

Beginnings of the

Trinitarian Bible Society

P A R T 1

Introduction ■ Needs and Necessities

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A simple outline of the beginnings of the TBS may be found helpful to our readers, not only as a reminder of those early days, but also highlighting the continuing relevance and significance of issues faced and decisions made at the outset of the work. In our title the word 'Needs' will serve to indicate the burden, the vision, which brought the whole work of making the Bible accessible and available, to practical realisation in the formation of Bible Societies. 'Necessities' will then direct attention to the formulation of principles and practices in the face of issues and differences of opinion over a quarter of a century which led to the separate and distinct position of the Trinitarian Bible Society.

NEEDS *an historical setting*

The immediate need which brought about the formation of Bible Societies was the burden generated by the vast expansion of Missionary labours through the eighteenth century. The burden had been there, of course, as soon as the New Testament began to come into existence and copies of the Epistles and Gospels were made available to congregations other than the first recipients. Very soon copies in translation were needed too, and the complete Canon of Holy Writ began to be made available in manuscript form and in several languages, for almost 1000 years. Amongst the Godly there was ever a hunger to search the Scriptures, to read, expound and hear the Mind of Christ thus recorded, but access to copies of all or any portion of the Scriptures was always severely limited. The European implementation of the craft of printing in the early to middle part of the fifteenth century made for greater availability of the Bible, as the craft of the print shop slowly began to outpace the skills of the scriptorium. The greatest significance of the printing revolution lay in consistency of the copy over hundreds of impressions.¹ As far as the individual was concerned though, cost was still high, and availability did

not mean very much easier accessibility. Copies of the Bible multiplied, but the multiplication of the Scriptures into more languages was done only slowly from the fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries. Various societies whose vision and labours included the distribution of Scriptures came into existence, among them the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel and the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge in the seventeenth century. In the eighteenth century there had been similar Societies in Denmark, and in Germany, as well as in England and Scotland. With the growing Missions activity at home in the UK and throughout the World, the need for more copies of the Bible and more translations of the Bible grew rapidly, and the formation of specifically 'Bible' Societies began early in the nine-

George III, reigning Hanoverian monarch at the time of the founding of the British & Foreign Bible Society



teenth century. The nature of the work of the early Bible Societies was to respond anew to the need which is as old as the New Testament – the need for the Scriptures to be more and more widely available and accessible. It cannot be too firmly or frequently emphasised that this is the chief reason for the formation and continuation, under the sovereign providence of God, of the TBS.

 **NEEDS** ■
*1804 and the formation
of a Society*

Many readers will be aware of the accounts of Mary Jones, her desire for a Bible, her six years saving to have the cost of a Bible, and her sixty mile round trek from Llanfihangel at the foot of Cader Idris to Bala, where she acquired a Bible at the hand of Thomas Charles. Perhaps it will now be realised that Dr. Charles' subsequent impassioned pleas in the December of 1802 to gatherings of similarly concerned Christians in London, was, in the purposes of Almighty God, the spark among much prepared and ready kindling. The resolve was formed to set up the British and Foreign Bible Society, with an inaugural public meeting on March 7th, 1804.

...The society was conceived as a

world-wide venture, to bring the Bible to every person in their own language; an enterprise in which all Christians, of whatever denomination, could wholeheartedly unite. The idea caught on, and the new society flourished. The grand simplicity of the Bible Society's aim, and a new awareness of the spiritual needs of the unconverted world, prompted many to give generous financial help. New editions of the Bible in the languages of Europe were immediately printed, and projects begun for the translation of the Bible into the languages of the Far East.²

Many well known names of Georgian Evangelicalism were involved in the founding and nurturing of the new

Dr. Thomas Charles



British and Foreign Bible Society, and thus also in the later controversies. Such names as Wilberforce, Shaftesbury, Charles Simeon, Joseph Irons, Thomas Erskine, Robert Haldane, appear in contemporary references to the work and later differences and decisions. Vatican response was a little slow in coming, but characteristic, most notably set forth in an encyclical of Pope Leo XII in 1824:-

You are aware, venerable brothers, that a certain Bible Society is impudently spreading throughout the world, which, despising the traditions of the holy Fathers and the decree of the Council of Trent, is endeavouring to translate, or rather, to pervert the Scriptures into the vernacular of all nations. It is to be feared that by false interpretation the Gospel of Christ will become the gospel of men, or, still worse, the gospel of the devil.³

From the very beginning the standard of "...without note or comment" was part of every statement of principle and procedure for the BFBS. As we later move on to consider 'Necessities' we shall see that the genial simplicity of early statements of purpose and practice became somewhat more rugged in face of controversy.



The office and depository of the British and Foreign Bible Society, which was based in Earl Street, London circa. 1816



At this point we can pause to review the Needs which led to the forming of a Bible Society, needs which go back to the beginning of the Christian Church and the desire of the Churches to have access to the written Testimony of the Holy Scriptures.

There is a continuing need for the Scriptures to be made available. This need was brought into sharp focus by the blessing of God upon the

Missionary and Evangelistic labours of the Georgian era. As a result there had come into being a specifically dedicated Bible Society. For about a decade this Society appeared to proceed as anticipated and prayerfully sought after. Support was manifest throughout the nation, from great and small, from churchman and dissenter. Auxiliaries began to be formed, Bibles were produced and distributed in the United Kingdom, on the Continent of Europe, and in India. As we now proceed to look at the differences and distinctions which arose, leading to the setting up of the Trinitarian Bible Society, I feel it important to stress that the TBS sees its origins and roots exactly in the situation so far described. The vision is this; the burden is still this; the defining task of the TBS continues to be this – to make available copies of the Scriptures, accessible in form and authentic in content.

NECESSITIES *which Bibles?*

The Vulgate Problem

Which Bibles? In English the obvious choice in 1804, at the beginning of the BFBS, was the Authorised Version; the obvious, but not the only choice. Besides various curiosities, and small issues of scholarly or even polemic versions of

Bibles and New Testaments, there was the Latin-based version of the Roman Catholics dating from the same era as the AV. This was never a serious option for distribution in the United Kingdom, but when it came to work on the European Continent things were different. An early correspondent of the nascent Bible Society was a Polish priest, who desired copies of the Romish version in Polish. Thus began a powder trail of discussion and dispute which would contribute to the explosive meetings of 1829-31 which brought about the separate formation of the TBS. The post-Reformation Latin Vulgate, with its translations into major European languages, was not strictly a true heir of Jerome's more reputable fourth century translation labours, based in great measure upon the Hebrew Text of the Old Testament and the Greek of the New. It was the Clementine Vulgate,⁴ bearing all the marks of the counter-Reformation, as well as the influence of the Septuagint on the text of the Old Testament. The differences in detail cannot occupy us here, but they are many, even with variations between, say, English, French, and Polish versions of the Vulgate.

The Apocrypha Problem

Closely associated with the Vulgate issue, and probably more prominent in people's minds at the time, was the matter of the

Apocrypha. These are the writings, such as I & II Maccabees, Ecclesiasticus, Susannah and the Elders, etc., which, whilst always viewed in association with the Scriptures from a historical point of view, were not seen as inspired, nor held to be canonical. However, as Andrew Brown records,

While there was general agreement that the Apocrypha was not the inspired Word of God, there were many who believed that the circulation of Bibles would not be acceptable among Lutherans and Catholics unless the Apocrypha was included.⁵

After 1813 a discretionary resolution in the BFBS committee opened the way for the printing and distribution of Scriptures with the text of the Apocrypha.⁶ This attempt to secure European openings was not made known generally, and as it slowly came to be realised amongst the supporters of the BFBS, controversy was inevitable.

NECESSITIES ■ *which Bibles?* *A summary*

With both of these early questions and disputes about principles, practice, and the real

connection between them, so much is necessarily brought under scrutiny. What is the right basis of translation? What are reliable principles of translation? What determines the choice of a Bible for a particular country – imagined ease of acceptance, or authenticity of text and translation? Another problem brought to sharp focus here is that a translation, however good or bad, should never serve as the sole basis of further translations. You will see why, once the TBS came to be formed, it adopted as a defining principle that it should circulate only the best and most faithful versions which can be obtained. This resolve implicitly extends to the textual provenance and also to the understanding that distribution is not to be determined by ‘acceptability’ but primarily by authenticity of text.

Which Bibles, then? Practicalities brought many Bible Society supporters strongly to feel that the need perceived must necessarily be met with authentic versions of the canonical Scriptures. ‘Authentic’ binds us to translation from the Biblical languages; ‘canonical’ excludes the Apocryphal books, and generally puts us in the Reformers’ rather than the Romish view of the Canon of Scripture.⁷ ➤

To be continued...

Endnotes

1 Of course, there could be consistency of typographical errors, too! Careful printing houses soon sought copyright protection for their work, not as making any proprietorial claim upon the text of the Bible, but as protecting their painstaking labours from careless, indifferent, commercially opportunist, or even downright hostile piracy of the printed page.

2 A. J. Brown, *The Word of God Among All Nations: a brief history of the Trinitarian Bible Society 1831-1981* (London, England: The Trinitarian Bible Society, 1981), p. 7.

3 A bull against Bible Societies had been promulgated in 1813. From “Ubi Primum” May 5th 1824, “Bible Societies”, Catholic Encyclopedia, <<http://newadvent.org/cathen/>>, April 2001.

4 In 1546 the Council of Trent, as part of its reaction to the Protestant Reformation, declared the Latin Vulgate to be the authentic text for the Roman Church. In the papacy of Sixtus V [1585-90, just when the English RC Rheims New Testament work was in hand!] numerous changes were made to that “authentic” text. Such was the clamour aroused that under the papacy of Clement VIII [1592-1605 just when the English RC Douai Old Testament work was in

hand!] thousands more changes were made. Officially this Latin text is the Sixtine/Clementine Vulgate. In English translation it gave rise to such renderings as ‘fruit worthy of penance’ at Matt. 3.8; ‘supersubstantial bread’ at Matt. 6.11; ‘baptism of penance’ at Mark 1.4. Many readings in the Douai/Rheims 1582/1609 version which reflected the Latinate vocabulary, such as ‘odible to God’ Rom. 1.30 and ‘exinanited himself’ Phil. 2.7, were removed in the Challoner edition of 1750, but the calculatedly theological vocabulary of penance for repentance, along with many others, remained in the text.

5 Brown, *op.cit.*, p. 8.

6 They are styled ‘Deutero-Canonical’ in RC literature, a convenient “have your cake and eat it” approach.

7 Many readers will be aware that the place of Scripture in Roman and Orthodox teaching is as but one part of a view of authority of revelation which equally includes the past traditions and present teachings of such churches. Both these groups speak dismissively of the “myth” of private interpretation, and of the dangers in the Protestant view of the perspicuity of Scripture. Reform would seem to be precluded amongst those who say as their ground of authority, in effect, ‘it is not what the Bible says, it is what we (meaning for them, of course, clergy, and NOT laity) cumulatively say that it says’.