

# Baptists and the Bible.

## II. WHAT THEY HAVE DONE FOR THE BIBLE.

THEY have translated it.

The early versions were all made by people who practised believers' baptism. The name "Baptist" was not in use then, perhaps because the baptism of believers was the usual thing. We should not think that when young children were urged to baptism, when once infants were baptised, then the baptism of believers vanished. It held its own for ten or twelve generations, even round the Mediterranean where Christians had been known for the first century; it was only ousted there when the compulsory baptism of infants left few people unbaptised. Yet for hundreds of years after that, on the frontiers of Christendom, there were always unbelievers, were conversions, were new believers baptised. It was in the West, where infant baptism originated and spread, that translation was opposed, and stopped.

We think, however, of the last three centuries, and modern Baptists. They have always been conspicuous in making the Bible available for new peoples.

Roger Williams was a pioneer Baptist in New England. He was very sympathetic with the natives there; it is well known that, while other settlers were simply squatting on the land, he recognised the rights of the aborigines, and bought. Those Pilgrims and Puritans were devout, and were conscious of their obligations to the red man; the seal of the Old Colony is Four Indians Praying. It was Roger Williams who conceived the idea of teaching them to read, and giving them the Bible—two difficult tasks. He studied their language, mastered its grammar, compiled a vocabulary, then printed these at once so that many might engage in the work. There the direct and exclusive interest of Baptists ended, for many did follow up; his friends there did the actual translation, the subscriptions for the cost were headed by the regiments of the New Model Army, which was not entirely Baptist, the Bible came out under the auspices even of Episcopalians. But the first step was by a Baptist, and it is the first step that costs.

Further down the coast was Pennsylvania, populated by an amazing assortment of dissenting sects. They included many Germans, at Germantown and Ephrata. Conspicuous among these were the German Baptist Brethren, nicknamed Dunkers. Cristoph Sauer was an enterprising printer, and he was the first to print a Bible across the Atlantic in any European tongue. True that it was not a new translation, but it does show the Baptist concern that the Bible should be readily available.

In both these lines, Baptists of America have maintained the good custom. Tribe after tribe of Red Indians owes its gospels, its Testaments, to Baptist enterprise. Our kinsmen yonder have always been in the van to provide immigrants with Bibles in their own tongues.

They have done more. They have not that reverence for the 1611 English version that occasionally is exaggerated into fetish-worship. They want a thing to be of use, and do not admire it simply because it is antique. The language of King James is not the talk of America. If the gangster of Chicago is to be won to read a Bible at all, it must be in words that he knows. So, more than eighty years ago, thoughtful Baptists began trying to make a more modern version. Another reason swayed many; that while Tyndale wanted to use real English words and not to put Greek or Latin words into his English Testament, he had not found one word which could render the Greek *baptizo*, so they tried to carry out his principle further. The controversy that ensued called great attention to the question of having new translations in modern English. Baptists have given a lead in these; yonder Mrs. Montgomery and Edgar Goodspeed are the latest. The movement resulted in a revision of the 1611 version, by scholars of England and America drawn from many denominations, including Baptists.

English versions promote Home missions; for a wider world there must be other versions. Romanists never used the Bible as a chief aid to their extension, and seldom made any versions except as a serum to inoculate against other views. Protestants on the Continent provided themselves with Bibles in seventeen languages by 1800; with Welsh, Manx and Gaelic there were a score of European versions in living tongues, actually used. Translation in the East was begun at the instance of King Frederick of Denmark, who had a trading station in Tranquebar. Testaments in Portuguese and Tamil were available by 1720. The German translators were patronised and helped by Joseph Collett, Baptist Governor of Madras, who suggested extension of their work.

As the eighteenth century waned, the young Baptist pastor at Moulton felt a deep concern for the spread of the gospel, and in 1792 published the results of his enquiry. Tables covering twenty-three pages showed the religions of the world; he began his positive suggestions with the remarks that 420 millions were still in pagan darkness, and had no Bible. That was still true when the century closed, but under the Danish flag he and another translator and a printer had made preparations to improve. When Carey died in 1834, the Serampore Press had printed New Testaments in thirty-seven Asiatic languages, made

by Baptists whom he inspired, English, German and American. While he catered chiefly for India, yet Ceylon, Burma, Java and China had Bibles translated by Baptists; other Churches had been quickened to follow the trail he blazed.

In the century since, many of the pioneer versions have been revised, and one inter-denominational committee was led by a Moslem converted to Baptist principles. Siam and Japan have been reached. The vanishing tribes of North America have had the work of Roger Williams continued for them. Central Africa has seen Holman Bentley lead the way.

To translate the Bible is a first step. But if the letters of Paul were soon felt to have some things hard to be understood, which ignorant people might wrest to destruction, then further steps must be taken. Baptist have commented on the Bible.

A fine set of annotations, made by the Dutch, were translated and put forth in 1657 by Henry Hills, the Baptist printer to the Commonwealth. A learned convert from Catholicism, Charles-Marie de Veil, in the next generation published half-a-dozen volumes of exposition, illuminated by his knowledge of Judaism, whence he sprang. His lead was followed next century by a self-taught pastor, John Gill, who published massive commentaries on the whole Bible.

John Fawcett in 1811 put forth a devotional family Bible, on the general lines of Matthew Henry. It proved so useful that a similar and smaller work was extracted from Gill; then a third issue was made combining both. As the century wore on, great expositors arose in London and Manchester. Spurgeon digested much into his *Treasury of David*. Maclaren contributed to the *Expositor's Bible*, and in his later years arranged his work into expositions of the whole Bible.

Baptists have usually aimed at practical devotional work. Yet side-lines have not been neglected. Dictionaries and cyclopedias were issued by Button of Southwark and William Jones of Liverpool. Andrew Gifford of Holborn and George Offor laid some critical foundations.

John Fellows, a Bromsgrove shoemaker, took a third important step. He wrote the History of the Bible in 1777. To-day we are familiar with omnibus volumes of many kinds; collected stories by one man; tributes by many pupils to their master; essays by different authors to show the attitude of a school on important questions. Even so, with the diversity of author and subject, they usually date from one generation. Now the New Testament is an omnibus book of this kind, and the fact needed to be pointed out. The Old Testament is made up of three omnibus books collected by Jews at different times for different purposes; Christians broke them up and re-arranged them.

Unless we grasp these elementary facts, we are likely to go astray in our study of the Bible. To-day, educated people are at least dimly aware of the facts, even if they are not awake to the consequences. It was a Baptist who broke this fresh ground, 160 years ago. A Welsh Baptist followed it up after thirty years, and the original was good enough to re-publish.

The tercentenary of the English Bible prompted Christopher Anderson of Edinburgh to acquaint himself with its story, and to set it forth. A great deal of research was needed, and the result was to show what a great part the Bible played in the Reformation—the very point that is being emphasised in 1937 and next year. Anderson afterwards revised his work, and it remains a most readable account of how the Bible came to be known in this island.

Thus if the Bible has done much for Baptists, we have been to the fore in three repayments; translating it, explaining it, and telling its story. It remains to see what we have done with it.

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*Baptists in Britain*, by H. Wheeler Robinson, M.A., D.D., and J. H. Rushbrooke, M.A., D.D. (Baptist Union Publication Department, 1/- net).

Dr. Wheeler Robinson writes on "The History of the Baptists in England," and Dr. Rushbrooke on "The Baptist Communion in Britain: Numbers, Organisation and Distinctive Principles." The two chapters were originally written for "Ekklesia," a comprehensive survey of all the Christian Churches. They are now published independently to make them more accessible to Baptists in general, and especially for educational use amongst young people. Together they form an admirable but all too brief summary of Baptist history and principles, and can be warmly commended to all who desire to know more of Baptists.