

CHAPTER VI

WILLIAM TINDALE—HIS INFLUENCE

1. Tindale's independence as a translator.
2. Influence on subsequent versions.
3. General estimate of Tindale.

IN following the story of Tindale's life and work we cannot fail to have been struck with the clearness with which from the first he saw what was wanted, and the marvellous steadfastness of purpose with which he sought to carry that out. The resolution formed so far back as the days at Little Sodbury, to bring the knowledge of Scripture within the reach of even the "boy that driveth the plough," was never for a moment lost sight of, and unlike many martyrs and reformers he had the satisfaction in the hour of death of knowing that his wish was in a fair way of being realised. Over the outward details of Tindale's career we can however no longer linger, but before we part from him there are one or two general points bearing on his work which must be noted, if we would estimate aright his character and influence as a translator.

§ 1. **Tindale's Independence as a Translator.**
—Foremost amongst these is the question, How far in his work of translation Tindale was influenced by other workers in the same field, and more particularly by the German Testament of Luther? Sir Thomas More, for example, who during Tindale's lifetime had been specially commissioned to attack his translation, asserts that "at the time of his translation of the New Testament Tindale was with Luther at Wittenberg, and the confederacy between him and Luther was well known";

an assertion which Tindale meets with the direct denial, "When he (More) saith Tindale was confederate with Luther, that is not truth."

A careful comparison moreover of the respective texts amply confirms this denial. For though it is clear that Tindale had Luther's Testament before him as he worked, and borrowed freely from his Prefaces and marginal notes, it is equally clear that in the matter of the text he took up a wholly independent attitude, and used Luther and all other aids within his reach "as a master, and not as a disciple." That he had a right to do so, all that we can gather regarding his personal scholarship abundantly proves. His bitter opponent Cochläus speaks both of him and his associate at Cologne as "learned, skilful in languages, and eloquent"; George Joye, against whom he had such just cause of complaint, admits his "high learning in his Hebrew, Greek, Latin," etc.; while an eminent German scholar, Herman Buschius, describes him as "so skilled in seven languages, Hebrew, Greek, Latin, Italian, Spanish, English, French, that whichever he spoke you would suppose it his native tongue."

We have no difficulty therefore in accepting the conclusion that to Tindale belongs the undoubted honour of being the first in England at any rate (with the possible exception of Bede) of going straight to the Hebrew and Greek originals; while his subsequent alterations and revisions all bear witness to his anxiety to bring his translation into ever closer approximation to these.¹

How far in so translating, his language was influenced by previous *English* versions, it is more difficult to say

¹ Tindale's Hebrew scholarship has sometimes been strangely called in question; but even granting that he may not have had much acquaintance with the language when he left England, he must very soon have acquired it. The testimonies just cited alone prove this, and are supported by his own notes in his Pentateuch on peculiar Hebrew words, and by the clear way in which he elsewhere remarks on the properties of the Hebrew tongue. Nor in his *Answer to More* could he have spoken in the way that he does of the Hebrew text as "most of need to be known" unless he had himself been familiar with it.

precisely. We have on the one hand his own statement that he "had no man to counterfeit, neither was holpen with English of any that had interpreted the same or such like thing in the Scripture beforetime"; while on the other hand the most cursory comparison of his renderings with Purvey's revision reveals an identity of language and expression which it is difficult to reconcile with total independence. Dr. Moulton has however pointed out that in many cases the Vulgate supplies the connecting link, and that in others the explanation probably is that the earlier Wycliffite renderings had passed into general currency, and become almost proverbial phrases.¹ In using these in his translation Tindale may therefore have been more indebted to Wycliffe and his successor than he was himself aware of; and in the same general sense we may at once accept the words of the editors of *The Wycliffite Versions*, that at the period of the Reformation these versions "supplied an example and a model to those excellent men, who in like manner devoted themselves at the hazard of their lives to the translation of Scripture, and to its publication among the people of the land."

§ 2. **Influence on subsequent Versions.**—If however Tindale was thus in the main independent of previous translators, his influence on all who succeeded him is direct and unmistakable. Indeed we are probably not overstating the case when we say that all future translations of the English Bible are in the main little else than *revisions* of his work so far as it had gone. We shall meet with frequent examples of this in the chapters that follow; but in the meantime it may not be out of place to indicate briefly one or two of the sources of his power.

Thus it is he who has given us our *religious vocabulary*. In the whole of Tindale's New Testament it has been estimated that the number of strange words, that

¹ Obvious examples are the use of "mote" and "beam" in both versions in Matt. vii. 3, and their common description of the "strait gate," and the "narrow" way, a few verses farther on.

is, words which are not found in our Authorised Version, is probably below 350, and many of these occur only once or twice. What is more important, in the general character of the Bible diction, its union of stateliness and homeliness, of majesty and sweetness, we may still see "a reflection of the high purpose which evoked the effort. Our Bible translation actually generated a new dialect in the English language; it produced the happiest type of diction that ever grew upon the prolific stock of our mother tongue."¹

But Tindale did more than give his successors words in which to translate; he showed them also the *spirit* in which alone the work ought to be entered on. His singleness of aim, his noble self-forgetfulness, his honesty of purpose, stand revealed on every page of his work. "I call God to record," so he writes to his friend Fryth in 1532, "against the day we shall appear before our Lord Jesus, to give a reckoning of our doings, that I never altered one syllable of God's word against my conscience, nor would this day, if all that is in the earth, whether it be pleasure, honour, or riches, might be given me." And in the last words which we have from him regarding his work he says: "As concerning all I have translated or otherwise written, I beseech all men to read it for that purpose I wrote it, even to bring them to the knowledge of the Scripture. And as far as the Scripture approveth it, so far to allow it, and if in any place the word of God disallow it, there to refuse it, as I do before our Saviour Christ and His Congregation."

Bishop Westcott is therefore not doing more than giving Tindale his due when he writes: "He toiled faithfully himself, and where he failed he left to those who should come after the secret of success. The achievement was not for one but for many; but he fixed the type according to which the later labourers worked. His influence decided that our Bible should be popular and not literary, speaking in a simple dialect, and that so by its simplicity it should be endowed with permanence."

¹ Earle, *The Psalter of the Great Bible of 1539*, Introd. p. xlvii.

§ 3. **Estimate of Tindale as a Translator.**—In view of a testimony such as that, it is an ungracious task to point out wherein Tindale's translations failed, and yet it would be idle, of course, to pretend that he fell into no mistakes. Many of his renderings are incorrect, others are uncouth, others are paraphrases rather than translations. Serious faults too are his constant disregard of connecting particles ("and," "for," etc.), his neglect of the Greek article, and his habit of translating the same Greek word in different ways in the same sentence—a habit in which the translators of the Authorised Version unfortunately followed him. Thus, to illustrate this last point only, all must feel how inferior in force is his rendering of Matt. xxi. 41 in the 1534 Testament, "He will *cruelly* destroy those *evil* persons," to our revised "He will *miserably* destroy those *miserable* men"; or of 1 Cor. iii. 17, "If any man defile the temple of God, him shall God destroy," to "If any man *destroyeth* the temple of God, him shall God *destroy*." On the other hand, in not a few instances where the Authorised Version has introduced an unnecessary change, Tindale has kept up the connection of the Greek, as "Our *ableness* cometh of God, which hath made us *able* to minister the new testament" ("sufficiency," "able," Authorised Version), 2 Cor. iii. 5, 6; and "About the *seat* were xxiii *seats*" ("throne" "seats," Authorised Version), Rev. iv. 4.

No more convincing proof indeed of Tindale's marvellous care and exactness on the whole can be given than the number of places in which the revisers of 1881 have gone back to his renderings in preference to those adopted in the Authorised Version; while it must not be forgotten that in many places where they differ, the fault lay not with Tindale, but with the inferior Greek text with which he had to work.

Take it all in all, his translation is a noble one, and Fuller's eulogy is not exaggerated: "What he undertook was to be admired as glorious; what he performed, to be commended as profitable; wherein he failed, is to

be excused as pardonable, and to be scored on the account rather of that age, than of the author himself." Or in the eloquent words of Mr. Froude : " The peculiar genius—if such a word may be permitted—which breathes through it—the mingled tenderness and majesty—the Saxon simplicity—the preternatural grandeur—unequaled, unapproached, in the attempted improvements of modern scholars—all are here, and bear the impress of the mind of one man, William Tyndal."