

Sunday, May 3, 2020—Grace Life School of Theology—*From This Generation For Ever*
 Lesson 115 The Coverdale Bible: Assessing Coverdale’s Ability as a Translator

Introduction

- Last week in [Lesson 114](#) we sought to assess the sources of Coverdale’s Bible. In doing so, we observed that Coverdale was not proficient in the source languages of Hebrew and Greek and therefore had to rely on Latin and German sources.
- In terms of the public reception for Coverdale’s Bible by the people of England (a topic we have not touched upon yet), Blackford Condit makes the following statement in his *The History of the English Bible* from 1882:
 - “For ten years the people had been familiar with Tyndale’s printed New Testament, and for some five or six years with parts of the Old Testament of Tyndale’s translation, and now from the hand of Coverdale they received the whole Bible in print. That it was favorably received by the people we have strong evidence in the fact, that the first edition was exhausted during the year 1536, and that in 1537 two editions, one in folio and the other in quarto, were published by James Nycolson of Southwark. . . Besides there was another issue of Coverdale’s Bible in 1550, which was reprinted in 1553.” (Condit, 159)
- Today in Lesson 115 our primary goal is to assess Coverdale’s skill/ability as a translator.

Assessing Coverdale’s Ability As a Translator

- In his *The Making of the English Bible* Gerald Hammond credits C.S. Lewis with having made the definitive statement regarding the Coverdale Bible:
 - “The definitive statement about his Bible translation was made by C.S. Lewis: as a scholar, ‘he was like a rowing-boat among battleships,’ but as a creative artist he is the translator ‘whose choice of rending came nearest to being determined by taste.’ What Lewis means is that because Coverdale did not know Hebrew or Greek he was forced to choose between versions of other translators, and that in the process he was largely guided by his own aesthetic judgement—and this, fortunately, was more than sound.” (Hammond, 68)
- Donald L. Brake author of *A Visual History of the English Bible* offers the following analysis of Coverdale’s skills as a translator:
 - “Coverdale only slightly revised Tyndale’s translation of the New Testament, Pentateuch, Jonah, and the historical books [Daniell proved that Tyndale’s version of Joshua through II Chronicles was not in print until the Matthew’s Bible of 1537.]. His original and most creative translation came in his work on the poetic and prophetic books. Without Tyndale to follow, he was left to his own stylistic contributions. He emphasized the readability of the receptor langue rather than the source language in which he clearly was

not competent. His translation of the Psalms become the standard for the Psalter for years to come and was used in the Common Book of Prayer (1549-1860).” (Brake, 118)

- According to Brake, “Coverdale did not capture much of the Hebrew structure such as parallelism and rhythmic cadence.” (Brake, 118) He then provides the following examples and commentary.
 - “Exodus 2:1-2
 - **Tyndale:** And there wet a man of the house of Levi ad toke a daughter of Levi. And the wife conceived ad bare a son. And when she saw that it was a proper child, she hid him three months long.
 - **Coverdale:** And there went forth a man of the house of Levi, and toke a daughter of Levi. And the wife conceived and bare a son. And when she saw it was a proper child, she hid him three months.
 - **KJV:** And there went a man of the house of Levi, and took to wife a daughter of Levi. And the woman conceived, and bare a son: and when she saw him that he was a goodly child, she hid him three months.

Psalm 1:1

- **Coverdale:** O blessed is ye man, it goeth not in the counsel of ye ungodly: it abideth not in the way off sinners, & sitteh not in ye seat of the scornful.
- **KJV:** Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful.

It seems fairly clear that Coverdale slightly revised Tyndale in Exodus 2 and the KJV follows both closely. Whereas, Coverdale’s Psalm 1 and the KJV vary slightly. This pattern can be observed by simple comparison. Coverdale felt the freedom to emphasize style and English composition more than accuracy based upon the original text.” (Brake, 118-119)

- If the analysis of Brake, Hammond, and Lewis is correct, there are two categories that we need to consider when assessing Coverdale’s ability as a translator.
 - Coverdale as a Translator: Poetry & Prophecy
 - Coverdale as a Revisor: Reworking of Tyndale
- The focus of this Lesson will be the first of these two points; Coverdale as a Translator.

Coverdale as a Translator: Poetry & Prophecy

- Knowing that Tyndale was only able to finish the Pentateuch, Historical Books (Joshua—II Chronicles), Jonah, and the New Testament before he was martyred, it is to the Poetic and

Prophet books that we must turn to ascertain Coverdale’s impact as a translator. After noting Tyndale’s prior work, Hammond writes the following about Coverdale:

- “This leaves the Prophetic and Poetic books of the Old Testament, and it is in these books that we see Coverdale’s creative translation at its freest, unaffected by an existing English version.” (Hammond, 69)
- S.L. Greenslade author of the essay “English Versions of the Bible, 1525-1611” for the *Cambridge History of the Bible* concurs with Hammond and Brake that Coverdale’s English style is best judged from his work on the Psalms.
 - “His English style is commonly judged by his Psalms, where it is at its best: abounding in music, beautify phrased. Elsewhere he is generally smoother and more melodious than Tyndale, less given to variation, missing something of his swiftness and native force, but often finding a better phrase. His style tends to adapt itself to the ‘interpreter’ most in use; hence his coining of Germanic compounds—deadburier, hand-reaching, righteousnessmaking and the like.” (Greenslade, 149)
- Condit’s *The History of the English Bible* from 1882 states the following regarding the enduring impact of Coverdale’s work on the Psalms:
 - “The English Church to this day reads in her Prayer-book, Coverdale’s version of the Psalms with very few changes, and even these are for the most part verbal, so that essentially the version of 1535 is retained. Not only the English Prayer-book, but our present version of the Psalms is indebted to Coverdale for its rhythmic flow and strength of expression.” (Condit, 161)
- In order the ascertain the truthfulness of Condit’s statement please consider the following table presenting Psalms 2 from Coverdale and the King James Bible in parallel columns. Please note that words found in Coverdale but not in the King James have been underlined. Likewise, working changes made by the King James translators have been bolded.

Verse #	Coverdale	King James
Ps. 2:1	Why do the Heathen grudge? why do the people imagine vain things?	Why do the heathen rage , and the people imagine a vain thing ?
Ps. 2:2	The kings of the earth stood up, and the rulers are come together, against the LORDE and against his anointed.	The kings of the earth set themselves , and the rulers take counsel together , against the LORD, and against his anointed, saying ,
Ps. 2:3	Let vs break their bonds asunder, and cast away their yoke from us.	Let us break their bands asunder, and cast away their CORDS from us.
Ps. 2:4	<u>Nevertheless</u> , he that dwelleth in heaven, shall laugh <u>them to scorn</u> : yea even the LORD himself shall have them in derision.	He that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh: the Lord shall have them in derision.
Ps. 2:5	Then shall he speak unto them in his wrath, and vex them in his sore displeasure.	Then shall he speak unto them in his wrath, and vex them in his sore displeasure.
Ps. 2:6	Yet have I set my king upon my holy hill of Sion.	Yet have I set my king upon my holy hill of Zion.

Ps. 2:7	As for me I will preach the law, whereof the LORDE hath said unto me: Thou art my son, this day have I begotten thee.	I will declare the decree : the LORD hath said unto me, Thou art my Son; this day have I begotten thee.
Ps. 2:8	Desire of me, and I shall give thee the Heathen for thine inheritance, Yee the uttermost parts of the world for thy possession.	Ask of me, and I shall give thee the heathen for thine inheritance, and the uttermost parts of the earth for thy possession.
Ps. 2:9	Thou shalt rule them with a rod of iron, <u>and</u> break them in pieces like an earthen vessel.	Thou shalt break them with a rod of iron; thou shalt dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel.
Ps. 2:10	Be wise now therefore (o ye kings) be warned, ye that are judges of the earth.	Be wise now therefore, O ye kings: be instructed , ye judges of the earth.
Ps. 2:11	Serve the LORDE with fear, and rejoice <u>before him</u> with reverence.	Serve the LORD with fear, and rejoice with <u>trembling</u> .
Ps. 2:12	Kiss the son, lest the LORDE be angry, <u>and so</u> ye perish from the <u>right way</u> . For his wrath <u>shall be kindled shortly</u> : blessed are all they that put their trust in him.	Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and ye perish from the way, when his wrath is kindled but a little. Blessed are all they that put their trust in him.

- As one can see little has changed in the King James from how Coverdale's Bible read in 1535. Please also consider the popular 23rd Psalm as another example.

Verse #	Coverdale	King James
Ps. 23:1	The LORDE is my shepherd, I can want nothing.	The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want .
Ps. 23:2	He fedeth me in a green pasture, and ledeth me to a fresh water.	He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters .
Ps. 23:3	He quickeneth my soule, & bringeth me forth in the way of righteousness for his names sake.	He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.
Ps. 23:4	Though I should walk now in the valley of the shadow of death, yet I fear no evil, for thou art with me: thy staff & thy shephoke [sheephoke] comfort me.	Yea , though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.
Ps. 23:5	Thou preparest a table before me against mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil, & fillest my cup full.	Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over .
Ps. 23:6	Oh let thy loving kindness & mercy follow me all the days off my life, that I may dwell in the house off the LORDE for ever.	Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.

- The King James is clearly an improvement over Coverdale in terms of rhythmic flow and poetic style. That said, Coverdale's rendering served as the rough draft for these Psalms as well as many other portions of the Poetic books found in the Old Testament. Recall that Tyndale was not able to translate the Poetic books before his execution.
- Gerald Hammond offers a balanced analysis of Coverdale's work in Ecclesiastes and Proverbs in his *The Making of the English Bible*. Consider the following comparison between Coverdale's rendering of Ecclesiastes 5:10-12 with that of the King James.

Verse #	Coverdale	King James
Ec. 5:10	He that loveth money, will never be satisfied with money: and who so delighteth in riches, shall have no profit thereof. Is not this also a vain thing?	He that loveth silver shall not be satisfied with silver; nor he that loveth abundance with increase: this is also vanity.
Ec. 5:11	Where as many riches are, there are many also that spend them away. And what pleasure more hath he that possesseth them, saving that he may look upon them with his eyes?	When goods increase, they are increased that eat them: and what good is there to the owners thereof, saving the beholding of them with their eyes?
Ec. 5:12	A laboring man sleepeth sweetly, whether it be little or much that he eateth: but the abundance of the riche will not suffer him to sleep.	The sleep of a labouring man is sweet, whether he eat little or much: but the abundance of the rich will not suffer him to sleep.

- After comparing the two passages, Hammond makes the following evaluative comment:
 - “The Authorized Version translators are closer to the strictly literal meaning and syntax of the Hebrew, but their version is wooden and unconvincing when set beside Coverdale’s; when they want to round the verses off with a final rhythmical close they follow Coverdale word for word. To take one example of Coverdale’s superiority, in verse 11, ‘saving the beholding of them with their eyes’ is the Authorized Versions’ rendering of a fairly compressed Hebrew clause, meaning literally “but only seeing his eyes.” The verb is a participle, hence the Authorized Version’s ‘beholding.’ Coverdale changes the grammar a little, and produces an effective and scarcely less compressed rendering, with none of the unnecessary impersonality of the Authorized Versions’ equivalent.” (Hammond, 75-76)
- Recall from Lesson 114 that Coverdale was not proficient in Hebrew. Therefore, the translational decisions of Coverdale, noted by Hammond, are not due to Coverdale’s intimate knowledge of Hebrew but rather what he had before him in his “five sundry translations” upon which he based his work. My reason for quoting Hammond on this point is to highlight that as a translator, Coverdale worked more off of rhythmic feel in English than Hebrew syntax. Consequently, Coverdale’s work lacks the accuracy that is found in Tyndale and the King James. Hammond elaborates on this point as follows:
 - “In the book of Proverb’s Coverdale’s rendering sometimes seem quaint or expansive in verses familiar to us from the Authorized Version, but not always without effect. Consider two fairly recognizable examples: ‘Presumptuousness goeth before destruction and after a proud stomach there followeth a fall’ (16:18); and ‘An indiscreet son is the heaviness of his father, and a brawling wife is like the top of a house where through it is ever dropping’ (19:13). But equally often Coverdale’s rendering is striking, either because it is recognizably the source, sometimes word for word, of the Authorized Version’s rendering, or because it presents us with an equally attractive alternative—if not a more attractive one. In chapter 23, for instance, he begins by missing the point entirely. Where the Authorized Version warns about sitting down to eat with a ruler—

‘put a knife to they throat if thou be a man given to appetite’—Coverdale merely has “measure them appetite’. But in verses 5-7 he achieves a persuasively flexible warning against desire for riches on earth with the envious; less accurate, but more memorable than the Authorized Version’s rendering of the verses.

5) Why wilt thou set thine eye vpon ye thinge, which sodenly vanisheth awaye?
For riches make them selues wynges, and take their flight like an Aegle in to ye ayre.

6) Eate not thou wt ye enuyous, and desyre no his meate,

7) for he hath a maruelous herte. He sayeth vnto ye: eate and drynke, where as his herte is not wt ye. . . [I have omitted Hammond quotation of these verse in the AV to save space in the notes.] . . .

Later in the chapter, verse 13 goes directly into the Authorized Version, with only the dropping of ‘thereof’ from the end: “Withhold not correction from the child, for if thou beatest hm with the rod he shall not die thereof.’ In verses 20-22 the most distinctive words of the Authorized Version’s translation come directly from Coverdale.

20) Kepe no company wt wyne bebbers and ryotous eaters of flesh:

21) for soch as be dronckardes and ryotous, shal come to pouerte, & he that is geuen to moch slepe, shal go wt a ragged cote.

22) Geue eare vnto thy father that begat the, and despyse not thy mother whan she is olde.

And then, in the memorable description of the whore in verse 27-8, Coverdale goes one better by giving a physical point to the comparison of her in a ditch and a pit. In fact he compares her to a grave and a pit—‘for an whore is a deep grave, and an harlot is a narrow pit’—and builds on this in the next verse with ‘She lurketh like a thief, and thos that be not aware she brigethn unto her.’ It ought to be said, though, that the Authorized Versions’ finish to this verse, which has none of Coverdale’s physicality—‘and increaseth the transgressors among men’—is more truer to the Hebrew.” (Hammond, 76-77)

- Hammond concludes his discussion of Coverdale’s handling of Hebrew poetry with the following cautionary statement:
 - “I ought not go too far in praising Coverdale. By selective quotation it could be possible to make him appear the most expressive of the English Bible translators, and that would be a mistake. The pieces I have quoted here have been long enough to show that his achievements are not solitary flashes of inspiration; just as often, however, his lack of knowledge of the original makes his translations come close to gibberish.” (Hammond, 77-78)
- After comment upon Coverdale’s Poetic work, Blackford Condit goes on to discuss his work on the Prophets.

- “The same rhythmical flow so noticeable in Coverdale’s translation of the Psalms is found likewise in his translation of the Prophetical books. . .” (Condit, 162)
- Given the difference in the style of literature between the Poetic books and the Prophets, Condit views Coverdale’s style as “more stately and elevated” in the Prophets. (Condit, 162) He then goes on to cite Isaiah 40 as an example. Please note that I have updated Coverdale’s spelling for ease of reading.

Verse #	Coverdale	King James
Is. 40:1	Be of good cheer my people, be of good cheer (saith your God)	Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God.
Is. 40:2	Comfort Jerusalem, and tell her: that her travail is at an end, that her offence is pardoned, that she hath received of the LORDES hand sufficient correction for all her sins.	Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned: for she hath received of the LORD'S hand double for all her sins.
Is. 40:3	A voice crieth: Prepare ye way for the LORDE in the wilderness, make straight ye path for our God in the desert.	The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.
Is. 40:4	Let all valleys be exalted, and every mountain and hill be laid low. What so is crooked, let it be made straight, and let the rough places be made plain fields.	Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low: and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain:
Is. 40:5	For the glory of the LORDE shall appear, & all flesh shall see it, for why, ye mouth of the LORDE hath spoken it.	And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together: for the mouth of the LORD hath spoken it.
Is. 40:6	The same voice spake: Now cry. And I said: what shall I cry? Then spake it: that, all flesh is grass, and that all the beauty thereof, is as the flower of the field.	The voice said, Cry. And he said, What shall I cry? All flesh is grass, and all the goodliness thereof is as the flower of the field:
Is. 40:7	When the grass is withered, the flower falleth away. Even so is the people as grass, when the breath of the LORDE bloweth upon them.	The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: because the spirit of the LORD bloweth upon it: surely the people is grass.
Is. 40:8	Nevertheless whether the grass wither, or the flower fade away: Yet the word of our God endureth for ever. Moreover the voice cried thus:	The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: but the word of our God shall stand for ever.
Is. 40:9	Go up unto the hill (o Sion) thou that bringest good tidings, lift up thy voice with power, o thou preacher Jerusalem. Lift it up without fear, and say unto the cities of Judah: Behold, your God:	O Zion, that bringest good tidings, get thee up into the high mountain; O Jerusalem, that bringest good tidings, lift up thy voice with strength; lift it up, be not afraid; say unto the cities of Judah, Behold your God!
Is. 40:10	behold, the LORDE, even the almighty sha come with power, & bear rule with his arm. Behold, he bringeth his treasure with him, and his works go before him.	Behold, the Lord GOD will come with strong hand, and his arm shall rule for him: behold, his reward is with him, and his work before him.
Is. 40:11	He shall feed his flock like an herdman. He shall gather the lambs together with	He shall feed his flock like a shepherd: he shall gather the lambs with his arm, and carry

his arm, and carry them in his bosom, & shall kindly entreat those that bear young.	them in his bosom, and shall gently lead those that are with young.
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- Condit, also includes examples from Isaiah 41 and 43, which I have elected not to reproduce here in the interest of time and space. After citing these examples from Coverdale, Condit states, “The above examples are Coverdale’s translating, in which he was independent of Tyndale.” (Condit, 164)
- Once again, Gerald Hammond provides the most detailed analysis of Coverdale’s skills as an original translator by breaking down his work in the Prophets. Consider the following breakdown of Coverdale’s work in Micah from the pen of Hammond.
 - “. . . take the Book of Micah as an example. Its first chapter clearly fails to impress a pattern on Coverdale. He knows that he is translating the words of a vehement prophet, and he attempts to convey the vehemence in his favorite way, by interpolating words and phrases like ‘yea’ and ‘for why.’ But the result is a mess, close to incoherence. These are verses 5-13 [Please note that I updated the spellings on as many words as possible. Some of the words I simply could not discern.]:

5) And all this shall be for the wickedness of Jacob, and the sins of the house of Israel. But what is the wickedness of Jacob? Is not Samaria? Which are the high places of Judah? Is not Jerusalem?

6) Therefore I shall make Samaria an heap of stones in the field, to lay about the vineyard: her stones shall I cast in to the valley, & discover her foundations.

7) All her images shall be broke down & all her wynnynge shall be burnt in the fire: yea all her Idols will I destroy: for why, they are gathered out of the hire of an whore, & in to an whores hire shall they be turned again.

8) Wherefore I will mourn & make lamentation, bare & naked will I go: I must mourn like ye dragons, & take sorrow as ye Ostriches:

9) for their wound is past remedy: And why? it is come in to Judah, & hath touched ye porte of my people at Jerusalem already.

10) Weep not, lest they at Gath perceive it. Thou at Betaphra, welter thy self in the dust and ashes.

11) Thou that dwellest at Saphir, get the hence with shame. The proud shall boost no more for very sorrow: & why? her neighbor shall take from her what she hath.

12) The rebellious cite hopeth, that it shall not be so euell: but for all that, the plague shall come from the LORDE, even in to the porte of Jerusalem.

13) The great noise off the charettes shall fear them, that dwell at Lachish, which is an occasion of ye sin of ye daughter of Sion, for in the came up the wickedness of Israel.

The Hebrew is not as symmetrical here as it is in other parts of the prophetic books, and Coverdale’s translation reflects the stumbling around of his predecessors. Only occasionally does the parallelistic structure of Hebrew poetic line peep through, and when it does it comes close to saving Coverdale’s version. This is especially so in his rendering of part of verse 7: ‘they are gathered out of the hire of an whore, and into an whore’s hire shall they be turned again.’ Here Coverdale has reproduced exactly the

pattern of the Hebrew—the contrast of antithetical verbs, ‘gather’ and ‘return,’ with the virtually identical noun phrases, ‘the hire of an whore’ and ‘an whore’s hire’—and a powerful rhythmic effect is helped by the chiasmic word order where the verb followed by its object is mirrored in the second half by the verb preceded by its object. But if you compare the way the same passage emerges from the hands of translators who have grasped the patterning of the original, that is the Authorized Version’s rendering, then the contrast makes this look primitive, lacking both a clear idea of what the prophecy means or any rhythmic control to convey that meaning.

Had Coverdale always translated like this there would be little point in considering him here. But the later chapters of Micah show something different: how he gains a clear enough picture of the original through his sources to introduce into English the patterns and rhythms which mark the Authorized Version’s translation of these books. Already the first two verses of the second chapter show a greater control:

- 1) Wo unto them, that imagine to do harm, and deuyse ungraciousness upon their beddes, to perfourme it in ye cleare daye: for their power is agaynst God.
- 2) When they covet to haue londe, they take it by violence, they robbe men off their houses. Thus they oppresse a man for his house, & euery man for his heretage.

The Authorized Version’s rendering is more accurate, but it succeeds not better in conveying the Hebrew parallelism, and its most distinctive phrases we can trace back to Coverdale:

- 1) Woe to them that devise iniquity, and work evil upon their beds! when the morning is light, they practise it, because it is in the power of their hand.
- 2) And they covet fields, and take them by violence; and houses, and take them away: so they oppress a man and his house, even a man and his heritage.”
(Hammond, 70-71)

- Interested parties are encouraged to obtain a copy of Hammond’s work to read the rest of his comments about Coverdale’s rendering of the Prophets. In the interest of brevity, suffice it to say that Coverdale’s original translations are a mixed bag of clarity and rhythmic cadence with incoherence that is hardly readable in English.
- To illustrate this point, consider the following memorable and idiomatic original renderings of Coverdale from the Poetic and Prophetic books. (Brake, 119)
 - Exodus 20:14—“Thou shalt not break wedlock.”
 - “Thou shalt not commit adultery.” (KJB)
 - Job 19:18—“Ye, the very desert fools despise me.”
 - “Yea, young children despised me. . .” (KJB)

- Psalm 90:10—“The days of our age are three score and ten.”
 - “The days of our years are threescore years and ten. . .” (KJB)
- Proverbs 16:28—“He that is a blabber of his tongue maketh division.”
 - “. . . and a whisperer separateth chief friends.” (KJB)
- Jeremiah 17:1—“Your sin (o ye off the tribe of Judah) is written in the table of your hearts, & graven so upon the edges of your alters with a pen of iron & with an Adamant claw:.”
 - “The sin of Judah is written with a pen of iron, and with the point of a diamond: it is graven upon the table of their heart, and upon the horns of your altars;” (KJB)
- From this Lesson it would appear safe to conclude that in those areas where Coverdale’s work was unique to himself, i.e., previous groundwork laid by Tyndale was not available to draw upon, Coverdale is a bit of mixed bag. His translations range from sound and enduring as in the Psalms to almost nonsensical and incoherent in other sections of the Poets and Prophets.
- In Lesson 116 we will consider the second feature of Coverdale’s work, Coverdale as a Revisor: Reworking of Tyndale.

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