

A SIGNIFICANT MONUMENT OF THE PRAGUE BIBLE LITERATURE OF THE LATE MIDDLE AGES

Josef Werlin

With the foundation of the first university of the Holy Roman Empire in Prague, an intellectual center embracing all areas of science arose here. Prague's fame as the first great literary center is marked, above all, by the first German prose work, „Ackermann aus Böhmen“ by Johannes von Tepl, by the rise of the modern High German literary language, by intense Bible-translating activity, the most famous monuments of which were the Codex Teplensis and the Wenzel Bible, and by extremely fertile activity in the fields of theology, the liberal arts, jurisprudence and medicine.

Also originating from the Prague school is a Bible manuscript which, in the form of Gospel pericopes, has been handed down in Cod. lit. 146 of the

Bamberg State Library. The manuscript was written in 1477 in the Benedictine monastery of Michelsberg near Bamberg. In the explicit to the pericope collection, the copyist refers to the „good masters of Prague“ as the authors, without, however, giving any details of the persons, their origin or period of activity. A number of pericope manuscripts from Silesia, Bavaria and Austria, written during a period extending over almost a hundred years, are textually related to the Bamberg manuscript. However, while these Codices were solely literal renderings of the Biblical text, the pericopes of the „good masters of Prague“ diverged, due to a certain textual adaptation, from the text of the Canonic Gospels. In the process, however, the authentic provenience of the collection was preserved. Investigations showed that eight manuscripts of the discovered manuscript group could be traced back to a common Bible source which must have existed in the 14th century in Prague, and which served as the basis for many Bible manuscripts in the following century in Bohemia and adjacent lands. The „good masters of Prague“, who must have lived during the period under Emperor Charles IV and King Wenceslas when Prague's literary life flourished, drew their Gospel pericopes from the same source. In so doing, however, they allowed themselves a freer treatment of the text. These „good masters of Prague“ cannot, to be sure, be considered as the translators of the Bible source — a partial translation or a complete German-language version of the Bible.

In the Bamberg Gospel work as a whole, a homiletic undertone can be clearly discerned, which is emphasized by two interspersed sermons. The authors from Prague appear to have been more concerned with treating the Gospel events in a homiletic or tractate-like fashion than with merely copying the Biblical text. In the Gospel pericopes handed down to us in the Bamberg manuscript, we have a hitherto ignored and, in its form, independent Bible manuscript from the period in which the Prague school of translators flourished. This shows once again the intensive and varied efforts made in the translation of the Bible into German in 14th-century Bohemia.