PRIVATE AND CONFIDENTIAL. DOCUMENTARY HISTORY OF THE AMERICAN COMMITTEE ON REVISION

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Private and Confidential. Documentary History of the American Committee on Revision by Various

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DOCUMENTARY HISTORY

OF THE

AMERICAN COMMITTEE ON REVISION.

PREPARED BY ORDER OF THE COMMITTEE
FOR THE USE OF THE MEMBERS.

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HISTORICAL SKETCH

OF THE

ENGLISH COMMITTEE ON REVISION.

[*We present, by way of introduction, the following "Authoritative Exposition of the History and Purpose of Revision," which appeared in the London "Times" (weekly edition), May* 20, 1881.]

THE REVISION OF THE AUTHORISED VERSION OF THE NEW TESTAMENT.*

On a December day, 346 years ago, the members of the Upper House of the Convocation of Canterbury were engaged on the same subject which will this day come before that ancient body—the faithful rendering of the Holy Scriptures into the vulgar tongue. They then unanimously agreed that the King should vouchsafe to decree that the Scriptures should be translated "by some honest and learned men to be nominated by the King, and to be delivered to the people according to their learning." As we know, no immediate results followed this very laudable resolution. The King, however, two years afterwards, made a proclamation in which, while he stoutly forbade the public reading of the Scriptures in English, he did, nevertheless, graciously allow "such as can and will read in the English tongue" to do so "quietly and reverently," and "by themselves secretly, at all times and places convenient for their own instruction." The Archbishop, too, appears to have done his best. Cranmer is said to have sent portions of Tyndale's Testament to several bishops to be reviewed and considered, and it is said that all returned their revisions. But there the matter ended. The subject, indeed, was revived in 1542, but in a reactionary spirit, and in the sequel with an equally unproductive result.

The Convocation of Canterbury of our own day have, however, been more fortunate. They have not only suggested that a faithful

* "The New Testament of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ," translated out of the Greek; being the Version set forth A.D. 1611, compared with ancient authorities, and revised A.D. 1881. Printed for the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge. Oxford: 1881.

rendering of the Scriptures should be undertaken, but, by means of members of their own body and co-optated scholars and divines, they have completed one portion of the work, and to-day will publicly receive it. The Revised Version of the New Testament will be presented this morning to both Houses of Convocation.

Before we make any comments on the work itself we may, perhaps not unprofitably, give our readers some general account of the origin of this really great undertaking, and briefly specify the manner in which the work has been done. Our columns for the last eleven years have contained short notices of the meetings that have been held by the Companies, and of the silent progress of the work. We may now give the history of that progress, and also mention the various circumstances connected with the early history of that portion of the work that has now been completed.

To find the true origin of this undertaking we must look back about twenty-five years. The year 1856 was marked by several distinct movements in favor of a revision of the Authorised Version, and by one particularly, on which, as a sort of first step in the now completed work, it may be desirable to speak a little in detail. The subject was alluded to both in Convocation and in Parliament. On February 1, 1856, the late Canon Selwyn, who had long been deeply interested in the subject, gave notice in the Southern Convocation of a resolution in which Convocation was to pray the Sovereign to appoint a Royal Commission for receiving and suggesting amendments in the Authorised Version of the Bible. The same course was recommended in Parliament by Mr. Heywood, one of the members for North Lancashire; but in both cases the result was the same. Neither the clerical nor the lay mind was prepared for such a leap in the dark as the appointment of a commission to modify the venerable version that has so long maintained its supremacy. Sir George Grey more blandly, and Archdeacon Denison more trenchantly, disposed of the Royal Commission, and, as far as any public action went, no steps were taken, though there were few probably, either in Convocation or Parliament, who did not feel that the subject could not long be postponed.

Private effort, however, was much more successful. The Rev. Ernest Hawkins, then secretary of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, was so deeply impressed with the importance of making some organized effort that he determined to try and gather together a small body of scholars that should undertake the revision of a portion of the New Testament, and that should show by actual results not only that the work needed to be done, but that it could be done, and that, too, on safe and conservative principles. After many

efforts he succeeded in gaining the support and co-operation of a few scholars who were known, either by their works or by general reputation, to be interested in the study of the New Testament. He drew together, in the summer of 1856, the Rev. Henry Alford, afterwards Dean of Canterbury; Rev. John Barrow, D.D., Principal of St. Edmund Hall; Rev. C. J. Ellicott, now Bishop of Gloucester and Bristol; Rev. W. H. [G.] Humphry, Vicar of St. Martin's-in-the-Fields; and Rev. G. Moberly, D.C.L., then Head-Master of Winchester College and now Bishop of Salisbury. These five scholars agreed to make an attempt by the revision of the Authorised Version of St. John's Gospel. They began their work in the autumn, meeting regularly at the vicarage of St. Martin's-in-the-Fields, with their gentle taskmaster, Ernest Hawkins, acting frequently as their secretary, and they concluded the first portion of their revision in the course of the ensuing year. The preface—a composition that will still bear attentive perusal—was written by Dr. Moberly, the press arrangements were superintended by Canon Hawkins; and a thin volume in royal octavo, bearing the title "The Authorised Version of St. John's Gospel, revised by Five Clergymen," appeared in March, 1857, as the first sample of a revision of the Authorised Version produced by the co-operation of several different minds. It was followed by the Epistle to the Romans, the Epistles to the Corinthians (the preface to which was written by Professor Ellicott), and subsequently by the Epistles to the Galatians, Ephesians, and Philippians, by four of the number, Dr. Barrow having then left England. The work was very favorably received both in England and America. It received the commendation of Archbishop Trench, and was spoken of in America by Mr. Marsh, in his lectures on the English language, as "by far the most judicious modern recension" that was known to him. It passed through several editions, and, though now almost forgotten, must certainly be considered as the germ of the present revision. It showed clearly two things—first, that a revision could be made without seriously interfering with either the diction or the rhythm of the Authorised Version; secondly, that a revision, if made at all, must be made by a similar co-operation of independent minds and by corporate and collegiate discussion. A third fact also was disclosed which had a salutary effect in checking premature efforts—viz., that, as these revisers themselves said, the work was "one of extreme difficulty," and of a difficulty which they believed was "scarcely capable of being entirely surmounted." And they were right: the present revision, good in the main as we certainly believe it will be found to be, confirms the correctness of their experience. As we shall hereafter see, there are difficulties connected with a conservative re-

vision of the existing translation of the Greek Testament that are practically insuperable.

After this effort, which from the very first was felt to be only prelusive and tentative, the immediate interest in revision sensibly languished. There were those, however, who were determined that the efforts already made should not become utterly fruitless. As year by year went onward, every change in public opinion was closely watched by those who had taken part in the revision just mentioned, and especially by the Bishop of Gloucester and Bristol and Dean Alford. It was thought in 1869 that many things pointed to a revival in the interest felt in revision. The Bishop and Dean frequently conferred on the subject, consulted all those who were in any degree likely to forward the undertaking, and at length obtained the hearty aid and support of Bishop Wilberforce. The Bishop entered into the movement with real interest, and, as the sequel proved, materially contributed to its finally receiving a definite and authoritative sanction. The real difficulty was how to break ground. It was urged by those most interested that precedent seemed in favor of a Royal Commission. In the revision of 1611 the King was the sole actor; and, in the case of the only other Bible that rests on any really valid authority, the Great Bible, the king's vicegerent, Lord Cromwell, has always been deemed to have been the real mover, and the one to whom the sole editor, Coverdale, was entirely responsible. It was also not forgotten that, in the two abortive attempts in Parliament and Convocation which have been already referred to, the proposal to proceed by way of a Royal Commission was not in itself objected to. There was, further, this very important consideration, that the extreme difficulties connected with the choice of those who were to undertake the revision would be much diminished in the case of a Royal designation. Those not chosen would be more likely to accept the decision, and in the sequel to prove more impartial and tolerant critics. The *spretæ injuria formæ*, as the case of Hugh Broughton in reference to the Authorised Version very distinctly shows, and as the revision of 1881 will also find out to its cost, is a very serious element in the early criticisms that are passed upon a work done by a necessarily selected few out of a larger and hardly less competent body. For these reasons it was deemed desirable that an address to the Crown should be moved for in the House of Lords, and in the following terms: "That a humble address be presented to Her Majesty praying Her Majesty to appoint a Royal Commission to revise the Authorised Version in all those passages where clear and plain errors, whether in the Greek text originally adopted by the translators, or in the translation made from the same, shall, on due in-