

FOREWORD

NO ATTEMPT is made in this brief pamphlet to appraise the whole range of influence exerted by the English Bible upon the English language and upon English literature. How powerful that influence has been is indicated by the statement of the historian Trevelyan:

"By the end of Elizabeth's reign the book of books for Englishmen was already the Bible, although the Authorized Version that is still in use was only drawn up by James the First's bishops in the years immediately following her death. For every Englishman who had read Sidney or Spenser, or had seen Shakespeare acted at the Globe, there were hundreds who had read or heard the Bible with close attention as the Word of God. The effect of the continual domestic study of the Book upon the national character, imagination, and intelligence for nearly three centuries to come was greater than that of any literary movement in our annals or any religious movement since the coming of St. Augustine. New worlds of history and poetry were opened in its pages to people who had little else to read,—indeed, it created the habit of reading and reflection in whole classes of the community and turned a tinker into one of the great masters of the English tongue."¹

Or again by Frederic Harrison: "The book which begot English prose still remains the supreme type. The English Bible is the true school of English literature. It possesses every quality of our literature in its highest form. If you care to know the best our literature can give in simple noble prose,—mark, learn, and inwardly digest the Holy Scriptures in the English tongue."²

Sir A. T. Quiller-Couch in his essay *On Reading the Bible* writes of the Authorized Version:

"It has cadences homely and sublime, yet so harmonizes them that the voice is always one. Simple men—holy and

humble men of heart like Izaak Walton and Bunyan—have their lips touched and speak to the homelier tune. Proud men, scholars—Milton, Sir Thomas Browne—practise the rolling Latin sentence; but upon the rhythms of our Bible they, too, fall back—"The great mutations of the world are acted, or time may be too short for our designs." "Acquaint thyself with the Choragium of the stars." "There is nothing immortal but immortality." The precise man Addison cannot excel one parable in brevity or in heavenly clarity: the two parts of Johnson's antithesis come to no more than this "Our Lord has gone up to the sound of a trumpet; with the sound of a trumpet our Lord has gone up." The Bible controls its enemy Gibbon as surely as it haunts the curious music of a light sentence of Thackeray's. It is in everything we see, hear, feel, because it is in us, in our blood."

How hopeless it is to reflect these achievements in a few pages! Yet it is believed that the notes here made will in considerable degree remind speakers and writers of many aspects of that influence and facilitate the contribution they will make to the Commemoration of Four Hundred Years of the Printed English Bible.

Many of the great figures of English literature found in the Bible the book of their own heart and life, and revealed their acceptance of its great message in much of their work. Other writers are less deeply sympathetic with it or even indifferent or hostile. Yet among these also it comes to the surface in phrase or allusion, coloring their style, their thought, or their environment. One perhaps should add that there are vast quantities of so-called literature—chiefly in the range of fiction and much of it in our own day—which by its weakness and coarseness manifestly is uninfluenced by the Book of books. No one force can do more to purify our current literary flood and to improve its quality than a more vital reading of the Bible by authors and the public alike.

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¹G. M. Trevelyan: *History of England*, p. 367.

²Frederic Harrison: *Tennyson, Ruskin, Mill and Other Literary Estimates*.

The Influence of the English Bible Upon the English Language and Upon English and American Literature

The English Bible and the English Language

IN DR. BAIKIE'S recent book, *The English Bible and Its Story*, he remarks upon the extraordinary fact that "among all the links which bind together the scattered branches of the English-speaking race, one of the very strongest is their common possession of a book of which not a single line was written nor a single thought conceived by an Englishman." It is another striking fact that this book translated into English using some 6,000 words has exerted a striking influence, still felt, upon a language that numbers now over 400,000 words. What wonder, then, that those who would write and speak to be "understanded of the people" should find even now the Bible the best mentor of vocabulary and style!

Charles A. Dana, one of the great journalists of America, in speaking before a body of students said: "Of all books, the most indispensable and the most useful, the one whose knowledge is the most effective, is the Bible . . . I am considering it now not as a religious book, but as a manual of utility, of professional preparation and professional use for a journalist. There is perhaps no book whose style is more suggestive and more instructive, from which you learn more directly that sublime simplicity which never exaggerates, which recounts the greatest events with solemnity, of course, but without sentimentality or affectation, none which you open with such confidence and lay down with such reverence."

What a vast debt we owe to Tyndale and to Coverdale and their associates, who so skilfully and in so inspired a manner drew upon the virile language of the people of their day for the direct and potent expression of the greatest truths the world can know. From Tyndale came such expressive combinations as "peacemaker," "long-suffering," "broken-hearted," "scapegoat"; from Coverdale, "lovingkindness," "morning-star," "kindhearted," "tender mercy."

Henry Bradley points out that the word "beautiful" was not known in literature until Tyndale used it. Jespersen cites how through the Hebrew phrase "holy of holies" there has come into English through the Bible a characteristic form of expression as seen

in "heart of hearts," "place of all places," "evil of evils." He judges that the influence of the King James Version on our grammar is greater than that of Shakespeare. Logan Pearsall Smith remarks that the Version of 1611, while not adding many new words, has had great effect in preserving words.¹

Upon more than one great language the Bible, especially through the New Testament, has wrought with creative force a repetition of the effect of Christianity itself upon the Greek language of the first century. Says Professor A. T. Robertson in his *Grammar of New Testament Greek*: "The Christian spirit put a new flavor into this vernacular and lifted it to a new elevation of thought and dignity of style that unify and glorify the language."

One has only to be reminded of the phrases from the Bible which have passed into common speech to realize how much vigor and expressiveness it has added to our language:

the apple of his eye
cast thy bread upon the waters
a coat of many colors
a good old age
living fountains of waters
the wife of thy bosom
the valley of decision
a still small voice
miserable comforters
the pride of life
from strength to strength
the little foxes that spoil the vines
precept upon precept, line upon line
as a drop in a bucket
the salt of the earth
the burden and heat of the day
the signs of the times
the children of light
the powers that be
the fashion of this world
decently and in order
a thorn in the flesh
a cloud of witnesses
a crown of life
labor of love
hewers of wood and drawers of water
thou art the man
prisoners of hope

¹HENRY BRADLEY: *The Making of English*. Macmillan, 1904. P. 220. J. O. H. JESPERSEN: *Growth and Structure of the English Language*. Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1923. Pp. 226, 235. LOGAN PEARSALL SMITH: *The English Language*. Henry Holt, New York, 1926, pp. 115-116; see also JAMES C. FERNALD: *Historic English*. Funk & Wagnalls Company, New York, pp. 183-231 on "The English Bible."