



THE PRINCETON THEOLOGICAL REVIEW

VOLUME IX

JULY 1911

NUMBER 3

THE MAKING OF THE ENGLISH BIBLE.¹

The task assigned is a delightful and a simple one. It is to review briefly, and in bare outline, a story which, in its fulness, is as fascinating as it is familiar. The whole story could not be told. It leads us forward in thought to work not yet complete, for men will continue to produce English versions of the Bible; and as we look backward, we are led through the labors of translators and copyists and saints and apostles and prophets to the very mind of God its Author and its Source. The character of this occasion and the necessary limitations of time confine our review to that portion of the process which was accomplished by men of England and which culminated in the production of that version, which, for three hundred years, has been in reality the Bible of the English-speaking world.

The interest centres about three great names: John Wiclif, William Tyndale, and King James the First. Of course there are others which we must mention and which we should hold in grateful remembrance to-day.

We might allow ourselves the pleasure of rehearsing the story, familiar to us all from childhood, of Caedmon the untutored keeper of cattle at the Abbey of Whitby, who leaves the banquet hall, when the harp is being passed, because he cannot sing; but as he falls asleep in the stable

¹ An address at the Tercentenary Celebration of the Publication of the Authorized Version, Princeton, May 9, 1911.

he dreams that a heavenly messenger appears and bids him "sing the beginning of created things", and imparts to him a divine gift of sacred song; when he awakes he recalls what he has sung and finds that he is able to add to the verses; so that at the bidding of Hilda the Abbess he enters the Abbey as a monk and composes his famous paraphrases of Scripture, of the Old Testament narratives, and the stories of Christ and His apostles, the glories of heaven, the horrors of hell. Dim, indistinct through the mists of ages, we see him; his work was ended in A.D. 680; yet we can still hear his voice, first in the great chorus which has rendered in the language of England the inspired truths of God.

Or we might linger for a moment with Aldhelm, Abbot of Malmesbury, as in disguise of a minstrel he sits, with his harp, on the bridge. He has concluded that the average Englishman cares little for a sermon, and so he gathers a crowd by his playing, and then sings the message of his Lord. He was not the last nor the least successful of those who have sought to secure audiences by means of music, but he was probably the first to translate the Psalms into the Anglo-Saxon speech.

Then too we must mention the "Venerable" Bede, the most illustrious scholar of western Europe. Some of you have stood by his tomb in the superb lady-chapel at Durham; but all of us are turning in memory, at this hour, to the little cell in the monastery at Jarrow-on-Tyne. It is Ascension Day 735; the old monk is dying; between the farewells to his followers he is endeavoring to complete a translation of the Gospel of John, "For", as he said: "I do not want my boys (followers) to read a lie or work to no purpose, when I am gone." The sun is sinking as the last verse is reached; and then, "It is finished", cries the weeping scribe; "Yes, it is finished", replies his master, "and now lift me to the window where I have so often prayed"; and with the *gloria* upon his lips he breathes out his life. Worthy is he to be mentioned; and worthy to

stand at the head of the long line of translators of the English Bible; for in his learning, his piety and his devotion he is a true type of these illustrious men.

Then too we must name King Alfred, for he too is a type—a king, beloved as was David, teaching his people to sing in their own tongue the Psalms of David, and prefixing to the laws of England his own translation of the laws of God—truly prophetic of the influence the Word of God was to have upon the national life of English-speaking peoples.

We might pause to glance at Aelfric, at Bath, in the year 1000, translating the Gospels, or later, as Archbishop of Canterbury translating the historical sections of the Old Testament. In one of his homilies upon the Bible, he gives us the very message for this hour: "Whoever would be one with God must often pray and often read the Scriptures, for when we pray we speak to God, and when we read the Bible, God speaks to us. The whole of the Scriptures are written for our salvation, and by them we obtain a knowledge of the truth."

Or we might notice how, after the Conquest, when Anglo-Saxon has been replaced by Anglo-Norman, Orm, for example, is furnishing a metrical paraphrase of the Gospels and Acts, in 1215; while William of Shoreham, in 1320, and Richard Rolle, in 1340, are producing paraphrases of the Psalter. However, neither in the Anglo-Saxon period, nor in the Anglo-Norman, do we find the entire Bible in the vernacular; nor do we find it the purpose of the translators to give the Bible to the people but more usually to the clergy.

The glory of first furnishing the whole Bible, to the entire nation, in the English tongue, belongs to John Wiclif. This distinguished scholar, ardent patriot, devoted Christian, was unquestionably one of the greatest men of his age, or of any age. Educated at Oxford, receiving the highest University honors, serving as Master of Balliol, appointed chaplain to the king, he won national dis-

tion and popularity by defending the action of king and Parliament in refusing to send tribute to the Pope. Later, at Bruges, representing the king at a conference with the papal nuncio, he became more definitely aware of the corruption of the church, and returned to England with the belief that indulgences, pardons, transubstantiation, the worship of images, saints and relics, were all parts of a gigantic fraud, and that the only way to defeat the Pope and to reform the church would be by placing the Bible in the hands of the people. Amidst growing unpopularity, with his doctrines condemned by the church, himself under the ban of excommunication, he turned his whole attention to the task of translating the Bible from the Latin Vulgate into language which could be read and understood by the simplest peasant. Beginning with the Apocalypse and next translating the Gospels, he completed his work on the New Testament in 1380. Two years before his death, in 1382, assisted largely by his friend Nicholas of Hereford, he completed the translation of the whole Bible. This work was revised and harmonized by John Purvey in 1388. It was at once given a wide circulation. Even to-day there are in existence 170 manuscripts of this version, 30 being of the original work, and 140 of the revision by Purvey. Of course this translation was denounced by the papal authorities, and it was made a punishable offence to copy or even to read it; and yet Wiclif was allowed to die in peace in his quiet home at Lutterworth, where he had long served as parish priest. Some forty years later at the command of the pope his body was exhumed and burned, and the ashes cast into the Swift, the little stream which runs by Lutterworth to the Avon.

“The Avon to the Severn runs, the Severn to the Sea;
So Wiclif’s dust shall spread abroad, wide as the waters be”.

Thus popularly has been symbolized the limitless influence of Wiclif; and it would be difficult to overestimate that in-

fluence. He crystalized the dialects of England into a unified language. He made the Bible the palladium of civil and religious liberty for the English nation. He not only placed an indelible stamp upon all subsequent versions of the English Bible, but it is his essential and undying glory to have been the first, by a hundred years, to produce a translation of the whole Bible, not only in English but in any language of the European world.

It must be remembered here, however, that his work was a translation of the Latin Vulgate; it was therefore a translation of a translation. Necessarily, too, his work was circulated only by means of manuscript copies. The honor of producing a printed Bible, translated into English from the original languages, belongs to William Tyndale. It is to him the Authorized Version owes its character, its form, its style. This version is in reality merely a revision of the work of Tyndale. Its vocabulary is certainly his; less than 350 words used by him are omitted from this version. Peculiarly is the style his own in its unique tenderness and majesty, its simplicity and its grandeur. No one name should be held in higher honor at this hour, than that of this scholar, hero, martyr. Wiclif is rightly called "the Morning Star of the English Reformation", but it is due in large measure to William Tyndale that it obtained its glorious noon.

Only a century elapsed between the death of Wiclif, in 1384, and the birth of Tyndale, in 1484; yet in that time two events took place which made possible the character and wide influence of Tyndale's work. The first of these was the invention of printing. The Bible of Wiclif had to be copied by hand, laboriously, letter by letter. The production of a single manuscript often required nine months, and the expense of two hundred dollars. We know what it is to-day to have Bibles printed at the rate of one a minute, and to have Testaments sold for a penny each.

The second event was the revival of learning. As a result of the fall of Constantinople, in 1453, Greek scholars,

and manuscripts of the Bible, were scattered widely over Western Europe. The Old Testament in Hebrew was printed in 1488. Erasmus printed his New Testament in Greek in 1516. It has been familiarly said that "Greece rose from the grave with the New Testament in her right hand".

Thus with the Bible placed before him in the original languages, and with the printing press at his command, the time for Tyndale's work had come. And he was prepared for his task. His training at Oxford, his knowledge of the Hebrew and the Greek, his deep piety, his reverence for the Bible, all contributed to this preparation, but most important of all was his fixed determination to make the translation of the Bible into popular English the one goal and purpose of his life—a purpose expressed in the words, so often quoted, addressed to the papist who had declared that the laws of the pope were more necessary than the laws of God: "I defy the pope and all his laws; if God spare my life ere many years I will cause a boy that driveth the plow shall know more of the Scriptures than thou doest." In undertaking this work he finds little encouragement among his countrymen. Going to London, and receiving no welcome for himself or his project at the palace of Tunstall, Bishop of London, he is entertained for a time by Humphrey Monmouth; but soon concludes that there is no room to translate the New Testament "not only in the Lord of London's palace but not in all England." Therefore, in 1524, he goes into voluntary exile, and leaves the land of his birth, never to return. We find him at work in Hamburg, in Wittenberg, and in Cologne. When, in Cologne, he is about to print his first edition of the New Testament, his project is discovered, and he is compelled to flee to Worms with the printed sheets of the 3000 copies of this quarto edition. Here he issues an octavo edition of 3000 copies, and then the quarto edition. These copies reach England in 1526 and receive a ready sale, but meet with such violent opposition from the officers of the king

and the church that they are soon destroyed; only a fragment of a single copy of each edition now remains. But the work of translation has been done; England has a New Testament, accurately translated and in popular speech. Edition after edition is put forth, and in spite of opposition copies are scattered broadcast through the land.

Tyndale continues his toil, and in 1530 completes the translation of the Pentateuch. While still at work on the Old Testament he is betrayed and arrested at Antwerp, in 1535. For a year and a half he is imprisoned at Vilvorde, and October 6, 1536, is strangled and burned at the stake as a heretic. But his last prayer: "Lord open the King of England's eyes," is marvellously answered, in so far at least as it expressed the yearning of his soul for royal permission to publish the Bible in English, and thus for the permanence of the work for which he laid down his life. During the very year of his imprisonment, in October 1535, Miles Coverdale issued the first translation of the entire Bible in English—a translation however out of the Latin and German, not, like Tyndale's work, out of the Hebrew and Greek. The second edition of this Bible was printed in England, in 1537, and was the first Bible to be printed on English soil; no less memorable is the fact that it was "set forth with the King's most gracious license."

Then too, in that same year, the very year after the martyrdom of Tyndale, appeared the Bible of "Thomas Matthew", the real author of which was undoubtedly the heroic John Rogers, who himself suffered martyrdom in 1555. The content of this Bible was two thirds the work of Tyndale, and one-third of Coverdale; and yet the king who allowed Tyndale to be put to death for translating the Bible, now permits a Bible, practically Tyndale's own work, to be "printed with the royal license". This was actually the first "authorized version" of the English Bible.

The year 1539 is characterized by the publication, not only of "Taverner's Bible," the work of a lawyer, but by the production of the "Great Bible", which was named

from its size, fifteen by nine inches, and which, by royal proclamation, was ordered to be placed for public reading in every church in England; and this too in the third year after Tyndale's death.

Then, in 1560, when the English exiles in Geneva produced a Bible which has been named from the place of its publication, while the work was carefully done by scholars who had access to many other sources and versions, the work was in substance only a third revision of the Bible of Tyndale. The popularity of this Bible was very great. It was the Bible of the Puritans, and it was extracts from this version which were carried by the soldiers of Cromwell. It had but one formidable rival, the "Bishops Bible", published in 1569, by a number of Anglican clergymen, chiefly bishops. This too was a revision of the work of Tyndale; but while it was supported by the influence of the church, it was too inaccurate for scholars, and too expensive for the people. Thus, while the Roman Catholic translation of the Vulgate New Testament into English was made at Rheims in 1582, and was widely distributed, there were in England only two versions, the Geneva and the Bishops, contending for the supremacy, on the accession of King James.

Of this ruler, whose name is ever glorious because of its connection with the Word of God, it is neither possible nor desirable to speak at length. We need not be reminded of the fact that he was proud, pedantic, tyrannical; that the immorality of his court was only comparable to the imbecility of his government; that he was "the wisest fool in Christendom"; and that his learning was largely theological, illustrating the fact that theological erudition is no guarantee of morality or common sense; and yet with this, and much more, in mind, it must be frankly admitted that, to the encouragement, determination and personal influence of this same King James, we owe that superb version of the Bible, the production of which we celebrate to-day.

Of the details of the work we know but little, and with them we are not specially concerned. We remember that the suggestion of such a version was made to the King by Doctor Reynolds, at the famous, and otherwise futile, Hampton Court Conference, in January 1604. The suggestion gave the King an opportunity of displaying his theological and Biblical knowledge, and of declaring all versions of the Bible to be poor, and the Geneva Bible of the Puritans naturally "worst of all". The same year the King appointed fifty-four members of six committees, to meet, two at Westminster, two at Oxford, two at Cambridge. Forty-seven editors are known to have taken part in the work chiefly during the years 1608 to 1611. It was the task of great scholars, carefully accomplished: "We did not huddle it through in seventy-two days", they declared, "but spent twice seven times seventy-two". The work was done thoroughly, reverently, superbly, so that the result seems less like a translation from another language than like an original work.

Of this "Authorized Version" two things must be said: first, it was not a version, and second, it was never authorized. Instead of being a new version it was in reality a revision of the work of Tyndale; not more than four words in a hundred were altered. The phrase on the title page "translated from the original languages" is not to be taken too literally. It is true, these revisers drew from every possible source, and compared all existing versions; but the work of Tyndale shaped all that was done. As they declared: "We never thought from the beginning that we should need to make a new translation, nor yet to make a bad one a good one, but to make a good one better, or out of many good ones one principal good one, that hath been our mark".

Nor yet was this version ever authorized; it is true that it was published at the command and under the benediction of King James; but it was authorized by no act of Parliament or Convocation, of Privy Council, or of King. It

owed its primacy and its acceptance as the Bible of the English world solely to its intrinsic excellence and its surpassing merits; that is its glory and the proof of its worth.

As to-day we pause and call to mind the heroic and godly men by whose gifts and toil this particular version came into being, and as we shall further dwell upon its literary and spiritual influence, we should be impressed more deeply with the debt of gratitude we owe to those who so labored and suffered for us, and we should realize anew our responsibility to translate this divine book in terms of human need, and to transmute its teachings into character and life.

Princeton.

CHARLES R. ERDMAN.