

# THE HISTORY OF THE ENGLISH BIBLE.

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## CHAPTER I.

### EARLY MANUSCRIPTS.

THE history of the English Bible falls naturally into two periods, the era of manuscript being the first, while the second follows the progress and shares the triumphs of the art of printing. With each of these periods one great name is inseparably connected. Almost a hundred years before William Caxton set up his rude press at the sign of the Red Pale in Westminster, **A. D. 1384.** John Wycliffe crowned a laborious life by giving to the English people the Bible in their own tongue. He represents the highest achievement of the manuscript period. Almost fifty years after Caxton started his press, William Tyndale, driven from England and forced to do his work by stealth on the Continent of Europe, succeeded in issuing the first printed English New Testament. **A. D. 1525.** To him belongs the honor of consecrating the new art to what has since proved to be its largest as well as its noblest use.

In the days of Wycliffe, the English tongue had attained a force and beauty which have scarcely been excelled. He is the father of our own best prose. But back of Wycliffe lie at least seven hundred years of the language, and it is possible to find traces in all these centuries of translations from the Scriptures.

It is with this earliest manuscript period that we are interested now. Possibly the uncouth tongue to which Cæsar listened when he landed on the shores of Britain became before long familiar with the truths of Christianity. Gildas, who merits too well the sneer of Gibbon, that he "presumed to exercise the office of historian," affirms that when, during the persecution under the Emperor Diocletian, English Christians went to their death, "all the copies of the Holy Scriptures which could be discovered were burned in the streets." What is certain is that when Alaric took Rome, a century later, Christianity found full employment for all its energies in disciplining the savage hordes that might otherwise have destroyed it; and as a consequence "the task of the translation of Scripture among the Northern nations was suspended."<sup>1</sup>

The oldest manuscript in existence is an English

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<sup>1</sup> Westcott, "A General View of the History of the English Bible," p. 5.

*Psalter*, partly in prose and partly in verse, preserved in the National Library at Paris. This translation was made by Aldhelm, who died bishop of Sherborne in the year 709. But of course versions of parts of the Bible may have been made earlier than this. The missionaries who found their home among the rugged moors of Northumbria, no doubt gave to the people in the vernacular the truths which they taught them. The ruins of Lindisfarne Abbey on Holy Island, off the northeast coast of England, "the solemn, huge, and dark-red pile," so happily characterized by Sir Walter Scott, recall the name of Bishop Aidan, who there trained laymen as well as priests in reading and learning the Scriptures. Eadfrith, a later bishop of Lindisfarne, is said to have translated most of the books of the Bible. No pleasanter story comes to us from those old times than that of Cædmon, the cowherd of the Abbey of Whitby, the ruins of which still confront the gray North Sea, the poor brother, songless and dispirited, who sees the harp coming toward him at the feast and escapes to the stable, to hear in his dream the voice of his master saying, "Sing, Cædmon! sing to me!" and waking finds that with the morning the gift of song has wakened too. From the translations made for him by his better educated brethren, the humble herdsman

versified the histories of the Bible in a tongue more robust than rythmical ; but his harp, as Fra Angelico's pencil, was never suffered to celebrate any other than sacred themes.

**A. D. 673-735.** Of all early translators of the Bible, Bede retains most freshly his charm for the student of to-day. His work was done at the monastery of Jarrow, on the river Tyne, where even yet, in strange contrast with forests of chimneys and furnaces, with an atmosphere poisoned by chemical smoke, and with a soil black with cinders, some scanty ruins of his church remain. Bede, known in later times as *the Venerable*, is one of those fascinating characters who never grow old. To the frank simplicity of the child he added the scholar's range of learning, the enthusiasm of a true teacher, and the piety of a saint. More than any other one man he made Northumbria "the literary center of western Europe."<sup>1</sup> Among the translators before the days of printing, he is the only one of whom it can be reasonably conjectured that he went for his authority to the original tongues rather than to the Latin Vulgate. He owned and frequently refers to a Greek Codex of the Acts. How much of the Bible he translated is uncertain, but we know that his last task was on the Gospel of John. For him death had no terrors, and yet he bade his scholars,

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<sup>1</sup> Green's "History of the English People," Vol. I., p. 64.

who could scarcely study for weeping, learn with what speed they might, for he felt sure that he could not be with them long. His last day was spent in dictating his version of John to his scribe, and in singing, during the intervals of relief from pain, snatches of cheery songs, rude rhymes in his own English tongue. When the evening came, the boy at his bedside said: "There is yet one sentence unwritten, dear master."

"Write it quickly," was Bede's reply.

And a few moments after the scribe told him all was finished: "You speak truth," said his master, "all is finished now."

The last words of the loving evangelist fitly closed the life of one so like-minded. They laid him on the pavement of his church, where he chanted a final doxology, and on its closing words his spirit passed to its rest.

Alfred the Great prefixed to his body of Laws a translation of the A. D. 849-901. Ten Commandments, with portions of the three following chapters of Exodus, and his death interrupted a version of the Psalms on which he was engaged. Patriot as well as scholar, Alfred saw clearly that no book so surely as the Bible would lay the foundations of a native literature, and it was his ambition that all the freeborn men in his kingdom should be able to read the English tongue. Two versions of the Gospels—the Lin-

disfarne or Cuthbert, and the Rushworth, still remain to us as memorials of the art and devotion of Northern England in the tenth century. The Cuthbert manuscript, once richly illuminated and bright with gold and gems, is preserved in the British Museum.<sup>1</sup> Originally written in Latin, in the seventh century, an interlinear Anglo-Saxon gloss was added to it between the years 946 and 968, by Aldred, a poor priest—*indignissimus et miserri-mus*, he pathetically calls himself—of Holy Island.

In the "Rushworth Gospels," while the glosses of Mark, Luke, and John follow closely the Cuthbert book, Matthew is given in an independent translation. This manuscript again is composed of the Latin Gospels written by MacRegol, an Irish scribe, about 820, and an interlinear translation, added eighty or one hundred years later, and of which the authors say: "He that of mine profiteth, pray he for Owun that this book glossed, and Farmen, the priest at Harewood, who has now written the book."<sup>2</sup>

A patriot as true of heart as Alfred himself was Aelfric, abbot of Peterborough, who afterward became archbishop of York, and who "Englished," as he terms it, the greater part of the Pentateuch, Joshua, Judges, Kings, Esther, Job, Judith, and Maccabees. "Englished according

<sup>1</sup> "The English Bible," by John Eadie, D. D., pp. 13, 14.

<sup>2</sup> Eadie, p. 15.

to my skill for your example," he says as he presents the book of Judith to Ealdorman Ethelward, "that you may also defend your country by force of arms against the outrage of foreign hosts." Perhaps the militant parts of the Bible were in his mind when he wrote in his homily "On Reading the Scriptures," "Happy is he, then, who reads the Scriptures, if he convert the words into actions."<sup>1</sup>

Aelfric's translation was in circulation in the tenth century. One catches in his resolute words the spirit of defiance with which Dane and Norsemen were met by successive generations of Englishmen. That spirit was invoked in vain before the resolute will and vast ability of William the Conqueror, one of the greatest men of his own, or of any age.

The Norman Conquest affected English scholarship very much as the vic- **A. D. 1066.**  
tories of Alaric, six centuries earlier, affected the scholarship of southern Europe. The work of translating the Scriptures, even if it did not altogether cease, was checked. A new language had to be imposed upon the people. The conflict between the Anglo-Saxon and the Norman-French was not to be settled in a day. Both tongues can be traced in fragments of translation yet extant; and in the end, the language which resulted from the

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<sup>1</sup> Mombert, "Handbook of The English Version," etc., p. 17.

struggle was to all intents and purposes the language of Wycliffe and Chaucer. Old forms still lingered, but only to stamp him who used them as uncouth and rustic. The day drew near when a translation of the whole Bible of permanent value could be made. That such a translation existed already is extremely improbable, although Sir Thomas More, Foxe the martyrologist, and Archbishop Cranmer claim that it did. "There are, however, two English versions of the Psalter still remaining which were made early in the fourteenth century, together with many abstracts and metrical paraphrases of particular books of the Bible, translations of the Epistles and Gospels used in divine service, paraphrases of gospel lessons, narratives of the passion and resurrection of our Lord, and other means for familiarizing the people with Holy Scripture."<sup>1</sup> The English Bible, even in its imperfect form, had laid hold of the hearts of the nation many years before Wycliffe was born. Preachers made free paraphrases for themselves, and no doubt did then as preachers have done since, founded their discourses upon misconceptions of their texts. But still the people found life in the words of Scripture. There must have been an unauthorized version of large parts of the Bible which to them carried the authority of law. It is remarkable, that while the poet Chaucer frequently quotes

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<sup>1</sup> Encyclopædia Britannica, "English Bible."



Scripture, he never uses the words of Wycliffe's version, nor does even Wycliffe himself in his discourses.

Naturalists have found a plant in one of the Western States which is so exceedingly sensitive to any interference with its accustomed life that it shows not only uneasiness but even anger when moved from one place to another. It quivers with displeasure and emits a pungent odor, which drives the enemy from its presence. The sensitiveness of our language is scarcely less marked. Preferring older although less satisfactory translations to the noble version of John Wycliffe, the English people furnished an early illustration of that conservatism which has been in all their history an element alike of national weakness and of national strength. The old word was not to be too readily abandoned, nor was the new word to be too readily adopted in the book which was already so dear to their religious experience. We do well to notice this disposition to cling to household words familiar in the ear, because in all the changes through which our English Bible has passed, from Lutterworth to the Jerusalem Chamber, it has been an element with which even the most prudent of our translators have been forced sooner or later to reckon. Kept within bounds, it has warned the scholar not to trifle without good cause with the pure "well of English undefyled"; while,

on the other hand, if suffered to thrust the spirit of intelligent criticism from its right place, it has done incalculable harm.

It was while the language of England was being molded and made ready for Chaucer and Wycliffe, that the Bible received the name by which we know it to-day. For a time it seemed as if Jerome's title, "The Divine Library," would win its way to general acceptance; but in the thirteenth century the Greek term "The Book," passing into the vocabulary of the West, became by a slight grammatical misapprehension, no longer plural but singular. "The Books," in popular use was transformed into "The Book"; not one alone but manifold, with an inward rather than an outward unity, true throughout its pages to the personal characteristics of every writer, and to the Divine purpose for the whole.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>"The Bible in the Church," Brooke Foss Westcott, p. 5.