

CHAPTER II.

WYCLIFFE AND HIS TRANSLATION OF THE BIBLE.

TOWERING above the pleasant town of Lutterworth, on the banks of the Swift, there stands the noble old church of St. Mary, an interesting specimen of the early pointed architecture of this country in the thirteenth century. What with the decay produced by time, and the mutilation occasioned by accident, it has lost very much of its original beauty, but there are associations clustering round it, which, to the mind of the lover of the word of God, invest it with a charm which the skill of the architect could never impart. We look with feelings of peculiar veneration on that time-worn edifice, as we remember that there JOHN WYCLIFFE preached and laboured, and that probably under the shadow of those walls he prosecuted his noble task of translating the whole Bible into the English tongue. The carved oak pulpit in which the reformer preached, the table on which he wrote, the chair in which he died, and the velvet robe, now torn and tattered, which he used to wear, are still preserved; relics these, which cannot fail to operate as

quickeners of the imagination, and which, with the aid of the portrait of his venerable form and face now hanging on the vestry wall, enable us to picture that true-hearted and holy man, occupying the sacred desk, and proclaiming to his parishioners the glorious gospel of the blessed God, and then retiring to his chamber to resume the study of the Scriptures, and to write upon that oak table page after page of his memorable version!

Wycliffe was appointed by Edward III. to the rectory of Lutterworth, about the year 1376, in part as a reward for his services at Bruges, whither he had gone as a commissioner with the bishop of Bangor, to negotiate with a papal embassy in that city respecting the reservation of benefices. That visit brought him better acquainted than before with the chicanery and corruption of the Roman court, and roused his indignation against the papal system. Twenty years before, he had written his tract, entitled "The Last Age of the Church," which showed that he then deplored the enormous ecclesiastical evils of the day. At Oxford, where he was appointed warden of Baliol, and then of Canterbury Hall, he had distinguished himself as the inveterate opponent of the Mendicant Friars, who were overrunning the university and the country too, and exerting all their influence to prop up the despotism of the Roman see. And in the controversy between Edward III. and the pope, respecting the papal claim of tribute from England, our reformer had fearlessly contended

against the claim as unjust and arrogant. But now, on his return from Bruges, reviewing what he had there seen and heard, he came out as a more decided champion than ever for a reformation of the church. Indeed, so bold was the course he pursued, that, soon after his return, he was cited to appear at St. Paul's to answer certain charges against him, when a scene of tumult occurred, quaintly described by Foxe, which ended in the deliverance of Wycliffe from his enemies, through the interposition of his illustrious friend, John of Gaunt, duke of Lancaster. The pope, however, would allow the reformer no peace, but despatched against him bull after bull; happily without effect, the refractory ecclesiastic enjoying the special favour and patronage of royalty.

All this excitement, we apprehend, while it increased his distaste for the papal system of government and doctrine, sharpened his love for the Holy Scriptures as the true standard of religious principles and ecclesiastical discipline. About this time it was that he wrote his book upon the Truth and Meaning of Scripture, in which he maintains that Christ's law is sufficient; "that a Christian man well understanding it may gather sufficient knowledge during his pilgrimage upon earth; that all truth is contained in Scripture; that we should admit of no conclusion not approved there; that there is no court beside the court of heaven; that though there were a hundred popes, and all the friars in the world were turned into cardinals,

yet should we learn more from the gospel than we should from all that multitude; and that true sons will in no wise go about to infringe the will and testament of their heavenly Father.”*

We are persuaded that it was about this time that Wycliffe began his translation. His writings subsequent to the year 1378 exhibit abundant arguments in support of the sufficiency of Scripture, and in defence of vernacular translations. “As the faith of the church,” he says, “is contained in the Scriptures, the more these are known in an orthodox sense, the better. And since secular men should assuredly understand the faith, it should be taught them in whatever language is best known to them. Inasmuch also, as the doctrines of our faith are more clearly and precisely expressed in the Scriptures than they may possibly be by priests, seeing if one may venture so to speak, that many prelates are but too ignorant of Scripture, and as the verbal instructions of priests have many other defects, the conclusion is abundantly plain that believers should ascertain for themselves the matters of their faith by having the Scriptures in a language which they fully understand. According to the constant doctrine of Augustine, the Scriptures contain the whole of truth, and this translation of them should therefore do at least this good, namely, placing bishops and priests above suspicion as to the parts of it which they profess to explain.

* English Translations and Translators. Bagster's Hexapla, p. 11.

Other means also, as prelates, the pope, and friars, may prove defective; and to provide against this, Christ and his apostles evangelized the greater portion of the world, by making known the Scriptures in a language which was familiar to the people. To this end, indeed, did the Holy Spirit endow them with the knowledge of all tongues. Why, therefore, should not the living disciples of Christ do as they did—opening the Scriptures to the people so clearly and plainly, that they may verily understand them, since, except to the unbeliever, disposed to resist the Holy Spirit, the things contained in Scripture are no fiction.” This is “sound speech that cannot be condemned.” It is an anticipation of the condensed and noble saying of Chillingworth, “the Bible, and the Bible alone, is the religion of Protestants”—that principle which lay at the basis of the Reformation, which forms still the grand bulwark of our reformed creed, entrenched behind which, we may mock the assaults of Romish sophistry, and justly anticipate the final and universal triumph of our cause. Powerfully impressed with the sentiments just quoted, Wycliffe devoted, from about the year 1378, his time and energies to the work of his translation. The time of its completion cannot be fixed, but probably it was the year 1380, or a year or two later. One loves to picture this remarkable man pursuing his Biblical toils now at his Lutterworth rectory, and then in his college at Oxford, working in the winter nights by his lamp, and

early in the summer's morn as the sun beamed through his window. We see him with his long grey beard, sometimes alone, bending over the parchment manuscript, carefully writing down some well-laboured rendering ; and sometimes in company with " Nicoley de Hereford;" whose name appears on an old copy of the version, as a coadjutor of the rector of Lutterworth, and with others of his friends and followers, who sympathized in his sentiments, and loved to aid him in his hallowed enterprise! Nor can we fail to connect with these pictures of the reformer notices of the enmity of the Mendicants and others against this noble workman, and his immortal work. We can imagine their malignant looks and virulent abuse, as they meet him in his walks through the university, or visit him in his college-chamber; in aid of which sketches by the pencil of fancy, there comes to our recollection the graphic anecdote of the reformer on his bed at Oxford, during a severe illness, when a company, deputed by the Mendicants in general, Grey, Black, White, and Augustinian, came to deliver an awful warning to the supposed dying man, on the heretical errors of his life; and the dignified veteran rising from his pillow, repelled with scorn their vain denunciations, and drove them from his presence, exclaiming with characteristic energy, " I shall not die but live, and again declare the evil deeds of the friars."

Probably, Wycliffe knew nothing, or next to

nothing, of Greek, a few words in that language sprinkled over his writings, affording no proof of any great acquaintance with it. Certainly, he did not make his translation of the New Testament from the original, but from the Latin Vulgate, as he did also his version of the Old Testament. Most rigidly did he adhere to the Latin text, as a comparison of his translation with it fully shows, leading him sometimes into strange obscurities and errors. "Quousque animam nostram tollis?" says the Vulgate; "How long takist thou aweie our soule?" writes the faithful translator. In his literal renderings he was anxious, no doubt, to avoid giving a handle to his adversaries for charging him with perverting the Scriptures, and in the use of the plainest and most racy old Saxon English he sought to instruct and interest the common people—thus, in both respects, proceeding on Hampole's principle of seeking "no strange English but easiest and commonest and such as is most like the Latin." Whether he derived any assistance from previous translations we are unable to say, though it appears to us very probable that he would seek out such fragmentary versions in existence as he could: but certainly it was, at the best, only in certain portions of the word of God, that he could get help from his predecessors, for till he undertook the task, no one appears to have executed a complete version. In spite of all the efforts made to deprive Wycliffe of this honour, it still cleaves to him. We maintain

that it is his by right; antiquarian investigation has fully refuted all rival claims. Sir Thomas More, when opposing Tyndale, to serve a purpose, maintained that the "*hole* Bible was long before [Wycliffe's] days, by virtuous and well learned men translated into the English tongue;" but strangely enough, sir Thomas, at the same time, admitted that it would be a dangerous thing for a printer to publish a Bible, "and then hang upon a doubtful trial whether the first copy of his translation was made before Wycliffe's days or since." Archbishop Usher, on the authority of Dr. James, has also spoken of a Bible antecedent to Wycliffe's, but it has been satisfactorily shown that the version to which he refers was made after Wycliffe's death.* Some critics have referred to a manuscript of the Bible in the Bodleian, bearing date mcccvm., in proof that Wycliffe's was not the first translation; but a careful examination of the book in question shows, that there has been an erasure between the c and the v; that not 1308, but 1408, is the true date: and further, upon a collation of the manuscripts with Wycliffe's, it turns out to be his identical version. Thus then all the attempts to wrest from the rector of Lutterworth the honourable distinction of being the earliest translator into English of the whole Bible have been futile, and to him therefore are justly due the admiration and gratitude of his country for the achievement of an enterprise as unprecedented

* Usher's Hist. Dog. 425.

as it was important and beneficial. He would open the gates of revelation to all his countrymen. He wrote for the people. He intended his work not for the library of the church and convent, nor for a shelf in the priest's study, but for the table of every man who had ability to read. He published his translation; sent it abroad throughout the world; encouraged persons to transcribe it, and urged men to read in their own tongue the wonderful works of God. Nor would he guard by gloss or comment the pure truth of Heaven, as almost if not all his predecessors had done, but he left the holy oracle to speak for itself—thus virtually asserting the right of private judgment. That this act of our reformer was a novelty, a startling innovation, a deed of noble daring, that it gave a shock to ecclesiastical prejudices, is apparent from the pages of the old historian Knighton, Wycliffe's contemporary, who mournfully deplores that the gospel pearl was thus scattered abroad and cast before swine. It may seem, in the present day, no mighty thing to make a translation of the Latin Vulgate and attempt its general circulation; but those who are disposed on that ground to lessen somewhat the fair fame of our first translator, should remember how well the detractors from the glory of Columbus, the first to sail on an untried ocean, were rebuked by the familiar story of the broken egg. In such an age as that in which Wycliffe lived, to translate the whole Bible for popular use, to conceive the plan, and

to execute the project when so conceived, implied the possession of qualities both of mind and heart, such as only the truly great and noble of our race possess. Wycliffe was the contemporary of some whose brilliant genius streaked the early morn of our revived literature, and whose rich poetic splendour far eclipses any literary honours which adorn his name; but still we must be allowed to pronounce Wycliffe, on the whole, a greater character than our British Chaucer, or the Italian Petrarch. The moral courage of the reformer was beyond all praise. There were others in his day and before his time, who saw the corruptions of the church, and assailed them, yet it was in a timid spirit and a covert form: they wrote in a double sense, concealing their more important meaning under the veil of allegory, "the trembling nurse for its own safety, induced by fear to disguise itself in sacred vestments;" but Wycliffe—bold, sincere, and earnest—brooked no trammels, and feared no opposition, while with one hand he opened the book of revelation before all the people, and with the other hand laid bare, in the face of the world, and to the apprehension of the humblest, the flagrant corruptions of the church of Rome.*

If Wycliffe had been an object of enmity to the church of Rome in his earlier days, that enmity was now more bitter than before. His

* This paragraph is partly taken, and slightly altered, from an article, by the author, in the *British Quarterly Review*, vol. iii. p. 443.

translation of the Scriptures was an unpardonable sin. It enraged the hierarchy more than ever against the man and his doctrines. Most envenomed and incessant was their opposition to the reformer. They cited him before a convention at the Grey Friars, in London, to meet charges of heresy. They procured from Richard II. an ordinance against him and his followers, under the designation of heretical preachers. But these attempts failed to injure the reformer. At length, however, they carried on a persecution against him at Oxford, which issued in their securing his banishment from the university. This was followed by a citation from the pope to appear before him at Rome, which a shock of paralysis and approaching death prevented. After the church had thus wielded the weapons of despotism against him, robbing him in part of his preferment, driving him into seclusion, and harassing his last days by incessant attacks upon his character, Walsingham, the historian, dipping his pen in gall, sought to crown the persecution of this illustrious man in his lifetime by the following unparalleled abuse:—"He was the devil's instrument, the church's enemy, the people's confusion, the heretic's idol, the hypocrite's mirror; a sower of hatred, a forger of lies, a sink of flattery; who, at his death, despised like Cain, and stricken by the horrible judgment of God, breathed forth his wicked soul to the dark mansions of the black devil." Not more ineffectual, however, was this virulent abuse

for the destruction of his repose after death, than was the persecution by the hierarchy for the affliction of his conscience while living. In patience he possessed his soul, and in the quietude of his Lutterworth rectory pursued his pastoral labours to the last, exempt from all "horrible judgments," and rejoicing in the prospect of another world. Taken suddenly ill, while administering the eucharist, he remained insensible for two days, and then fell asleep in Jesus, leaving behind him a name, which, though vilified by his enemies, an impartial posterity delights to honour. To use the language of the book of Ecclesiasticus, respecting Simon the son of Onias, so happily accommodated to the reformer by our famous martyrologist, we may truly say, "Even as the morning star being in the midst of a cloud, and as the moon being full in her course, and as the bright beams of the sun, so doth he shine and glister in the temple and church of God." But hatred to Wycliffe survived his decease, and would permit neither his memory to remain unassailed, nor his bones to sleep peaceably in the grave. An Oxford convocation, in 1410, condemned his doctrines, and burned his books; and the council of Constance, in 1415, with pitiful spleen, ordered his corpse to be disinterred and removed from the burial of the church—an act which was not performed till thirteen years afterwards. Then his bones were thrown into the Swift, and the Swift conveyed them to the Avon, the Avon into the

Severn, the Severn into the narrow seas, and they into the main ocean, and thus the ashes of Wycliffe are the emblem of his doctrine, which now is dispersed all the world over!*

But, however intense might be the spiteful feelings of Wycliffe's enemies, and however strenuous their opposition to his influence, the work he had accomplished was of such a character that men could not overthrow it. His translation was studied; poor priests—as the preachers of his doctrines were called—went through the land diffusing the knowledge of God's truth, which they had acquired by the study of that translation. They became popular, and, in some quarters, rivalled in influence the Mendicant order. "Men came to mock them, but went away struck to the heart, overawed, humbled, and converted. At the same time, that they arrested the attention and commanded the passions of the vulgar, they challenged the most refined to the contest; and it seems to be generally admitted that no one was found able to cope with them in the field of argumentation. Though the multitude are not qualified to be direct judges of the higher powers of intellect, and though they are often made the dupes of loquacious effrontery, yet there is something in true genius and sterling merit which, when skilfully employed for that purpose, will produce a more powerful and extraordinary effect than ignorant assurance can ever reach."† The character of the times was also in favour of the

* Fuller. † Godwin's *Life of Chaucer*, vol. ii. p. 378.

success of Wycliffe's labours, and those of his disciples, for the fourteenth century was an age of revival in freedom, commerce, literature, and civilisation. Men were waking up after the slumber of centuries, they were stimulated to thought and inquiry, and were thus prepared to listen to instruction upon the most awfully interesting of all subjects—religion. The corruptions of the church, too, which were exposed in so many quarters by poetry and satire, had produced a revulsion of feeling in the breasts of multitudes, and, sickened at heart with a system so palpably false, they turned to look for what was true. But, above all, there was, doubtless, the concurrent power of God—the disposal of his providence, and the effusion of his grace, to aid the labours of Wycliffe and his followers.

That we have not overstated the effect of the toils of our great reformer and translator, may be proved by an appeal to the pages of his bitter enemy, Knighton. He compares the progress of Lollardism to the shooting forth of saplings from the root of a tree, and informs us that it filled the land with its fruit, and he goes so far as to aver that, if you met two men on the road, one was sure to be a Wycliffite.* If it be conceded, as probably it ought, that many who bore Wycliffe's name, only partially adopted his doctrines, yet, it must be admitted, on Knighton's testimony, that a very large multitude of persons were thoroughly imbued

* Knighton de Eventibus, 2663.

with the spirit of the reformer's teaching. The number of manuscripts still extant containing Wycliffe's version, which must have been copied by his followers, that were deemed heretical documents by the papal hierarchy, and were excluded then from college and cathedral libraries, also tend to substantiate the same fact. These manuscripts are to be regarded at once as the proof, and as the means, of Wycliffe's success. A cause which depended mainly on the circulation of the Holy Scriptures for its extension, can leave little doubt in the minds of the impartial as to whence it came, and with whose honour it ought to be identified. Wycliffe's work was evidently of God, and it was not in the power of man to overthrow it.

Soon after Wycliffe's death, his version was revised by some of his disciples. It is now settled, beyond all doubt, that there are two distinct versions belonging to the latter part of the fourteenth century. These two versions we have identified in manuscripts, which we have examined in our public libraries. Out of ten of these interesting volumes, we have found five containing Wycliffe's original version, and five containing another version, which plainly appears to be a revision of the former one. The five latter but slightly vary, and present substantially the same text. They are as follows: A manuscript in Sydney College, Cambridge; British Museum, reg. 1, b. vi.; Oxford, Laud L. 54; Harleian mss., 1862; Arundel, 264. Five other manuscripts which we have not

seen—but descriptions of which have been given to the public—seem also to contain the later version. These are, first, a manuscript of the New Testament, in Trinity College, Dublin, 237; one in the possession of bishop Butler; another belonging to Mr. Douce; a fourth in the Advocates' Library, Edinburgh; and a fifth in the Lambeth Library.* This second version appears to have been the work of John Purvey or Purnay, a zealous disciple of Wycliffe, who lived with his master and continued in his house to the day of his death.† The authorship is ascribed to him, upon the testimony of the manuscript in Trinity College, Dublin, which, together with the version, contains a treatise called the "Elucidarium Bibliorum," bearing his name. From allusions in the treatise to events which had recently taken place, the date is fixed to a period subsequent to the beginning of the year 1395. Perhaps it was written at the close of that year, or about the commencement of the next, which was eleven years after Wycliffe's decease. Reference is made in the treatise to "the English Bible late translated," by which Wycliffe's version is no doubt intended, and the author says that, in executing his labours, he had much travail with "divers fellows and helpers." As Purvey had been, for some time before Wycliffe's death, his companion and fellow-labourer, we think it probable that he had taken some part in the

* See English Translations, etc. Bagster's Hexapla, p. 19.

† Knighton de Event.

first version, but this second work, or rather revision, we apprehend was performed mainly by himself. The variation of his renderings from those of Wycliffe, in many parts, is but small. The following comparison may interest the reader :—

Wycliffe. Manuscript, Fairfax 2.

“ Therefore whane Jhesus was born in bethleem of Juda in the daies of king eroude loo astronomyens camen fro the eest to Jerusalem and seiden where is he that is born king of Jewis, for we han seyn his sterre in the eest and we han (in the margin, or “ben”) comen for to worshipe im.”

The other version, Laud L. 54, called Wycliffe's, but evidently identical with the revised translation :—

“ Therefore when Ihesa was boren in bedlem of juda, in the dayes of kinge heroude, loo kyngis or wise men camen fro the est to ierusalem seynige where is he that is boren kyge of jewes, for-soye we han seen his sterre in the eest and we comen for to worschipe hym.”

This variation in the first verse, “kyngis or wise men,” being put for “Astronomyens,” we have noticed in all the manuscripts of the second or Purvey's version; and it would seem to be taken from the legend of the three kings, Gaspar, Melchior, and Balthasar, whose relics are preserved at the far-famed Cathedral of Cologne. Here was no improvement upon Wycliffe, but the reverse; and it may be ques-

tioned whether, on the whole, the disciple at all mended the work of the master.

It is reported that as early as the year 1390 an attempt was made to suppress Wycliffe's translations by act of parliament, but that John of Gaunt, Wycliffe's old friend, resisted the iniquitous bill, declaring, "we will not be the dregs of all, seeing other nations have the law of God, which is the law of our faith, written in their own language." Be this, however, as it may, a convocation at Oxford, in the year 1408, enacted a law, commonly called Arundel's Constitution—from the part taken in the measure by the archbishop of that name—by which all unauthorized persons were forbidden to translate any part of the Scripture into English, and every one was warned, under pain of excommunication, against reading any version or treatise, made either in Wycliffe's time, or since, except it should be approved by the diocesan, or a provincial council. Here then was a weapon put into the hands of the enemies of Lollardism, which they might wield at pleasure against any one found possessing one of the Wycliffe Bibles. The ecclesiastical courts were soon occupied with cases of this description; and from the register of Alnwick, bishop of Norwich, we learn that in 1429, Richard Fletcher, of Beccles, had to appear before his lordship, on the charge of having a book of the new law in English. Nicholas Belward, too, was arraigned for purchasing a New Testament for four marks and forty pence, and teaching William Wright and Margery

his wife the study of the same. Others were accused of belonging to the sect of the Lollards, on the ground that they could read English well, and did read in the presence of others the word of God. As one muses over these old entries in the records of persecution, they bring up vivid illustrations of the state of the times. How revolting to our Christian feelings, that the study of the Scriptures should be alleged against a man in the *spiritual* court as a crime! How wide-spread must have been the ignorance of the people when the ability to read English was enough to attach to a common person a suspicion of heresy, and Lollardism! How precious must the word of God have been in those days, when a Testament was worth £2 16s. 8d., equal to £45 6s. 8d. now, taking, on the authority of Mr. Hallam, sixteen as the multiple for bringing down the money of that time to our standard.*

Happy reader! who can in these times read without molestation the charter of mercy—who lives in an age when the ability to read it is possessed by so many, and may be acquired by all—who is encouraged to discharge the duty of searching the Scriptures, and is aided in its performance in so many ways—and who, instead of having to give half a year's income for a Tes-

* In the Paston Letters, under date November, 1468, there is the following passage:—

"Also for a Bible that the master hath, I wend the utmost price had not past five marks, (£3 6s. 8d.) and so I trow he will give it, weet I pray you."

This was soon after the invention of printing: but it is not likely to have been a printed Bible. It was, no doubt, a manuscript Latin Bible, a book by no means uncommon.

tament as Nicholas Belward—supposing him to have been a respectable yeoman—probably had to do, can buy one for *sixpence*! Truly “the lines are fallen unto” us “in pleasant places,” and we “have a goodly heritage!”

Among the relics of that olden time, besides these Wycliffite manuscripts, there are preserved some other Biblical curiosities of a different character, which deserve here at least a passing notice. Well do we remember examining, in Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, a fine specimen of the “*Biblia Pauperum*,” of which a few copies only are to be found in the present day, in very rare collections. It consists of rude plates, representing Scripture figures and incidents, with a few Latin sentences explanatory of the subject. The work was printed from wooden blocks, in the way in which playing-cards were manufactured, a curious art which was applied to the production of other books of a religious character, such as the “*Speculum Humanæ Salvationis*.” These block-books, Mr. Hallam considers, were executed in the Low Countries :* but probably some of them found their way at an early period into England. They belong to the first half of the fifteenth century, and were the precursors of those nobler productions, whose appearance in the latter half of the same century mark it as a memorable era in the history of mankind. Mr. Horne, in his “Introduction,” describes the “*Biblia Pauperum*” as deriving its name from its being a Catechism of the

* Introduction to Literature of Europe, vol. i. p. 207.

Bible for the common people, who were enabled to acquire it at a low price ; but it could be of little use to such persons, who cannot be supposed generally to have been able to read Latin, when so few could read their own vernacular tongue. It seems much more likely that the volume took its name from the Franciscan Friars, who were among the chief preachers of the day, and who styled themselves *Pauperes*;* the volume, probably, being a sort of text-book to aid them in their public ministrations.

But these imperfect specimens of the printing art were soon to be succeeded by productions of a character which filled the world with astonishment. Let the reader visit in imagination the city of Mentz, in the year 1442. Mark that thoughtful man pacing the banks of the Rhine, as if revolving something which absorbs his mind ; and then, winding along the streets and entering his own dwelling, around which some air of mystery is thrown, for there he works in a secret apartment, where no one, save an assistant at his unknown craft, is allowed to enter. He is clever and ingenious, but no one knows what he is doing. And there he works and works, till, at length, beautiful volumes—correct copies of one original—all marvellously alike, displaying on their leaves gracefully formed letters, such as may rival the fairest specimens of penmanship, appear in unusual numbers ! These magic manuscripts become more and more common. No copyist's

* Du Cange Voc. Pauper. et Minores.

pen could write them so fast. No scriptorium could multiply books as they are multiplied in this German work-room. Men marvel, and well they may—they think there must be some witchcraft in all this; but happily we know, and have long practised, the precious secret. That mysterious workman is GUTTENBURG, and his house the first printing-office. The invention he discovers is the means of circulating the Bible to an unprecedented extent, of pouring the streams of all kinds of knowledge to the ends of the earth, of propelling a new impulse throughout society, and of peacefully revolutionizing the world. The whole, or a portion of the Scriptures, was certainly the first book of any size that issued from the press. The earliest printed book bearing a date is the beautiful Psalter of 1457, executed by Fust and Schæffer: but the Mazarin Bible is generally considered the earliest offspring of this noble art, and is assigned by conjecture to 1455 or 1452. The Cologne Chronicle says 1450. "We may see," exclaims Mr. Hallam, "in imagination, this venerable and splendid volume leading up the crowded myriads of its followers, and imploring, as it were, a blessing on the new art, by dedicating its firstfruits to the service of Heaven."*

Printing was early employed on the continent for multiplying copies of vernacular versions. An Italian version appeared in 1471; a German version, in 1466; a Dutch one, in 1477; a

* *Introd. to Lit.*, vol. i. p. 211.

Valencian, in 1478; a Bohemian, in 1475; and a French version in 1477. But the press was devoted to no such purpose in England during the fifteenth century. The never-to-be-forgotten Caxton, working away at his primitive press under the shadow of the abbey towers at Westminster, either never thought of, or did not dare the execution of, a printed Bible, in Latin nor English. One looks in vain over the list of books printed by Caxton, for any other volumes on Scriptural subjects beyond the "Speculum Vite Christi, or the Myrroure of the blessed Lyf of Jhesu Criste;" the "Infancia Salvatoris;" the "Golden Legende;" and one or two volumes on practical theology.

The earliest printed translation of any part of Scripture in English, was a volume by bishop Fisher, printed in 1505, containing a version and exposition of the seven penitential psalms: but though, for so long a period, the press was unemployed in this country upon the most sacred of all its works, copies of Wycliffe's version in manuscript, original or revised, continued to be multiplied and circulated. The extent and effect of that circulation have, we conceive, been generally underrated. Fully do we concur in the opinion expressed by Mr. Anderson in his "Annals of the English Bible," that the opposition to the Romish church in this country before the Reformation, and the spread of gospel truth, are to be ascribed to the entire volume, or certain portions of the Holy Scriptures, circulated in manuscript. "It

is, therefore, to be regretted, that even British historians, in too many instances, should have so hastily looked to Germany, as accounting for the commencement and progress of all that occurred in their own country in the first quarter of the sixteenth century. After an examination of the official records of the day, and other original manuscripts, more patient and laborious than that in which any man has ever since engaged, it is not surprising that John Foxe should dwell on the retrospect with delight, and confess his inability to do it justice, while he as distinctly ascribes this work of God to his own word in the vernacular tongue, and to this alone, though not yet in print."

We are now approaching the era of the Reformation. The present chapter closes on the eve of that fair morning when the Sun of righteousness arose with healing in his wings, shedding the full daylight of his own truth on our long-benighted countrymen. That memorable event will come before us in the next division of this little work : exciting our gratitude to God, and leading us to appropriate to ourselves those beautiful lines in the song of Zacharias :—

" Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
 For he hath visited and redeemed his people ;
 That we should be saved from our enemies,
 And from the hand of all that hate us ;
 To give knowledge of salvation unto his people
 By the remission of their sins,
 Through the tender mercy of our God ;
 Whereby the day-spring from on high hath visited us,
 To give light to them that sit in darkness and in the shadow
 of death,
 To guide our feet into the way of peace."