

Editorial

THE ENGLISH BIBLE

THE MORE important translations of the Bible into English have been made in three historical periods, 1380 to 1397, 1524 to 1611, and 1881 to the present day. From the first brief period come the two Wycliffite versions. From the vital Reformation age, in astonishing variety and excellence, come the translations of Tyndale, Coverdale, and Rogers; the Great Bible associated with Thomas Cranmer; the Geneva Bible of Whittingham; the Bishops' Bible of Matthew Parker and his collaborators; the Rheims-Douai Bible, and finally the King James Version whose 350th anniversary is now being observed.

Although many private versions of the Bible in whole or in part were published within the two and one half centuries after 1611, yet the Revised Version of 1881-1885 opened the third great age of translation. Since then have appeared the Standard and Revised Standard Versions; the Bible in Basic English; various versions in modern speech such as those of Weymouth, Moffatt, Goodspeed, and Powis Smith; the Knox translation from the Vulgate; and paraphrases by Wand and Phillips. This year the New English Translation of the New Testament has been printed.

Many of these translators have left records of what they believed about the Bible and what they hoped to accomplish as they began their exacting and, in early times, dangerous work. It is of interest to inquire whether, although separated by centuries, they speak on basic themes with a common voice.

Of the three periods the earliest has a peculiar charm, sounding as it does the fundamental note of the middle ages, yet with overtones of a new time coming. John Purvey's *General Prologue* which accompanies some copies of the second Wycliffite Bible is in many respects a characteristic medieval document. It was modelled on ancient prologues such as that of St. Jerome. It bowed to orthodox authorities like Augustine, Isidore, and Nicholas of Lyra. It recommended the familiar fourfold method of biblical exegesis, the literal, moral, allegorical, and anagogical. At one point the *Prologue* makes bible study appear a task of some complexity:

By these rules of Austin and by four understandings of holy scripture, and by sure knowledge of figurative speeches, with good living and meekness and studying the Bible, simple men may somewhat understand the text of holy writ and edify much themselves and other men.

But other passages from the same hand point to a new pattern of thought and simpler qualifications for such a study, as:

He whose heart is full of charity comprehendeth without any error the manifold abundance and largest teaching of God's scripture.

The *Prologue* distinguishes between the intellectual task of translation and the devotional use to which the translation is to be put, but it makes clear that for a full understanding of scripture both translator and reader must first obey the law of charity before they can expect to grow in wisdom and spiritual knowledge. The men of this period were aware of the difficulties attending translation but they had faith that the same Holy Spirit who brooded over the composing of the books of the Bible would aid in the interpretation of them. Above all, so they believed, Christ was to be found everywhere in the Old Testament as in the New. He supplied the key to all the treasures of divine truth contained in the Bible.

Translators and Bible students of the Tudor period belonged to the new age of the Renaissance. They felt themselves to be wiser than their fathers, as indeed they were. They threw themselves into the work of translation, not from the Latin only, but also from Greek and Hebrew. Equally with the Wycliffe circle they believed the Bible to be "Godde's lawe," containing answers to questions both political and religious. They modified or rejected the medieval scheme of biblical interpretation, giving greater attention to the literal and historic meaning. Like the "Translators to the Reader" in the Authorized Version of 1611 they wrote defensively, as if wielding both sword and pen, to warn, to encourage, and to persuade:

O receive not so great things in vain, O despise not so great salvation! Be not like swine to tread under foot so precious things neither yet like dogs to tear and abuse holy things. . . . It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God; but a blessed thing it is and will bring us to everlasting blessedness in the end, when God speaketh unto us, to hearken; when he setteth his word before us to read it; when he stretcheth out his hand and calleth, to answer, Here am I; here we are to do thy will, O God.

They recognized a deep need for the Bible in the vernacular. Robert Crowley, who reprinted Purvey's *Prologue* in 1550, but who attributed it to Wycliffe, speaks in his preface of "greedy students of God's book," and of those who "hunger for the perfect knowledge of God's word." With all their learning they too recognized that the Bible was written for all men. Cranmer wrote in the preface to the Great Bible:

The Holy Ghost hath so ordered and attempered the Scriptures that in them as well publicans, fishers and shepherds may find their edification as great doctors their erudition.

They wrote prologues of great grace and beauty, as befitted the high themes which were presently to be treated in the Bible itself. To the translators of the Geneva Bible the Word of God was

the light of our paths, the key to the kingdom of heaven, our comfort in affliction, our shield against Satan, the school of all wisdom, the glass wherein we behold God's face, the testimony of his favour and the only food and nourishment of our souls.

Those whose ears are attuned to the full orchestration of Tudor English will find the Bible introductions of the third and present period muted and dissonant. Ancient battles, so the writers seem to feel, have been fought and won and need no further mention. It is assumed that education is widespread, hence no difference needs to be made between wise and ignorant for all are now wise. No effort is made to persuade, preach, or propagandize. Much is said, drily and factually, about advance in knowledge of ancient tongues and of archaeology and about the necessity for translators to keep up with this progress. The poetry and adventure and evidence of strong faith that pulsates in every line of introductions of former ages is strangely absent. Yet, truth to tell, the present generation of Bible readers is able to use more accurate translations of the original than readers in earlier centuries. Doggedly and patiently translators as well as theologians and commentators are pursuing their essential and never-ending tasks, and doing them well, without the support and encouragement which was available to their predecessors in times past. Yet now and again the old winning tones are gently sounded, sufficient to show that Christians of the fourteenth, sixteenth, and twentieth centuries are partakers in a common faith. The Preface to the Revised Standard Version of the New Testament says:

In the Bible we have not merely an historical document and a classic of English literature, but the Word of God. The Bible carries its full message, not to those who regard it simply as a heritage of the past or praise its literary style, but to those who read it that they may discern and understand God's Word to men.

Although the Authorized Version of 1611 has seen its greatest days yet the translators of three hundred and fifty years ago wrought a great work and merit a salute from us as we contemplate, and indeed continue to use, their wonderful achievement. Let the trumpet voice of their more robust faith speak, both for themselves and also for our own confused generation, what we and they, and all his people down the ages, really know "God's sacred Word" to be:

That inestimable treasure, which excelleth all the riches of the earth; because the fruit thereof extendeth itself, not only to the time spent in this transitory world, but directeth and disposeth men unto that eternal happiness which is above in heaven.

T.R.M.