

JOHN WYCLIFFE, 1320(?)—1384.¹

THE MAN AND HIS MESSAGE.

BY JOHN KNIPE.

“ THE EVANGELICAL DOCTOR ”

WYCLIFFE'S ENTRANCE INTO PUBLIC LIFE, 1366.

IN his own day Wycliffe was best known as lecturer, preacher and reformer, and only in his last years as a translator of the Bible. The bulk of his writings—amazing in variety and amount—being in Latin, were probably little read except at Oxford.

This brief study is concerned with his Life, and especially with that side of his career which is less a matter of common knowledge. His great influence on the England of the Later Plantagenets will afford some clearer insight into the underlying character of the man as it was developed by his actions and thought.

THE SECOND PERIOD.

With his appointment to Canterbury Hall as Warden there began what is roughly called “ The Second Period ” of John Wycliffe's Life. Up to 1366 it had been singularly free of political or controversial storms for one of the bold honesty of this brilliant Yorkshireman.

There is no record of partisan opposition. He was at the zenith of his popularity in the University, and his classroom in Canterbury Hall or in St. Augustine's Monastery, was thronged by eager students. When the trouble came it arose from without.

Now when Archbishop Islip removed the Benedictines from his new Canterbury Hall, and decreed it should be henceforth reserved for Seculars, he overlooked the fact that he was exceeding the Royal Licence given to his Deed of Foundation. And in April, 1366, Simon Islip died and Simon Langham, a Benedictine monk, was nominated Primate. There was the usual delay about his receiving the Pallium, and perhaps the Avignon Court were more dilatory since Pope Urban V chose just then to listen to the astute suggestion of the King of France, that the time was ripe for the old vexatious demand of the Papal Tribute to be pressed upon the haughty Edward of England.

The Peace of Bretigny (1360) was wearing thin. From the time he governed Edward had steadily refused to pay tribute to the Pope or acknowledge him as his overlord. So Urban V sent in the reckoning: One Thousand Marks Annual Tribute with Thirty-three Years of Arrears at Compound Interest. Not for nothing did they protect the Jews in Avignon.

The ancient quarrel with France flamed up in 1365, and the Pope

¹ A continuation of an Article which appeared in the *CHURCHMAN* for July, 1928.

threatened that if his vassal, the King of England, who held his crown in fief by the surrender of John of Anjou, did not honour his bond by a prompt settlement in full, Edward would be cited to appear in person before his overlord at Avignon. The Pope being resident in French territory made his demand peculiarly exasperating to English pride.

Edward seized upon this point. "The Old Cat," as Langland called him, saw how he might regain the popular favour which he had lost by the heavy taxation of the French wars, when the Royal Exchequer spilt gold like water through a sieve.

With a grand gesture the King summoned his Parliament and bade them be the judges of his cause. He asked their counsel how he might spare his loyal lieges the burden of finding the money to satisfy the Pope.

Now Edward did not wholly trust his Bishops. The Pope had the power of transfer to vacant sees, so the King created a precedent and he added to the Knights of the Shire and the Burgesses six representatives of both Universities, Masters in Arts who were privileged in their office and naturally attached to the Crown.

WAS WYCLIFFE ONE OF THE OXFORD REPRESENTATIVES IN PARLIAMENT ?

Some authorities think that he was, others say not. Against it there is the fact that his name is not included in the list of the Masters of Arts summoned to Parliament; while there is strong reason to infer he was present during the weighty discussion, because he wrote a treatise in reply to a vehement attack on his defence of the King's cause, and he uses this curious expression: "If such things had been asserted by me against my King they would have been inquired into before now in the Parliament of the English Lords." ("Si autem ego asserem talia contra regem meum, olim fuissent in parlamento dominorum Angliæ ventilata"—Lewis's *Life*.)

There is also the statement that "before 1295 the Bishops were to appoint for every archdeaconry two experienced men as representatives." ("*Modus tenendi Parliamentum*."—Lechler.)

The most definite ground, however, is the expression Wycliffe uses in his treatise, "Peculiaris regis clericus talis qualis" ("For this Cause I am the King's especial Clerk").

Finally there is the undoubted fact that *two* of the speeches he quotes are word for word the same as the clauses in the Act of Parliament and Solemn Declaration affixed to the Statute.

Thus there seems to be little doubt that Wycliffe's opinion was asked by the King's Council, which would be the body to draw up the said Statute. The case is a parallel with the famous advice of Cranmer to Henry VIII.

"WAS EDWARD OF ENGLAND THE POPE'S VASSAL OR NO?"

It was in these terms that Edward III demanded his Parliament to settle the question once and for all. He knew, none better, how

to rouse the slow, dogged pulse-beat of English pride. Perplexed, disturbed and secretly alarmed, the Lords Spiritual requested a day in which to consider the matter in private. Edward granted their request and they withdrew and went, it appears, to consult by themselves in the Jerusalem Chamber. The King returned to his palace and left the Barons, Knights, Burgesses and the new University men sitting in the Painted Chamber. It is their discussion that Wycliffe purports to report. They had no mind to dally with the matter. The new clerks seem to have remained silent, while their presence had the effect the King wanted. If the Prelates went against him he knew that the University men, who owed their privileges directly to the Crown, would be for him. And by the next day word came to the Bishops and Abbots that the rest had voted as one man for the King. The Prelates saw that they must yield to the popular opinion, and they agreed to return to the Painted Chamber, where together with the "other dukes, earls, barons and great men" they answered the King: "neither King John nor anybody else could put himself, nor his kingdom, nor his people, under subjection without their accord and consent."

The Act of Repudiation was framed and the Solemn Declaration was affixed; the Act plainly declared that "England was won by the sword and the Pope must take it by the sword." (*Rotuli Parl.*) Edward was assured that "his loyal lieges would ever maintain his Royal Majesty and Dignity." They promised him in case of need neither men nor money should be lacking if the Pope carried out his threat of citation or preached a Crusade against England.

Pope Urban received the brief intimation that Edward Plantagenet was of one mind with the will of his subjects. The demand was dropped in silence.

FIRST ATTACK UPON WYCLIFFE. THE "MOTLEY DOCTOR'S" CHALLENGE.

The wording of the Act of Repudiation of the Papal Tribute threatened the temporal claims of the Church. The Bishops were aware of the part Wycliffe had taken and they did not care to attack him themselves. But an anonymous monk whom Wycliffe styled "Mixtim Theologus," or "Motley Doctor," challenged him on three heads:

(1) The Becket dispute; that for no cause whatsoever could Clergy be answerable in Civil Courts.

He argued the Pope as overlord might punish Criminous Clerks. He overlooked or ignored the recent Statute "Against Suitors in Foreign Courts," and "De Premunire."

(2) The inviolable sanctity of all Church Lands—or Mortmain.

(3) That the Kings of England owed their crown to the Pope's gift in fee and that by not keeping his bond Edward had forfeited his kingdom. (This argument Wycliffe stigmatized as *Lèse-majesty*.)

The tract "*Determinatio quædam de Dominio*." It has been

called "the first Parliamentary Report ever issued" (Shirley). The probable date is later in the same year (1366). It is true that Wycliffe cites the opinions of Seven Lay Lords of Parliament, but he says no word of the Commons, and while the First Lord gives the warrior-like answer of the Solemn Declaration, and the Seventh Lord speaks in the terms of the Act of Repudiation, the speeches put into the mouths of the remaining Five contain the outlines of the famous theory of "Dominion founded on Grace."

The whole tract seems to be in style too philosophical and closely reasoned for the manners of that age. But its supreme value and interest to us is the fact that Wycliffe *defends the Royal Prerogative together with Privilege of Parliament*. There he shows himself far ahead of his times. Briefly, this First Political Tract begins with a prudent assurance of his being a humble and obedient son of the Church who would never be unjust to her lawful claims: he then gives the Peers' arguments, of which the other five are these:

The Second Lord:—the Pope must be bound by Christ's Example who Himself refused Worldly Dominion. Or "Evangelical Poverty."

Third Lord:—the Pope's title, "Servus servorum Dei" (Servant of God's servants), went ill with his avarice towards England, which he served no whit in maintaining the French King's quarrel.

The Fourth Lord:—examined Feudal Law and found the Pope was the King's vassal by virtue of the overlordship reserved in Mortmain.

He made a neat point that during each Church vacancy the Pope must needs be the King's inferior.

The Fifth Lord declared the original ground of the tribute was tainted with simony, being the price of John's Shrift.

The Sixth Lord denied the Pope could alienate a realm so rich for annual tribute so small, and said the Holy See might demand England on pretence of being defrauded. "We hold our kingdom in fief from Christ as of old, for He is the Lord Paramount."

This final argument is Wycliffe's "Dominion in Grace." And this stamps the tract as being largely his own work.

In dwelling at length I want to point out that this treatise also shows the trend of contemporary opinion against the usurped Endowment and Church Property Rights. Statute after statute since John's ignoble surrender had been directed against these claims. *Mortmain* (Henry III and Edward I), *Provisors* (1350), *Premunire* (1353) maintained the Crown Supremacy over the Land of England, and the great *Statute of Treasons* (1351) deprived the Churchmen of Benefit of Clergy in causes touching the person of the Sovereign and the safety of the Realm.

Even to-day there is a mythical belief held by some persons that Church Lands are absolute property which cannot be alienated by the State without sacrilege. History is absolutely against this opinion. We shall see how Wycliffe's career upheld the great principle that not a rood of English soil belongs to any man or Church without the condition of allegiance to the Crown.

WYCLIFFE DEPOSED FROM HIS WARDENSHIP OF CANTERBURY HALL,
1367.

It is rather significant that the following year Archbishop Langham received the Pope's Consecration Bulls with the Pallium, and being enthroned on March 25, before the week was out he deposed Wycliffe from his Headship of Canterbury Hall and appointed Redingate, a Benedictine, in his place. But this appointment soon gave way to the reinstatement of the monk Woodhall and the ejection of Wycliffe and the other Seculars, including his friends, the three Fellows Middleworth, Benger and Selby.

Canterbury Hall was declared to be henceforth exclusively a Benedictine Foundation belonging to the Priory of Christ Church, Canterbury. Here was fresh ground for quarrel between the poor Seculars and the well-endowed Religious. Wycliffe contended that Islip had intended his Hall to be endowed for the maintenance of poor Clerks.

The monks could show that their Prior had nominated the first Wardens, but neither side could deny the original Charter had provided for a "Mixed Foundation." Wycliffe appealed to the Pope. This fact proves that he had never been yet involved in any dispute with the Mendicant Orders, for his appeal is based on the principles of almsgiving. He also appealed to the King, whose Charter had confirmed the Deed. Then Archbishop Langham went to Avignon, where Urban V received the Appeal, and the Curia examined the Cause of the Oxford Seculars.

Towards the end of the year Wycliffe published his best-known Latin work, "*De Dominio Divino*" (Of Divine Dominion).

The main argument, expounded at length, develops his theory that all Dominion or Government is of Divine Ordinance, but conditional on Moral Conduct. A wicked ruler in Church or State forfeits his right to rule. He insisted that it was a Theory, not a Law, while he admitted that the time was not ripe for its acceptance. It is noteworthy that Wycliffe only expressed this ideal in his Latin writings. As a learned opinion "Dominion founded in Grace" caused no alarm to the King or his Council. It troubled the Churchmen only when they looked for trouble some years later.

WYCLIFFE PRESENTED TO LUDGARSHALL, 1368 (NOVEMBER 12).

The undoubted hardship of his deposition led to his presentation to Ludgarshall living by the patron, Sir John Paveley, Prior of the Knights Hospitallers of St. John of Jerusalem. Wycliffe's name is on the books of Queen's College from 1363–1365,¹ and the Bishop of Lincoln licensed him to reside at Oxford for study a further two years as late as 1368, when he was still Rector of Fillingham. It seems from his tract "Why Poor Priests have no Benefices" that he was obliged to pay for this privilege. And probably Sir John Paveley presented him to Ludgarshall in Buckinghamshire because it was only twelve miles distant from Oxford. He could easily ride to and from his Cure in a few hours.

In 1369 the Pope appointed Cardinal Adrian to hear the Cause

¹ Also "in 1375 and 1380." (Pennington).

of the Oxford Seculars against the Benedictines of Canterbury. Langham had accepted the Red Hat and the Titular Bishopric of Praeneste in Italy, but in so doing he offended the King, who was determined that no English See should be held by a non-resident holder of a foreign bishopric, and no foreign ecclesiastic should become an English diocesan. Langham was told that he must either resign Canterbury or return home and resign Praeneste (1368).

The peremptory mandate seems to have startled Langham, who resigned the Primacy, being the *second* Archbishop of Canterbury who resigned that high office. (His precedent was Archbishop Kilwarby, 1278, also a Cardinal-Titular Bishop and Non-Resident.) Langham was succeeded by Bishop Whittlesea, an aged and weak Prelate.

Thus the Primate who deposed Wycliffe was himself deposed in less than two years. In 1370 Cardinal Adrian decided the Appeal in favour of the Monks. Edward showed his displeasure that his Charter had been infringed by both Archbishops: Islip "who exceeded Our Licence" and Langham "in the teeth of Our Licence." However, as Wycliffe shrewdly anticipated, the King mulcted the Prior and Benedictines of Christ Church, Canterbury, 200 marks, and confirmed Langham's appointment by the grant of a fresh Licence as "an act of our especial Grace."

A heavy tax was laid on all lands which had passed into Mortmain during the last hundred years, which may have had some influence on the fact that this year (1371) Wycliffe wrote his second great work, "*De Dominio Civili*." His life during these few years can only be traced by his writings. His pen was busy. This book contains his account of another Parliamentary discussion: "The Fable of the Owl." Edward demanded a subsidy of 50,000 marks for the renewed French wars and the ecclesiastics tried their hardest to obtain exemption for the wealthy endowed monasteries and benefices. A Peer replied by the fable of an Owl who begged the plumage of the other birds, who even parted with their wing feathers until the coming of a Hawk made them ask for their return. The Owl, cumbered with borrowed plumes, refused the request, whereon the birds forcibly retook their own feathers. "Even so," added the Peer, "must we take from the endowed Clergy a portion of their temporal possessions, as property which belongs to us and the kingdom in common, and we must wisely defend the country with property which is our own, and which exists among us in superfluity."

Whether these were the actual words used or whether the fable is Wycliffe's invention it certainly expresses his attitude towards Church Endowment as being National Property. He was warmly in favour of the demand of the Lords and Commons for the removal of Prelates from High State Offices, and, the King consenting, both the Bishop of Winchester, William of Wykeham, was forced to resign the Lord Chancellorship, and the Bishop of Exeter lost his post as Lord Keeper ("Treasurer and Privy Seal"). "Neither prelates nor doctors, priests nor deacons should hold secular offices" (Wycliffe).

The return of the Black Prince from the campaign in Spain and Gascony (1370), shattered in health from dysentery, marked the rise to

power of John of Gaunt, who soon became Wycliffe's especial patron. The Duke favoured Oxford, and in 1372 the exactions of the Papacy brought Wycliffe again into public notice by his outspoken protests.

Gregory XI sent Arnold Garnier, Canon of Chalons, as "Papal Nuncio and Collector of Dues for the Apostolic Chamber." He landed in February and was refused the Royal Licence until he had been sworn at the Palace of Westminster "never to violate the rights and interests of the Realm." Garnier took the oath before the assembled Councillors of State without hesitation, and toured England with a retinue of servants and six horses laden with sacks for coin. And he visited every parish in the kingdom. Now the War Tax of 1371 had been computed at 22s. 3d. for each parish, reckoned at 40,000 parishes. But when the King's Collectors reckoned the total they found there were only 9,000 parishes in all England and Wales! The tax was raised to 116s. for each parish. William of Wykeham surely smiled when a fresh Parliament was hastily called to adjust the tax. Of course he must have known the total of the parishes.

Therefore it can be seen how heavily the Papal Receiver's demands fell on the sorely impoverished parishes, and that the bold Rector of Ludgarshall, who alone said openly what others thought, would become increasingly popular with his fellow-countrymen. Between 1372 and 1374 Wycliffe wrote his Second Political Tract, "*De Juramento Arnoldi*" (Of Arnold's Oath). The date is disputed and it may not have appeared before 1377. (Garnier remained until July, 1374.) No doubt it summed up many of his speeches. He maintained that Garnier broke his oath by conveying money from England to a foreign power, domiciled in an enemy State, that he was crafty and full of guile, that he robbed the Church at home and oppressed the poorer clergy, and that his begging was against the Gospel precept. He asked Parliament to protect the National Church from the Receiver, and he denied that the Pope and his Curia could absolve sins for money.

WYCLIFFE PRESENTED BY THE CROWN TO LUTTERWORTH, APRIL, 1374.

Ferrar of Groby being a minor, the patronage rested with the Crown, and the King promoted Wycliffe to Lutterworth as "a mark of his royal favour." Lutterworth is in Leicestershire and not so distant from Oxford that Wycliffe was unable to continue his work in the schools. Before leaving Ludgarshall, which living he at once resigned, he must have begun, as at Oxford, the training of his wonderful band of "Poor Priests." He refers to the need for them "to study God's Law at Oxford" (*Why Poor Priests have no Benefices*).

At this period he began prudently and quietly so that his aims escaped general notice. Archbishop Sudbury was a mild and tolerant man while Wycliffe was known to be favoured at Court. He was "an irregular resident in the University" as a Regent Master, where he preached frequently and disputed in the Schools.