

CHAPTER XVII

JUST BEFORE WYCLIF—THE FIRST PROHIBITION OF THE BIBLE

“Dulcius ex ipso fonte bibuntur aquæ.”

THERE are two other Psalters the date of which is about the same as those we have been considering. There was also an attempt made to translate the whole of the New Testament during this century, a gloss on many of the books being in the library of Benet College. It was probably the work of a priest wishing to instruct his people, and it is the most important contribution to the Bible literature of the time that we possess. The following example we derive from Professor Morley:—

Mark i. :—“ And He prechydde sayande a stalworthier thane I schall come after me of whom I am not worthi down fallande or knelande to louse the thwonge of his chawcers.”

This is described in the Catalogue as written in the fifteenth century, but Lewis judged it to be before the time of Wyclif. There are the Gospels of Mark and Luke, and all the Epistles of Paul. The comments on the Epistles are much shorter than those on the Gospels, and abound in allegory and mysticism. It is, however, the most extended attempt at an English version before Wyclif.

Here is Romans i. :—“ Poule servaunt of Jhu Cst callid apostil departed unto ye evangelye of God, ye whiche before he hadde behizt bi his pphetis in holy wryttis of his sone ye whiche is maad to hym of ye seed of David

aft ye flesch ye whiche is before ordeyned goddes sone in vtue after ye spryte of makyng holy of ye resureccion of ye deade of our Lorde Jhu Crste bi whom we hafe grace and office of Apostil (or power of ye office of apostyl) to all folcs obeische to ye feiy for ye name of hym among ye wheche zee be called of Jhu Crste."

A partial translation of the Gospels in the Northern dialect is also found in a MS. of the British Museum, containing the Gospels for the Sundays of the year, together with an exposition. The following is a sample of it:—

John i. 19:—"And this is the testimonge of John whan the Jues of Jerulm sent prestis and dekenes unto Jon Baptist for to aske him what ertou. And he graunted what he was, and agensaide nogt. And he graunted and said, for ynam nogt Crist."

The sermons afford curious specimens of the superstitious and ridiculous legends with which the preachers of the Middle Ages sought to interest their people. Husks are they chiefly, instead of the bread of life.

These scant references then are, at all events, enough to assure us that both our Saxon and Norman forefathers possessed some portions of the Word of God in their own tongue. It is possible that many earnest-minded priests endeavoured to supply their own people with such portions, though they have perished amongst the "inutilia et vetusta." For instance, in the Register of Wills at York, it is recorded that Thomas de Farnylaw, Chancellor of the Church at York, bequeathed at his death, in 1378, a Bible and Concordance to the Church of St. Nicholas at Newcastle, "there to be chained for a common use for the good of his soul." This was before Wyclif, and a Latin book would not be much use.

The Preface to the Bishops' Bible of 1568, defending itself as the manner then was, and with abundant justification, says—

"Our old forefathers, who ruled in this realm, in their times and in divers ages did their diligence to translate whole books of the Scriptures to the erudition of the laity.

“As yet to this day are to be seen divers books translated into the vulgar tongue, some by Kings of the Realm, some by Bishops, some by Abbots, some by other devout godly Fathers. So desirous were they of old time to have the lay-sort edified in godliness by reading in their vulgar tongue, that very many books be yet extant, though for the age of the speech and strangeness of the characters of many of them, almost worn out of knowledge.”

John de Trevisa may have translated a large portion of the Scripture, and it is possible that this may be the volume Dr. Adam Clarke possessed, and from which he frequently quoted in his Commentary.*

Nevertheless, it was during this period of the Normans that the first actual prohibition was issued, as far as has been ascertained.

A change in the attitude of the Church towards the Scriptures had indeed been going on for some time. The Council of Nicæa (A.D. 325) had said that no Christian should be without them; and it is indisputable, as we have seen, that in the early centuries they were circulated wherever Christianity found a footing. There followed, however, a gradual growth of error; and we cannot but regard this as the main reason why the Bible came to be looked on suspiciously, and at last locked away from the common gaze. Doubtless as the Latin tongue fell into disuse the Bible suffered with it, and the very language which had been its vehicle became its grave. Fleury puts it that the Roman Church, in order to stop the disputes amongst schismatics, and to prevent heretics from abusing the Sacred Books, adopted the wise and effectual measure of taking away the key of knowledge altogether. And doubtless there were real heretics and schismatics, but no candid student of the second seven centuries will now fail to acknowledge that most of those so called were opponents of such perversions of the Word of God as nevertheless were described as dogma.

* See Townley's *Illustrations of Biblical Literature*. More light may be thrown on this matter, to which Townley gave a good deal of attention, but without result.

It became politic, in fact, to speak of the mystery rather than the simplicity of the Word of God, and to make it a priest's book altogether; and thus, as early as 1199, Innocent III. is found praising the zeal of the Bishop of Metz, who denounced to the Holy See certain people of the diocese, who, having procured a French version of some portions of the Scriptures, held clandestine assemblies at which they read them.*

The first direct prohibition, however, appears to have been at the provincial Council of Toulouse, in 1229; and if we are to trust the writers of their own Church, the state of things amongst the Roman Catholics presented a great departure from the earlier times. Peter of Ailly, about this time Bishop of Cambray, quotes St. Bernard, where he says: "A putrid disease is at this day creeping through the whole body of the Church." Then, having spoken of some excessive abuses of ecclesiastics, he says—

"Behold, in peace is my bitterness most bitter! Bitter first in the slaughter of the martyrs, more bitter afterwards in the conflict with heretics, most bitter now in the manners of those of her own household. There is the voice of one crying, 'I have brought up children and exalted them, but they have despised me. They have despised and dishonoured me by a base life, a base gain, finally by a traffic which walks in darkness.'"

Things were worse now, and it was in vain that the people looked to the clergy for instruction or example. They looked therefore elsewhere, and found them in the Scriptures which had been translated. The perusal of these brought to light the errors and abuses of the Church, and those who opposed these evils got the name of heretics. To put them down, the Inquisition was established; and with a view to their final extermination in the territories of the Council of Toulouse this Synod was assembled, at which the Pope's Legate, with three archbishops and several bishops, enacted forty-five canons for the rooting out of "heresy." It was quite in the spirit of the rest that the fourteenth canon should prohibit the laity from

* *Introduction to the Scriptures*, Dr. Dixon.

having the books of the Old and New Testament even in their possession. The exact words of this famous prohibition are as follows:—

“We also forbid the laity to possess any of the Books of the Old or New Testament, except perhaps someone out of devotion wishes to have the Psalter or the Breviary for the Divine Offices, or the Hours of the Blessed Virgin. But we strictly forbid them having any of these books translated into the Vulgar tongue.”*

The Inquisition had only been established in 1208, so that this may be looked upon as its offspring, when it was just of age. The opposition, however, abroad was considerable, as it came to be later on in our own country. It is said of the learned Fulgentio that on one occasion he preached from Matthew xii. 3, “Have ye not read what David did when he was an hungered?” saying that if Christ were to ask the question now, the answer would be, “No, for we are forbidden to read the book.” At another time he took for his text, “What is truth?” and told the people that, after much searching, he had found it out, holding up a New Testament. Then, returning it straight to his pocket, he added, “But the book is prohibited.” His fate was like most of those who spoke out. He trusted to the Pope’s promise of safe conduct, went to Rome, and after being feasted at first, was burnt to ashes on the field of Flora.†

The state of the clergy got worse and worse, with the light shut away. William had separated the lay and the ecclesiastical courts when he took possession, but this only strengthened the clergy, who were thus thrown into the arms of the Pope. As they gained in power they lost in influence, and their nicknames, such as the “Rev. Lack Latin,” “Mumble Matins,” and “Babbling Sir John,” stuck to them. This was the era of the Miracle Plays, which will be described later on, and in which the devil was the popular buffoon. Sunday was a day of rioting, bowls, dice, gambling, and drunkenness. The

* *Vindiciæ Laicæ*, Dublin, 1825, *Essays on Ecclesiastical History*.

† *Life of Bishop Bedell*.

monasteries were perhaps, in spite of many corruptions, the brightest spots in the picture. They were the almonies, abodes of art, learning, and medicine; hospitals, schools, and retreats, foundling asylums, and hostelries for way-faring men. They had been very much of one order, but at the beginning of the thirteenth century the Franciscans and Dominicans came over to England, and soon gathered numerous disciples.

Certainly, the material progress made at this period was very great. Many of the most admired cathedrals were built—such as York, Salisbury, and Winchester. The number of abbeys, priories, and religious houses built in the reign of Henry III. alone amounted to 157. The most solid and beautiful buildings went up side by side with the meanest. Wooden houses, soon erected, and soon burnt down, filled even the cities, whilst stately towers and spires rose slowly above them. Stowe says that, even in 1189, London was nearly all built of wood, covered over with thatch of reeds and straw. Perhaps the chief agents in this rapid development of impressive buildings were the “free masons,” a band of ingenious architects and workmen of different countries. They were distributed into classes, every tenth man being a warden overlooking the other nine, whilst a master in chief directed the whole. They offered their services to opulent princes, and were much attached to Henry III. and Edward I.

The “shutting of the Bible” was by no means unopposed. John Thursby, for instance, Archbishop of York, who died 1373, a prelate of great piety and learning, published a manual in English for the instruction of his diocese. This was an Exposition of the Creed, the Lord’s Prayer, and the Ten Commandments, and in it he strongly condemns those who were then beginning to withhold the use of the Scriptures from the people.

We are able to look in and hear the preachers of this time. The Early English Text Society, has lately published a number of Old English Homilies of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, edited by Mr. R. Morris. He

says (1867) there are huge mounds of Anglo-Saxon Homilies and other MSS. right up to the time of Elizabeth which have never been published. "Yet the glass and the spirit-level are pointed at them, and the stroke of the Editor's pick has been long heard at each end of the tunnel, whilst a train of 70 texts bears witness to the strength of the editorial arm." In this volume we have a fair sample of the preaching of the age, which our readers will thank us for giving specimens of. The "moral ode" is an excellent sermon in verse. It exhorts all men to grow in love as they grow in years. All may purchase Heaven, the poor with his penny and the rich with his pound. At the day of Doom everyone will be his own accuser, wherefore we should repent whilst we have health and strength. It will be too late when death is at the door. In Hell the uncharitable suffer the extremes of hunger and thirst; vowbreakers, traitors, thieves, drunkards, unjust judges, unfaithful stewards, and adulterers are tortured in turn by fire and frost; slanderers, the envious, and proud men are torn and fretted by adders, snakes, and ferrets.

The sum of human duty consists of two loves—love to God and to man. The broad way is our own will, which leads to Hell; we must choose the narrow and green way, along the high cliffs, which leads to Heaven.

The Homily has about 400 long lines, and was written by someone who looked back regretfully on much time wasted or misspent. He says:—

Ich am eldre han ich wes a winter and
ek on lore.

Ich welde more han ich dude, my wyt
auhte beo more,

Wel longe ich habbe child ibeo, a worde
and eke on dede;

Hah ich beo of wynter old, to yong
ich am on rede.

I am older than I was, in years and
in lore.

I wield more than I did, my wit
ought to have been more,

Well long have I been a child, in
words and in deeds;

Though I be bold in years, too
young am I in wisdom.

He warns others to do good while they may:—

Sende god biforen him man, he hwile
he mai, to hevenc,

For betre is on almesse biforen, han
ben after sevenc.

Let a man send some good before
him, the while he may, to heaven,

For better is one alms before, than
seven after.

The joys of life are too dearly bought with wickedness :—

Swines brede is swithe swete, swa is
of wilde dore ;
Alto dore he hit buh, he yefth herere
his swore.

Swine's flesh is very sweet, so is
that of the wild deer ;
All too dear he buys it, who gives
for it his neck.

The joys of Heaven will recompense us for all troubles :—

Crist scal one beon inou alle his dur-
linges ;
He one is muchele mare and betere,
hanne alle ohere hinges.
Christ yve us leden her swile lif, and
habben her swile ende,
Hat we moten huder come, wanne we
henne wende.

Christ shall alone be enough for all
his darlings ;
He alone is much greater and better
than all other things.
Christ grant that we lead here such
a life, and have here such an end,
That we may thither come when we
go hence.*

In another Homily (Bispel), after describing God as our Father, whose earth produces for us corn and cattle, whose sun gives us light and life, whose water produces drink and fishes, and whose fire serves manifold purposes, the homilist asks : “ May we, think ye, call Him at all our mother ? Yea, we may. What doth the mother to her child ? First, she cheers and gladdens him by the light, and afterwards puts her arm under him, or covers his head that he may enjoy a quiet sleep. This does the Lord of you all. He rejoices us with the daylight, and sends us to sleep by means of the dark night.”

In the first six Homilies, “ By Christ,” or “ so help me, Christ,” occur frequently. “ Dear men,” “ good men,” “ dear brethren and sisters,” are constantly found also.

In the Homily for Palm Sunday, the preacher reminds his hearers that, though Jesus might have ridden upon a rich steed, a palfrey or a mule, He did not even ride on the big ass, but upon the little foal, to teach us humility. It is no use singing and praying for the proud and unrepentant sinner, for “ who is he that may water the horse that refuses to drink ? ” Some confess their sins, to be like other people, or because they would not like to be turned away from the Lord's Table, but they had far better stay away, for there is more harm in going than in abstaining. If they receive the bread, an angel will come and take it

* *Handbook of English Literature*, R. M'William, B.A. 1888.

straight away with him to Heaven, and instead thereof will remain a live coal that will utterly consume them.

For wrong-doing nothing will avail but restitution. If the sinner says, foxlike, that he has spent it all—"This will not do; you must take of your own goods, and make restitution." But the covetous sinner may reply that he does not know where to find those he has wronged—they are either dead or have left the neighbourhood. He must then be exhorted to go to the district where the theft was committed, and expend a sum equivalent in almsgiving, and the repairing of churches and bridges. Then let him look to God, for the priest cannot forgive any man his sins, nor even his own; all he can do is to point to Christ.

In the fifth Homily, we find that female blandishments found place even then, and the preacher exclaims that yellow frogs are fit emblems of those women who wear saffron-coloured clothes, and who powder their faces with "blaunchet" to make themselves fair and seductive. Such as these are the devil's mousetrap, and their outer adornments are the treacherous cheese whereby many a mouse is enticed into the trap. Their cosmetic is the devil's soap, and their mirror the devil's hiding-place.

"Wherefore, good men, for God's sake keep yourselves from the devil's mousetrap, and see that ye be not the spotted adders (slanderers and detractors), nor the black toads (rich misusers of their wealth), nor like the yellow frogs."

In the sermon on the Lord's Prayer, there is a curious division of men into sheepish, neatish (ox-like, labouring well), and goatish. The thirty-third discourse is also curious, treating of the traps set by the devil in the following lairs—play, drink, market, and church.