

## CHAPTER I

### THE BIBLE IN ENGLISH LITERATURE

It is no exaggeration to say that the English Bible is, next to Shakespeare, the greatest work in English literature, and that it will have much more influence than even Shakespeare upon the written and spoken language of the English race. For this reason, to study English literature without some general knowledge of the relation of the Bible to that literature would be to leave one's literary education very incomplete. It is not necessary to consider the work from a religious point of view at all; indeed, to so consider it would be rather a hindrance to the understanding of its literary excellence. Some persons have ventured to say that it is only since Englishmen ceased to believe in the Bible that they began to discover how beautiful it was. This is not altogether true; but it is partly true. For it is one thing to consider every word of a book as the word of God or gods, and another thing to consider it simply as the work of men like ourselves. Naturally we should think it our duty to suppose the work of a divine being perfect in itself, and to imagine beauty and truth where neither really exists. The wonder of the English Bible can really be best appreciated by those who, knowing it to be the work of men much less educated and cultivated than the scholars of the nineteenth century, nevertheless perceive that those men were able to do in literature what no man of our own day could possibly do.

Of course in considering the work of the translators, we must remember the magnificence of the original. I should not like to say that the Bible is the greatest of all religious books. From the moral point of view it contains very much that we can not to-day approve of; and what is good in it can be found in the sacred books of other nations. Its

ethics can not even claim to be absolutely original. The ancient Egyptian scriptures contain beauties almost superior in moral exaltation to anything contained in the Old Testament; and the sacred books of other eastern nations, notably the sacred books of India, surpass the Hebrew scriptures in the highest qualities of imagination and of profound thought. It is only of late years that Europe, through the labour of Sanskrit and Pali scholars, has become acquainted with the astonishing beauty of thought and feeling which Indian scholars enshrined in scriptures much more voluminous than the Hebrew Bible; and it is not impossible that this far off literature will some day influence European thought quite as much as the Jewish Bible. Everywhere to-day in Europe and America the study of Buddhist and Sanskrit literature is being pursued not only with eagerness but with enthusiasm — an enthusiasm which sometimes reaches to curious extremes. I might mention, in example, the case of a rich man who recently visited Japan on his way from India. He had in New Zealand a valuable property; he was a man of high culture, and of considerable social influence. One day he happened to read an English translation of the “Bhagavadgītā.” Almost immediately he resolved to devote the rest of his life to religious study in India, in a monastery among the mountains; and he gave up wealth, friends, society, everything that western civilisation could offer him, in order to seek truth in a strange country. Certainly this is not the only instance of the kind; and while such incidents can happen, we may feel sure that the influence of religious literature is not likely to die for centuries to come.

But every great scripture, whether Hebrew, Indian, Persian, or Chinese, apart from its religious value will be found to have some rare and special beauty of its own; and in this respect the original Bible stands very high as a monument of sublime poetry and of artistic prose. If it is not the greatest of religious books as a literary creation, it is at all events one of the greatest; and the proof is to be found in

the inspiration which millions and hundreds of millions, dead and living, have obtained from its utterances. The Semitic races have always possessed in a very high degree the genius of poetry, especially poetry in which imagination plays a great part; and the Bible is the monument of Semitic genius in this regard. Something in the serious, stern, and reverential spirit of the genius referred to made a particular appeal to western races having certain characteristics of the same kind. Themselves uncultivated in the time that the Bible was first made known to them, they found in it almost everything that they thought and felt, expressed in a much better way than they could have expressed it. Accordingly the northern races of Europe found their inspiration in the Bible; and the enthusiasm for it has not yet quite faded away.

But the value of the original, be it observed, did not make the value of the English Bible. Certainly it was an inspiring force; but it was nothing more. The English Bible is perhaps a much greater piece of fine literature, altogether considered, than the Hebrew Bible. It was so for a particular reason which it is very necessary for the student to understand. The English Bible is a product of literary evolution.

In studying English criticisms upon different authors, I think that you must have sometimes felt impatient with the critics who told you, for example, that Tennyson was partly inspired by Wordsworth and partly by Keats and partly by Coleridge; and that Coleridge was partly inspired by Blake and Blake by the Elizabethans, and so on. You may have been tempted to say, as I used very often myself to say, "What does it matter where the man got his ideas from? I care only for the beauty that is in his work, not for a history of his literary education." But to-day the value of the study of such relations appears in quite a new light. Evolutional philosophy, applied to the study of literature as to everything else, has shown us conclusively that man is not a god who can make something out of nothing, and

that every great work of genius must depend even less upon the man of genius himself than upon the labours of those who lived before him. Every great author must draw his thoughts and his knowledge in part from other great authors, and these again from previous authors, and so on back, till we come to that far time in which there was no written literature, but only verses learned by heart and memorised by all the people of some one tribe or place, and taught by them to their children and to their grandchildren. It is only in Greek mythology that the divinity of Wisdom leaps out of a god's head, in full armour. In the world of reality the more beautiful a work of art, the longer, we may be sure, was the time required to make it, and the greater the number of different minds which assisted in its development.

So with the English Bible. No one man could have made the translation of 1511. No one generation of men could have done it. It was not the labour of a single century. It represented the work of hundreds of translators working through hundreds of years, each succeeding generation improving a little upon the work of the previous generation, until in the seventeenth century the best had been done of which the English brain and the English language was capable. In no other way can the surprising beauties of style and expression be explained. No subsequent effort could improve the Bible of King James. Every attempt made since the seventeenth century has only resulted in spoiling and deforming the strength and the beauty of the authorised text.

Now you will understand why, from the purely literary point of view, the English Bible is of the utmost importance for study. Suppose we glance for a moment at the principal events in the history of this evolution.

The first translation of the Bible into a western tongue was that made by Jerome (commonly called Saint Jerome) in the fourth century; he translated directly from the Hebrew and other Arabic languages into Latin, then the language

of the Empire. This translation into Latin was called the Vulgate,—from *vulgāre*, “to make generally known.” The Vulgate is still used in the Roman church. The first English translations which have been preserved to us were made from the Vulgate, not from the original tongues.

First of all, John Wyclif’s Bible may be called the foundation of the seventeenth century Bible. Wyclif’s translation, in which he was helped by many others, was published between 1380 and 1388. So we may say that the foundation of the English Bible dates from the fourteenth century, one thousand years after Jerome’s Latin translation. But Wyclif’s version, excellent as it was, could not serve very long: the English language was changing too quickly. Accordingly, in the time of Henry VIII Tyndale and Coverdale, with many others, made a new translation, this time not from the Vulgate, but from the Greek text of the great scholar Erasmus. This was the most important literary event of the time, for “it coloured the entire complexion of subsequent English prose,”—to use the words of Professor Gosse. This means that all prose in English written since Henry VIII has been influenced, directly or indirectly, by the prose of Tyndale’s Bible, which was completed about 1535. Almost at the same time a number of English divines, under the superintendence of Archbishop Cranmer, gave to the English language a literary treasure scarcely inferior to the Bible itself, and containing wonderful translations from the Scriptures,—the “Book of Common Prayer.” No English surpasses the English of this book, still used by the church; and many translators have since found new inspiration from it.

A revision of this famous Bible was made in 1565, entitled “The Bishops’ Bible.” The cause of the revision was largely doctrinal, and we need not trouble ourselves about this translation farther than to remark that Protestantism was re-shaping the Scriptures to suit the new state religion. Perhaps this edition may have had something to do with the determination of the Roman Catholics to make an English

Bible of their own. The Jesuits began the work in 1582 at Rheims, and by 1610 the Roman Catholic version known as the Douay (or Douai) version — because of its having been made chiefly at the Catholic College of Douai in France — was completed. This version has many merits; next to the wonderful King James version, it is certainly the most poetical; and it has the further advantage of including a number of books which Protestantism has thrown out of the Authorised Version, but which have been used in the Roman church since its foundation. But I am speaking of the book only as a literary English production. It was not made with the help of original sources; its merits are simply those of a melodious translation from the Latin Vulgate.

At last, in 1611, was made, under the auspices of King James, the famous King James version; and this is the great literary monument of the English language. It was the work of many learned men; but the chief worker and supervisor was the Bishop of Winchester, Lancelot Andrews, perhaps the most eloquent English preacher that ever lived. He was a natural-born orator, with an exquisite ear for the cadences of language. To this natural faculty of the Bishop's can be attributed much of the musical charm of the English in which the Bible was written. Still, it must not be supposed that he himself did all the work, or even more than a small proportion of it. What he did was to tone it; he overlooked and corrected all the text submitted to him, and suffered only the best forms to survive. Yet what magnificent material he had to choose from! All the translations of the Bible that had been made before his time were carefully studied with a view to the conservation of the best phrases, both for sound and for form. We must consider the result not merely as a study of literature in itself, but also as a study of eloquence; for every attention was given to those effects to be expected from an oratorical recitation of the text in public.

This marks the end of the literary evolution of the Bible. Everything that has since been done has only been in the

direction of retrogression, of injury to the text. We have now a great many later versions, much more scholarly, so far as correct scholarship is concerned, than the King James version, but none having any claim to literary importance. Unfortunately, exact scholars are very seldom men of literary ability; the two faculties are rarely united. The Bible of 1870, known as the Oxford Bible, and now used in the Anglican state-church, evoked a great protest from the true men of letters, the poets and critics who had found their inspirations in the useful study of the old version. The new version was the work of fourteen years; it was made by the united labour of the greatest scholars in the English-speaking world; and it is far the most exact translation that we have. Nevertheless the literary quality has been injured to such an extent that no one will ever turn to the new revision for poetical study. Even among the churches there was a decided condemnation of this scholarly treatment of the old text; and many of the churches refused to use the book. In this case, conservatism is doing the literary world a service, keeping the old King James version in circulation, and insisting especially upon its use in Sunday schools.

We may now take a few examples of the differences between the Revised Version and the Bible of King James. Professor Saintsbury, in an essay upon English prose, published some years ago, said that the most perfect piece of English prose in the language was that comprised in the sixth and seventh verses of the eighth chapter of the Song of Songs:

Set me as a seal upon thine heart, as a seal upon thine arm: for love *is* strong as death; jealousy *is* cruel as the grave; the coals thereof are coals of fire, *which hath* a most vehement flame.

Many waters cannot quench love, neither can the floods drown it: if a man would give all the substance of his house for love, it would utterly be condemned.

I should not like to say that the Professor is certainly right in calling this the finest prose in the English language;

but he is a very great critic, whose opinion must be respected and considered, and the passage is certainly very fine. But in the Revised Version, how tame the same text has become in the hands of the scholarly translators!

The flashes thereof are flashes of fire, a very flame of the Lord.

Now as a description of jealousy, not to speak of the literary execution at all, which is the best? What, we may ask, has been gained by calling jealousy "a flame of the Lord" or by substituting the word "flashes" for "coals of fire"? All through the new version are things of this kind. For example, in the same Song of Songs there is a beautiful description of eyes, like "doves by the rivers of waters, washed with milk, and fitly set." By substituting "rivers" only for "rivers of waters" the text may have gained in exactness, but it has lost immeasurably, both in poetry and in sound. Far more poetical is the verse as given in the Douai version: "His eyes are as doves upon brooks of waters, which are washed with milk, and sit beside the beautiful streams."

It may even be said without any question that the mistakes of the old translators were often much more beautiful than the original. A splendid example is given in the verse of Job, chapter twenty-six, verse thirteen: "By his spirit he hath garnished the heavens; his hand hath formed the crooked serpent." By the crooked serpent was supposed to be signified the grand constellation called *Draco*, or the Dragon. And the figure is sublime. It is still more sublime in the Douai translation. "His obstetric hand hath brought forth the winding serpent." This is certainly a grand imagination—the hand of God, like the hand of a midwife, bringing forth a constellation out of the womb of the eternal night. But in the Revised Version, which is exact, we have only "His hand hath pierced the swift serpent"! All the poetry is dead.

There are two methods for the literary study of any book—the first being the study of its thought and emotion;



the second only that of its workmanship. A student of literature should study some of the Bible from both points of view. In attempting the former method he will do well to consider many works of criticism, but for the study of the text as literature, his duty is very plain—the King James version is the only one that ought to form the basis of his study, though he should look at the Douai version occasionally. Also he should have a book of references, such as Cruden's Concordance, by help of which he can collect together in a few moments all the texts upon any particular subject, such as the sea, the wind, the sky, human life, the shadows of evening. The study of the Bible is not one which I should recommend to very young Japanese students, because of the quaintness of the English. Before a good knowledge of English forms is obtained, the archaisms are apt to affect the students' mode of expression. But for the advanced student of literature, I should say that some knowledge of the finest books in the Bible is simply indispensable. The important books to read are not many. But one should read at least the books of Genesis, Exodus, Ruth, Esther, the Song of Songs, Proverbs, —and, above all, Job. Job is certainly the grandest book in the Bible; but all of those which I have named are books that have inspired poets and writers in all departments of English literature to such an extent that you can scarcely read a masterpiece in which there is not some conscious or unconscious reference to them. Another book of philosophical importance is Ecclesiastes, where, in addition to much proverbial wisdom, you will find some admirable world-poetry—that is, poetry which contains universal truth about human life in all times and all ages. Of the historical books and the law books I do not think that it is important to read much; the literary element in these is not so pronounced. It is otherwise with the prophetic books, but here in order to obtain a few jewels of expression, you have to read a great deal that is of little value. Of the New Testament there is very little equal to the Old in literary value; indeed, I should recommend the

reading only of the closing book—the book called the Revelation, or the Apocalypse, from which we have derived a literary adjective “apocalyptic,” to describe something at once very terrible and very grand. Whether one understands the meaning of this mysterious text makes very little difference; the sonority and the beauty of its sentences, together with the tremendous character of its imagery, can not but powerfully influence mind and ear, and thus stimulate literary taste. At least two of the great prose writers of the nineteenth century, Carlyle and Ruskin, have been vividly influenced by the book of the Revelation. Every period of English literature shows some influence of Bible study, even from the old Anglo-Saxon days; and during the present year, the study has so little slackened that one constantly sees announcements of new works upon the literary elements of the Bible. Perhaps one of the best is Professor Moulton’s “Modern Reader’s Bible,” in which the literary side of the subject receives better consideration than in any other work of the kind published for general use.

If this brief lecture has shown the real place of the King James version in English literature, and suggested to you the reason why the book has an all-important value, independently of any religious thought in it, — quite sufficient has been said. It would be of no use whatever to spend the time otherwise utilisable, in pointing out beauties of the text. What beauty there is is of a kind so simple that explanation is quite unnecessary. Where I think that the value of the reading would be greatest for you, is in regard to measure and symmetry and euphony in English construction. But that means a great deal—so much that the best illustration of it is the observation already made, that all English written since the sixteenth century has been coloured by the Bible.