

Sunday, April 19, 2020—Grace Life School of Theology—*From This Generation For Ever*
 Lesson 113 The Coverdale Bible: Assessing Its Impetus

Introduction

- Last month in [Lesson 112](#), before all this Coronavirus stuff started, we wrapped up our study of William Tyndale by assessing his impact and legacy. This morning we want to begin looking at the life and translation work of Miles Coverdale.
- Coverdale was the second person to translate and print the English Bible. He was the first one to print the Bible in its entirety. Remember that Tyndale was only able to complete two thirds of the Bible (Pentateuch, Joshua to II Chronicles, and the New Testament) before his betrayal, arrest, and execution.
- Before conducting research on Miles Coverdale for this study, I was functioned with the following set of assumptions regarding Coverdale. I came by these assumptions via the prevalent teaching of the King James Only movement.
 - Coverdale was the first person to print the entire Bible in English.
 - Coverdale was the second in a series of seven translations of the *Textus Receptus* into English.
 - While I long ago relinquished the “purified seven times” argument regarding the King James Bible, I previously had no reason to doubt the assumption that Coverdale translated the *Textus Receptus*.
 - Coverdale included the Apocrypha in his Bible between the Old and New Testaments.
 - In his Prologue, “Miles Coverdale to the Christian Reader,” he made the following rudimentary dispensational statement:
 - “Again, it shall greatly help thee to understand scripture, if thou mark not only what is spoken or written, but of whom, and unto whom, with what words, at what time, where, to what intent, with what circumstance, considering what goeth before, and what followeth after.” ([Prologue](#))
- After studying the matter, I have come to believe that there are good reasons to question some of the above assumptions. In this Lesson we will consider the following points:
 - Comparing Tyndale & Coverdale as Translators
 - Coverdale’s Impetus to Translate

Comparing Tyndale & Coverdale as Translators

- According to Dr. Donald L. Brake, Tyndale's unfinished task of translating the entire Bible into English fell to Miles Coverdale.
 - "William Tyndale's incarceration and subsequent execution in 1536 prevented him from translating the entire Bible. That task awaited another scholar and disciple of Tyndale: Miles Coverdale. Tyndale, the fiery martyr, paved the way for the approval of an English Bible; but it was left to Coverdale, the very politically astute and mild-mannered scholar, to bring the Bible to every church in England." (Brake, 111)
- Much like William Tyndale, much of Coverdale's early life is shrouded in mystery.
 - "The work of the immortal William Tyndale might have passed into obscurity had it not been for the politically savvy and capable Miles Coverdale, a Yorkshire man born about 1488 in the home province of John Wycliffe. Educated as an Augustinian monk at Cambridge, Coverdale was admitted to the priesthood in 1514. By 1528 Coverdale abandoned his priestly habit, left his Augustinian order, and embraced Lutheranism." (Brake, 111)
- Like Wycliffe and Tyndale before him, Coverdale believed that everyone should possess God's word in their own language.
 - "Sure I am that there cometh more knowledge and understating of the Scriptures by their sundry translation than by all the glosses of our sophistical doctors." (Coverdale)
- Coverdale was also a well-respected preacher. The following was written by John Hooker of Exeter, a servant in the Coverdale household:
 - "He most worthily did perform the office committed unto him: he preached continually upon every holy day, and did read most commonly twice in the week in some one church or other within this city. He was, after the rate of his livings, a great keeper of hospitality, very sober in diet, godly in life friendly to the godly, liberal to the poor, and courteous to all men, void of pride, full of humility, abhorring covetousness, and an enemy to all wickedness and wicked men, whose companies he shunned, and whom he would in no wise shroud or have in his house and company." (Quoted in Brake, 112)
- Dr. Brake draws the following interesting contrast between Tyndale and Coverdale.
 - "Tyndale was a man uncompromising in his convictions, undaunted by the task before him, and tireless in his pursuit of perfection. Acting independently of others Tyndale forged his translation from his own self-motivation. Coverdale, on the other hand, passed prosperously through life, politically correct. His ability to move among political enemies without being alienated by any of them enabled him to keep his head while most of those associated with Bible translation were dying for the cause. Coverdale gained some powerful protectors who eventually allowed his translation to become the first

Bible authorized in the British Empire. His translation was motivated by others, rather than a self-motivated effort.

Coverdale's place in history was safeguarded by his willingness to compromise. . . In spite of his willingness to compromise for the sake of a goal, he was exiled in the late 1520s, 1530s, most of the 1540s, and again in the late 1550s. Yet his death was due to natural causes." (Brake, 112-113)

- It is common knowledge among Bible historians and linguists that Coverdale did not know Hebrew and Greek. Therefore, unlike Tyndale who focused on linguistic faithfulness to the original languages, Coverdale focused on smooth readings in English.
 - "Tyndale's translation was governed by his desire for accuracy and style, while Coverdale's was governed by his desire for smooth readings in English. Tyndale's work was a natural product of his scholarly knowledge of Greek and Hebrew, whereas Coverdale's lack of knowledge of the original language meant he had to rely on Luther's German and Jerome's Latin translations. His choice of English expression had more to do with aesthetic judgment and linguistic taste. The results of Coverdale's tactics favored a smooth and more stylistic product. Tyndale's translation intentionally highlighted linguistic faithfulness to the original author's intended meaning. Because Coverdale was not as careful with the intended meaning, his translation was not an improvement on Tyndale's work." (Brake, 113)
- Dr. David Norton concurs with Brake's assessment of Coverdale's linguistic abilities when he states the following in *The King James Bible: A Short History from Tyndale to Today*:
 - "He [Coverdale] was not a linguist to rank with Tyndale or his continental predecessors [Luther and Melancthon], lacking sufficient Hebrew and Greek to work from these primary texts." (Norton, 14)
- In making the point that Coverdale's translation work "does not rank beside Tyndale's," Professor David Daniell gave the following succinct reason:
 - "This is because Coverdale knew neither Hebrew nor Greek." (Daniell, 176)
- S.L. Greenslade, editor of *The Cambridge History of the Bible: The West From the Reformation to the Present Day* records the following regarding Coverdale's first foray into Bible translating:
 - "His first translation was A Paraphrase upon all the Psalms of David from the Latin of Johannes Compensis, published anonymous in 1534 and attributable on strong internal evidence and some external evidence to Coverdale. A reprint of 1535 adds Ecclesiastes, again attributable to him on grounds of style." (Greenslade, 148)
- Coverdale's complete Bible was published on October 4, 1535. Regarding the first edition from 1535, Greenslade writes, "Remarks in the 1550 edition show that he began it [1535 edition] only in 1534 under pressure from Jacob van Meteren, an Antwerp merchant." (Greenslade, 148) A.S.

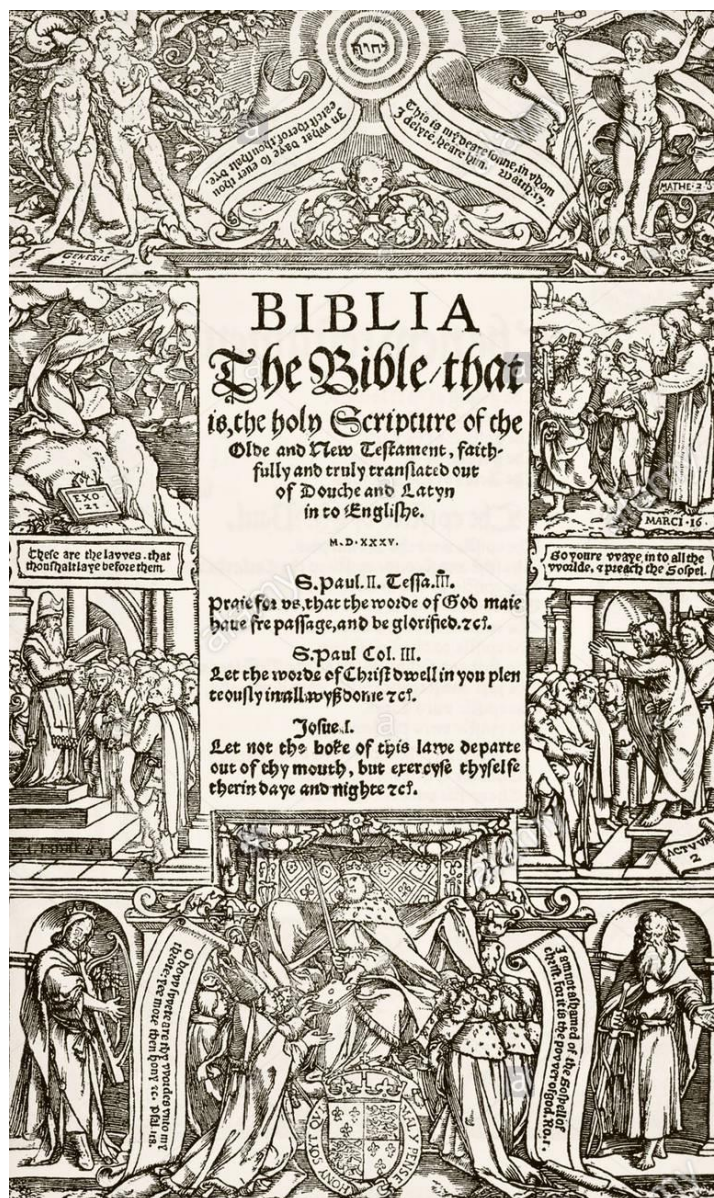
Herbert, author of *Historical Catalogue of Printed Editions of the English Bible 1525-1961* seems to concur with Greenslade. He writes the following in his *Catalogue* entry for the 1550 reprint of Coverdale:

- “The latest reprint of the Bible of 1535 issued during the translator’s lifetime. In an additional paragraph at the end of the Dedication in this edition Coverdale refers to his earliest bible translation-work “sixteen years ago”—i.e., in 1534; and he mentions the same date in his Prologue.” (Herbert, 46)

Impetus to Translate

- In [Lesson 112](#) we discussed the post-Tyndale landscape in terms of the English Bible. In doing so we discussed Sir Thomas More’s scheme to make the Bible available in English via the authority of the Catholic Church as set forth in his *Dialogue Concerning Heresies* (1529). Recall that under this scheme, the Bishops would translate, control, and distribute the text by deciding who could read which portions, for how long, and under what conditions. In the end, nothing came of this as well as other schemes.
- Recall also that Professor Daniell discussed a renewed attempt under Archbishop Thomas Cranmer to authorize a translation of the Bible into English in 1534.
 - “When Thomas Cranmer became Archbishop of Canterbury on 30 March 1533, a fresh attempt was made. The Convocation of Canterbury in their session of autumn 1534, in both Houses, gave a great deal of attention to the matter of heresy and to the English books which were flooding in from overseas. On 19 December, the Upper House resolved that the Archbishop should approach the king and beg him to order first, that all owners of suspected books should exhibit them within three months to a person appointed for the purpose. Cranmer was also to ask the king to order that: ‘The Holy Scriptures should be translated into the vulgar English tongue, by creative good and learned men, to be nominated by his Majesty, and should be delivered to the people for their instruction.’ A third request was intended to curb the presumption of laymen to dispute on faith or Scripture.” (Daniell, 165)
- Because he was ultimately asking his colleagues to revise and correct Tyndale’s work, Cranmer’s project ultimately went nowhere. A few years later in 1537, Cranmer wrote to Cromwell praising Matthew’s Bible and begging that the king might license it:
 - ‘until such time that we bishops shall set forth a better translation, which I think will not be til a day after doomsday.’ (Daniell, 167)
- With yet another failed attempt by the powers that be within England to produce a Bible that they could live with, many believe that King Henry exercised a back channel via Thomas Cromwell and Thomas More to encourage Coverdale to translate the Bible. Regarding this possibility Donald L. Brake writes:

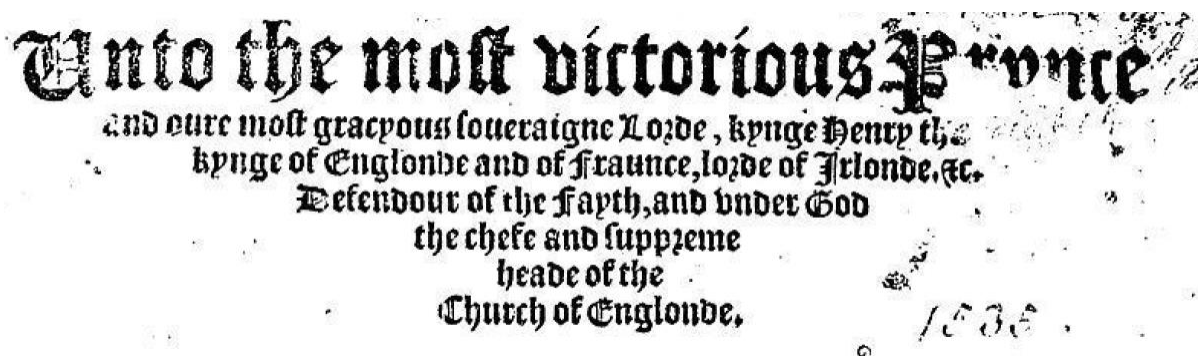
- “Many believe Henry, through Thomas Cromwell and Thomas More, encouraged Coverdale to translate the Bible—hence the dedication. Because of Henry’s open opposition earlier, he certainly could not accept the work of Tyndale. Coverdale’s support of the influential More and Cromwell helps explain his long and successful life as a translator. His political sensitivity proved his most valuable asset as others around him were being persecuted for their faith” (Brake, 115-116)
- J. I. Mombert offers the most insight into this situation in his *Hand-Book of the English Versions of the Bible* from 1883. Regarding the possibility that Coverdale’s translation work was induced, motivated by, if not funded by Cromwell and More, Mombert states the following:
 - “It may be, however, admitted that Coverdale, where he worked, was encouraged, if not employed, by Cromwell in the translation of the Bible, and it would seem from a letter without date (assigned to 1527 or 1532), that Sir Thomas More was aware of his occupation. The letter is penned by Anderson, and in Pearson’s *Remains of Coverdale*, p. 490 [the letter in Pearson is simply dated May 1 with no year ascribed to it] ; the passage in question is this; “If it like your favour to revoke to your memory the godly communication, which your mastership had with me your orator in master More’s house upon Easter Eve” etc. And further on he says: “Now I begin to taste of Holy Scriptures: now honour be to God! I am set to the most sweet smell of holy letters, with the godly savour of holy and ancient doctors, unto whose knowledge I cannot attain without diversity of books, as is not unknown to your excellent wisdom. Nothing in the world I desire but books, concerning my learning: they once had, I do not doubt but Almighty God shall perform that in me which he of his most plentiful favour and grace hath begun.” That these passages relate to the translation of the Bible cannot be doubted. . .” (Mombert, 150-151)
- While this citation from the pen of Mombert is far from conclusive, the notion of Coverdale working for or with Cromwell and More to produce a complete English Bible is an interesting one given what we will observe in the next point on the sources for Coverdale’s translation. An additional point of interest to ponder is, that unlike Tyndale’s Bibles and readers, neither Coverdale’s Bible nor his readers were ever burned.
- That Coverdale was courting royal authorization for his Bible is also evidenced by a consideration of the artwork found on the title page.



- Regarding Coverdale's title page, Blackford Condit states the following:
 - "This title occupies a small square in the middle of the page, and is inclosed by a border of woodcuts illustrating scenes both of the Old and New Testament. The cut extending across the top of the page represents, the *Fall and Redemption*. The small squares on the right represent, the *Giving of the law*, and *Ezra reading the book of the law to the people*; and on the left, *Christ showing himself after his resurrection*, and *Peter preaching to the people*. The cut extending across the bottom of the page, represents *Henry VIII on his throne*, presenting a clasped Bible to his bishops, who kneel on his right, while his peers of the realm kneel on his left. On the extreme right in this cut, there is full-length figure of *King David playing on a harp*, with a connecting scroll bearing an appropriate inscription; so on the extreme left there is a corresponding full-length figure of the

Apostle Paul, with a scroll bearing the inscription, I am not ashamed of the Gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God. Ro. I.” (Condit, 155)

- The artwork of King Henry VIII at the bottom center of the page distributing the Bible to his bishops serves as a clear indication that Coverdale and his supporters, whomever they may have been, were clearly courting royal approval for their Bible.
- In addition, most copies of Coverdale’s 1535 edition contain a dedication to King Henry VIII:



- “Unto the most victorious Prince, and our most gracious sovereign Lord, King Henry the Eighth, King of England and of France, Lord of Ireland, &c. Defender of the Faith, and under God the chief and supreme head of the Church of England.”
- Included within this Dedication was a word about Queen Anne.
 - “The right and just administration of the laws that God gave unto Moses and unto Joshua: the testimony of faithfulness that God gave of David: the plenteous abundance of wisdom that God gave unto Solomon: the lucky and prosperous age with the multiplication of seed which God gave unto Abraham and Sara his wife, be given unto you most gracious Prince, with your dearest just wife, and most virtuous Princess, Queen Anne, Amen.”
- Many historians believe that the mention of Queen Anne, in his original epistle dedicatory in 1535, who had already fallen out of favor with Henry VIII, is what doomed the royal sanctioning of Coverdale’s Bible from the start.
- J. R. Dore, author of *Old Bibles: An Account of the Early Versions of the English Bible*, notes that a second edition of the Coverdale Bible was printed in Southwark England by James Nicolson in 1537. This folio size addition claims on the title page to be “newly overseen and corrected.” This second edition like the first, was dedicated to King Henry in the same words, along with a change in the “dearest just wife and most virtuous Princess Queen Anne is changed for “Queen Jane.”” (Dore, 94)
- Regarding how the fate of Coverdale’s Bible was tied to the fate of Queen Anne, Donald L Brake states the following:

- “The first royal endorsement led to tragedy. Queen Anne Boleyn’s evangelical leanings and her patronage of the 1535 Coverdale Bible signaled its downfall. Its destiny was completely tied with the queen’s fate [Especially since she was explicitly mentioned in the original Epistle dedicatory.]. Her arrest and execution in May 1536 meant that the king would not authorize the Bible she supported.” (Brake, 119-120)
- Considering the evidence, it seems reasonable to conclude that the impetus for Coverdale’s translation work was to produce a Bible that would be sanctioned by the English Crown. To this end, it appears that Coverdale was possibly supported by Sir Thomas More and Thomas Cromwell. As we will see next week in Lesson 114, all of this had a bearing upon the sources that Coverdale utilized for making his translation.

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