

Editorial

Translating the Bible

At the end of this year we shall be celebrating the sixth centenary of the death of John Wycliffe, the 'Morning Star' of the Reformation. It is a commemoration which is bound to look somewhat pale beside the great extravaganzas staged last year for the five-hundredth anniversary of Martin Luther's birth, but there is at least a chance that it will attract some notice. Wycliffe, almost alone of the English Reformers, is actually commemorated in the Church of England's official calendar on 31 December.

It is Wycliffe's historical misfortune to have been a pioneer whose immediate initiatives failed, either because they fizzled out or because they were transformed into something else—in his case, into a widespread peasant's revolt with which he had little real sympathy. His work bore fruit in distant Bohemia, thanks to the fact that he wrote in Latin and was therefore accessible to a European audience, and, through the Hussites, he influenced Luther and the first Protestants.

In England, his lasting claim to fame is that he was the first to translate the Bible into the vernacular (if we except Anglo-Saxons in the time of King Alfred) and it is in this capacity that he is most widely honoured today. His name graces a score of Protestant institutions and societies, from Wycliffe Hall in Oxford, which of course was his university, to the Wycliffe Bible Translators.

Today, Bible translation is a very different enterprise from what it was in Wycliffe's day. Then, the sacred text had been rendered into perhaps a score of languages, many of which were quite unknown in medieval England—Armenian, for example, or Ge'ez in Ethiopia. For Wycliffe and his contemporaries there was really only one text of the Scriptures, the Latin Vulgate of St Jerome, which was the official Bible of the Western Church. In spite of the criticisms which the Reformers were to level at it, Jerome's work was a masterpiece of both scholarship and literature. He did not just copy the Greek Septuagint, but went back to the Hebrew original for his readings, much to the discomfiture of St Augustine, who thought that because the Greek text was that used by the apostles and the early church, it should be the accepted Christian norm.

Wycliffe knew nothing of Hebrew and virtually nothing of Greek, but he did know the Bible, and believed passionately that its message should be given to the people in a language they could understand. His dream was not to be realized until the sixteenth century, when the great Geneva Bible of 1560, and later on the Authorized Version

of 1611, made their way into the homes and hearts of the English-speaking peoples.

In our own generation, the principle of open access to the Scriptures is no longer disputed by anybody. Printing technology and universal literacy have made the Bible a book which almost anyone can buy and read; indeed, as the Wycliffe Bible Translators remind us, virtually the only people still deprived of the Scriptures are those belonging to small tribal minorities in remote corners of the globe, or those living under hostile regimes. They are a formidable number *in toto* but, within the limits of the possible, everything is being done to facilitate translation and distribution.

A bigger obstacle to Bible reading, at least in western countries, is television, though of course enterprising Americans have long since made it available on film, records, tapes, video-cassettes and even in comic-strip form! In the English language there is a translation for every taste, and now it is not unusual for every person in a Bible-study group to bring a different version! How different it all is from the days when Europe had only one Bible—even if only a tiny minority could read it.

In the six centuries which have passed since Wycliffe's death, there have been losses as well as gains, though few would dispute that the latter far outweigh the former.

In one respect, however, there is a remarkable similarity between his day and ours, and this gives considerable cause for disquiet. In the fourteenth century the Bible was restricted, if not actually forbidden to the laity, because it was thought to contain dangerous ideas which in the hands of the unskilled might lead to schism, heresy and rebellion—something which did indeed happen. The church kept as close a watch as it could on its sacred text, though it was expounded freely, and to the modern mind quite fantastically, in the monasteries and universities. In fact it was a text which belonged to the theologians, who made of it what they would.

Today it is quite astonishing to think that we have, in this respect, returned to the situation which prevailed in the late Middle Ages. The range of possible translations has not helped matters; it is now necessary to turn to a commentary, or to an expert, to find out 'what the Greek says'. How many study groups lose precious hours looking up the 'real meaning' of a particular word or passage?

The current fashion for academic study has produced another phenomenon as well, one which can be met at the highest level of research. This is the belief that we are distant in time, space and culture from the biblical writers—so distant, in fact, that it is quite impossible to understand them without scholarly advice, which naturally varies and changes every other minute or so. 'Thus saith the Lord' is now a matter of debate: what did the original author intend to convey to his hearers by such a mysterious phrase? It is good for a

lecture or two, perhaps even a PhD thesis or a book. A really iconoclastic bishop might even manage to get his name in the papers by making some outrageous statement about it all—it certainly would not be the first time such a thing has happened.

In the face of this latest challenge to the open Bible, what can we say? There are two cardinal principles of biblical interpretation which must be borne in mind by any student. Those who want a detailed discussion of them must read C. S. Lewis, *Fern-seed and Elephants*, surely the best popular analysis of biblical criticism generally available. But for those who lack the time, the principles can be stated quite simply. First, a manuscript is innocent until proved guilty. Not everybody in the last two thousand years was a fool, and we need not suppose that generations copied and revered a book which made no sense. Secondly, a great text will survive any commentator. To regard Bultmann as a definitive interpreter of Scripture would be like regarding the Swingle Singers as the definitive interpretation of Bach. We may admire their achievement, but in the end the original must prevail.

The Bible will remain open to the ordinary person as long as he or she does not lose elementary common sense, backed in this case by principles of literary and artistic criticism which are accepted in the best circles. Wycliffe's memory should be commemorated by looking again at the text of Scripture, and seeking in it the Word of eternal life.

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