

The Petrine Text

Something of real historic importance has taken place in our own days; that is the publication of the new English translation of the Bible. This work was carried through under the auspices of all the chief British Churches, and was finally accepted by all those Churches and by their parallel bodies throughout the world. The Catholic Church was not associated in this project but subsequently gave an approval to it subject to a comparatively small number of objections.

I gather that the scholars representing the Catholic Church, as well as the Protestant ones, are now engaged in trying to secure agreement in regard to the texts still in dispute. From the temper in which this research is being undertaken, it would seem likely that agreement will be reached, and that the dream of a uniform English Bible will be realised.

I say to Thee, Simon, Thou Art Peter

However it is not that whole Bible which I am going to discuss with you, but only a single text of it, the one

which we call the Petrine Text; that is the passage of St Matthew which defines St Peter's relation to the Church. In our Bible it reads as follows:

I say to thee, Simon, thou art Peter and upon this rock I will build my Church, and the gates of Hell shall not prevail against it. And I will give thee the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven; and whatever thou shalt bind on Earth shall be bound in Heaven, and whatever thou shall loose on Earth shall be loosed in Heaven.

That passage is a proclamation of the papacy. Its wording is almost exactly paralleled in the Protestant Bibles from the Authorised Version of King James (1611) and the Revised Version of 1881 on to the present time, when it has been radically enough amended by the translation which is being called the New English Bible, published in 1961.

Why have such extensive changes been made considering that the translators had proposed to themselves a new but strict translation of the original Greek, which would aim at introducing as few alterations as possible while at the same time removing definite ambiguities which existed in the earlier Bibles? Here, they declared, the step would be taken of altering the original so as to make the intended meaning completely clear.

In the Petrine Text this latter step has been taken. The phrase: 'Thou art Peter' has been amplified by adding to it the words 'the rock' meaning thereby that the original form had been causing confusion. Why should this be, for to the minds of Catholics there had been no ambiguity?

The reaction of every Catholic would be: 'What is wrong with the Petrine Text as it has always been rendered? We find no obscurity in it. We have always seen it as that new Bible now has it.' If there had been ambiguity in the text, the Church would have put a footnote to clarify it. I repeat: no Catholic ever saw the difficulty that the new Bible has so commendably removed.

A Common Protestant Rendering

But there was a disastrous confusion at work among Protestants. They were put into that difficulty by those who taught them and the purpose was the denying of the papacy. The method adopted was to explain the text somewhat in the following manner:

Our Lord is addressing Simon: 'Blessed art thou Simon Bar-Jona. I say to thee: thou are Peter.' But then immediately Our Lord directed attention to himself, perhaps by placing his hand on his breast or pointing to himself as he spoke the ensuing words: 'And upon this rock I will build my Church and the gates of Hell shall not prevail against it.' Then at this point our Lord swings back to Simon Peter and directs the remainder of the text to him as follows: 'And I will give thee the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven and whatever thou shalt bind upon Earth shall be bound in Heaven, and whatever thou shalt loose on Earth shall be loosed in Heaven.'

Now I ask what justification is there for such a strained, in fact tortured, interpretation as that? The text is obviously directed towards Peter from beginning to end. There is no indication or reason for alleging that Our Lord suddenly applied one phrase of it to himself.

Neither let us forget that Our Lord had begun by designating Simon as the Rock, so that it would be

confusing in the extreme for him to introduce himself as another or opposition Rock. In Aramaic, the dialect of Hebrew in which Our Lord was speaking, the phrase was: 'Simon, thou art 'Kepha' and upon this Kepha I will build my Church.' There is no possibility of a confusion. Likewise in Greek and Latin, and in the languages which grew out of them, Peter and Rock remain the same word. To that effect, from his Catechism days, every Catholic has been instructed. So as a result no difficulty is apparent to him.

Exploitation of an Ambiguity

In English-speaking Protestantism, however, the possibility of ambiguity did exist. At some stage or another in the development of that language the word Peter lost its primary meaning as 'Rock' and became the Christian name alone. Accordingly without proper explanation the phrase 'Thou art Peter' became confusing and in fact unintelligible. As I have said, this explanation was routinely given to English-speaking Catholics. Peter meant Rock. That made sense. Simon was made the Rock on which Our Lord then goes on to say he will build his Church against which the gates of Hell will not prevail.

But somewhere along the line after the Reformation some bright minds had the brainwave of exploiting the ambiguity which lay in the fact that the English Bible used the word Peter instead of Rock and that the Protestant people did not know that Peter meant Rock. So those false teachers utilised this to eliminate the papacy by explaining that when Jesus said he would build the Church upon the rock, he meant he would build it upon himself. This was calculated to deceive those who did not know that Peter and Rock were the one word, and that Simon had just been declared to be the Rock.

This is certainly an alarming way of handling Scripture. Surely it is to the like of them that the Epistle of St Peter is pointing when it speaks of those who distort the scriptures to their own destruction (2 Pt 3:16).

Then, having thus deprived Simon Peter of the headship of the Church, those distorters of the text inconsistently go on to grant him the attributes of headship, that is the possession of its keys and the power of binding and loosing. How can these privileges be separated from the function of headship?

When for the first time many years ago, that method of repudiating the papacy was practised on me by a Protestant controversialist, I thought it to be an idiosyncrasy of his own. But I was soon to learn that it was their standard method of expounding the text. Apparently that was what was taught to children in their classes.

Silence of the Scholars

And now one has to ask: What attitude were the Protestant scholars adopting in that reprehensible situation: Because they were not under any illusions. Just as much as the Catholic scholars, they were aware of the linguistic niceties involved in that text. They knew that Our Lord, having declared Simon to the Rock, did not in the next breath abstract that word from him and transfer it to himself, because that would only make nonsense.

Perhaps they were relying on a sentence from St Augustine (tract 124, 5) which says that Christ is the rock on which the Church is built. And of course he is. He is 'head of the corner'. But his words to Simon on this occasion constitute him the visible Rock that will represent the Lord and wield his authority when he himself returns to the Father. And St Augustine goes

on to say 'Peter is the rock built upon the Rock that is Christ'.

Knowing those things full well, what did they do? Did they try to get the true meaning over to those who were being led astray? Personally, I never saw any sign that they were endeavouring to correct that wrong interpretation. The better books may not have taught it but neither did they seek to correct it. The scholars resorted to a discreditable silence because the false explanation suited them by hitting at the papacy.

Of course those were days when passions ran high and the light of reason was obstructed by the clouds of prejudice. But in what may be described as our own time, the scholars of the various religions began to come together to discuss their differences. Then that astounding misuse of the Petrine Text could come in for attention, and the Catholics would make themselves heard on the subject.

The production of the Protestant revised Bible in 1881 brought to a head the question of the general accuracy of its contents. Its merits as a faithful translation came in for fierce attack. One such criticism by a learned Protestant writer, Abbott, set out the very many errors which existed in that revised edition. He declares that in almost every page of it are to be found deviations from strict accuracy, and that without such accuracy the closest reasoning may be involved in deep perplexity.

Another eminent Protestant expert, Archdeacon Hare, develops as follows: 'No error should be deemed slight which affects the meaning of single word in the Bible where so much weight is attached to every single word and where so many inferences and conclusions are drawn from the slightest grounds. Hence it is the main duty of

the Church to take care that the version of the scriptures which it puts into the hands of its members shall be as faultless as possible. It should be revised from time to time in order to secure the utmost accuracy in every word.'

Fallibility of Translations

But counter-arguments were not lacking to the effect that to make changes would cast doubt on the validity of the whole scriptures, as if every work in the English Authorised or Revised Versions must be regarded as infallible. Actually that very idea was encouraged in many quarters because of the absence of any other infallibility in the Protestant Churches, certainly had to be found somewhere. It had been agreed to find it in the Bible and therefore differences of words assumed an importance which they would not have in the Catholic Church where there is a recognised authority to determine disputes. No matter how many languages the Bible may be in, the living voice is at hand to explain. But obviously where the Bible is set up as its own unregulated authority, variations in wording can take on importance and can even produce divisions and heresies.

The saying that there are as many opinions as there are men became more and more justified as authority became increasingly indefinite in Protestantism. Hindrances to the productions of new editions of the scriptures disappeared so that any publisher could bring out a new and revolutionary version. Any sort of absurdity could perpetrate itself, for example the impudence of the marked Bibles which underline what the respective editors regard as the texts most important to salvation. Who gave them the authority to make such a picking of texts? Needless to say they are not found marking the

Petrine Text; nor the episode of Cana where Our Lord worked the first miracle at the behest of his mother; nor the promise at Capernaum of the Eucharist; nor the institution of the Eucharist.

Who Can Vouch for the Scriptures?

Moreover the authenticity of the scriptures and their standing as the inspired Word of God began to be widely and, one could almost say, universally questioned. Of course such attitudes must necessarily prevail once the status of the Catholic Church is denied, for it is the body on which the entire position of the scriptures depends. Without it we would not have any Bible, for it was the Church which defined what was scripture and what was not scripture. St Augustine in the Fourth Century insisted on this principle: 'I would not,' he said, 'believe the Gospel itself if the authority of the Catholic Church did not move me to do so.'

From the highly unexpected quarter of Luther comes the testimony: 'We are obliged to yield many things to the Papists; that with them is the Word of God which we received from them. Otherwise we should have known nothing whatever about it' (*Commentary on John VI*, 16).

From what Our Lord declared in the Petrine Text, which we have been discussing, derives the standing of the scriptures as inspired. To the Church alone belongs the authority to define everything about it and to judge whether a particular wording expresses the divine intention. Experts of all brands may debate eruditely on items and aspects, but finality rests with the See of Peter. The Catholic Church is not the child of the Bible but its mother.

Interpretation Theory That Did Not Work

Today the dykes have opened to let in a deluge of doubt. The Protestant claim that the Holy Spirit inspires the reader of the Bible with the true sense has not stood up to the heat and burden of time. Because it is not the way to the truth which God has ordained. That way is the Church to which the Bible itself points as the pillar and the ground or mainstay of the truth (1 Tm 3:15).

Once the teaching of the Church is repudiated, there is nothing which cannot happen. As St Paul forcefully puts it: 'Mankind is tossed to and fro and carried about by every wind of doctrine devised in the wickedness of men and in craftiness according to the wishes of men' (Eph 4:14).

Without the Church no correcting of the texts of scripture or the bringing out of new revisions of the Bible is going to remedy those chaotic conditions but rather to intensify them. Today world-Protestantism presents the appearance of an ultimate fissuring where everyone is a law unto himself and agreement with another is only accidental.

A New Bible for All

Possibly it was due to a realisation of that desperate position, that in 1947 a Joint Committee of the Protestant Churches of Great Britain and Ireland was setup to make a completely new translation of the Bible. That Committee was un-denominational and included representatives of:

- The Baptist Union of Great Britain and Ireland,
- The Church of England,
- The Church of Scotland,
- The Congregational Union of England and Wales,
- The Council of Churches for Wales,

- The Society of Friends (Quakers),
- The Methodist Church of Great Britain,
- The Presbyterian Church of England,
- The united Council of Christian Churches and Religious Communions in Ireland,
- The British and Foreign Bible Society,
- The National Bible Society of Scotland.

That degree of concord on the part of the Protestant Churches is impressive. The weight of scholarship and of patient labour which it brought to bear on its task could hardly be exceeded. The first part of its project was concluded in 1961 by the publication of the New Testament.

I understand that this work has been acclaimed and accepted by nearly all of the non-Catholic world, and that the Catholic Church has caused to be issued a New Testament which includes every item of that other work with the exception of about fifty words or phrases. These it sets forth as an Appendix giving the reason in each case for non-acceptance. I understand further that the Catholic experts are now in consultation with the others in the aim of reaching a total agreement.

Would be a Giant Step towards Reunion

When contemplating the possibility of attaining this end, the objection which will present itself to the Catholic mind is that some of the still disputed items may involve vital points of doctrine on which agreement cannot be reached. But when one takes into account the extreme sincerity shown by those Protestant workers in trying to set out the real sense of words, even where this tells against the traditional or accepted Protestant meaning, it becomes

possible to hope that agreement will be forthcoming in those surviving instances.

Fifty items of difference represents a very small proportion of the entire New Testament. Yet that is all that now stands in the way of an agreed New Testament, which would surely be a priceless possession, a giant step towards the unification of Christianity. For the uniformity of the text would denote the still greater element of desire for corporate union.

Effort to Make Amends

Another notable exemplification of the generosity of that Protestant effort is contained in Jn 2-4 and in Jn 19-27, which concern Our Lord's address to his mother at Cana and on Calvary. In each of these texts the word 'Woman' is substituted for 'Mother' for the purpose (as explained in the Introduction to the volume) of 'making the meaning as clear as it could be made'. What is the problem of ambiguity which has to be solved here? It is that the word 'Woman', hitherto used in all editions of the New Testament, has been subjected to a violation of its true meaning. Rank and file Protestantism has imparted to the word 'Woman' a derogatory sense, as if Our Lord was spurning his mother. In other words at Cana she is being offensively told to mind her own business; and on Calvary Our Lord is exhibited in his last moments as addressing his mother contemptuously.

The alteration in each case to 'Mother' made by the new Bible decisively disposes of that more than improper misinterpretation. But while appreciating the intention which produced the new version, it has to be pointed out that it is effective at the price of interfering with a vital purpose of Our Lord on those supreme occasions,

that is, to identify his mother with the Woman of Genesis (3:15). However, I am only mentioning this as an aside and I repeat that the Protestant intention is honourable and commendable.

Now let us return to the main tide of our consideration, that is the Petrine Text. I suggest that it would be difficult, even impossible, to make a scriptural alteration which could have more far-reaching consequences than the one which we are discussing. It makes plain to those outside the Catholic Church what had been obscured for them before. It takes the remarkable liberty with the scriptures of adding words to a classical text in order to remove all possible doubt. And this is in respect of that ultra-special text, which more than any other, marks the dividing line between the Protestant and Catholic Churches. The addition of that word 'Rock' changes what had been a battlefield into a broad road towards reunion.

Noblest and Most Dramatic Gesture of All

It is not easy to see how anyone outside the Church can for the future read that new blunt Petrine Text without realising its dynamic content. I quote the new form:

You are Peter the Rock; and on this Rock
 I will build my Church, and the forces
 of death shall never overpower it. I will
 give you the keys of the Kingdom of
 Heaven; what you forbid on Earth shall be
 forbidden in Heaven, and what you allow
 on Earth shall be allowed in Heaven (Mt
 16:18-19).

The more one reads this new version, the more one is moved by the nobility of making such an amendment which is an admission that grievous wrong had been tolerated in the past. Multitudes have been left in ignorance of the elementary fact that Our Lord had used the one word for Peter and Rock, and that all the original languages of the Bible did the same; and that the comparatively modern language of English is one of those which has separated the meanings of the two words. Moreover this lack of knowledge had been so manipulated as to turn the whole text upside down; it was made to mean that the Church was *not* built upon Simon Peter.

I refer again to the reprehensible silence of their leaders who knew. But only for the purpose of giving honour where honour is due, that is to all those who took part in the meritorious work of producing the New English Bible.

Petrine Text Now Clear

This New Bible transforms the situation in many ways. Does this mean that the signals are now set for the reunion of Christendom? Far from that, one has to say with infinite regret. The prejudices of ages cannot be thus easily erased. But at least it will be possible to prove to Protestants that their old anti-Petrine interpretation is now inadmissible. It would be irrational for them to say that they will not receive the new and that they adhere to the old. Thereby they would set themselves against the accumulated up-to-date scholarship of all the Protestant Churches.

But of course there would be nothing inconsistent in their doing that, because Protestantism is essentially an individualism. The individuals have been told to read the Bible and that the Holy Spirit will administer the correct meaning to them. A person educated to that idea will not

yield his own opinion to the united declaration of all the Churches on earth. He believes that the Holy Spirit has picked him out and given that truth to him alone.

With such as he, nobody can deal. But there are others who have been going by the incorrect interpretation hitherto given to them and who will be ready to accept the new rendering which leaves no doubt as to the identity of the Rock on which Christ has built his Church.

An Escape Route Found: a Personal Gift to Peter Only

I have heard one method of escaping from the new text. It was that Our Lord was indeed basing his Church upon Peter, but that this was only a personal grant. It was to Peter alone and not continued to his successors! This explanation would certainly represent the finding of a loophole where the authors of the New Bible had meant to leave none. The idea that Peter was to be the foundation for the term of his own life and no more would be so bereft of purpose as to be senseless. The special need for such a head would arise later when the apostles would all have passed away, and would increase as the origin became the more remote.

Furthermore, would that withdrawal of headship mean that the other attributes of the Church would also disappear at the death of Peter, that is its prevalence against the gates of Hell, its power to loose and to bind? Would not, also, the other teaching functions conferred on Peter by Our Lord, that is the feeding of the lambs and sheep (Jn 21:15- 17), terminate with Peter? Thus deprived of pastoral function, what would be left for the Church to do? Could such an attenuated Church claim to have a tangible existence?

The conclusive answer to the foregoing nonsensical supposition lies in the commission given to the Church in the final words of Our Lord, spoken on Mount Oliver: 'All power in Heaven and on Earth has been given to me. Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you all days even unto the consummation of the world' (Mt 26:18-20).

Therefore the Church is for all time, and subject to the same conditions as those under which it was established, and is identical in every way with what was established.