

THE CHURCH AND THE WYCLIFITE BIBLE

The Council of Oxford (1408) published a Constitution forbidding anybody to publish or even have privately any unauthorised translation of Scripture made in the time of Wyclif or after. From which it is clear that the Council did not forbid *all* English translations. The decree was misunderstood, however, from the start, and St Thomas More complains about this in his *Dialogues* (cf. Pope, *Aids to the Bible*, p. 251). The reason for the decree is fairly plain. Evidently false translations were in circulation in Wyclif's time, hence the proviso inserted in the decree. Translations made before that time are in no way forbidden. All the decree insists on therefore is proper authorisation. And this is no more than the Church might do at any period of history, with the exception of the rather severe stricture on private possession of unauthorised copies. The celebrated canonist Lyndwode makes it clear that the above interpretation is how it was understood at the time. He says that the prohibition does not extend to translations made before Wyclif's time, and he assigns the following reason why more recent translations must be approved by authority: "Although it be the plain text of Scripture that is translated, yet the translator may err in his translation, or if he compose a booklet or tract he may, as in fact frequently happens, intermingle false and erroneous teaching with the truth". St Thomas More takes the same view (cf. Gasquet, *The Old English Bible*, p. 124): "I trow", he says, "that in this law you see nothing unreasonable. For it neither forbiddeth the translations to be read that were already well done of old before Wyclif's days, nor damneth his because it was new, but because it was naught, nor prohibiteth new to be made, but provideth that they shall not be read if they be made amiss, till they be by good examination amended".

Were the Lollards persecuted for reading or having the Scriptures? The articles on which they were examined are well known and are in a manuscript in the British Museum. There are thirty-four points of faith and morals. English translations of Scripture are not even mentioned. In the accounts of the examinations of the Lollards (Wyclifites) and their recantations, Gasquet says he has found only two references to Scripture translations in English. One thing seems clear from all this. The spreading of the Bible in English was never a chief aim of the Lollards, nor were they persecuted for having them. It is true that the Bible of a Lollard called Hun was burnt by the

Church authorities, but this was because there was a preface attached to it which contained heretical views on the Blessed Sacrament. There are few copies of this preface or prologue now extant but it may still be read in the large edition of the Wyclifite Bible by Forshall and Madden. The heresy is plain there for all to see. Moreover this is the explanation already given long ago by St Thomas More (*cf.* Pope, *Aids to the Bible*, p. 252).

An examination of the Wyclifite Bibles shows that they are quite orthodox apart from that prologue. Many of the manuscripts are large and finely made; many of them belonged to the nobility and even royalty, e.g. Henry VI and Humphrey Duke of Gloucester. These facts do not agree very well with the theory that the Lollards were persecuted for having them. In themselves there was nothing to connect them with Wyclif, so long as the prologue was omitted, and no doubt as time passed, many, including royal, owners had no suspicion of any such connexion.

Kenyon, in the earlier editions of *Our Bible and the Ancient Manuscripts*, has said "There is no doubt that the Lollards . . . were persecuted, but it does not appear that the possession, use or manufacture of an English version of the Bible, was one of the charges specially urged against them . . . one is glad that it should be so". Unfortunately, in later editions, Kenyon abandons this fair estimate.

Was Wyclif's the first complete English Bible? In dealing with this question, some Catholics are not always very logical. After spending a long time proving that there was really no need for English translations, they then strain every nerve to show that Wyclif's was not the first. What are the facts? It is very likely that in the fourteenth century clerical learning was at a low ebb, and knowledge of Latin was scanty. The chief need was to learn Latin. But we may admit that an English translation of Scripture would have come in very useful. Parts were already in English; we may be fairly certain that whether Wyclif translated the Bible or not, there would have been one before long in any case as the knowledge of Latin declined. That one had not appeared before could be explained perhaps by the fact that English was only just beginning to assert itself as a language and to oust French. The rise of a need for an English translation was gradual. The Wyclifites of course had a great need of a translation so that by private interpretation they might defend their views. They wished to set the authority of Scripture privately interpreted over against the authority of the Church.

Till recently it was commonly accepted that Wyclif made the first complete English translation, though many non-Catholics freely admit our contention, stated above, that one would have been made anyway

about that time, even if Wyclif had not done so, and that one could hardly have been made earlier since English as a language hardly existed. (By "Wyclif" we mean also his followers, because it is very doubtful how much Wyclif himself did, if indeed he did any.) But the point is whether the Wyclifite Bible was first. There can scarcely be any doubt that the first version is Wyclifite because of the reference to Nicholas de Hereford, a well-known Wyclifite, at the end of Bar. III.20. What of the later version? We saw that there are many more manuscripts of this extant. It has a long prologue, which is a Lollard tract, criticising the clergy and containing various heresies, especially against the Blessed Sacrament. If the author of the prologue also made the Bible translation then the Bible is Wyclifite. Now, the English of the later version corresponds closely to the principles of translation set out in the general prologue. Again, certain Bible passages quoted in the prologue correspond almost exactly to the wording of the later version. We may perhaps conclude that they are by the same person. That would mean that the "later version" is Wyclifite, as well as the earlier. It is true that few manuscripts of the later version actually have the prologue attached, but the reason is not far to seek. Since it was heretical it would not be allowed to survive, except perhaps by accident. The Bibles could only freely circulate without it.

We know from external evidence that the Lollards had a Bible. The decree of the Council of Oxford makes this clear, though some try to show that it only refers to texts and not to whole Bibles. Either view is arguable. However, Archbishop Arundel, writing to the Pope, says that "Wyclif tried by every means in his power to undermine the very faith and teaching of Holy Church, filling up the measure of his malice by devising the expedient of a new translation of the Scriptures in the mother tongue". John Foxe tells us that in the time of Richard II there was a proposal to make a new translation of the Bible into English to take the place of an unauthorised one. The proposal was rejected, but it does testify to the existence of what can hardly be anything else but the Wyclifite Bible. None of Wyclif's contemporaries who speak of Bible translations knows of the existence of any other, and when looking for precedents to justify their own they are forced to quote the example of the French: "As lords of England have the Bible in French so it were not against reason that they hadden the same sentence in English. . . ." This could hardly have been written if in fact there did exist at the time an English Bible (cf. J. F. H. Tregear, "The First English Bible", in *Clergy Review*, March and May, 1947).

In 1894, Cardinal Gasquet, writing in the *Dublin Review* (July 1894),

proposed the startling new theory that the two versions which we know as Wyclifite are not in fact such, but Catholic versions made before Wyclif. Unfortunately his thesis appears to be largely based on an error. He mentions Hun's Bible (see above) which he admits to be a Lollard Bible, and quotes Thomas More about the heresy contained in its prologue. But, he says, this must have been different from the so-called second Wyclifite version, because we shall look in vain in the edition of Wyclifite Scriptures published by Forshall and Madden for any trace of these errors (*cf. The Old English Bible*, p. 129). As we have already stated, however, the heresy is plain for all to see in the Forshall and Madden edition.

Gasquet goes on to argue that the prologue and the Bible translations are by the same hand. "There is no room for doubt", he says. But, if so, then it is quite certain that the Bible is Wyclifite and not Catholic.

Father Thurston, S.J. tried to save something from the wreck by suggesting that the earlier Wyclifite Bible may well be a Catholic one, since it is not by the author of the prologue. But he unaccountably overlooks the connexion of *both* versions with the prologue, and (still more curiously) the explicit assertion at the end of Bar. III.20 that Nicholas de Hereford made the translation—a man well known as a follower of Wyclif. It seems therefore that the Bibles now called Wyclifite are really such—they are orthodox in content, but the second version has a heretical prologue attached. Further, there is no evidence, so far as contemporaries are concerned, of any earlier English translations of the whole Bible, though there were translations of many parts.

The chief difficulty against this conclusion is the evidence of St Thomas More, who not only asserts that there were good Catholic Bibles in English before Wyclif, but that he had actually seen them. Further, he thought Wyclif's translation itself heretical (*Dialogue concerning Tyndale*, BK.III, ch.14), and hence condemned by the Council of Oxford. But he was writing over a hundred years after the Council, and he appears to be mistaken in thinking that the Council condemned the Wyclifite Bible as heretical. It seems probable that this error led him to conclude that the Bibles circulating in his day could not therefore be Wyclifite because they were orthodox translations. Moreover, as already observed above, many of them were in or had been in the possession of the great families and in religious houses as well. Few copies had the heretical prologue and there was nothing to connect them with Wyclif.

If they are not the ones seen by More, how is it that these Catholic ones have vanished while the others have survived, and in some cases

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with a heretical prologue? These Wyclifite Bibles therefore, short of their prologue, eventually found their way into Catholic households and thus came to be accepted as Catholic Bibles (*cf.* Deanesly, *The Lollard Bible*). As Gasquet has pointed out, whether Wyclifite or not, the fact remains that Catholics did then possess English Bibles without interference from authority, and these Bibles now regarded as Wyclifite were in pre-Reformation days uniformly regarded as perfectly orthodox by undoubtedly loyal sons of Mother Church (*cf.* *Old English Bible*, p. 161).

PAROCHUS