



The Sword & The Plow

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Urgent Corrections Preterism Must Make No. 2: The Eschaton was Essentially Covenantal

By

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Introduction¹

In a recent article, companion to this one, we noted the impossibility of maintaining the view that the eschaton was *local*, or historically confined to events in Palestine. In that article, we saw that numerous texts depict the day of Christ's eschatological coming as *world-wide*; a time when *all nations* would feel the rod of his correction. In this article, we want to look at the second major corrective Preterism needs to make: the assumption that the eschaton was essentially *covenantal*.

The Problem Described

Just as there is a tendency among Preterists to explain all prophecy, imagery, and scripture relating to the eschaton locally, there is a tendency to explain everything covenantally. Traditionally, we have interpreted the *earth or land* (*Gk. ge*) covenantally;² we have interpreted the *age/world* (*Gk. aionon*) covenantally; we

have interpreted the *inhabitable earth* (*Gk. oikoumene*) covenantally; we have interpreted the *heavens and earth, the world* (*Gk. kosmos*) and its *elements* (*Gk. stoikia*) covenantally. Not surprisingly, there are even those who go so far as to "covenantalize" the Genesis creation. We are now surprised to learn that the first chapters of Genesis are not about the creation of the cosmos at all, but about a mystical, veiled account of God's covenantal creation of Israel and the Old Testament:

Though some preterists might be horrified at the suggestion, might we understand the creation of the "heavens and earth" in Genesis 1 as a direct reference to the covenant creation of Israel during the time of Moses? If that were the case, the creation account would better be understood primarily within the context of Israel's history, rather than cosmologically. It may be speaking about the creation of the Garden of Eden which is typological of the Promised Land. But the implication is that a universal, cosmological reading of Genesis 1 is not warranted.³

We might interpret the heavens and earth in reference to the covenant creation of Israel, but

¹ This article is adapted from a speech given at the 1st Annual Carlsbad Eschatology Conference.

² We do not suggest there are not times when this is appropriate. In Revelation, for example, when the land is set over against the sea, it is best understood in reference to the holy land, the sea in reference to the Gentiles. However, in historical narratives such as Genesis interpreting "earth" covenantally would normally be inappropriate. The author's intent and context must control interpretation, not the mere occurrence of a particular word or phrase.

³ Timothy P. Martin, *Beyond Creation Science* (2005, Whitehall, MT), p. 101

that is not the question. The question is did God *intend* us to so interpret it? If he did *not* intend it to be interpreted that way, none dare impose such interpretation upon the text; to do so is to effectively re-write scripture by assigning unwarranted definitions to its terms. That it was not so intended is clearly seen from Exodus 20:11, where Moses, in explaining why the sixth day of each week was set aside as a time of national rest for the Jews, states that “in six days the Lord God made the heavens, the earth, the sea, and all that in them is.”⁴ Moses, who wrote the Genesis creation account, not only treats it literally, precluding us from making it figurative, but treats it as a *past event*, precluding it from being turned into a mystical account of the covenantal creation of Israel, which was only *just occurring* at the time he spoke these words. How can events in Genesis, which Moses treats as already past, recount events in Exodus that were still in the future?

But we digress. The point is not whether the creation account was intended to be understood literally in terms of time and event (it was); the point is the improper and insupportable use of scripture by Preterists in spiritualizing things like the “heavens and earth,” making them take on covenantal significance. Unfortunately, this “covenantalizing” doesn’t stop at creation. We are told, moreover, the flood is not about God’s universal anger with the sons of Adam (*God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually – Gen. 6:5*), but his anger with a single race of people who broke covenant with him, prompting him to bring in a local or regional flood!

*If we are self-consciously covenantal, we will not first ask, “What is the literal meaning of this text?” nor “What does science say about a global flood?” We will first say, “Let’s examine these same constructs as used elsewhere in the Bible and interpret this Scripture in light of the rest of Scripture.”*⁵

Scripture is not ours to do with as we will. In interpreting a writing, we move away from the literal meaning *only* as the author intends and

context requires. But the above writer ignores normal rules of hermeneutics, and urges that we *consciously impose* a covenantal interpretation upon the text merely because certain “constructs” (in this case, the terms “heaven and earth”) occur in the passage. The outcome of this method is only too predictable: everything will quickly become “covenantal.” And, of course, that is precisely the problem: in our rush to prove the second coming of Christ occurred in the events culminating in the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, we tend to impose a covenantal hermeneutic and paradigm upon the divine text, until there is almost nothing that is not susceptible to being “covenantalized.” There are very distinct dangers in this approach, which, unfortunately, has become standard among many Preterists. Not only do we rest the word of God and open the way for enemies of Preterism to detract from the essential truth of fulfilled eschatology, but an improper use of scripture opens the door to all sorts of errors. For example, there are even those that, having covenantalized the whole of creation, proceed to covenantalize the lusts of the flesh, man’s soul, hell and destruction, the resurrection, and very death itself, saying that all referred solely and exclusively to the Mosaic law and the world of Judaism!

*Related to the “end of the world” and “death” is the controversial issue of “losing the soul.” We find Jesus discussing them all in Matthew 16:24-27. “Then Jesus said to His disciples, “If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life [soul, according to the old economy] will lose it; but whoever loses his life [soul, according to the old economy] for My sake will find it [according to the new] This “world” is the same “world” that John said was “passing away.” It is the old economy. Here we see the soul is attached to the world that passed away. This requires the soul to be seen as a covenantal identity.”*⁶

“Losing the soul according to the old economy?” The soul a “covenantal identity?” Who attached these meanings to these words? God or man? If

⁴ The earth is set in the heavens and, therefore, was made within the space of six days along with everything else. There is no room for a “gap” here.

⁵ *Beyond Creation Science*, p. 12.

⁶ From an article posted on Max King’s Presence Ministries web-site by David M. Timm, *Grace Upon All*, Oct. 5, 2006. Bracketed material in the original; emphasis added.

God, then well; but if man, look out! But there is more:

*Just as people were separated from God without their say in the matter because of Adam's sin (in the old economy), in the new world people are reconciled to God without any say in the matter... Faith in Christ, though it no longer includes delivering one from that covenantal hell because that covenantal judgment is in the past, is still critical today for one to have peace, close relationship, and fellowship with God in this life on earth.*⁷

So, apparently, faith is nice if we want to enjoy peace and swell relationship with God while on earth, but not necessary to be saved or to get to heaven. Muslim, Buddhist, Atheist, and Jew – it is all just the same. All men are to be saved; indeed, they have no say in the matter! Universalism is commandeering Preterism, and “hyper-covenantalization” of the scripture is helping to make its case! In fact, the covenantal aspects of the eschaton so far affect many people’s view that they have left off calling it Preterism and began to call it “*covenant eschatology*.”

We have taken this survey to get an idea of the lengths to which a local and covenantal eschaton have been taken, and why I say we have a problem that needs correction. Let us now turn our attention to the correctives.

Logical Corollaries

The problems we have identified and the correctives I want to suggest are more or less logical corollaries of one another. An essentially *covenantal* eschaton – one that holds that the end times had mostly to do with the change of the Old Testament to the New Testament – fits nicely in a paradigm that is *local*. We can interpret the age, the land, the earth, the heavens, the elements, and a hundred other things in reference to Judea and the Old Testament comfortably in a paradigm that sees the eschaton confined to Palestine. But an eschaton like we have been describing does *not* work very well in a paradigm that is world-wide. The two simply do not fit together very well; there are too many characters and too many events going on in a

world-wide paradigm to allow us to say the eschaton was predominately covenantal.

For example, how do you make the defeat of the beast in Rome and Asia fit within a local and covenantal paradigm situated in Jerusalem and Judea? How do you make the subjugation of the image in Nebuchadnezzar’s dream, which by definition represented the world governments of the inhabited earth, fit within a local and covenantal paradigm? How do you make Christ’s dominion over *all nations* local? How do you make it covenantal? How do you make Paul’s statement to the Athenians (Acts 17:30, 31) that God was about to judge the cosmos in righteousness by Jesus Christ local? How do you make it covenantal?

Thus, we see that as soon as we open our view to take in the world-wide aspect of the eschaton, we also have to adjust our assumption that it was essentially or predominately covenantal.

Correct Use of Covenantal and the Eschaton

We should state at the outset that the eschaton was in fact *partly* covenantal. One only has to read the book of Hebrews to see that this is so. The whole book turns upon the hinge of the changing covenants, and it is also plainly eschatological. (*Cf.* Heb. 10:37; 12:22, 27) However, allowing that the eschaton was partly covenantal, we need to decide what parts *were*, and what parts *were not* covenantal. How do we sort it out? What do we mean when we say covenantal?

The *first* way something can be covenantal is when it is *symbol* for the Old or New Testaments. Oftentimes this occurs in the context of prophetic imagery or in metaphoric language. We see this when people say the land or the heavens and earth are symbols for the old law or the New Testament. Those that argue for a mystical, covenantal account of creation and a regional flood do so, in part, based upon reverse reasoning about the heavens and earth: they think the heavens and earth are symbols for the Old and New Testaments; therefore, when Genesis mentions the heavens and earth, they say “Voila!” Local & covenantal!

A *second* way something can be covenantal is where it *pertains to or occurs in consequence of* the Old Testament. For example, the priesthood and temple were covenantal (although they were

⁷ *Ibid.* Emphasis added.

also typical). Jerusalem's desolation may also be deemed covenantal in the sense that it was the due reward for her violation of the Old Testament curses.

A *third* way something can be covenantal is for it to describe a condition that is essentially *legal*. A covenant is a legal arrangement, similar to a contract. A covenant differs from a contract in that covenants are solemnized by oaths and an appeal to God as a witness or party to the compact. This is the way it is used by individuals like Max King; King argues the Old Testament was the very state, and power of death, and that the resurrection was therefore legal and covenantal, consisting in the abolition of the Old Covenant and ratification of the New. It is also one of the false premises underlying "Comprehensive Grace" and other Universalistic gospels preached in Preterist circles these days: If the Old Testament is the state and power of death, then with its removal what remains but for all men to be justified?

Given that there are at least *three* ways something can be covenantal, the question becomes, what can properly be said to fall within these descriptions? I find only three:

- 1) The fall of Jerusalem,
- 2) The removal of the Old Testament, and
- 3) The coming in of the New Testament with its attendant legal benefits.

The legal benefits of the New Testament, which came in fullness at the eschaton, are described various ways, such as redemption, justification, adoption, manifestation of the sons of God, marriage, and the eschatological change - but they point to the same thing: the consummation of God's redemptive purpose at the eschaton. Thus, unless it can be characterized as belonging to these three -1) The fall of Jerusalem, 2) the removal of the old law, and 3) the coming in of the New Testament with its attendant legal benefits - it probably was not covenantal.

Aspects of the Eschaton that were not Covenantal

Having noted some of the ways in which the eschaton was covenantal (indeed, probably the only ways), let us proceed to note ways in which it was not covenantal.

First, Christ's coming would be *judicial and retributive* - Christ would judge the quick and the dead; he would render everyman according to his works; those that opposed the gospel and persecuted the church would suffer plagues and wrath.

Ps. 110:5, 6 - The Lord at thy right hand shall strike through kings in the day of his wrath. He shall judge among the heathen, he shall fill the places with the dead bodies; he shall wound the heads over many countries

In our previous article, we surveyed a catalogue of Roman disasters, detailing some of the retribution visited upon the world at Christ's coming. It was a time of universal tribulation: famines, wars, pestilences, storms, political upheavals, military and navel disasters, which rocked the world and shook it to its very foundations. Italy was ruined; it was leveled by the storms and blasts of civil war of those competing for the empire; there were five emperors in 1 yr. 22 days; hundreds of thousands of Romans died; fifty thousand perished in Vespasian's siege of Rome alone. The same year that saw Jerusalem and its temple destroyed saw Rome besieged and its temple destroyed. The two greatest temples in the world thus perished in heaven's outpouring of wrath upon the disobedience of man.

Obviously, none of this had any connection with the Old Testament or can fairly be styled *covenantal*.

Second, Christ's coming would be *imperial and militant* - Christ was extending the dominion of his throne over every people, language, and nation. The necks of his enemies among both Jews and Romans would be put beneath his feet. One has only to ponder a world ruled by the likes of a Tiberius, a Caligula, or a Nero to appreciate how desperately mankind required a new beginning, a new day; yet where was it to come, if not from Christianity? And what more could contribute to its birth than the cataclysms of the eschaton and the horrendous suffering of the martyrs? The image of Christian virgins uncovered to vulgar eye, torn by wild dogs in the arena, gored by maddened bulls, burnt alive upon crucifixes, or slain as spectacles in the theatre, all the while protesting their innocence and affirming their humble faith in Christ, fixed in the collective conscience of the world the

impression of a truth greater than Nero, a truth greater than Rome; a truth that could not be conquered; a truth that animated, sustained and transcended all earthly existence. Forty years from the eschaton and Pliny would write Trajan from Cappadocia that the pagan temples and sacrifices were all but abandoned and all men gone over the new faith.

Again, there is nothing that can remotely be characterized as “covenantal” here.

Third, Christ’s coming would be **declarative and revelatory** - Standing before the Sanhedrin, when asked if he was the Son of God, Jesus answered “I am, and ye shall see the Son of sitting on the right hand of power, and coming in the clouds of heaven.” (Mk. 14:62) Jesus’ claims of divinity would be vindicated – his Sonship would be declared and revealed in the events of the eschaton. Christ would show in his times who was the only potentate, king of kings and lord or Lords. (I Tim. 6:15) And, he would show it not merely to the Jews, *but to the world*. The huddled mass of Christian martyrs would be avenged. Every eye would see him; they also which pierced him, all kindreds of the earth would wail because of him. (Rev. 1:7)

Fourth, Christ’s coming would herald **the resurrection of the dead** - We sometimes hear of the resurrection being covenantal, but this is wrong. The notion of a corporate body⁸ resurrection that was covenantal is a favorite child of Universalism; it spiritualizes the resurrection and places it on this side of eternity, where there is no objective basis to determine its participants, opening the way for false claims that *all men* have been justified apart from obedience to the gospel. Two of the earliest known full Preterist books make use of the corporate body approach to the resurrection and are written by men who either were, or shortly became, adherents of Universalism.⁹ However,

⁸ The “corporate body” view holds that the eschatological resurrection consisted in the living saints covenantal change from “death” under the Mosaic law to life under the gospel of Christ.

⁹ Robert Townley, *The Second Coming A Past Event* (1845, London); *An Oral Debate on the Coming of the Son of Man, Endless Punishment, and Universal Salvation* between Erasmus Manford and Benjamin Franklin (1860, Boston). We hope in a future article to identify the theological distortions connecting Preterism and Universalism. Preterism itself is sound; it is its distortion (like some of those discussed in this article) that has caused it to become a vehicle for Universalism.

Revelation portrays the eschatological resurrection of souls from Hades as actual, personal, and spatial, not covenantal.

And I saw a great white throne, and him that sat upon it...And I saw the dead, small and great, stand before God...and death and hell delivered up the dead which were in them: and they were judged every man according to their works. Rev. 20:11

These are all ways in which the eschaton was neither local nor covenantal. But we are not through; there remains for our consideration the new Jerusalem and the new heavens and earth.

Heavens & Earth and their Elements

A common interpretation among Preterists is the notion that the heavens and earth and their elements that passed away at the eschaton were symbols of the Old Testament and that the new heavens and earth are the New Testament. This is *wrong*. The city, the new Jerusalem, is covenantal – *it* is the covenantal habitation of the saints; the heavens and earth are *not* covenantal.

And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away; and there was no more sea. And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride for her husband. Rev. 21:1, 2

The city is a symbol for the church or bride and is plainly covenantal; the walls, gates, and foundations of the city probably are also covenantal, and likely represent the teaching and doctrine – the legal terms and conditions - upon which the city stands and by which men enter covenantal relationship with God. The rest of the things in the city - the tree of life, the river of life, the streets of gold - can probably be characterized as covenantal, being symbols for various aspects of the gospel or New Testament. God’s presence in the city – like that of the saints themselves - is also probably legal and covenantal. The legal barrier of sin that had separated men from God being removed, we are restored legally and covenantally to his presence *in the church*.¹⁰

¹⁰ The idea that believers are in “heaven now” and already possess their resurrection bodies is frivolous (the things we can talk ourselves into!). John is abundantly clear that the

What about outside the city in the new heavens and earth? These most assuredly are *not* covenantal for the simple fact they contain those that are *out of* covenant with God

Without are dogs, and sorcerers, and whoremongers, and murderers, and idolaters, and whosoever loveth and maketh a lie. Rev. 22:15

Unless we are prepared to subscribe to some form of Universalism, or can otherwise explain their presence, the fact that unregenerate men inhabit the new heavens and earth *outside* the city proves conclusively that the heavens and earth are *not* symbols of the New Testament. They depict New Testament *times*, and the world *surrounding* the New Testament church, but they are *not* the New Testament itself. As earthly Jerusalem of the Old Testament sat in the world surrounded by uncircumcised men, so the new Jerusalem sits in the world surrounded by unregenerate sinners. Neither the old nor the new heavens and earth were covenantal or represented the Old or New Testaments. But if the heavens and earth are not symbols for the Old and New Testaments, what are they? Here, we have to go to Isaiah for the answer.

The former troubles are past forgotten...they are hid from mine eyes. For, behold, I create new heavens and a new earth: and the former shall not be remembered, nor come into mind. But be ye glad and rejoice for ever in that which I create: for, behold, I create Jerusalem a rejoicing, and her people a joy. Isa. 65:16-19

The phrase “the former troubles” is the key because it describes the *way* in which the heavens and earth were new. Simply stated, the new heavens and earth describe the *changed condition and circumstance* of God’s people in

city, the bride, came down *out of* heaven from God. It is axiomatic that if it came down *out of heaven*, it cannot represent the dwelling place of God above. It is the covenantal equivalence; but it is not heaven itself. Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of heaven; not until we put off our bodies in death can we actually and spatially inherit the realm above. Meanwhile, we enjoy covenantal communion with God by the blood of his Son in the church; we enter the church by repentance and baptism. (Acts 2:41, 47; I Cor. 12:13) Outside of the church (Christ) there is no salvation promised in scripture.

the world, in which the former troubles were now forgotten. What were the former troubles? The nation had sinned, was given over to desolation, and was carried into captivity; the new heavens and earth represented God’s promise to restore his people, hide their sins from his eyes, and save them from their oppressors. In the first instance, the promise looked to and began to be fulfilled in the return of the captivity from Babylon; but *ultimately* the prophecy was eschatological and looked to the time when the saint’s would be promoted over their enemies and reign victorious with Christ. This is reflected in the second passage from Isaiah:

*For as the new heavens and earth, which I will make, shall remain before me, saith the Lord, so shall your seed and your name remain...And they shall go forth, and **look upon the carcasses** of the men that have transgressed against me: for their worm shall not die, neither shall their fire be quenched; and they shall be an abhorring unto all flesh. Isa. 66:22, 24*

“Looking upon the carcasses of their enemies” answers the image in Ezekiel after the eschatological battle of Gog and Magog (the persecution under Nero) where the church goes about figuratively to bury the multitude of the slain. (Ezek. 38:11-16) Both visions speak to the victory and preeminence of the church over their enemies after the eschatological crisis was past. Haggai said “I will shake the heavens, and the earth, and the sea, and the dry land; and I will shake all nations, and the desire of all nations shall come: and I will fill this house with glory.” (Hag. 2:6, 7) “Shaking all nations” answers the removal of the old heavens and earth; “filling his house with glory” speaks to the church triumphant in the new heavens and earth. Rome would decline, Constantine would embrace Christianity, and *Byzantium* would become the seat of eastern Christianity and most powerful empire in the world for the next thousand years.¹¹ A new world – a new heavens and earth - in which Christianity mounted higher and higher soon became the undeniable reality of which we are heirs, as the following chart shows.

¹¹ Not to be confused with Revelation’s millennia.

Passing of Old Heavens & Earth

Hag. 2:7 - "I Will Shake All Nations"

- Elements of the Pre-Parousia World Dissolved –

What was not local (Palestine), probably was not covenantal

Covenantal

Defeat of False Prophet and
Babylon the Great

- * Fall of Jerusalem/ destruction of temple
- * Abolition of Old Covenant
- * Consummation of NT (church)

Non-Covenantal

Nebuchadnezzar's Image Destroyed
Destruction of Dragon, Beast &
Their Allies among the Heathen

- * Various world-wide calamities, plagues, earthquakes, famines
- * Pestilence decimates Rome (AD 65)
- * Hurricane in Campania (AD 65)
- * Destruction of fifth legion under Cestius (AD 66)
- * Famine in Rome (AD 68)
- * Year of four emperors; Roman civil wars
- * Tiber floods / Famine in Rome (AD 69)
- * Destruction of Cremona (AD 70)
- * Siege of Rome (AD 70)
- * Destruction of temple Jupiter Capitolinus (AD 70)
- * Resurrection of the Dead

New Heavens & Earth

(Isa. 65, 66; Rev. 21, 22)

Former Troubles Forgotten
Enemies Put Under Christ's Feet
Church Triumphant Reigns with Christ

A "covenantal" paradigm – the one Preterists have used in the past – ignores the right hand of the chart, interpreting everything locally and covenantally, including the heavens and earth. A correct view of the eschaton, however, will recognize that much, if not most, of the eschaton was neither local nor covenantal, and had more to do with establishing the reign of Christ, than the change of the Old Testament and overthrow of Jerusalem.

Conclusion

The idea that the eschaton was predominately local and covenantal is plainly wrong. Instead, the eschaton should be viewed as *world-wide and multi-faceted*. Correcting our understanding to better accord with scripture represents one of the most urgent challenges facing Preterism today.

1488–1569
History of the English Bible
Miles Coverdale
Bible Editor, Bishop, and Beggar

by

C. P. Hallihan

Prelude – The Bible and the Reformation¹²

One hundred years before Miles Coverdale was born, the Lollard Bible began to be distributed in manuscript form.¹ 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,² 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

¹² Adapted from an article in the Trinitarian Bible Society Quarterly Report. The views contained in this newsletter belong to their author; Trinitarian Bible Society does not necessarily endorse our views.

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 Englishe.'

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 'sondrye 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. 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 redest scripture, if thou find ought therein that thou understandest not, or that appeareth to be repugnant, give no temerarious nor hasty 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. 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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

An Act of Uniformity was passed on January 25, 1549, enjoining the use of the Edward VI Prayer Book in 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 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

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, 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.

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. Mozley⁸ lists thirty-eight distinct works of Coverdale – sermons, catechisms, translations from German and Latin authors as well as Bibles, concordance and diglot,⁹ and not including his letters. 'Old Father Coverdale' his friends affectionately called him 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

6 As for vs, we go all astraye (like shepe), euery one turneth his owne waye. But thorow him, the LORDE pardoneth all or synnes. 7 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. 8 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. 9 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.

Historical Background

1527 -ZURICH BIBLE
 1533 - CRANMER Archbishop
 1534 - LUTHER BIBLE
 1535 - COVERDALE’S ENGLISH BIBLE
 Olivetan’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

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

Endnotes

- 1 See the article on Wycliffe in *Quarterly Record* no. 565, Oct.-Dec. 2003, pp. 8-29.
- 2 Quoted in J.F. Mozley, *Coverdale and his Bibles* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1953), p. 1.
- 3 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.
- 4 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!
- 5 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.

6 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.

7 Not far short of £500,000 at today's values!

8 Mozley, *op. cit.*, Appendix E, p. 324.

9 Pages from Coverdale Bibles can be viewed at www.smu.edu/bridwell/publications/ryrie_catalog/toc.htm (then go to chapter 8).

10 The next person that comes to mind as winning that affectionate general esteem and soubriquet is John Newton in the 18th century.