

How to Read

The English Bible

A CANADIAN CHAUTAUQUA LECTURE

BY REV. JOHN BURTON, B.D.

TORONTO
PRESS OF THE CANADA PRESBYTERIAN

1891

1891

(2)

76076

Newry J. Marman
From the Auction

HOW TO READ THE ENGLISH BIBLE

A CANADIAN CHAUTAUQUA LECTURE.

1896

“ Without faith it is impossible to be well pleasing unto God, for he that cometh to God must first believe that He is.—Belief cometh of hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ.” That word for Protestant Christendom is to be found in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, which confessedly contain “all things necessary to salvation ;” and, being “given by inspiration of God,” are the supreme rule of Christian faith and life. Worried with doubts, frenzied by the lashings of an awakened conscience, Augustine fled from the schools of philosophy wherein no rest was found, to the sects of Christendom only to find perplexities multiplied ; flinging himself under a fig tree in despair a voice directed him to the Scriptures in the hands of a friend crying, “Tolle lege ; tolle lege.” “Take, read.” He read and found peace. “The Holy Spirit bore witness by and with the word in his heart.” This is practically the position of the Churches of Evangelical Protestantism as to the relation borne by the Scriptures to the individual soul.

But, as our translators in their epistle to the reader ask : “How shall men understand that which is kept close in an unknown tongue ?” One characteristic of evangelical Christianity is that all men have common right unto and interest in these Scriptures, hence one of its crowning principles is, the Bible in the vulgar or mother tongue to all peoples. Many years ago a returned missionary said to his friends that wherever he went in China, Java, Siam or elsewhere, he met one missionary neither Presbyterian, Episcopalian, Congregational nor Methodist, but who combined the excellencies of all ; who was always ready to speak for God with undoubted

utterance; was never offensive; could be silent where not wanted; and who was more satisfactory in the presentation of truth than any other. That missionary was the Bible as given in the native tongue by the Bible societies. The book of all books, the book whose teaching has changed the face of the earth, and which is the true palladium of liberty wherever it is an open page for the people to read, i.e., where men have it in their homes and in their own tongue. Therefore, for us English-speaking peoples the English Bible is our Bible, the Bible we must read, by which we, through patience and comfort, have hope.

This applies not only to the merely English reader, but to those who in after years may become familiar with the original Hebrew and Greek; for their first impressions in childhood, which largely mould all after judgments and feelings, are made by the truths as taught in English words; the prayers lisped in earliest life are English prayers, after the English Bible's model. Therefore, for learned and unlearned, prince, peer and peasant, how to use aright the English Bible is a question of no small import, not only to the teacher, but also to the parent and the friend. As the subject opens up it is so wide that we must crave pardon for what we do not say which is important to say, and to present mere hints on some few points so far as our time limit will permit. Take what we do say as merely introducing a study your lifetime will leave incomplete.

For practically giving the Bible to his countrymen in an English dress, Wycliffe has been called the Morning Star of the Reformation; our chief interest lies in the version generally used and known as the Authorized, and which is almost a lineal descendant of the Wycliffe Bible. The stately yet simple grandeur of the Authorized Version's style has woven it into the very texture of Anglo-Saxon life wherever found. Moreover, its general faithfulness to the spirit of the originals has given it an unquestioned superiority. It must, however, be remembered that no translation, however faithful, can exactly reproduce. We cannot give another tongue the music of our own. In all the richness of classic languages there is no word that exactly represents the mel-

ody and sentiment of our one word "home." There is no English representative of the Scotch "pawky." We may have found some years ago amid the Highlands of Scotland some of the tenderness to be found in the Oriental "shepherd." Certainly not in the "droves" of sheep huddled together for our markets. Our word "word" is in many respects a poor rendering of the Greek "logos" (John i. 1), as Goethe's Faust makes plain when studying that verse he reasons:—

"'Tis written, 'In the beginning was the *Word*.'
 Here am I balked: Who now can help afford?
 The *Word*? Impossible so high to rate it.
 And otherwise must I translate it,
 If by the Spirit I am truly taught,
 Then thus: 'In the beginning was the *Thought*.'
 This first line let me weigh completely,
 Lest my impatient pen proceed too fleetly.
 Is it the *Thought* which works, creates indeed?
 'In the beginning was the *Power*,' I read.
 Yet as I write a warning is suggested,
 That I the sense may not have fairly tested:
 The Spirit aids me; no! I see the light!
 'In the beginning was the *Act*,' I write."

This certainly is an exceptionally difficult word for the translator, but the example may suffice to indicate the unavoidable weakness of a translation. Could our theological colourings be minimized instead of magnified, a paraphrased rather than a translated Bible would better serve the general public.

But if every one of us must give an account of himself to God, how can that account be intelligently rendered if under a translation His will may be veiled? The object of this lecture is in a measure so to direct that none need err, if only men would be content to *rightly* use that which they have, and not presume on that which they have not. Our English Bible *is* a translation, as its title pages declare; and as a translation it should be read; and though a translation must in some respects fail in exactly reproducing the original, it ought not to fail in representing the spirit; and confessedly the spirit of the revelations found in both the Old Testament

and the New has been well maintained in our accepted version. Let the plainest reader be content to find the will of God for man's salvation in the Scriptures, and though a wayfaring man he need not err therein. No, nor in minuter matters if he will but walk advisedly ; circumspectly and not haughtily or hastily.

By a strange perversity of our printers, while our common English Bible still retains our translators' fulsome dedication to "the most high and mighty" pedant "Prince James," their noteworthy epistle to the reader has been left out. In it we are admonished that they "have not tied themselves to a uniformity of phrasing, or to an identity of words" in their rendering of the Hebrew or Greek, lest they should fall into that "niceness in words, which was always counted the next step to trifling"—or that they should be esteemed "partial" in their use of good English words by saying "as it were to certain words, stand up higher, have a place in the Bible always, and to others of like quality get you hence, be banished forever." The English reader thereby is hindered from at once seeing that "eternal" and "everlasting" as in Matt. xxv. 46 are identical ; that "church" is in itself nothing more than "assembly" as the word is rendered in Acts xix. 41 ; that "bishopric," Acts i. 20, has no reference whatever to the ecclesiastical authority known by that name, but is simply overseership or charge ; and that "appear," 1 John iii. 2, is the "manifest" of verses 5, 8, 10. In this respect the Revised Version of 1881 is far the better guide. As an illustration of the need of "helps," when one desires to take advantage of verbal differences in the more minute study of the Scriptures, let the following have its lessons. Our translators, as they warned the reader, have used synonyms as the rhythm of the sentence seemed to require. (Hence its superiority in style to the Revised Version, which has aimed at giving an exact translation.) Thus we find the words "judgment—condemnation—damnation" used apparently at random for the Greek equivalent. A distinction we have seen drawn between them, thus : Judgment is the declaring of man guilty. In which sense we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, Rom. iii. 9, xiv. 10.

Condemnation is the passing of the sentence from which the believer is freed, viii. 1. Damnation is the infliction of the penalty, iii. 8—a very ingenious, and perhaps harmless, exegesis, imperfect however in one particular, that is, in being untrue. In the first instance “judgment seat” is a single Greek word corresponding to our “criminal dock,” while judgment, condemnation, damnation, represent the same word in the original, or when what might be held as a stronger word is used in the Greek, the translators have given “judgment.” In this connexion let my hearer read John iii. 17-19, substituting as our revisers have, judge and judgment for condemn and condemnation, and ask themselves whether some fresh light is not thereby thrown upon those utterances.

Reverent and faithful scholarship has done very much during the past few years for the diligent student of the English Bible. And we almost venture the assertion that the man who essays to teach without one or more of the helps now ready to hand, if ignorant, is criminally so. Let two of these aids be mentioned.

First, because of the wide range of scholarship engaged, and the thoroughness of its work—the Revised Version of 1881 and 1885, the New Testament appearing in the former year, the entire Bible in the latter. Its prefaces, notes, and the appendices of the American Committees are most valuable sources of information, and reliable. The English reader therein finds, e.g., that “flock” not “fold” should be read John x. 16. and will learn thereby to discount the struggle for mere organic unity in the Christian Church, and to enlarge the sphere of Christian sympathy beyond the limits of “Our Church,” till all who follow the Good Shepherd in sincerity and in truth are embraced in the folds which together make up the flock of God. Such archaisms as “Take no thought” (Matt. vi. 25, comp. 1 Sam. ix. 5) are expressed in the language of to-day, “Be not anxious.” Work does not kill, worry does. Be prudent, not burdened with anxiety.

The other help that in this connection calls for mention is the “Variorum Bible” of Messrs. Eyre and Spottiswoode of London, which, in a portable form, gives to the English

reader the results of the best and latest researches into the text of Scripture, and enables him to form an independent judgment as to the meaning of the sacred volume. This work first appeared in 1876, and has improved through several editions; its most recent edition notes all the important readings of the Revised Version, as indeed many were anticipated by the earlier; and the poetical parts of Scripture are printed in lines that bring out more plainly the parallelisms or "thought rhythms" which form the characteristic of Hebrew poetry. The brief but clear account in an introduction of the principal manuscripts and versions is valuable to the thoughtful reader, and together with the various renderings and readings composing the footnotes affords a critical apparatus which leaves to the English reader little to be desired, or indeed possible beyond.

In the infinity of the universe of God we have still need for the patient labours of the astronomer, though by their truthful toil the sixpenny almanac is a sufficient guide for general life; there is still call for scholarly and loving study in that Divine Word we call the Bible; we cannot know too much; but as all cannot be astronomers, so all, not even the many, can be "exegetes"; nevertheless all that is needed for a full and true study of the English Bible is within the reach of every Anglo-Saxon reader, nor need he go beyond the aids to which already his attention has been directed.

Another important fact to be remembered as we read our English Bible—or indeed the Bible in any language—is that we have therein a library, not a single book. The Old Testament is practically a nation's entire literature. "Ta Biblia," "The Books," our Bible was originally called. The two great divisions indicate this—the Old Testament in Hebrew, the New Testament in Greek. The Old Testament includes the law, the prophets, the sacred writings. The New Testament the gospels, epistles and apocalypse. The revelations these books contain were given "in divers portions and divers manners" (Heb. i. 1), and the time covered thereby may be roughly estimated as twelve centuries. Let us look back twelve centuries. Our Saxon ancestors had scarcely given up their idols, English literature had not be-

gun. And Israel underwent during that period changes as great, even greater, than our own Anglo-Saxon land. The exodus, the conquest, the anarchy and the kingdom, the exile and the return; throughout all these changes the living oracles spake, and each period had its own special record. The bondage and deliverance gave us the commandments and the law; Joshua records the conquest; Judges the time when, being no king in Israel, every tribe did what seemed right in its own eyes. Samuel ushers in the kingdom which the historical books take note of. Isaiah and contemporaries span the exile, and the three prophets last in our order speak of the return and restoration. The Psalms sing through all the periods from "The prayer of Moses, the man of God," (xc.) till the harps were taken down from the willows and tuned again to the strains on Zion hill (e.g., cxxxvi.). The century that was ushered in by the birth of Jesus at Bethlehem must have seen all the authentic books of the New Testament, but very varied were the circumstances which called forth the separate writings. You will readily see, therefore, that first each book should be read in the light of its own day if we would take therefrom the true intent and meaning. Ezekiel, e.g., must be read, not as if written in the year of grace 1891, but as written on the banks of an eastern stream while Judah was captive, but looking forward hopefully to the return.

One great defect of a child's picture is want of perspective; it lies flat; a true picture stands out. To the diligent student of the Bible its varied volumes stand out in a grand perspective; the childlike flatness in which many carelessly read it leads to distorted views and ignorant bitterness; remember that the earlier part of Isaiah was written while the kingdoms of Judah and Israel still existed, that the two great rival powers of the then known world were Egypt and Assyria, that Palestine lay on the great highway between, very much as Afghanistan lies between the advancing Russian power and our Indian lines; remember also that men then as now were ready to follow the dictates of policy rather than of righteousness, playing Egypt against Assyria and Assyria against Egypt, as we can imagine the Ameer of Afghanis-

tan to do ; and you read a life into those prophecies you fail to feel if simply read as a treatise of yesterday, and rid yourself of a host of "cranky" commentators.

Yet these separate volumes are part of a whole. There are stages in the revelation ; there are "rudiments" (Gal. iv. 3, R.V.), and the consciousness of sonship. The perspective unifies, does not isolate. We may note a providential guiding which, placing Genesis first on the shelf of this library, brings Revelation to close the series. Beginning with an Eden lost we stay at the Paradise regained ; and all between "the divers portions and divers manners" are stages in the progress, steps in the ladder whose base resting on earth leads up to the heaven of our highest hopes, the goal of the regenerated human race. A wise reader, standing upon the vantage ground which Christ's teachings afford, will read from the beginning on to the many mansions home, the way by which God leads from the primitive Eden up to the glory in which He Himself dwells.

Ah me ! sighs some poor heart, if all this trouble is to be taken, where is rest to be found ? All things are full of labour. You take some pains in choosing a suit, selecting a hat or bonnet. I have known some people spend some hours selecting a scarf pin, ring or brooch. Certainly we spend labour to spread our table for our daily meal. "Is not the life more than the food, and the body than the raiment ?" and God's kingdom and His righteousness above all things to be sought ? Some little care to read and pains to search, may surely be exercised in the reading of those writings in which we profess to find the will of the Lord for our salvation. "I will meditate in thy precepts and have respect unto thy ways" is the resolve of the earnest soul. Moreover, all our utterances in this lecture are within the range of any thoughtful common school lad or lass. Whatever advantages the speaker may have in scholarship has been used in abstaining from saying things false or doubtful. We avoid the realm of ignorant learning, and content ourselves with drawing attention to acknowledged facts in their practical bearing, and to opinions readily weighed by any attentive hearer.

A few words as to interpretation. In a letter you read: "You are a fine fellow," a simple English sentence. What does it mean? As it reads? or is it an expression of scorn? The voice would declare by inflection in a moment; but there is no voice, only the plain blank lines. Need we remain in doubt? Not if we understand the relation which exists between the writer and ourselves. The entire tenor of the letter also renders misunderstanding out of the question. If we would read the Bible aright our relation to the God of the Bible and His to us must be experienced and maintained. We need clean hands to handle and pure hearts to read. And I venture to say that the reason why "This is the book where each his dogma seeks. And this the book where each his dogma finds," is, that we do not allow ourselves to be moved into a right relation with our Father in heaven. I shall give an example, speaking unto wise men, judge ye what I say. We may safely conclude that when in our best moods, still far above and beyond us is our Father which is in heaven. See Matt. vii. 11.

The wrong that pains my soul below
 I dare not throne above;
 I know not of His hate—I know
 His goodness and His love.

No father would punish his child because the nurse had neglected to wash his face; or damn a boy of obedient spirit because he had overlooked some small attention to his toilet. True, if a son is told to pick up a straw and refuses, the straw is a trifle, but disobedience is a sin; but even here, a wise father will scarcely seek to show his authority by making the straw a test of obedience; and certainly not should he be striving to reclaim a prodigal. Read Mark xvi. 16. Unless overwhelming reason can be given for such an interpretation, it is inconceivable that Jesus should have said that water baptism is one of the conditions of salvation? Yet ecclesiasticism has practically thus affirmed. We have appropriated the word "baptize" and narrowed it down exclusively in our common parlance to the rite, the ceremony, in one or other of its controverted administrations; but Mark i. 8 should at

once teach us otherwise. He that confiding in Jesus receives of His spirit shall be saved ; the unconfiding will not come to have life and must needs perish. There need be no difficulty here if we remember that the Gospel message is one of reasonable love, and peace ; not of ritual or of discord. " Hear what God the Lord will speak : For He will speak peace to His people and to His saints ; but let them not turn again to folly."

To the Christian the Bible is emphatically the Word of God. Some conception therefore of what is meant by " inspired of God " (2 Tim. iii. 16) seems necessary in rightly reading the same, and though the subject with our present surroundings and prejudices bristles with difficulties, this essay would be worse than incomplete were no reference made thereto. We shall however best show our reverence for " the oracles of God " (1 Pet. iv. 11) by confining ourselves to what they say concerning themselves. This testimony is concisely given, 2 Pet. i. 21, where we read (R. V.) " Men spake from God, being moved by the Holy Ghost." A divine enlightenment, the supernatural inbreathing of the Holy Spirit, far above the ordinary utterances of men [as Sirius shines above the Rockies. Certainly our supernatural is God's natural ; but here we are plainly told that in an exceptional way these men were moved by the Holy Ghost. The message was, is, through men to men, as the Spirit of God moved the utterance. God did not use the prophet's lips as a lifeless speaking trumpet ; or the scribes as a mere type-writer ; but men spake His message to men. We need not fear the humanity of the Scriptures, the prophetic word is through man to men. The message burned within them, as Jeremiah (xx. 9) " If I say I will not make mention of Him, nor speak in His name, then there is in mine heart as a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I weary myself to hold it in but cannot." The divine inspiration constrains, the prophet must speak ; necessity is laid upon him.

This fact that *men* speak, emphasizes a principle of interpretation to which already reference has been made, to understand the message we must place ourselves *en rapport* with its occasion. The common practice of selecting texts

out from their living connection, as jewellers choose gems for setting in some special form, e. g., that of a cross, may make a seemly ornament but fail most thoroughly in discerning what the prophecy is designed to teach. Texts are not to be torn from their native context to adorn our pet systems, but used as the message of God through the prophet to our soul. Men spake with all their surroundings moved, borne along, by the Holy Ghost.

Thoroughly conscious of the necessary imperfection of this effort, we are also assured that if in the way of the facts and principles presented the English Bible is studied, that Bible will be to us a much more living word than in moments of depression it sometimes appears. The history of Noah will be none the less real if we cease to discuss whether the flood was partial or universal, whether or no all existing species of animals found refuge in the ark; and realize that there are to-day ark-builders patiently toiling—"pegging away" as Abraham Lincoln would say—amidst ridicule, discouragement and opposition, that their house may be saved amid floods of ungodliness. Isaiah will speak even more evangelically if we take pains to read—as in Kings and Chronicles we may—that from the fortieth chapter onward there is primary reference to the approaching day when Israel's exiles were to rejoice in their own land, and sing again the songs of Zion in the city of the great King. We might get less speculative theology, but we should find more life; the prophecy monger would be largely discounted, but the ways of God would be more clearly seen; we should find greater unity and a more blessed peace.

Thus intelligently reading we should deepen our reverence for that record of continued and progressive revelation made by divers portions and in divers manners, to be "once for all" completed—not in our apprehension, but—in the Christ. Comparisons with the sacred books of the East, with Vedas or Koran, will only make our word of prophecy more sure and its light more clear. The Bible presents progressive revelation; the Vedas deterioration, the earlier being the simplest and the purest. The Koran is as an iron coat, no growth or

freedom possible. The Bible presents a life that ever forgetting things behind presses on, and its heaven is not a dreamless Nirvana, nor a voluptuous garden of self-indulgence; but a life of service and of joy ever pressing on to the fulness of an infinite God who is love.