

# John Wycliffe and the English Bible

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## **Wycliffe's early career**

Of John Wycliffe's early life we know next to nothing. His birth has been dated between 1320 and 1330; it should probably be placed later rather than earlier in that decade. It is natural to suppose that his family name was derived from the manor of Wycliffe in the North Riding of Yorkshire, on the south bank of the Tees. But when surviving records first mention him, he is already making a name for himself at Oxford. He was certainly Master of Balliol in 1360—the third man to hold that dignity in the history of the college—but—Merton claims him as a Fellow four years earlier. Whether the Merton John Wycliffe was the scholar with whom we are concerned, or another man of the same name, is disputed; but the dispute need not detain us here.

Wycliffe relinquished the Mastership of Balliol in 1361, on being presented to the college living of Fillingham in Lincolnshire. He exchanged that living in 1368 for the benefice of Ludgershall in Buckinghamshire. In 1374 he was presented by the crown to the rectory of Lutterworth in Leicestershire, which he held until his death ten years later. But the spiritual needs of the parishioners in those places were served for the most part by curates whom he installed there; he continued to study and teach at Oxford, where he had lodgings in Queen's College. For a brief period he was Warden of Canterbury Hall in Oxford, a foundation of Simon Islip, Archbishop of Canterbury; but when Islip died in 1366 his successor removed Wycliffe from this office.

In 1372 Wycliffe proceeded to the degree of doctor of divinity, his doctoral dissertation being a treatise on the incarnation of Christ (*De benedicta incarnatione*). His scholarly reputation stood high among his contemporaries. One of them, the continuator of Henry Knighton's *Chronicle*, who was no follower or sympathizer of Wycliffe's, speaks of him as 'the most eminent doctor of theology of his times, in philosophy second to none, in the training of the schools without a rival'.<sup>1</sup> It is not surprising that such a man should have had a large following of devoted disciples. That his influence was not confined to England is shown by the indebtedness of the Czech Reformer Jan Hus to Wycliffe's teaching. Some of the writings of Hus follow Wycliffe's work so closely that by today's standards of literary propriety they might well be charged with plagiarism.

In philosophy Wycliffe maintained a moderate realism, over against the nominalism of Ockham and others. Universals or archetypes (Plato's 'ideas') had real existence, that is to say; they were not mere abstractions. In expounding the doctrine of the incarnation, he taught that Christ was the universal man (the 'idea of man', in Plato's terminology), and therefore really man, a perfect example for his people to imitate. In the eucharist the body of Christ was present 'not corporally but spiritually';<sup>2</sup> the bread and wine remained in substance bread and wine, but became in significance and figure the body and blood of Christ. Christ nevertheless was really present in the sacrament. Attempts have been made to interpret Wycliffe's doctrine in terms of consubstantiation, but they are frustrated by his denial that the body and blood of Christ are present in substance in the eucharist.

While Wycliffe was a schoolman among schoolmen, using their conceptual framework and vocabulary, he could communicate effectively with ordinary people in their own tongue. Some of his sermons reveal him as a preacher of exceptional moral and evangelical fervour. Here is a sample of his pulpit style:

Lift up, wretches, the eyes of your souls and behold him that no spot of sin was in, what pain he suffered for sin of man. He sweat water and blood to wash thee of sin; he was bound and beaten with scourges, the blood rushing adown by his sides, that thou shouldest keep thy body clean in his service. He was crowned with sharp thorns that thou shouldest think on him and flee all cursed malice. He was nailed to the cross with sharp nails through hands and feet and stung to the heart with a sharp spear that all thy five wits should be ruled after him, having mind on the five precious wounds that he suffered for man.<sup>3</sup>

### **Wycliffe's later career**

In the 1370s Wycliffe became involved in political life. In 1374 he was one of the commissioners sent by the crown to a meeting in Bruges with papal ambassadors, to try to reach agreement about the payment of certain dues to the papacy and the pope's reservation of certain English benefices for disposal at his own discretion. The settlement reached at the meeting, which marked an almost complete victory for the papal side, must have been deeply unsatisfactory to Wycliffe; it stimulated him to further study of the whole basis of authority, civil and ecclesiastical—a subject to which he had already begun to devote radical thought.

Wycliffe formulated a doctrine of 'dominion by grace', according to which dominion or authority belonged ultimately to God, and was delegated by him to others who could exercise it lawfully only if they were in a state of grace—only if their hearts were right with God. He broke with the feudal conception which had come to dominate ecclesiastical as well as secular organization, in which authority was mediated from the king or the pope through a chain of command—from the king through his tenants-in-chief and their sub-tenants and so forth, from the pope through archbishops, bishops and parish priests. Instead, Wycliffe maintained that each man, each paterfamilias, was God's tenant-in-chief, deriving authority and possessions directly from God and directly responsible to God for the use which he made of these.<sup>4</sup> Wycliffe was indebted to previous thinkers, but the form in which he presented his doctrine reflected the uncertainty about the effective seat of authority in England during the closing years of Edward III and the minority of his successor Richard II. His doctrine might appear to be too theoretical—too 'academic' in the proper sense of that word—to be taken seriously as the basis for a practical reordering of society. It may be, indeed, that some of Wycliffe's ideas rubbed off on to John Ball and other moving spirits in the Peasants' Revolt of 1381, although there is no reason to think that Wycliffe had anything to do with the Revolt. (This did not prevent his opponents from trying to saddle him with some responsibility for it.)

It is easy to see how a thoughtful man like Wycliffe should be disillusioned by the spectacle presented by the Western Church of his day. Its prestige, damaged already by the Babylonian Captivity of 1309-1378, was shattered in his eyes (as in the eyes of many others) by the start of the Great Schism of 1378-1417, with two rival popes, at Rome and Avignon respectively. Nothing could redeem the Western Church, Wycliffe argued, but a return to the apostolic poverty of New Testament times. The church was never more vitally powerful than when it could say, 'Silver and gold have I none'. He called for the disendowment of monasteries and episcopal sees, and an end to the appointment of leading clerics—the 'Caesarean clergy', as he called them—to the great offices of state, to which they devoted time and energy that

should have been expended on their spiritual commitments. The material wealth and secular power of the papacy, he held, were in total contradiction to the teaching and example of Christ and the apostles, and he disapproved of the export of so much English money to augment the papal wealth.

There were powerful voices in England at the time, calling, as Wycliffe did, for the disendowment of monasteries and sees and the withholding of revenues from the papacy. This policy was supported by the party led by John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster. True, John of Gaunt and his followers were not moved by the consideration that a return to apostolic poverty would promote the well-being of the church; they were concerned rather to release resources to be used in prosecuting the war with France. For a time, however, the protection of John of Gaunt stood Wycliffe in good stead when attempts were made by the papal party to silence him. But when his published opinions on the eucharist, which included the denial of transubstantiation, exposed him to a charge of heresy, this protection was no longer available to him. William Courtenay, who had succeeded the unfortunate Simon Sudbury as Archbishop of Canterbury in 1381, convened a council at Blackfriars in May 1382 at which a number of Wycliffe's conclusions were condemned as heretical. He then compelled the University of Oxford to condemn them; this involved the silencing of Wycliffe as a teacher at Oxford and the banning of his works. Perhaps even before this action by the University, Wycliffe had withdrawn to his rectory at Lutterworth, where he remained unmolested for the rest of his life. A stroke about this time left him partially paralysed; a more severe one, which he suffered while celebrating the eucharist on 28 December 1384 (the feast of the Holy Innocents), resulted in his death three days later (the last day of the year).

But his work lived on after him—partly in the activity of the Lollards, the 'poor priests' who were sent out along the roads of England by Wycliffe's Oxford disciples, if not by Wycliffe himself, to propagate in popular form doctrines which were predominantly Wycliffe's;<sup>5</sup> and partly in the English version of the Bible associated with his name. Of these, the Wycliffite Bible was specially influential; indeed, it became the Lollards' handbook to such an extent that it is frequently called the 'Lollard Bible'.

### **Wycliffe and the Bible**

Wycliffe's title to be called *doctor evangelicus* is vindicated by his insistence on the unique authority of the Bible and his concern that it should be made accessible to the common people. He may not indeed be called 'evangelical' in the Lutheran sense of the term: he does not appear to have grasped the principle of justification by faith with the clarity found in the Reformers of the sixteenth century. But on the principle of *sola scriptura* he was wholly at one with Luther, as also on the primacy of its literal sense. The highest form of ministry in his eyes was the preaching of the Word: he ranked it emphatically higher than the celebration of the eucharist. The office of the priesthood, he maintained, could not be discharged without a knowledge of Holy Scripture; and that knowledge should be communicated to others. Holy preaching came next after holy living. All this, and more, came to expression in his treatise on the truth of Holy Scripture (*De veritate sacrae scripturae*), composed around 1378.

Wycliffe's concern for the circulation of the Bible in English seems to have sprung from his doctrine of 'dominion by grace'. If each man is directly responsible to God as his tenant-in-chief, then it is important for each man to know God's law—and God's law was identified *simpliciter* with the Bible, the whole Bible and nothing but the Bible.

Parts of the Bible had, of course, been translated into English before Wycliffe's time—both in the Old English period and, more recently, in Middle English. But these partial translations had been designed for devotional or liturgical use or for narrative interest. In the Old English period we have the translation of the Psalter by Aldhelm of Sherborne as early as the eighth century, while from the tenth century we have the Wessex Gospels and the Heptateuch (Genesis-Judges) of Aelfric of Eynsham. Alfred the Great's law-code was introduced by an English version of the Decalogue and other parts of Exodus 20-23. From the early fourteenth century we have Middle English translations of the Psalter, the best known of which is that by Richard Rolle, the hermit of Hampole (near Doncaster), which was accompanied by a verse-by-verse commentary; it was evidently a popular work, being copied in other dialects than Rolle's own. Later in the same century comes a version of the New Testament epistles made apparently for members of religious houses.

But before the time of Wycliffe no one seems to have thought of providing ordinary layfolk with a vernacular version of the whole Bible. The provision of such a version, however, was imperative if ordinary layfolk were directly responsible to God as Wycliffe taught, for knowing and obeying his law.

Wycliffe was certainly the prime instigator of the work of translation associated with his name, whether he himself took little or great part in the actual work of translating. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries he is repeatedly credited with the work. In 1411 Archbishop Thomas Arundel charged him with 'devising—to fill up the measure of his malice—the expedient of a new translation of the Scriptures into the mother tongue.'<sup>6</sup> About the same time, the continuator of Knighton's *Chronicle* says that 'Master John Wyclif translated from Latin into English ... the gospel that Christ gave to the clergy and doctors of the church',<sup>7</sup> while Jan Hus in Prague writes, 'By the English it is said that Wycliffe translated the whole Bible from Latin into English.'<sup>8</sup> This tradition persisted: in Sir Thomas More's *Dialogue Concerning Heresies* (1529) it is stated that 'the great arch-heretic Wycliffe, whereas the whole Bible was long before his days by virtuous and well learned men translated into the English tongue, and by good and godly people with devotion and soberness well and reverently read, took upon him a malicious purpose to translate it of new'.<sup>9</sup> More was mistaken in supposing that 'the whole Bible' had been translated into English before Wycliffe's day, but he had no doubt that Wycliffe did make his own translation.

An examination of the evidence, however, suggests that Wycliffe can be said to have translated the whole Bible only in the sense that 'he who does something by the agency of another does it himself' (*qui facit per alium facit per se*). Most of the translating was carried out by his disciples, but certainly at his instance. The primary evidence lies in the copies of the Wycliffite Bible that have survived, nearly 200 in number. It was a manuscript Bible, for its production and circulation belong to the period before the invention of printing in Western Europe; and even after printed books began to appear (about 1450) the Wycliffite Bible was long in being printed. The New Testament part of the work was first printed in 1731; the whole Wycliffite Bible in print was first published in 1850 (at Oxford), in a four-volume edition by Josiah Forshall and Sir Frederic Madden.

The comparative study of the manuscripts has revealed that there were two distinct versions of the Wycliffite Bible, an earlier and a later. The earlier version was probably completed while Wycliffe was alive; the later version, which represents a revision of the earlier one, was issued ten or twelve years after his death.

### **The earlier Wycliffite version**

The manuscripts containing the earlier version are far fewer than those containing the later version. That is not surprising, because the later version was a popular work in idiomatic English, whereas the earlier was a rigidly literal rendering of the Latin Vulgate, regularly reproducing the constructions natural to Latin in preference to those characteristic of English idiom. Why should this be? Wycliffe himself was the master of a racy and pungent English style; the style of the earlier version cannot be put down to a donnish inability to achieve anything but a literal translation.

The reason for the literalness of the translation is simply that the Bible was treated as a law-code. The Bible, and not the corpus of canon law, was the codification of God's law. Even civil law was secondary to God's law set forth in the Bible. It should make no difference whether the Latin text or the English text was used. People of education could use the Latin text, but it was most desirable that those who had no Latin should have equal access to God's law; hence the English version. But it had to be evident that, whether the Latin or the English text was used, the two texts exhibited a word-for-word identity. The lay leaders of John of Gaunt's party could be satisfied that they were using (in English) precisely the same law-book as the learned clerks read in Latin.

Theological students, too, could derive an advantage from this word-for-word translation. In the standard glosses or commentaries on the sacred text, each individual Latin word was annotated; it was therefore easier to use them to elucidate the English Bible if each English word corresponded, as far as possible, to its Latin counter-part.

The Wycliffite Bible was, of course, translated from the Latin Vulgate: the production of a translation from the original languages was not practical politics. Greek and Hebrew scholars in England were few; an outstanding exception to the general rule had been Robert Grosseteste, bishop of Lincoln, in the first half of the thirteenth century. At the Council of Vienne in 1312 it was decreed that chairs of Greek and Hebrew should be established at Oxford and a few other western universities. Nothing was done about this at Oxford, although it is recorded that a Jewish Christian, one John of Bristol, taught both Greek and Hebrew there in 1320-21. When, in January 1401, the Byzantine emperor Manuel II visited Henry IV at Westminster, and his companions said office together in Greek, the Lollards of the day were impressed not so much by their using the original language of the New Testament as by their using their own mother tongue—which was something that the Lollards contended for.<sup>10</sup>

Wycliffe and his disciples were, however, restricted to the Latin text as the basis of their translation, and for the purpose which their earlier version was intended to serve, no other basis than the Latin text would have been satisfactory in any case.

To illustrate the literary character of the earlier Wycliffite version it would be desirable to exhibit its text and that of its Latin exemplar in parallel columns, so that the reader might take in at a glance the word-for-word nature of the rendering. Since this is not expedient here, let it be said that Latin goes in for subordinate clauses and participial phrases to a greater degree than English; therefore, when the Latin structure is reproduced faithfully, the resultant idiom is not characteristically English. Here, for example, is the parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:29-37) in this version. (The spelling is modernized.)

Forsooth he, willing to justify himself, said to Jesus, 'And who is my neighbour?' Soothly Jesus beholding, said 'Some man came down from Jerusalem into Jericho, and fell among thieves, which also robbed him and, wounds put in, went away, the man left half quick. Forsooth it befell, that some priest came down in the same way and, him seen, passed forth. Also forsooth and a deacon, when he was beside the place, and saw him, passed forth. Forsooth some man Samaritan, making journey, came beside the way, but he seeing him was stirred by mercy. And he, coming nigh bound together his wounds, holding in oil and wine. And he, putting on his horse, led into a stable, and did the cure of him. And another day he brought forth two pence, and gave to the keeper of the stable, and said, "Have thou the cure of him, and whatever thing thou shalt give over, I shall yield to thee, when I shall come again." Who of these three seemeth to thee to have been neighbour to him that fell among the thieves?'

And he said, 'He that did mercy on him.' And Jesus saith to him, 'Go thou, and do thou in like manner.'

(The less apology is required for the modernizing of the spelling, because the spelling varies from one manuscript to another of both Wycliffite versions, and not only the spelling but sometimes the dialect, according to the scribe's place of origin.)

The participial phrases 'wounds put in' in verse 30 and 'him seen' in verse 31 (the construction called 'ablative absolute' in Latin and 'nominative absolute' in English) correspond exactly to the Latin wording, but one would not normally use them in telling a story like this in English.

### **Nicholas of Hereford and other men**

This latinate idiom probably reflected Wycliffe's policy, but the greater part of this version was not translated by Wycliffe himself. One manuscript of the version in the Bodleian Library, thought by some to be the original manuscript (but this is uncertain), breaks off in the middle of Baruch 3:20, where a note has been added (in Latin) by another hand: 'Here ends the translation of Nicholas of Hereford.' (The order of books in the Wycliffite versions follows the Vulgate, where Baruch follows Jeremiah and Lamentations.)

Nicholas of Hereford is known to have been one of Wycliffe's Oxford disciples; his teaching was condemned along with his master's at the Blackfriars synod in 1382. He appealed to Pope Urban VI against the synod's sentence and went to Rome to lodge his appeal in person. It has been conjectured that his departure for Rome made him break off the work of translation. This may be so; but there is every reason to give credence to the note which ascribes to him the translation of the bulk of the Old Testament.

This note is taken over and amplified in a Cambridge manuscript containing an abridgement of the Wycliffite Old Testament from Chronicles to Maccabees. Between Baruch 3:19 and 20 this manuscript has a note in English: 'Here endeth the translation of N, and now beginneth the translation of J and of other men.'<sup>11</sup> There is no doubt that 'N' is Nicholas (of Hereford), but what does 'J' stand for? For John, perhaps? But if so, which John? John Wycliffe, or his secretary John Purvey, or one of the other bearers of the same name in Wycliffe's entourage? We have no means of knowing for sure. But one thing we know: the version which Nicholas left unfinished was taken up and completed by others.

### **The *Glossed Gospels***

There was nothing in the translation itself to which objection could reasonably be taken. The objections brought against it arose from its being produced by such a suspect group as

Wycliffe and his disciples, and from the purpose for which they produced it: it was designed to be a replacement for canon law and ecclesiastical authority in general. But when detached from its obnoxious context it could be quite acceptable in the highest echelons of society.

This was specially so with an edition of the four gospels in this version, in which the biblical text was accompanied by an English commentary based on the *Golden Chain* of Thomas Aquinas, with quotations from other authorities (such as Bishop Grosseteste). Who was responsible for compiling these *Glossed Gospels*, as they were called, is not certain, but it may have been Wycliffe's secretary, John Purvey, who carried on his master's biblical work after his death. One copy of the *Glossed Gospels* was acquired by Anne of Bohemia, wife of Richard II, with the approval of that hammer of the Lollards, Archbishop Arundel of Canterbury. Arundel reported at her funeral service in 1394 that he approved for Anne's use 'all the four gossellers in English with the doctors upon them'.<sup>12</sup>

### **The later Wycliffite version**

The later Wycliffite version should in all probability be regarded as the work of John Purvey. His name is not actually attached to it, but all the available evidence points to him. After Wycliffe's death, Purvey betook himself to Bristol and undertook a thorough revision of the earlier version. Whereas the earlier version, in keeping with its purpose, was a painfully literal rendering of the Latin Bible, the revised version was composed in idiomatic English, and speedily attained remarkable popularity.

The principles on which Purvey worked are set forth in a work of fifteen chapters commonly called the *General Prologue*, evidently composed in 1395 or 1396. Its working implies that the task of revision had now been completed, but it is no unusual thing for a prologue or introduction to a book to be written last of all. The *General Prologue* insists that every one, great or small, learned or unlearned, should become acquainted with God's law—that is the Bible, and not least the Old Testament.

The fifteenth chapter of the *General Prologue* is of special interest, because it defends the right of the common people to have the Scriptures in their own vernacular, and sets out the procedure necessary in translating them.

For these reasons and other, with common charity to save all men in our realm, which God would have saved, a simple creature hath translated the Bible out of Latin into English. First, this simple creature had much travail, with divers fellows and helpers, to gather many old Bibles, and other doctors, and common glosses, and to make one Latin Bible some deal true; and then to study it anew, the text with the gloss, and other doctors, as he might get, and specially Lyra on the Old Testament, that helped full much in this work: the third time to counsel with old grammarians and old divines of hard words and hard sentences, how they might best be understood and translated; the fourth time to translate as clearly as he could to the sentence, and to have many good fellows and cunning at the correcting of the translation.

This paragraph reveals the author as a fine scholar who knows exactly what is involved in Bible translation. He may call himself 'a simple creature', but such disparaging references to himself are a mannerism of Purvey. There are four stages in the work of translation, he says. First, the translator must be sure of the text he is translating. At a time when each copy was written out separately by hand, no two copies of the Latin Bible agreed completely, and the area of disagreement was sometimes very wide. The translator, therefore, must compare old copies of the Latin Bible to establish the authentic text, and where there is disagreement in wording, he will find helpful discussions on the point in 'glosses' (i.e. commentaries).

In the second place, once a reliable basic text has been established, the translator must study it in order to grasp its meaning: he cannot translate what he himself does not understand. Here too Purvey found help in the work of earlier commentators who had dealt with the meaning of the text, especially in the work of Nicholas of Lyra. Nicholas of Lyra, who died in 1349, was a Franciscan scholar whose studies marked the climax of a long medieval tradition of Hebrew study: he produced a commentary on the whole Bible called the *Postilla litteralis*. Purvey's expression of indebtedness to him is repeatedly illustrated in the later Wycliffite version. Here are two examples from the Psalms.

In Psalm 8:4 the words which the earlier Wycliffite version had rightly rendered 'or the son of man for thou visitest him' appear in the later version as 'either the son of a virgin for thou visitest him'. Where did Purvey get 'the son of a virgin'? Not from the biblical text, but from Lyra's commentary, where at this point 'the son of man' is followed by the comment: 'that is, the son of a virgin'. Again, in Psalm 132:6 the later version says, 'Lo, we heard that *ark of testament* in Ephratah, *that is, in Shiloh*'. The words 'ark of testament' and 'that is, in Shiloh' are not present in the biblical text. No, but they are present in Lyra's commentary and from there they have made their way into Purvey's text.<sup>13</sup>

Thirdly, it is necessary to consult grammars, dictionaries and similar reference works to find as much light as possible on the meaning of rare and unfamiliar words. And fourthly, when by all these means the translator has grasped the sense of his basic text, he must proceed to translate it—not giving a mechanical word-for-word rendering but expressing the meaning of the basic text in the language into which he is translating (the receptor language, as it would be called nowadays). That is what Purvey has in mind when he speaks of translating 'to the sentence'—that is, according to the meaning. Later in the prologue he comes back to this: 'the best translating out of Latin into English is to translate after the sentence and not only after the word.' Thus he anticipated the procedure followed by the translators of the New English Bible, who said, 'We have conceived our task to be that of understanding the original as precisely as we could (using all available aids), and then saying again in our own native idiom what we believed the author to be saying in his.'

When the work of translating was finished, Purvey knew the wisdom of having it checked by other competent readers. Translators of the Bible, moreover, should lead holy lives in keeping with the holiness of the Scriptures themselves; they should rely on the wisdom imparted by the Holy Spirit to keep them from going astray in their responsible task. And, in a situation in which the translating, circulation and reading of the Bible might be attended by hazard, the prayer with which the prologue ends is apposite: 'God grant to us all grace to know well and to keep well Holy Writ, and to suffer joyfully some pain for it at the last.'

The relevance of this prayer is underlined by the experience of the translators themselves. Both John Purvey and Nicholas of Hereford endured terms of imprisonment for their activities, and both of them were compelled to recant their Lollard principles. Some of their associates died at the stake after the statute 'On the burning of heretics' (*De heretico comburendo*) was passed in 1401, but already, when Purvey composed his prologue, there had been burnings on the Continent of people who professed principles quite similar to his. And, while there was nothing partisan or heretical in the later Wycliffite version, any more than in the earlier, the translation and circulation of the Bible in English came to be so closely associated with Lollardy in the mind of the establishment that in 1408 Archbishop Arundel summoned a synod at Oxford which forbade anyone to translate, possess or read a vernacular

version of the Bible, or part of the Bible, without the approval of the diocesan bishop or a provincial council. This ban was one of the thirteen ‘Constitutions of Oxford’ passed by that synod against Lollardy; they remained in force until the Reformation.

But the later Wycliffite version made such an appeal to the hearts and minds of the English people that it could not be suppressed. The parable of the good Samaritan has already been quoted from the earlier version; this is how it was rendered in the later version:

But he, willing to justify himself, said to Jesus, ‘And who is my neighbour?’ And Jesus beheld, and said, ‘A man came down from Jerusalem into Jericho, and fell among thieves, and they robbed him, and wounded him, and went away, and left the man half alive. And it befell, that a priest came down the same way, and passed forth when he had seen him. Also a deacon, when he was beside the place and saw him, passed forth. But a Samaritan, going the way, came beside him; and he saw him and had ruth on him, and came to him, and bound together his wounds, and held in oil and wine; and laid him on his beast, and led him to an ostrie [a hostelry], and did the cure of him. And another day he brought forth two pence, and gave to the ostler, and said, “Have the cure of him; and whatever thou shalt give over, I shall yield to thee, when I come again.”’

‘Who of these three seemeth to thee was neighbour to him that fell among thieves?’ And he said, ‘He that did mercy into him.’ And he said to him, ‘Go thou, and do thou on like manner.’

The later version is plainly based on the earlier version. (The word ‘cure’ in both has the sense of ‘care’, as when we still speak of a parson as having ‘the cure of souls’.) But the Latin constructions have been removed, and after nearly six centuries we are conscious that we are reading plain, if rather archaic, English.

### **The fortunes of Wycliffe’s Bible**

When Sir Thomas More, in 1529, contrasted the ‘malicious’ translation of the Bible made by ‘the great arch-heretic Wycliffe’ with the acceptable version ‘well and reverently read’ by many ‘good and godly people’, he went on to say:

Myself have seen, and can show you, Bibles fair and old written in English, which have been known and seen by the bishop of the diocese, and left in laymen’s hands, and women’s, to such as he knew for good and catholic folk that used it with devotion and soberness. But of truth, all such as are found in the hands of heretics, they use to take away.<sup>14</sup>

There is no reason to doubt More’s personal witness. There was, however, one thing of which he was unaware: those English ‘Bibles fair and old’ were copies of the later Wycliffite version. There was nothing in the translation itself that smacked of Lollardy or any other form of ‘heresy’, and the copies bore no indication of the translators’ identity. Many bishops would feel quite happy to grant permission for the possession and use of such copies to those who could be trusted not to exploit the permission for ‘improper’ purposes.

But many others, who could not obtain official permission, refused to be deprived of the opportunity of reading the Scriptures in their own tongue, and met together in small groups to read and discuss them together. The house-meeting for reading the Bible in this way became a tradition that still lives on in English-speaking lands (as well as elsewhere), but in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries those who attended such groups did so at the risk of liberty and even of life itself.

Early in the sixteenth century a Scottish edition of the later Wycliffite version of the New Testament appeared, the editor being one Murdoch Nisbet. This remained the only complete Scottish version of the New Testament until the publication of W. L. Lorimer's superb work in 1983. Even earlier, in the reign of James IV of Scotland (1488-1513), a group in the west of the country known as the 'Lollards of Kyle' attracted official displeasure; one of their misdemeanours was the reading of the Bible in the vernacular, and the version they used was probably Purvey's New Testament.<sup>15</sup>

With the activity of William Tyndale and his successors, and the production of a printed English version based not on the Vulgate but on the original languages, the Wycliffite versions were superseded. But for 130 or 140 years the Wycliffite Bible was the only form in which the Word of God was available in English. Occasional copies were made even after the first appearance of printed versions. The library of York Minster contains a copy bearing the autograph of Elizabeth I. She was perhaps the last English monarch to own a personal copy; several of her predecessors, from Henry VI onwards, had copies in their possession.

King James's translators in 1611, in their prefatory address 'to the reader', may or may not have had Wycliffe in mind when they paid tribute to their predecessors: 'blessed be they, and most honoured be their name, that break the ice, and give the onset upon that which helpeth forward to the saving of souls. Now what can be more available thereto, than to deliver God's book unto God's people in a tongue which they understand?' But Wycliffe deserves a primary place among the recipients of such a tribute. In this sixcentenary year of his death it is well to recall his service to gospel truth in this land and do honour to his memory.

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#### Endnotes:

- 1) J. R. Lumby, ed., *Chronicon Henrici Knighton* (London 1889), ii, p.151.
- 2) J. Loserth, ed., *De eucharistia* (London 1892), p.303.
- 3) Wycliffe, *Select English Works*, T. Arnold, ed., iii (Oxford 1871), p. 107.
- 4) cf. Wycliffe, *Select English Writings*, H. E. Winn, ed., (Oxford 1929), pp. 60-6.
- 5) cf. *ibid.*, pp.30-40.
- 6) In a letter (1411) to Pope John XXIII; cf. H. Hargreaves, 'The Wycliffite Versions', *Cambridge History of the Bible*, ii (Cambridge 1969), p.387 f.
- 7) *Chronicon*, Lumby; ed., ii, p.152.
- 8) J. Hus & Hieronymus Pragensis, *Historia et Monumenta* (Nürnberg 1558), i, cviii b.
- 9) *Dialogue*, 3, ch.14; cf. T. Lawler, G. Marc'hadour, R. Marius, eds, *Complete Works of St Thomas More*, vi.1 (Yale UP, New Haven 1981), p.314.

- 10) cf. E. Gibbon, *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ch.66; M. Deanesly, *The Significance of the Lollard Bible* (Athlone Press, London 1951), p.18.
- 11) cf. H. Hargreaves, 'An Intermediate Version of the Wycliffite Old Testament', *Studia Neophilologica*, 28, 1956, pp.130-47; *Cambridge History of the Bible*, ii, p. 400.
- 12) According to John Purvey; see M. Deanesly, *The Lollard Bible* (Cambridge 1920), p.278 f., p.445.
- 13) cf. H. Hargreaves, 'The Latin Text of Purvey's Psalter', *Medium Aevum*, 24, 1955, pp.73-90.
- 14) *Dialogue*, 3, ch.15; cf. *Complete Works*, vi.1, p.317.
- 15) cf. Deanesly, *The Lollard Bible*, p. 359.