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JOHN WYCLIFFE, 1320(?)–1384.¹

THE MAN AND HIS MESSAGE.

BY JOHN KNIPE.

III. THE RECTOR OF LUTTERWORTH, 1374–1384.

FRIENDSHIP WITH JOHN OF GAUNT BEGUN AT BRUGES, JULY, 1374.

GREAT complaints had been made against the Pope's disregard of "Provisors." A Peace Conference had been called with France at Bruges and Edward seized the opportunity to appoint a Royal Commission to negotiate with the Pope (July 26).

The names read in order, "John Gilbert, Bishop of Bangor, John Wycliffe, Doctor of Theology (the date of his degree is unknown), John Guter, Dean of Segovia (Castile) (Gaunt's private chaplain), Simon Multon, Doctor of Laws," and three laymen, Sir William Burton, Robert of Bellknap, Judge, and one John of Kenyngton.

On the 27th Wycliffe embarked at London, and he was in Bruges until September, 1375 (or at least so it appears from the Records). It must have been to him a very important and significant fourteen months. And it is certain that then began his political and personal friendship with John of Gaunt, the strong man of those feeble years of a great reign. When we tread the cobbled narrow ways of Bruges beside those sluggish canals it is strange to think of the bygone wealth and importance of the chief mediæval town of Flanders, a Free City with a population of 200,000 souls. The Archbishop of Ravenna headed the Papal Envoys with four others. Charles V of France sent his brothers, the Dukes of Anjou and Burgundy, to confer with Lancaster, Archbishop Sudbury and the Earl of Salisbury.

As to the Peace Conference the Chronicler wrote: "Their (the French) thoughts were craftily running . . . not on peace but on war; the English trusted everything to the Duke's wisdom and gave themselves up to carousals and amusements" (Walsingham).

Small wonder the Congress broke up "without conclusion of peace." The Pope made some concessions by which the *status quo* of benefices remained untouched. Wycliffe was given a prebend's stall (November), which he resigned the same month, as a sinecure.

The Black Prince died in June, 1376, and September saw John of Gaunt firmly in the saddle and William of Wykeham banished from Court for corruption when Chancellor, and his Temporalities confiscated. On the 22nd Alan of Barley was sent to Oxford with a writ to Wycliffe summoning him to appear before the Privy Council. We know he stayed in Gaunt's palace at the Savoy, and probably the Duke needed his advice on Church Reform. Bishop Trillek of Rochester "told Wycliffe in great excitement that his Theses had

¹ A continuation of an Article which appeared in *THE CHURCHMAN* for January, 1929.

been condemned by the Pope." The attack seems to have been due to his unsparing attacks on the abuse of Papal excommunication. Parliament complained of Garnier in a long Memorial to the King, calling him an enemy alien with a great City house, who sent 20,000 marks annually to a Pope on French soil. They objected to Deaneries and preferments held by foreign Cardinals. Edward replied evasively, but Garnier was expelled the following year, which the Commons neatly suggested, being the King's Jubilee, was a proper occasion for Ecclesiastical Reforms!

Convocation met in February and, moved by William Courtenay, Bishop of London, the subsidy was refused until Winchester was allowed to take his seat. Then Courtenay seized the opportunity of Wycliffe being the Duke's guest to cite him before Convocation on a heresy charge. Walsingham writes: "Too late the Bishops roused their father the Archbishop, as one from a deep sleep, as a lord stupefied with wine, or rather as a hireling drunk with the poison of avarice, to recall the wandering sheep . . . for cure, or if need be, that the knife should be used. The Archbishop, though he had planned to spend his days in good things . . . not liking to be publicly known as one who had abandoned the sheep-folds, sent to invite this prodigal son to answer" (*"Chronicon Angliæ"*). Whereby it does not seem the monk showed the Archbishop much respect.

Walsingham writes: "Many great lords . . . or more rightly, I should call them devils, embraced his mad doctrines, . . . and protected him with the secular arm. . . . He drew after him many citizens of London. . . . He was an eloquent man, and pretended to look down on worldly possessions as things transitory. . . . He ever ran from church to church and scattered his mad lies in the ears of many."

THE FIRST APPEARANCE OF WYCLIFFE BEFORE BISHOP COURTENAY, ST. PAUL'S, FEBRUARY 19, 1377.

This well-known event ended in tumult as it began. Courtenay, sitting in state among prelates and nobles in the Lady Chapel, heard some uproar and saw an excited mob pressing into the Cathedral. Dr. John Wycliffe had come escorted by John of Gaunt, his host, and Lord Percy the Earl Marshal. Five Friars, Bachelors of Divinity, followed the Duke their Patron, ready to defend Wycliffe. But Gaunt's retainers forced a passage roughly, which provoked the Bishop to affront Lancaster. This incident roused Percy's Border temper and in the Lady Chapel he bade Wycliffe to sit, saying: "He had need of a soft seat, having so many things to answer." Courtenay ordered Wycliffe to stand while his Cause was tried. In his long thin black gown and narrow girdle, his head erect and his eyes keen, the spare form and flowing beard made John Wycliffe a striking figure; he stood motionless and the eloquent lips were silent and compressed. High words passed between Duke and Bishop; taunts and threats, even it was said Gaunt muttered he would drag out the proud prelate by the hair of his head! With cries of "Shame!" the citizens surged into the Chapel and surrounded

Courtenay as he retired before nine to his house in the Precincts. He dared not charge Wycliffe before Gaunt and he had avoided the necessity of bringing forward his evidence. Courtenay and other Bishops wrote a lengthy accusation to Pope Gregory XI, who had solemnly entered Rome in great pomp on January 17, and he issued Five Bulls against Wycliffe from the Church of Santa Maria Maggiore (dated May 22).

THE BULLS OF GREGORY XI : THEIR ARRIVAL IN ENGLAND, JUNE, 1377.

Three Bulls were sent to the Primate and the Bishop of London, the fourth to the King, and the fifth to the Chancellor and University of Oxford. Their language is too verbose for quotation except an occasional word. The Archbishop and the Bishop of London are charged "with plenary powers" to inquire privately whether certain 19 Theses¹ in the Schedule appended are Wycliffe's actual opinions. If so they should imprison him until further instructions from Rome. The Bishops are rebuked as "watchmen negligent and slothful," for "the evil had been felt at Rome" first. (This explains Bishop Trillek of Rochester's heat.) "John Wycliffe, Rector of Lutterworth and Professor of the Sacred Page, had dared to assert opinions utterly subversive of the Church." If he attempted to save himself by flight the accused was to be cited before the Pope. They are to warn the King and his lords of these dangerous subversive errors. Edward himself was requested to support the Bishops. Oxford was rebuked and bidden to seize Wycliffe's person and deliver him to the Primate.

DEATH OF EDWARD III AT THE PALACE OF SHENE, JUNE 21, 1377.

The King was dying when the Bulls arrived, and the First Parliament of Richard II proposed to forfeit Papal Provisions and to expel all foreign priests during the War and use their revenues. John of Gaunt and the Council consulted Wycliffe in person and he wrote a long pamphlet denouncing "the avarice and corruptions of the Papacy."

EDWARD STAFFORD SENT WITH BULL TO OXFORD, DECEMBER 18, 1377.

Oxford was enraged by the Pope's interference and the attack on her famous son. Archbishop Sudbury was obliged to write to the Chancellor that "no violent hands would be laid on Dr. Wycliffe" and he promised that University Privilege would be fully respected.

WYCLIFFE'S SECOND APPEARANCE BEFORE THE BISHOPS, LAMBETH CHAPEL.

The date was probably early in March, 1378. Wycliffe was alone, but not treated as a prisoner. He put in a written defence,

¹ The order of the 19 Theses condemned is not Wycliffe's arranging, but Rome's.

defining his Theses. Towards the end of the Inquiry, when with shouts the Londoners broke in to save him, Sir Henry Clifford, Chamberlain to the Princess Joan of Wales¹ (Richard's mother), brought an order from her that "they should abstain from pronouncing any final judgment on the accused." She was of course Gaunt's mouthpiece, and, the Chapel being in a tumult, gladly the bewildered Archbishop gave way. Walsingham breaks out furiously against the boastful cowardice of the Bishops, "as if they had no horns to their mitres!" Word came how that Gregory XI died on March 27 and his Bulls of course became void. The charges against Wycliffe touched more on Church Property and her Temporalities than matters of Faith.²

WYCLIFFE RENOUNCED POLITICS FOR CHURCH REFORM. THE POOR PRIESTS.

He had already started his famed Preaching Order of Itinerant Clerks at Ludgarshall and the Bishop of Lincoln sanctioned their preaching. The tract "*Why Poor Priests have no Benefices*" explains his Ideal of Evangelical Poverty, and fear of Simony. For their training he wrote "*The Six Yokes*." Their watchword was "God's Law" (Gospel). Barefooted, with long russet gown, leather girdle and long staff, he sent them forth all over England. They were not bound by Final Vows, like the Mendicant Orders. Under an enlightened and simple Pope Wycliffe might have been a second Saint Francis. He hoped at first that the new Pope Urban VI would inaugurate a New Era. But the GREAT SCHISM broke out and the French Cardinal chose Robert of Geneva (Clement VII) at Avignon. England recognized Urban, and Wycliffe called both rival Popes "Anti-Christ." From now dated his thunder against the degenerate Friars, and his tract "Of the Pastoral Office." He had formerly called them "Men very dear to God" and "would have nothing to do with the monks-possessioners" (Walsingham). He saw as Rector how they trafficked in sin and how "they beset the dying bed of the noble and wealthy in order to extort secret bequests from their fears of guilt or superstition" (Matthew Paris).

WYCLIFFE PUBLISHED THESES AGAINST TRANSUBSTANTIATION AT OXFORD, 1381.

Suddenly Oxford was startled by Twelve Theses against Transubstantiation signed by Wycliffe with an open Challenge to Public Disputation. He asserted that the consecrated Host was only a Sign of Christ present not to the bodily eye but by Faith. He main-

¹ She favoured Wycliffe, but her name is in the Pope's Bull, so she could hardly have been an avowed follower. I can find no evidence for the story that the Black Prince refused to see her when dying because she was a heretic.

² They concerned principally his theory of "Dominion on Grace"; the Conditional Rights of Property and Inheritance being put foremost to alarm the King and his Council. But he had assailed the Abuse of Excommunication, as applied to Secularization of Church Endowments.

tained that the Dogma, as also the terms Identification and Impanation, cannot be shown to be Scriptural. The sensation his Challenge caused was tremendous. Chancellor William De Bertou called quickly a Conference of Doctors who declared that two of the Theses were "erroneous." Mandate of Prohibition was served on Wycliffe, who was found quietly teaching in his lecture-room in the Augustinian Monastery.¹ He was surprised and replied that neither the Chancellor nor the Doctors could refute his Theses. He appealed to the King. "Like a heretic, leaning on the Secular arm," the Chancellor commented. John of Gaunt hurried in great concern to silence Wycliffe and warn him the King must reject the appeal. Here their friendship ended, for the Duke would not touch any dispute of the Sacrament of the Altar. Wycliffe retired to Lutterworth and published "*The Wicket*"—his great English tract. It was read secretly up to the Reformation. He followed it with his Confession of Faith, "*De Sacramento Altaris*."

(The Duke of Lancaster was then eager to satisfy the clergy who had just paid the unpopular Poll Tax.)

TRANSLATION OF THE BIBLE. THE NEW TESTAMENT.

There is something sublime in Wycliffe's resolve, in spite of the danger in which it involved him, to give the common people the Bible in the Mother tongue. "The worthy Realm of France has the Scriptures in the French Tongue," he wrote.

Probably he began with the Gospels, and he translated from the Latin Vulgate. His clear-cut, nervous sentences are the finest beginnings of fourteenth-century English prose. There is no evidence whatever that any book except the Psalter then existed in English, and only Gospel portions.

THE OLD TESTAMENT.

John Purvey, his assistant, helped in the great work, and his friend Nicholas of Hereford translated the Old Testament as far as the Book of Baruch, III. 20 (Bodleian Library). This is attested by the clerk who continued his work.

The murder of Archbishop Sudbury by Wat Tyler's mob gave Courtenay the Primacy; however, the King's marriage to Anne of Bohemia in January, 1382, brought Wycliffe a fresh friend at Court.

THE LOLLARD PERSECUTION, 1382–4. THE EARTHQUAKE SYNOD (MAY 21).

Courtenay waited for the Pallium in May and at once called a Provincial Synod in Blackfriars. Ten Bishops and fifty Doctors and Bachelors were carefully chosen to condemn Wycliffe's tenets. But to their astonishment and alarm, when they took their seats the Chapter House was shaken by an earthquake and for the third time the London Assembly was thrown into disorder. Courtenay, being a zealot, refused the proposal that the discussion should be suspended and adjured them "to purge the realm of heresy as the Earth is

¹ Wadham College is on the site.

purging itself of noxious vapours." He proclaimed a Procession of Penitence in which high and low, rich and poor went barefoot to St. Paul's, were met by the Bishop of London and Cathedral clergy at the door, and heard Dr. John Cunningham preach a sermon at Paul's Cross calling "ten of Wycliffe's Theses heretical and fourteen erroneous."

The Primate then sent Solemn Mandates to his Commissary, Peter Stokes, the Carmelite Friar at Oxford, and to the Bishop of London for all Suffragans of the Province. Both Mandates prohibited utterly the condemned Theses on pain of the Greater Excommunication.

The Primate moved in the Lords that a Royal Ordinance should enjoin the Sheriffs to seize and imprison without trial or witnesses all such preachers, their patrons and followers as the Bishops should denounce. He attacked hotly the "Poor Priests." It was the most flagrant violation of Magna Carta and all Constitutional Rights of the King's subjects. This infamous Decree was never passed by Parliament, yet Richard allowed it to be included among the Statutes of the Realm (May 26). It gave unheard-of powers to the Bishops. Courtenay's vehemence carried his point, and styling himself "Grand Inquisitor" he obtained a Royal Patent "Out of Our zeal for the Catholic Faith" (June), by which the King's vassals were forbidden on pain of forfeiture to support the preachers. However, in this Royal Patent the Bishops' powers were limited to their own officers, who might arrest and detain those accused. The word "Recantation" occurs for the first time. The Primate turned on Oxford, where Nicholas of Hereford had preached in Wycliffe's defence. The University was literally in arms against Stokes, who dared not for his life publish the Mandate before Dr. Repyngton's Corpus Christi Sermon. Chancellor Rygge was Wycliffe's friend¹ and he delayed the Ban, which was treated with levity when it appeared. Stokes begged for his recall; "I do not know what will happen further," he wrote to Courtenay—and the clank of armour in Repyngton's lecture-room drove the Friar away, dumb, and he fled to London. The state of the roads being good, Brother Stokes was able to arrive in London that night. Here a fresh surprise awaited him; Chancellor Rygge had been seized with panic also, and he had arrived at Lambeth first. He was forced by the King's Council to submit to Courtenay and asked pardon on his knees, William of Wykeham interceding for him.

Sent back to Oxford with fresh Mandates, the Chancellor had courage to suspend one Crumpe, an Irish Cistercian, who had publicly called Wycliffe and his friends "heretical Lollards." This is the first instance of the word.

SUBMISSION OF OXFORD. EXPULSION OF WYCLIFFITES.

Courtenay got a Crown Warrant forbidding the molestation of Crumpe and ordering a search for Wycliffe's followers and the books of Wycliffe and of Hereford. John of Gaunt protected such men as

¹They were together at Merton, some say.

would submit, and the Londoners saved Aston from the Bishops. Hereford and Repyngton were twice cited before Courtenay (at Blackfriars and at his house near Oxford). The second time he postponed a hearing and cited them at Canterbury for July. They did not appear and he excommunicated them.

Hereford went to Lutterworth, where Wycliffe was calmly translating the Bible. He approved his colleague's resolve to appeal to Rome. The New Testament was completed amid Courtenay's "sound and fury." But Richard was highly displeased with Oxford and sent two Royal Mandates to Rygge. Wycliffe, Aston, Hereford and Repyngton were banished within seven days from Oxford. Crumpe was restored to the Schools.

WYCLIFFE CITED FOR THE THIRD TIME. THE OXFORD SYNOD.

It is now generally accepted that Wycliffe did appear before the Primate at Oxford, prepared to die. Except Hereford all his friends had recanted and been reconciled. The contemporary Knighton admits that Wycliffe called Transubstantiation "a modern error." He rebuked Courtenay to his face for encouraging the lying tales of the Friars. Tradition says Wycliffe finally uttered the words "The Truth will prevail."

He went out unharmed, for Parliament had met and Courtenay dared not touch Wycliffe. The Commons had denounced the "Royal Ordinance" and demanded its repeal, "to which we gave no consent nor ever will consent" (Cotton MS.) (November).

WYCLIFFE'S CLOSING YEARS AND DEATH.

Protected by the Commons, Wycliffe lived peacefully at Lutterworth, revising the Bible and writing to the last. Courtenay heard, doubtless with satisfaction, that the brave Rector had a stroke of palsy at the end of 1382. He lived two more years and wrote a strong protest against the Papal Crusade of the warrior Bishop Spencer. John Purvey quietly worked with him, and a curate, John Horn, took duty when needed. Wycliffe had the comfort of knowing that the Commons and Lay Peers had checked Courtenay's persecution. The Poor Priests preached unmolested, and at Court Queen Anne herself read his New Testament, while her servants and others carried his entire writings to the Prague University. To this we owe their existence.

The end came suddenly in a second stroke at the Mass on Innocents' Day, when Wycliffe was carried speechless from the church. He died on December 31, 1384. "God buries His workman and carries on his work."

THE MESSAGE LIVES.

Outwardly Archbishop Courtenay was triumphant, for although the Commons promptly annulled the "Royal Ordinance" which gave him inquisitorial powers, he silenced Oxford, which fell back into the dry-as-dust orthodoxy by which all progress and freshness of thought was forbidden in her Schools. But the power of the

Papacy was shaken by the Great Schism, and the ignominious failure of the fighting Bishop Spencer in his Flanders Campaign brought about his public disgrace and reflected grave discredit on the Primate's approval of the Crusade. Then men remembered the burning protests of Wycliffe, then they perceived clearly how evil had been the influence of the Church corrupted by avarice and ambition. Gradually Cambridge rose to take the lead which Oxford lost for centuries. Meanwhile the "Lollards," as they were derisively nicknamed, carried on Wycliffe's work. John Purvey quietly finished the revision of the entire Bible which was sold in portions, copied, passed from hand to hand. More than one bishop was found who was willing to license the Gospels to persons in his diocese, and Archbishop Neville of Raby is said to have been himself one of the "Poor Priests." Whether this is true or not, he certainly allowed the Wycliffe Bible to be privately circulated in the Northern Province. Deprived of support in Parliament, Courtenay had no jurisdiction to interfere with the Primate of York, in licensing such books as he thought fit. By degrees the "Poor Priests" became known as the "Poor Preachers" and under local protection they were received gladly, more in the villages and country-places than in the towns, while slowly and surely their quiet influence broke down the tyranny of the Courts Christian. Men learned that true religion did not consist in mere ceremonies, or outward observances, that God's pardon could not be purchased in pounds of wax-candles; changed lives deprived the infamous Summoner of his blackmail, and his former victims no longer feared "the archdeacon's curse." The venial Friar had yearly a decrease in sinners who sought an easy shift without repentance, the Pardoner lost his market for relics of "Pigge's bones"; Indulgences fell into disrepute; everywhere a new force was stirring men to consider critically the ancient frauds of a corrupt Church, the while secretly "Thy simple ones" met in barn and homestead to read "God's Law," for "the threatenings" were stopped for a time, even as Wycliffe had prayed.

The Decree of the Council of Constance (1415) was not executed until 1428, when, though the River Swift received his ashes, the senseless barbarity which insulted Wycliffe's bones could not root out his memory from the minds of his countrymen, who cherished his disciples for his sake.

Archbishop Courtenay had a very fine funeral; and was speedily forgotten, since he left nothing of note and few men cared to remember him, but the name of John Wycliffe, the "Evangelical Doctor," lived as a household word, which neither friends nor enemies could forget, and his name, like our forefathers, we hold dear to-day.