

## *The Significance of the Lollard Bible*

**Margaret Deanesly**

*Emeritus Professor of History,  
University of London*

**The Ethel M. Wood Lecture  
delivered before the University of London  
on 12 March, 1951**

[p.3]

My interest in the subject of the English Bible has centred in the text and purpose of the first complete English Bible, the fourteenth century version made by the Wycliffites. It may be called the 'Lollard Bible', because the Wycliffites at Oxford were called Lollards, at first by their enemies, and then generally, as a party name. Lollard was a foreign word, and the very intelligent preacher of a university sermon at Oxford first used it of the Wycliffites to imply that they were no better than Flemish half-heretics. Most Englishmen had no idea what 'Lollard' meant, but it made no worse a party name for that.

'Lollard Bible' seems a fair name to apply to the Wycliffite translations, because manuscript evidence forbids us to believe that they were the work of Master John Wycliffe personally, and shows that they were the work of his followers. 'Lollard Bible' does not imply that the English text itself had any partisan verbal translations, quite the contrary: it was a very good English translation of the Vulgate.

Between the years 1380 and 1384 then, a notable academic feat was accomplished at Oxford, at the inspiration of Master John Wycliffe, and by the hands apparently of five of his followers. We have the original manuscript of the first part of the Wycliffite translation, down to Baruch iii. 20; written in five hands: and an early copy attributing it to Nicholas Hereford. The translators began at the beginning of Genesis and worked their way through the whole Bible, which to them, of course, included the Apocrypha. This complete translation of the

[p.4]

Vulgate was a great undertaking and no one had done such a thing before in England. Two vernacular Bibles were prepared for royal personages on the Continent in and after Wycliffe's day: a French one for Charles V and a German one for Wenzel, king of the Romans: but they had no popular importance.

Those of us who are used to reading the Bible, well printed and possibly on India paper, are insensibly deluded into thinking it a shorter book than, in fact, it is. A Latin Vulgate written on vellum in Wycliffe's day would normally make two large folio volumes. When Cassiodorus

wrote out his newly collated Latin scriptures, with the Jeromian prefaces and a few commentaries, it took nine large vellum volumes: but then, he had them written *largiori littera* and in Latin not much contracted. In Wycliffe's day, a Vulgate written in a much smaller hand, and in contracted Latin, would take only about two folio volumes. Still, the translation of such a book into a vernacular language was a heavy task.

There had been numerous partial translations of the scriptures in England, right back into Anglo-Saxon times, just as there had been on the Continent into Romance, Germanic and Slav languages. But these had been made for didactic purposes, for unlearned clergy or the instruction of lay people: and they had been limited to those parts of scripture useful for such ends, the gospels, the epistles, the psalms, and, in Anglo-Saxon times, those fine Old Testament stories that appealed to men who had an oral literature of heroic poetry. Clearly, you do not translate the book of Leviticus or certain other books of the Old Testament for pastoral purposes: you translate mainly the gospels or the whole New Testament; which leaves a great part of the scriptures untranslated. Caedmon, the Anglo-Saxon peasant used to the passing round of the harp and song after the feast, translated the beginning of Genesis, singing of how the Lord almighty shaped first the heaven and earth: he upreared the sky and set firm the wide land with his might. But he sang too, instructed by scholars, of the whole life of Christ, turning

[p.5]

it into heroic poetry. Bede translated St. John's gospel: there were Latin gospel books with Anglo-Saxon glosses and Anglo-Saxon Sunday gospels with homilies: in the fourteenth century the Sunday gospels were translated into English verse. Two prose translations of the psalms were made in the fourteenth century, just before and in Wycliffe's life time. There was, altogether, quite a good deal of biblical translation. It occurred to no one, however, to translate the whole Bible for pastoral purposes: why should it?

But this is just what John Wycliffe and his followers did. Nicholas Hereford, his most prominent follower, was responsible for one complete translation, and John Purvey, Wycliffe's secretary, for the second, made some years later. And by the way, the rights of authorship were not at the time associated with the making of a translation, and the name of any translator was not usually given in the manuscript. An explicit will run 'Here endeth the gospels in Romance' (*i.e.*, Old French): 'Here endeth Vegetius' Art of War in English', without any mention of a translator's name, more often than not. There is no contradiction in the fact that certain contemporaries tell us that John Wycliffe translated the whole Bible into English, while the manuscripts show that it was his followers who did this. By contemporary usage, if John Wycliffe caused the whole Bible to be translated into English, then he did translate the Bible. Translation was a mechanical act: the Bible was the Bible, whether written in Latin by Jerome or in English by Wycliffe.

Wycliffe's intention in carrying through this complete translation can scarcely have been to render the Bible directly accessible to the masses. The manner of translation he selected was not one suited to pastoral work in general. The first Wycliffite version was a construe, and the decision to use such a method cannot have been accidental. A long debate about the best method

of translation had been gently ambling through the centuries ever since the time of King Alfred and his translations. 'I began, amidst other diverse and manifold cares of the

[p.6]

kingdom,' wrote Alfred, 'to turn into English the book which is called *Cura Pastoralis* in Latin, and in English, *The Shepherd's Book*, sometimes word for word, and sometimes meaning for meaning.' 'Word for word or meaning for meaning': there was quite a controversy about it going on in Wycliffe's day, which was an age of translations: and he chose that his translation should be made word for word.

A version 'meaning for meaning' would have been more suited for popular use. Two centuries earlier Peter Waldo at Lyons had had translations of the Sunday gospels made in this manner, and his followers learned them by heart from a teacher, committing long portions to memory. In Wycliffe's day, by far the larger part of the population was illiterate (and with the excellent, unspoilt memories of the illiterate): all classes of lay people up to the social grade of knights and lords and ladies would be illiterate: and their only chance of profiting by an English Bible would be by committing passages to memory. Now a construe is not easy to commit to memory: and even the Bible-reading lords and ladies would have found a translation 'meaning for meaning' more understandable, it would seem. But no: the Wycliffite translation was made from letter to letter word for word.

These two facts: the translation of the whole Vulgate, and the choice to translate from word to word, rule out, it seems to me, the explanation of the translators' intention, to make the scriptures easily accessible to all men for devotional purposes. Not many people owned an English Bible, for the cost of a Latin or English Bible written on parchment was quite prohibitive. Even parish priests, as examination of contemporary wills show, could not afford one: only the higher clergy, bishops, deans, archdeacons, bequeathed a Vulgate in their wills, and that very rarely. An English Bible would have been as expensive. In 1222 the council of Oxford laid down that the stipends of vicars ought to be at least five marks a year, except in Wales, 'where vicars are content with less, by reason of the poverty

[p.7]

of their churches'. A Vulgate in those days might cost as much as the vicar's annual stipend. and in Wycliffe's days, not much less: how then could the parishioners be expected to buy such a book?

The method of learning scriptural passages by heart was the only possible way for the villagers, and was in fact the one practised by the later Lollards, for whom a second translation, from meaning to meaning, had to be made, and was made by 1395. Even then, the records of Lollard trials show them oftener as learning from 'a book called James', 'a book called Luke', a single book in fact, than from a whole New Testament. If popular use by the masses had been the

translators' main intention, it is difficult to see why the first version was not made 'from meaning to meaning'.

To illustrate the difference between the two versions, let me quote a few sentences from the first, and a longer passage from the second. The first version renders the ablative absolute and present participles literally in English, while the second breaks the Latin up by using two finite verbs, as we should in translating nowadays. The first, moreover, follows the order of the Latin words so closely as sometimes to invert the meaning in English: *Dominum formidabunt adversarii eius* becomes 'The Lord his adversaries shall dread'. Constructions like 'Sothli, hem rowynge, he slepte ... And he risynge blamyde the winde ... And the breed takun, he dide thankynge' occur regularly throughout the first version.

The second version, however, is English in construction, and has its fine passages, as this from 'the book called Luke'

And he seide, A man hadde twei sons; and the 3onger of hem seide to the fadir, Fadir, 3yue me the porcioun of catel, that fallith to me. And he departide to hem the catel. And not after many daies, whenne alle thingis were gederid togider, the 3onger sone wente forth in pilgrimage in to a fer cuntre; and ther he wastide his goodis in liuyng lecherously.... And he coueitide to fille his wombe of the coddis that the hoggis eeten, and no man 3af hym.... And he roos up, and cam to his fadir. And when he was 3it afer, his fadir sai3 hym, and was stirrid bi mercy. And he ran,

[p.8]

and fel on his necke, and kisside hym. And the sone seide to hym, Fadir, Y haue synned in to heuene, and bifor thee; and now Y am not worthi to be clepid thi sone. And the fadir seide to hise seruantis, Swythe brynge 3e forth the firste stoole, and clothe 3e hym, and 3yue 3e a ryng in his hoond, and schoon on his feet; and brynge 3e a fat calf and sle3e, and ete we, and make we feeste. For this my sone was dede, and hath liued a3en; he perischid and is foundun. And alle men bigunnen to ete. But his eldere sone was in the feelde; and when he cam, and nei3ede to the hous, he herde a symfonye and a croude. And he clepide oon of the seruauntis, and axide, what these thingis weren. And he seide to hym, Thy brother is comun, and thi fadir slewe a fat calf, for he resseyuede hym saaf.<sup>1</sup>

This is the version the Lollards used when they had been driven from Oxford out into the countryside: it is, again, a complete translation, though I know of no case when the Lollards were accused of learning any of the Old Testament (except the psalter) by heart. I should like to examine the question why such a translation should not have been made at first: and perhaps it will make for clearness if I say now, that I think the translation was made as the basis for a new *magisterium*, a new authority, to set over against that code of the Church's coercive jurisdiction: the canon law. The teaching of the Church, as all fourteenth century theologians would have admitted, was founded on the scriptures: theology rested on the scriptures: but the enforcement

---

<sup>1</sup> Quoted from Forshall and Madden, *The Holy Bible ... in the earliest English versions ... made ... by John Wycliffe and his followers*, iv. 199.

of the Church's jurisdiction rested on canon law. It was an age of political difficulty for the western Church, almost a situation of deadlock; the canon law, buttressing papal power, seemed a rock in the path of possible reform, moderate or revolutionary: Wycliffe was not content with any gradual levering of the rock out of the path: he wanted to clear it away altogether, to substitute a new law for the old. To the Wycliffites, the Lollards, the scriptures were pre-eminently 'Goddis law': as the gospels were 'Christis law': those are always the names they use for the scriptures. Wycliffe desired to use the scriptures as an authority, and to translate

[p.9]

them with the strictest academic accuracy, for use by the less learned clergy, and the lords and knights of the 'lay party', the party of John of Gaunt, his own patron: the enemies of Frenchmen and the French papacy at Avignon.

I should like to say then, something about Wycliffe's career, and activities; the political situation that brought him to the making of an English Bible, as an authority for radical change in church Organisation; about the Avignon papacy, the Great Schism, and the canon law, which seemed to render impossible efforts to end it; about the causes of the anti-clericalism expressed in England in John of Gaunt's lay party (and anti-clericalism is very closely connected with the whole Wycliffite movement); about the reason why there was an exclusive use of Latin in the west for mass and Bible, and hence, any need of a translation at all: and finally, something about the means by which an illiterate, peasant population had in fact been instructed in Christianity in the past, of how they had in fact been made acquainted with the story of man's redemption, as set out in the scriptures.

The world into which John Wycliffe the reformer was born, about 1330, was one which still thought internationally, but where national interests were beginning to dominate European politics. Six years earlier, in 1324, Marsilio of Padua had published his *Defensor Pacis*, an antipapal, imperialist treatise, marked by strong feeling for Italy, his mother country: the pope was later to see in Wycliffe another Marsilio of Padua. Wycliffe was born in Yorkshire, in the honor of Richmond, and when he went up to the university of Oxford, probably at fifteen or sixteen, the Hundred Years' War was just beginning. He would have known that the pope was a Frenchman, with a curia almost entirely of French cardinals, that they lived at Avignon and that the stricter friars held the papal residence at Avignon a scandal. There is no evidence that Wycliffe in the first part of his career at Oxford was in any sense antipapal. He followed the ordinary scholastic course, and we can infer

[p.10]

that he showed great ability from the value of the living conferred on him at the termination of his regent mastership: we hear of him as Master of Balliol and a regent master shortly before 1360, and in May 1361 we find him, an ordained priest, instituted to the living of Fillingham, Lincs., valued at 30 marks. That was a very good living. For two years, from 1361 to 1363,

Wycliffe may have resided at Fillingham and served the parish the only two years when he was a parish priest, if so.

In the October of 1363 he went up to Oxford again to read theology. Between 1368 and 1370 he took his bachelorship of theology and read his sententiary treatise, his doctorate thesis, the most beautiful and balanced of his Latin works, the *De Benedicta Incarnatione*. In 1372 he became professor of theology. So far, his career had proceeded on normal academic lines, and he had won marked respect as a theologian. The turning point of his career came in 1374, when he was drawn into the direct service of the crown. In April of that year he was presented by the crown to the living of Lutterworth, which is due north of Oxford and conveniently midway between Oxford and John of Gaunt's castle of Leicester (Wycliffite influence was to be very strong in Leicester): and in July 1374 Wycliffe was appointed to the royal commission that was to proceed to Bruges and discuss with pope Gregory XI's representatives the payment of certain sums claimed by the papacy from England.

This year, 1374, marks the beginning of his importance in politics. The French wars had recently gone badly: old Edward III's government was very hard up, and averse from making payments to a French pope at Avignon: Wycliffe, a consulting theologian, was to argue the case against such payments. No important decision was reached by the commission but Wycliffe returned home with the question of the Church's right to property and to revenue much in his mind; with the question of the pope's and the bishops' right to riches as equally a subject for philosophical examination.

I am not suggesting that Wycliffe had become merely a

[p.11]

politician, an advocate of John of Gaunt and the English crown: the account given by Thorpe the Lollard of how he chose at Oxford to be associated with Wycliffe and be taught by him as a 'passing ruly man and an innocent in his living', and fervent in the defence of 'Goddis law', forbids such an interpretation of his character. He could inspire his followers with religious zeal, even in some cases to suffering the death penalty for heresy. But undoubtedly it was this royal commission of 1374 that directed Wycliffe's attention to the question of authority. He returned to Oxford to expound for eight years his philosophical theory of civil dominion, and, far more important than that, because it was teaching, that reached the countryside as well as the university, to apply to ecclesiastical institutions the criterion: did they agree with the practice of Christians in the gospels and the Acts, or did they not? If men could find precedent for their actions and their usages in 'Goddis law', 'Christis law', then, then indeed they followed Christ: they 'sued Christ'; if they did not, they 'contraried Christ' and were anti-Christ: anti-Christian. This is a very favourite Lollard English term: to contrary Christ: I suppose it comes from the lawyer's use of *contrarietas*, the term invented by the twelfth century commentators on the *Digest* and the *Code*; commenting on all this material they often had to deal with an apparent

*contrarietas*, which they sought to resolve:<sup>2</sup> the Lollards apparently got their expression ‘to contrary’ (*contra ire*) from the civilians. To follow Christ was the duty of all Christians; but a large part of the existing institutions of the Church, could not be traced back to the Acts of the Apostles: therefore, they contraried Christ and should be done away. With this premise Wycliffe could justify the setting aside of all papal and episcopal authority, the whole canon law, the whole landed endowment of the Church, the employment of bishops as great officers of state, the existence of religious orders, some of the sacraments and

[p.12]

most of the religious practices of the day. It was a criterion that eventually took him a very long way: farther than John of Gaunt and the lay party would go: farther than John Hus would follow him, a generation later: farther than the sixteenth century reformers were to go, for none of them wished their clergy to live as mendicants like the apostles: in England the existent episcopate even was not disendowed. But it was a criterion passionately applied by Wycliffe and the early Lollards for the reform of the Church, and they did not shrink from any of the logical inferences. The Church must become again poor and primitive, as men might read that she had once been in the pages of ‘Goddis law’.

From 1374 to the condemnation of certain points of Wycliffe’s teaching in the summer of 1382, Wycliffe was the most respected doctor in Oxford, and he worked in Oxford only. He had a stipendiary curate at Lutterworth called John Horn: he only retired to Lutterworth after his condemnation in 1382, and he died in 1384. He was supported by the chancellor, John Rygge, and all the secular masters: he was attacked in academic debate in the schools by one or two Benedictines and friars. Oxford university was strongly on his side; the archbishop of Canterbury had to hold the trial of Wycliffe for heretical teaching at London, not at Oxford, and to exercise great pressure to get John Rygge to publish the findings of the court against him at Oxford. It is doubtful if the archbishop would have been strong enough to have him tried at all, if the risings of 1381 and the murder of archbishop Sudbury, defended by Wycliffe, had not discredited Wycliffe’s teaching as revolutionary. It was as a great Oxford don, not as a parish priest or wandering preacher, that Wycliffe did his work.

It is quite easy to see where Wycliffe’s translation fitted into his plan of reform. He needed it as an authority. The translation was a construe, because, first of all, it was the strictest school of translators who advocated this kind of trans-

[p.13]

lation: where it was a question of translating the Bible, which could be interpreted not only literally, but allegorically and mystically, there were some who allowed that a literal translation might suffice, who would not admit that the grace of the Word could be transferred by a

---

<sup>2</sup> From a lecture on the *Revivals of Roman Law*, given by Professor H. F. Jolowicz on. 19 February, 1951, at the Warburg Institute.

translation 'meaning for meaning'. Moreover, to scholastics arguing in the university by lettered paragraph and numbered verse, a very close English rendering was better for use in academic debate. It was not for ten years after Wycliffe's death that the second version was made, less for use in the university than by Lollard teachers and preachers. It was, again, a fair, unpartisan translation, but accompanied by a violently fanatical Lollard preface.

All this effort of translation, to help convince Englishmen that the Church ought to become again what she had once been, poor and primitive, may seem to us naïf, but did not seem so to the Lollards. To us the argument, 'Ought a bishop to be the king's treasurer? St. James was not,' seems naïf: we have all observed and been taught that religious movements go through a first stage of 'prophecy', when the leader's personality and presence are sufficient to keep the disciples together and give the body life: but that later, unless the movement find some organisation, some institution, its virtue and force will die out. We are all familiar with the difficulties of the primitive, little organised, stage of the Franciscan movement, and the later history of the Franciscan order: the strife between those who remembered the simplicity of the first days on the Umbrian hills, and those who wished to secure the permanence of Francis' work by an organised order. We should not think it possible to put back the water under the bridges and return to the Church order of Galilee. None of the sixteenth century reformers went quite as far as that: and their success depended in a very large measure on the Organisation they established for their adherents.

But Wycliffe made his attempt at reform very early: before Luther and Calvin; and he did want a return to Galilee, a

[p.14]

church without bishops, possibly without an ordained clergy, without bishops who could be officers of state, without a powerful and magistral papacy, without canon law. His followers were called at first his 'poor priests', 'poor men of the treasury of Christ' (for they were not all priests), and efforts have been made to determine when Wycliffe instituted the 'poor priests' and what discipline or rules bound them. But it has not been possible to find out this, because they were not instituted at a specific time, and because Wycliffe gave them no organisation. They were his disciples, who preached in Leicester and London and Bristol and the Chilterns, possibly in the long vacations before his condemnation in 1382, and certainly to a larger extent afterwards. It was of the essence of Lollardy to be unorganised, as Wycliffe believed the apostles and first believers had been in Galilee. The comparative failure of the Lollard movement in the next century is explained by this lack of an organised body to secure continuity. The effort to perpetuate the early days of Galilee by making the scriptures accessible to Wycliffe's supporters failed.

Wycliffe's determination to translate the Bible was affected by the situation of the Church in western Europe as well as in England, and by his rejection of the final authority of canon law. All men then accepted the Church as one and catholic: and the belief in this unity was not greatly disturbed by the schism that had divided the Greek church from the Latin since 1054. The Greek



east and the Latin west turned, as it were, their backs on one another and faced outwards: they sent their missions to the heathen outwards, the Latins from the Mediterranean up towards the Scandinavian countries, the Greeks up north towards Russia and eastwards to contend with Islam. They were very little concerned about one another. Hence, the Latin Christians of western Europe looked to the papacy and the papal curia as a single international spiritual court: and, while the papal court was at Rome and the cardinals mainly Italian, it was reasonably impartial as between English

[p.15]

men, Scotsmen, Frenchmen, Dutch, Swedes, etc., and its cost equally fair or equally oppressive. But when from 1305 to 1378 the papal curia was at Avignon and the cardinals were nearly all Frenchmen, Englishmen were offended: and from 1378 to 1418 the two popes, at Rome and Avignon, caused scandal to all. Men could only suggest that both popes should be persuaded to resign (which they would not), or that a great council should be held, as long before at Nicea or Chalcedon.

Canon law, however, would not recognize the possibility of such a council unless convened by the pope, and the fourteenth century canonists had worked out an extreme doctrine of the plenitude of papal power. The study by the twelfth century canonists at Bologna of the *Digest* and the *Code* had influenced the concept of papal sovereignty: theologians, for the great canonists were theologians, had restated the limits of the *plenitudo potestatis papae* after this study of Roman sovereignty. Dr. Walter Ullmann, in his recent notable book on *Medieval Papalism*, quotes the fourteenth century papalists as asserting that the pope, in the fulness of his power, was beyond the reach of any mortal, emperor, king or any other. There was no one who could say to the pope, 'Cur ita facies?' The pope could do and say whatever he pleased to do and say in all and everything: he was above the law, whether natural (and, as it were divine) or whether humanly devised. The Roman principle that the prince was above the law was translated to the ecclesiastical prince. All human and divine law was entrusted to him alone: whoever resisted his power, resisted the ordinance of God. 'In the conception of the canonists,' Dr. Ullmann writes, 'the pope was truly God on earth.' And, he writes, 'whilst modern theology and philosophy in some respects show a certain kinship to their medieval predecessors, the canonists left no heirs.'

'The canonists left no heirs.' The reviewer of Dr. Ullmann's book in the *Month*, Fr. J. C. Murray, a learned American Jesuit and theologian, takes Dr. Ullmann to task for his apparent

[p.16]

surprise that the 'fourteenth century canonists left no heirs'. Why should they, he writes, when what they taught was wrong?<sup>3</sup> The post-Tridentine canonists naturally did not resume their

---

<sup>3</sup> See *The Month*, Feb. 1950, p. 150.

position. It appears then, that though the fourteenth century canonists did excellent work in the field of private law, they were very wide of the mark in the field of public law.

But Wycliffe was actually dealing with canon law as laid down by the fourteenth century canonists: with the public difficulties of the Church which it seemed impossible to remedy: which were not, in fact, remedied for forty years, before the end of the Great Schism in 1417. I think this has a real bearing on Wycliffe's great break-away: his desire for another law, 'Goddis law': and his criterion for reform, that things must be as they were shown once to have been in 'Christis law'.

A word then about Wycliffe's anti-clericalism, a factor now so much stressed as one of the causes of the sixteenth century Reformation. Anti-clericalism did not begin with Wycliffe or in England: it existed in France at the beginning of the fourteenth century. It spread from the south French university of Montpellier, a great law school, which trained most of the anti-clerical courtiers and ministers of Philip IV. Anti-clericalism was, in origin, a movement that grudged to the clergy the holding of great offices of state, the performance of so much of the administrative business of the state. Moderate reformers in England, not Wycliffites, but men like the poet Gower and Brinton, bishop of Rochester, preaching at Paul's Cross, asked how such work, such preoccupation with national business, was consistent with the apostolic functions of bishops? Many bishops were in the royal service: and for that matter Simon of Sudbury, who was murdered by the mob outside the Savoy palace in 1381, had only just resigned the chancellorship.

All this holding of royal office by bishops, and transaction of legal and administrative business by the clerical order, goes back to the circumstances of the collapse of the Roman empire

[p.17]

in the west. The tradition arose in the sphere of Latin Christianity of a very close connexion between the clergy and the carrying on of secular business in the new barbarian kingdoms, because the clergy were the only men, beside the notaries, who could read and write. The contrast can be seen in the great churches of the east, where a learned laity did not die out under the stress of barbarian attack, and where the secular government could use laymen for great offices of state and also routine work that in the west we should call clerical work. There are certainly no grounds for censuring the Christian clergy of the west for carrying on the work that needed to be done, whether it was the preservation of learning, or of the traditions of Roman justice. Merovingian-bishops contended for the right of sanctuary as a defence against Merovingian royal lynchings, which were very horrid things: sixth century deacons learned from the notaries the *formulae* of Roman law: and finally, for his own reasons, Charles the Great gave up the use of referendaries, or headnotaries, for the authenticating of royal writs, and used a bishop, calling him chancellor: which is a variant for 'notary'. It was a pregnant precedent: the foundations of anti-clericalism were laid: for hundreds of years bishops in western Europe were chancellors, treasurers, chamberlains, great state officials. Wycliffe and Hereford and John Purvey knew but little, if anything, of Charlemagne: but the grounds were prepared for their

complaints against the 'pride and covetise of worldly prestis'. The desire of 'the lay party' fitted in with extreme appropriateness with the desires of John of Gaunt: with an anti-French policy, with the possibility of expropriations from the clergy to help make up the deficit in the royal revenue but it accorded also with John Wycliffe's dream of a restored primitive Church. There were no episcopal officers of state in the gospels or the Acts. The Lollard petition, twice put into parliament, asked for the expropriation of all the religious orders and all episcopal endowments. This would have provided a large sum: but it would also, as the Lollards saw it, have brought

[p.18]

the bishops back to the 'meke and poor and charitable living of Christ'.

And finally, about the need of an English Bible, as the Lollards saw it: why was it, that in England and western Christendom the liturgy and the scriptures were all in Latin, and not in the mother tongue? When nearly all men were illiterate and ignorant of Latin, how had it arisen that so obvious a means of instructing the ignorant in the message of redemption as attendance at the services of the Church had been missed? Why were these services said or sung in a language they could not understand? The divine office was a great communal meditation on the scriptures, containing very little except the words of scripture; the mass, considered in its educational aspect, was an acted drama of the Christian redemption, at which each Christian was bound to assist, on Sundays and holy days: and the mass was in Latin. When the Greek emperor Manuel II visited Henry IV at Westminster in January 1401, the Lollards were quick to notice that his clerks and lay officers said office together in Greek: they have the scriptures, they said, in their mother tongue! How had it come about that part of the Church allowed the use of the vernacular for mass and office, and part did not? As with the origin of anti-clericalism, the causes lay far back in the past.

Christianity had taken its rise in a province near the eastern frontier of the Roman empire, and could, in fact, easily pass that frontier and expand outside the empire to the east and south. From the Syriac church of Edessa, on the upper waters of the Euphrates, it spread into Persia (Iran), an autonomous state, outside the empire, but federate and with a large Syriac-speaking population. The Iranian plateau, commanding the cross-rows between west and east, and also the roads to the Caspian, to Mongolia and to India, was a position of strategic importance to a missionary church. Christianity spread along the Tigris and into all parts of the Persian empire without hindrance from its kings, and in the third century asylum was

[p.19]

offered in Persia to Christians fleeing from persecution in the Roman empire. The see of Seleukia-Ctesiphon, the royal residence of the Persian kings, became from a council in 410 a quasi-patriarchate for the Christians beyond the eastern frontier of the Roman empire, the mother church of sees its own missionaries had founded. Similarly, within the Roman empire, the see of Constantinople was a mother see for Christian bishops in Bulgaria, Roumania, Serbia and south Russia.

None of the eastern patriarchates were averse from the use of the vernacular of their converts for the scriptures and the mass: nor were the churches of Armenia or Ethiopia. Where Greek or Persian or Armenian missionaries converted pagans in a countryside not using Greek or Persian, no effort was made to teach them to use Greek for Christian rites. The contrast in the practice of Christian missionaries in the Latin west arose, as it were, by accident, because the western missionaries found the pagan provincials using Latin generally, and even in their pagan cults. When Latin was used as the language of Romano-British town councils, and the Romano-Celtic cults of Gaul,<sup>4</sup> or the pagan rites of Africa, as well as for secular purposes in general, there was no case for using a language other than Latin for Christian rites. This difference of liturgical language among the Greeks, Persians, Goths and their missionary sees, and the uniform use of Latin in the west, was one of the practical causes that made for a subsequent division between Rome and Constantinople. In England, neither Henry IV nor his clerical advisers understood anything of this or why the Greeks in 1401 appeared to have mass and office in their mother tongue, as the Lollards pointed out: the king sent for the Master of the King's Hall at Cambridge to preach a sermon at Paul's Cross for the benefit of the London Lollards, and he explained that the Greek used in mass and scriptures was so old a Greek that

[p.20]

laymen could no more understand it than Englishmen could understand Latin! Which was really no answer to the Lollard query: the real reason for the universal use of a Latin Bible and Latin services in the fourteenth century was the existence of Latin as a universal language in the west Roman empire in the fourth.

Were Englishmen then, in Wycliffe's day, ignorant of the gospel story and the divine scheme of Christian redemption? It is noticeable that Wycliffe and the Lollards do not suggest this: they do not write as if the population of England were pagan: they are not missionaries seeking to teach men that Christ was born at Bethlehem and died on Calvary, for our salvation. This they assume that men knew. Only they wish that the meek, and poor and charitable living of Christ should be proved, that men should realise what it meant to follow or contrary Christ, how they and particularly, great churchmen, ought to live.

How well-informed, or ignorant, then, of the scriptures were men in Wycliffe's day and earlier? How were they taught? There had always been the visual methods of teaching the illiterate: the use of pictures and carvings in churches and pictures in books. One of the books Augustine brought to England had pages illuminated with a number of little pictures from the gospels. Benedict Biscop in the seventh century had pictures painted on the walls of his church at Monkwearmouth one of the 'ever lovely aspect of the Lord's incarnation' (i.e., Bethlehem), one of the Last Judgment 'that men might remember to examine themselves the more strictly', and on the other walls scenes from the Lord's life. The books he brought from the continent to

---

<sup>4</sup> See F. Cumont, *Pourquoi le latin fut la seule langue liturgique de l'Ouest*, in *Mélanges Paul Frédéricq*, pp. 63-6; F. Dvornik, *National Churches and The Church Universal*, p. 17.

Monkwearmouth had too their illuminations. In stone carving too, even as early as the seventh and eighth centuries, scenes from the gospels were displayed the shafts of the Bewcastle and Ruthwell crosses have the figures of Christ in the wilderness, Magdalen wiping the feet of Christ, etc. The later centuries had far greater plenty of

[p.21]

carvings, painted windows, illuminated manuscripts, than the eighth: a small village church in the fourteenth century might well have gospel scenes painted on its walls or shining through its windows.

As regards the masses, the oral teaching of the faith was probably always the most important means of instruction. The early centuries were oral centuries: almost everything that got taught, got taught orally. Even imperial Rome, though she paid the salaries of teachers, provided no textbooks, nor did the scholars in her schools have any, except their own lecture notes. For Christians, there was the direct teaching of the faith to catechumens in the early centuries, in the greater churches the homily at mass in all the centuries, and in the later middle ages the teaching of children by the village priest. In England, as various canons and manuals for priests show, the village priest was required to know that his flock individually were acquainted with the 'articles of the faith' (the apostles' creed), as well as the seven sins and the principal virtues: he might ask them whether they did know them when they came to confession at Easter. There were, moreover, carols in English at Christmas, and by Wycliffe's day, many gild plays and miracle plays.

The homily or sermon at mass, however, must have been, through the centuries, the most important means of instruction. It was nearly always an exposition of the Sunday gospel, very simple and direct. Not all village priests gave such a homily or sermon: Grossetete in the thirteenth century complained of this: but by and large, the homily must have been the most important means by which biblical knowledge, particularly of the gospels, was imparted in the middle ages. This is shown in collections of homilies preserved in manuscript, in references in saints' lives to their assiduous preaching, and in the many manuals composed by the friars in the century before Wycliffe on how to preach a sermon (Wycliffe did not approve of friars' sermons, by the way: they introduced little stories for illustration: they were not sufficiently biblical). Not every country priest

[p.22]

then preached every Sunday: but preaching there was: and the normal sermon dealt with the gospel just read at mass. There seem to have been sermons at other times too: John de Newton, chancellor of York, we hear, used to go down to the parish of his stall in Kent, a parish normally served by his stipendiary chaplain, and stay for a month each year, in order to 'recreate his parishioners with sermons'.

Some chance references in saints' lives show us that scholarly ecclesiastics, whom we associate with other activities than pastoral work, did a great deal of preaching: this appears for instance in the recent book by Professor Henry Beck on the Pastoral Care of Souls in South-East Gaul in the Sixth Century. Caesarius, archbishop of Arles, who died in 542, was the most outstanding scholar of the Rhone valley, the most learned part of Gaul in his day: he was a good classical scholar, learned in Latin and Greek texts, a good canonist, and learned in the scriptures. But he used to preach regularly: he wrote once that sermons in church must be simple in style, lest the congregation miss their meaning. Nevertheless, Caesarius used to be grieved that his own sermons in his cathedral were sometimes avoided by certain members of his flock. Sunday mass took at least two hours in those days, and included the reading of many passages of scripture interspersed by the recitation of groups of psalms, before the central part of the service was reached (Those of us who hear the Book of Common Prayer are let off very lightly: we hear only one epistle and one gospel: but in the sixth century Latin rite there were many such.) Well: Caesarius always gave the homily between this first part of the mass, and the canon: and he noted that some of his hearers used to go out before the sermon, holding that their obligation to assist at the sacred mysteries was already fulfilled. On one Sunday Caesarius left his seat where he sat among his clergy on the stone bench at the back of the low altar, and ran down among the congregation, imploring them to give heed to the salvation of their souls: 'For you will not be able at the Day of Judgment to slip

[p.23]

out at the back door as I see you trying to do now!' But even so, the same thing happened a few Sundays after, and Caesarius gave orders that when the congregation was assembled, the church doors should be locked, and no one leave, till after the *Ite missa est*. It would seem that, through the centuries, knowledge of the gospels, of the life of our Lord, was imparted more by preaching and instruction than in any other way. There certainly was not a sermon in every village church in England every Sunday in Wycliffe's day: but there are indications that most people heard a good many sermons during their life time, and some more sermons than they wanted to listen to. The story of the redemption of the world was imparted to simple people in the middle ages, in spite of the use of Latin for mass and scriptures.

To sum up, then: Wycliffe's translation of the whole Bible was an undertaking with a political side: the lay party could use it against the clericals: disendowment was in the air. But the spiritual side of Wycliffe's intention was much the stronger. He desired to put the clock back: to restore the Church to her poor and primitive state. He had no realisation that in destroying the institutions of the Church of his day he might be endangering the Christian religion itself: for he desired in simplicity to bring men back to the meek and poor and charitable living of Christ, as he saw that living portrayed in the pages of the gospel. Wycliffe's reform scheme was immature: but he surely planted in men's minds the love of the Bible in their mother tongue, and for its own sake. It was left for Erasmus to find adequate words for the popular devotion to the gospel which Wycliffe made possible: for 'the evangel doth represent and express the quick and living image of his most holy mind, yea and Christ himself, healing, dying, rising again; and, to conclude, all

Margaret Deanesly, *The Significance of the Lollard Bible*. The Ethel M. Wood Lecture delivered before the University of London on 12 March, 1951. London: The Athlone Press, 1951. Pbk. pp.23.

---

parts of him; so that thou couldst not so plainly and fruitfully see him, though he were present before thy bodily eyes'.

---

© 1951 Margaret Deanesley. All reasonable efforts have been made to contact the current copyright holder without success. If you hold the copyright on this lecture, please contact me.

Prepared for the Web in August 2006 by Robert I. Bradshaw.

<http://www.medievalchurch.org.uk/>

---

Also, I wanted to learn the significance of the ten horns on its head and the other horn that had arisen, before which three of them had fallen that is, the horn with eyes and a mouth that uttered magnificent things and which was greater in appearance than its fellows. ISV. Verse Concepts.Â because they didn't understand the significance of the loaves. Instead, their hearts were hardened. ISV.