

# **A Study of the King James Version of the Bible**

**by**

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## Preface

THE lectures included in this volume were prepared at the request of the Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Sciences, and were delivered in the early part of 1912, under its auspices. They were suggested by the tercentenary of the King James version of the Bible. The plan adopted led to a restatement of the history which prepared for the version, and of that which produced it. It was natural next to point out its principal characteristics as a piece of literature. Two lectures followed, noting its influence on literature and on history. The course closed with a statement and argument regarding the place of the Bible in the life of to-day.

The reception accorded the lectures at the time of their public delivery, and the discussion which ensued upon some of the points raised, encourage the hope that they may be more widely useful.

It is a pleasure to assign to Dr. Franklin W. Hooper, director of the Institute, whatever credit the work may merit. Certainly it would not have been undertaken without his kindly urgency.  
CLELAND BOYD McAFEE.

Brooklyn, New York, May, 1912.

# Lecture 1

## PREPARING THE WAY--THE ENGLISH BIBLE BEFORE KING JAMES

THERE are three great Book-religions-- Judaism, Christianity, and Mohammedanism. Other religions have their sacred writings, but they do not hold them in the same regard as do these three. Buddhism and Confucianism count their books rather records of their faith than rules for it, history rather than authoritative sources of belief. The three great Book-religions yield a measure of authority to their sacred books which would be utterly foreign to the thought of other faiths.

Yet among the three named are two very distinct attitudes. To the Mohammedan the language as well as the matter of the Koran is sacred. He will not permit its translation. Its original Arabic is the only authoritative tongue in which it can speak. It has been translated into other tongues, but always by adherents of other faiths, never by its own believers. The Hebrew and the Christian, on the other hand, but notably the Christian, have persistently sought to make their Bible speak all languages at all times.

It is a curious fact that a Book written in one tongue should have come to its largest power in other languages than its own. The Bible means more to-day in German and French and English than it does in Hebrew and Chaldaic and Greek-- more even than it ever meant in those languages. There is nothing just like that in literary history. It is as though Shakespeare should after a while become negligible for most readers in English, and be a master of thought in Chinese and Hindustani, or in some language yet unborn.

We owe this persistent effort to make the Bible speak the language of the times to a conviction that the particular language used is not the great thing, that there is something in it which gives it power and value in any tongue. No book was ever translated so often. Men who have known it in its earliest tongues have realized that their fellows would not learn these earliest tongues, and they have set out to make it speak the tongue their fellows did know. Some have protested that there is impiety in making it speak the current tongue, and have insisted that men should learn the earliest speech, or at least accept their knowledge of the Book from those who did know it. But they have never stopped the movement. They have only delayed it.

The first movement to make the Scripture speak the current tongue appeared nearly three centuries before Christ. Most of the Old Testament then existed in Hebrew. But the Jews had scattered widely. Many had gathered in Egypt where Alexander the Great had founded the city that bears his name. At one time a third of the population of the city was Jewish. Many of the people were passionately loyal to their old religion and its Sacred Book. But the current tongue there and

through most of the civilized world was Greek, and not Hebrew. As always, there were some who felt that the Book and its original language were inseparable. Others revealed the disposition of which we spoke a moment ago, and set out to make the Book speak the current tongue. For one hundred and fifty years the work went on, and what we call the Septuagint was completed. There is a pretty little story which tells how the version got its name, which means the Seventy--that King Ptolemy Philadelphus, interested in collecting all sacred books, gathered seventy Hebrew scholars, sent them to the island of Pharos, shut them up in seventy rooms for seventy days, each making a translation from the Hebrew into the Greek. When they came out, behold, their translations were all exactly alike! Several difficulties appear in that story, one of which is that seventy men should have made the same mistakes without depending on each other. In addition, it is not historically supported, and the fact seems to be that the Septuagint was a long and slow growth, issuing from the impulse to make the Sacred Book speak the familiar tongue. And, though it was a Greek translation, it virtually displaced the original, as the English Bible has virtually displaced the Hebrew and Greek to-day. The Septuagint was the Old Testament which Paul used. Of one hundred and sixty-eight direct quotations from the Old Testament in the New nearly all are from the Greek version--from the translation, and not from the original.

We owe still more to translation. While there is accumulating evidence that there was spoken in Palestine at that time a colloquial Greek, with which most people would be familiar, it is yet probable that our Lord spoke neither Greek nor Hebrew currently, but Aramaic. He knew the Hebrew Scriptures, of course, as any well-trained lad did; but most of His words have come down to us in translation. His name, for example, to His Hebrew mother, was not Jesus, but Joshua; and Jesus is the translation of the Hebrew Joshua into Greek. We have His words as they were translated by His disciples into the Greek, in which the New Testament was originally written.

By the time the writing of the New Testament was completed, say one hundred years after Christ, while Greek was still current speech, the Roman Empire was so dominant that the common people were talking Latin almost as much as Greek, and gradually, because political power was behind it, the Latin gained on the Greek, and became virtually the speech of the common people. The movement to make the Bible talk the language of the time appeared again. It is impossible to say now when the first translations into Latin were made. Certainly there were some within two centuries after Christ, and by 250 A.D. a whole Bible in Latin was in circulation in the Roman Empire. The translation of the New Testament was from the Greek, of course, but so was that of the Old Testament, and the Latin versions of the Old Testament were, therefore, translations of a translation.

There were so many of these versions, and they were so unequal in value, that there was natural demand for a Latin translation that should be authoritative. So

came into being what we call the Vulgate, whose very name indicates the desire to get the Bible into the vulgar or common tongue. Jerome began by revising the earlier Latin translations, but ended by going back of all translations to the original Greek, and back of the Septuagint to the original Hebrew wherever he could do so. Fourteen years he labored, settling himself in Bethlehem, in Palestine, to do his work the better. Barely four hundred years (404 A.D.) after the birth of Christ his Latin version appeared. It met a storm of protest for its effort to go back of the Septuagint, so dominant had the translation become. Jerome fought for it, and his version won the day, and became the authoritative Latin translation of the Bible.

For seven or eight centuries it held its sway as the current version nearest to the tongue of the people. Latin had become the accepted tongue of the church. There was little general culture, there was little general acquaintance with the Bible except among the educated. During all that time there was no real room for a further translation. One of the writers[1] says: "Medieval England was quite unripe for a Bible in the mother tongue; while the illiterate majority were in no condition to feel the want of such a book, the educated minority would be averse to so great and revolutionary a change." When a man cannot read any writing it really does not matter to him whether books are in current speech or not, and the majority of the people for those seven or eight centuries could read nothing at all. Those who could read anything were apt to be able to read the Latin.

[1] Hoare, Evolution of the English Bible, p. 39.

These centuries added to the conviction of many that the Bible ought not to become too common, that it should not be read by everybody, that it required a certain amount of learning to make it safe reading. They came to feel that it is as important to have an authoritative interpretation of the Bible as to have the Bible itself. When the movement began to make it speak the new English tongue, it provoked the most violent opposition. Latin had been good enough for a millennium; why cheapen the Bible by a translation? There had grown up a feeling that Jerome himself had been inspired. He had been canonized, and half the references to him in that time speak of him as the inspired translator. Criticism of his version was counted as impious and profane as criticisms of the original text could possibly have been. It is one of the ironies of history that the version for which Jerome had to fight, and which was counted a piece of impiety itself, actually became the ground on which men stood when they fought against another version, counting anything else but this very version an impious intrusion!

How early the movement for an English Bible began, it is impossible now to say. Certainly just before 700 A.D., that first singer of the English tongue, Caedmon, had learned to paraphrase the Bible. We may recall the Venerable Bede's charming story of him, and how he came by his power of interpretation. Bede himself was a child when Caedmon died, and the romance of the story makes it

one of the finest in our literature. Caedmon was a peasant, a farm laborer in Northumbria working on the lands of the great Abbey at Whitby. Already he had passed middle life, and no spark of genius had flashed in him. He loved to go to the festive gatherings and hear the others sing their improvised poems; but, when the harp came around to him in due course, he would leave the room, for he could not sing. One night when he had slipped away from the group in shame and had made his rounds of the horses and cattle under his care, he fell asleep in the stable building, and heard a voice in his sleep bidding him sing. When he declared he could not, the voice still bade him sing. "What shall I sing?" he asked. "Sing the first beginning of created things." And the words came to him; and, still dreaming, he sang his first hymn to the Creator. In the morning he told his story, and the Lady Abbess found that he had the divine gift. The monks had but to translate to him bits of the Bible out of the Latin, which he did not understand, into his familiar Anglo-Saxon tongue, and he would cast it into the rugged Saxon measures which could be sung by the common people. So far as we can tell, it was so, that the Bible story became current in Anglo-Saxon speech. Bede himself certainly put the Gospel of John into Anglo-Saxon. At the Bodleian Library, at Oxford, there is a manuscript of nearly twenty thousand lines, the metrical version of the Gospel and the Acts, done near 1250 by an Augustinian monk named Orm, and so called the Ormulum. There were other metrical versions of various parts of the Bible. Midway between Bede and Orm came Langland's poem, "The Vision of Piers Plowman," which paraphrased so much of the Scripture.

Yet the fact is that until the last quarter of the fourteenth century there was no prose version of the Bible in the English language. Indeed, there was only coming to be an English language. It was gradually emerging, taking definite shape and form, so that it could be distinguished from the earlier Norman French, Saxon, and Anglo-Saxon, in which so much of it is rooted.

As soon as the language grew definite enough, it was inevitable that two things should come to pass. First, that some men would attempt to make a colloquial version of the Bible; and, secondly, that others would oppose it. One can count with all confidence on these two groups of men, marching through history like the animals into the ark, two and two. Some men propose, others oppose. They are built on those lines.

We are more concerned with the men who made the versions; but we must think a moment of the others. One of his contemporaries, Knighton, may speak for all in his saying of Wiclif, that he had, to be sure, translated the Gospel into the Anglic tongue, but that it had thereby been made vulgar by him, and more open to the reading of laymen and women than it usually is to the knowledge of lettered and intelligent clergy, and "thus the pearl is cast abroad and trodden under the feet of swine"; and, that we may not be in doubt who are the swine, he adds: "The jewel of the Church is turned into the common sport of the people."

But two strong impulses drive thoughtful men to any effort that will secure wide knowledge of the Bible. One is their love of the Bible and their belief in it; but the other, dominant then and now, is a sense of the need of their own time. It cannot be too strongly urged that the two great pioneers of English Bible translation, Wiclif and Tindale, more than a century apart, were chiefly moved to their work by social conditions. No one could read the literature of the times of which we are speaking without smiling at our assumption that we are the first who have cared for social needs. We talk about the past as the age of the individual, and the present as the social age. Our fathers, we say, cared only to be saved themselves, and had no concern for the evils of society. They believed in rescuing one here and another there, while we have come to see the wisdom of correcting the conditions that ruin men, and so saving men in the mass. There must be some basis of truth for that, since we say it so confidently; but it can be much over-accented. There were many of our fathers, and of our grandfathers, who were mightily concerned with the mass of people, and looked as carefully as we do for a corrective of social evils. Wiclif, in the late fourteenth century, and Tindale, in the early sixteenth, were two such men. The first English translations of the Bible were fruits of the social impulse.

Wiclif was impressed with the chasm that was growing between the church and the people, and felt that a wider and fuller knowledge of the Bible would be helpful for the closing of the chasm. It is a familiar remark of Miss Jane Addams that the cure for the evils of democracy is more democracy. Wiclif believed that the cure for the evils of religion is more religion, more intelligent religion. He found a considerable feeling that the best things in religion ought to be kept from most people, since they could not be trusted to understand them. His own feeling was that the best things in religion are exactly the things most people ought to know most about; that people had better handle the Bible carelessly, mistakenly, than be shut out from it by any means whatever. We owe the first English translation to a faith that the Bible is a book of emancipation for the mind and for the political life.

John Wiclif himself was a scholar of Oxford, master of that famous Balliol College which has had such a list of distinguished masters. He was an adviser of Edward III. Twenty years after his death a younger contemporary (W. Thorpe) said that "he was considered by many to be the most holy of all the men of his age. He was of emaciated frame, spare, and well nigh destitute of strength. He was absolutely blameless in his conduct." And even that same Knighton who accused him of casting the Church's pearl before swine says that in philosophy "he came to be reckoned inferior to none of his time."

But it was not at Oxford that he came to know common life so well and to sense the need for a new social influence. He came nearer to it when he was rector of the parish at Lutterworth. As scholar and rector he set going the two great movements which leave his name in history. One was his securing, training, and sending out a band of itinerant preachers or "poor priests" to gather the people in



fields and byways and to preach the simple truths of the Christian religion. They were unpaid, and lived by the kindness of the common people. They came to be called Lollards, though the origin of the name is obscure. Their followers received the same name. A few years after Wiclif's death an enemy bitterly observed that if you met any two men one was sure to be a Lollard. It was the "first time in English history that an appeal had been made to the people instead of the scholars." Religion was to be made rather a matter of practical life than of dogma or of ritual. The "poor priests" in their cheap brown robes became a mighty religious force, and evoked opposition from the Church powers. A generation after Wiclif's death they had become a mighty political force in the controversy between the King and the Pope. As late as 1521 five hundred Lollards were arrested in London by the bishop.[1] Wiclif's purpose, however, was to reach and help the common people with the simpler, and therefore the most fundamental, truths of religion.

[1] Muir, Our Grand Old Bible, p. 14.

The other movement which marks Wiclif's name concerns us more; but it was connected with the first. He set out to give the common people the full text of the Bible for their common use, and to encourage them not only in reading it, if already they could read, but in learning to read that they might read it. Tennyson compares the village of Lutterworth to that of Bethlehem, on the ground that if Christ, the Word of God, was born at Bethlehem, the Word of Life was born again at Lutterworth.[1] The translation was from the Vulgate, and Wiclif probably did little of the actual work himself, yet it is all his work. And in 1382, more than five centuries ago, there appeared the first complete English version of the Bible. Wiclif made it the people's Book, and the English people were the first of the modern nations to whom the Bible as a whole was given in their own familiar tongue. Once it got into their hands they have never let it be taken entirely away.

[1] "Not least art thou, thou little Bethlehem  
In Judah, for in thee the Lord was born;  
Nor thou in Britain, little Lutterworth,  
Least, for in thee the word was born again."  
--Sir John Oldcastle.

Of course, all this was before the days of printing, and copies were made by hand only. Yet there were very many of them. One hundred and fifty manuscripts, in whole or in part, are extant still, a score of them of the original version, the others of the revision at once undertaken by John Purvey, Wiclif's disciple. The copies belonging to Edward VI. and Queen Elizabeth are both still in existence, and both show much use. Twenty years after it was completed copies were counted very valuable, though they were very numerous. It was not uncommon for a single complete manuscript copy of the Wiclif version to be sold for one hundred and fifty or two hundred dollars, and Foxe, whose Book of

Martyrs we used to read as children, tells that a load of hay was given for the use of a New Testament one hour a day.

It would be difficult to exaggerate the influence of this gift to the English people. It constitutes the standard of Middle English. Chaucer and Wiclif stood side by side. It is true that Chaucer himself accepted Wiclif's teaching, and some of the wise men think that the "parson" of whom he speaks so finely as one who taught the lore of Christ and His apostles twelve, but first followed it himself, was Wiclif. But the version had far more than literary influence; it had tremendous power in keeping alive in England that spirit of free inquiry which is the only safeguard of free institutions. Here was the entire source of the Christian faith available for the judgment of common men, and they became at once judges of religious and political dogma. Dr. Ladd thinks it was not the reading of the Bible which produced the Reformation; it was the Reformation itself which procured the reading of the Bible.[1] But Dr. Rashdall and Professor Pollard and others are right when they insist that the English Reformation received less from Luther than from the secret reading of the Scripture over the whole country. What we call the English spirit of free inquiry was fostered and developed by Wiclif and his Lollards with the English Scripture in their hands. Out of it has grown as out of no other one root the freedom of the English and American people.

[1] What Is the Bible?, p. 45.

This work of Wiclif deserves the time we have given it because it asserted a principle for the English people. There was much yet to be done before entire freedom was gained. At Oxford, in the Convocation of 1408, it was solemnly voted: "We decree and ordain that no man hereafter by his own authority translate any text of the Scripture into English, or any other tongue, by way of a book, pamphlet, or other treatise; but that no man read any such book, pamphlet, or treatise now lately composed in the time of John Wiclif ... until the said translation be approved by the orderly of the place." But it was too late. It is always too late to overtake a liberating idea once it gets free. Tolstoi tells of Batenkoff, the Russian nihilist, that after he was seized and confined in his cell he was heard to laugh loudly; and, when they asked him the cause of his mirth, he said that he could not fail to be amused at the absurdity of the situation. "They have caught me," he said, "and shut me up here; but my ideas are out yonder in the streets and in the fields, absolutely free. They cannot overtake them." It was already too late, twenty years after Wiclif's version was available, to stop the English people in their search for religious truth.

In the century just after the Wiclif translation, two great events occurred which bore heavily on the spread of the Bible. One was the revival of learning, which made popular again the study of the classics and the classical languages. Critical and exact Greek scholarship became again a possibility. Remember that Wiclif did not know Greek nor Hebrew, did not need to know them to be the foremost scholar of Oxford in the fourteenth century. Even as late as 1502 there was no

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