



John Wycliffe and the Lollards

A Yorkshire man born in 1324, John Wycliffe made an important contribution to the cause of improving access to the Bible in English. He was a man of great intellect and integrity, educated at Queen's and Merton Colleges, Oxford. In 1372 he became a lecturer in theology and later Rector at Balliol College, Oxford.

Reformer

Wycliffe is often regarded as the forerunner of the sixteenth century Reformation. He believed that all people, without distinction, had the right to read the Scriptures and then to obey God. He spoke against Papal claims of infallibility, attacking the excesses of the clergy and the practices of mendicant Friars. This led to his impeachment by Pope Gregory XI in 1377. The Pope sought, unsuccessfully, to prevent translations of the Bible and even the reading and reciting of Scripture by laymen. The Latin Bible (later known as the Vulgate) was the only translation permitted by the Church. In contrast, on the Day of Pentecost the Apostles preached to the assembled company in Jerusalem and by His Holy Spirit power God caused the gospel to be translated from the tongue of the Apostles so that each listener heard the wonderful gospel message in their own language (Acts 2:8-11).

Wycliffe dedicated himself to giving his countryman the whole Bible in their native English. His pupil and friend, John Purvey and Nicolas of Hereford, a

fellow of Queen's College, Oxford assisted in the translation of the Latin Vulgate. They used the same strategy of translation that the King James translators were to use over 200 years later, so between 1380 and 1384 they worked diligently to produce a word-for-word translation of the Latin text.

Wycliffe went about his translation work unharmed because of considerable support from colleagues at Oxford, his congregation at Lutterworth in Leicestershire and from his aristocratic champion, John of Gaunt. His translation of the Latin Vulgate Bible into the Anglo-Saxon tongue was also motivated by a desire to improve the understanding of the parish priests and monks of the Latin language used in Church services. Many had little idea of the meaning of the words they were using! How much less the Anglo-Saxon speaking congregations!

What does the Bible say?

The prophet Isaiah speaks of the freedom that all should have to read God's Word.

Ho! Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat. Yes, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price ... Listen diligently to me, and eat what is good, and let your soul delight itself in abundance. Incline your ear, and come to me. Hear, and your soul shall live; and I will make an everlasting covenant with you – the sure mercies of David (Isaiah 55:1-3).

Jesus also invites us to drink of the water of life contained in the Scriptures.

“Whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst. But the water that I shall give him will become in him a fountain of water springing up into everlasting life” (John 4:14).

Wycliffe and others with his encouragement finished the first handwritten complete English Bible in 1384. As the books of the Bible were completed they were painstakingly copied by hand by Wycliffe’s supporters in Oxford and Leicester and distributed around the land. This was 70 years before the invention of moveable type printing in 1454. A revision of Wycliffe’s Bible was carried out by John Purvey around 1388 to replace some of the stiff literal Latin-based construction with native English idiom.

Opposition from the Church

The Church forbade anyone to possess the Wycliffe Bible and copies when found were destroyed. For the Church considered Wycliffe’s writings, sermons and translation work to be acts of heresy. On the nineteenth of February 1377 he was summoned to appear in Old St Paul’s, London, before Simon Sudbury Archbishop of Canterbury and William Courtenay, Bishop of London to answer the charges made against him. However Wycliffe had powerful friends. He duly appeared to answer the summons, flanked by two of them – John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster (a son of King Edward III) and Lord Percy, the Earl Marshall of England, and they were accompanied by several barons and other supporters. After a brief exchange between his protectors and the diocesan dignitaries the court

broke up in confusion. Wycliffe departed without having been asked a single question or the need to utter a word!

On receipt of letters from the Pope, the prelates issued a further summons. This time the trial was to be conducted before a secret tribunal. When news of Wycliffe’s impending trial became known there was widespread alarm for his safety. Many first citizens of London and the populace stormed into the building and Sir Lewis Clifford spoke forbidding any sentence to be passed by the court. Therefore, Wycliffe was preserved to continue his work of translation of the Latin Bible to English.

The Church continued their pursuit of Wycliffe, Pope Gregory XI sent to the King, the Oxford authorities and the University accusing them of “idleness and sloth” in permitting Wycliffe to continue to “vomit” heresies.

Fortunate Turmoil

Then a turn of events in Church and State preserved Wycliffe from excommunication and a martyr’s death. Within a year Pope Gregory was dead and the Papacy in turmoil. In 1378 the Papacy was split by the election of two Popes, Urban VI and Clement VII by the same group of Cardinals! In May 1378 the Peasants Revolt broke out in London as a revolt against the imposition of a poll tax. Wycliffe was blamed in part because of his radical preaching and for championing the cause of the poor. The rioting that followed resulted in the beheading of Simon Sudbury, Archbishop of Canterbury.

Wycliffe was hounded by the new Archbishop of Canterbury, William Courtney, who condemned his writing and criticisms of the Church as heretical. Wycliffe was forbidden to teach at Oxford and retired to Lutterworth where

he continued to preach sermons against the clergy for their accumulation of wealth and riches at the expense of the poor. He spurned the use of Latin, describing it as the language of Church oppression. Wycliffe died a natural death in 1384 and was buried in St Mary's Church, Lutterworth. Forty-four years later, on 14th December 1428, in accordance with the instructions of Pope Martin V, Wycliffe's body was exhumed and burnt as a heretic in a field on the bank of the river Swift and his ashes thrown in the river.

Who were the Lollards?

They were supporters of Wycliffe whom he sent out preaching armed with religious tracts and sheets of the New Testament translated into English. They were scornfully called "Lollards" a word which is thought to be derived from the Dutch word "lollen" which means 'to mutter'. Lollards were very active in preaching in England and many met painful deaths by burning as heretics.

Thomas Arundel who succeeded Courtney as Archbishop of Canterbury persecuted the Lollards. First he lobbied the King and Parliament in 1401 for powers to execute Lollards. Then, in 1408, Arundel drew up the "Constitutions of Oxford" to deal with translations of the Bible. It enacted that: "... no one henceforth on his own authority translate any text of Holy Scripture into English or other languages ... and that no book, pamphlet or tract of this kind be read, either recently composed in the time of the said John Wycliffe or since then".

The penalty was excommunication and death as a heretic. Arundel wrote in scathing terms to the Pope about

Wycliffe and his teachings, identifying 267 heresies and errors worthy of fire. Pressure from the Papacy continued, the Council of Constance in 1414 condemned Wycliffe's books, doctrine and memory.

Wycliffe's influence abroad

Queen Anne of Bohemia, wife of King Richard I, came to know of Wycliffe's writings and by this means they reached Prague. Wycliffe's work influenced John Huss of Prague University and his supporter Jerome. The spirit of change brought the reformation to the people of Bohemia and in 1400 the Scriptures were translated into Bohemian. The Papacy persecuted them as they did Wycliffe and his followers. Huss was charged with heresy and burnt at the stake on 6 July 1415 on the banks of the Rhine and his ashes were also thrown into the river.

Many men have laboured, suffered and died to make it possible for us to read the Word of God in our own language. Now is the time for us to learn what God has done for us through the work of His son the Lord Jesus Christ.

Wycliffe is reported to have said that "*The Bible is the sole authority for the Christian way of life*". The Bible shows how right this statement is.

"Tell and bring forth your case; yes, let them take counsel together. Who has declared this from ancient time? Who has told it from that time? Have not I, the LORD? And there is no other God besides me, a just God and a Saviour; there is none besides me" (Isaiah 45:21).

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