

ENGLISH VERSIONS OF THE BIBLE

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HISTORY reveals to us few spectacles more awesome than the long procession of mortals who, undeterred by considering their mortal frailty, have set out to revise, re-edit, recipher, retranslate the text of the sacred scriptures. Seventy-two Greek-speaking Jews locked up in a library, a hermit in a rocky wilderness, a whole monastery given over, year after year, to the collating of photostats: should the line stretch out to the crack of doom, we may be sure that the last newcomer will still believe that where his precursors have erred, he will find the right way, the just word. We may be sure, too, that his 'Azymes', his 'Feast of the Skipover', his 'Give each other a hearty handshake all round for my sake' will earn for him the unkind criticisms of those by whom, usually, he has not meant his version to be read at all. The translators, the emendators, the excisors, interpolators, forgers, the *Urtextfinder* have all had their way with us, and yet we still contrive, century after century, to know more or less what the Bible is about; surely a most striking fulfilment of St Matthew xxiv, 35.

The late Father Hugh Pope, O.P., was attracted to the history of these undertakings as they have affected Britain and the United States; and in *English Versions of the Bible* (B. Herder, London, 1952; 75s.) we have a revision, first by an anonymous Benedictine and then by Father Sebastian Bullough, O.P., of the book which he had not completed at the time of his death in 1946. It is a vast work, beginning with Caedmon and bringing us down to 1950. It is questionable whether Fr Pope was well advised in seeking to compile such an exhaustive treatment of what is not one subject but three. The only factor which can unify studies of English biblical translations in the ninth, fourteenth and sixteenth centuries is the essential identity of the texts translated: almost every other circumstance differs. King Alfred and his collaborators were seeking to re-establish an intellectual élite, if so portentous a term can describe a priesthood capable of understanding the Latin of the Gospel and the

missal. Nothing which he wrote, nothing which had survived from Anglo-Saxon times, suggests that any object was pursued or achieved other than the instruction of the clergy, whose task it was by homily and exposition to transmit to the laity the Faith. But by the fourteenth century all this had been changed. The Waldensians and other heretical movements abroad had shown that such a Latin-speaking élite could be circumvented, a vernacular Bible could be made available to the laity: and the Church had rejoined with *Nolite sanctum dare canibus*, a supreme piece of tactlessness often to be repented in the centuries to come. Wycliffe's was the daring, restless mind which perceived what a weapon such a vernacular Bible could be against his enemies. While St Birgitta in Rome struggled, as Alfred had done, to master some Latin grammar, and struggled with the Popes to persuade them to abandon their earthly lordship, and to make a little city of peace around the Vatican, if the wrath to come might be averted, Wycliffe in England was striking the blows which she foretold. The glosses, the artless versions of the Gospels, the elegant biblical verses of pre-Conquest England were the work of men who never thought of themselves as other than simple shepherds, succeeding those first sent by Gregory, bound like them in filial obedience to Gregory's see: the Lollard Bible was a mine powerful enough to rock Rome and Avignon. It was a declaration of war, and, as do all wars, that which followed destroyed good and evil alike. No better measure can be taken of the changes brought by a century and a half than to contrast the pusillanimity, the bigotry, the worthless promises of the Synod of Oxford in 1408 with the resolution with which Allen and his fellow-exiles in Flanders faced the necessity of producing that Catholic English Bible which had been promised, and which never came while there was time, and which now when there was no time Martin and his handful of helpers made.

Each of these three epochs presents a field of study with its own complexities and its own experts: and it is too much to hope that Fr Pope and his editors can satisfy them all. Indeed, the work as it reached his editors probably showed that he had come to realise that his task must be confined

within narrower limits. The present writer must note one such instance, in which the editors have done their author a grave disservice, and have invited adverse criticism. Finding in his manuscript a notable omission, they have made it good by supplying a chapter, *Pre-Wycliffite Versions*, which they admit is not a part of the present work as he wrote it, but an extract from an earlier book, *The Catholic Student's Aids to the Study of the Bible* (1926). Their note on this reads: 'But we cannot be certain that Fr Pope, after more than twenty years of further study on the problem, would have endorsed in his later years all the conclusions arrived at in his earlier work' (p. 63, n. 1). We can be very certain that he would not have endorsed them: in 1926 he supported Cardinal Gasquet's syllogism that Catholics before the Reformation used English Bibles: Wycliffe's Bible was inherently heretical: therefore Catholics must have used a Catholic English Bible. So that in 1926 Fr Pope quoted the famous observations of St Thomas More, and continued: '. . . From this it is clear . . . that the Wycliffite Bibles . . . were distinctly heretical' (p. 66); but in writing his chapter *The Wycliffite Versions* for this present work he said: 'Yet there is nothing heretical in the Wycliffite versions' (p. 86). The whole of this chapter shows how completely he had abandoned his former views: to reproduce them as a preliminary to his more mature judgments makes nonsense.

For the general reader, undoubtedly the most rewarding part of this work will be the chapters which deal with English translations of the sixteenth century and later. Fr Pope was a curious and active investigator, in some respects well aware of the advances made in disciplines other than his own, so that we have many illuminating comments on the economics of Bible-publication, and his analyses of the comparative merits of different versions owe much to the most recent techniques of literary criticism. Much of his information is set forth systematically for the first time; and the chapter on the Protestant 'private versions' of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and his account of the vicissitudes of the Rheims-Douay-Challoner text, are particularly rewarding. His researches have also disinterred some minor characters quite undeserving of oblivion, notably

Dr Alexander Geddes, a Catholic priest of the eighteenth century whose views on biblical history would not have been strongly challenged by Voltaire. Even in the mildness of Bishop Milner's request that, as a preliminary to his examination of Geddes' scriptural version, the bishop be convinced that Geddes holds the Bible to be inspired, 'and that he considers Paul of Tarsus to be something more than a very extraordinary man', we have a fine memorial to the Age of Reason.

The chapters dealing with Catholic versions since Rheims-Douay, Protestant versions since 1611, are accompanied with a wealth of bibliographical criticism and information, somewhat erratically supplied. Sometimes important statements are not documented at all, as when we are informed that of Edward Bulkeley's list of forty-four omissions in the Rheims version from the Greek text, 'modern textual criticism had shown that the Rhemists were right in all but seven of these instances', a pronouncement which can hardly satisfy any student. The text, too, is constantly marred by errors. Some of them are serious, as when, on page 21, what is manifestly fourteenth-century English is given an ascription to Anthony Purver, the eighteenth-century Quaker translator, and is supplied with a garbled footnote citing one of his writings as the source, whereas in the Index the quotation is correctly listed as by John Purvey, Wycliffe's collaborator. Some of them are trifling, as when we are told that Erasmus was ordained in 1592 and came to England in 1596, that Richard Rolle wrote *The Prick of Conscience*, that two Middle English works have been published by the Early English Tract Society; but in sum they are disquieting, for inevitably the reader asks how much of the exact and precisely-documented textual and bibliographical apparatus with which the work abounds is to be relied upon.

'Check; and check; and check again.' If the scribes of the Middle Ages had done this, there would be less work for scholars today. But the errors of the past are in themselves sufficient to occupy students of the Bible; and they may justly hope that Father Sebastian Bullough will presently lighten their load by producing a second, corrected edition of this potentially most valuable study.