

“Debts” or “Trespases.”

“FORGIVE us our debts as we forgive our debtors”; “Forgive us our trespases as we forgive them that trespass against us.” Both forms of the fifth petition of the Lord’s Prayer are used in our Scottish churches. The one is the version of the Bible and the great liturgies of the Church Catholic, the other the version made familiar throughout the English-speaking world by the *Book of Common Prayer* of the Church of England. The Editor has asked me to write a note on the history of the words.

All scholars to-day would agree that the original prayer was taught in Western Aramaic, and that the word our Lord used was *hobēn*, which means literally “debts,” and metaphorically “sins.” It had suffered attrition and had come to mean sometimes sins in general; but our Lord had minted the word afresh in the parable of the Two Debtors. The connection between the parable and the words of the prayer is too close to have been fortuitous. Both Greek and Latin retain loyally this sense of debt, of something by which God is deprived of His due. There is no deviation, either in Scripture or Liturgy, from the Greek *ὀφειλήματα* and the Latin *debita*. The use of the word “trespases” is a purely English idiosyncrasy.

That “trespases,” which has the sense of a breach of law, is not a satisfactory translation, we have indication in the fact that, of all the translators of the English Bible, Tyndale alone has used the word. “Wyclif,” Coverdale, the translators of the Great Bible, the Geneva Bible, the Bishop’s Bible, the Reims New Testament, the Authorised Version, the Revised Version, all use “debts.”

Bishop Westcott numbers among the “felicitous emendations” made by Coverdale (1535), on Tyndale’s New Testament, his change in Matt. VI. 12 from “trespases” to “debts.” Professor George Milligan points out that the word “trespass” fails to give expression to an essential idea in the word “debt,” viz., that God suffers by our failure to fulfil our obligations, and adds, “Debts are what we owe . . . think not only of committed sins, but of omitted duties.” Canon Anthony Deane writes, “It is strictly consonant with the rest of His teaching that His prayer bids us ask that we may be forgiven less for the wrong things we have done than for the right things we have failed to do; not ‘forgive us our trespases’ but ‘forgive us our debts.’”

“Trespass” was not the usual mediæval word in this petition. “Debts” was the standard translation, and “trespases” a very occasional aberration. Out of over fifty Paternosters that I have found between 1200 and 1500, “debts” occurs 32 times in the first clause, and “debtors” 31 times in the second, “trespass” only three times in each clause. But a century earlier than “trespases” the same idea underlay the word “misdeeds,” which occurs sparingly throughout the period, though more frequently than “trespases.”

To understand the circumstances in which the use of the word at all was possible, we must remember the following facts:—

1. Every Christian man was required to know the Lord’s Prayer in Latin. Vernacular translations (exclusive of the Wycliffite circle) were intended mainly for the use of priests and friars in their pulpit expositions, and for the edification of the religious. They were meant as commentaries, and not for use in devotion. Since the standard Paternoster was in Latin, the translators could and did allow themselves considerable latitude.

2. The use of “gloss.” The 13th and 14th centuries were the heyday of “glosing,” and nowhere was the habit more apparent than in translations of the Paternoster. We would scarcely recognise “Bring us to Thy mickle bliss” as an equivalent of “Thy Kingdom come”; nor “Bring us out of woe and care and fiend’s fonding (tempting)” as the last petition. A French Cyclopædia defines gloss as “la substitution d’une phrase claire pour une phrase obscure.” This is exactly what has happened with the words “misdeeds” and “trespases.” They are substitute words, intended to be more intelligible to the common man. That this was so in the case of “misdeeds” we have direct evidence. Dan Michel writes in the “Ayenbite of

Inwyt,” “ In this bene (petition) we pray our Father of heaven that He will forgive our misdeeds as we forgive them that misdo or have misdone us. Then say we thus ‘ Dear Father, forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors ’.”

3. No one could come to Holy Communion unshriven. This universal practice of confession and penance made the word “ debts ” obscure, and the word “ trespasses ” clear to the mediæval mind. The sins with which the Church was concerned were “ things done, that took the eye, and had their price.”

Once a year, if he were to fulfil the Church’s minimum, three times a year if he were to do what the Church prescribed, the ordinary layman went to his parish priest to confess. At Eastertide especially the priests were overwhelmed by those who came for their Lenten shrift. Evidently, where a whole parish had to be shriven, the examination of each individual was limited in time, and so perforce he was questioned of actual sins committed. Let a 12th century sermon show how this was done. “ My brethren when ye come with true confession to your priest, he will carefully enquire of you with what means and for what cause the sin was done which one confesses he has committed He shall also instruct him how to make confession of his evil thoughts and shall advise him to make confession of the eight deadly sins. And the priest shall mention to him each deadly sin separately by name, and so accept his confession.” It is evident that such words as ‘ misdoings ’ or ‘ trespasses ’ would be much more intelligible to a man who had gone through this process than ‘ debts.’

Perhaps the earliest use of the word in connection with the Paternoster is in a parenthetical explanation. In a short homily on the Lord’s Prayer by an unknown author founded on a work of Hugo of St. Victor, the petition runs, “ Forgive us our sins, as we forgive them that have sinned in us, (that is to say trespassed against us).” The date is probably mid-14th century.

The earliest use I know of “trespass” in the text of the prayer is in a late 14th century MS. of the “ Lay Folks’ Mass Book.” This is not a translation of the Mass, but a devotional manual for the use of lay-worshippers, “ How thou, at the Mass, thy time should spend.” The original, now lost, was in Norman-French. It was translated into English in the early 14th century, but I venture to think that the translations of the Lord’s Prayer and the Creed were added late in the century. They only occur in two of the five extant MSS. That the translator was given to the “glosing” habit of the time we see in his translation of the phrase *communio sanctorum* in the Creed

“ And so I trow that housel is
Both flesh and blood.”

He uses “trespass” in the second clause of the petition.

“ And our misdeeds forgive us aye,
As we do them that trespass us.”

Mirk’s “ Instruction for Parish Priests ” contains “ trespass ” in the first clause of the petition.

“ And forgive us our trespass
As we do them that gult us has.”

The first use of the word in both clauses I find in his Festiall. John Mirk, “ that credulous ecclesiastic ” as Dr Owst calls him, wrote one of the most popular books of the later Middle Ages in the “ Festiall,” a series of sermons on Feast Days, &c. It was printed by Caxton twice, and altogether about twenty times between 1480 and 1530. “ With Mirk,” writes Dr Owst, “ the text of canonical Scriptures seems almost out of fashion. He revels in the most fanciful and impossible anecdotes about sacred characters.” His method and that of his time is shown in the version he adopts of the Ten Commandments, (4th Sunday in Lent). It omits altogether the second commandment, and divides the tenth in two. “ The IX. is, Thou shalt neither covet servant nor ox nor no thing that is thy neighbour’s against his will. The X is this, Thou shalt not desire thy neighbour’s wife nor counsel her by no manner way to evil, nor to that that is harm or villainy to her husband.”

In this book we find a sermon on the Lord’s Prayer, a characteristically mediæval attempt to link the Seven Deadly Sins with the seven “ benes ” of the Paternoster.

The fifth petition, which he connects with the sin of wrath, he translates, "And forgive us our trespass, as we forgive them that trespass to us." The date is about 1400. These are all the examples I have found in the 14th century, and come from men noticeably careless of the text of Creed and Scripture. The only other I have found before 1500 is in the *Mirror of Our Lady*, c. 1440. "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive our trespassours."

In the 16th century Colet wrote, about 1512, a paraphrase of the prayer for St. Paul's School. The fifth petition runs, "O Father forgive us our sins done to Thee, as we do forgive them that trespass against us."

Then, in 1525-26, came Tyndale's New Testament, which translates Matt. VI., 12. "And forgive us our trespasses, even as we forgive them which trespass us." We must remember that Tyndale's avowed aim was to make every ploughboy know the Scriptures better than did many of the parish priests of his day. His methods as a translator are described by his latest biographer, J. K. Mozley. "For pedantic exactness he cared not at all . . . he varies his renderings constantly . . . he desires to be easily understood of the people. This affects his choice of words. He does not worry about anachronisms or slight inaccuracies." As a matter of fact, where the word *ὀφείλω* or its derivatives occurs elsewhere in the New Testament, his usual word is "owe", "ought". Only in the Lord's Prayer does he use "trespasses." It was not so much wilful mistranslation, as one of the "slight inaccuracies" about which he did not worry. The word was in the air, witness Colet, and the ploughboy fresh from his Lenten shrift would understand it better than "debts." In his revised New Testament of 1534 Tyndale altered the second phrase, "Forgive us our trespasses, even as we forgive our trespassers." This was the form in "Matthew's" Bible sponsored by Cranmer, the first Bible to be printed by Royal License (1537).

The first authoritative English translation ever put forth was given in the King's Book of 1543, "A necessary Doctrine and Erudition for every Christian Man." The form of the fifth petition given in the King's Book was not quite that of Tyndale, nor of any version of Holy Scripture. It comes from Marshall's Primer, of 1535, and changes Tyndale's earlier form to "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive them that trespass against us." This was taken over from the King's Book to the first Prayer Book of Edward VI., and has never varied since.

Why it was adopted by the King's Book is an interesting question, for the committee which had the Lord's Prayer in its purview consisted of Gardiner, Heath, Thirlby and Cranmer, three of whom rose to high preferment under Queen Mary, and one of whom suffered at the stake. I presume that Mirk's popularity had something to do with the matter, in the minds of the conservatives, and that Cranmer was influenced by Tyndale, who was anathema to the others. But behind the prestige of Tyndale and the popularity of Mirk was something which made "trespasses" more congruent than "debts" to the thought of the time, viz., the forensic cast of early Protestant theology. The Ten Commandments became prominent as they had never been before. In 1538 it was ordained that, before being admitted to Holy Communion, all catechumens must be able to repeat the Apostles' Creed, the Lord's Prayer and the Ten Commandments. The "redditio," since the time of Augustine and earlier, had been of the Creed and Paternoster. It was only with Protestantism that a knowledge of the Decalogue was required of candidates.

Again, in the 1552 Prayer Book, the Ten Commandments were integrated into the Communion service. Miss Underhill points out that the only parallel in early Liturgy had been the Byzantine use of the Beatitudes. Here was a pre-Christian, if not a sub-Christian form taking the place of the words of our Lord.

The emphasis was on things done, rather than on aspirations after holiness. What this gained in definition it lost in scope. But it made "trespasses" the natural word for sins. And so it became a ritual word, and as such has remained unchanged throughout the centuries.

JOHN MACRAE.