

American Bible Society

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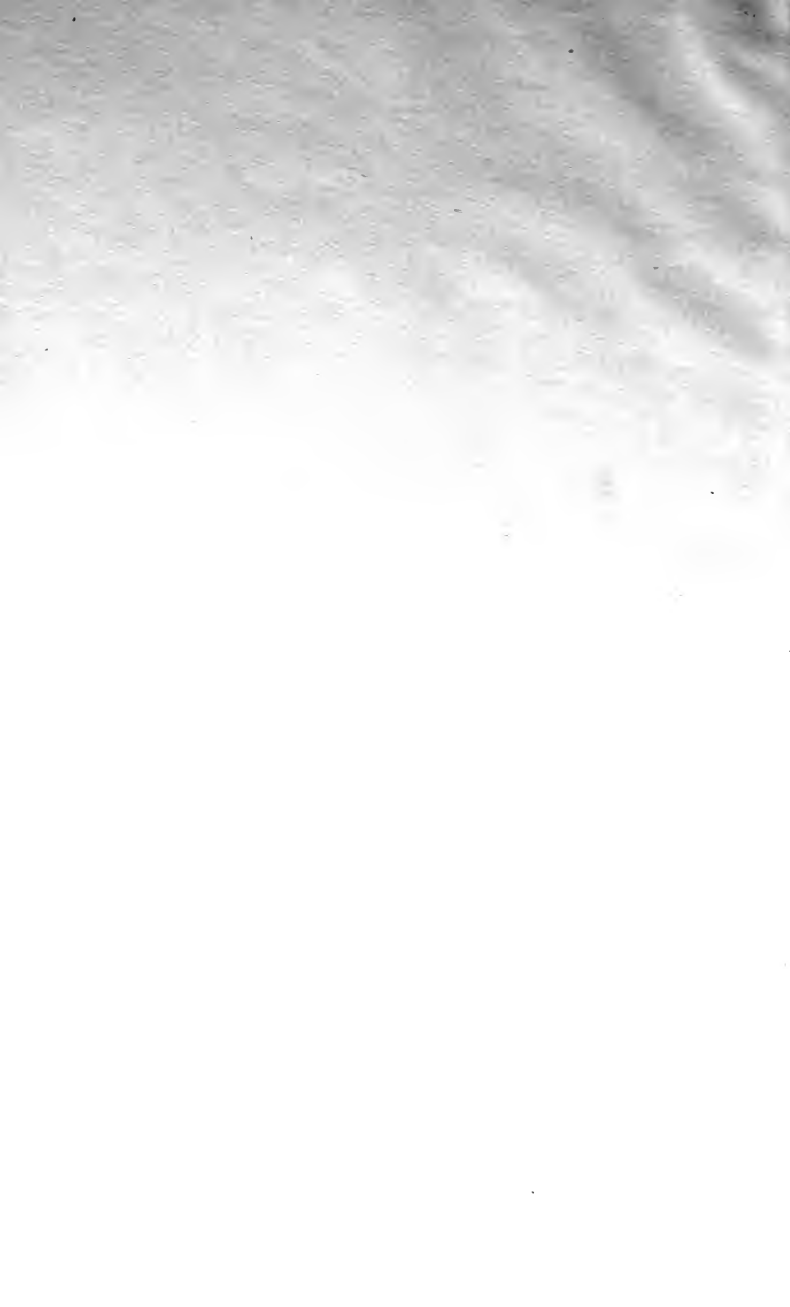
The Story of the  
Arabic Bible

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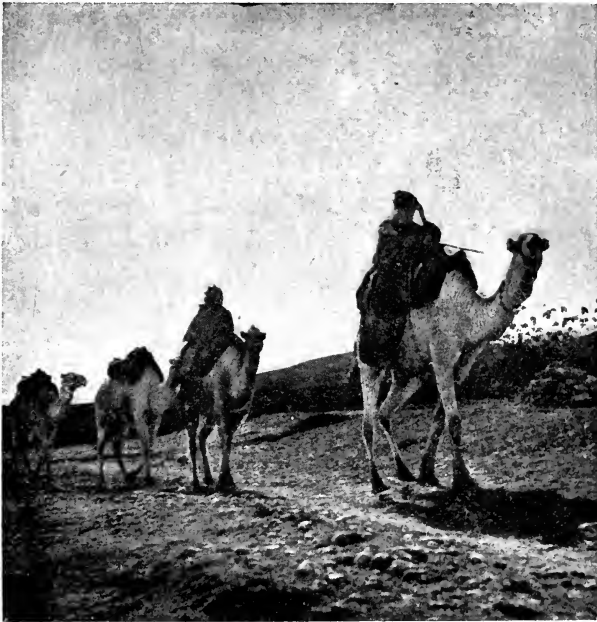
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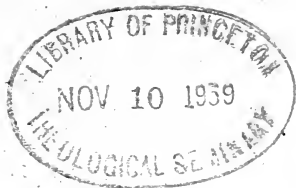
# THE STORY OF THE ARABIC BIBLE

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A CARAVAN IN SYRIA

✓ AMERICAN BIBLE SOCIETY  
NEW YORK  
1906



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# THE STORY OF THE ARABIC BIBLE

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THE story of the Arabic Bible deals with a struggle begun by the fathers and bequeathed in trust to this generation—the struggle to domesticate the gospel of Jesus Christ in that wonderful language which Mohammedanism calls divine, and with which it has superseded Christian language, in Syria, Mesopotamia, and Egypt. The story begins with the Arabic alphabet and the man who shaped the type with which to print it.

The mission of the American Board had no sooner brought its printing press from Malta to Beirut in 1834, than Mohammedans criticized its Arabic type. The type had been made in Europe, and looked—well, about as English type would look if designed by an Arab. The Rev. Eli Smith saw that in plans for using the printing press as a teacher of the gospel, the quality of the equipment counts; the press would be handicapped unless its type pleased the fastidious, artistic taste of Mohammedans. Such type did not exist; therefore it was a duty to create it. He collected specimens of choice Arabic manuscripts and of writing-masters' beautiful models, and with a reed pen copied from them the letters of the alphabet to serve as models for the type. Since the letters of Arabic words are generally joined together in printing as in writing, each letter changes its form to suit its position; and including the vowel points, about 1,800 different types are necessary to print one complete alphabet.

The preparation of these written models having been finished, Dr. Smith, in 1836, took passage in a little Prussian schooner for Smyrna, to watch over the cutting

of the steel punches with which to strike the matrices used in casting type. The voyage ended in shipwreck, and all Dr. Smith's written models were lost under the smiling waters of the Mediterranean Sea.

Catastrophe is a spur to a determined man, and Dr. Smith at once began again at the beginning. He collected more specimens of fine writing and made a new set of models. Then Mr. Hallock, the American Board's printer at Smyrna, under Dr. Smith's guidance, skillfully cut the steel punches and struck the matrices.



REV. ELI SMITH, D.D.

Providing types to print an alphabet may seem a very small thing, yet if there had been the slightest slip or change of form in designing the letters, or in cutting the steel punches, Mohammedans would have refused to read any book printed with that type. To this day book lovers among them prefer manuscripts to printed books. But this undertaking was so carefully and sympathetically carried out that when the work was done, the slant and curve of the letters and the

thickness and swell of the lines were singularly perfect, according to the most critical Arab calligrapher's taste. So Smyrna, home of the second of the Seven Churches of Asia, had this added to the riches of its history: that it was closely connected with executing the plan of presenting the Christian Scriptures in the great Mohammedan language.

With the finishing of the matrices, a part only of the work was done. The whole batch of precious bits of



metal had to be carried to Germany by a long and tedious journey, for there were neither steamboats nor railroads on that route. The fonts of type were cast at the Tauchnitz establishment in Leipzig. Dr. Smith spent some months there in 1838 supervising the work ; and in 1841 the Mission Press at Beirut was at last equipped with Arabic type, the equal of which, for beauty, was not then to be found in any other printing office in the world. The work had occupied some five years. This achievement, so laboriously worked out in fine detail, was the successful execution of the first part of a plan for a missionary literature campaign of the greatest importance.

The Scriptures had been translated into Arabic long before this. The four Gospels, at least, were translated in the sixth century. About the year 750 the Roman Catholic Bishop of Seville translated the New Testament and a part of the Old, for the benefit of the Moors of Andalusia. In 1671 the Maronite Bishop Serkis issued a translation of the Bible from the Vulgate ; but it was too costly to be any poor man's possession, it was inaccurate, and its style was uneven. The British and Foreign Bible Society, soon after its organization, adopted this version and circulated it rather extensively in Syria and Egypt. This was the version used for thirty years by the American missionaries in Syria ; but Mohammedans reviled it, saying that the coarse diction and the graceless form of the printed letters clearly proved the book to be a shabby production of human enterprise, not at all inspired of God. Then in 1851 the Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge (London) published an Arabic version of the Scriptures made by Professor Lee and Faris-es-Shidiak, an eminent Syrian writer ; but this version followed closely the King James' English version, even reproducing its errors. The success of missionary work in Syria, Egypt, and Arabia depended upon the production of a new version which should accurately render the original in perfect Arabic form.

In 1844 Dr. Smith presented to Drs. Anderson and Hawes, the deputation from the American Board present at the annual meeting of the mission, a paper containing cogent reasons why a new translation of the Bible should be made, and this was decided upon in 1847, Dr. Smith being assigned to the work.

This decision could not be carried out save at a heavy cost. During twenty years the American Bible Society had aided the mission in the struggle to circulate the Bible in Arabic. In 1829 it had sent \$800 to the British and Foreign Bible Society to pay for the Psalms in Arabic to be shipped to the Syrian Mission for use in schools. In 1838 it paid the cost of printing some portions of Scripture at the Beirut Press. In 1840 it undertook the expense of printing the Psalms in Arabic. In 1841 it made another grant to print the book of Acts with Dr. Smith's beautiful new type, and it has in its library a specimen of this edition inscribed in Dr. Smith's own handwriting. In 1843 it furnished the money for an edition of the Proverbs.

So, in 1848, when the Syrian Mission came to the Bible Society with a request for \$500 to pay for the support of a native assistant to Dr. Smith in his work of translation, the Society did not hesitate about participating in this great enterprise. Was it not in some degree a steward of the Oracles of God? It made the grant, repeating it in successive years, besides bearing the expense of printing the portions of the Bible as they were completed. The Society from the very outset thus committed itself to the financing of the enterprise. Neither the Society nor the generous donors of the money can ever regret their share in the sacrifices which made the Standard Arabic version an accomplished fact.

Dr. Smith's method of working was marked with the thoroughness that characterized all of his undertakings. The duty of his assistant, Mr. Bistani, was to prepare the first draft of the translation, using the Syriac version as



ARAB VILLAGER AND HIS CAMEL

an aid. When he finished a chapter, he passed it over to Dr. Smith, who made it the basis of his own work and brought it into conformity with the Hebrew or Greek. As soon as any complete portion of the Bible was translated, it was put into type, a hundred proofs were struck off and sent to British, American, and German scholars, and to educated Syrians and Arabs. The criticisms made upon these proofs were afterward carefully collated and considered, and the final result was a translation which had the approval of the greatest Arabic scholars of the day.

Dr. Smith sent out his printed proofs of Genesis early in 1850. He had translated the New Testament, and the greater part of the Old Testament, before he died in 1857. He was only fifty years of age. He had hoped and prayed that his life might be spared to finish the great undertaking. But it was not to be. When he saw that his life had reached its allotted term, he explicitly forbade the publication, in his name, of any part of the translation, except the books of Genesis and Exodus and the first twelve chapters of Matthew. All the rest must be regarded as unfinished work. So he fell asleep, in the place of his labors, on Sunday morning, January 11, 1857.

We commonly speak of the Arabic Bible as having required sixteen years for its preparation, but Dr. Smith's work from 1836 onward was definitely and closely related to the translation. He never relaxed for a moment the study of the Arabic language. Since he steadily labored on his preparations from that year, it is perfectly proper to say that the translation of the existing Arabic Bible cost the two great men, Smith and Van Dyck, twenty-eight years of hard labor.

For a moment Dr. Smith's death seemed to crush beyond reconstruction the enterprise of Arabic Bible translation. The American Bible Society had spent some \$10,000 upon Arabic Scriptures, and had nothing to

show for this great outlay but a few volumes of an unsatisfactory, old version and piles of unfinished manuscript.

But one of the notable characteristics of the Bible enterprise in foreign mission fields is that those engaged in it have no faculty for perceiving defeat. The death



REV. C. V. A. VAN DYCK, D.D.

of the leader in this Bible translation meant, not stoppage of the work, but prompt action to find a new leader, also able to use Arabic as his own language. The Rev. Cornelius Van Dyck had been in the service of the American Board in Syria seventeen years at the time of Dr. Smith's death. He was one of the choice scholars of

the mission, having an extraordinary fluency in the use of the Arabic. Very shortly his associates sent to Boston a request for Dr. Van Dyck's transfer from his station at Sidon to Beirut, that he might take up Dr. Smith's unfinished work. He was then thirty-nine years of age. The transfer was made by the Prudential Committee, and the result amply justified the choice. Dr. Van Dyck, like Paul with the Athenians, had won influence among Mohammedan scholars through his profound acquaintance with Arabic literature. He soon induced a brilliant Mohammedan graduate of the great Al Azhar University of Cairo to take part in the translation of the Bible. Thus the work steadily proceeded, in the main upon lines already laid down, the Bible Society year by year making grants to cover the expense of printing.

Arduous labors during eight years brought the translation to a successful conclusion in August, 1864. The printing of the whole Bible was completed in March, 1865. This event, which Dr. Anderson, Secretary of the American Board, well characterized as "of the highest importance to a large portion of the human race," was appropriately celebrated by the missionaries. In the room where Dr. Smith had labored on the translation eight years, and Dr. Van Dyck eight years more, the missionaries assembled to pray and to thank God for the completion of the great undertaking. Then the sound of many voices arose from below, and a large company of young Syrians, workmen at the press and members of the Protestant community of Beirut, began to sing a hymn composed by one of their number for the glad occasion. The hymn was afterward translated from Arabic by the Rev. H. H. Jessup, D. D., as follows :

" Hail, day thrice blessed of our God !  
Rejoice, let all men bear a part,  
Complete at length thy printed word,  
Lord, print its truths on every heart.

“ To Him who gave his precious word,  
Arise and with glad praises sing ;  
Exalt and magnify our Lord,  
Our Maker and our Glorious King.

“ Lord, spare thy servant, through whose toil  
Thou giv’st us this, of books the best ;  
Bless all who shared the arduous task,  
From Eastern land, or distant West.

“ Amen ! Amen ! Lift up the voice ;  
Praise God whose mercy’s e’er the same ;  
His goodness all our song employs,  
Thanksgivings then to His Great Name.”

In 1840 the Rev. S. H. Calhoun, the Agent of the American Bible Society for the Levant, wrote, in a plea for funds for translation work : “ Is it a matter of no interest or consequence to American Christians whether the people for whom these translations are intended have or do not have the Word of God in a language which they can understand ? Oh, that Christians in America would reflect a little upon the condition of a nation which has no Bible ! ” Perhaps such language may help us to-day to understand the spontaneous outburst of joy which celebrated the completion of the Arabic version. “ Surely not for many centuries,” wrote one of the missionaries at Beirut, “ have angels in heaven heard a sweeter sound arising from Syria than the voices of that band of young men ascribing glory and praise to God that now for the first time the word of God is given to their nation and tongue in its purity.” Dr. Van Dyck, on finishing the translation, expressed his deep feeling in the midst of the general joy by sending fifty dollars to the American Bible Society as a thank-offering because he had been permitted to finish a work of paramount significance to the human race.

As soon as the translation of the Bible approached completion, the Syrian Mission, in March, 1864, had called upon the American Bible Society to electrotype it

in ten different forms : with references, without references, with vowel points, in large type, in pocket size, and so on. Few can realize the tremendous complexity of a page of Arabic proof, or the sight-destroying labor involved in making it ready for the press. The resetting of the Bible for every new edition was not to be thought of. Economy, as well as accuracy, required the construction of electrotype plates which would always be ready for printing additional thousands of copies. The Bible Society hesitated before the great expense of this work, estimated to be not less than \$35,000. On examining the records of sales, it was found that between 1860 and 1864 the Society had already paid for publishing 43,000 volumes of the different portions of the Arabic Bible. As the printing progressed in Beirut, these had been almost all purchased by the people, so that new editions must be printed immediately. After mature consideration of the whole question, the Bible Society decided to grant the request of the Syrian Mission. The work was begun in 1866 as a special feature of the fiftieth year of the Society's existence, new Arabic type being cast in New York for the purpose. It was a memorable undertaking, destined beneficently to affect almost every non-Christian land.

The expenditure of the American Bible Society upon issues of Arabic Scriptures during seventy-six years probably exceeds \$100,000. Since the new Standard Arabic version began to be printed in 1860, the Mission Press at Beirut (since 1870 being connected with the Presbyterian Board of Foreign Missions) had printed 1,076,518 volumes of Scripture in Arabic. It is sometimes not understood by casual observers that this is a work of the American Bible Society. Mr. Freyer, the superintendent of the Beirut Mission Press, writing for publication in April, 1904, felt it necessary to call attention to this fact. He says : " At the time of translation, the Bible in various sizes was set in type and electro-



شرح في هذه العرفه  
 في ترجمه النجوه الى اللغة العربيه  
 الذاكوره على سبب  
 ١٨٤٨ هـ  
 والسنة الحرامه ووافقها في  
 ملكه في ذلك الماهما  
 الذاكوره كرسى في  
 في شهر ربيع الاول سنة  
 في ربيع الاول سنة ١٨٦٤ هـ

MEMORIAL TABLET IN ARABIC IN THE ROOM  
 WHERE THE ARABIC BIBLE WAS  
 TRANSLATED

plates made. All this was paid for by the American Bible Society, whose property they are to-day. As necessity for printing new editions of the Bible, or parts thereof arises, the American Bible Society gives authority for the work, and the Mission Press does the printing and binding. For this work the Bible Society pays the actual cost of production. Likewise, when Scriptures have been printed and bound, they are distributed and sold by direction of the Bible Society." In short, the entire work of Arabic Bible publication and distribution is at the expense and under the direction of the American Bible Society, through its Agency in Constantinople, with this exception—that the British Bible Society distributes, at its own expense, the Scriptures which it receives at cost price from the American Bible Society.

The friends who have contributed to this work in previous years, and those who have rallied to prevent its suspension in this year (1906), will naturally ask, before we leave this story of the Arabic Bible, "What is the good of it all? What has been the result?" The Book has gone forth from the Mission Press at Beirut into Syria, Mesopotamia, Arabia, and Egypt in many great editions; the issues for 1905 somewhat exceeding thirty thousand volumes. It has been circulated in less degree among the teeming millions of all North Africa, from the Red Sea to the Atlantic Ocean. It has found its way across the Sahara to Timbuktu, and into the Mohammedan regions of north central Africa as far south as the Niger River on the west of the continent, and to Mombasa on the east. A regular demand for it exists at the Cape of Good Hope. It circulates to some extent among Mohammedans in Persia, Central Asia, India, China, and Malaysia. The Arabic Bible from Beirut has found readers in the Philippine Islands, in Yucatan, and in Brazil. The Syrian colonies in New York and in Chicago, as well as in Buenos Ayres, use this Bible, imported from Beirut for their benefit. The Syrian Mission has

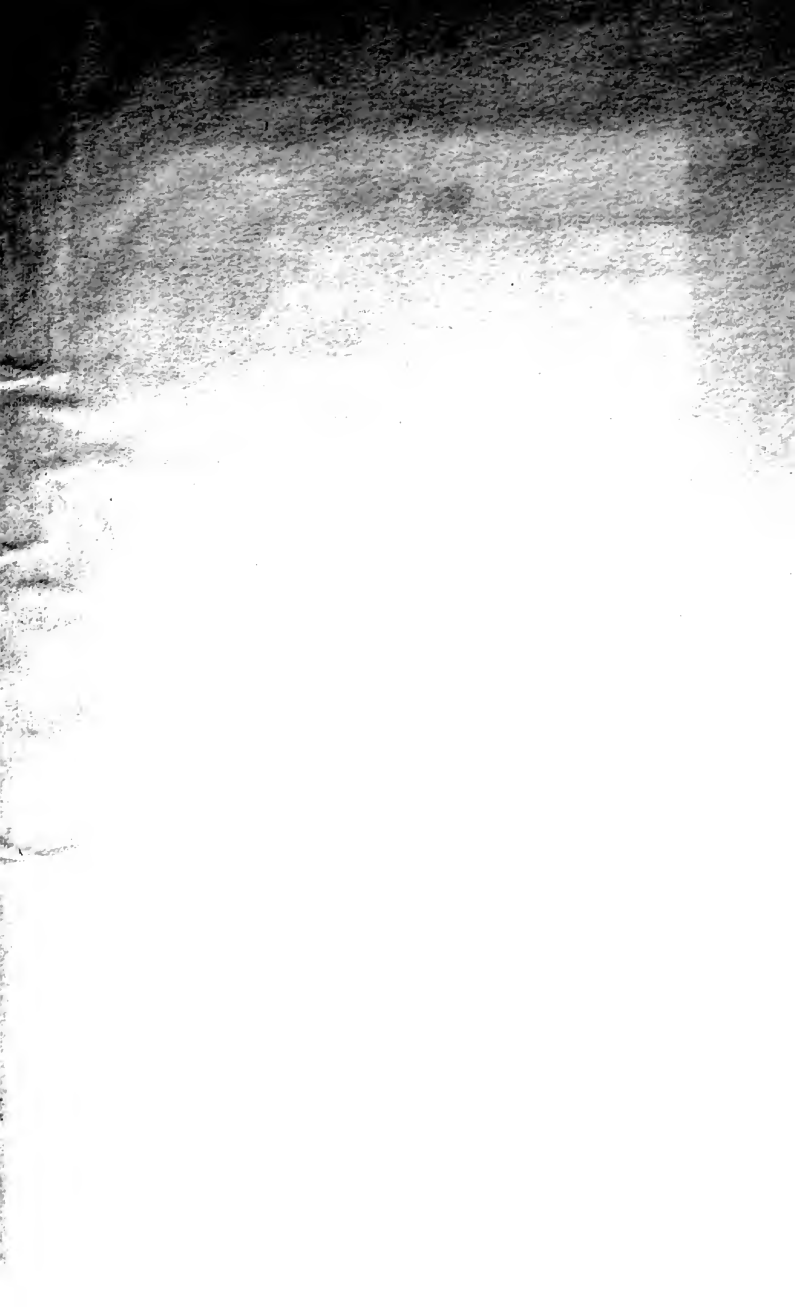
thus found the Bible Society a faithful fellow-laborer in what the appeal of the mission in 1847 prophetically described as an undertaking "to give the Word of God to forty millions of perishing sinners, to write their commentaries, their concordances, their theology, their sermons, their tracts, their school books, and their religious journals ; in short, to give them a Christian literature, or that germinating commencement of one which can perpetuate its life and expand into full maturity. Such labors are gigantic verities taking fast hold on the salvation of myriads, which no man can number, of the present and all future generations."

The fathers bore the burden of great toil and expenditure in providing the Arabic Bible ; the children inherit the duty of using it aright. It is not for any uncertain work or tentative enterprise that the American Bible Society asks the interest and the prayers of its supporters. The Arabic version is a proved success. It is one of the noblest of all versions in non-Christian languages, and the gospel is now at home in the language of Islam. All that we now have to do is to protect the text from printer's error and to see that supplies for printing and circulating this doubly sacred book are yearly made good. The increase of its circulation is a duty left to us in implicit trust by the heroes now entered into their rest. As was pointed out in an address of Bible Day, 1904, by the Rev. Dr. Hoskins of the Syrian Mission: "Not one of the original circle of workers of 1844 is left to speak to us to-day. Bright boys who entered the Press in those early days grew slowly into gray-haired men as they handled the millions of types necessary for each of the complete editions of the Bible. Some sacrificed the light of their eyes, others the cunning and skill of their hands, and then they passed out silently into the night of death. Eli Smith and Cornelius Van Allen Van Dyck gave their life-blood to the task. . . . Their memory, the fruits of their toil, we must hold as a secret trust. If we can toil

on as faithfully in reproducing, and distributing, and preaching the word of God as they did in making the book, then the cause of the Christian faith is safe, no matter how darkly the storm clouds lower, nor however slow seems the coming of the Gospel Day.”

*American Bible Society Leaflet, No. 32*

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