



# OUR ENGLISH BIBLE.

## CHAPTER I.

### EARLY HISTORY AND ASSOCIATIONS.



THE fact of so many different tongues being spoken by the human family is sometimes regarded as one of the infelicities of our present condition; but it brings counterbalancing advantages, in the bond of sympathy and brotherhood which it supplies to each nationality. And radical differences of speech form an institution of Providence, which, if it had not appeared at the building of Babel, would certainly have arisen sooner or later through the scattering of mankind. It necessitates some kind of method by which a Revelation made from heaven in one language may be made intelligible in another. Revelation is hidden—wherever there is ignorance of the original—like the sun behind dark clouds, or beneath

hills before the hour of dawn; we must either acquire a knowledge of Hebrew and Greek for ourselves, or the book must be translated into words with which we are familiar. The first process is no doubt the most effectual, but it must be confined in the nature of things to a few; the second is indispensable for the vast majority. What cannot be done *by* the multitude must be done *for* them; the result of the Pentecost miracle must be accomplished in the best way it can by learning and labour on the part of scholars, that every man may learn in his own tongue the wonderful works of God. The reading of what is divinely written is subject to the same conditions as the hearing of what was divinely spoken. "Things without life giving sound, whether pipe or harp, except they give a distinction in the sounds, how shall it be known what is piped or harped? For if the trumpet give an uncertain sound, who shall prepare himself to the battle? So likewise ye, except ye utter by the tongue words easy to be understood, how shall it be known what is spoken?" "If I know not the meaning of the voice, I shall be unto him that speaketh a barbarian; and he that speaketh shall be a barbarian unto me."\*

The traditions of the Jews discourage the translation of their Scriptures; to this hour the Hebrew original alone is read in the synagogues: and the religion of the Mahometans forbids a change of the Arabic Koran into any equivalent rendering; because, say they, not only the substance of it is uncreated and eternal, subsisting in the essence of Deity, but the words are "inscribed with a pen of light on the table of His everlasting decrees."

It is otherwise in this country, thank God! and a

succession of men have, with zeal and patience, devoted themselves to the translation of the Holy Scriptures.

Our English Bible differs from all other vernacular translations at least in two respects. First, it is the most widely circulated volume in the world. Copies of it have been multiplied to an unparalleled extent. They are read not only by a greater comparative number of persons at home than any book in any other land, but throughout our colonial dependencies, and in the vast territory of the United States, there is no volume which can vie with it in the multitude of its copies, any more than in the interest which it has inspired and the effects which it has produced. And next, whilst most other versions, ancient and modern, have been produced by individuals who undertook the task single-handed, and all the versions have remained much as they were at first, our Bible is the work of successive scholars, covering a wide space of time, and only by slow degrees arriving at completion. Syriac, Latin, Gothic, Armenian, and Slavonic translations were accomplished with considerable speed, and the same may be said of those which have been produced in foreign languages by modern missionaries: but the English Bible may be called a growth of centuries; preparations were made for it before the sixteenth century, and not until the seventeenth did it take the form in which it now appears. We may almost say the English Bible is like the English constitution, not indeed as to its first origin and elements, but as to the successive steps by which it reached its present state. On these accounts the history of English translations and translators has an interest altogether its own.

A thick haze rests over the early history of Christianity in Britain; how, when, or where it was first proclaimed

within our shores is a secret which no research has been sufficient to discover. Traditions that Paul, or Joseph of Arimathæa, preached the gospel here are utterly worthless, and have long been rejected; all that can be said upon the subject of the first planting of the Church among our fathers is, that probably during the first century some Romans who visited Britain, or some natives who had returned from the great city, brought tidings of the new faith which God had revealed to man. The landing of Cæsar upon our coast, with its attendant events, leading to the establishment of a new earthly dominion, is a scene preserved on the page of history with vividness; but the landing of the first Christians, as instruments in the hand of God for establishing His reign among our pagan ancestry, and what they said and did, how they were opposed, where they succeeded, and what was the measure of their success—all this, so interesting to curiosity, and affording such play for imagination, is lost, for ever lost, amidst the shadows of the past.

Tertullian expressly alludes to places in Britain inaccessible to the Romans, which had been subdued by Christ;\* so that, in his time, Christianity would seem to have penetrated further than the imperial arms, and to have reached, perhaps, as far as Scotland. The inspired records, at first in detached portions, and afterwards in their collective form, were prized, and circulated among early Christians as containing the authoritative rule of religious belief and conduct. Wherever the gospel was carried and embraced, the Book from which its facts and precepts were drawn would speedily follow; and we cannot question that the sacred writings were, at an early period, brought over to

\* *Africanus Judæos*, vii