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Dunham Bible Museum

Junior

Artifact: *The Books of Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Solomon, Paraphras'd: With Argument for Each Chapter, and Annotations Thereupon.*

Word Count: 1243

Symon Patrick's Paraphrase:

A Forgotten Work of Majesty

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During the seventeenth century, England struggled with multiple government revolutions and deep religious tensions. Symon Patrick, the Bishop of Ely, wrote numerous influential works during these tumultuous times, including sermons, commentaries, and an autobiography. The Dunham Bible Museum holds an eighteenth century copy of a work by Symon Patrick in which he paraphrases the ancient biblical books of wisdom: Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon, and Job. This work is an important historical relic of a significant age in England, showcasing what God can do with humble servants, and deserves to be displayed on the museum shelves.

Embossed with a simple pattern characteristic of its timeframe, Symon Patrick's book is filled with beautiful illustrations, a comprehensive analysis of the wisdom books, and a letter of dedication to William, Earl of Bedford. For each of the five books, he provides a preface, passage of scripture in KJV, and a paraphrase. In a letter to the Earl, he explains the reasons for paraphrasing the text: "thereby I have preserved, I persuade myself, the majesty of the book; and made it still look, not like the word of a man, but, as it is indeed, the word of God" (Patrick i). Not only does the paraphrase preserve its majesty, but the preface and cover page for each book has beautiful patterns above the work, creating a majestic atmosphere. For example, the book of Job has an illustration of Job suffering, his friends distraught, and his wife accusing him. Both the paraphrase and the artwork are intricately crafted to elevate the beauty of scripture, creating an ambience of awe and wonder surrounding this text.

Symon Patrick's paraphrase was born amid deeply tumultuous times. Following the Protestant Reformation, the seventeenth century "became a century of theological and political entrenchment" (James 253). England went through rapid shifts in government and religious

convictions. Patrick's early childhood was during an age that "was wracked by a painful civil war, which culminated in the execution of Charles I (1649), a 'divine right monarch'" (287). Following the execution of Charles I, England temporarily became a commonwealth before the monarchy was restored. This transition in 1660, however, "meant much more than the restoration of the monarchy" (Patterson 357). It was a major shift for religion in England with "the restoration of the Church of England to its own" (357). A series of conflicts ensued, most notably between the Anglican and Presbyterian Churches. In 1661, the Anglican Church and Presbyterian ministers convened in the Savoy conference to try and reconcile differences, but "no agreement was possible between the contending parties" (358). Symon Patrick's early years were charged with major political swings and religious tensions, shaping his future paraphrases of scripture.

Symon Patrick's private life mirrored the external conflict in England. Born in 1626 at Lincolnshire, Patrick was raised by religious parents that did their best to instill their son with a love for God (Patrick 1-3). He was intelligent from youth; however, education was difficult to provide. In his autobiography, he writes: "it was thought I might be fit for the University. But the war between king and parliament breaking out, put by all those thoughts" (7). Eventually, he was admitted into Queen's College, Cambridge. Although he was comparatively raised to a place of privilege, he maintained a posture of humility, writing to himself: "consider often how long thou hast lived, and how ignorant still thou art now almost twenty-seven years old, and yet a child" (24). He continued to recognize his ignorance and pursue further understanding.

In 1654, Symon Patrick was ordained as a Presbyterian Bishop outside of Norwich (24). Despite his position, his personal theological views did not fully align with the Presbyterians of his day. The Presbyterian Church holds theological beliefs which stress God's absolute

sovereignty over man. Symon Patrick, however, emphasized God's love and desire for all to be saved (18). Later in life, he writes: "This procured me with many the name of an Arminian" (26). Arminianism, rather than stressing God's sovereignty, stresses mankind's freewill. Symon Patrick's difference in beliefs led him to be "twice ordained, first as a Presbyterian minister; some years later, when he had become convinced of the necessity of episcopal ordination, by Bishop Hall of Norwich, a moderate Anglican" (Berg 165). His life was filled with turmoil between different Christian factions, exercising his "ministry during a time of great tension between the Established Church and other parts of the reformed tradition" (Fisher 4). Despite holding controversial views, Symon Patrick remained firm in his convictions. His works are a representation of the contentiousness of his time and his bravery to remain steadfast.

Later in life, Symon Patrick wrote numerous paraphrases and commentaries on scriptural passages including the collection in the Dunham Bible Museum. Although all five wisdom books were published together, he originally wrote the works separately. His first paraphrase was on Romans which he undertook "for the satisfaction of a friend, who feared he was under the sentence of reprobation" (Patrick 59). In commentaries, authors typically go verse by verse, providing comments on the passages. Symon Patrick eventually penned multiple commentaries, but at this point, he chose to paraphrase the book of Romans. This allowed for a more accessible work that didn't require years of theological education to comprehend.

Further into his life, he wrote a paraphrase of Job; however, shortly after finishing the work, his son of eleven days passed away (80). Akin to Job, Symon Patrick's life was beset with death and grief. In spite of this, he persevered in his ministry and scholarly work. Within the next two years, he finished paraphrasing the additional four works that were grouped together and published in 1731 (290-291). The very last section in the collection of paraphrases ends

with: “O Lord, make haste to help us” (Patrick 544). These words display his profound humility; even in a position of authority, his last words petition God for support.

Symon Patrick’s works, although largely unfamiliar, were deeply influential during his lifetime. Nicholas Fisher writes, “some twenty years after Patrick’s death, his achievements were still allowing him to be remembered as a leading clergyman of his generation. By any standard Patrick had a most successful career” (1). His works directly shaped his generation. Likewise, J. H. Parker writes: “his commentaries are universally known, and indeed form the groundwork on which almost all succeeding commentators have proceeded” (Parker vi). Over a hundred years after his death, Symon Patrick’s works were being used as a foundation for deeper studies. Patrick, a man of resilience, was dedicated to God in all his pursuits. He was “a man who assiduously performed his episcopal duties and whose pen did not rest” (Berg 168). However, this was not selfishly motivated, but “to him, the centre of religion was the awareness of the love of God” (179). Modern biblical scholarship owes gratitude towards Symon Patrick’s zealous workmanship.

While easy to undervalue, the paraphrases of Symon Patrick, Bishop of Ely, are a significant relic of the past and Patrick’s life. His work was born out of political contention, religious strife, and personal zeal. The paraphrases are unique, written amidst familial tragedy and focusing on the majesty of God’s word. Moreover, not only are his writings influential, but his humble posture, steadfast endurance, and love for God are noteworthy. Stepping beyond the strife of his times, Symon Patrick humbly relies on God as the sole provider of truth and his paraphrases are a beautiful token of this legacy.

Works Cited

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