” name was chosen because it combines those of two of Jesus’ disciples.

After Archbishop Thomas Cranmer received a copy of the Matthew's Bible he wrote to Thomas Cromwell, Henry VIII's Vicegerent for ecclesiastical affairs, asking for Cromwell to show the Bible to the King and ask for his license for it to be published. Archbishop Cranmer stated in his letter that he liked the translation better than any he had ever read. Thomas Cromwell obtained a license for the Bible and subsequently undertook the process of providing the Bible to every parish church in England.

Thus, less than a year after William Tyndale had been burned at the stake for translating the Scriptures into the language of the common man, the entirety of his work was published in a single volume—one that was licensed by his royal foe, King Henry VIII.

**Dr. Joseph W. Johnson** is a lifetime member of the Tyndale Society, and has served as North American Representative for the Society.

#### ABOUT THIS FACSIMILE EDITION

The Hendrickson Publishers facsimile of the 1537 Matthew's Bible was created from photographic images created by Mr. Michael Peterson, using an authentic, original edition in the collection of Dr. Joseph W. Johnson. The images were meticulously edited, with stains, marks, and damage removed, and imperfect type improved by Ms. Becky Morrell. Mr. John R. Kohlenberger III conducted additional imaging and editing of the pages.