

Book Review of *The Bible in Spain* by George Borrow

By Richard W. Amero

The Bible in Spain by George Borrow (Kindle edition, 2010) sold more copies than *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens when it was first published in 1843. This seems odd today, but at the time of its publication it was understandable. It covers five years from 1835 to 1837 and geographically it ranges over the Iberian Peninsula. Its appeal for English readers is that it was unabashedly patriotic while at the same time it defended the Protestant religion against the arguments and blandishments of the Pope and the Roman Catholic Church which he headed. Borrow was a salesman for the London Bible Society whose job was to arrange publication and distribution of a Castilian translation of the New Testament and a Gypsy translation of the Gospel of St. Luke. While selling Bibles and inveighing against idolatry and superstition, Borrow was hounded by soldiers and servants headed by Cristina, mother and regent for the infant Queen Isabella II, daughter of Ferdinand VII and by followers of Don Carlos, a rival claimant to the throne, who was the brother of Ferdinand VII. As a Bourbon queen, Isabella II was backed by liberals who advocated a constitutional monarchy and State supervision of the Roman Catholic Church and by the English government, under the direction of Foreign Secretary Viscount Palmerston (1830-1841), who endorsed the liberal's platform. The so-called Spanish "nationalists" regarded Don Carlos as weak and subservient to the wishes of a Papal-dominated Roman Church hierarchy. Cristina wavered in her support of the liberals and in a shift in power Moderatos took over the government and evinced a more agreeable attitude toward the Catholic Church. Spain, as a poor country in the nineteenth century, was having problems with the Pope and was more assertive in exercising its authority than it was when the Hapsburgs ruled Spain and acceded to the wishes of the Spanish Inquisition in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In 1835 the horrors of the Inquisition were happily a thing of the past.

George Borrow accepted his Spanish name Don Jorge. Don Jorge had a pet name for the Pope whom he calls Batuschea. It would help if this name or insult were explained as it does not appear in the Oxford Dictionary of the English language. Since the Pope has been called many insulting names, one name might well be as offensive as another. John Wesley and his followers were active in England during Borrow's lifetime and it is probable that members of this group were the sponsors of the London Bible Society. What better place to spread the Gospel of Jesus Christ than Roman Catholic Spain, where ostentatious and esoteric ritual took the place of a more immediate felt presence of God's grace? It is not the purpose of this review to defend Borrow's missionary activities. The Gutenberg press made the Bible available to more people than to an educated Catholic clergy who read it in Latin (if they read it at all) and who regaled their parishioners with Orthodox Church ideas about a three-part Jesus, Jehovah, and a more ethereal Holy Ghost. The new readers of Bibles in their own vernacular languages found a version of religion which was different from what they were told about in the Catholic Church. To Borrow and to the London Bible Society, he was spreading the Good News of Jesus Christ when he was not spreading news of a more remote and jealous Ancient of Days who spoke imperiously and capriciously to people.

Don Jorge found practicing curates who were eager to find out about the Jesus who was the center of their religion by purchasing a Castilian Bible. He did not go into the gypsy reception of

the Gospel of St. Luke as he claimed he had covered that subject in a previous out-of-print book. Since the gypsies traversed most of Europe and possessed a common language they must have been acquainted with both Protestant (individualistic) and Roman Catholic (collectivistic) notions about the worship of God, but the independent-minded gypsies, whom Borrow mentioned, possessed a skeptical and stoic view toward life that made promises of salvation superfluous. To gitanos (gypsies) the present was more important than the future, particularly a future that took place after death. While he never forgot that he was supposed to push the sale of Bibles (and took a mathematician's pride in the number circulated), Don Jorge, as a passive viewer of scenery, people and events, was a kind of chameleon. The gypsies knew him well enough not to confuse him with their own; not so the Jews. Because of Don Jorge's knowledge of Hebrew and of Hebrew dialects and because of his being intentionally evasive, "conversos" or clandestine Jews thought of him as one of their own. Don Jorge's singing of Hebrew hymns was a help in his endeavor to blend with low-class working and marauding people. (He had an abiding distaste for members of the nobility.) As Don Jorge had a loathing of Roman Catholics, so also his attitude toward Jews reflected a similar animosity. Nevertheless, he occasionally met hospitable and good-looking Jews who might have challenged his preformed opinions if they were not so deeply embedded. In general the Jews in *The Bible in Spain* are as conniving and as mean as Shakespeare's Shylock.

The Bible in Spain consists of a continuous narrative in which scenes keep moving by as they do in the movies. Don Jorge used the lecturer's trick of making his descriptions interesting by claiming that many of them were the most interesting, remarkable, singular, mysterious, important, wild, beautiful, etc. he had ever seen. His memory was photographic so he conveyed a general impression of scenery and left the reader to imagine the rest. Each reader may have different ideas about which scene is the most outstanding. The explorations in Basque countries of Asturia and Galicia are especially impressive. It may take a long while to get to Finisterre, or Land's End, in Spain and in Europe, but the scenery when finally revealed is worth the effort. Scenes in the prison in which Don Jorge spent a few invigorating days getting to meet murderer and cut-throats and listening to their slang are striking. Since Don Jorge had the support of English consuls and money to pay for his needs, he was better off than the prisoners who in their debased and deprived conditions are more exciting. It is interesting to read how Cintra, Salamanca, Seville and Cordova appeared in the middle of the 19th century. These cities may be better reconstituted today, but it is exhilarating to know that the Spain of the Goths, Moors, and "old Christians" still retains so much that appeals to the eyes of visitors. Every so often Don Jorge forgot himself and said something praiseworthy about the architecture of Roman Catholic cathedrals in Spain or about the religious paintings of Murillo. Towards the end of his journeys he visited Gibraltar and the Pillars of Hercules before leaving for Tangier. He did not notice the Barbary apes so these may have been a later intrusion, but he found the caves and tunnels in the rock to be a spelunker's delight.

It is offensive to have the Virgin Mary called a strumpet and to have the God in the Roman Catholic Church described as a piece of bread and as an infant. As symbolism and sacramentalism are at the core of most of the world's art, this reviewer replies, "why not?" There is religious feeling in Van Gogh's painting *The Potato Eaters*. It is ironical, that Van Gogh was a member of a Dutch Reformist Church. As an artist, he must have looked long at the Madonnas

and Childs that appeared on the walls of museums if not in the undecorated and unadorned Protestant churches of Amsterdam.

A peculiarity of Borrow's style is that he takes great pains in describing the appearance and clothes of those Don Jorge meets. It is thus possible to derive an impression of the personality of the person being described, perhaps not with the depth and permanence of Rembrandt, but enough so that it arouses interest of a temporary kind. But the description is soon over and afterwards the characters fade away, never to be heard from again. The exception is Benedict Mol, a displaced Swiss from Lucerne who had an obsession that a hidden stash of treasure was buried at San Diego de Compostela. He kept re-appearing in Don Jorge's peregrinations begging for alms. Indeed he followed in Don Jorge's footsteps. The treasure is a hoax but Don Jorge had great fun describing Benedict's incorrigible gullibility.

In line with Don Jorge's animus against the Pope and of Roman Catholic theology, he expressed approval of Muslims he met in Tangier for they worshiped One God and not like the Pope a trinity and because their God was not conveyed in images. Here Don Jorge went overboard for while there may be Protestant sects that don't accept the Trinity, and this is certainly true of Deists and Unitarians, a great many do and the Nicene Creed is still recited in English Protestant and German Lutheran Churches.

An incident in *The Bible in Spain* that stands out in this reviewer's memory is when Don Jorge had an occasion to meet to a surviving member of the Spanish inquisition, who curiously took him to be a Roman Catholic clergyman. The now superseded inquisitor mentioned the three great evils Inquisitors wanted to get rid of. There were (!) sorcery; (2) Jews who had become converted but who practiced Judaism in secret, and (3) those members of the clergy who were guilty of "certain acts of flagitiousness," the last the biggest word used in *The Bible in Spain*. By way of clarification the antiquarian priest remarked, "You understand me now, Don Jorge, for you are learned in church matters." To which Don Jorge replied; "I think I understand you." (See Chapter 17 for a full disclosure.) I leave it to readers to guess what the unmentionable sexual transgression was.

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