

XI.

THE FIRST ENGLISH BIBLE.¹⁹

JOHAN WYCLIFFE is one of the immortals. His name will never die. He was one of the most learned men in England, or even in Europe. Many learned men had by-names given them in those days. He was "The Evangelical Doctor," because he rested all on the Bible.

It was the custom to give the learned men of the day by-names, or nick-names, *e. g.*—

Duns Scotus was called the "subtle" doctor.

Bradwardine was called the "profound" doctor.

Ockham was called the "invincible" doctor.

Thomas Aquinas was called the "angelic" doctor (and when in earlier life studying at Cologne, the "Dumb ox").

At this time the Pope lived at Avignon. Wycliffe took up a position against Papal power in England, holding that "The Bishop of Rome has no jurisdiction in this realm of England," and opposing the payment of all dues and tribute to Rome. The immediate occasion of his stand was the fact that Pope Urban V. had demanded the arrears of the tribute promised by King John.

When the Pope returned to Rome there were soon rival Popes each excommunicating the other, and *now* Wycliffe no longer attacked papal power in England alone, but the Papacy itself and Roman doctrine. He thought that the greatest of all helps and remedies was to give the people the Bible in their own mother tongue. For this he laboured. The New Testament was completed in 1382 and the entire Bible at, or soon after, that date. His work is a translation from the current edition of the Vulgate, probably with the help of a French

19. See chapter XIII. (B.).

translation. He had the help of various scholars, a great part of the Old Testament being translated by Nicholas Hereford. Hereford's translation breaks off in the middle of a sentence. (Baruch iii. 20.) The work was completed by another hand, probably that of Wycliffe himself. A revised edition of Wycliffe's Bible, by John Purvey, his Curate and helper, and others, followed in 1388. This revised version soon took the place of Wycliffe's first edition.

On the last Sunday of 1384 he was engaged in the administration of the Sacrament of Holy Communion, when he was suddenly stricken and fell to the ground, remaining unconscious until his death on December 31st of the same year.

Some thirty years after Wycliffe's death, by decree of the Council of Constance (1414-1418) his bones were ordered to be dug up and burned, and the ashes to be thrown into the stream of the Swift which runs past the churchyard of Lutterworth. This sentence was executed thirteen years later, and so (as Fuller says) :

"As the Swift bare them into the Avon, Avon into the Severn and the Severn into the Narrow Seas, and they again into the main ocean, thus, the ashes of Wycliffe are an emblem of his doctrine which is now dispersed over the world."

To quote Fuller again, speaking of Wycliffe's peaceful death :

"Admirable, admirable, that a hare so often hunted with so many packs of dogs, should die at last quietly sitting in his form."

Admirable as Wycliffe's Bible was, and noble as the work was, yet we must remember that, so far, the English Bible was in manuscript only and that Wycliffe's translation was not from the Hebrew or the Greek, but from the Latin Vulgate of Jerome (now much corrupted through errors of manuscripts), with the assistance of the Old Latin and of such commentaries, etc., as were then available.

A period of nearly 150 years followed before Tyndale's New

Testament was issued, and yet nearly another 100 years before the issue of the Authorized Version.

In this period of about two hundred and fifty years, the English language obtained its ripe maturity and its golden age—and yet (with the allowance for changes in spelling) we can read and understand Wycliffe's translation to-day. Some of his forcible renderings remain yet in the Authorized Version, *e. g.*—

“Compass sea and land,” “first-fruits,” “strait gate,” “damsel,” “peradventure,” “son of perdition,” “savourest not the things of God,” “enter thou into the joy of thy Lord.”

We hardly realize the great debt we owe to John Wycliffe to-day. He first conceived the idea of an English Bible for English men. He stood out alone, in danger of his life, as he well knew, to execute this great work and to win the victory for the people, declaring their inalienable right for every man to hear and read the Word of God in his own language.

In his address at Gettysburg President Lincoln used the immortal words as to—

“Government of the people, by the people, and for the people.”

Clark E. Carr in his “Lincoln at Gettysburg” (No. 153) alludes to a contemporary charge of plagiarism made against Lincoln—stating that the phrase had been taken from Webster's reply to Hayne. The matter was thoroughly investigated and it was found that the words had been so often used as to have become common property. Mr. Carr says:

“It appears substantially as Mr. Lincoln used it in Webster's reply to Hayne, 1830, in a work by James Douglas in 1825 and in the Rhetorical Reader by James Porter in 1830. The phrase was used by Theodore Parker in an anti-slavery convention at Boston, May, 1850, and substantially the same phrase was used by Joel Parker in the Massachusetts Constitutional Convention in 1853. Long before Mr. Lincoln used

the phrase it was used in other languages. The first appearance of it, so far as it has been possible to ascertain, was in the preface to the old Wicliffe Bible, translated before 1384, the year in which that bright 'Morning Star of the Reformation' died. It is here declared that 'this Bible is for the government of the people, by the people, and for the people.' "

Lechler (No. 84, page 228), speaking of a period ending with Wycliffe's time, says, in a summing up of the whole result :

1. A translation of the entire Bible was never during this period accomplished in England, and was never even apparently contemplated.

2. The Psalter was the only book of Scripture which was fully and literally translated into all the three languages, Anglo-Saxon, Anglo-Norman, and Old English.

3. In addition several books of Scripture, especially of the Old Testament, were translated partially or in select passages as by Aelfric, leaving out of view poetical versions, and the translation of the Gospel of John by Bede, which celebrated work has not come down to us.

4. Last of all, and this fact is of great importance, in none of these translations was it designed to make the Word of God accessible to the mass of the people, and to spread scriptural knowledge among them. The only object which was kept in view was to furnish aid to the clergy, and to render service to the educated class.

Wycliffe's Bible was printed in 1850, issued from the Clarendon Press, Oxford, in four large quarto volumes, edited by Forshall and Madden. This cost the editors twenty years' labour and the examination of one hundred and seventy manuscript copies.

In A. D. 1229 the Council of Toulouse decreed that no layman should be allowed to have any book either of the Old Testament or of the New, especially in a translation, "unless

perhaps the Psalter, a Breviary, or the Hours of the Virgin." In 1408 Archbishop Arundel made certain constitutions under which it was penal to read any of Wycliffe's writings or translations "unless such work shall have been first examined and unanimously approved by the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge."

With reference to the Title of this Chapter, and the statements in support of the Title, it may be well to quote Sir Thomas More and Archbishop Cranmer. (See Dore 139, pp. 1, 2.) Sir Thomas More in his "Dyalogues," Edition of 1530, p. 138, says:

"The hole byble was long before Wycliffe's days by vertuous and well learned Men translated into the English tong; and by good and godly people with devotion and soberness wel and reverently red."

In his Prologue to the second Edition of the Great Bible Cranmer says:

"If the matter shoulde be tried by custome wee might also alledge custome for the reading of the Scripture in the vulgar tongue and prescribe the more ancient custome. For it is not much aboue one hundred years ago since Scripture hath not bene accustomed to be read in the vulgar tongue within this realme, and many hundred years before that it was translated and read in the Saxon's tongue whiche at that tyme was our mother tongue, where of there remayne yet diverse copies found lately in olde Abbeyes of such antique maner of wryting and speaking that fewe men nowe be able to ead and vnderstand them, and when this language waxes olde and out of common vsage bycause folke should not lacke the fruit of reading it was again translated into the newer language where of yet also many copies remayne and be dayly founde."

There is nothing in the Archbishop's words that need take us further than the Psalter and the separate portions of Scrip-

ture translated mainly for the use of the clergy and to some small extent for the educated classes as above named.

The only difficulty arises on Sir Thomas More's words, "the hole byble," &c. It is certain (as Dore remarks) that there is no English Bible known to be in existence of earlier date than the fourteenth century, and it is strange if the whole Bible had been translated into early English that all traces of it should have been lost.