STUDIES IN THE SYNTAX OF THE KING JAMES VERSION *

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In offering their new version of the English Bible to King James in 1611, the translators declared in the dedication that they were merely "poor instruments to make God's holy Truth to be yet more and more known unto the people," and that to this end, in their translating they had "walked in the ways of simplicity and integrity, as before the Lord." On the title page we find the familiar words: "Appointed to be read in the churches." It seems, then, that the chief aim of the translators was to present Bible truth in a form (1) simple enough to be understood by illiterate people and (2) suitable for reading aloud with impressiveness and perfect intelligibility. These are in general the principles which control the syntax of the King James Version, and which have doubtless given our masterful Bible its influence upon the language. Since the thorough dissemination of this book among all classes and conditions of English speaking people, English syntax has certainly been developing along lines of simplicity and easy intelligibility.

Yet this version did more than to forecast future tendencies in English syntax: it recorded past development. It summed up in many ways the transition from Late Middle to Early Modern English. It is an epitome of the development of English syntax from Tyndale's time to 1611. First among the several reasons for this compendious nature of the syntax

of the version of 1611 was the use of the Bishops' Bible of 1568 as a common basis for the new version, by all of the six different companies who worked on the translation. The code of instuctions, given by the king to this body of biblical students, directed them to follow the Bishops' Bible with as few alterations as truth would permit and to use the translations by Tyndale (1525–1535), Matthew (1537), and Coverdale (1532–1537), the Whitchurch or Great Bible (1549), and the Geneva Bible (1560), when these versions agreed better with the text than the Bishops' Bible (1568). As the dates show, this chain of successive translations stretches over an important transitional period in the history of English. The Bishops' Bible, the final link in the chain, being itself based to a great extent on former translations, and being the chief basis for the King James Version, naturally imparted to the new version the synoptic nature of its own syntax, including the main features of the English language at that time, the late middle of the sixteenth century. The new version in turn reflected syntactic development from 1568 to 1611. For this was the time during which the translators themselves acquired their mother tongue. They, while retaining most of the syntactic features of the older translations, naturally put their own living syntax into their alterations. Thus it came about that Bible English is English of no fixed time but represents a long period when the language was in transition.

Another reason for the compendious nature of Bible syntax was the above-mentioned popular aim of the translators. Popular speech is at once the most conservative and the most progressive element in a language. It retains old idioms longer and adopts new ones more readily than literary language. If the translators had been producing a work for scholars, they would have used the medial literary language; but in adapting their work to the ear of the people, they favored the popular style with all it embraces of both archaisms and neologisms.

Yet the translators could not work without some norm by which to regulate their style. It was natural, therefore, that

they should set up, as their standard, either conciously or un-conciously, the authors who were considered classic in their time. Exactly who these would be can hardly be settled to-day, but we are justified in assuming that, just as today an author's work must have lived at least half a century before the title of classic is assured, so in the first decade of the seventeenth century the prose writers who would be taken as models by the scholars translating the Bible, would most likely be the best polemic and secular writers of at least two generations earlier. This would be especially true in a time when the language was shifting and nothing late could be accepted as permanent. The conservative influence of religion, together with the natural dignity and impressiveness of the archaic, would operate also toward the retention of the older idioms. Therefore, while the translators must needs have reproduced very late usages and followed recent tendencies to some extent, their work in its main features presents characteristics of times earlier than their own.

Because Bible syntax does represent transition English, scarcely a rule can be fixed for any usage that was variable during the period represented. A few general principles can be pointed out, but no hard and fast laws of practice can be established. The object of the treatment in hand is to show some of these general principles by studying the use of certain constructions and forms. These studies make no pretense to exhaustiveness. More particularly, the aim is to show how the translators followed their expressed purpose of making the Bible simple and intelligible for the illiterate, and impressive when read aloud, and how, being little constricted by rules of grammar, and using English as they found it, they gave us a mosaic made up from transient stages in the development of the language.

In this investigation no work on Bible syntax has been available. Scholars seem to have avoided the subject because, in the first place, the Bible being a translation, the ancient tongues must necessarily have impressed their idiom upon the language of the translation, and to a certain extent kept the

original genius of the English language from asserting itself strongly. In the second place, scholars have not cared to investigate closely the syntax of a translation that represents the individuality of no one man or period. The Authorized Version, however, because of its immense popularity, has exerted a greater influence upon the subsequent development of English syntax than any other body of literature. In view of this influence, any investigation of Bible syntax immediately justifies itself. Most of the books and treatises mentioned in the bibliography below have contributed to the results merely by suggestion. Cruden's Concordance, which has served mainly in locating words and passages, has practically no other use to the student of syntax. Particular reference to other works will appear at the proper places.

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