THE ENGLISH BIBLE

ADDRESS OF

WILLIAM D. MELTON, President
of the University of South Carolina

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THE ENGLISH BIBLE

ADDRESS OF
WILLIAM D. MELTON, President
of the University of South Carolina

Delivered before the Abbeville District Bible Society
in Abbeville, South Carolina, on the
29th day of July, 1925

"God is his own interpreter
And He will make it plain."

EXTENSION DIVISION
UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH CAROLINA
1925
INTRODUCTION

The Abbeville District Bible Society is one of the oldest societies of its kind in the United States. It was formed in 1823 just seven years after the organization of its parent, the American Bible Society. The purpose of its organization as expressed in its constitution is to cooperate with the American Bible Society "in promoting a wider circulation of the Holy Scriptures, without note or comment * * * in the version now in common use". To this end it has been faithful. In the early years of its history it supplied the churches of its District with pulpit Bibles; and through its beneficence and generosity it has been made possible during its existence for every man, woman and child, white and colored, in its District, who could read, to own a Bible. Moreover it contributed to the sending of Bibles to California after the mad rush of so many thousands consequent to the discovery of gold in 1849; it distributed Bibles among the slaves and taught them to read at a time when it was a statutory offense to do so; and it distributed Bibles among the soldiers during the War between the States, and among the freedmen, after the War.

The officers and members of the Society have come from the highest type of our citizenship. Many names could be mentioned distinguished in business, in the professions, in politics, in peace and in war. It will suffice to give the names of its presidents. Hon. Patrick Noble was President from 1823 to 1840; Hon. D. L. Wardlaw from 1840 to 1853; Hon. T. C. Perrin from 1853 to 1877; Hon. Thomas Thomson from 1878 to 1880; Hon. Armistead Burt from 1881 to 1883; Rev. W. M. Grier, D.D. from 1884 to 1899; Rev. F. Y. Pressley, D.D. from 1900 to 1916; and the present incumbent, serving since his election in 1916, is that cultured Christian gentleman and scholar, Dr. J. I. McCain who graces and adorns the position of Head of the Department of English of Erskine College.
And so when I accepted the invitation to deliver the annual address for the Society it occurred to me that the most appropriate subject which I could choose was The English Bible, to the distribution of which the Society owes its existence and has devoted its entire efforts. It also seemed to me that at this time when the Bible is being attacked from so many angles it might not be inopportune to prepare and present a re-statement of how it came to us; of how its integrity has been preserved through the zeal and contests of those who loved and died for it as well as of those who despised it, of how at times it had to fight its own battles, with the blood of the martyrs dripping from its sacred leaves, and of how it has emerged in all its perfection and beauty not only as the greatest blessing of mankind but as the acknowledged classic of our mother tongue.

As I sat on the porch of the hotel in Abbeville just before going to deliver the address, the hotel porter engaging me in conversation said: “You know, Dr. Melton, there was a time when Abbeville furnished the brains for the whole United States.” I shall not argue the question. The history of Abbeville is the proud heritage of every citizen of our great State. And as we contemplate the splendor of so glorious a past no discerning mind will fail to observe the work of The Abbeville District Bible Society running like a golden thread through more than a hundred years and contributing its soft and gentle glow.

“'Tis not in costly piles of brick and stone,
Nor in the abundance of things we own,
Salvation lies.”

WILLIAM D. MELTON.

Columbia, South Carolina,
15 November, 1925.
"God is his own interpreter
And He will make it plain."

Preliminary Statement.

The three great book-religions of the world are Judaism, Christianity, and Mohammedanism. The sacred writings of the other religions are historic records as distinguished from authoritative sources of belief. Both the subject matter of the Koran and the exact original Arabic in which it was expressed are sacred to the Mohammedans. They allow no translations, and such translations as are in existence have been made by scholars not of their faith. Their Koran in its original form is the last and final word. The Jews, and more especially the Christians, on the contrary, have encouraged and insisted upon the translation of the Scriptures into the common language of the people of every land into which their creeds have gone; and it is an observation of significance that in almost every instance the translation is an improvement on the original. So it happens that the German Bible, the French Bible and the English Bible are better than the originals in Hebrew and Greek. There is something back of the original texts that impels and carries forward the message which they embrace, into the hearts and consciences of mankind with an ever increasing light and a better understanding of God's purposes; and that something is the inspiration which came in the beginning and continues to come in super-abundant freshness and beauty from God Himself.

The Septuagint.

The Old Testament was written originally in Hebrew and Aramaic. Aramaic was a dialect of classical Hebrew and was the vernacular of Palestine at the time of Christ. About 200 years before Christ, in response to persistent
demands, the Old Testament was translated into Greek, Greek having become the predominant language of the world after the conquest of Alexander the Great. This translation is known as the Septuagint. The word Septuagint is from the Latin *septuaginta*, meaning seventy. An interesting, though probably unfounded, story is related in explanation of the origin of the name. It is said that King Ptolemy Philadelphus, in response to the demand for a popular edition of the Scriptures and in furtherance of his desire to make a collection of sacred books, appointed 72 learned Hebrews, 6 from each tribe, sent them to the island of Pharos, and confined them in 72 rooms for 72 days for the purpose of making the translation; and that when they came out with their translations completed all the translations were alike. This story is not very generally accredited. The Septuagint was probably the result of the work of a great many years, some estimating the time consumed at as much as 150 years. It is of the utmost importance in the history of the English Bible. It is the Bible cited by Philo and Josephus and is the Bible used by Jesus Christ and St. Paul. A vast majority of the quotations from the Old Testament in the New Testament are from the Septuagint.

**The Vulgate.**

In the course of time, as the Roman Empire extended its sway and Latin came to be the language of the people, translations of the Septuagint into Latin began to appear in response to the popular demand. Versions were numerous, but none was authoritative and all were of uncertain values. St. Jerome, a profound and very alert scholar, undertook to supply the demand for an authorized version. To this end, he took up his residence at Bethlehem, where he became the head of a monastery, and after 14 years of arduous labor, with such assistance
as he could receive from the scholars associated with him in the monastery and from an intimate personal study of Palestine, he completed his translation of the Bible into Latin, embracing both The Old and The New Testament. St. Jerome's translation is known as the Vulgate. The name is from the Latin *vulgatus*, meaning common. As had been the case with the Septuagint, and as was to be the case with each subsequent translation, authorized and unauthorized, the publication of the Vulgate met with bitter criticism and violent opposition. But St. Jerome was a distinguished controversialist and a fearless fighter as well as an able scholar, and succeeded in having his translation recognized as the authorized Latin version. The Vulgate was soon very generally accepted and is today the only Latin version recognized as authentic by the Roman Catholic Church. The Vulgate was published in 404 A.D., sixty-four years after the death of Constantine the Great, the first Christian Emperor of the Roman Empire. The Vulgate was recognized as the world's best Bible for more than a thousand years. At Mayence, in the year 1455, an edition of the Vulgate, known as the Mazarin Bible, was the first book to come from the printing press of Gutenberg and Faust, inventors of the printing press and movable type.

**John Wycliffe's Bible.**

If we pass over the poetic paraphrases of Caedmon and Cynewulf and the abortive efforts of King Alfred and Ormin and others as mere mutterings of the coming storm, the first effort to translate the Bible into English was made by John Wycliffe, whose Bible appeared in 1382. Prior to Wycliffe's time there really was no English language or literature. Even as late as 1516 we find so gifted an Englishman as Sir Thomas More writing his Utopia in Latin, in all probability because Latin furnished a better vehicle for the expression of his thoughts
and ideas than the English of his time. The English language was in its formative period. It was at best an ill-sorted conglomeration of Saxon, Anglo-Saxon and Norman-French. Shakespeare and Spencer and Milton and Bacon had not yet come with their magic pens to crystallize the fragments of the language into a literature and show its wonderful possibilities in nobility and beauty and power of expression. It was reserved for John Wycliffe and Geoffrey Chaucer to become the fathers of the greatest language of all times. These two, Wycliffe and Chaucer, were contemporaries. Wycliffe was born in 1324 and Chaucer in 1328. They were not only contemporaries but friends. As Chaucer became the father of English poetry so Wycliffe became the father of English prose. The Bible of Wycliffe is the accepted standard of Middle English.

John Wycliffe is described as a great scholar and perhaps the greatest orator of his time. Twenty years after his death a younger contemporary (W. Thorpe) said that “he was considered by many to be the most holy of all the men of his age. He was of emaciated frame, spare, and well nigh destitute of strength. He was absolutely blameless in his conduct.” He was the idol of the masses who hung upon his eloquent words, but “was disliked by the higher orders of the clergy whose political power he antagonized.” His Bible was a translation of the Vulgate. Wycliffe knew neither Greek nor Hebrew. He did not have to know either to be the foremost scholar of Oxford in the fourteenth century. His translation was received with a storm of protest and his personality was subjected to the grossest vituperation and abuse. He was tried for heresy, his teaching was condemned and he himself was excommunicated.

One of the charges against Wycliffe was as follows: “This Master John Wycliffe, translated into the Anglic, not Angelic tongue, the Gospel. Whence it is made vulgar by him and more open to the reading of lay men and
women than it usually is to the knowledge of lettered and intelligent clergy, and thus the pearl is cast abroad and trodden under feet of swine. The jewel of the Church is turned into the common sport of the people.”

As further illustrative of the intolerant spirit of the times, the following is an epitaph written of him at St. Albans by one of the monks: “The devil’s instrument, Church’s enemy, people’s confusion, heretic’s idol, hypocrite’s mirror, schism’s broacher, hatred’s sower, lies’ forger, flatteries’ sink, who, stricken by the horrible judgment of God, breathed forth his soul to the dark mansion of the black devil.” Some time after his death a petition was presented to the Pope praying him “to order Wycliffe’s body to be taken out of consecrated ground and buried in a dunghill.” This petition was not granted, but forty years later we are told that “under a decree of the Council of Constance his bones were dug up and burned and the ashes flung into the little river Swift, which ‘runneth hard by his church at Lutterworth’. * * * And so, in the oft quoted words of old Fuller ‘as the Swift bare them into the Severn, and the Severn into the narrow seas, and they again into the ocean, thus the ashes of Wycliffe are an emblem of his teaching, which is now dispersed over all the world.’”

**William Tyndale’s Bible.**

About 100 years elapsed before another great version of the Bible appeared in English. During this time there had occurred several events of far reaching importance in the history of scriptural translation. The invention of the printing press in 1450 was followed by the invention of movable type in 1454. Therefore the translations had had to be laboriously copied by hand. In the same year of 1454 there came the fall of Constantinople. As a result there was an exodus of Greek and Hebrew scholars to western Europe. Previous translations had been from the Latin manuscripts and principally from the Vul-
gate. Under the influence of these scholars there was a renaissance of Greek and Hebrew learning and translators could now have recourse to the Greek and Hebrew manuscripts.

In 1483, a hundred years after the death of Wycliffe, one year after the birth of Luther, and nine years before the discovery of America, William Tyndale was born. He became distinguished for his scholarship at both Oxford and Cambridge. Herman Buschius, a prominent scholar of the times, who knew Tyndale at Worms, is quoted as saying that Tyndale "was so skilled in seven languages, Hebrew, Greek, Latin, Italian, French, Spanish and English, that whichever he spoke you would suppose it his native tongue." Tyndale must also have been adept in German, for it is inconceivable that so accomplished a linguist could have lived so long in Germany without becoming familiar with the language. Furthermore a perusal of Luther's New Testament published in 1522 must have appealed to him as of assistance in making his own translation which was to appear about three years later. In 1516 Erasmus, a Cambridge professor and one of the great scholars of the time, published his Greek New Testament. Stimulated perhaps by the success and reception of this publication, Tyndale undertook to get permission and assistance from the Bishop of London and others in authority to prepare and publish a translation of the Scriptures in English. This was denied him. The times were critical. Luther had burnt the Pope's Bull in Germany and the spirit of revolt against authority was in the air. If not arrested it might lead to anarchy and schism. Besides, England's king, Henry VIII, was violent in his opposition to Luther and wrote a treatise condemning Luther and praising the Pope, which was published in 1521 and won for him the title of Defender of the Faith. But Tyndale was not to be outdone. Not being permitted to carry on his work at home, he left his native land and went to Hamburg,
where amid poverty and distress, and surrounded by constant dangers, he devoted himself diligently to his task. The next year he placed his manuscript of the New Testament in the hands of printers at Cologne. In some way his secret became known, a part of his manuscript was seized, and the bishops and authorities of England were warned of his activities. Hurriedly gathering up such sheets of his manuscript as he could lay his hands on, Tyndale made his escape to Worms, and there in an atmosphere more congenial because of the local enthusiasm for Luther, he resumed and completed his work.

We are told that his translations were sent to England “in cases, in barrels, in bales of cloth, in sacks of flour, every secret way that could be devised; and in spite of the utmost diligence in watching the ports, many of them arrived and in a few years the books were scattered far and wide through the country.” A veritable “bootlegging” of the Scriptures into England! The bishops of England exerted every possible effort to stop the shipments and circulation of the books. The Bishop of London even went to the extremity of buying all that remained of the editions and had them burnt at Paul’s Cross. The purchase money was used to print and publish new and better editions; and the work went on with renewed energy and power. Finally Tyndale’s hiding place was treacherously betrayed by a villain named Phillips, in whom he confided, believing him to be a friend. He was clandestinely taken while at a friend’s house in Antwerp, confined for a year and a half in Vilvorde Castle, not far from Brussels, where he was denied even comfortable clothing, and on the 6th of October, 1536, he was first strangled to death and then burnt at the stake. According to Foxe, his last words were: “Lord, open the King of England’s eyes,” a prayer which was answered during the following year in the licensing of the Matthew’s and Coverdale editions.
Henry's only other child and daughter, Elizabeth. During the procession incident to her coronation a copy of the Genevan Bible was presented to her. She pressed it to her lips and thanked the donor for so precious a gift. However, no hope of having Elizabeth adopt the Genevan Bible was entertained. This Bible had been prepared by and under the direction of Calvin and John Knox, both of whom Elizabeth hated with all the venom of her heart, especially John Knox, whom she not only hated but whose great influence she feared. In order to conciliate and pacify her, therefore, her Archbishop Parker, probably at her instance, selected a revision committee, instructed them to follow the Great Bible wherever possible, and as a result produced what was known as the Bishop's Bible. This Bible was published in the year 1568 and shows a very marked influence of the Genevan Bible, though no credit was given. So far as the record goes, Elizabeth took no notice of the work and quietly withheld her approval. Elizabeth was always a Roman Catholic at heart.

In 1582 English scholars connected with the University of Douai published a translation of the New Testament at Rheims. The Old Testament of this edition was not published until 1609 just before the publication of the Authorized Version. These two translations are known as the Douai Bible. They were made from the Vulgate and are anti-Protestant. The preparation and publication of the Douai Bible were probably conceived of as an answer to the Genevan Bible. In the preface Protestants are accused of "casting the holy to dogs and pearls to hogs."

The Authorized Version.

"God moves in a mysterious way
His wonders to perform."

The making of the Authorized Version was not the result of premeditation on the part of King James. It was
to a large extent an accident. On the 24th of March, 1603, Elizabeth died unmarried and without issue. With her the Tudor line of English sovereigns expired, and the Stuart line descending from Henry VII succeeded to the throne. James VI of Scotland therefore became James I of England and immediately after the death of Elizabeth made his royal progress from Edinburgh to London. He is described as being thirty-seven years of age, a little over middle height, as loving a good horse though an ungainly rider, as being a heavy drinker of the wines of the times, as having fallen off his horse three or four times during the royal progress, and as having horribly coarse, even gross manners. Macaulay said that "his cowardice, his childishness, his pedantry, his ungainly person and manners, his provincial accent made him an object of derision," that "even in his virtues and accomplishments there was something eminently unkingly," and that it seemed too bad that royalty should be exhibited to the world stammering, slobbering, shedding unmanly tears, trembling at the drawn sword, and talking in the style alternately of a buffoon and a pedagogue." In describing him John Richard Green said: "His big head, his slobbering tongue, his quilted clothes, his rickety legs, stood out in as grotesque a contrast with what men recalled of Henry and Elizabeth as his gabble and rhodomontade, his want of personal dignity, his buffoonery, his coarseness of speech, his pedantry, his contemptible cowardice. Under this ridiculous exterior, however, lay a man of much natural ability, a ripe scholar with a considerable fund of shrewdness, of mother wit and ready repartee." Melville, a Scotch minister, on one occasion "plucked him by his royal sleeve and called him 'God's silly vassal' right to his face." And Henry IV of France, one of his contemporaries, is said to have referred to him as the "wisest fool in Christendom." H. W. Hoare in his book entitled "Our English Bible" says: "Elizabeth's mind was secular and political, so
that religious questions had in themselves little or no interest for her, but James was a born theologian. From his childhood he had been devoted to the study of the Bible. He had written a paraphrase of the Book of Revelation. He had translated parts of the Psalter. His conversation savored always of scriptural allusions and scriptural phrases.” A strange instrument indeed to be selected as the means of giving to a trouble-tossed and sin-cursed world the most perfect expression of God’s revealed will! The Bible was evidently James’ hobby and the wisdom of choosing him to direct the great enterprise of revision has been tested and abundantly proven for more than three hundred years.

I have referred to the making of the Authorized Version as being largely a matter of accident. It happened thus. When James was on his way in his royal progress to London in March, 1603, the Puritan wing of the Church, with Dr. Reynolds, President of Corpus Christi College, Oxford, as spokesman, presented to him what is known in history as the Miliary (or Millenary) Petition. The petitioners did not have a revision of the Bible in mind. They were satisfied with the Genevan Bible just as the Anglican wing of the Church would in all probability have been satisfied with the Bishop’s Bible. The complaint of the petitioners was against the Prayer Book. They petitioned that some alteration “be made in the Church services, so as to purify them from what they deemed to be superstitious rites and ceremonies, such as the sign of the cross in baptism, the use of the ring in marriage, and the use of the surplice in the Church. They also further petitioned for the provision of a well-trained ministry of preachers, and for a greater strictness in ecclesiastical discipline.” James had no idea of granting the Puritans any relief whatever and so far as appears the matter of a new edition of the Bible had not occurred to him. Not daring to deny a hearing of the petitioners James called a conference to
be held at Hampton Court on the 15th of January of the following year, 1604, for the purpose of hearing the petition and invited not only the petitioners but the opponents of the petition to be present. The convention met at the appointed time and place. James meant really only to harry the petitioners and dismiss the petition. During the discussion, however, Dr. Reynolds animadverted upon certain errors of translation in the Great Bible and in the Bishop's Bible and spoke in praise and commendation of the accuracy and value of the Genevan Bible. The King replied that he had never seen a good translation of the Bible in English but that in his judgment the worst of all was the Genevan Bible. He objected to the notes in the Genevan Bible. He agreed with the annotators in their notes on the doctrine of predestination for that was in accordance with his idea of the divine right by which he had been predestined to be the ruler of his people. But he could not stand for the notes on the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man enforcing the democratic doctrine of man's equality; and there was a note which seemed to say that there were circumstances under which it would be wrong for a subject to obey the command of his sovereign. This brought from Dr. Reynolds the suggestion: "Why then not let us have a uniform edition prepared under the authority of the King?" The Bishop of London grumbled that "if every man's humor should be followed there would be no end of translating." But the suggestion, incidental and extemporized though it was, had caught the fancy of the King, and by the 22nd of January, 1604, all the preliminaries appear to have been settled and the work was well under way. And let it be said to the everlasting credit and honor of James I, for it is perhaps the only worthy act of his career, that he entered upon his part of the work with a sincerity, earnestness, zeal and ability of which all men must have thought him utterly incapable. The part performed by him in producing the
“This is the secret of England’s greatness.” These are but a few encomiums which I have garnered at random from the many read in preparing this lecture. And all these testimonials have been made notwithstanding the Bible was never intended as literature in the ordinary acceptation of the term.

The victory of the Bible over infidelity and atheism is well illustrated by a few instances which I have taken from Will H. Brown’s book of Illustrative Incidents. He says: “The printing press from which Voltaire’s works were issued has been used to print the Word of God. Chesterfield’s parlor, once an infidel club room, is now a vestry where Christians meet for prayer and praise. Hume predicted the death of Christianity in twenty years, but the first meeting of the Bible Society in Edinburgh was held in the room in which he died. Paine on landing in New York, predicted that in five years not a Bible would be found in the United States, but there are more Bible Societies in America to-day than in any other country in the world.”

Among the interesting statistics sent out by the American Bible Society from its publishing house in New York covering the period through the latest detailed statistics available are the following: The Scriptures have been published as a whole or in parts in 800 different languages and dialects. The New York Bible House alone during its comparatively brief existence has printed 76,000,000 copies of the Bible, and the American Bible Society a total of 164,907,176 since its foundation in 1816. The total number of volumes of the Scriptures printed and circulated since the invention of printing by the three great English and American Bible Societies is estimated as being in excess of 625,000,000 with the number increasing with the demand from day to day. The oldest of the principal societies engaged in printing the Scriptures was founded in 1804 and the youngest in
1861. About 30,000,000 copies are being produced every year and this does not supply the demand.

In Conclusion.

The Bible has long withstood the tests of time and notwithstanding the many efforts made to destroy it by enemies both within and without its own household it has pursued the even tenor of its way and has gone on working its miracles, healing broken hearts, consoling the disconsolate, relieving the oppressed, comforting the poor and afflicted, restoring troubled souls, making homes happy, inspiring forlorn humanity with hope, and consecrating the efforts of a selfish sinful world to the accomplishment of universal love and peace. No wonder Sir Walter Scott in his dying hour called for it as “the only Book”.

It has been likened to a great lighthouse. The Old Testament is the foundation. The New Testament is the superstructure. The four gospels are the plate glass sides of the lantern. And the light within burning with steady glow, gloriously effulgent, radiating its brilliantly beautiful beams o’er land and sea everywhere throughout the world is none other than He who said of Himself: “I am the light of the world.”
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