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ART. IV.—ARGUMENTS AGAINST THE USE OF
VERNACULAR BIBLES, PUT FORWARD IN THE
CONTROVERSY OVER THEIR LAWFULNESS,
1400-1408.

The Lollard Bible, and other Medieval Biblical Versions.
By MARGARET DEANESLY. (Cambridge. 1920.)

FOR about thirty years before the constitutions of Archbishop Arundel dealt with the question of English Bibles in 1408, considerable discussion had taken place in England, and particularly in the university of Oxford, about the lawfulness and expediency of vernacular Bibles in general. Wycliffe had written his *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae* in 1378, to defend his conception of the supremacy of 'Goddis Lawe,' or the Bible, as final arbiter in all questions of national or individual conduct. In this and his later Latin works, he often laid down the necessity for each Christian to know and study 'Goddis Lawe,' since each Christian was personally responsible to God for the keeping of it: and since, as a scarcely less important reason, each Christian would find therein the picture of the meek and poor and charitable living of Christ, which he might copy for himself, and contrast with the lives of great ecclesiastics of his own day. Through this doctrine Wycliffe was led, at the end of his life, to find a means whereby those ignorant of Latin could read for themselves the Law of God—or, as Archbishop Arundel said of him later, 'to fill up the measure of his malice by devising a new translation of the Scriptures,'¹ for the late Saxon gospels and psalters, to be found in a few monastic libraries at the time, were of no use for popular Bible reading. From that time, till the constitutions of

¹ Wilkins, *Conc.* iii. 350.

1408 decreed that no man was to read, without episcopal licence, any translation of the Bible made in the time of the late Master John Wycliffe, or since,¹ a series of pamphlets or treatises was written in defence of English Bibles, and popular Bible reading, by the Lollards, and especially by John Purvey, the author of the second version of the Wycliffite Bible, and the greatest doctor of the Lollard party. Meanwhile the friars, whose influence was very great, since they were the only lecturers on the biblical text at the universities, and the theology lecturers of greatest weight, opposed the popularisation of the biblical text, and, finally, denounced the lawfulness of vernacular translations of the Bible in general.

It is not proposed to enter into the history of this controversy, the authorship of some of the Lollard treatises, or the comparison of the dispute with its counterpart on the Continent, but only to enumerate the tracts dealing with the subject, and select from them the chief arguments against vernacular Bibles, letting the fourteenth-century theologians speak for themselves, though in modern English. In the chronological order, these tracts include :

- (1) An English treatise, probably Wycliffe's, written about 1380, and beginning : *The holy prophet David saith of a just man*, etc. This tract urges the reading of the Bible by the simple, but does not refer to an English translation.²
- (2) A series of twelve pamphlets or sermons, almost certainly Purvey's, all defending popular Bible reading, and the later ones, the use of English

¹ Wilkins, *Conc.* iii. 317.

² *Ff.* 6, 31, *ff.* 64-104b. Printed in an appendix to *The Lollard Bible*, Camb. Univ. Press, a monograph on medieval Bible reading, by M. Deanesly. The tract is very similar, in argument and position, to the *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*. Butler's, Palmer's and Purvey's Latin tracts (see *infra*) about vernacular Bibles will also be printed in an appendix. The reasons for assigning the authorship of certain tracts to Purvey, and for concluding that Peter Payne took part in the debate at Oxford, are also given in the text of the monograph.

Bibles. The series must have been written between about 1380 and 1390.¹

- (3) A Latin determination of the regent (or officially lecturing) master, the Franciscan, William Butler. This was delivered in the schools at Oxford in 1401, and condemned the lawfulness of all vernacular translations of the Bible.² Butler became warden of the Oxford Franciscans about 1406-8.
- (4) A Latin determination to the same effect by the Dominican, Thomas Palmer, c. 1403-5.³ This is the record of a protracted debate, held between Palmer and another regent master, who was almost certainly Peter Payne, or Peter the Clerk. The latter had stronger Lollard sympathies than any other Oxford scholar at the time, or more courage in expressing them: he maintained his opinions till 1415, when he was in such imminent danger of trial for heresy that he fled to Prague. He had been incited to undertake this debate by John Purvey, who had recanted his Lollardies in 1401, been given a benefice, resigned it in 1403 (though without openly relapsing), and in 1407 was trusted neither by the Lollards nor by Archbishop Arundel. Actually, however, he was still making efforts to save the work on which he had spent the best years of his life, the English translation of the Bible, from official condemnation.
- (5) Purvey himself listened to this debate, and compiled a long Latin tract in defence of translations, founded on the arguments put forward in the debate: but the tract was substantially his own, and not Peter the Clerk's. He also made an English version

¹ *Ii.* 6, 26, pp. 1-158. One tract was printed by Forshall and Madden (henceforward, F.M.) in *The Holy Bible . . . made from the Latin Vulgate by John Wycliffe and his followers*, 1850, I, xiv.

² Merton 68, ff. 202-204b. See A. G. Little, *Grey Friars in Oxford*, p. 254.

³ Trin. Coll. Camb. 347, ff. 42b-47b.

of the section dealing with English Bibles in particular.¹

All these treatises were for long unprinted. Though the Lollard point of view is fairly familiar, because set forth to some extent in a chapter of the English version of Wycliffe's *De Officio Pastoralis*,² and in Purvey's *General Prologue to all the Books of the Bible of the Old Testament*,³ no tract giving the opposite point of view had been printed when the best modern studies of the period were published.⁴

The friars, who argued against the lawfulness and expediency of translations of the Vulgate, relied chiefly on the grounds that a general, lay reading of the Bible would be an infringement on the teaching office of the clergy, and would be contrary to the divine economy of different orders in the Church. They claimed too that the mysteriousness of holy scripture rendered it unprofitable for the simple, that familiarity with it would lead to irreverence, that the linguistic difficulties of translation were too great, that particular biblical verses should be understood as forbidding translations, and that the precedents of St. Jerome's (and perhaps, Bede's) translations were not valid. The Lollards, on the other hand, defended the use of translations mainly from historical precedent: from the giving of the divine law in the Old and New Testaments, the precedent of St. Jerome's translation, and non-English biblical translations. They argued that all men needed to know the life of Christ by personal

¹ Trin. Coll. Camb. 333, ff. 26-30b. Printed in a very confused form, with many omissions and sixteenth-century interpolations, by Foxe; see 1843-9 ed. of *Acts and Monuments* iv 671-6. For the Latin tract, see Denis Codd. *Theol. Lat. Bibl. Vienn.*, I, i MS. ccxlv, f. 195.

² Ed. F. D. Matthew, in *E.E.T.S.*, Ex. S. 19; chapter 15, pp. 429-30.

³ Printed by F.M., I 1-60.

⁴ E.g. the documents were apparently not used by Dr. Gairdner (*Lollardy and the Reformation in England*, 1908), Mr. Trevelyan (*England in the Age of Wycliffe*, 1909), nor J. H. Wylie (*A History of England in the reign of Henry IV*, 1884), though the last was aware of the existence of Butler's determination.

knowledge of the gospels, that the ignorance of many parish priests would be lessened by the use of translations, and they answered the charges that Bible reading would lead the simple into heresy, that the linguistic difficulty was too great, 'that holy scripture is false,' 'that the letter slayeth,' etc.

Friar Butler gave it as his 'principal' argument against translations, that God had appointed different orders in His Church, and that it was the function of the clergy to instruct the laity verbally in what was necessary to salvation, including as much of the scriptures as was needed for that end. Drawing his argument partly from the *De Caelesti Hierarchia* of the pseudo-Dionysius, and partly from St. Paul, he argued that illumination, on earth as in Heaven, must proceed from the higher to the lower orders :

' Thus, for the sake of argument, let us take Raphael, an angel of an inferior order, who ought to receive illumination as to any truth obscure to him from the archangel Gabriel, who belongs to a superior order. Now, in the hierarchy of the Church triumphant, the passive illumination of Raphael depends absolutely, in the order of created causation, upon that of Gabriel. But the order of the Church militant ought to conform to the disposition of the hierarchy of the Church triumphant : and therefore, the passive illumination of mortals¹ in an inferior order ought to depend absolutely on the will of mortals in the order above them. Thus it is obvious that the reading of scripture translated into the vulgar tongue is the act of the superior, and is not to be elicited or commanded by the will of a person of the inferior order. Therefore such an act, that is to say, reading of the scriptures, when found in a person of the lower order of the terrestrial hierarchy—even in one to some extent purified by the sacrament of penance—is almost an infernal act. . . . Now I ask you, whether angels of a superior order permit or do not permit angels of an inferior order to have special books, in which, by spiritual reading or special privilege, they may know such things as inflame their affections, without any revelation of the superior order? If you say, that there are no such special books of this kind, but that they are only illuminated by the revelation of the prelates

¹ *Viantium*, with the usual medieval meaning.

of their hierarchy . . . then how ought any man to murmur because our enthroned pontiffs do not permit to the lowest orders the reading of holy scripture . . . since this is held to be forbidden in the celestial hierarchy? . . . St. Jerome says¹ that the study of the scriptures needs a multitude of books, silence, sedulous librarians, safe and leisured scribes: how then, when the occupation of the people in tilling the fields, caring for the beasts, and performing their due services, is as great as, or greater than, the occupation of a soldier in fighting, how, I ask, can it but be, among such various cares, but that study of the scriptures should sleep?'

Moreover, Butler explains elsewhere, it is far safer for the laity to have the scriptures expounded to them by the clergy, than to read them themselves: they will thus obtain the true meaning of the passages studied.

'St. Jerome says, that hearing is a better manner of obtaining knowledge of holy scripture than reading, for the way of hearing is better, safer, and quicker, than the way of reading, and should be followed because it is the more immediate way; therefore the way of reading ought to be forbidden, and the way of hearing frequently recommended. But perchance someone will object, that though to hear is better: yet nevertheless, it would be good for the common people to understand a little? To this, I say, that reading is more liable to lead to error than hearing.'

Friar Palmer also made the teaching office of the clergy the chief reason for denying biblical translations to the laity.

'Nothing should be revealed to those who are not capable of understanding it: but these lay people are not capable of understanding many of the difficulties of holy scripture: therefore these matters at least should not be written in our vulgar tongue. . . . Nothing should be had in the vulgar tongue which might be an occasion and cause of error to the simple: for the mass of the people are led into error very easily; but many parts of scripture, if translated into our vulgar tongue, would be wrongly understood and lead simple people into error; for if the difficulty of scripture led Arius, Sabellius, Nestorius, Frontinus and other heretics into error, therefore even more

¹ *Pat. Lat.* 22, col. 1086.

would it mislead simple people. . . . For it is foolish to be scrupulous about what can without peril be ignored; and much of holy scripture may be ignored by the simple without peril, because it surpasses their understanding. . . . Some things are too hard and difficult and lofty for simple people: even as Paul the apostle wrote: *Even as babes in Christ, I have fed you with milk and not with meat.* . . . Those things needful for salvation, and no other part of holy scripture, should be translated for them.'

While Butler's principal argument was the subordination of the laity in conformity to the order of the celestial hierarchy, his final one was very similar: the function and subordination of the laity in the body of Christ.

'Sixthly and lastly I argue against the aforesaid assertion from the ground of the co-ordination of the mystical body of Christ. . . . *If the whole body were the eye, where is the hearing? If the whole were hearing, where smelling?* But now, saith Paul, *God hath made members as it pleased Him.* . . . All the faithful have been born again in the sacrament of baptism and have become members of Christ. Now consider then the members of Christ, as compared to the hands, back, chest, etc. as A; and consider all the members as compared to the eyes in the said body, as B. And it is argued, that the separate members signified by A are not capable of an action proper to the eyes: but to read letters is an action proper to the eyes: therefore, according to the words of the apostle, they cannot compete with those members signified by B. But the whole mass of the Christian laity is composed of the members signified by A: therefore, on the ground of the co-ordination of the mystical body of Christ, it follows, according to the mind of the apostle, that the common people ought by no means to read the text of holy scripture. This is confirmed because, granting the argument of the apostle, *if the whole body were the eye, where would be the hearing, or where the foot:* if the feet, (as it were, the common people,) ought to know the law [of God], then the feet would be eyes, and feet and eyes would have the same function, contrary to the apostle in both particulars. Therefore that assertion is contrary to the apostle: and I beg your reverences also, that you would judge this practice by the law of reason: now would it be useful and convenient to offer a book to a foot, or a toe of the foot, to read? And if you decide

that it would not be : yet is not this in fact what the advocates of the aforesaid toes would here attempt to do, under pretext of zeal for souls ? I beg all the toes to decline such an absurdity. For if a foot, or the toe of a foot, should read like the eye, then the mystical body of Christ would be deprived of meaning. . . . And as to how these members of the mystical body of Christ ought to be nourished, Chrysostom, a famous Greek doctor, teaches . . . showing that the priest . . . is like a doctor visiting a sick man ; he first inquires about the stomach, and hastens to cure that, for if the stomach is sound, then the whole body is strong. Thus if the whole priesthood is sound, the church flourishes : and if it is corrupt, the faith of all withers. And he adds, that as the stomach receives the food into itself, and disperses it throughout the whole body, even so priests should receive the knowledge of the scriptures of God, and meditate upon them, and minister them to a sound people. And as through the ministration of the stomach each member receives nourishment, and converts it according to the nature of the member, . . . so, he says, in the Church, all priests receive the word, and each converts it according to his own heart. . . . Through which pronouncement it is clear that the priesthood alone should drink of the springs of doctrine for the whole people, and from them, as from the stomach, they should receive nourishment.'

Closely connected with this argument, that it is not the function of the laity to read the Bible, is the broader one of the mysteriousness of scripture, and the insufficiency of the human mind to deal with it. Sometimes this is connected with the old argument as to the relative value of the four meanings of holy scripture, and whether a translation would convey other than the literal meaning. The discussion over the relative value of the four meanings arose much earlier than the controversy over biblical translations, and survived it : it was really a separate question, and was debated within the Franciscan order itself with great vigour.¹ But it is often difficult to distinguish between passages deploring the reading of the mysteries of scripture by simple people, and those claiming

¹ See the tracts on the subject printed in the Antwerp, 1634, edition of *Biblia sacra cum Glossa Ordinaria et postilla Nic. Lira. Franc.*

that the simple will gain only the literal meaning by reading a translation of the Bible. Butler says :

'My second argument against the aforesaid assertion, is on the grounds of the deficiency of the human intellect. . . . For since people are slow of understanding and holy scripture is full of ambiguities, or doubtful matters (especially, as Dionysius says, in the passages of the sacred poets), how, I ask, should their reading be a means of obtaining knowledge of the meaning of holy scripture? That proposition then, that the common people should read holy scripture, ought to be given up: for it is not a means of leading them into knowledge of the aforesaid scripture. . . . Since the best means of knowing God is to meditate on God, and humbly to entreat Him, and since Christian people profit more by these two means than by reading or hearing the scriptures . . . it seems to me that it would be better to exhort people to make use of these two means: namely, meditation and prayer, than to advise that a translation of scripture into the vulgar tongue should be handed over to the laity.'

Palmer also argues from these grounds in many passages :

'The secret things of God should be concealed from the simple, and not revealed to all men; . . . those things which are more difficult to understand, and which are beyond the understanding of the simple, should not be demanded by them of the scriptures, lest they should lead them into error: *Seek not out the things that are too high for thee*. Not every truth is to be written in English, for many truths are useless: but every truth is contained in holy scripture, according to the Lollards, since it contains the first truth, which contains all other truths. Thus many things ought to be hidden and not shown to the people, lest they should grow vile when they are known and used.'

Early Lollard apologies for translations shew that in the first stage of the controversy, *the letter slayeth* had been used as an argument against translations, which, it was implied, conveyed only the literal meaning of the words. Palmer again uses it, however, in this connexion :

'Thus it is reckoned to be the reason why the Jews slew Christ, that He taught them to understand holy scripture

spiritually, for the letter slayeth, but the spirit giveth life. And when some of the disciples went back from Him, He said, *The words which I speak unto you, they are spirit and life*, because spiritually understood, they create eternal life. Wherefore, on that verse of Ecclesiasticus, *Many things are hidden from thee by the Lord*, Hugo says in the gloss: "to increase the merit of faith," for according to Gregory, "faith hath no merit when human reason affords proof." . . . How therefore shall simple and unlettered people not err concerning scripture, if they have it in the vulgar tongue, or rather, have it only nominally, on account of the false understanding of the Lollards and simple men, who merely understand Latin, [without theology]?'

A further development from the argument of the mystery and dignity of holy scripture, is that familiarity with it would lead to irreverence—an argument used long before in almost every case where heresy led to discussion of doctrinal questions by lay people, and one of great weight in later days with Sir Thomas More. Palmer says:

'Many things should be hidden and not revealed to the people: lest being known and familiar, they should become despised. For the bishop of Chartres says: that if on the mitre of our holy father the pope were written in letters of gold the four letters of the great name of God, ioth, heo, wach, hoch, [*sic*: for YHWH], in the tetragrammaton, without vowel points—that since the great name of God is not known to the common people, they would thus swear frequently and horribly by it, as Christians should not do, and dishonour it in manyfold wise. . . . Holy scripture ought not to be made public to every man in all its parts, neither hidden from all men in all its parts, for Bede said, that the mysteries of the Christian faith ought not to be unveiled, lest they should be despised, nor hidden from the just, lest they should be altogether forgotten.'

Both Palmer and Butler explain in one or two passages that the parts of holy scripture which they consider it allowable to translate to lay people, are those parts necessary to salvation, namely, the Ten Commandments and the Lord's Prayer. These the laity may have written for them in books in the vulgar tongue.

The third great argument against translations was the difficulty, which naturally appeared greater to the medieval

mind than ours, of transferring the same meaning from one language to another, and particularly from an inflected language like Latin to the comparatively uninflected vernaculars. Thus Palmer took his stand on the actual difficulty of linguistic translation, while Butler, on the other hand, argued from the impossibility of ensuring that vernacular Bibles would be accurately copied. Although this fear of the absolute and insuperable obstacle to effectual translation seems incredible, in face of the fact that these medieval scholars know that the Latin Vulgate was itself a translation, yet their contempt for the vernacular languages as vehicles of expression had some justification. Apart from the fact that it had hardly been settled whether translations could be made 'from meaning (sentence) to meaning' or only 'from word to word,' vernacular languages had as yet hardly begun to deal with scientific or abstract subjects. Theology was both scientific and abstract, and it was actually very difficult to state theological truths in the new national languages. Bishop Peacock was the first English doctor to write extensive theological tracts in the vernacular, and the length of his tracts compared with their matter shews the unwieldiness of the instrument he was using. The doctors who argued on linguistic grounds against the translation of the Bible always regarded it as the basis of theology, and indeed overrated the abstract nature of the matter to be translated, but they had more grounds for their opposition than might appear at first sight. It is noticeable also, that they do not argue that the Latin language has in itself a sort of sacredness or dignity, an idea that is somewhat groundlessly attributed to medieval scholars by some modern writers. The linguistic argument, though puerile enough in some of its forms, was based on the inflexibility of the vernacular languages, and their poverty of abstract terms, and not on the idea that Latin and Greek possessed some mysterious virtue which vernacular languages did not.¹

¹ This view is sometimes read into the advice given by the authors of *The Chastising of God's Children* (see A. C. Paues, *Fourteenth Cent. Eng. Bib. Version*, 1904, xxviii, for a quotation of the

Palmer's chief argument against translations was this linguistic difficulty :

'The whole of holy scripture ought not to be translated into every tongue and language. This has been proved by articles brought forward already to refute the assertion: and again, by the fact that holy scripture in many places cannot always be preserved from incongruity and falsehood, except by figures of speech and grammatical rules. This is shown in a certain tract which I have seen, in which all the grammatical figures were given, and quotations were given, showing where holy scripture in its different parts is preserved and defended from error by them. Therefore it should not be translated into any tongue which is not regulated by these grammatical figures and rules [inflexions]. This is proved, because if it were translated into a tongue ruled by these figures, it would be erroneous unless these figures were retained intact; therefore if it were translated into another tongue not ruled by these figures, it would be erroneous, because it would not be protected by them. Perhaps it will be said, that other tongues are regulated by rules, properties and grammatical figures: . . . but these figures are not found in English, nor in the barbarous idioms, because, manifestly, they have other figures: similarly, as regards middle syllables, and some letters to be added to final syllables, and some letters or syllables to be omitted, as *Catholicon* [the dictionary] shews. And for the most part, English words are monosyllables, like *stone, bone, none, done, gone, man, that, rat*, etc. Therefore in such words there is no place for such grammatical figures, neither can speeches and propositions be secured by them from falsehood and incongruity.

'Also, if the properties of one tongue governed by grammatical rules cannot be preserved in another tongue, even though also governed by those rules, *a fortiori* those properties cannot be preserved in a barbarous tongue not governed by those grammatical rules. But the properties of the Latin tongue, which is obviously governed by grammatical rules,

passage), and the *Sion Myroure of oure Ladye* (ed. J. H. Blunt, p. 71). But the warning not to use translations in saying prayers assigned in penance, or in following the divine office, was due to the obligation of pronouncing the (Latin) words with the lips, which would not have been satisfied, for instance, by merely mental recitation, much less that of a translation.

cannot be preserved in the Greek language, which is governed by rules of grammar. For according to the Sibylline prophecy, which Isidore quotes in his sermon *De Natali*, the lines about the nativity, passion, resurrection and second advent are so written, that if any one took the Greek capital letters beginning each line, he would find, Jhesus, Christus, Uios, Theou, Soter,¹ and if these verses were translated into Latin, this would appear as [blank.] This is because the properties of the Greek letters cannot here be retained. How therefore the properties of the language can be preserved in the English tongue, or any other barbarous tongue, which is by no means governed by rules of grammar, I fail to see.

'Even so many expressions, words, propositions, and syllables cannot be pronounced by the English voice, nor formed into syllables with the letters of the Latin alphabet, but they are expressed as it were by stammering, or by making sounds in the throat, like the grunting of pigs and the roaring of lions. How therefore the rules of grammar and the properties of the language can be observed in such a tongue, I cannot see. There are not letters sufficient to express our English sounds, and as evidence of this point, other letters not found in the Latin alphabet have been invented to express and preserve our English: as, for instance, the letter *h* to express *ha*: horn,² and the like, and *ʒow* to express such words as *ʒe*, *ʒyth*, *ʒonge*, *ʒor*, and *ʒorn* to express such words as *pero*, *pat*, *porwe*, *penne*, and the like.

'But the English tongue is not only lacking in letters, but even in words, for the best known and commonest Latin words have no corresponding names or words in English: this is shewn in the case of transcendental words, like *ens*, *substantia*, *accidens*, and of a few like *quantitas*, *qualitas*, *relatio*, *habitus*, and *positio*, *actio*, *passio*, *quando* and *ubi*, and similarly of fallacies, and of equivocal words,³ words of double meaning, with which there are no English terms to correspond, and though that tongue usēs monosyllables more than others, yet such words can scarcely be expressed in it even by circumlocution.

¹ The scribe has not preserved quite the right order of words, which should give *ιχθύς*.

² *Sic*. The scribe probably miswrote some of these words, as often elsewhere. The Latin alphabet actually has an *h*: probably Palmer instanced *w*, and the scribe misunderstood and miscopied.

³ Cf. F.M., i 59.

'And thus, if the whole of holy scripture ought to be translated into English, or any barbarous tongue, it must either be from word to word or from sentence to sentence: but it cannot by the first means, for many Latin words have no corresponding words in English, since they are translated by circumlocutions—like *legio*, which is written 666¹ [*sic*], and *lustrum* which is a space of five years. . . . Neither ought translation to be from sentence to sentence, because the *sententia* of a Latin word is different in different cases: which sense therefore the translator should use cannot be known. Perhaps someone will say, that it has a literal, a moral, an allegorical and an anagogical meaning, and that it ought to be translated as regards its literal meaning. On the contrary, the literal meaning differs according to the opinion of different people, and the argument holds good.'

Butler again argued, that scribal errors in English Bibles would be much more frequent than in Latin ones, and that they ought to be prohibited partly for this reason—though it was also true that unlicensed reading even of Latin Bibles ought not to be allowed. St. Augustine himself, he says, argued at length from a text in which there was a scribal error, and this would happen more frequently if English texts were used.

'Thus it appears that if books were so multiplied, they would be false: and therefore it would be very dangerous for such books to be written. But perhaps someone will argue, that Latin books may be read, when they may equally well happen to be false. To him I say, that the Church has ordained universities in which the scriptures are taught, and books are written which can easily be corrected if they are false: and this policy cannot conveniently be preserved in the face of so great an increase of people [who would use them]. And prelates ought not to allow each man to read scripture in a Latin translation at pleasure; for, as experience shews well enough, this has in many cases proved an occasion of lapsing into heresies and errors. Therefore it is not politic for each man, anywhere,

¹ Nicholas de Lyra, † 1340, had written on Marc. v, *Legio mihi nomen est*: 'Legio autem proprie dicitur numerus determinatus armorum in exercitu, et continet sex millia sexcentos sexaginta sex.' I am indebted for this reference to Dr. R. Lane Poole. Cf. Antwerp 1634 ed. of Lyra's *Postill.* v 531.

to apply himself to the fervent study of the scriptures, whensoever he wills.'

Many arguments, again, were deduced from passages in the Bible, some fairly broad and of possible application, while some were merely quibbles. The favourite texts,—used in this connexion by Hildebrand, Innocent III and Gregory IX,—occur frequently: *Cast not pearls before swine*¹: *Search not into matters that are too high for thee*²: *If any beast touch the mount let him be run through with a spear*³: *And the seventh trumpet sounded, and it was said unto me, Write it not.*⁴

Butler argued that the giving of the New Law at Pentecost was superior to that of the Old on Sinai, which was indeed written on tables of stone.

'The apostles did not descend bearing in their hands tables of stone like Moses: but they bore the sacred text in their minds, and were themselves holy and living books. . . . It was in accordance with this that the incarnate wisdom of God, when He was twelve years old, repaired to the temple and was in the midst of the doctors, hearing and asking them questions, and after that reading in the law: teaching by this, that those who wish to approach the law of God ought to approach by means of the doctors, and not to teach all the doctors in the temple. . . . The special circumstances in which the gospel was given shew that it was not given in writing . . . but the manner of reading is another manner from this aforesaid one: therefore that manner is not allowable for lay people, for any reason whatever.'

St. Paul, he says, differentiated in his teaching between the wise and the simple: *We speak wisdom among those that are perfect—I have fed you with milk as babes*; and Christ Himself spoke to the multitude in parables only. Whence, even the holy fathers and priests have no general power to publish the scriptures themselves: and if the most privileged in the hierarchy of the Church have no power to do so, then it is not lawful for any man to make holy scripture public, by making it accessible for reading.

¹ Matt. vii 6.

² Hebr. xii 20.

³ Eccl. iii 22

⁴ Apoc. x 4.

Palmer's inferences are generally more fanciful :

' Many things are hidden by the commandment of God : they ought not to be written in the vulgar tongue, for thus they would become known to all men, contrary to the Christian precept : *Seal up those things which the seven thunders uttered, and write them not*, that is to say, proclaim not the mysteries of God in public. . . . For Paul heard *secret words, which it is not lawful for man to utter*, which were no other than the divine mysteries contained in holy scripture, which contains all things. Therefore it is not lawful to write all. . . . Even if holy scripture might be revealed, nevertheless there is sometimes a time for hiding it : it is proved by the words to Daniel, *But thou, O Daniel, shut up the words, and seal the book, even till the due time. . . . He that beholds the majesty shall be overcome by the glory*. For even as exceeding brightness blinds the sight, so too close scrutiny of the secrets of the mount of God blinds the understanding : there should we be *wise unto sobriety* : for *the beast which toucheth the mount shall be stoned*. The *beast* is the human understanding of the simple, and the *mount*, ignorance of the scriptures. . . . *If thou shalt find a bird's nest on the ground or in a tree, and the mother bird sitting upon it, thou shalt not take her with the little ones, but suffer her to go away, that it may be well with thee, and that thou shouldst prolong thy days*¹ which figuratively signifies, according to Gregory, that the literal sense, which is, as it were, the master of the other senses, the allegorical and anagogical, should be allowed to depart, and her *young birds* should be kept, because *the letter slayeth, but the spirit giveth life*. How therefore can simple unlettered people, or those understanding grammar only, who are ignorant of the *young birds*, the three senses, how can these fail to err, if they have the master sense, that is, the literal sense, and yet care not for the *young birds* (or the other senses) ? '

Palmer's treatise has several other objections, based on fanciful interpretations of biblical texts.

The anti-vernacular treatises are interesting also on two other points, their reference, implied or explicit, to the canon law on the subject of biblical translations, and their explanation of the precedents alleged by their opponents. Butler states that the general reading of translations is, as a fact,

¹ Deut. xxii 6-7.

forbidden : ' our enthroned pontiffs (bishops) do not permit to the lowest orders the reading of holy scripture.' Innocent II, he said, had reminded St. Bernard in a letter, that the emperor Marcian had forbidden clerks or laymen of any rank to dispute publicly in future about the Christian faith : the civil law appointed due penalties for such procedure.

' And to the testimony of these men, canon law also is not lacking, but runs surely to meet it, offering the kiss of peace, and ordaining that a layman who disputes publicly or privately about the faith should be excommunicated : see *Extra. De haereticis*, lib. v.'¹

Although the passage quoted prohibited only lay preaching, the latter, both among the Waldensians and the Lollards, consisted so often of the reading of biblical translations aloud, both for the purpose of hearing them and committing them to memory, that the reference was, in fact, to the point.

' From all these witnesses, it appears to me to follow,' Butler continued, ' that on account of the subtlety of the literary character of holy scripture itself (and to this, doctors plainly testify), holy scripture ought not to be read by the common people, in any manner whatsoever, neither as regards its obvious passages, nor as regards its obscure passages, nor with the expositions of approved doctors.'

As regards precedents for translations of the Scripture, Butler and Palmer naturally said as little as possible, but certain cases could not be altogether ignored, particularly, of course, that of St. Jerome's Latin vulgate. Butler did not mention this, unless he did so in the first pages of his tract, which are missing in the manuscript. Palmer explained how

' The translators of the Septuagint never translated without fasting and prayers : and yet Jerome says that they made many mistakes, as indeed Jerome confesses of himself.'

¹ *Decret. Greg. IX*, lib. v, tit. vii, cc. xii, xiv ; see *Corpus Iuris Canonici*, ed. Friedberg, A., Leipzig, 1881, ii, coll. 784-9.

The constitutions of 1408 boldly used St. Jerome's own words as a prelude to the prohibition of translations later :

' It is a dangerous thing, as St. Jerome declares, to translate the text of holy scripture out of one idiom into another, since it is not easy in translations to preserve exactly the same meaning in all things : and St. Jerome himself, though inspired, confessed he had often erred in that matter.'¹

Butler seems to be referring to the precedent of Bede, when he argues that written translations might perhaps be lawfully made for a people not yet converted, though not for one completely Christian.

' Therefore, though it might have been politic that the common people, in whatsoever nation they were, might have read holy scripture, when only few of that tongue were converted to the faith : it does not therefore follow that it would now be politic in the same nation for all in the same manner to be able to read scripture, as when the faith was being made known to catechumens. And if it should be found that any approved or canonized doctor should have translated the holy scriptures for the reading of any people, or should have counselled them so to read : it does not therefore follow that it would be politic to do so now.'

Palmer dealt with Bede's supposed translation more explicitly :

' Although Bede should have translated the whole of holy scripture, nevertheless the Church did not accept the translation : because perchance he erred, like Jerome, and nearly all others who have presumed to translate it. And secondly, I assert that Bede did *not* translate it, except in so far as it was necessary unto salvation, and in the easier portions, for according to his own words, he could not translate the whole into a barbarian tongue, as has been shewn above.'

This closes the list of the principal arguments against the translation of the Bible—not merely into English, but into any vernacular tongue. The main objection was, evidently, that translations of the Bible would lead to Bible-reading by the laity in general, which could be of no use

¹ Wilkins, *Conc.* iii 317.

to them unaccompanied by the exposition of the clergy, and might lead them into false interpretations and dangerous errors. The clergy were divinely appointed to teach, and an unlicensed lay reading of the Bible was certain, sooner or later, to lead to lay exposition of the Bible, which involved an attack on the clerical function and the idea of Christendom as an organic body. The canon law, Butler said, forbade laymen to dispute about the scriptures, and implicitly forbade the reading of them; 'our enthroned pontiffs' forbade this also, and they had no right to do otherwise. There was here, according to him, no idea of demanding an innovation in custom: the ancient custom ought to be maintained: it was the Lollards who were innovators, in seeking to open the scriptures indiscriminately to all men. The limitations on Bible reading imposed by the constitutions of Oxford of 1408 shew the triumph of these views over those opposed to them by the Lollards, and those who, without being Lollards, had been educated at Oxford under Wycliffe's influence.

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