

CHAPTER I.

THE BIBLE THE PEOPLE'S CHARTER. RELATION OF WICKLIFFE TO HIS AGE.

IT was a great day for England, when John Wickliffe first conceived the idea of giving to his countrymen the **WHOLE BIBLE** in the common tongue. The execution of that idea is the leading event of the fourteenth century. It would not be too much, perhaps, to call it the leading event in Anglo-Saxon history.

To Wickliffe belongs the peculiar honor of having rekindled, from the ashes of the past, the doctrine of the essential worth and equal rights of men. His claim that, in regard to the highest interest of humanity, all men are equal; namely, in the right of each to know for himself, and to obey the will of God; that here the king can claim nothing above the serf, the priest nothing above the layman; the absolute supremacy of the individual conscience in matters of religion; this involved the ultimate recognition of all inferior rights.

This idea, which breathes through the whole spirit of primitive Christianity, had been long lost to the world. It was indeed alien to the spirit of the world. The most enlightened nations of antiquity knew it not. The wisest and purest of pagan philosophers, who searched deepest into the character of God and the destiny of men, never attained to this glorious and ennobling truth. Even when they come so near it as to discern a special providence guiding the affairs of individuals, it is still only the great men, the patriots and philosophers, whom they deem worthy of such care. "Great men," say they, "enjoy the peculiar oversight and influence of the gods; inferior persons they disregard." The highest truths, those especially which respect the nature of God, must be veiled in mysteries and sealed by oaths from the vulgar rabble, who are to be held in subjection by scarecrows and mummeries, which the wise ones laugh at. Even their Elysium was peopled only by the spirits of sages and heroes. Thus were the masses of the human race abandoned, to live and die like the brutes which perish.

When Christ appeared, there dawned a new day for the poor and down-trodden. He made it the distinguishing glory of his ministry to preach the Gospel to the poor. The Christian communities, which

owed their existence to the immediate effusion of his Spirit after his ascension, were strictly companies of brethren, with one Head and Lawgiver, their risen and glorified Lord. Men from the most diverse conditions of society here met on terms of perfect equality ; united by a noble and endearing relationship, whose ties were stronger than those of caste, or blood, or nation. What a foundation was here laid for the protection and elevation of the weak and defenceless classes of society !

With the decline of the apostolic spirit in other respects, this idea also faded from the Christian consciousness. A splendid hierarchy, appointed to rule God's heritage, was an institution utterly at variance with the conception of the Church as a community of brethren. With the growth and consolidation of this mighty spiritual power, the lay element in the Church continually declined in importance, till at length the people became the mere tools and bond-slaves of the priesthood.

The aim of the Romish prelacy was no less than the entire monopoly of all ecclesiastical and all secular rule. The vital element of power, knowledge, it had gradually withdrawn wholly into its own hands. It has frequently been made the subject of praise to the papal clergy, that they alone were the depositaries of learning, at a period when all other classes of society were sunk in ignorance and barbarism. Should it not rather be accounted their shame ? Who can doubt, that if the hosts of the Romish priesthood had encouraged the general diffusion of knowledge, the dark ages would have been ages of light ? Could not the parish priest have awakened, in the humble portion of his flock, that spirit of improvement which is everywhere, even in the most debased heathen countries, the fruit of Protestant missions ? Could not the monastery have become a fountain of intelligence to all the adjacent community ? Boast not of the light thus hid within the cloister, for the use and delight of its few holy inmates, while thousands of their fellow-creatures groped, under their very walls, in the blindness of the deepest midnight !

But a general diffusion of knowledge, and the monopoly of power in the hands of a few, are ideas entirely incompatible with each other. The power of the hierarchy demanded the ignorance of the masses. The policy by which it reached its end was masterly. When the Holy Scriptures were taken from the common people, they lost the charter of their rights as men ; in time, the very consciousness of their manhood. Thus the great body of all the nations of Christendom sunk from one degree of debasement to another, till they became the prey of every spoiler ; till the people, the cultivators of the soil, the indus-

trious artisans, the actual producers of the national wealth, had no power, no rights. They were the rabble, the vulgar herd, the mob, to be used or abused without limit or mercy, for the benefit of their masters.

Nothing could more significantly indicate their social position, than the scantiness of contemporaneous information in regard to it. History relates the doings of Popes and Councils, of Kings and Nobles. But it seems rarely to have occurred to the learned chronicler of the times, that the condition of the people constitutes any part of history. Now and then some social earthquake rends the veil, and we catch a glimpse which makes the heart ache ; for we see there, spite of ignorance, superstition, and all the vices of their degraded state, living human souls, burning and writhing under the keen sense of outrage and oppression ; capable, therefore, of sweet affections, of generous and noble deeds, of goodness and piety. At some new or more galling wrong, outraged humanity has overburst the bounds of discreet submission. The rude mass, for a moment, heaves convulsively ; agonizing cries for redress, fierce threats of vengeance, disturb the air ; and then it is crushed down again by the iron hand of power, to weep, and bleed, and curse in silence.

Such was the condition of a majority of the inhabitants of England in the fourteenth century. Where now was help and redemption to be looked for ? The barons had already, a hundred years before, wrested from the monarch the recognition of their own rights, the famous MAGNA CHARTA. But on their side was wealth and power. With his immense landed possessions, his castle-fortress, his thousands of retainers, each baron was a petty king. Combination among these powerful lords was equivalent to success. But the poor, unlettered, unarmed populace gained nothing by this triumph of their masters. Their only hope, though they knew it not, was in the restoration of what will ever be the only Magna Charta of the weak—THE HOLY SCRIPTURES.

Then arose the Man of the Age. Among the brilliant and imposing forms that crowd the arena of that stirring time—the magnificent Edward III., and his chivalrous son, the martial barons, the gorgeous array of ecclesiastical dignitaries—stands alone and preëminent the apostolic form of John Wickliffe, Rector of Lutterworth.

We call him the man of the age, who into a dead Past drops the seed of a living Future ; who infuses into the social mass leavening ideas, which, sooner or later, by their inherent quickening energy, work essential changes in the inner and outer life of society. This John Wickliffe did. The supreme and binding authority of the Holy

Scriptures as the guide of Christian faith and life ; the right of all men, without distinction, to the possession of the Scriptures ; these are the living thoughts which Wickliffe cast into the soil of the fourteenth century. They inspired the labors of his active years ; they culminated in that great gift to the Anglo-Saxon race, the Holy Bible in the common tongue.

To us, in this later age, these ideas may seem too obvious to merit the place here assigned them. Not so when first announced. Then, they startled like an earthquake. And well they might ; for they struck at the root of that vast system of spiritual fraud, by which merchandise had so long been made of the souls of men.

It may seem, also, that too wide and lasting an influence is ascribed to Wickliffe's version of the Scriptures. A work circulated only in manuscript, and at a period when so few of the laity acquired even the first rudiments of learning, cannot, it may be thought, have made a very deep impression on the national character. But when we take into account Wickliffe's preparatory labors, for more than thirty years, it will be seen that no book, before the invention of printing, ever enjoyed such advantages for becoming generally known. His conflicts with the Papacy at home and abroad, involving political and social questions of vital interest to the nation, his preaching and his writings in the despised vernacular, and the labors of his "poore priestes" (those pious itinerants whom he had sent forth over the length and breadth of England), had awakened a mental activity, a spirit of inquiry, before unknown : and in numerous instances an earnest religious life. The attention of all classes had thus been turned to the Holy Scriptures. Among high and low, there was that hunger for the word of God, whose power to conquer difficulties we, in this day of intellectual and spiritual fullness, can but imperfectly appreciate.

The details of the following chapters will enable us to estimate more perfectly the labors and influence of this great man, the Father of English Bible-Translation.