Chapter Two

BETWEEN TYNDALE AND COVERDALE

HAVING GIVEN THIS SKETCH OF COVERDALE'S LIFE, WE have now to consider his work as translator of the bible. But before we do this, it may be well to review the situation that confronted him. What was now the state of feeling in England? How sharp was the hostility to the idea of an English bible?

That the hostility had been very bitter is undeniable. For more than a hundred years Lollards had been hunted down, their manuscript bibles torn from them, and they themselves forced to recant or even burnt at the stake. By the constitution of Oxford in 1408 the bishops made the translation of scripture their own close preserve, forbidding, under pain of the greater excommunication, any man to meddle with that task unless directly authorized by one of the episcopal bench. This indeed left the door open to a future translation sponsored by the hierarchy, but nothing was done to supply the need. No bishop lifted his finger, none went even so far as to say that it was desirable that an official version be made. When in 1523 Tyndale asked bishop Tonstall to support him in translating the New Testament, he was met with a refusal, and after this rebuff he decided that it was hopeless to expect anything in England, and that it only remained for him to strike for his own hand, to translate and print his book overseas, and to circulate it in England in defiance of the ecclesiastical ban.*

* M. M. Knappen, *Tudor Puritanism* (1939), p. 8, denies that Tyndale told Tonstall that he wished to translate the New Testament: he merely asked him to take him into his palace as chaplain. This seems to me to misconceive Tyndale's character and situation. Tyndale always knew his own mind and went straight to his point. He had made his resolve to translate the New Testament: it was unsafe to carry out the work in Gloucestershire, therefore he went to Tonstall. "Even in the bishop of London's house," he says, "I intended to have done it." How would he be

But there are some who tell us that Tyndale took too gloomy a view of the situation, and that things were not quite so bad as they seemed. The English hierarchy indeed had had a bad fright from Lollardism and had not yet recovered, but still their disease was beginning to abate. Humanism had arisen, and more liberal ideas were now infecting the minds of the noblest and most influential churchmen. Erasmus, the archhumanist, had pronounced decisively in favour of the vernacular bible, and his friends and admirers in England—Warham, Fisher, More, Tonstall and the king himself—could not refuse to answer his lead. Tyndale was too impatient: had he but waited, all might have fallen out as he wished. As one writer puts it, Tyndale in translating the New Testament was "pushing at an open door", he "acted while his betters were deliberating." *

An open door! What kind of open door is it which bruises, wounds, maims and even crushes to death all that seek to pass through? How many men were there in 1526–33 who were haled before the bishops, thrown into jail and forced to recant for reading the English New Testament! How many more went into hiding or fled oversea! And there were even some who died in the martyr's fire. Bishops thundered

safer in Tonstall's palace? Only if he gained the active support of the bishop. To write a single page without Tonstall would expose him to all the penalties of the law. Nor could he afford to delay, and to hold up his project. Time pressed; he was already under suspicion of heresy; he must know where he stood with the bishop. Besides, the bitterness with which he spoke of his rebuff is explicable only if he told him his desire. Tyndale, though a lusty warrior, was fundamentally just. He had no claim on Tonstall, save that he came offering to do a work of Christ which the bishop, on his own Erasmian principles, ought to have been eager to support. That Monmouth, in describing in 1528 Tyndale's sojourn in London, is silent on the project of the New Testament, is only what we should expect. He was himself in prison for heresy, as a maintainer of Tyndale and his opinions. It would be madness to draw needless attention to that book which was the head and front of Tyndale's offending.

* *Times Lit. Suppl.*, 4 June 1925, a quatercentenary article on Tyndale's New Testament. This essay contains some magisterial judgments, but is in truth a shallow performance. Its author (whose name I know not) has not even read Tyndale's New Testament: had he done so, he could never have spoken of Tyndale's "perverse neglect" of the word *grace*, or said that his "only definite borrowing from Luther" was his rendering of ψυχικὸς by *natural*.

against the book, convocation denounced it,* the king issued a proclamation against it.

Nor did this fierce hostility proceed merely from the die-hards, the ignorant and bigoted conservatives, who hated the new learning, who thought that Greek meant heresy, who never mentioned the name of Erasmus unless to revile him. On the contrary, the most notable leaders of the campaign were humanists, firm friends and admirers of Erasmus, men not without claim to our admiration on other grounds. It was Warham who presided over the church through these proceedings: he ordered his suffragans to hunt down the book†; he bought up and burnt testaments in 1527; he, with Fisher's support, sent Thomas Hitton to the stake in 1530. Tonstall was equally zealous; twice he made a bonfire of the books at Paul's cross,‡ and its readers he hunted down ruthlessly, and filled his prisons with his victims. And as for Sir Thomas More, gentle and charming as he could be when he pleased, all his kindliness vanished when he thought of Tyndale's translation of the scripture. Though only a layman, he hurled himself eagerly into the battle, lent his mind and pen to the bishops, vilified the book, justified the burning of the readers, and only regretted that no more of them had gone to the fire of martyrdom.

These are hard facts: how are they to be reconciled with an enthusiasm for the English bible? The first answer—and it was given repeatedly by Thomas More—was that Tyndale's New Testament was too false and dishonest to be suffered, and that another translation would have been more favourably received. On this charge of dishonesty enough has already been said in my book on Tyndale. Suffice it to say here that Tyndale's New Testament has commended itself to a long line of scholars of unimpeachable fairness, that it has become the foundation of our standard version, that its special

* Wilkins, III, 719. The date is January 1532, as is proved by a comparison with p. 746.

† The bishop of Hereford's reply is extant: search had been made in the diocese, but no copies found—Bothe's register (printed), p. 189.

‡ The exact date of the second burning—2 May 1530—is given in a marginal note of Herbert's *Henry VIII* (1649), p. 323. This point has been generally overlooked. The later editions (1682 onwards) misprint May 3.

renderings were in full line with Erasmus' teaching, and that the outcry against it, like the outcry against Erasmus' Latin testament, was due to the conservatism and bigotry of the assailants, and not to any grave faults in the translation itself.

Still, men must be allowed to have their prejudices: let us therefore put ourselves in the place of the bishops, and assume that Tyndale's New Testament was really too bad to be tolerated. What was the next step for men to take who wished the scripture to be in the English tongue? Surely to put out a translation of their own; only so could they hope to draw the sting from their enemy's version. Is there any evidence that they seriously contemplated this, "were deliberating" on the matter, as our essayist in the *Times Literary Supplement* tells us? There is nothing but a few theoretic words, vague and remote, from which action was always withheld.

First there is the king's preface, written about the end of 1526, to the English edition of his letter against Luther. After denouncing Luther because he "fell in device with one or two lewd persons born in this our realm [i.e. Tyndale and Roye] for the translating of the New Testament into English", and warning his people that by the counsel of his prelates he means to burn the book and sharply punish its readers, he assures his subjects that if they will "not descant upon scripture, nor trust too much your own comments and interpretations", but in all doubtful points follow the advice of their pastoral fathers of the soul, well-learned men will be encouraged to translate into English "many good things and virtuous, which for fear of wrong taking they dare not yet do", and the people by the good use thereof shall win great spiritual profit:

> "which thing in you perceived shall give occasion that such holy things as evil disposed persons, by false and erroneous translations corrupted, deliver you to your imminent peril and destruction, good men and well learned may be percase in time coming the bolder, truly and faithfully translated, substantially viewed and corrected, by sufficient authority to put in your hands." *

* Most of this preface is in Ames, *Typographical Antiquities*, ed. W. Herbert, 1785-90, p. 299. The Latin edition of the king's letter against Luther appeared on 2 Dec. 1526; the English translation (with a new preface) cannot be much later.

Here indeed is a sop thrown to the bible-readers, a hope dangled before their eyes, but how faint and distant! If the people will reform and become more submissive, good men and well learned *may be percase in time coming the bolder* to give them an authorized new testament. There is no sense of urgency here, no firm promise even if the condition were fulfilled, nothing to satisfy the longings of those eager souls who desired access to the word of life. All is to remain at the will and pleasure of the rulers.

It is clear that this preface was written after consultation with the divines, maybe also with Sir Thomas More, for it tallies well enough with the doctrine expounded by More a couple of years later in his dialogue against Tyndale. More claims to be heart and soul in favour of the vernacular scripture: none will be harmed thereby save bad men, and it matters not if a hundred heretics be hurt, if only one good and devout layman be benefited by the reading. But he then goes on to propose a scheme which is in flat contradiction to this lofty exordium. Let each bishop buy a stock of English bibles to serve his own diocese; if he spent ten pounds or twenty marks, that would be as much as would be needed. Let him then lend them out to the laity. A thoroughly safe man might have the whole book; others would have the parts suited to their capacities, maybe the synoptists but not St John's gospel, or the Ephesians but not the Romans; still others nothing at all. When the borrower died, the bishop would reclaim the book.

Dr R. W. Chambers calls this a "noble" argument, but to many it will seem feeble and irresolute. Not only is the proposed scheme in the sharpest opposition to the brave and confident principle with which he started, but it is also quite impracticable. How could any bishop exercise a personal control over the bible-reading of his whole diocese? He could only attempt to do this if he ruthlessly limited the number of readers. And this is in fact what More intends; for he considers that ten pounds would serve the needs of a whole diocese. How many bibles could one buy for ten pounds? Certainly not more than twenty and perhaps fewer. Bible-reading would thus become a carefully guarded

privilege, doubtless an aristocratic privilege, the close preserve of the few who happened to have the bishop's ear.

A year later the matter was discussed at length in an assembly of divines convened by the king. Among them were Tonstall, Gardiner, Latimer and More, and archbishop Warham presided. At the end of the proceedings the archbishop put out, on 24 May 1530, a Public Instrument in his brethren's name. He explained that whereas the opinion was spreading among the people that it was the king's duty to have the scripture translated into English and to let it go abroad, the king, wishing to know what his duty really was, had asked the divines to assist him. They had debated the matter fully and with the greatest freedom, the arguments on each side were stated, and "finally it appeared" that the people has no right to demand the vernacular scripture; it is not necessary for Christian men to have it; the decision rests with their superiors. At present it could only work harm, and therefore the king and prelates do well in refusing it. But in case the temper of the people might change for the better, the king has made a promise in presence of the divines. He "did there openly say and protest that he would cause the New Testament to be by learned men faithfully and purely translated into the English tongue, to the intent that he might have it in his hands ready to be given to his people," so soon as he could do so without fear of its misuse.*

These conclusions of the divines were embodied in a royal proclamation of the month of June: but here the king's undertaking to make a new translation dwindles somewhat and becomes remoter. If his people abandoned Tyndale's versions and all erroneous and heretic opinions, "his highness intendeth to provide that the holy scripture shall be by great learned and catholic persons translated into the English tongue, if it shall then seem to his grace convenient so to be."

Here then are certain theoretic words: but men are judged by actions, not by words. Was anything done to fulfil the promises, or half-promises, thus made, to give body to any

* Wilkins, III, 736 f., from Warham's register. The three or four dissentients (e.g. Latimer) did not *sign* this document, as is often asserted; Warham put out the general sense of the meeting. Nor would a vote be taken; even in parliament voting was rare (A. F. Pollard, *Henry VIII*, 1951, p. 205).

hopes that these words may have raised? Nothing was done. Yet Thomas More had it in his power to do much; a special opportunity lay before him. He was *persona grata* with the great world, and had the ear of king and bishops. It is hard to believe that if he had gone to them with an offer to translate the New Testament himself, they would have forbidden him. And he had the skill to do it. How happy had England been, had she enjoyed two translations of the New Testament, from two such masters as Tyndale and More! More could have performed this task at half the labour which he expended upon his controversies with the Lutherans. But he made no move, silenced the promptings of his heart, and when in 1533 he recurs to the question (*Apology*, chapter four) takes a more cautious tone: he still stands by the views of his *Dialogue*, "if the men were amended and the time meet therefor."

Nor was the king at all eager to make good his words. Yet he did not lack reminders. On 1 December 1530 Latimer wrote him his brave letter in favour of an English bible, and begged him to fulfil his promise.

> "Other men have showed your grace their minds, how necessary it is to have the scripture in English. The which thing also your grace hath promised by your last proclamation: the which promise I pray God that your gracious highness may shortly perform, even today, before tomorrow. Nor let not the wickedness of these worldly-wise men detain you from your godly purpose and promise."*

In the following summer Tyndale issued a challenge to the king, which might well have spurred him on to action, had he had any heart in the matter: he (Tyndale) would cease his controversial writing, and come and kneel at the royal feet, if the king would license an English bible, by whomsoever translated; and this challenge was repeated by Frith, in Tyndale's name and his own, nearly two years later. The king made no response, and meanwhile the persecution

* Latimer II, 304 (from Foxe). Gairdner (*D.N.B.*, Latimer; *Lollardy and Reformation*, II, 261) denies that this letter is Latimer's, but his grounds are very weak.

proceeded. As late as December 1534 fifteen English testaments were burnt by order of lord chancellor Audley.* No motion of any kind towards an English bible was seen from the side of the bishops, until Cranmer sat in the archiepiscopal chair, Cranmer who had drunk deep from the wells of the Lutheran movement and had married the niece of one of its chiefest representatives in Germany: and then he failed against the stubborn resistance of his brethren.

Our knowledge of this attempt is not so detailed as we should like, but the main outlines are clear enough. The first step was taken by the convocation of Canterbury, prompted no doubt by the archbishop. In their sessions of autumn 1534 both houses gave much attention to the matter of heresy and to the English books which were flooding in from oversea, and on 19 December, the day of prorogation, the upper house resolved that the archbishop approach the king and beg him to take order: firstly, that all owners of suspected books should exhibit them within three months to persons appointed for the purpose; secondly, that "the holy scripture should be translated into the vulgar English tongue by certain good and learned men, to be nominated by his majesty, and should be delivered to the people for their instruction"; and thirdly, that no layman should presume in future to dispute publicly or contend violently on the catholic faith or holy scripture.†

We may suppose that Cranmer approached the king and received instructions to proceed with the matter himself; for within a few months we find him engaged in an attempt to have the New Testament translated, or rather to have the current translation revised. Our knowledge of the matter is derived mainly from a manuscript formerly in the possession of John Foxe, and written in the hand of Cranmer's secretary, Ralph Morice.‡ The writer is describing the wit of Thomas Lawney, then chaplain to the archbishop, and formerly chaplain of Wolsey's college at Oxford, where he had been imprisoned in 1528 on suspicion of heresy.

* So Chapuys reports on 1 Jan. 1535—*L. & P.*, VIII, (1).

† Wilkins, III, 769 f., Pollard, 175.

‡ Harl. MS. 422, f. 87, J. G. Nichols, *Narratives of the Reformation* (1859), p. 276, Pollard, 196 (a careless transcription); cf. Strype, *Cranmer*, 49.