

CHAPTER AND VERSE NUMBERING IN THE BIBLE

Occasionally one hears the suggestion that the chapter and verse divisions of newly-translated Bibles should all be made to conform to one standard system, and on the face of it this seems a reasonable request. After all, if one wishes to draw attention to the verse which says, 'For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given', it is an advantage to be able simply to refer to Isaiah 9: 6. How convenient it would be if one could indeed be sure that such a chapter and verse reference would give the desired result! But unfortunately this does not prove to be the case. One German edition, the Zürich Bible, does indeed follow the English verse numbering here, but another, the Luther Bible, counts this as v. 5, and does so because that is the number of the verse in the Hebrew Bible.

It is exceedingly difficult to get at the root of the many discrepancies of this kind to be found in the Old Testament. The problem scarcely arises in the New Testament because the system of verse enumeration there is practically uniform, though even there we find the Luther Bible combining Acts 7: 55 f. into one verse! There are also, admittedly, a few places in which certain verses, found in the Textus Receptus and the Authorized Version, are omitted from the Revised Version and subsequent versions, so that in Acts 8, for instance, v. 37 is relegated to the margin, and v. 38 follows v. 36. Such instances are not very numerous, and the omitted material is generally to be found in the margin.

In the Old Testament, however, we have two systems or even more, found side by side, and the number of verses in a chapter, or of chapters in a book, varies from one translation to another. Joel has three chapters in the Zürich Bible and four in the Luther Bible, while Malachi has three in the Luther and four in the Zürich!

The basic unit in the Old Testament is the verse, a unit which is to all intents and purposes common to both Hebrew and English Bibles. That is to say, there were verses in the Old Testament before there were chapters, while in the New Testament the chapters were the primary division and these were subsequently divided into verses in the sixteenth century.

The primitive Hebrew verse division goes back in its essentials to the beginning of the Christian era, since the Mishnah lays down the rule: 'He that reads in the Law may not read less than three verses; he may not read to the interpreter more than one verse, or, in the Prophets, three verses.' This short unit was read out in order to be translated into Aramaic. But even this primitive verse division has not always been followed in translations which have been made from the Hebrew. In 1 Kings 22, for instance, there are 53 verses in the English, but 54 in Hebrew, since the English 43rd verse

is divided in two in Hebrew. Also, v. 22 begins in Hebrew with the words, 'And he said, I will go forth . . .' This seems to be a point at which the verse division in all English versions since the Authorized Version differs not only from the Hebrew but from both the German translations, from the LXX, the Vulgate, the Douai Version and the Geneva Bible. In such a situation as this, should a translator follow the English version simply because the English-speaking world accepts it?

The blame for originating this state of affairs cannot always be laid at the door of the translators of the Authorized Version, who have almost invariably been followed in subsequent English versions. Departures from the modern Hebrew enumeration are sometimes to be found in earlier translations. For instance, Job 42 has 17 verses in both Hebrew and English, but the Vulgate, followed by the Douai Version, has 16, since it attaches the last sentence in the book to the preceding verse. Hosea 2: 23, which incidentally is v. 25 in the Hebrew, is divided to make vv. 23 and 24 in the Vulgate and Douai! Again, there is a considerable difference of opinion about the beginning of chapter 7 in Song of Songs. In Hebrew the chapter begins with 'Return, return O Shulammitte' (6: 13 in English), whereas in the Vulgate and the Douai the chapter begins halfway through that verse: 'What shalt thou see in the Sulamitesse but the companies of campes?'

This brings us to the consideration of the differences between the chapter divisions in the Hebrew and the English. The Hebrew chapter divisions are said to have been adopted to facilitate discussion with Christian controversialists, and to have been taken from the earlier Vulgate chapter divisions attributed to Stephen Langton, Archbishop of Canterbury. They do not, however, always agree with those in the Vulgate, nor do these always agree with the chapter divisions in the English Bible tradition. Why does the English tradition agree with the Vulgate in beginning Exodus 8 after 7: 25, whereas the Hebrew, followed by Luther, begins the chapter four verses later?

A suggestion which might occur to someone looking for a logical basis to these differences turns out to be baseless. At an early period, the Hebrew Bible was divided into sections or paragraphs for liturgical purposes. These sections are of far greater antiquity than the modern chapter divisions, and one might suppose that where such a sectional division conflicts with a chapter division in the Vulgate, the Jews, in introducing what Ginsberg calls the 'pernicious practice' of chapter division, would have made these divisions conform with the primitive sections. The situation turns out to be quite otherwise in practice, as one or two examples will show. Exodus 7 in Hebrew continues on, as we have seen, into what in the Vulgate and English is now chapter 8, ending at our 8: 4. But the Hebrew section division coincides, not with the end of the Hebrew chapter but with the end of the Vulgate and English chapter! The same is true of the division between Exodus 21 and 22.

An even more extraordinary situation occurs at the beginning of Numbers 26, where the English, together with continental versions, follows the Vulgate and the LXX, but where the Hebrew apparently stands alone in attaching the first clause, including the comma, to the previous chapter as v. 19, and beginning chapter 26 in what is technically the middle of a verse!

Similarly the English versions stand alone against the world in refusing to include Numbers 29: 40 in the next chapter! In this they have the support of the liturgical division of the Hebrew Bible, which is at the point where the English chapter begins.

As one last example of the chaos resulting from the adoption of three various systems of chapter division, mention may be made of the conclusion of the book of Job. The last five chapters in the Vulgate, the Hebrew and the English, all begin at the same point, with God's answer to Job, but from there on they go their separate ways. The Vulgate and Douai call 38: 39 v. 1 of chapter 39, Douai adding a note, 'In some Editions the 39. chap. begineth here'. They then insert the heading for chapter 39 at its usual place, but go on numbering the verses three higher than in Hebrew and English! They continue the thirty-ninth chapter beyond the point at which it ends in English and Hebrew, giving it a total of 38 verses, made up of the 30 in our chapter 39, the last three of our 38 and the first five of our 40. They start chapter 40 at our 40: 6, but whereas our English versions begin chapter 41, logically enough, with the account of Leviathan, both the Hebrew and the Vulgate make the break between the two chapters in the middle of the description of this beast, the Hebrew beginning chapter 41 at our v. 9 and the Vulgate one verse later.

Even among printed Hebrew editions there is no uniformity of chapter division. The earliest Hebrew Bible to contain chapter and verse enumeration (printed in Antwerp in 1574) agrees with the English chapter divisions, as against those of modern Hebrew Bibles, in nine places, and in two of these—Isaiah 24 and Jonah 2—the Vulgate agrees with the later Hebrew division. In Job 41 the chapter division occurs at the same place as the Vulgate, one verse later than in modern Hebrew Bibles. All of which goes to show that one cannot even appeal to 'the Hebrew Bible' as the final authority on this question.

Enough has been said to indicate that no uniformity in the division of chapters can be reached without upsetting systems that have the sanction of centuries of usage behind them.

Probably the best practical solution in the circumstances is to urge that translators should adopt the system of chapter and verse enumeration used in the particular European Bible familiar to those readers in the language area involved who have reached a stage of education where the Bible is studied in a language other than the vernacular. This principle may not always be easy to carry out in practice, especially where one non-European language is common to areas of, for example, English and French culture, or American and German backgrounds. If the situation should arise in which there is no traditional European Bible, then it might be advisable to follow the division of the Hebrew Bible. But whatever system is adopted should be maintained throughout the Bible, or still greater confusion will result.

In this article I have not touched on the related problem of the enumeration of the verses of the Psalms. This, together with the problem of psalm-titles, will form the subject of an article in a subsequent issue.