


## Prelude – The Bible and the Reformation


 ne hundred years before Miles Coverdale was born, the Lollard Bible began to be distributed in manuscript form.<sup>1</sup> The effect of this English Bible and the ministry of the Lollard preachers over those hundred years worked like leaven. There was a slow growing acceptance of the need for the Bible in the 'common tongue' amongst many 'common folk'. There was also a deadly hostility to any such idea among the royal, political, and ecclesiastical authorities. The discovery of the use of moveable type to print multiple copies of pages, and therefore books, brought Gutenberg's Latin Bible to print in 1453/6. The production and distribution of the Scriptures on a scale never before contemplated was now possible. In the sovereign providence of God, the last thirty years of the 15th century saw the birth of Luther, Zwingli, Latimer, Coverdale, Cranmer, Tyndale and Melancthon. In yet one more Divine demonstration of the significance of 'the fulness of times', the Reformation was about to begin. *'Whoso is wise, and will observe these things, even they shall understand the lovingkindness of the LORD'* (Psalm 107.43). These men were gripped by the Gospel of the Grace of God in Christ toward sinners. These men were captivated by the simple, sure and certain testimony of the Scriptures directly to Jesus Christ. The Scriptures, then, had to be made known in the common tongues of men and sinners, and the dangers and penalties of doing this had to be accepted. In England, even while Tyndale and Coverdale were learning discipleship of Christ, beginning their labours of Bible translation and editing, men and women were being tormented and destroyed for possession of a Wycliffe Bible.

## Coverdale Beginnings – ‘In Christ before them all’

The first complete printed Bible in English was the result of the enthusiastic and diligent editorial labours of Miles Coverdale. Born in Yorkshire, and ‘from his childhood given to learning’ according to John Hooker,<sup>2</sup> Coverdale became an Augustinian monk. He was ordained a priest in 1514, and continued in the Austin monastery at Cambridge. Erasmus was at Cambridge from 1511–1514, so Coverdale may just have experienced at first hand Erasmus’ startling appeal to the authority of the text of Scripture rather than to ecclesiastical tradition.

Reformation teaching was certainly affecting Cambridge, and in the 1520s Lutheran-minded people gathered for fellowship and sermons at an inn called the White Horse (thus nicknamed ‘Germany’). The group would have included Bilney, Latimer, Frith, Barnes, Tyndale, Cranmer and Ridley. Coverdale and Barnes were among the very first to respond to the Gospel – much later Grindal was to say of the aged Coverdale that ‘he was in Christ before them all’. In 1528 there is record of Miles Coverdale openly declaring against the mass, worship of images, and private confession.

Around that time, after Cuthbert Barnes’ first trial, Coverdale came under the influence of Thomas Cromwell, having met him in Thomas Moore’s house. He wrote to him asking for assistance to buy books. Miles seems to have been dedicated to Bible work from the beginning, assisting Tyndale in his Biblical labours on the continent in Hamburg 1529, and in Antwerp 1529–35. After Tyndale’s imprisonment, Coverdale went on with the work, eventually supervising the production of our first complete Bible printed in English.



### The Coverdale Bible, October 1535

*‘Biblia: The Bible: that is the holy Scripture of the Olde and New Testament, faithfully translated into English.’*

So reads the title page of this work, published either in Cologne or Marburg and reprinted in 1537. Nowhere does Coverdale ever claim to have worked from the Biblical languages, but rather from ‘sundry interpreters’ and ‘sondry translacions’. He used William Tyndale’s work, Pagnini’s ‘new’ Latin, Luther’s German, the Zurich Bible of 1530, and the common Latin – the Vulgate. From these five he produced a noble English text, a splendid bridge between Tyndale and the Authorised Version.<sup>3</sup> It was

## Historical Background

1450s

GUTENBERG BIBLE

1469–1536

Desiderius Erasmus

1483–1546

Martin Luther

1484–1531

Ulrich Zwingli

1485–1555

Hugh Latimer

1485–1509

Henry VII

1488

Printed HEBREW BIBLE, Soncino

1488–1569

**Miles Coverdale**

1489–1556

Thomas Cranmer

1492

Columbus discovers America

1494–1536

William Tyndale

1497–1560

Philip Melancthon

1498

Erasmus in England

1505

Luther an Augustinian monk in Erfurt

1509–1547

Henry VIII

1509–1564

John Calvin

1513–72

John Knox

1516

Erasmus' GREEK/LATIN NT

1517

Luther's Ninety-five Theses

1518

Aldus' complete GREEK BIBLE

1519

Leonardo da Vinci died

1522

Luther's GERMAN NT

1523

Lefebvre's FRENCH NT

1524

Erasmus' *The Freedom of the Will*

TYNDALE'S *Cologne Fragment*

1525

Tyndale's Scripture translation

1526

TYNDALE'S NT burned.

Liesveldt's DUTCH BIBLE.

SWEDISH NT

Coverdale who gathered and separated the books of the Apocrypha from the Old Testament and placed them together between the Testaments. His was also the first English Bible to indicate chapter headings, but did it all together at the beginning of every book. Coverdale gave us '*the pride of life*', '*the world passeth away*', '*lovingkindness*' and '*tender mercy*', and also is the origin of some quaint renderings: '*so yt thou shalt not nede to be afrayed for eny bugges by night*' at Psalm 91.5 and '*there is no more Triacle at Galaad*' at Jeremiah 8.22

Miles' Prologue to the 1535 Bible is a gem in its own right, a standing plea that you should always read an author or editor's preface, and especially those that deal with spiritual matters, for there you will see the heart revealed. Insisting on the plainest and simplest handling of the text, he offers this direction:

*Now will I exhort thee, whosoever thou art that readest scripture, if thou find ought therein that thou understandest not, or that appeareth to be repugnant, give no temerarious nor basty judgment thereof; but ascribe it to thine own ignorance, not to the scriptures. Think that thou understandest it not, or that it hath some other meaning, or that it is haply overseen of the interpreters, or wrong printed. 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 circumstances, considering what goeth before and what followeth after.<sup>4</sup>*

A concordance of the New Testament based on Tyndale's Testament was published in London in 1535. There is strong evidence that it, too, was Coverdale's work.

## Matthew's Bible and the failed Paris Bible

Another complete Bible printed in English indicates the way of the English Bible for the next generation, combining in various measures (and with varying competence!) the work of Tyndale and

Coverdale. The Matthew's Bible of 1537 is the first English Bible distributed under 'royal licence', albeit printed in Antwerp. Thomas Matthew, mentioned on the title page as 'translator', is a pseudonym. John Rogers, a close associate of Tyndale and who also became a martyr for the cause of the vernacular Scriptures, was probably the 'editor'. It is to him, then, that we owe the survival of Tyndale's translations of Joshua to Chronicles. Though he himself had no direct involvement, Coverdale's work was used from Ezra onward.



TYNDALE

Coverdale began the preparation of another edition of the English Scriptures in Paris around 1538. Most of that edition was seized and burned by the French authorities, only a very few being sold. The metal type and skilled workmen were brought to London to be used in yet another Bible labour. This illustrates a further feature of 16th century vernacular Bible work: the phoenix-like quality of these early Bible editions. They were burned, suppressed, bought up, impounded, and yet provided the basis from which even more vigorous editions were provided. Add to this the death rate and toll of suffering associated with the preparation, publication, distribution and use of the vernacular Scriptures – a trail that goes back to Wycliffe's time – and treasure your Bible.

## Historical Background

1527

ZURICH BIBLE

1533

CRANMER Archbishop

1534

LUTHER BIBLE

1535

**COVERDALE'S ENGLISH BIBLE**

Olivetian's FRENCH BIBLE

1536

1st edition *Calvin's Institutes*

1537

**MATTHEW'S BIBLE**

1539

**GREAT BIBLE**, 'Cromwell's';  
TAVERNER'S BIBLE

1540

**GREAT BIBLE**, 2nd ed. 'Cranmer's'

1545–1563

Council of Trent

1546

Luther died

1547–1553

EDWARD VI

1550

STEPHENS' GREEK NT 3rd. ed.,  
the archetype of TR, DANISH BIBLE

1553–1558

MARY Queen; Servetus killed

1556

Cranmer, Ridley, Latimer, burned

1557

**WHITTINGHAM'S NT – Geneva**

1558–1603

ELIZABETH I

1560

**GENEVA BIBLE**, FRENCH GENEVA

1562

Sternhold and Hopkins Psalter  
Heidelberg Confession

1564

Calvin died

1567

WELSH NT

1568

BISHOPS' BIBLE. Coverdale died

1569

Reina SPANISH BIBLE

1570

Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* published

1572

Huguenot St. Bartholomew massacre

## The Great Bible and the Latin Diglot

The Great Bible appeared in 1539, with the benefit of the type and printers from Paris. Coverdale's renewed editorial labours were helped by Thomas Cromwell's political protection. It was Thomas Cromwell, Royal Secretary and vice-regent in church affairs, who ordered the English clergy to allow a large, legible edition of the English Bible to be provided in a convenient place where people could 'most commodiously resort to the same and read it'. This 14" x 9" 'Great Bible' of 1539 was Coverdale's revision of Matthew's version, taking into account Sebastian Münster's Latin Old Testament, later editions of Erasmus' Greek New Testament and the Complutensian Polyglot. The work was completed in April of 1539.

In a strange anticipation of the 1611 Authorised Version, there is nothing in the Great Bible itself telling of its royal authorisation! This came only in the second edition of 1540, which includes both Cranmer's preface and the statement, 'the Byble apoynted to the use of churches'.

Liberty to read an English Bible was briefly revoked at the end of King Henry's reign, but restored under King Edward VI. Miles Coverdale also prepared a diglot of the Vulgate Latin text and a revised English translation. He seems to have shared with Erasmus, who had published a two-Latin one-Greek text triglot, a desire to maintain and demonstrate continuity of the textual tradition. The Reformers were often diligent to show that they were not plunging off into a wilderness, but truly seeking to reform that which was there. Richard Grafton was the publisher of the Diglot and both Great Bible editions, sometimes called 'Cromwell's' and 'Cranmer's', and was styled the King's Printer.<sup>5</sup>



ERASMUS

## Bishop Coverdale and Edward VI

Coverdale had spent a lot of time outside of England; King Henry's favour towards Bible editors was no certain thing! At some time before 1540 he had married a Scots wife, Elizabeth Macheson, whose brother-in-law was John Macalpine, professor of Divinity at Copenhagen. During one continental stay, Coverdale is known to have met Calvin in Strasbourg. He actually became for a time a schoolmaster in Bergzabern and official assistant to the Lutheran pastor there.



CALVIN

The widowed Queen, Catherine Parr, was sympathetic to the Reformation, and returning to England a year after the death of Henry VIII, Miles Coverdale was her Almoner. Because of this relationship he helped with the translation of Erasmus' paraphrase of the Gospels, a project which was advanced under the influence of the Queen. Coverdale preached at her funeral in 1548. By that time he was Chaplain to the Boy King, Edward VI.



HENRY VIII

An Act of Uniformity was passed on January 25, 1549, enjoining the use of the Edward VI Prayer Book<sup>6</sup> (Cranmer's Prayers and Coverdale's Scriptures) in



CATHERINE PARR

every parish of the King's dominions 'throughout England, Wales, Calais and the marches of the same'. There was resistance to this, and the city of Exeter came under siege from an estimated 10,000 men, 'mostly mechanics and deluded peasants', demanding the restitution of the old service books and a recognition of the mass. The siege and ensuing revenge were horrific. In the midst of it all Coverdale received licence from the King to preach the Word of God to the people there. It was a hazardous task, and a contemporary said that 'none of the clergy were hasty to take it in hand, but



Thos. CROMWELL

only old Father Coverdale'. Coverdale was appointed to be Bishop of Exeter in August 1551, but was so poor that he had to plead for special arrangements to cover the required expenses lawfully. For the space of two years he laboured diligently in the Word, prayer and hospitality, promoting the reformed religion.

## Coverdale, Queen Mary and Geneva



MARY STUART

After Mary's accession to the throne in 1553 Coverdale was deprived and imprisoned. Mary suggested that he owed the Crown more than £2,000,<sup>7</sup> but really it was his religion that she objected to. It seemed possible that he would be put to death – that was certainly the intention of the new Queen's administration. In anticipation of death Coverdale wrote,

*Pray for us, for, God willing, we shall not leave you, we will go before you. You shall see in us that we preached no lies, nor tales of tubs, but even the true word of God, for which we, by God's grace, and help of your prayers, will willingly and joyfully give our blood to be shed for confirmation of the same... Like God's children let us go forward apace; the wind is on our back. Hoist up the sails, lift up your hearts and hands unto God in prayer; and keep your anchor of faith to cast in time on the rock of God's word, and on his mercy in Christ.*

By his marriage, you will recall, Coverdale was related to John Macalpine, who was now chaplain to the King of Denmark. The Danish King intervened with Mary on Coverdale's behalf. With grudging bad grace on Mary's part he was eventually released and by a proper Act of Council was permitted to go to Denmark. Being loosed, Miles joined the growing company of English exiles on the Continent, and it is during this time that he translated into English Calvin's treatise on the Eucharist.



CRANMER

At first he was in Denmark with his wife's family, then he was chaplain to a group in Wesel. This group inclined to the Swiss rather than the German form of 'Reformed' and was asked by the magistrates to move on. In August 1557 Coverdale was in Aarau, with his wife and two children, and then from Autumn 1558 to August 1559 he was in Geneva, serving as an elder of the English Church

with John Knox. There he preached and taught, and was soon caught up in Bible work once more.

With fellow labourers including Calvin's son-in-law, William Whittingham, he became involved briefly with that rugged version of the English Scriptures, the Geneva Bible. The first edition of the Geneva New Testament was the first English version to have verse numbers. This, together with the explanatory notes, was a provision to earnest Bible searching, and it became the Bible of the Puritans. More than thirty editions were printed in Elizabeth's reign.

## Coverdale, Queen Elizabeth and England

When Elizabeth came to the throne, Coverdale returned to England. In common with many returning 'Mary-Exiles' he was now anxious for a much more thorough work of reformation than was pleasing to the English establishment. Within the terminology of that time he was counted as a nonconformist, and neither return to the Bishopric of Exeter nor any other advancement was open to him. No friend of Geneva, follower of Calvin, fellow-elder of Knox was going to be countenanced by Elizabeth I!



Although ageing, in his seventies, he still preached at Paul's Cross, and it was at this time that Grindal's affectionate recollection of Coverdale as 'in Christ before them all' led him to secure for 'Old Miles' the living of St. Magnus Martyr, London Bridge. Dr. Grindal, as Bishop of London, appointed him in 1564, but he was too poor to pay the 'first-fruits' of £601.16s.10d. Once more Coverdale's poverty meant that special allowances had to be made before he could accept the living, and at length Queen Elizabeth was induced to forgive him that debt. At this point he wrote some poignant letters to Parker and Cecil, seeking their 'interest', or, more bluntly, begging.

Edmund Grindal was involved with what is perhaps the least satisfactory of the major 16th century English versions, the Bishops' Bible of 1568. It was an 'establishment' attempt to counteract the popularity of the Geneva Bible. The success of the Geneva and the failure of the Bishops' Bible led to Puritan demands at the 1604 Hampton Court Conference for a better translation of the Scriptures, and the subsequent appearance of the Authorised Version.

Although Coverdale had undertaken to 'be quiet' in his rectory at St. Magnus, he never conformed to the degree required of him, and resigned the living. He carried on a ministry whilst refusing to wear the required priestly garments. His end was happy, we are told, and he died at the age of 81 soon after standing in at his old benefice of St. Magnus, where, records John Hooker, 'he was carried up into the pulpit where God did with his spirit so strengthen him that he made his last and the best and most godly sermon that ever he did in all his life'. Coverdale died, according to some authorities, on 19th February, 1568; others say 20th January, 1569; all agree that he was aged 81. He was buried in the chancel of St. Bartholomew's Church, and when that was demolished in 1840 his remains were removed to St. Magnus, London Bridge.

Miles Coverdale served the written and the Incarnate Word through four tumultuous reigns. He was acquainted with many of the foremost men of the European and the English Reformation, and commended himself to all in his piety and humble adorning of the doctrines he professed, showing himself to be no mere handler of the Word, but in very truth a living epistle in his own life. His relish and delight of the Scriptures is plain to see in his many works and much correspondence. Mozley<sup>8</sup> lists thirty-eight distinct works of Coverdale – sermons, catechisms, translations from German and Latin authors as well as Bibles, concordance and diglot,<sup>9</sup> and not including his letters. ‘Old Father Coverdale’ his friends affectionately called him<sup>10</sup> in the fullness of his years and ripeness of Christian character. Hear his exhortation:-

**Go to now, most dear reader, and  
sit thee down at the Lord's feet  
and read his words.**

When we consider the trail of the early printed English text of the Bible we gain a partial insight into the astounding nature of textual preservation under the providences of Almighty God. This one thread (the printed English Text) appeared. It then appeared in almost simultaneous ‘rival’ editions. It appeared in noble style. It appeared in hurried and careless style. It appeared in editions which were wrought in concern for the glory of God and for the work of the Gospel. It appeared in editions which were pirated for filthy lucre. Very rarely did it appear as a ‘pure’ translation from the Biblical languages, but often showing the influence of Latin and German. In all of this we see the sovereign purposes of God, whereby all things truly work together beyond the limited perception or arrangements of men to accomplish the preservation and transmission of the Scripture of Truth. The very nature of the Bible demands an exercise of faith and discernment – we might almost say of it, ‘for there must be also heresies among you, that they which are approved may be made manifest among you’ (1 Corinthians 11.19). Let us, however, never be so satisfied with our perception and choice of the printed text of Scripture, that we fall short of the exercise of faith in Jesus Christ and Him crucified, which is the blessed voice of all the Scripture.

*Isaiah 53.6–9 from the Bible of 1535*

*<sup>6</sup>As for vs, we go all astraye (like shepe), euery one turneth his owne waye. But thorow him, the LORDE pardoneth all or synnes. <sup>7</sup>He shal be payned & troubled, ad shal not ope his mouth. He shalbe led as a shepe to be slayne, yet shal he be as still as a lambe before the shearer, & not open his mouth. <sup>8</sup>He shal be had awaye, his cause not herde, & wtout eny iudgment: Whose generacion yet no man maye nombre, when he shalbe cut of fro the grounde of the lyvinge: Which punyshment shal go vpon him, for the transgression of my people. <sup>9</sup>His graue shalbe geue him with the codemned, & his crucifienge with the theues, Where as he dyd neuer violence ner vnright, nether hath there bene eny disceatfulnesse in his mouth.*

**Endnotes**

- <sup>1</sup> See the article on Wycliffe in *Quarterly Record* no. 565, Oct.-Dec. 2003, pp. 8-29.
- <sup>2</sup> Quoted in J.F. Mozley, *Coverdale and his Bibles* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1953), p. 1.
- <sup>3</sup> How poignant that this Bible had a qualified support and approval of the King, and yet *one year later*, October 1536, William Tyndale was martyred at Vilvoorde.
- <sup>4</sup> Given this so early insistence on the fundamental rule of Bible interpretation, 'Context is King', how did so many go astray in the nearly five hundred succeeding years!
- <sup>5</sup> Not surprisingly he lost the title and was imprisoned under Queen Mary, but somehow was able to begin a second career as a Member of Parliament in 1554.
- <sup>6</sup> It is well worth comment that the Prayer Book lectionary for Morning and Evening Prayer provided for the complete reading of the Bible during the church year. Until 1611 the Prayer Book used the Great Bible version of 1539, a Coverdale edition. Even after 1611, the Prayer Book retained the Coverdale version in some of the most frequently read parts such as the 'Comfortable Words' and the Psalms.
- <sup>7</sup> Not far short of £500,000 at today's values!
- <sup>8</sup> Mozley, *op. cit.*, Appendix E, p. 324.
- <sup>9</sup> Pages from Coverdale Bibles can be viewed at [www.smu.edu/bridwell/publications/ryrie\\_catalog/toc.htm](http://www.smu.edu/bridwell/publications/ryrie_catalog/toc.htm) (then go to chapter 8).
- <sup>10</sup> The next person that comes to mind as winning that affectionate general esteem and soubriquet is John Newton in the 18th century.