Chapter Six

THE COVERDALE BIBLE IN ENGLAND

WE HAVE SEEN THAT NEARLY ALL COPIES OF THE 1535 bible have their preliminaries printed in an English black letter. Now the same letter was used by James Nicolson of Southwark when he reprinted the Coverdale bible in folio in 1537, and he also used most of the woodcuts of the original book, including the Holbein border. It is clear, therefore, that he took over the whole edition from Meteren in sheets, and put it upon the market on his own account.

For Meteren to sell his sheets to an English printer was an obvious way of distributing them, and it had become still more desirable, and even necessary, in the light of a new law passed by parliament in 1534 for the protection of English bookbinders. This laid down that after next Christmas no man might import bound books from oversea for the purpose of selling them again; from henceforth the binding of foreign books must be done in England. Nicolson himself was a native of the Low countries, and was doubtless already well known to Meteren. It may be added that the same act of parliament forbad any alien to sell foreign books by retail in England unless he became a citizen of the realm. This will explain why Nicolson and his assistant John Hollybush took out letters of denization in February 1535.*

That Nicolson put the Coverdale bible on the market has long been recognized. But I am happy to lay before the reader some new and very interesting evidence on the matter, which shows him in the process of importing the book. This evidence is in the form of a letter from Nicolson to Cromwell, and to the best of my belief it has been overlooked by all previous

* *Statutes of the Realm*, III, 456; *L. & P.* VIII, 291, (52) and (58). Nicolson was a glazier, and Wolsey at his fall owed him £58 for glazing done at Southwell, Scroby and Cawood; *L. & P.*, IV, p. 3048 (15).

writers on the Coverdale bible, though an abstract of the contents has long been in print. We will give it in its original spelling.

"Yt may playse your mastership to be so good master not only to me: but also unto the trouth (who hath unther the kynghys grace) your goodnes for an only patrone unto her: as to visit the copie of the epistle dedicatorie for the bible to the kynge. And as your goodnes ever and only hath put forth your fote for the preferremente of goddes worde: even so that your mastership wyll now sett to your helpynge handes that the hole byble may come forth, where of as moche as ys yet come into englonde I have sende unto yow by thys brynger George constantyne a copie wych I beseke your discretion for the zele ye beare unto the trouth so to promote that the pure worde of god maye ones go forth unther the kynges prevelege: wych yf your mastership maye opteyne the whole realme of englonde shall have occasyon to have your acte in more hye remembrance then the name of Austen that men saye brought the faith fyrst unto englonde. Thus our lorde Jhesu lende us your wysdome longe to rule after hys wyll and playsure. Amen.

"After I had wrytten thys letter I receved melanctons comen places newly oversene and dedicate to the kynges hyghnes, wych I sende to your mastership wyth the bearer here of.

"your humbly servant Iamys nycolson glaysyr."

("To the Ryght worshipfull and me syngular good master, master secretary.")*

We can date this letter with some exactness. It was written towards the end of August 1535. On 6 August Melanchthon writes to a friend that he is busy on an edition of his *Common places*, which must be completed before the Frankfort fair [September 2 in that year], but that he expects to be finished in a few days. Before the month is out he sends the book to the king by the hand of Alexander Alesius the Scot, together with letters to the king and

* *L. & P.*, IX, 226.

Cranmer, both dated in August 1535. Alesius was in London by the end of the month: for a paper of Cromwell's memoranda, or list of topics to be discussed with the king, which mentions the instructions to Edward Foxe as ambassador to Germany, mentions also "Melancthon's book *De Locis Communibus*". Now the instructions to Foxe were given, according to Gairdner, on 31 August.*

This is an important letter. It tells us that part of the printed bible was in England before the end of August and also a copy of Coverdale's dedication to the king. The latter may well have been brought over by Constantine, who in past years had been more than once in Antwerp, engaged in the traffic of protestant books to England. Whether the dedication was in manuscript or had been specially printed we cannot say. It is clear that the dedication was not, as is usually assumed, an afterthought, conceived and composed after the arrival of the bible in England, but was part of the plan from the start. It was written abroad, six weeks before the printing of the biblical text was finished, and there was ample time for it to be sent back to Antwerp and Cologne by the beginning of October. We learn too from the letter, what we have already gathered on other grounds, that the project of the Coverdale bible was not Cromwell's: he is asked to help, he is expected to sympathize, he has been informed before, but the initiative and the risk plainly lie elsewhere, with Nicolson himself and his backers. All that Cromwell is asked to do is to enlist the royal support.

In answer to this appeal Cromwell would of course show the bible to the king, and doubtless would show also the epistle dedicatory. Now the king's custom, when books were sent to him, was to give them to his advisers to read—advisers of various opinions—and on hearing what they had to say, to make his own decision.† With this fits in well a story told by William Fulke in 1583.

> "I myself, and so did many hundreds beside me hear that reverend father, Master Dr Coverdale, of holy and learned

* *Corpus Reformatorum*, II (i.e. Melancthon, *Opera*, II), col. 899, 919 f., 930, 947; *L. & P.*, IX, 211–3.

† So Cranmer says, *Orig. Letters*, 15.

memory, in a sermon at Paul's cross, upon occasion of some slanderous reports that then were raised against his translation, declare his faithful purpose in doing the same: which after it was finished and presented to king Henry VIII, and by him committed to divers bishops of that time to peruse, of which, as I remember, Stephen Gardiner was one; after they had kept it long in their hands, and the king was divers times sued unto for the publication thereof, at the last being called for by the king himself they redelivered the book; and being demanded by the king what was their judgment of the translation they answered that there were many faults therein. 'Well', said the king, 'but are there any heresies maintained thereby?' They answered there were no heresies that they could find maintained thereby. 'If there be no heresies,' said the king, 'then in God's name let it go abroad among our people.' According to this judgment of the king and the bishops, Mr Coverdale defended his translation, confessing that he did now himself espy some faults which, if he might review it once over again, as he had done twice before, he doubted not but to amend: but for any heresy, he was sure there was none maintained by his translation.'' *

Now I have little doubt that the bible spoken of in Coverdale's sermon is the 1535 bible, and Wright takes the same view: but Westcott and most writers suppose that he means the Great bible of 1539.† They point out that whenever Fulke speaks of Coverdale's bible he means the Great bible. This is quite true, but it does not carry us very far. Fulke has no occasion to mention the 1535 bible, because he is defending himself against an opponent who singles out only three bibles for his attack, the Great bible of 1562, the Bishops' bible of 1577 and the Geneva bible of 1579. With the earlier bibles Fulke has no concern, though he once or twice mentions the Matthew bible of 1537, of which he himself possessed a copy. Besides we are not dealing with Fulke's

* Fulke, *Defence of the translations of the holy scriptures into the English tongue*, Parker Society, p. 98.

† Westcott 63, 192–3.

usage but with Coverdale's. What did Coverdale mean in speaking of "his translation"? If he did mean his 1535 bible, what more natural phrase could he have used for describing it? Whether Fulke misunderstood him or not is another question.*

There are two strong arguments to prove that the 1535 bible is meant. Firstly, the king committed the book to the bishops to be perused by them before he "let it go abroad among our people". Is he likely to have done this with the Great bible? He had already in 1537 formally licensed the Matthew and Coverdale bibles, and the Great bible was a mere revision of the former, and a conservative revision too. It was an official undertaking, promoted by Cromwell, who was still in high favour. The king knew of it beforehand, got a licence for the printing from his brother of France, and was angry when the inquisitors intervened to stop the work. Before the printing was finished, the famous injunction of September 1538 was put out in the royal name ordering that a copy be set up in every church. After all this can there have been any doubt about a permission to circulate? The king himself had already approved it. But with the 1535 bible all was different. It was the first English bible, and no portion of English scripture had as yet been licensed by the king. Many volumes in fact had been publicly burned; nay, as late as December 1534 the chancellor of England had committed fifteen English New Testaments to the flames. Can we believe that Nicolson would put his book upon the market without making certain that he would not lose his money, would not himself be in trouble as a favourer of heresy?

Secondly, if Coverdale meant the Great bible in his sermon, how are we to understand the double revision which he says that he gave it? The second edition of April 1540 might pass for a revision, though not a very thorough one: but what else is there? The later editions are little more than reprints of the second, and with none of them can Coverdale have had

* Fulke, *Defence*, 20, 67 f., 91, 112, 226, 548. Fulke supposes there was an earlier Matthew of 1532, being misled doubtless by Foxe's mistake (cf. p. 138 below). Very likely he had no clear idea of the 1535 bible, and regarded it merely as a first draft of the Great bible. He was born in 1538, so the Coverdale sermon was probably in Elizabeth's reign.

anything to do except with the third (July 1540): for he fled to Germany about the middle of 1540. But if Coverdale meant the 1535 bible, we have a choice of three or four interpretations. He may have meant the Nicolson folio of 1537 (which is described on its title-page as "newly overseen") and the Great bible, or the first and second editions of the Great bible (this is Wright's interpretation), or even the diglot and the Great bible.

It appears then that Cromwell received the Coverdale bible at the end of August and presented it to the king. The king handed it to Gardiner and other bishops to read, and since their verdict, however grudging, was not unfavourable, he suffered the publication to go forward.* But he did not grant what Nicolson had desired, a formal licence to be printed on the title-page; for this doubtless is what Nicolson meant by the words "go forth under the king's privilege." It may be that Cromwell, feeling that the project was regarded with hostility in powerful quarters, did not think it prudent to ask so much as this, and was content with assuring himself that the publication would not be actively hindered.

As soon as the complete book arrived in England, Nicolson took steps to put it on the market. Without delay he reprinted the foreign preliminaries, and his new title-page (which is extant in two copies) bears the date 1535.† Early in 1536 the book was in circulation: for on 25 February Chapuys, the imperial ambassador, wrote as follows to his master's minister:

> "A bible has been printed here in English in which the texts that favour the queen, especially Deuteronomy 19, have been translated in the opposite sense."

Another letter from England of March 18 said that

> "to confirm their heresies they have translated the bible

* Gardiner had just been appointed ambassador to France, but he did not leave till about October 20; he reached Calais on October 24.

† The two copies belong to the Cambridge University Library and the marquess of Northampton. In two other copies—at Gloucester cathedral and Elton Hall, Peterborough—the title-page is dated 1536.

for the people into the vulgar tongue, altering many passages to support their errors." *

But why did Nicolson reprint the preliminaries? To this question no certain answer can be given. The usual answer is that he wished to insert the dedication to the king, which had been wanting in the preliminaries printed in Germany: but we have seen reason to doubt whether it was so wanting. But there are other possible reasons. He may have disapproved of the wording of the title-page, or of the arrangement of the preliminaries, with the list of books preceding the dedication to the king; or it may be that some copies of the preliminaries were damaged or destroyed in transit.

But whatever the reason may have been, Nicolson took the occasion to make a notable change in the title-page. He used again the Holbein border (whose blocks must have been sent him by Meteren), but he altered the wording within the compartment. Instead of saying that the bible was "faithfully and truly translated out of Dutch and Latin into English", it now reads " faithfully translated into English", and the space saved by this shorter form is filled up by the completion of the last of the three quotations, that from Joshua 1. Two lines are added to it, so that it now reads:

> Let not the book of this law depart
> out of thy mouth, but exercise thyself
> therein day and night, <that thou mayest
> keep and do every thing according
> to it that is written therein>.

How are these changes to be explained? The matter has been much debated. There are two theories. Some (e.g. Eadie, Pollard) suppose that Nicolson feared that the mention of Dutch or Latin translations, or of both, would offend buyers. The word Dutch (i.e. German) smacked of Luther, and Luther was unpopular in many quarters. The word Latin even might be unpalatable to some. So he omitted the words and lengthened the third quotation in compensation.

* *L. & P.*, X, 352 (French), 698 (Spanish). Chapuys means Deut. 25: 5–9, where Coverdale renders *kinsman* and *kinswoman* after Luther's *Schwäger* and *Schwägerin*.