

THE ROAD TO THE AV



PART TWO

by C. P. Hallihan

Greek and English

The Fall of Constantinople, and the Greek New Testament

The year 1453 marked not only the first printing of the Bible, but also the overthrow of the city of Constantinople. This city on the northern shore of the Bosphorus had been called Byzantium, and today is Istanbul. For a thousand years, Byzantium had maintained an Empire, derived from the Roman Empire,

nominally Christian and wholly Greek in language, literature and culture. The burgeoning strength of the Ottoman Muslim Empire under Mehmat II, centred in Anatolia (modern Turkey), laid siege to the waning culture of Byzantium. In fifty-four days the city fell. So huge were the effects of this event that some historians have used it as marking the beginning of 'Modern' history.¹

For the history of the text of Scripture the significance is that Greek scholars, scholarship and literature surged westward

seeking refuge. On the European stage, the scene was set for the flowering of the Renaissance; for the Western Churches the original language texts of the New Testament were brought again to mind, with men capable of instructing others in them.² Many of these displaced scholars went to Italy: that is, from New Rome (Constantinople) to Old Rome. The first part of the Bible to be printed in Greek was a Greek and Latin Psalter of 1481 in Milan, but work on the printed New Testament was soon in hand.

John Colet, 1467–1519, will serve us well to illustrate events of those times. He was the eldest son of the Lord Mayor of London, Sir Henry Colet, and was educated at St Anthony's school and



Constantinople was surrounded by a series of formidable walls and numerous ditches, but in May of 1453 the sheer brute force of the Ottomans finally triumphed.

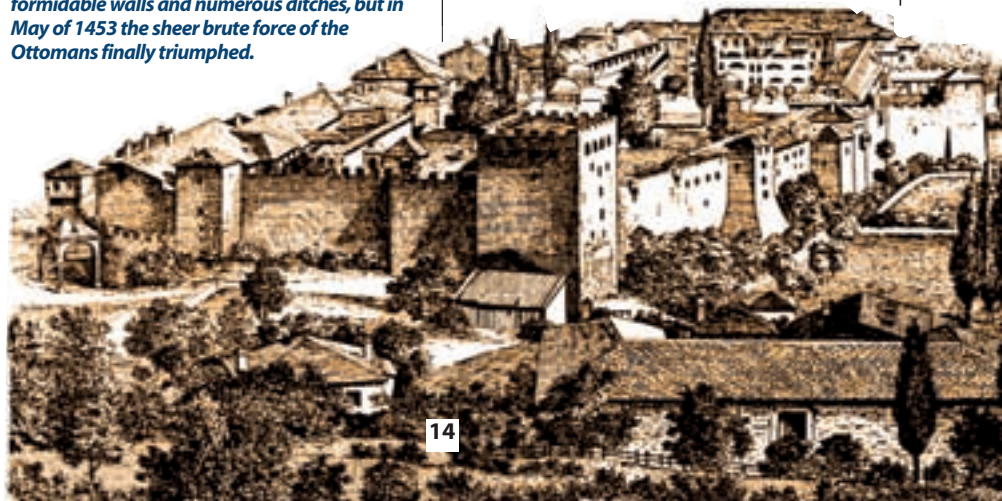
Magdalen College, Oxford, earning an MA in 1490. In 1493 he went to Paris and then to Italy, where he was able to study the rudiments of Greek³ sufficiently well later to assist



John Colet

Thomas Linacre in the production of the first printed Greek grammar in England. This journey to France and Italy, seeking the New Learning, and return to London, Oxford and Cambridge to spread it, was a familiar path at that time. During his years abroad, John Colet became acquainted with the teaching of Savonarola, and with Erasmus whom he strongly influenced and drew to England.

Colet's most significant contribution to the English Reformation was his reading the Greek New Testament with his students at Oxford, a momentous lecture series on Romans which 'swept away centuries of turgid and often fantastic pedantry' by expounding the text in accordance with the plain meaning of the words. Such activity was strictly forbidden by the church, but subsequently

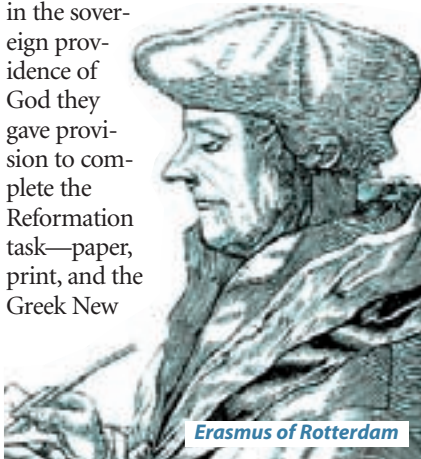


Colet went even further, reading the Scriptures, in English, in public, at Saint Paul's Cathedral.⁴ In this open violation of the church's 'Latin-only' policy Colet demonstrated the hunger for the Gospel in English, tremendously fuelling the growing fire of the Reformation.

Now we have the appointed conjunction of the printed book, the renewal of Greek learning, the availability of Greek New Testament manuscripts, and the Christian scholars' need to translate anew from a clear ground-text. Furthermore, the appetite for Scripture in the common tongues of Europe was growing wherever opportunity allowed. Erasmus of Rotterdam and Ximenes of Complutum (Spain) were working towards the printed text⁵ of the New Testament in the dawning years of the 16th century.

Ximenes completed his Polyglot a year before Erasmus printed his Greek, but did not publish, so that the first printed Greek New Testament actually published was that of Erasmus in 1516. None of these three men, Colet, Erasmus, or Ximenes, ever made the needful break with Rome, and yet

in the sovereign providence of God they gave provision to complete the Reformation task—paper, print, and the Greek New



Erasmus of Rotterdam

Testament. The English Reformers fell gladly on this provision, the better to learn of Christ and the Truth as it is in Jesus, and to preach the Gospel plainly, becoming mighty through God to the pulling down of strongholds. And, that the Gospel might not perish with them, they used this Greek New Testament to be the sound basis of the New Testament in English, translated and printed for the use of preachers, ploughboys and kings.



Complutensian Polyglot

Tyndale to Hampton Court

At the risk of oversimplifying, I would suggest just five steps in one hundred years: (1) the printed Greek New Testaments, 1516ff.; (2) the Tyndale/Coverdale Bibles,⁶ 1525ff.; (3) the Geneva Bible (with Coverdale in the picture still), 1560; (4) the Bishops' Bible, 1568; (5) the Authorised Version of 1611. It is not the purpose of this article to examine anew these historic versions. Tyndale and Coverdale are well known in their labours (see QR 528 for Tyndale, and QR 567 for Coverdale).

The Geneva Bible should be noted, in our context, as being a Bible produced by exiles from Mary's persecution under almost 'specimen' conditions, removed from the immediate fear of hostile force,

by men of great experience combined with time for the task. Its robust presentation of Truth, in both text and notes, earned the approval of the ‘stronger kind of Protestants’ and the disapproval of most religious authorities. (The sig-



A stained glass window at Hertford College, Oxford, depicting Tyndale examining printed proofs of his New Testament

nificant appearance of the printed page of the Geneva will be taken up in an appendix.)

You may be surprised to see the Bishops’ Bible included in these steps—but in the wisdom of God, it became a crucial part of the Road to the AV. The Geneva Bible and its swift acceptance amongst English Protestants was highly disturbing to the ecclesiastical authorities.⁷ Archbishop Parker put in hand a revision of the Great Bible, to be done by eight Bishops and certain other scholars. Poor communication or lack of cooperation amongst the team led to a very uneven result, despite Parker’s supposed general oversight. The Bishops’ Bible, although appointed to be read in churches, did not displace the Geneva Bible from homes or studies, or

even from some pulpits. Two years after its last printing in 1602, the insufficiency of the Bishops’ Bible was a huge factor in the acceptance by King James of the need for a new translation at the Hampton Court Conference of 1604. (Please see QR 566, ‘Kings and Puritans, Bishops and Bibles’, for this background, and for the conclusion of it in the Authorised Version of 1611.) Sovereign providences had brought together the Greek Text, the English language, and the technology of paper and print, and had brought to the kingdom for just this hour men of urgent calling and ability in the way of Bible translation. The labours of William Tyndale and Miles Coverdale had put in place the last part of the Road to the AV.

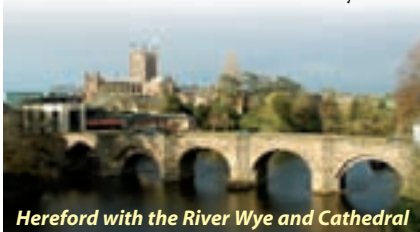
‘Mere English’: Miles Smith

This phrase, ‘mere English,’ was dear to Elizabeth I, using the word ‘mere’ in its primary, though now rare, meaning of ‘pure, unmixed, exactly right’. She meant it of her loyal people, her triumphant sailors, her accommodating church; but in contemplating Bible translation labourers from Tyndale and Coverdale to Hampton Court, the phrase comes much to mind in connection with the English Bible. They pursued a ‘mere English’ New Testament that was just right, pure, simple; in textual authority—the Greek New Testament; in profusion and yet stability of copy—printed; and in accessibility—the common English tongue, not the religious-authority tongue of Latin, nor the elite-authority tongue of French.

The names and the distribution of tasks amongst the 1604–11 Translation

Committee are reasonably well known,⁸ but the overall finishing work of Miles Smith is often lost from view. Miles Smith was born in Hereford, son of a butcher, and educated at Oxford; he graduated with BA in 1573, MA in 1576, BD in 1585 and DD in 1594. Wanting ‘nothing but books’, and of widely acknowledged humble demeanour, he nonetheless became chaplain of Christ Church, vicar of Bosbury, prebendary of Hereford Cathedral and of Exeter Cathedral, then rector of Hartlebury. Dr. Smith earned a widespread reputation for his knowledge of ancient languages. Chaldaic, Syriac and Arabic were reportedly as familiar to him as his own native tongue. In that age of blossoming in the study of ancient languages, he probably engaged directly with the Scriptures in Hebrew and Greek, and only in English as need arose. His 1632 biographer gives the following story of an event at Evensong one day in Hereford Cathedral: ‘Being requested by the dean of the same church to read the first lesson, he yielded thereunto, and having with him a little Hebrew Bible, he delivered the chapter from it in the English tongue plainly and fully to that learned and judicious auditory.’⁹

It is no surprise then that he was named to join the Translators, and not only that, but he was one of two required at the end to supply the editor’s role and examine the whole work for consistency and



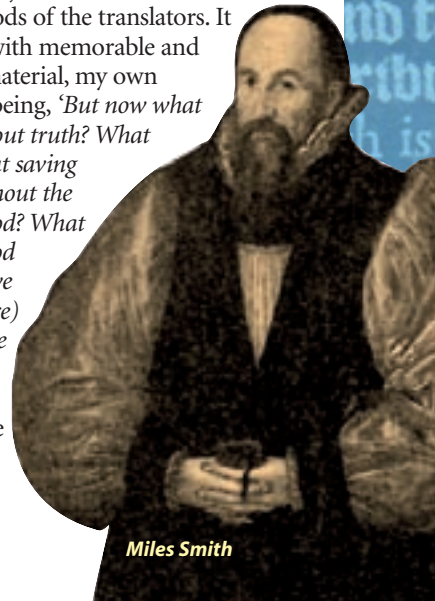
Hereford with the River Wye and Cathedral

integrity—the task which Parker had signally failed to accomplish for the Bishops’ Bible. We have it again from the 1632 biography:

He began with the first, and was the last man of the translators in the work: for after the task of translation was finished by the whole number set apart for that business, being some few above forty, it was revised by a dozen selected ones of them, and at length referred to the final examination of the learned Bishop of Winchester and Doctor Smith, who happily concluded that worthy labour.

It is probably from Miles Smith that we have the page and chapter headings of the 1611 editions of the AV.

We also learn that Dr. Smith ‘was commanded to write a Preface, and so he did in the name of all the translators, being the same that now is extant in our church Bible’.¹⁰ This substantial manifesto gives a comprehensive, scholarly and robust review and justification of the task and methods of the translators. It abounds with memorable and relevant material, my own favourite being, ‘*But now what piety without truth? What truth (what saving truth) without the word of God? What word of God (whereof we may be sure) without the Scripture?*’ But the style of the Preface is



Miles Smith

so different from that of the 1611 Bible that I offer this sample of Miles Smith in the pulpit—and hoping that you will agree with me that this is more the style of our beloved Bible, herein are the echoes of Tyndale, Coverdale and the Geneva Bible:

...Our sins do threaten God's vengeance upon us, our consciences do accuse us, the law containeth matter of indictment against us; all the creatures of God which we have abused, all the calling of God which we have neglected, do witness against us. Hell opens her mouth wide, being ready to swallow us up. The world forsaketh us, our friends have no power to help us. What is to be done in this case? What shift shall we make, what place of refuge shall we fly unto? Only this, that the son of God became the son of Man to make us the sons of God; vile he became, to exalt us; poor, to enrich us; a slave, to enfranchise us; dead, to quicken us; miserable, to bless us; lost in the eyes of the world, to save us. Lastly, partaker of our nature, of our infirmity, of our habitation, to advance us to his kingdom and glory, that is, to be unto us according to his name, Emmanuel, God with us. God to enlighten us, God to help us, God to deliver us, God to save us...

As with many of the 1611 translators, preferment followed, and Miles Smith became Bishop of Gloucester in 1612. Four years later there was a new Dean of the Cathedral, William Laud, the rising opponent of Puritans and plain religion. What a difficult working relationship it must have been, but that, as we say, is

another story! Miles stood with his convictions, shared generally by the 1611 translators; and another clergyman of Hereford, preaching the funeral sermon in 1624, told how Bishop Miles would *'discourse sweetly of the certainty of salvation, and of perseverance in grace: comfortable truths so much opposed by papists, Arminians, and carnal gospellers'*. I think of him, with affection, as carrying the mantle of his namesake, Miles Coverdale, in these last miles on the Road to the AV.

Résumé

The labours of the 1604 committees, editorially finished by Miles Smith, had given to the English-speaking world a



The Jerusalem Chamber, which hosted the Westminster Committee of the AV translators responsible for the translation of Genesis to 1 Chronicles; the chamber was also the setting for the Westminster Assembly of 1643

printed, durable translation of the Scriptures, faithfully founded on the original language texts. Full use was made also of almost one hundred years' labour, drawing not only on English but other European languages, too. Certainly in the New Testament more than nine-tenths can be traced directly to Tyndale;

the homeliness and vigour, the directness of style, owing so much to the initial wordsmith craftsmanship under God of Tyndale's Anglo-Saxon vocabulary. It is no surprise that of the eight thousand word vocabulary of the Authorised Version, words of Saxon derivation make up the same proportion, nine-tenths. Add to that the inescapable, unconscious seasoning of the stately rhythms of the Latin which was the working scholarly accomplishment of all these men, and the majestic, vibrant, persuading, memorable cadences of the English Authorised Version are gone into all the world.

Whatever popular opinion may now say about the English Authorised Version, there can be no doubt that it towers above all other works as a benchmark of 'mere English' Scripture. It is not in embellished courtly style: read the Dedicatorial Epistle to James¹¹ for an easy comparison. It is not in the densely worded and complexly structured Establishment style: read the *Translators to the Reader* for comparison. It is not in the colloquial style: read a few scenes from Shakespeare for contrast. In this I intend no denigration of the material mentioned, but desire the outstanding quality of the 1611 English language Bible to be recognised as a signal gift of God, able to serve the saints and churches of God from generation to generation without being tied to passing styles, high or low. A slight misquotation from Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* serves the AV well: 'Why, man, he doth bestride the narrow world like a colossus and we petty [versions] walk under his huge legs, and peep about to find ourselves dishonourable graves'.¹²

Remember as you reach down your Authorised Version, that one of the infallible tests for revealing a 'heretic' in the Middle Ages was whether he or she possessed, or knew, any part of the Bible in their own language! The Waldensians and the Lollards suffered much from this procedure. As late as 1539 Thomas Forret was burned outside Edinburgh Castle. Arraigned in court for teaching his congregation the Lord's Prayer and the Commandments in English, he had quoted the words of Paul from 1 Corinthians

14.19 in defence. 'Where finds thou that?' his accuser cried. 'In my books, here in my sleeve', was the answer. The book, a Testament, was snatched from him and triumphantly waved at the court. 'Behold, Sirs, he has the heresy book in his sleeve—Know thou, Heretic, that it is contrary to our acts and express commands, to have a New Testament or Bible in English, which is enough to burn thee for', which they then did. Truly, the Road to the AV is marked with suffering and death as well as diligent labour and extraordinary gifts—'other men laboured, and ye are entered into their labours' (John 4.38). Thanks be unto God!



King James I, 'The High and Mighty Prince' as he is called in the AV preface.

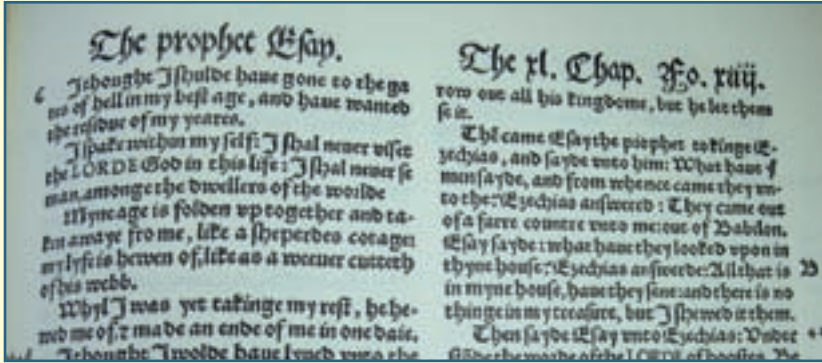
APPENDIX: THE 'PRESENTATION' OF THE BIBLE

Early printed books resembled the manuscript book in physical appearance, and there was no reason to change what was generally familiar and acceptable. Just like the codex manuscripts described in part one of this article, they were simply gatherings of parchment or paper sewn and bound between covers. Printed editions were rarely more than one thousand copies; the average was about two hundred. Gutenberg designed a type-face that looked as similar as possible to the handwritten style of the scribes and copyists, the grandfather of the 'black letter' typeface, popularly called 'gothic'. He also retained the 42-line, two-column format of



medieval manuscripts. Fairly soon, however, printers developed a lettering that was lighter and they began to use it on well-spaced, well-arranged pages. The effect of this on Bible presentation, as the possibilities of the new technology were slowly realised, is illustrated here.

Compare this page of a *Wycliffe manuscript Bible* (above) with the pages from the *Gutenberg printed Bible* (left), and you will see the imitative nature of the early printed page—by no means easy to read.

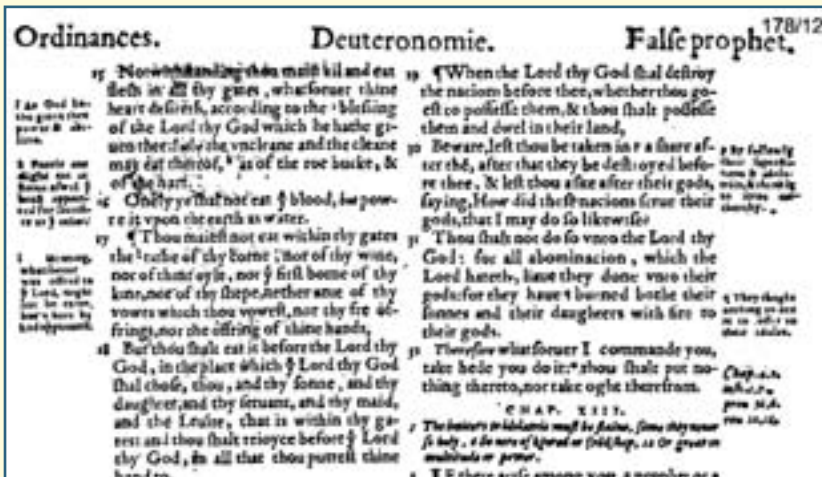


Next is a detail from a *Coverdale edition* (above), which begins to look a little more familiar:–

There are page headings, chapter and folio numbers, but no verse numbers. There are actually chapter contents also, but all at the beginning of each book. It is still black letter typeface.

Now see a detail from a page of the *Geneva Bible* (below):–

Here is a ‘proper’ Bible! ‘Roman’¹³ typeface, page headings, chapter contents, verse numbers, margin notes to help in difficult places, a practical size: it is a Bible presented not for liturgical reading but for personal study, the ease of reference inviting shared study. This, in general, is the shape of the pages of Bibles ever since.



Endnotes:

1. That usage is not in favour now, but still has a lot to commend it.
2. At a trickle rate this had, inevitably, been going on since the Crusades, but now became a significant influence: this surge to Italy also explains why so many important Greek manuscripts came to rest in the Vatican, where Pope Nicholas V was an eager bibliophile (he left a library of 5,000 items at his death).
3. There is a difference of opinion as to Colet's competence in Greek, or even whether he knew it at all! Researching this conflict has occupied a disproportionate amount of time. My conclusion was that he had some Greek, workable if not wonderful; able, if not adept. (Something like me!)
4. People were so hungry to hear the Word of God in a language they could understand that within six months there were 20,000 people packed in the church to hear him, and at least that many outside trying to get in!
5. We can only mention in passing the huge labour of designing and casting the fonts for the new print technology. Typography has begun, and another area of creativity and beauty is helped into being through connection with the Scriptures.
6. I gather together Matthews, Taverner, Rogers, Cranmer, Cromwell and the Great Bible, as one tranche with Tyndale/Coverdale.

7. And seemingly still is, as in this recent (1998) remark by an Anglican writer: 'The Bishops' Bible, [was] created by the Elizabethan hierarchy to avoid the use in church of the tendentious glosses of the Geneva, and its contentious translations...'

8. See TBS Article 115 'The Learned Men'.

9. Quotations here and following taken from Canon John Tiller, Chancellor of Hereford Cathedral, "In the Steps of William Tyndale: Miles Smith as Bible Translator", A Paper given at Gloucester Cathedral, 6th October 1998. How different from Tyndale's time, when, it is said, scarcely a handful (i.e., fewer than five) in England had any knowledge of Hebrew; and how different from Colet's bold English readings scarcely one hundred years before!

10. There is the delicious irony of all fourteen Scripture quotes in the Preface being from the Geneva Bible, Smith's study Bible. But until the AV was actually published, what else should he use?

11. The florid contribution of Thomas Bilson, Bishop of Winchester, not Miles Smith.

12. Act 1, scene 2, line 134; Cassius speaking of Caesar.

13. Popular taste brought about the printing of some few 'black letter' editions of the Geneva; such are the foibles of men that these now command a significantly greater price on the secondhand book market. The Douai-Rheims Bible, 1582/1610, was in Roman type, but the AV started in black letter.