

SCRIPTURES OPENED to the INDIVIDUAL MAN

Wycliffe Translation to The King James Bible

WYCLIFFE'S Teutonic love of truth, of freedom, and of independence, . . . moved him to give his countrymen the open Scripture as their best safeguard and protection. . . and it was the development of the English language into a literary medium of expression, ripe for his work of translation as Italian had grown ripe for Dante, and as German was presently to grow ripe for Luther, which first made a people's Bible possible. . .

"And if Wycliffe represents a new movement in our literature, so too does he represent a new departure in our religious history. For the rise of Lollardy, in so far as it was a religious movement, marks the earliest break in the . . . continuity of Latin Christianity in England. . . The Wycliffe Bible was spoken of. . . as being not merely a book but an event. . . It was Chaucer, no doubt, who by his genius impressed the literary stamp on our language, but it was Wycliffe who, in his own field, and addressing his own audience, made ready and prepared the way.

"The rivalry between Norman-French and English had come at length to an end. Largely owing to the loss of Normandy in the reign of King John, and to the loss of Aquitaine in the reign of Edward III., the continental invader had been gradually turning into an Englishman. In the twelfth century English had been to the dominant race nothing else but a foreign language. As the vernacular of everyday life it had naturally remained the spoken language of the subject population; but no Norman magnate of the twelfth century would have used English except under circumstances where his native tongue promised to be unintelligible to those whom he was addressing. With the fourteenth century there had come a great change. The conquered Saxon had at length completed the assimilation of his conqueror, and the Norman had become finally naturalized. While French still kept up its social position as the language of polite society, it had come to be the general practice for every gentleman to know the native English, inasmuch as the foreign settlers now felt themselves to be no longer Normans but Englishmen. . .

The above excerpts are from H. W. Hoare's "The Evolution of the English Bible" - 1901

TYNDALE is the true father of our present English Bible. He is so notwithstanding the fact that he neither originated the idea of a popular version, nor was the first to make one. In these respects the glory rests with his predecessor, Wycliffe. But the English of the fourteenth century is not our English, and Wycliffe's Bible is not a translation at first hand but only a translation of the Latin Bible.

"For felicity of diction, and for dignity of rhythm, Tyndale never has been and never can be surpassed... He worked, like a sane and sound scholar, on the principles of grammar and philology. He endeavored, in a spirit of unpedantic sincerity and conscientiousness, to find out what it was that each sacred writer had meant to say, and then to say it in plain and vigorous Saxon-English with all the idiomatic simplicity, and grace, and stateliness which characterise the Authorized Version...

"It has been estimated that, of Tyndale's work as above specified, our Bibles retain at the present day something like eighty per cent, in the Old Testament, and ninety per cent, in the New. If this estimate may be accepted no grander tribute could be paid to the industry, scholarship, and genius of the pioneer whose indomitable resolution enabled him to persevere in labours prolonged through twelve long years of exile from the land that in his own words he so 'loved and longed for'. with the practical certainty of a violent death staring him all the while in the face.

"About the month of May 1524 he left London for Hamburg. The unanimous evidence of his contemporaries supports the view that he was at Wittenberg with Luther, and that he worked there at his translation. His modern biographers, on the other hand, keep him in Hamburg for the whole interval. It is not known how far the work of translation had advanced before Tyndale left for England, but at any rate the New Testament seems to have been ready for the printers by the early summer of 1525...

"But Tyndale had no intention of resting content with what he had achieved. He was soon busily engaged on the Old Testament. In 1530 there accordingly appeared a new volume containing a translation of the Pentateuch from the original Hebrew. In 1531 was published the Book of Jonah with a lengthy Prologue... Now in 1534 there came out a revised edition both of the Pentateuch

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of 1530 and of the New Testament of 1525, and this latter has always taken rank as its author's masterpiece... In the spring of the next year, during the month of May, 1535, Tyndale was treacherously betrayed to his ever watchful enemies... Partly to his labours in this (a) foreign dungeon we owe the translation of that portion of the Old Testament (Joshua to II Chronicles inclusive), which he left in the charge of his intimate friend and literary executor, the martyr that was to be, John Rogers...

"Within twelve months of the martyrdom of its author at Vilvorde, the translation which 'either with glosses (marginal notes) or without' had been denounced, abused, and burnt at St. Paul's, was now, under its assumed name (the Matthew Bible), formally approved by the King's grace, and published, together with Coverdale's Bible, under the shelter of a royal proclamation and license... Except for Fulke's statement that Matthew's edition was the first 'authorized' English Bible, there is nothing to indicate that it was any earlier in circulation than the Coverdale Edition of 1537, which was 'set forth with the King's most gracious license'.

"...In April 1539, the first edition of this magnificent specimen of the art of printing was ready for publication... One great feature of this Bible is the frontpiece, which is said to have been designed for it by Hans Holbein...

THE
GREAT
BIBLE

"By an injunction framed as early as 1536, but not issued until September 1538, in virtue of which all clergy were ordered to provide before a specified day 'one booke of the whole Bible, in the largest volume, in Englishe, sett up in summe conveyent place within the churche that ye have care of, whereat your parishoners may most commodiously resort to the same and rede yt.' This injunction had all the authority of a royal proclamation and thus, within thirteen years of the burning of Tyndale's New Testaments at St. Paul's, the battle of the English Bible had been finally won. First forbidden; then silently tolerated; and next licensed, it was now commanded by the King's Highness to be set up for the benefit of each one of the eleven thousand parishes in the land...

"The forerunner of the Genevan Bible was an English New Testament which came out in 1557... It is, in the first place, the earliest translation to adopt that division of the text into verses, which was made, during a ride between Paris and Lyons, by Robert Stephens in his Greek Testament of 1551, and which reappears in the Genevan Bible of 1560...

THE
GENEVAN
BIBLE

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"Knox, Coverdale, and several others among the revisers, . . . left Geneva before their task was complete; but we learn from Anthony A. Wood that 'Whittingham, with one or two more, being resolved to go through with the work, did tarry a year and a half after Queen Elizabeth came to the Crown.' The 'one or two more' appear to have been Anthony Gilby, of Christ's College Cambridge, and Thomas Sampson, Dean of Chichester, and subsequently Dean of Christ Church in the early years of the reign of Elizabeth.

"Based, as regards the Old Testament, mainly on the Great Bible, and, as regards the New Testament, on Whittingham's version of 1557, which was itself a revision of Tyndale, the Genevan Bible was the result of a careful collation with the Hebrew and Greek originals, and of a free use of the best recent Latin versions, especially Beza's, as well as of the standard French and German translations.

"In many ways this edition formed a new departure and offered new attractions. Especially was this the case with regard to bulk. The Great Bible was a huge, unwieldy folio, suited only for liturgical use. Its rival was for the most part issued as a quarto of comfortable size, and at a moderate price. In place of the heavy black letters to which readers had been accustomed, there appeared the clear Roman type with which our modern press has made us familiar. The division of the chapters into verses, however we may condemn it as a literary device, has undeniable advantages, both for the preacher and for private reference and study, to say nothing of its effect in facilitating the prominence that soon began to attach to particular favourite texts.

"Neither cumbersome nor costly; terse, and vigorous in style; literal, and yet boldly idiomatic; the Genevan version was at once a conspicuous advance on all the Biblical labours that had preceded it, and an edition which could fairly claim to be well abreast of the soundest contemporary scholarship.

"Apart, however, from its intrinsic merits, and from its incidental attractions, the introduction of the Bible into England, from the point of view of its authors, was singularly opportune. Secular literature was at this time all but unknown. Shakespeare was not yet born. Spenser was but six years old, and Bacon in his cradle. With the exception of the Bible, the Prayer Book, Foxe's 'Book of Martyrs', and Calvin's 'Institutes', it is difficult to recall a book which had any considerable circulation. Meanwhile the habit of Bible-reading had been steadily gaining a firm hold upon that large and increasing section of the community to which the Genevan Bible would most forcibly appeal.

"Elizabeth died in March 1603, and with the accession of James I., we arrive at length within sight of that monumental work which was destined not merely to eclipse but absolutely to efface all rivals, and to enter upon a reign which has endured unbroken for nearly three hundred years, and in the undimmed lustre of which we yet live. We need waste no words in praise of the Authorised Version.

"The conference of 1604, which met by the royal command on the 14th, 16th, and 18th of January at Hampton Court, and in the very palace which had once belonged to Wolsey, had not been called with any view to the production of a new translation of the Bible. The sole object of the meeting was to consider what is known as the 'Millenary Petition'. This was a petition to the throne by the Puritan section of the national Church. . . . A useful sidelight is thrown upon the matter by the Preface to the Authorised Version. The translators there write as follows:

"The very historical truth is, that upon the importunate petitions of the Puritans, the Conference at Hampton Court having been appointed for hearing their complaints, when by force of reason they were put from all other grounds, they had recourse at the last to this shift, that they could not with good conscience subscribe to the Communion Book (i. e., the Prayer Book), since it maintained the Bible as it was there translated, which was, as they said, a most corrupted translation. And although this was judged to be but a very poor and empty shift, yet even hereupon did his Majesty begin to bethink himself of the good that might ensue by a new translation, and presently after gave orders for this translation which is now presented unto thee."

"The first practical step had naturally been to select a competent committee of revisers. Most probably the King, whose whole heart was in the matter, consulted both Bancroft and the Universities, but to whom the ultimate decision was entrusted is uncertain. It is evident, from what is known of the names on the list which has come down to us, that all possible pains were taken to secure the services of the best available men. The only qualification which was held to be indispensable was that the revisers should be Biblical students of proved capacity.

"Puritan Churchmen and Anglican Churchmen, linguists and theologians, laymen and divines, worked harmoniously side by side.

"Fifty-four of the most prominent scholars appear to have been originally selected to constitute the committee, but the lists that have come down to us include the names of only forty-seven. Why this was so we have no information, nor has any satisfactory explanation of the discrepancy been hitherto offered. What, however, is of the more importance is that the appointments were in no case lightly made, but that the utmost care and catholicity of mind was exercised in the matter. Hugh Broughton was probably the greatest Hebraist of the time, but he was a man of such ungovernable temper, and one so impossible to work with, that his cooperation was not invited.

"The revisers were organized in six companies. Two of these held their meetings at Oxford, two at Cambridge, two at Westminster. The representative of the Puritans at Hampton Court, Dr. Reynolds, one of the foremost scholars of the day, was on the Oxford committee, and among his colleagues was Dr. Miles Smith, who 'Had Hebrew at his finger ends.' and was moreover one of the final supervisors and the author of the very interesting and instructive preface which, though there is no room for it in our overcrowded Bibles, was prefixed to the completed work in 1611.

"The instructions to which reference has been made appear on the whole to have been admirably conceived, and a copy of them was presented to each of the six companies. They ran as follows:

'... Every particular man of each company to take the same chapter or chapters: and having translated or amended them severally by himself where he thinketh good, all to meet together, confer what they have done, and agree for their parts what shall stand.

'As any one company hath dispatched any one book in this manner, they shall send it to the rest to be considered of seriously and judiciously, for his Majesty is very careful in this point.

'If any company, upon the review of the book so sent, doubt or differ upon any place, to send them word thereof, note the place, and withal send the reasons: to which if they consent not, the difference to be compounded at the general meeting, which is to be of the chief persons of each company at the end of the work.

'When any place of special obscurity is doubted of, letters to be directed by authority to be sent to any learned man in the land for his judgment.

'Letters to be sent from every bishop to the rest of his clergy, admonishing them of this translation in hand, and to move and charge as many as being skilful in the tongues, and having taken pains in that kind, to send his particular observations to the company either at Westminster, Cambridge, or Oxford...

'These translations to be used when they agree better with the text than the Bishops' Bible: Tindale's, Matthew's, Coverdale's, Whitchurch's, Geneva...'

"It is supposed that some three years were spent in arranging for the payment of expenses, in the individual study of the text, and in labours of an anticipatory character, three more in organised and joint work, and a brief nine months in a final revision in London by the representative committee of six...

"In 1611 the Authorized Version, a folio volume in black-letter type, was issued to the public. It had no notes, and the interpretation of it was therefore left perfectly free... It has already been translated into something like two hundred different languages and dialects, and not less than three million copies of it are now year by year poured out from the English Press. In sober earnest may we say that 'its sound has gone forth into all lands, and its words unto the ends of the world'.

"The description which has been given of the evolution of our Authorized Version may now perhaps best be completed by a consideration of the happy conjunction of circumstances to which its unique greatness is in part, at any rate, to be ascribed. In the first place, then, the King's Bible was indebted for its success to the personal qualifications of the revisers. They were the picked scholars and linguists of their day. They were also men of profound and unaffected piety. Let them speak for themselves.

'In what sort did these assemble? In the trust of their own knowledge, or of their sharpness of wit, or deepness of judgment? At no hand. They trusted in Him that hath the key of David, opening and no man shutting; they prayed to the Lord, O let Thy Scriptures be my pure delight; let me not be deceived in them, neither let me deceive by them. In this confidence and with this devotion did they assemble together... Neither did we think (it) much to consult the translators or commentators, Chaldee, Hebrew, Syrian, Greek, or Latin; no, nor the Spanish, French, Italian, or Dutch; neither did we disdain to revise that which we had done, and to bring back to the anvil that which we had hammered...'