

SECTION I.

INTRODUCTION.

IN treating the present subject, little attention will be paid, as little is needed, to any theological aspect of the question. To take the two Bibles (that of Wiclif, and the later authorised version) as standards of English at their respective dates, and compare the language of one with the language of the other, would not by any means give a fair idea of the actual alterations which our language underwent in the period which elapsed between the publication of the two books. Consequently it has seemed best to look upon the publication of the two Bibles as simply marking eras in our literary history. There were many influences at work, for instance the Italian, or indeed nearly the whole Romance influence, which left our theological language untouched. Again, as will be noticed later on, this theological dialect long remained to a great extent separate and apart from the ordinary language, so that in considering it alone, due justice could scarcely be done to the consideration of other lingual changes. Doubtless no book can, like the Bible, record such changes,

since in none other have we the same text, or almost the same text, modified only by differences in the language, appearing over and over again at different periods in our history. In this respect the Bible stands alone, but then its nature—nay, the very fact of its reproduction—preserved it from being affected so strongly by mutations in the popular idiom, and thus so far detracted from its value to the student of the language. Consequently, though very much may be learnt by careful comparison of the styles of earlier and later Bibles, the different versions cannot be taken as good examples of the language of their own period, but only as examples of the state of the theological—as opposed to the popular—dialect. Sufficient use has, it is hoped, been made in the following pages of the chief versions, by comparing their several renderings of the same passage; but on the whole it has seemed best to consider the language, as it existed between the two specified eras, in as comprehensive a view as possible, and to pay as much attention to the general language of the people—prose and verse—as to the more special dialect in which the Bible, and all theological writings, were of necessity couched.

It so happens that the publication of the two Bibles coincides tolerably accurately with two of the divisions into which our literary history would naturally fall, the commencement of Middle English (though that period is usually placed some fifty years before Wiclif's Bible), and the commencement of Modern English. For these reasons it has seemed as well to make use of a classification unconnected with religious history, and to consider, first, the period from Chaucer to Caxton, and secondly, that from Caxton to the publication of the authorised version, prefacing the former with a brief sketch of the course of the language in earlier times, and considering the Bible with regard to its language alone.

Also, the language has been regarded from a literary, rather than from a purely philological point of view ; with regard, that is, to the men who wrote in it and their work, and not to the language alone in which they wrote. The language and the literature of a country are so intimately connected, that it is hard to separate them when considering them without becoming dull and uninteresting in the extreme.