

JOHN DE WYCLIFFE, D.D.

A

Monograph.

WITH SOME ACCOUNT OF THE WYCLIFFE MSS. IN OXFORD, CAMBRIDGE,
THE BRITISH MUSEUM, LAMBETH PALACE, AND TRINITY COLLEGE, DUBLIN.

BY ROBERT VAUGHAN, D.D

Seeleys,

FLEET STREET AND HANOVER STREET.

LONDON : MDCCCLIII.

CHAPTER X.

WYCLIFFE AND THE ENGLISH BIBLE.

IN the old time, revelation came to man in the first instance in an oral form; and, as this fact supposes, it came to each man in his own tongue. The successive portions of the Old Testament were delivered to the Hebrew people in their own language—came upon them in living words, from the lips of living prophets. So it was with all that the New Testament teaches. The oral preceded the written, and the written, when it came, came, as far as might be, to every man, in the language of his own country and household.

Strange that men should have set themselves to undo, in this respect, what their Maker had done—done through so many centuries, and by such diversities of tongues, bestowed by miracle to that end. But the time did come, when the priest undertook, in this sense, to *keep* knowledge—reserving it to himself, as a concealed treasure, in place of dispensing it freely to the people, as being theirs of right.

We are only too familiar with the pretexts under which this was attempted, and so long achieved. ‘The people are not to be trusted. They will misinterpret and misapply the record if thus placed in their hands, and the effect will be evil and not good.’ It would not seem to have occurred to these men to ask—whether a priesthood, in such case, would be likely to prove itself more trustworthy than a people. The great authority of religion being restricted, in this manner, to their own keeping—is not the priesthood in danger, in such circumstances, of corrupting the religion so as to serve its own ends? The time we see has come in which this may be done, and done with something more inviting in the distance than mere impunity. Not only is there temptation in this direction, it may be safely described as a temptation much too potent to be resisted by our frail nature. History is decisive on this point. The withdrawal of the scriptures from the hands of the people, was a withdrawal of the light, and the deeds natural to the state of darkness which ensued were the result. The Christianity of the priesthood, no longer confronted with the teachings of Scripture, ceased to be the Christianity of Scripture. This unnatural, vicious, and most mischievous relation of things, appears to have been constantly present to the mind of Wycliffe during the later years of his life. By degrees, accordingly, it became his fixed purpose to give to the people of England, to the largest extent possible in the circumstances of that age, not merely fragments of the Bible, but the whole Bible, in their mother-tongue. It was the authority to which he was himself constantly appealing—he would do his best that the humblest of the people might be empowered to follow his example in that respect.

The safe keeping of such a revelation as we possess, can never lie with a priesthood alone, nor with the common people alone. Scholarship has its

work to do in relation to it, and so has the robust and natural intelligence of our working-day humanity. The best conservation of a revealed religion, can never result from either of these influences taken separately—it must come from the two taken together. If a people will be likely to err from tendencies of one sort, a priesthood will be quite as likely to err from tendencies of another sort. The checks which each supplies are for the good of each. The effect is the equilibrium in which there is safety. The clergy, if left to themselves, become arbitrary, corrupt, and degenerate into a caste; and the people, if left without spiritual guides, become bewildered, disorderly, and demoralized.

Before the age of Wycliffe, the knowledge of the scriptures accessible to the laity was very limited. The Christianity of the Britons retired with them into their mountain fastnesses. We have no reason to suppose that the pastors of the British Churches withheld the sacred writings from their flocks with intention, or on any such principle as was avowed by the clergy of a later age. But on the other hand, the circumstances of those times warrant us in concluding, that almost the only knowledge of the scriptures possessed by that people, was the knowledge which had come to them by means of oral teaching. The Latin language, indeed, had become so familiar to them during the sway of the Romans, that according to Gildas, their historian, Britain might have been described as a Roman, rather than a British island; and it is possible that through the medium of that language, some portions of the inspired records became known to a few of the better educated and more wealthy. But we have nothing to warrant us in extending our conjectures further in this direction.¹

The Saxons became possessors of this southern portion of our island as pagans; and after the arrival of Augustine and his monks, nearly a century passed before these rude settlers were brought to their very imperfect profession of Christianity. In the seventh century, Cedman, an Anglo-Saxon monk, wrote sacred poetry in his native tongue, and appears to have been the first of his race who did so. Among his productions is a translation, if such it may be called, of portions of the Old Testament, into Anglo-Saxon rhyme. This rhyming version bears all the marks of the antiquity assigned to it. It includes the leading events of Old Testament history—as the creation of the world, the fall of man, the deluge, the departure from Egypt, the entrance upon Canaan, and some subsequent occurrences.²

In the next century, Aldhelm, bishop of Sherborne; and Guthlac, the celebrated anchorite, are among the authors who produced Anglo-saxon versions

¹ Ussher's *Britan. Eccles. Antiq. and Religion of the Ancient Irish and British*. Stillingfleet's *Antiquities of the British Churches*. Collier's *Eccles. Hist.* I. 1-46. Tacitus. *Vita Agric.* *Researches into the Ecclesiastical and Political State of Ancient Britain under the Roman Emperors*, by the Rev. Francis Thackeray, M.A.

² Bede *Hist.* B. IV. c. 20.

of the psalms.³ In the same age, the venerable Bede completed a translation of St. John's Gospel. This was a literal rendering of the sacred narrative into the spoken language of the time, and was the first attempt of its kind in our history.⁴ The Durham Book, attributed on probable evidence to about the age of Alfred, is a manuscript copy of the Latin Gospels, with a Saxon version interlined. In the Bodleian library is a manuscript of the same portion of the sacred volume, with a Saxon translation, introduced after the same manner, the translation being made apparently sometime in the tenth century. This manuscript is known by the name of the Rushworth Gloss. Among the valuable manuscripts in Benet college, Cambridge, is a third copy of the gospels in the Saxon tongue, written a little before the conquest and a fourth, which appears to have been copied from the former, and to be of the same period, may be seen in the Bodleian.⁵ But an ecclesiastic who did more than all his brethren towards presenting the Scriptures to his countrymen in their native language, was Elfric. This laborious scholar lived in the reign of Ethelred, and subscribes himself at different periods as monk, mass-priest, and abbot. We learn from himself that, at the request of various persons, he had translated the Pentateuch, the books of Joshua and Judges; those of Esther, Job, and Judith, also the two books of the Maccabees, with a part of the first and second book of Kings.⁶ Alfred the Great prefixed a translation of certain passages from the Mosaic writings to his code of laws, and at the time of his death had made considerable progress in a Saxon version of the Psalms.⁷ Such is the extent of our information on this interesting question as connected with the Anglo-Saxon period of our history.

The Anglo-Norman clergy were far more competent than the clergy who had preceded them, to have given the scriptures to the people in their own tongue, had they been so disposed. But by this time, the ecclesiastical system had become more than ever hostile, both in form and spirit, to all such views of the relation between the clergy and the people, as might have disposed the former to attempt the elevation of the latter by any such means. Small fragments of the Sacred Scriptures would become familiar to the people, as having their place in the ritual of the period, and as expounded to them on the

³ Baleus de Script. Brit. Cent. I. Baber's New Testament, translated by Dr. Wiclif. Historical Account, lviii.

⁴ Cuthberti Vita Ven. Bedæ.

⁵ Baber's Historical Account, lix. lx. Wycliffe's Bible, Pref. i. ii.

⁶ Wycliffe's Bible, Pref. ii. iii. Baber's Historical Account, liii. lxiii. Turner's Anglo-Saxons, Book X. c. iii.

⁷ 'Alfred, in his zeal for the improvement of his country, did not overlook the importance of the vernacular Scripture. At the head of his laws, he set in Anglo-Saxon, the Ten Commandments, with such of the Mosaic injunctions in the three following chapters of Exodus, as were most to his purpose. What other parts of the Bible he translated, it is difficult to determine. A remarkable passage in his preface to the pastoral of Pope Gregory, leaves no room to doubt, that if the more necessary portions of Holy Writ were not made accessible to his subjects in their own tongue, it was only because this wise and pious Prince failed of the opportunity to accomplish his wishes.' Wycliffe's Bible, Pref. ii.

comparatively rare occasions when preaching became a part of the church service. But even the portions of the sacred text which thus came in their way, were too often given in a form so isolated, and in connexion with interpretations so artful and untrue, as to produce injurious, rather than wholesome impressions.

The first attempt after the Conquest, to place any continuous account of the contents of the Sacred Scriptures before the people of England in their own language, appears to have been made by the author of a rhyming paraphrase on the Gospels, and on the Acts of the Apostles, entitled ‘Ormulum.’⁸ The next production of this nature known to us, consists of a huge volume of metrical pieces, under the title of *Salus Animæ*, or in English ‘Sowlehele.’ The object of the writer or transcriber of this volume appears to have been, to furnish a complete body of legendary and scriptural history in verse, or rather to collect in one view, all the religious history he could bring together. But it professes to give an outline of the contents both of the Old and New Testaments, and its composition dates somewhere towards the close of the thirteenth century.⁹ In Benet College, Cambridge, there is another work of the same description, produced about the same time, and containing notices of the principal events recorded in the books of Genesis and Exodus. In the same library, there is also a manuscript translation of the Psalms in English metre, made about the year 1300; and two transcripts of this work, of nearly the same antiquity, have been preserved—one in the Bodleian library, the other in that of Sir Robert Cotton.¹⁰

But it is not until we come to about the middle of the fourteenth century—that is, not until five and twenty years after the birth of Wycliffe—that we trace the remotest attempt to produce a literal translation, even of detached portions, of the sacred writings. The effort of this nature then made was by Richard Roll, called the Hermit of Hampole. His translations were restricted to little more than half the book of Psalms, and to these renderings he annexed a devotional commentary. Contemporary with this recluse, were some well-disposed men among the clergy, who produced translations of such passages from the scriptures as were prominent in the offices of the church, and some ventured so far as to attempt a complete translation of an Epistle or a Gospel. Several of the Epistles, and parts of the Gospels by Mark and Luke, are among the fruit of this labour that has descended to our time. But it should be added, that even these versions—which are of various merit—are generally guarded by a commentary.¹¹

⁸ MSS. Junius I. Bodleian. ‘Highly valuable as it is in a philological point of view, yet, never proceeding probably beyond the original copy of the author, it could have been of little or no use in religious teaching.’ Wycliffe’s Bible, Pref. iii.

⁹ MSS. Bodleian, 779. Wharton’s History of English Poetry, Sect. i. Baber’s historical Account, lxiv. lxv.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Wycliffe’s Bible, Pref. IV. V. Baber’s Historical Account, lxvi, lxvii.

It is well known that many years since the Rev. Josiah Forshall and Sir Frederick Madden were engaged to prepare an edition of Wycliffe's Bible, to be issued from the Oxford University press. In 1850, this long-promised publication made its appearance, in five handsome quarto volumes. The projectors of this undertaking, and those who have given themselves with so much patient labour to the prosecution of it, are entitled to the warmest acknowledgments from every sincere Protestant, from every scholar, and from our country at large. If the research of the editors has not led to anything very remarkable—one point perhaps excepted—in the way of discovery, the account they have given of existing MSS. including translations of the whole, or of parts, of the sacred volume, either by Wycliffe, or by his followers; the care with which the MSS. in this greatly enlarged catalogue have been examined and collated; and the result as given us, not only in the text which they have published, but in the copious emendations and readings subjoined to it—are altogether such as to promise that the publication bearing their names, will form a monument of our British literature as lasting as the language.

But it is with the Preface and 'Prologue' included in the preliminary matter of the first volume of this work that we are, in this place, most concerned. Down to the year 1360, say the editors, 'the Psalter appears to be the only book of scripture which had been entirely rendered into English. Within less than twenty-five years from that date, a prose version of the whole Bible, including as well the apocryphal as the canonical books, had been completed, and was in circulation among the people. For this invaluable gift England is indebted to John Wycliffe. It may be impossible to determine with certainty the exact share which his own pen had in the translation, but there can be no doubt that he took a part in the labour of producing it, and that the accomplishment of the work must be attributed mainly to his zeal, encouragement, and direction. It was not, probably, until his later years, that Wycliffe matured so extensive a design. He was led to the undertaking slowly and gradually; and it was not completed until after several preliminary efforts. It is interesting to mark the several steps by which he advanced in the interpretation and diffusion of the Holy Scriptures. The evidence, indeed, which bears upon the point is scanty, and only sufficient, it should be remembered, to afford to the conclusions which it suggests, a presumption of their truth.'

Consistency demands that the Romanist should withhold the Scriptures from the laity. It is the authority of the church—an authority made infallible for that purpose—which is to determine the meaning of Scripture, not the judgment of private persons. It is of the essence of such a system that the sacred books should be regarded as designed for the hands of the priesthood, constituting in this case the church, and that they should not be designed for the hands of the people.

Nevertheless, it has been very widely felt among Romanists, that this

withholding of the Scriptures from the laity has a very ugly appearance. Much artifice, accordingly, and at times not a little effrontery, have been resorted to, that the shaft directed against them from this quarter might be turned aside.

It has been pretended, for example, that there was nothing really novel in the idea of Wycliffe, when he contemplated a translation of the whole Bible into English, that simple laymen might read it—that there were good catholics who had done the same thing before him. Even so ingenuous a man as Sir Thomas More took this ground. He is bold enough to declare that the whole Bible had been translated into English before the days of Wycliffe, and that he had himself seen such translations,—copies which he describes as fair and old, and which had been seen by the bishops of the diocese.¹² We do not think Sir Thomas More capable of uttering a falsehood,—and the positiveness with which he speaks on this point has disposed more than one English scholar in the seventeenth century to think that there must be truth in this statement. But the explanation is easy. The copies which Sir Thomas More saw, were no doubt copies of the translation made by Wycliffe and his followers; some of which, it is well known, were in possession of the prelates, and others, in the sixteenth century. Had a translation prior to their own been in existence, the Wycliffites would surely have known it, and would as surely have appealed to it in defence of their own policy. But nothing can be more clear than that they regarded their proceeding in this matter as a novelty; as a proceeding that would be so regarded by the ruling clergy; and that great opposition would be made to it, as most contrary to catholic usage, and fraught with great mischiefs. Enough, indeed, was said, in connexion with the first broaching of this purpose, on the part of Wycliffe and his disciples, to foreshadow the hostility which would thus be called forth. There is a passage in Knighton, written not long after the death of Wycliffe, which may be taken as decisive, both as to the judgment of the clergy of those times, concerning the duty of withholding the Scriptures from the people, and as to the part taken by Wycliffe in the effort made to place them in the hands of the people in their own tongue. ‘Christ,’ says our indignant ecclesiastic, ‘delivered his gospel to the clergy and doctors of the church, that they might administer to the laity and to weaker persons, according to the states of the times, and the wants of men. But this master John Wycliffe translated it out of Latin into English, and thus laid it out more open to the laity, and to women, who could read, than it had formerly been to the most learned of the clergy, even to those of them who had the best understanding. In this way the gospel-pearl is cast abroad, and trodden under foot of swine, and that which

¹² *Dyalogues*. cvii. cxi. cxx. Ed. 1530. Ussher *De Scripturis de sacris vernaculis*, 155. *Treatise of the Corruptions of Scripture*, by Thomas James, 30. 74. ed. 1612. Henry Wharton early corrected Ussher’s mistake on this point. *Specimens of Errors in the History of the Reformation*. Ed. 1693. Wycliffe’s Bible, Pref. xxi.

was before precious both to clergy and laity, is rendered, as it were, the common jest of both. The jewel of the church is turned into the sport of the people, and what had hitherto been the choice gift of the clergy and of divines, is made for ever common to the laity.’¹³ Such is the testimony of Knighton to the opinion and usage of his age on this point. Nothing, in his view, could be further from the thoughts of a good Catholic, than the idea of giving the Sacred Scriptures to the people in their own tongue. To the same effect is the decision of an English council in 1408, with Arundel, Archbishop of Canterbury at its head. ‘The translation of the text of Holy Scripture out of one tongue into another, is a dangerous thing, as St. Jerome testifies, because it is not easy to render the verse in all respects faithfully. Therefore, we enact and ordain, that no one henceforth do, by his own authority, translate any text of Holy Scripture into the English tongue, or into any other, by way of book or treatise; nor let any book or treatise now lately composed in the time of John Wycliffe aforesaid, or since, or hereafter to be composed, be read, in whole or in part, in public or in private, under pain of the greater excommunication.’¹⁴ This extract needs no comment.

On a review of all the available evidence on this subject, we are warranted in believing that the idea of translating the Bible into the English language originated with the mind of Wycliffe, and that to the men of his time it was in two respects a strictly novel conception—first, as it embraced a literal translation of the entire Bible, nothing more, nothing less; and second, as it contemplated making this translation accessible to the people, without distinction, and to the utmost extent possible. The object contemplated was the Bible—the Bible in its *completeness*, and without *note* or *comment*; and the Bible to be in *every man’s hands*, as *every man’s guide*. This conception, simple as it may appear to us, was a large, a sublime conception, for any man to rise to, and to hold by, in such times.

But the object thus presented to the minds of men, was not one to be realized suddenly. The disciples of Wycliffe, indeed, appear to have entered at once into his views in relation to it, and the idea that the scriptures should be thus placed in the hands of the people, once pronounced, seems to have spread with amazing rapidity. The thought was no sooner in motion, than it lodged itself in a multitude of minds, some regarding it as pregnant with all good, others being no less alive to it as including, in their view, the seeds of every kind of evil. One of the Reformer’s short treatises, published while the discussions thus called forth were at their height, and while the work of trans-

¹³ Knighton. De Eventibus. 2644.

¹⁴ Wilkins, Concilia, III. 317. The spirit of this enactment was evidently that of the clergy generally in the life-time of Wycliffe. Hence, he describes them, as asserting it to be ‘heresy to speak of the Holy Scriptures in English.’ But this he interprets as ‘a condemnation of the Holy Ghost, who first gave the Scriptures in tongues to the Apostles of Christ, as it is written, that they might speak the word in all languages, that were ordained of God under heaven:—Wicket.

lation was still in progress, will suffice to indicate the style in which the disputants on either side endeavoured to sustain their cause. The treatise to which we refer, bears this plain-spoken title. *How Antichrist and his Clerks travail to destroy Holy Writ, and to make Christian men unstable in the faith, and to set their ground in devils of hell.*¹⁵ The piece begins thus:—‘As our Lord Jesus Christ ordained to make his gospel sadly known, and maintained against heretics, and men out of belief, by the writings of the four Evangelists, so the devil casteth, by Antichrist and his worldly false clerks, to destroy Holy Writ, and the belief of Christian men, by four cursed ways, or false reasonings.’

These four ways are—‘*First*, that the church is of more authority and more credence than any gospel. *Secondly*, that St. Augustine saith he would not believe in the gospel, but if the church taught him so. *Thirdly*, that no man now alive knows which is the gospel, but if it be by approving of the Church. And *fourthly*, if men say that they believe that this is the gospel of Matthew, or John, they ask—Why believest thou that this is the gospel, since, whosoever believeth this hath no cause, except that the church confirmeth it, and teacheth it.

‘*First*, they say that Nicodemus, and many more, wrote the Gospel of Christ’s life and his teaching, and the church put them away, and approved these four gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Then the church might as well have put out these four gospels, and have approved the other, since it was in the free-will and power of the church to approve and condemn which they would, and to approve and accept what they liked, and *therefore, men should believe more to the church than to any gospel.*’ Wycliffe says in reply—First, these forecasting heretics understand by the *church*, the *Pope of Rome* and his *cardinals*, and the *multitudes of worldly clerks, assenting to his simony and worldly lordships, above the kings and emperors of the world.* For else it were not to their purpose thus to magnify the church. True men, then, say, that the clergy which *first* was, *knowing men*, and *holy of life*, were *stirred by the Holy Ghost* to take these gospels, and to charge not Christian people with more, since these are enough and profitable to the full, and these four witnesses were accepted of the Holy Ghost for many reasons which we may not now tell.’

But the Divine illumination, which enabled the clergy in those times thus to distinguish between the genuine records of inspiration, and all spurious writings, is said to have been sadly wanting in the clergy of the ages which have followed. Speaking of the contemporary priesthood, Wycliffe observes, ‘Jesus Christ saith his Gospel is an everlasting testament, but these would fordon (undo—destroy) it with a foul blast from the mouth of Antichrist. Lord! how dare Christian men maintain such heretics against God’s teaching, and the peace of Christian people? Such heretics are full unable to rule lords

¹⁵ MS. C. C. C. Cambridge.

and commons, to shrift in preaching and praying, and to do other points concerning their souls' health, for they destroy them in respect to faith and good life, that their own pride, covetousness, and lusts may be borne up, and draw all men to hell that are ruled by such confessors, false preachers, and false counsellors.'

Having thus dismissed the thought of the Holy Ghost as dwelling with such men, Wycliffe then proceeds to what he describes as the "Second Wheel" in the machine of this adversary. 'They bear,' he writes, 'upon Austin, that he saith he would not believe in the Gospel, but if the church saith it is true. We then answer, that Austin saith to this intent, that he would not believe thereto, unless *Christ*, head of holy church, and *Apostles* of Christ, and *saints now in heaven*, which are in truth, holy church, said and approved the Gospel. And this understanding is full true, and according to the letter of Austin; but they understand it thus, that *unless* the cursed *multitude of worldly clerks* approve this for the Gospel, Austin would not believe to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.' But to make the church consist, after this manner, of a degenerate priesthood, to the exclusion of the body of the faithful, and then to reason about church authority from a church so constituted, is said to be to make everything valuable in the religion of Christ depend on approval from men who have shown themselves its enemies—'but what heresy,' he exclaims, 'might sooner destroy the belief of Christian men? And God forbid that Austin should be found in poisonous heresy. It is accursed falsehood, therefore, to slander Austin with this accursed error, by the name of this holy doctor colouring their own false understanding and heresy. For by this cursed wheel, Antichrist's clerks condemn the faith of Christian men, and the commandments of God, and points of charity, and bring in their own wayward laws. *Therefore Christian men should stand to the death for the maintenance of Christ's Gospel, and the true understanding thereof, obtained by holy life, and great study, and not set their faith nor trust in sinful prelates, and their accursed clerks, nor in their understanding thereof.*'

'See you,' the Reformer proceeds to say, 'the third wheel of Satan's chair. They say that no man can know what is the Gospel, but by the approving and confirming of the church. But true men say that to their understanding this is full of falsehood. For Christian men have certainty of belief by the gracious gift of Jesus Christ, that the truth taught by Christ and his Apostles is the Gospel, though all the clerks of Antichrist say never so fast the contrary, and require men to believe the contrary, on pain of cursing, prisoning, and burning. And this belief is not founded on the pope and his cardinals, for then it might fail and be undone, as they fail and sometimes be destroyed; but on Jesus Christ, God and Man, and, on holy Trinity, and so it may never fail, except from his default who should not love God and serve him. For Almighty God and his truths, are the foundation of the faith of Christian men; and as St. Paul saith, *other foundation may no man set, besides that which is set, that is Jesus Christ*. Therefore, though Antichrist and all his accursed

clerks be buried deep in hell for their accursed simony and pride, and other sins, yet the Christian's faith faileth not, and plainly because *they* are not the ground thereof, but *Jesus Christ is the ground* thereof. For he is our God, and our best master, and ready to teach true men all things profitable and needful for their souls.'

'The fourth wheel of Belial's cart is this,—If Christian men say they know by belief that this is Christ's Gospel, these malicious heretics ask—*Why* they believe that this is Gospel? But true men ask of them again, why they believe that God is God, and if they tell a sufficient reason, we can tell as good a reason why we believe that this is Christ's Gospel. *But they say, whatever the prelates teach, teach openly, and maintain stedfastly, were of as great authority, or more, than is Christ's Gospel,* and so they would destroy Holy Writ and Christian faith, and maintain that *whatever they do is no sin*. But Christian men take their faith of God by his gracious gift, when he giveth to them knowledge and understanding of truths needful to save men's souls by grace, to assent in their hearts to such truths. And this men call faith, and of this faith Christian men are more certain than any man is of mere worldly things by any bodily wit—(outward sense.) And, therefore, Christ reproveth most defect of belief, both in the Jews and his disciples, and therefore Christ's apostles prayed most to have stableness in the faith, for it is impossible that any man can please God without faith. And so Christ prayed principally that the faith of Peter, and of the other disciples, might not fail for ever. And God's law telleth how by faith saints wrought all the great wonders and miracles that they did. And if Antichrist here say that each man may feign that he has a right faith, and a good understanding of Holy Writ, when he is in error—let *a man seek in all things truly the honour of God, and live justly to God and man, and God will not fail to him in anything that is needful to him, neither in faith, nor in understanding, nor in answer against his enemies.*'

This piece concludes thus:—'God Almighty strengthen his little flock against Antichrist, to seek truly the honour of Christ and the salvation of men's souls, to despise the feigned power of Antichrist, and willingly and joyfully to suffer reproof in the world for the name of Jesus Christ and his Gospel, to give good example to others to follow, and to conquer the high bliss of heaven by glorious martyrdom as other saints did before! Jesus, for thine endless might, endless wisdom, endless goodness and charity, grant to us sinful wretches this love! Amen!'

So did some men oppose themselves to the notion of seeking truth from the Scriptures in English, in place of seeking it in the decisions of the church; and in this manner did Wycliffe prepare his disciples to meet assaults in such forms. It will be seen from the preceding extracts, that the arguments common to the disputants in this controversy since the age of Luther, were in substance anticipated in the age of Wycliffe. The following passage gives a

portion of this argument, as relating to the better side, with admirable directness. The treatise from which this extract is taken, was written in English and in Latin; the English appears to have perished, we give a translation from the Latin.

‘Those heretics are not to be heard, who imagine that temporal lords should not be allowed to possess the law of God, but that it is sufficient for them that they know what may be learnt concerning it from the lips of their priests and prelates.’

‘As the faith of the church is contained in the Scriptures, the more these are known in their true meaning the better; and inasmuch as secular men should assuredly understand the faith they profess, that faith should be taught them in whatever language may be best known to them. Forasmuch, also, as the doctrines of our faith are more clearly and exactly expressed in the Scriptures, than they may probably be by priests; seeing, if I may so speak, that many prelates are but too ignorant of Holy Scripture, while others conceal many parts of it; and as the verbal instructions of priests have many other defects; the conclusion is abundantly manifest, that believers should ascertain for themselves what are the true matters of their faith, by having the Scriptures in a language which they fully understand. For the laws made by prelates are not to be received as matters of faith, nor are we to confide in their public instructions, nor in any of their words, but as they are founded on Holy Writ,—since according to the doctrine of Augustine, the Scriptures contain the whole truth, and this translation of them into English should therefore do at least this good—viz., placing bishops and priests above suspicion as to the parts of it which they profess to explain. Other means, such as the friars, prelates, the pope, may all prove defective; and to provide against this, Christ and his Apostles evangelized the greater portion of the world, by making known the Scriptures to the people in their own language. To this end, indeed, did the Holy Spirit endow them with the knowledge of tongues. Why then should not the living disciples of Christ do in this respect as they did?’¹⁶

¹⁶ *Doctrina Christiana*, cited by Lewis, *Life of Wiclif*, c.v. Walden, a well-known antagonist of Wycliffe, maintained, in opposition to this doctrine of the Reformer, that ‘the decrees of bishops in the church, are of greater weight and dignity than the authority of scripture.’ Walden’s Doc. Trial. lib. II. c. 21. The last article in the eighteen selected by Woodford, in his ‘*adversus Johannem Wiclefum*.’ (Brown *Fasciculus Rerum*, I. 257-265.) is on this question—the scriptures, *versus* the clergy, in which Wycliffe is made to state his doctrine as in the extracts given above, and various points are worked out in reply. On all these points the writer shows much zeal, but no great discrimination. Wycliffe never maintained that men should believe nothing, or do nothing, for which a direct sanction could not be found in scripture. He simply insisted that no opinion or usage should be accounted as Christian, that could not be shown to be *consistent with the letter or spirit of the Christian Scriptures*. But to such polemics as Walden and Woodford, it is often convenient to understand him as saying more than this—that is, as pushing his principle so far as to reduce it to an absurdity. The substance of Wycliffe’s maxim may be said to be, that the certainties of revelation were not to be disturbed by the uncertainties of tradition; and that the interpretation of the Scriptures

On such grounds did Wycliffe commit himself to his labours as a translator of the Scriptures, and to the hostilities and perils to which those labours would expose him. In relation to this portion of his history there are three questions which present themselves as of much interest—first, when did Wycliffe resolve on attempting this great work; secondly, in what degree did he live to see it accomplished; and thirdly, had he coadjutors in this labour, and if so, who were they?

With regard to the first of these questions, it will be remembered that in 1377 the papal commissioners summoned Wycliffe to appear before them at Lambeth, to answer upon a series of charges then preferred against him. We are justified in supposing that the eighteen ‘conclusions,’ as they are called, which were then produced, embraced all the main points of obnoxious opinion that had been broached by the Reformer up to that time. The nature of some of these charges demonstrates, that if any matter of graver import could have been attributed to the accused, the disposition was not wanting to bring it forward, and to give it due prominence. Now it is observable that of two matters, about which so much is said not long afterwards, nothing is said then. Nothing was then said as to his having broached any novel doctrine about the Eucharist; nor as to his having meditated so grave an innovation as that of giving the Scriptures to his countrymen in their own language. These omissions are significant. It is further observable, that in the discussions which took place in Oxford in 1381, and in the following year, about the Eucharist, and which led to the retirement of the Reformer from the University, no mention is made of any such intention or idea in relation to the Scriptures. What is more, in his appeal from the chancellor to the king and parliament, published afterwards, in which he is occupied with other matters of complaint against the clergy, much more than with a defence of his doctrine on the Eucharist, Wycliffe does not place among the prominent articles there enumerated, the withholding of the Scriptures in the mother tongue from the laity. We cannot avoid thinking that this he would have done, had that conception been as matured and fixed in his mind then, as we know it to have been only a few months later. Much stern truth, such as the Reformer must have known would be most unwelcome in many quarters, was sent forth in that document, but this idea of translating the Bible into English was not there, nor anything tending specially in that direction. Even in the proceedings instituted by Courtney, against the holders of the doctrines of the Reformer, so late as the spring of 1382, in the five and twenty propositions condemned at that time by the synod in the Grey Friars Church, as being either heretical or erroneous, we find no expressions indicating that the obnoxious teachers were contemplating a translation of the Scriptures into the vernacular language. Hereford, Ashton, Reppingdon, and others, are made to

by the clergy, however helpful that might be to the layman, should never be to him in the place of an interpretation of the Scriptures for himself.

appear at several meetings of this synod; a full record of the proceedings has been preserved; but amidst the different investigations prosecuted, we find no reference to any meditated translation of the scriptures into English, as among the depraved purposes of these delinquents. This negative evidence is to me, not only forcible, but decisive, as to the late—comparatively the *very* late period, at which the Reformer gave himself to this great work.¹⁷

In 1381 Wycliffe is silenced in Oxford. He then retires to Lutterworth—not to be inactive, but evidently to devise new methods of prosecuting the work of reformation. One result we see, in the almost incredible number of Tracts and Treatises in English, issued by him during the next three years. Had he been suffered to continue his lectures among the students at Oxford, it is probable that this eminently popular department of his labours would not have filled by any means so large a space. The circumstances which disposed him to multiply these appeals to the people in their own language, appear to have led him, and by a very natural process of thought, to the determination to secure a translation of the Bible itself into English. In every stage of his efforts, he had given evidence enough of his disregard of Church authority, as commonly viewed in his time, and also of his conviction that the plain teachings of Scripture, concerning which every intelligent and well-disposed man should be deemed a competent judge, are, in truth, the one ultimate authority to be acknowledged in matters of religion. In consonance with this maxim—always implied, if not expressed, even in his earliest writings, and

¹⁷ It is not every passage in which Wycliffe speaks of the importance of imparting scriptural knowledge to the people in their own tongue, that he is to be understood as saying that the whole Bible should be given to the laity in that language. Where he does speak explicitly on this point, it will be found, we think, that such expressions occur in compositions of a late date. He often expressed himself strongly in this *direction*, long before he expressed himself distinctly to this *effect*. The editors of the Wycliffe Bible have not, perhaps, borne this distinction sufficiently in mind, in respect to some extracts they have given from the real or supposed writings of the Reformer. Pref. viii—xv. The second tract. in the MS. volume in the University Library, Cambridge, is, we doubt not, from the pen of Wycliffe, and was prefixed to his translation of Clement Lanthony's Harmony of the Gospels, either at the time when the translation was made, or subsequently. In this piece he speaks forcibly on the subject now before us. 'Covetous clerks of this world reply and say, that laymen be liable soon to err, and therefore they should not dispute of the Christian faith. Alas! alas! what cruelty is this, to take away all bodily meat from a whole realm, because a few fools are inclined to be gluttons, and do harm to themselves and other men, by this meat taken immoderately. As readily may a proud priest err against the Gospel written in Latin, as a simple layman may err against the Gospel written in English. * * * But worldly clerks cry that Holy Writ in English, will put Christian men at strife, and subjects in rebellion against their sovereigns, and therefore it shall not be suffered among laymen. Alas! how may they more openly slander God, the author of peace, and his holy law, fully teaching meekness, patience, and charity.' MS. Harl. G333, cited in Wycliffe's Bible. Pref. xv. This tract contains nothing in itself to enable us to determine its date; it may be taken as showing how Wycliffe had to fight his way *towards* his ultimate effort as a translator of the Bible.

to which each new discussion seemed to give greater clearness and certainty—he endeavoured, in this later period of his life, to give his countrymen a fuller expression of scripture truth in their own tongue; and with this more resolute purpose to make the people reformers through their own language, came the purpose to give them the entire Bible in that language.

Among Wycliffe's manuscript sermons, there is one in which he speaks of 'a great bishop of England' as being deeply incensed 'because *God's law is written in English to lewd men* (laymen).' The preacher adds 'He pursueth a certain priest, because *he writeth to men this English*, and summoneth him, and traveleth him, so that it is hard for him to bear it. And thus he pursueth another priest, by the help of Pharisees, (Monks and Friars) because he preacheth Christ's gospel freely, and without fables. Oh! men who are on Christ's behalf, help ye now against Antichrist, for the perilous times are come which Christ and Paul foretold.'¹⁸ here the 'great bishop' alluded to, is evidently Courtney, and the two priests mentioned must have been Hereford and Ashton. The latter we have seen to have been an earnest disciple of Wycliffe, and zealous and effective as a preacher. But if we are correct in this interpretation—and the passage does not seem susceptible of any other—it is clear that even in the absence of any article to that effect in the charges urged against Hereford and Ashton in 1382, Wycliffe had the impression that the zeal of Courtney had been stimulated in the prosecutions of that year, from some knowledge, or suspicion, of an intention to put '*God's law, written in English*,' in the hands of the laity. It shows further, that *Wycliffe knew Hereford to have been engaged in this labour at that time*.

On this first question—the question as to when Wycliffe first became possessed with the idea of securing a translation of the Scriptures into English, we had hoped to derive some assistance from the labours of the learned editors of Wycliffe's Bible; but to this point they have brought no new light. It is something, however, to find that researches so extended, and so carefully conducted, have tended to confirm our own view in this particular, as given to the public before those researches were contemplated. Our impression then was, that the thought had certainly not been broached publicly by Wycliffe earlier than the year 1378; our present impression, as the result of further examination and reflection is, that the thought did not become a *purpose* earlier than the year in which the Reformer withdrew from Oxford—the year 1381. We shall see in another place, that many of his writings published after his retirement from Oxford contain allusions to this subject, while nothing definite on this point is found in any of his productions belonging clearly to an earlier period. When once his intention in this matter became known, his followers concurred in it so warmly, and his enemies began to look upon it

¹⁸ MS. Horn. Bib. Reg. British Museum. MS. Magd. Coll. Cambr. Pepys, 2616. p. 192. C. C. C. Cambr. cccxxxvi. p. 52. The above extract is from the first of these manuscripts, and first printed in the *Life and Opinions of Wycliffe*; the extract given in the *Wycliffe Bible* is from the manuscript in Magd. Coll. Cambr.

with so much resentment, that the idea soon became notorious, and would no doubt have so become much sooner, had the announcement of it been sooner made.

On the second question—did Wycliffe live to see this great work completed—the evidence before us may be taken as decisive. In a well-known ‘Prologue,’ prefixed to some manuscripts of the English Bible, and which some suppose to have been written in 1395, but which others, on better evidence, regard as written in 1388, not four years subsequent to the death of Wycliffe, mention is distinctly made, of ‘the Bible of late translated,’ and reasons are assigned at large, for subjecting the translation so made, to a careful revision.

It will hardly be supposed that a less space than four years would intervene between the completing of the first version, and the elaborate preparation of a second. It will be remembered, moreover, that the canon against translating the ‘text of scripture into the English tongue,’ which was adopted by the synod over which Archbishop Arundel presided, pointed expressly to ‘the time of John Wycliffe,’ as the time with which innovation in this shape was especially connected. Comparison of the various manuscripts of the translations made about this time, shows, beyond doubt, that there was an earlier and a later translation, each with characteristics of its own. If there be any difficulty here, it is in supposing that the first of these versions did not precede the second by more than four years, rather than within a less space. On the whole, both documents and tradition may be said to attest, with sufficient clearness, that the Reformer lived to see his wishes in this respect accomplished.

Concerning the manner in which this idea was realized, we cannot do better than avail ourselves of the statement given by the editors of the Wycliffe Bible, as now printed. Speaking of the various attempts of this nature which had preceded the effort of our Reformer, these gentlemen say—

‘By the several productions which have been noticed, and probably by others of a like kind now lost, the way was prepared for a more complete and correct version of the Holy Scriptures. The New Testament was naturally the first object. The text of the gospels was extracted from the commentary upon them by Wycliffe, and to these were added the Epistles, the Acts and the Apocalypse, all now translated anew. This translation might probably be the work of Wycliffe himself; at least the similarity of style between the Gospels and the other parts, favours the supposition. Prologues were prefixed to the several books, agreeing with those commonly found in Latin manuscripts of the fourteenth century. It seems questionable, whether the prologues were translated by the same hand as the text: and if they were added subsequently, it would account for the circumstance of their being wanting in several of the copies. Short verbal glosses are frequently introduced into the text.

‘Probably while the New Testament was in progress, or within a short time

of its completion, the Old Testament was taken in hand by one of Wycliffe's coadjutors. The original copy of the translator is still extant in the Bodleian Library. It is corrected throughout by a contemporary hand. A second copy also in the Bodleian Library, and transcribed from the former previously to its correction, has a note at the end, assigning the translation to Nicholas de Hereford. This note was evidently made not very long after the manuscript was written; and there need be no hesitation in giving full credence to its statement. It is remarkable, that both these copies end abruptly in the book of Baruch, breaking off in the middle of a sentence. It may thence be inferred, that the writer was suddenly stopped in the execution of his work, nor is it unreasonable to conjecture further, that the cause of the interruption was the summons which Hereford received to appear before the synod in 1382. Soon after that event he left England, and was absent for some time. The translation itself affords proof, that it was completed by a different hand, and not improbably by Wycliffe himself. It comprises, besides the canonical books, all those commonly reckoned among the Apocryphal, except the fourth book of Esdras.

'The prologues, in the Old Testament as in the New, are, for the most part, those usually found in the contemporary manuscripts of the Vulgate. The Old Testament has no marginal glosses, neither does it appear to have been the intention of Hereford to admit glosses into the text; those which occur in it previously to Baruch iii. 20, are the insertions of a second hand. Subsequently to this place textual glosses are frequent. The manuscripts of the Old Testament are remarkably uniform in the readings of the text.

'The translation of the whole Bible being thus completed, the next care was to render it as extensively useful as possible. With this view, a table of the portions of Scripture read as the Epistles and Gospels of the Church Service on the Sundays, Feasts, and Fasts of the year, was framed. This table was inserted in certain copies of the newly-translated Bibles, and the passages were marked in the text by letters placed in the margin, over against the beginning and end of the several portions; or sometimes the margin contained a rubric, stating at length the service for which the lesson was appointed. To some copies of the New Testament such portions of the Old were annexed, as were used in the Church Service instead of the Epistles. In order also to render those parts of Scripture in most frequent use accessible at less cost, books were written containing nothing more than the Gospels and Epistles read in the service of the Mass.'¹⁹

The note concerning 'Nicholas de Hereford,' in the manuscript mentioned, did not escape the research of Mr. Baber. It will be seen, that this piece of information, together with the above suggestion, as to the probable cause of the abrupt termination of the labour of the translator, are matters of evidence strictly in accordance with the allusion made by Wycliffe to the proceedings

¹⁹ Wycliffe's Bible, Pref. xx.

against Hereford, in the homily before cited.

Of course, the translation thus completed, was made simply from the Latin into English. But made in so short a space of time, by different hands, and in such unfavourable circumstances, it will not be supposed to have been faultless. 'The part translated by Hereford,' it is said,²⁰ 'differed in style from the rest; it was extremely literal, occasionally obscure, and sometimes incorrect; and there were other blemishes throughout, incident to a first essay of this magnitude.' It is not surprising, therefore, that a revised version should have been soon contemplated; and it is certain that a few years after the death of Wycliffe—probably not more than four years—this work also was accomplished. Though it did not make its appearance during the lifetime of the Reformer, it is by no means improbable that this later version owed its existence to his suggestion and encouragement. We are assured by those who have a right to speak with authority on this subject, that the two translations are distinguished from each other by marks which place the earlier date of the one, and the later date of the other, beyond all reasonable doubt.

But so little have these differences been attended to, that it now appears, that the New Testament printed by Mr. Lewis a century since, and reprinted by Mr. Baber in our own time, does not give us the earlier translation made by Wycliffe, but the revised translation, subsequently set forth by one of his followers. The evidence to this effect is so decisive, that there is not likely to be any controversy in relation to it among persons entitled to have an opinion on the subject. 'Dr. Waterland,' it is said, 'who greatly assisted Lewis in obtaining information for his history of the English translations of the Bible, was at first induced to think that both versions were the work of Wycliffe; but afterwards concluded that the later version, and the general prologue, were by John Purvey. Unfortunately, having but little leisure for the investigation, he was induced by a comparison of the style and language of the versions, to take for the earlier of the two that which was in fact the later. Lewis adopted the opinions of Dr. Waterland, and interweaving in his narrative the information supplied to him, much as it came to his hands, has compiled an account, which is not only confused, but sometimes inconsistent with itself. Mr. Baber, when he reprinted Lewis's edition of the New Testament, repeated this mistake.'²¹ This mistake is the less excusable, as Henry Wharton had truly determined the respective characters and dates of the two versions, rightly assigning the earlier to Wycliffe, and the later to the author of the General Prologue.²²

But to whom should this later and revised version, and this Prologue introducing it, be attributed? We see that Dr. Waterland, in what may be called the middle stage of his investigation on this point, ascribed both the Prologue

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Wyclif e's Bible, Pref. xxiv.

²² Harmer's (Henry Wharton's) *Specimens of Errors in the History of the Reformation. Auctarium Historiæ Dogmaticæ, J. Usserii, 424, et seq.*

and the later version to John Purvey,—a clergyman who had officiated as a curate with Wycliffe, at Lutterworth. The editors of the Wycliffe Bible adopt this opinion, and have reasoned at considerable length in support of it. On some points the evidence adduced does not appear to us as decisive or forcible; but, on the whole, we know not another man among the followers of Wycliffe, who may be regarded with so much probability, as having been the chief agent in this honorable service.²³ The volumes issued by the Oxford University press, give the two versions, column by column on the same page, and describe the whole as ‘the earliest English versions, made from the Latin Vulgate, by John Wycliffe and his followers.’

There are deeds which stand for more than they seem; which include more than they articulate; which perform more than they promise. In ideas, as in substances, there are appearances which give little to the eye, but which, ere long, give largely to experience. Men work for ages with these ideas—these elements of things—without suspecting that they contain all that is in them. Great principles are born slowly—advance slowly and do their ultimate work, like the master-forces in nature, as much without hurry as without noise. The men who gave the English Bible to our forefathers, lodged a fact in our history pregnant with such principles. It was a fact which supposed the Sufficiency of Scripture, and the Right of Private Judgment—fixing the Ultimate Authority concerning Religion, in the Individual and the Bible, not in the Church and her Traditions. Of these principles the translators of our first English Bible saw something—enough to stimulate them in their labours, and to sustain them under the sufferings to which those labours exposed them. But they no more saw all that was involved in what they did,

²³ Purvey lived with Wycliffe in the latter years of his life, and after the death of the Reformer we find him preaching at Bristol. (Knighton, 2660.) In 1387, a mandate from the bishop forbids his preaching again in that diocese. Among the erroneous or heretical books, condemned by the bishops of Worcester, Salisbury, and Hereford, in 1388 and 1389, we find those of Purvey. Bale states, (541) that while in prison in 1390, he wrote a Commentary on the Apocalypse, compiled from the lectures delivered by Wycliffe. From a notice of his writings in Foxe, under the year 1396, he must at that time have been an author of much celebrity. In 1400, the storm became so formidable, that he was induced to read a recantation at St. Paul’s Cross. (Wilkins’ Concilia. iii. 260.) In the following year he was admitted, on the presentation of the Archdeacon of Canterbury, to the vicarage of Westthithe, in Kent, which he resigned in 1403, (Reg. Arundel, 278-290.) He is said to have been a second time imprisoned under Archbishop Chichely, in 1421. (Bale’s Notes in Fascic. Zizaniorum MS. Bodleian e Mus. 86. Foxe, Acts and Mon.) There is evidence that he was alive as late as 1427. Walden speaks of him as a follower of Wycliffe, *magnus autoritate, doctor eximius*, and quotes his book, *De compendiis scripturarum, paternarum, doctrinarum et canonicum*; and farther states that he himself had a copy of this work, taken from Purvey, when he was put in prison. (Doctrinale, Tom. i. 619, 637.)

It is not difficult to suppose, that such a man should have been the author of the Prologue prefixed to the translation of the Bible completed in 1388, and the person chiefly concerned in the translation itself. Wycliffe’s Bible, Pref. xxiv. xxv. Lewis’ Life of Wiclif, 246.

than our ancestors saw all that was included in the provisions of Magna Charta. In both cases, the chief actors knew only in part, and therefore prophesied only in part. But the more to their honour, if with a forecast so limited, they could do and dare so largely. It was the aim of Wycliffe and his followers, in this memorable achievement, to take man out of the hands of the priest, and to place his religion in the personal—in his personal responsibility, intelligence, and right feeling. In this they became Englishmen of their own order. Men like them had not gone before them. The thought was born with them—born never to die.