

Sunday, April 26, 2020—Grace Life School of Theology—*From This Generation For Ever*  
 Lesson 114 The Coverdale Bible: Assessing Its Source

### Introduction

- Last week in [Lesson 113](#) we began looking at the life and translation work of Myles Coverdale. In doing so, we compared Tyndale and Coverdale as translators as well as sought to ascertain the impetus for Coverdale's Bible.
- Regarding Coverdale's abilities as a translator, we noted that he was not proficient in Hebrew and Greek and was therefore forced to rely on the Latin Vulgate, Luther's German, as well as other translations.
- In terms of the impetus to translate, there is strong evidence to suggest that Coverdale was employed via back channels by King Henry VIII and his associates Sir Thomas More and Archbishop Thomas Cromwell to translate an English Bible that could be sanctioned/authorized by the Crown.
- The strongest evidence for this is found in an examination of Coverdale's 1535 edition itself. The artwork on the Title Page in addition to the epistle Dedicatory to King Henry VIII provide strong evidence to this end. This evidence coupled with other albeit less clear documentation such as surviving letters and documents for high church meetings furnish a strong case as to the impetus for Coverdale's work.
- As we saw in the previous lesson, Coverdale's original epistle dedicatory to King Henry also mention "Queen Anne." As the following image confirms.

**C** The ryght & iust administracyon of the lawes that God gaue vnto Moyses and vnto Iosua: the testymonye of faythfulnes that God gaue of Dauid: the plenteous abundaunce of wysdome that God gaue vnto Salomon: the lucky and prosperous age with the multiplicacyon of sede whiche God gaue vnto Abraham and Sara his wyfe, be geue vnto you most gracypus Prynce, with your dearest iust wyfe, and most vertuouse Pryncesse, Quene Anne, Amen.

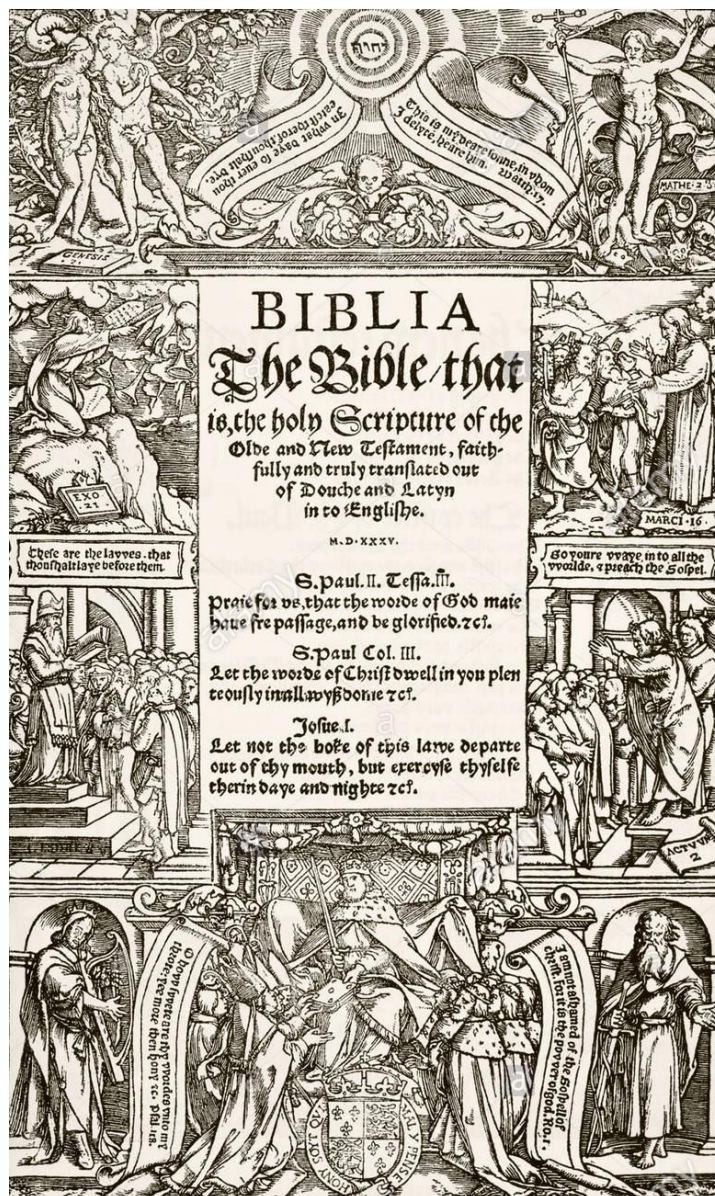
- Since Queen Anne had already fallen out of favor with Henry VIII by the time Coverdale's Bible was completed, there was little chance that the Crown was going to sanction/authorize it.
- There is one further piece of evidence that we neglected to cover in Lesson 113. When Henry finally did authorize the Great Bible in 1539, some four years later, the task of translating it fell to Myles Coverdale. This provides further evidence that the impetus for Coverdale's original work in 1535 was in fact a Crown approved Bible.
- The politics of the situation impacted the source and the printed history of the Coverdale Bible. A topic to which we will now turn our attention.

### The Source of Coverdale's Translation

- Printed in 1535 in Antwerp by Jacobus van Meteren, Coverdale's Bible was the first complete Bible in English. That said, English law forbid the volume from being bound outside of Britain.
  - "By this time [1535], the English Bible was in great demand in England. In 1533, a new English law had passed, compelling foreigners to sell their editions to London binderies. This was a blatant attempt to protect the bindery industry in England. Jacobus van Meteren sold the sheets already printed from the Coverdale Bible to another publisher, James Nicolson of Southwark. Although printed in Antwerp, all surviving Coverdale Bibles have English bindings." (Brake, 115)
- J.R. Dore's book from 1888 titled *Old Bibles: An Account of the Early Version of the English Bible* offers some interesting perspective on Coverdale's first edition. Contrary to the common narrative advanced by many King James Only advocates, Coverdale did not translate from Greek and Hebrew. Rather, he utilized the Latin Vulgate and Luther's German Bible.
  - Internal evidence proves that the first English Bible was not translated from the original tongues, but principally from the Vulgate and Luther's Bible . . .

Coverdale tells the reader, "to help me herein I have had sundry translations, not only in Latin, but also of the Douche [German] interpreters, whom because of their singular gifts and special diligence in the Bible, I have been the more glad to follow for the most part." (Dore, 90-91)

- The image below is the original Title Page printed in Antwerp.



- The original Antwerp title page printed by Jacobus van Meteren bears witness to this fact. It reads:
  - “Biblia | The Bible / that | is, the holy Scripture of the | Olde and New Testament, faith | fully translated out | of **Douche [German] and Latin** | into English. | M.D. XXXV.” (Dore, 91)
- Regarding this original title page, A.S. Herbert states the following in *Historical Catalogue of Printed Editions of The English Bible 1525-1961*:

- “The title and preliminary leaves mentioned above are printed in English black-letter, unlike the angular type used in the body of the book. Variations of this title occur which the following is an example [Quotes the text shared in the previous citation.] . . . Now both this title (hence styled the ‘foreign’ title) and this leaf are printed in the same angular type which is used in the body of the book. No doubt they are relics of the preliminary matter originally issued, which, in all probability, consisted of four leaves, containing title, list of books (2pp.), prologue (4pp.), and content of Genesis. (One of the two BM [British Museum] copies, has an imperfect foreign title. It appears that the printer who promoted the sale of the edition in England cancelled these leaves, and issued a fresh title (slightly altered) and seven other preliminary leaves (including a Dedication to the king), all of which were printed in English black-letter. This printer—no doubt Nicolson, from whose press came the second editions of 1537—probably also inserted the map which is found in some copies of this Bible.” (Herbert, 10)
- In his dedication to Henry VIII (see below), which was added later, Coverdale stated the following regarding his source texts:
  - “. . . but have with a clear conscience purely and faithfully translated this out of **five sundry interpreters**, having only the manifest truth of the scripture before mine eyes, ...” (Quoted in Norton, 14)
- In other words, Coverdale did not utilize original language resources while translating. Later in his Prologue, Coverdale states the following:
  - “I was the more bold to take it in hand. And to help me herein, **I have had sundry translations, not only in Latin, but also of the German interpreters**: whom (because of their singular gifts and special diligence in the Bible) I have been the more glad to follow for the most part, according as I was required.” ([Prologue](#))
- It is important to note that Coverdale makes no mention of Tyndale or the Erasmus Greek text in any of his statements regarding his translation work. Yet, he clearly mentions German and Latin, resources. Regarding Coverdale’s sources, Professor Norton goes on to state:
  - “These ‘interpreters’ were, in Latin, the Vulgate and Pagninus, and in German, Luther and the Zurich Bible of 1524-9, all of which have left clear marks on his work. If Coverdale meant his five to be German and Latin only—so tactfully omitting mention of his main source, the postscripted Tyndale—then the first was probably Erasmus’ NT.” (Norton, 14)
- S.L Greenslade states the following about Coverdale’s “five sundry interpreters” in the *Cambridge History of the Bible*:
  - “Coverdale did not translate directly from Hebrew and Greek. His modest preface speaks of lowly and faithfully allowing his interpreters, given in number according to the *Dedication to the King*. They were the Vulgate, Pagnini’s Latin version of 1528 (very literal in rendering the Old Testament), Luther’s German, the Zurich Bible in the 1531 and 1534 editions, and Tyndale, or if Tyndale was not counted, Erasmus’ Latin version;

he did not use Tyndale's Joshua-II Chronicles. Coverdale's scholarship was not sufficient for an independent choice between authorities on philological grounds. For the Pentateuch, Jonah, and the New Testament Tyndale is basic [This is Greenslade's opinion. It is not derived from any clear statement from Coverdale.], though much revised; for Joshua-Esther (where Luther and Zurich largely agree) he relies on the German versions, with some preference for Zurich; for Job-Maccabees he trusts the scholarship of Zurich, here independent of Luther, though the Vulgate is used considerably for the Apocrypha." (Greenslade, 148-149)

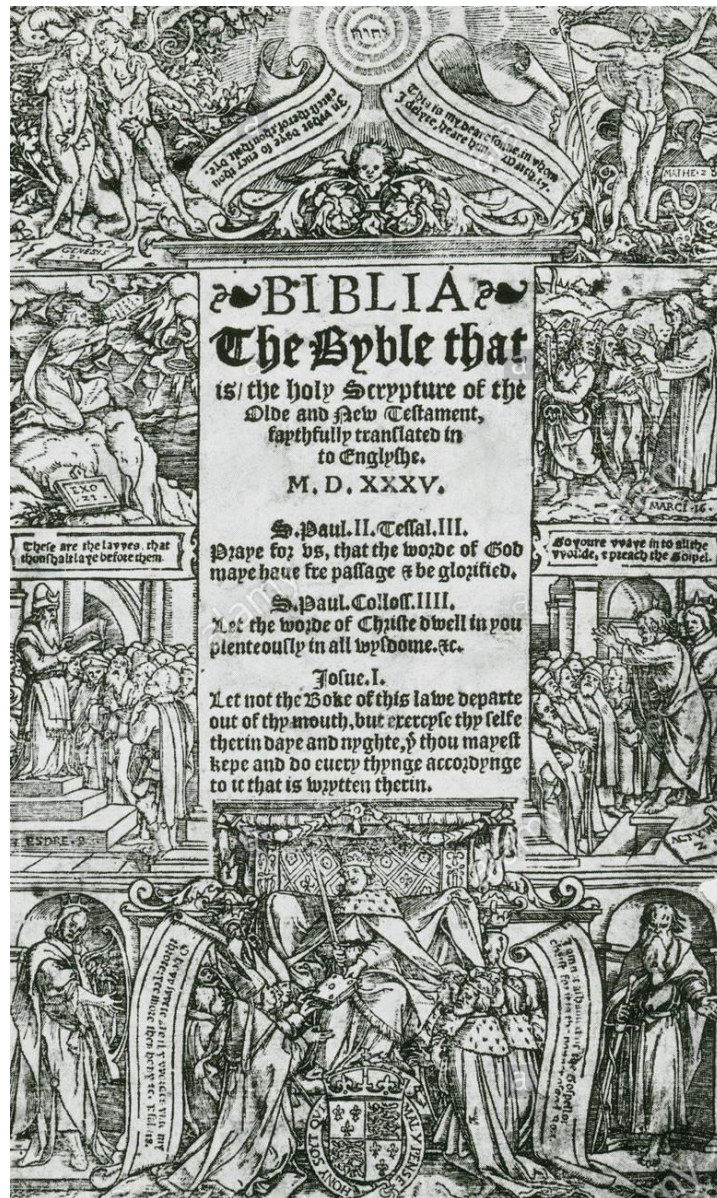
- Regarding the identity of the "five sundry interpreters" Dr. David Daniell adds:
  - "The 'five sundry interpreters' turn out to have been the Swiss-German version of the whole Bible made by Zwingli and Leo Juda, printed in Zurich between 1524 and 1529, a version emphasizing grace and flow of phrase rather than exactness to the original; the rather curious and over literal Latin version of the Old Testament made by Sanctus Pagninus, first published in 1528; Luther's German Bible, completed in 1532, the Vulgate; and Tyndale for the New Testament and half the Old." (Daniell, 176)
- Herbert's *Catalogue* is clearly the source for the last citation from Daniell. That said, Herbert adds the following statement that was not cited by Daniell, "In the main his translation is based on the first two of these." (Herbert, 9) Which in the context is referring to the Swiss-German version of Zwingli and the Latin of Pagninus.
- There is much to unpack here. First, it is possible that Tyndale was a source that Coverdale elected not to mention for political reasons, knowing that any mention of the alleged heretic would doom his translation project before it got off the ground. Second, the original title page, epistle dedicatory to Henry VIII, and Prologue taken together mention at least two of the five source texts for Coverdale's work: German and Latin. Third, it seems highly unlikely that the Erasmian Greek would have been one of Coverdale's five sources given the almost universal agreement among scholars that Coverdale was not proficient in Greek, unless he used Erasmus' Latin correction of the Latin Vulgate. In a later paragraph, Norton goes on to say that Coverdale "had worked as Tyndale's assistant in preparing the Pentateuch." (Norton, 14) Consequently, Norton sees Coverdale as Tyndale's understudy who naturally would have utilized the work of his mentor. But is this correct?
- Norton's evidence for this position is the work of John Foxe in *Acts and Monuments*. Dr. David Daniell questions the Foxe narrative on the following grounds:
  - "Foxe in *Acts and Monuments* had Coverdale in Hamburg for most of 1529, invited by Tyndale to help him retranslate the Pentateuch. The two men worked, Foxe writes, 'on the whole five books of Moses, from Easter till December, in the house of a worshipful widow, Mistress Margaret Van Emmersen, AD 1529; a great sweating sickness being at the same time. . . Perhaps Coverdale was indeed there; yet the story Foxe tells has too much against it. It is only a few lines in his last, 1576 version of *Acts and Monuments*. There, Tyndale suddenly sails from Antwerp to Hamburg to print his Pentateuch, and loses everything in a shipwreck on the coast of Holland. He proceeds to Hamburg and meets Coverdale there by appointment, and sets about retranslating his entire Pentateuch.



For Tyndale to have gone to Hamburg makes no sense. Antwerp, where Protestantism first took root in the Low Countries, in 1529 had many fine printers with established trade with Britain. Among them was the dependable Martin de Keyser, who had already printed Tyndale's *Mammon* and *Obedience*. De Keyser would go on to print his other books, including his revised New Testament in 1534. Tyndale had no reason to commit to any unknown printer in Hamburg the first translation ever made from Hebrew into English, his next most precious work after his 1526 New Testament. Coverdale, an educated Christian, was no doubt enriching company for Tyndale; and like Tyndale he had an admirable ear for the rhythms of English. But he knew neither Hebrew nor Greek and would have been of small use for the work on the Pentateuch. **Comparison of Tyndale and Coverdale translating those five Old Testament books show the distance in method between the two men, and the unlikelihood of collaboration.**

The shipwreck story is certainly dramatic. The most significant point against it, however, is that, though the Prologue to the very Pentateuch is where Tyndale tells us most about himself, he makes no mention of it at all. Nor does Coverdale. Nor does anyone else at the time.” (Daniell, 178)

- The bolded statement above from the pen of Daniell further calls into question the influence of Tyndale upon Coverdale's work. At this point Coverdale did not use the Greek *Receptus* and his use of/reliance upon Tyndale remains, at best, an open and unanswered question.
- Given Tyndale's earlier work with the original languages, Nicolson, the English binder, feared that his countrymen would not purchase a Bible translated from German and Latin. Consequently, he removed Coverdale's original title page and substituted the following:
  - “Biblia | The Bible: that | is/the holy Scriptures the | Olde and New Testament, | faithfully translated in | to English. | M.D. XXXV . . .” (Dore, 91)



- In addition, much of the original Antwerp preliminary material was cancelled and substituted for the dedication to King Henry VIII that we considered last week in [Lesson 113](#). Following the dedication to the King, Nicolson's edition included a Prologue titled "A Prologue. Myles Coverdale unto the Christian reader." Nicolson was able to make these changes to the initial project because he "not only bought the entire edition from van Meteren, but also the original blocks of woodcuts, map, and the title border." (Dore, 92)

**A prologe.**  
**Myles Couerdale Unto the Christen reader.**

- Coverdale did retain some of Tyndale's Protestant word choices such as *congregation* for church, *elder* for priest, and *love* for charity, according to Greenslade. (Greenslade, 149) As we studied in Lesson 113, despite his desire to compromise, Coverdale's Bible would fail to garner the support of Henry's Romanish bishops. Blackford Condit comments upon this in his *The History of the English Bible*:
  - "Notwithstanding Coverdale's compromises, in the rendering of certain ecclesiastical words, and the leaving out of objectionable prologues and glosses found in Tyndale, his translation met with no favor at the hands of the Romish bishops. This appears from the fact, that in the convocation of June 9, 1536, a petition was agreed upon, to be presented to the king, for a new translation of the Bible. The substance of this petition was, that the king would graciously indulge his subjects of the laity the reading of the Bible in the English tongue, and that a new translation might be forthwith made." (Condit, 157-158)
- Despite there being no evidence that this petition was ever passed or acted upon it does furnish us with circumstantial proof that the Bishops of the newly established Anglican Church were not going to sanction Coverdale's Bible. John Foxe records the following injunction "Given by the authority of the King to the clergy of his realm in the year 1536 [The year after Coverdale's Bible was first published.]," and it reads:
  - "The every person or proprietary of any parish Church within the realm, shall on this side of the feast of S. Peter ad vincula next coming, provide a book of the whole Bible, both in Latin and also in English, and lay the same in the quire for every man that will, to look and read thereon, and shall discourage no man from the reading of any part of the Bible either in Latin or English, but rather comfort, exhort, and admonish every man to read the same, as the very word of God, and the spiritual food of man's soul, whereby they may the better know their duties to God, to the sovereign Lord the King and their neighbor, ever gently and charitably exhorting them, that using a sober and modest behavior in the reading and inquisition of the true sense of the same, they do in no wise stiffly or eagerly contend or strive one with another, about the same . . ." (Condit, 158)
- This injunction called for the production of an edition that contained both the Latin and English in parallel columns. In 1538, Nicolson issued a quarto reprint of Coverdale's Testament in parallel columns along with the Latin Vulgate. This edition is also known as Coverdale's English/Latin Diglot. The title page reads,
  - "The new tes | tament both in Latin and | English each correspondent to | the other after the vulgare text com | monely called S. Jerome. Faith | fully translated by Myles | Coverdale | Anno. | M.CCCC. XXXViii. | Is not my word like a fire sayeth the | Lord, and like an hammer | breaketh the hard stone? | Printed in Southwarke | by James Nicolson | Set forth with the Kings | most gracious license." (Dore, 98-99)





- According to Dore, “The Latin text introduced by Coverdale is the ordinary Vulgate of S. Jerome and was inserted to enable the clergy and others to convince themselves that this English translation was an accurate one.” (Dore, 99)
- Herbert states the following about Coverdale’s Diglot in his *Historical Catalogue of Printed English Bibles*:
  - “The English text differs somewhat from that in the 1535 Bible, agreeing more closely with the Vulgate.

Before leaving London in the spring of 1538 for Paris . . . Coverdale had settled that Nicolson should publish for him in London a New Testament with the Vulgate text and

his own English version printed side by side. This he determined on in order to reassure his timid friends, and to confute his critics. The book appeared in 1538 in a handsome form, but so full of misprints and errors that Coverdale repudiated it, and immediately arranged for an edition under his own superintendence at Paris.” (Herbert, 21)

- Coverdale was in Paris when the above volume was published. Upon examining it, he issued a corrected edition with the following title page:
  - “The new testament in | Latin and English after | the vulgar text: | which is red in | the church. | Translated and corrected by My | les Coverdale; and printed in | Paris by Francues Regnault, | M.CCCCC. XXXVijj. | in November.” (Dore, 99)



- In the dedication to this corrected volume Coverdale stated the following:
  - “True it is, that this last lent I did with all humbleness direct an Epistle unto the kings most noble grace: trusting that the book (where unto it was prefixed) should afterward have been as well corrected, as other books be. And because I could not be present myself (by reason of sundry notable impediments) there inasmuch as the new testament,

which I had set forth in English before, doth so agree with the Latin, I was heartily well content, that the Latin and it should be set together. Provided alway, that the corrector should follow the true copy of the Latin in any wise, and to keep the true and right English of the same. And so doing, I was content to set my name to it. And even so I did: trusting though I were absent and out of the land, yet all should be well. And (as God is my record) I knew none other, till this last July, that it was my chance here in these parts as a strangers land, to come by a copy of the said print. Which want I had persued, I found, that it was disagreeable to my former translation in English, so was not the true copy of the Latin text observed, neither the English so correspondent to the same as it ought to be: but in many places both base, insensible and clean contrary, not only to the phrase of our languages, but also from the understanding of the text in Latin. Whereof though no man to this hour did write ner speak to me, yet for as much as I am sworn to the truth, I will favor no man to the hinderance thereof, ner to the maintaining of anything that is contrary to the fight and just further of the same. And therefore as my duty is to be faithful, to edify, and with the uttermost of my power to pay all occasion of evil, so have I (though my business be great enough beside) endeavored myself to weed out the faults there were in the Latin and English afore: trusting, that this present correction may be (unto them that shall print it hereafter) a copy sufficient.” (Dore, 99-100)

- Mark well, Coverdale was not upset that his translation of the New Testament had been printed in parallel columns along with the Vulgate, he admits that he gave his blessing to the project. Rather, he was upset that it was done improperly or in a “disagreeable” manner. Consequently, from Paris, Coverdale took steps to correct and reissue the project. From this we see that Coverdale has no problem with the Latin Vulgate and believed that his translation answered to it.
- When accurately viewed through the prism of history, Coverdale seems to have been courting political favor for the official sanctioning of his Bible by the English Crown. He did this by seeking to demonstrate to the powers that be that his translation cohered with the Latin Bible of the established Church.
- The truth regarding Coverdale’s translation seems to stand in direct opposition to the standard narrative of the King James Only movement. Coverdale did not translate from the *Textus Receptus* but instead relied heavily upon the Latin Vulgate, one of the Bibles in the stream of corruption, according to the “two streams of Bibles” paradigm of transmission. It is high time that King James advocates leave behind unsound arguments in their defense of the KJB.
- My analysis leads me to believe the following. Coverdale used Tyndale, where available (New Testament and Pentateuch), as his base text but did not say anything about it for political purposes as his goal was to garner Crown authorization for his Bible. In doing, so Coverdale revised Tyndale through selective use of his “five sundry interpreters.” For those sections of the Old Testament for which Tyndale was not available to serve as a base, Coverdale relied heavily on Latin, German, and other non-English sources. In the end, the situation is far messier than the “two streams of Bibles” and “purified seven times” paradigms would have us believe.

### Works Cited

- Brake, Donald L. *A Visual History of the English Bible*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2008
- Condit, Blackford. *The History of the English Bible: Extending from Earliest Saxon Translations to the Present Anglo-American Revision*. New York & Chicago: A.S. Barnes & Company, 1882.
- Daniell, David. *The Bible in English: Its History and Influence*. New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2003.
- Dore, J.R. *Old Bibles: An Account of the Early Versions of the English Bible*. London: Eyre and Spottiswoode: 888.
- Greenslade, S.L. *The Cambridge History of the Bible: The West From the Reformation to the Present Day*. Cambridge University Press, 1963.
- Herbert, S.A. *Historical Catalogue of Printed Editions of the English Bible 1525–1961*. London: British & Foreign Bible Society, 1968.
- Norton, David. *The King James Bible: A Short History from Tyndale to Today*. Cambridge University Press, 2011.