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Question 82 - What are the facts regarding the Coverdale Bible?

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101 MOST ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT THE BIBLE

82. What are the facts regarding the Coverdale Bible?

- A. The Coverdale Version (A.D. 1535) – Miles Coverdale was born in 1488. He was converted to Christ and developed a strong love for the Scripture. He was a friend of Tyndale and later finished Tyndale’s Old Testament translation and revised his New Testament. It was a secondary translation; that is, it was based on previous translations of the Bible into Latin, German, and English. The reason for this is that Coverdale was not familiar with the Greek or Hebrew. The first edition came off the press on October 4, 1535. This was indeed a milestone for God’s Word, as it marked the first whole Bible printed in English.
- B. Jacob van Meteren, an Antwerp merchant, hired Coverdale to produce an English translation of the Bible, a task he completed in 1535. When his fellow clergy argued for the retention of the Scriptures in Latin, he said: “No, the Holy Ghost is as much the author of it in Hebrew, Greek, French, Dutch, and English, as in Latin.”

The first edition of this, the first Bible to be printed in English, appeared on October 4, 1535. There are no complete copies in existence, and on the five or six fragments which have a title page there is no indication of the publisher or the place of its publication. In order to make his translation more acceptable in England, Coverdale dedicated it to the king and to “his dearest just wife, and most virtuous princess, Queen Anne.” But when Anne was disgraced and executed a few months later, this dedication became a liability.

In December 1534, Coverdale had attended a Convocation called by Archbishop Cranmer, which petitioned for an authorized translation of the scriptures in English. Coverdale now wanted to have his edition authorized, but this attempt failed. The version was not even particularly scholarly. Some of the title pages state that it was translated out of German and Latin but Coverdale admitted to using five translations – two Latin, two German (Luther’s and the Zurich Bible), and Tyndale’s New Testament and Pentateuch. Two fresh editions appeared in 1537, but none received official approval; in fact, in 1542 Coverdale’s Bible was placed on a list of banned books.

Coverdale was in Geneva in December 1538, and participated in the preparation of the Geneva Bible. But his greatest accomplishment in the history of the English Bible was yet ahead of him. This came in 1539 when Thomas Cromwell commissioned him to edit the Matthew Bible, giving England its greatest authorized version of Henry’s reign.

(*The Indestructible Book*. Ken Connally. Baker Book House. Grand Rapids, Michigan. 1996. pp. 147, 148)

- C. Coverdale had translated the entire Bible while in exile on the Continent. It was published in 1535 (probably at Marburg, Germany) and copies quickly made their way to England. It was dedicated to Henry VIII. The dedication denounces the Pope, who is compared to Caiaphas – something that must have pleased Henry greatly.

Evidently Archbishop Cranmer had petitioned King Henry to allow the Scriptures in English to circulate among the populace, and the King had responded by asking Cranmer to prepare such a version. The bishops who were to assist Cranmer dragged their feet, and when Coverdale's version, with the flattering dedication to King Henry appeared, Cromwell drew the King's attention to it. The bishops were asked to check it and when they could not find any heresies in it, Henry reportedly said, "Then in God's name let it go abroad among our people."

What was new in Coverdale's Bible was that the Old Testament Apocrypha were segregated from the canonical books, rather than being scattered all over the Old Testament as they are in the Septuagint and the Latin Vulgate. Also, he has a note advising the reader that they are not found in the Hebrew Bible and are not of the same authority as the canonical books. Most English Bibles followed Coverdale's example for years to come. Eventually this practice was discontinued and the Apocrypha were omitted altogether. Today, however, one can buy many English versions with or without the Apocrypha.

Although Coverdale's version was reprinted twice in 1537, once in 1550, and once again in 1553, it was never fully accepted by the hierarchy. With the death of Anne Boleyn in 1536, all chances for Coverdale's Bible to become an "authorized" version were lost. However, in 1537 there appeared another Bible that had in its title the words, "truly and purely translated into Englysh by Thomas Matthew."

(*A General Introduction to the Bible*. David Ewert. Zondervan Publishing House. Grand Rapids, Michigan. 1983. pp. 190, 191)

- D. Tyndale didn't live to complete his version of the Old Testament, a task continued by Miles Coverdale, who also fled to Germany from England. Coverdale's Bible was the first complete English Bible to be printed on a press in 1535.

Incorporating Matthew's 1537 Bible into his work, Coverdale in 1539 produced the Great Bible, so called because of its large size designed for church display. King Henry VIII authorized every church building in England to be given a copy just four years after Tyndale was killed for the "crime" of making an English translation! Preachers sometimes complained about parishioners remaining in the foyer to read the Bible instead of attending services.

Coverdale's Psalms are still included in the Anglican Book of Common Prayer. The later, Geneva, Bishops', and KJV Bibles were all based on the Great Bible, the culmination of Tyndale's work.