

FRANCIS BACON AND ‘THE SUMME OF THE BIBLE’

At some point in 1639, the scholarly Justinian Isham heard of an intriguing manuscript by Francis Bacon (1561–1626) in the possession of Sir Christopher Hatton. Samuel Hartlib recorded Isham’s information in his *Ephemerides*: it was apparently ‘a MS. of Verulam containing an Epitome of the Histories of the Bibel’.¹ In September Isham took the opportunity to see this document. His report to Hartlib does not conceal his disappointment:

The Abridgement of the Bible, which I made such Account to see was nothing to that I expected, not about 30 lines & whither writt by Verulam tis doubtfull; there is nothing neere that, in it, as in the Preface to most Bibles.²

Yet the report is suggestive. Did Francis Bacon write an unknown abridgement of the Bible? The evidence presented here suggests that he may have done so.

In 1651 a modest duodecimo volume of prayers and meditation was put out by the stationer Thomas Slater. Its full title is Gleanings of refreshment in Gods vineyard. Being prayers, meditations, consolations and ejaculations. Also, The order of times in Gods deputation of the government of his church. With a confession of faith and a sum of the Bible, by the right Honorable Francis L. Verulam, Viscount S. Alban.³ This volume is unusually rare: the English Short-Title Catalogue records only a single surviving copy, in the library of Christ Church, Oxford.⁴ Among the various devotional items that it contains are included four that are clearly attributed to Francis Bacon: ‘A Confession of the Faith, by the Right Honorable Lord Viscount St. Alban’ (sigs. A5r–B2r); ‘An Appendix’, consisting of ‘A Prayer or Psalm’ (B2v–B4r) and ‘The Summe of the Bible’

¹ Samuel Hartlib, *Ephemerides for 1639*, Sheffield University Library, HP 30/4/12B, as published in M. Greengrass, M. Leslie, and M. Hannon, eds., The Hartlib Papers (Sheffield, 2013) (honline.ac.uk/hartlib).

² Justinian Isham to Samuel Hartlib, 2 Sept. 1639, cited here from the edition of Beinecke Library, Yale University, Osborn Collection, MS File 16792, in Greengrass et al. (eds.), The Hartlib Papers.

³ Wing G848B. The volume is item 408 of the ‘Baconiana’ in R. W. Gibson, Francis Bacon: A Bibliography of his works and of Baconiana to the year 1750 (Oxford, 1950), but Gibson did not seem to appreciate its full significance.

⁴ Shelfmark a.2.198 (copy consulted). The English Short-Title Catalogue (estc.bl.uk, consulted 4 Aug. 2016). It is not reproduced on Early English Books Online (eebo.chadwyck.com).

(sigs. B4v–B5r), both described as being ‘by the same Author’; and a prayer, headed ‘This Prayer was used by the late Lord Chancellor himself’ (sig. C3v).⁵

Each of these three items besides the ‘Summe of the Bible’ is securely attributable to Bacon. The Confession of Faith (by 1603?) was printed by Bacon’s former chaplain and posthumous editor, William Rawley (c.1588–1667), in his edition of Bacon’s uncollected English writings, the Resuscitatio of 1657.⁶ Manuscript copies in the handwriting of one of Bacon’s regular scribes from the 1610s and of Rawley himself also survive.⁷ Rawley also sent a copy to Roger Maynwaring for his considered theological opinion.⁸ The ‘Prayer, or Psalm’ (which Joseph Addison suggested resembled the devotions of an angel rather than a man) has plausibly been assigned to the period of Bacon’s trial and disgrace in 1621.⁹ It seems to have been written for circulation, and several manuscripts survive, one of which, now found among documents associated with William Rawley, is possibly in the handwriting of Bacon’s retainer Thomas Meautys.¹⁰ Finally, the ‘Lord Chancellor’s Prayer’ was first published at the end of a volume of letters by Bacon printed from a publicly circulating manuscript volume of his correspondence.¹¹ The authority of these three pieces does not confirm the authorship of ‘The Summe of the Bible’ that is associated with them, but does lend some tacit support to the claim.

Bacon’s authorship of the piece receives a further degree of circumstantial support from a statement by another of his former retainers, Thomas Bushell (b. before 1600, d. 1674). In 1660 Bushell published a catalogue of Bacon’s published writings, in which the final item is said to be:

A Manual of Devotions, intituled Comfortable Crums of refreshment, by Prayers, Meditations, Consolations, and Ejaculations, with a confession of Faith, published by the aforesaid worthy and faithfull Doctor Rawley, Doctor in Divinity, and one of his Majesties Chaplains.¹²

⁵ In the ‘Table’ at the back, this item is catalogued as ‘The Lord Chancellors usual Prayer’ (Gleanings, sig. Q6v).

⁶ Francis Bacon, Resuscitatio, ed. William Rawley (London, 1657), sigs. 3Q1r–3Q3v. See further Brian Vickers’ introduction in Francis Bacon, The Major Works (Oxford, 1996), 560–5.

⁷ British Library, Harley MS 1893, fos. 1r–4v; British Library, Additional MS 4263, fos. 111r–115v.

⁸ Maynwaring’s undated reply is printed in Thomas Tenison, Baconiana (London, 1679), 209–13.

⁹ James Spedding, The Letters and the Life of Francis Bacon, 7 vols (London, 1861–74), VII, 229.

¹⁰ British Library, Additional MS 4263, fo. 110r.

¹¹ The Remaines of the Right Honorable Francis Lord Verulam (London, 1648), sigs. O3r–O4v.

¹² Thomas Bushell, An Extract by Mr. Bushell of his Late Abridgement of the Lord Chancellor Bacons Philosophical Theory in Mineral Prosecutions (London, 1660), sig. H1r.

Bushell's testimony seems to ascribe the entire volume to Bacon, whereas as we have seen the 1651 volume only explicitly assigns four particular items to his authorship. Moreover, as we have also seen, the 1651 volume is actually entitled Gleanings, rather than Comfortable Crums. Yet it happens that Bushell's title corresponds precisely to an entry in the Stationers' Company Register for 21 July 1647:

Entred under the hands of Master Downham and Master Bellamy warden a booke called Comfortable crums of refreshment by prayers meditacions, &c. vj^d.¹³

The instigator of the entry was the same 'Master Slater' who printed the 1651 volume. If such a book was published in 1647, however, no copy now seems to survive.¹⁴ Presumably, therefore, the 1651 volume is either a reprint of a lost 1647 imprint, or constitutes its first appearance. The alteration in the title may be explicable as an endeavour to avoid confusion with a different and best-selling collection of devotions put out by the stationer Michael Sparke, entitled Crums of Comfort, which went through at least eight editions between 1627 and 1652.¹⁵

If the Gleanings of Refreshment volume was edited by William Rawley, as Bushell asserts, then it constitutes a sixth addition to the five volumes of Bacon's posthumous writings that Rawley has hitherto been known to have published.¹⁶ It also provides the only known text so far of the little work entitled 'The Summe of the Bible'. Shorter even than Isham's 30 lines, it has never been published in any edition of Bacon's writings, nor indeed (so far as I can find) has it ever been reprinted at all. An edition is accordingly offered below.

The nature of the piece is, as its title suggests, summary and concise. It consists of ten numbered points, each one of which follows logically from previous ones. Its consistent use of dichotomies is perhaps reminiscent of the teaching of the Huguenot author Petrus Ramus, who recommended them. As this suggests, it would be eminently possible to organise 'The Summe of the Bible' into the kind of synoptic table that is characteristic of (though not specific to) Ramist analytical practises. Such a table, headed 'How to take profite in reading of the holy Scriptures' prefaces (as Isham's comment

¹³ A Transcript of the Registers of the Worshipful Company of Stationers; from 1640–1708 A.D., vol. 1: 1640–1655 (London, 1913), 274.

¹⁴ According to the English Short-Title Catalogue (estc.bl.uk), consulted 4 Aug. 2016.

¹⁵ See STC 23015.7 to Wing S4818BB.

¹⁶ Graham Rees, 'Introduction', to Francis Bacon, The Instauration Magna: Last Writings, The Oxford Francis Bacon XIII (Oxford, 2000), lxxiii–lxxix.

suggests) editions of the Geneva Bible across the period; that is not directly comparable in nature, however, to this ‘Summe of the Bible’.¹⁷

Treatises offering to provide ‘the sum of’ the holy scripture; of Christianity; of Christian doctrine; of divinity; and also of specific portions of the bible, such as the four gospels, were a characteristic feature of sixteenth- and earlier seventeenth century English book-production.¹⁸ These sometimes took the form of translations of Latin compendia of divinity by authoritative Reformed theologians. English catechistical works, usually simple ones, also liked to present themselves as offering ‘the sum of Christian religion’.¹⁹ None are so extremely concise as this particular ‘Summe’.

Appropriately enough for a ‘Summe of the Bible’, several points echo specific Biblical texts. The distinction between ‘the law and the prophets’ is found in Matthew 22:40; that of ‘holiness and righteousness’, in Luke 1:75; while the ‘doctrine of Christ’ is that of Hebrews 6:1, and so too is the appeal to ‘dead works’.

The theology of ‘The Summe of the Bible’ is that of orthodox Reformed Christianity, and is conformable with the version of that theology that was presented in the Book of Common Prayer. Both concur, for instance, in the regular Reformed view that the two sacraments of the New Testament were only baptism and the Lord’s supper (and not the seven erroneously supposed by Roman Catholics).²⁰ From this perspective, there seems to be nothing potentially unorthodox or singular in the ‘Summe’; nor is there any reason to expect there to be.

The work by Bacon that comes closest to the preoccupations of ‘The Summe of the Bible’ is his Confession of Faith, which might be taken as a much more ambitious expansion of certain of its themes, especially when the Confession turns to consider ‘the word of God, whereby his will is revealed.’²¹ But there are no really striking textual parallels between the two by which a case for Bacon’s authorship might be strengthened. One might only add that in the third item there is a very modest natural-philosophical touch, in the invocation of holiness as the ‘Loadstone’ to the kingdom of heaven.

There is nothing in the text to fix the date. If it is by Bacon, one would be inclined to place its composition under Elizabeth, before the more elaborate Confession of Faith, and in the period before Bacon’s enthusiasm for religious compositions was quashed by

¹⁷ The Bible translated according to the Ebrew and Greeke (London, 1599), sig. π2v.

¹⁸ See e.g. STC 3040 (1548); STC 23007 (1567); STC 21183 (1578?); STC 24532 (1587).

¹⁹ E.g. STC 18817 (1580); STC 12170 (1588).

²⁰ The Booke of Common Prayer (London, 1603), sig. D6v. John Mayer, The English Catechisme. Or a Commentarie on the Short Catechisme set forth in the Booke of Common Prayer (London, 1621), 519.

²¹ Bacon, The Major Works, 111–12.

James I's quickly manifest distaste towards lay contributions to the definition of English religious identity.²² And like the Confession of Faith, one might suspect that it was composed with an eye on public circulation rather more than for private edification.²³

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THE SUMME OF THE BIBLE

ascribed to Francis Bacon

From Gleanings of Refreshment in Gods Vineyard. Being prayers, meditations, consolations and ejaculations. Also, The order of times in Gods deputation of the government of his church. With a confession of faith and a sum of the Bible, by the right Honorable Francis L. Verulam, Viscount S. Alban (London: by James Young for Thomas Slater, 1651), sigs. B4v–B5r.

The Summe of the Bible.

The eternal Word of God (commonly called the Bible) comprehends two parts, the old Testament and the new.

2 The old Testament contains two parts: the Law, and the Prophets.

3 The Law commands two things, Holiness and Righteousness. Holiness, which is our dutie towards God, and this is our Loadstone to the Kingdom of Heaven. Righteousness, which is our dutie towards our Neighbor, and this is our Touchstone for all matters of this life.

4 The Prophets fortel two things, the coming of Christ in the flesh, and the coming of Christ to judgement.

5 The Sacraments of the old Testament were two, Circumcision and the Passeover. Circumcision was instituted for the Male onely, the Passeover for Male and Female. [sig. B5r]

6 The new Testament contains two things: The doctrine of Christ, and the Writings of the Apostles.

²² Richard Serjeantson and Thomas Woolford, 'The Scribal Publication of a Printed Book: Francis Bacon's Certaine Considerations Touching ... the Church of England (1604)', The Library, 10 (2009), 119–56.

²³ I thank James Lancaster, Alexandra Walsham, and Thomas Woolford for their helpful advice.

7 The Doctrine of Christ is twofold, the Government of his Kingdom on Earth (which is the Church Militant) and the glory of his Kingdom in Heaven, which is his Church Triumphant.²⁴

8 The Writings of the Apostles comprehend two things, abstinence from dead Works, and Faith in Christ.

9 The Sacraments of the new Testament are two, Baptisme, and the Supper of the Lord; Baptisme succeeds Circumcision, and the Supper of the Lord succeeds the Passeover.

10 God spake by Moses obscurely, by Christ plainly.

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²⁴ In the printed text the word 'abstinence' follows 'Triumphant.' here. It is evidently a typographic intrusion from the item following.