

THE FIRST ENGLISH BIBLE

BY H. B. WORKMAN

From *The London Quarterly Review*, April
(CONSERVATIVE AND NATIONALIST QUARTERLY)

THE publication by Miss Deanesly of this learned volume¹ brings to a close as we believe, a controversy carried on for the last thirty years. For this controversy we may be thankful; it has served to sweep away a mass of traditional error as regards Wyclif's translation of the Bible, and in the place to build up a truer doctrine. The spades of many painstaking workers have made it possible for Miss Deanesly to reach finality in many matters hitherto in suspense. In the following pages we propose to give our readers a brief account of the stages through which the controversy over Wyclif's Bible has passed, and of the conclusion that we believe will not be generally accepted, though we must premise that strict proof of many of the contentions is impossible.

Seventy years ago scholarship and tradition alike assigned to Wyclif the publication of the first English translation of the Bible, at a period in his life variously dated as between 1378 and his death (December 31, 1384). Elaborate pictures were drawn of Wyclif at work at Lutterworth, half paralysed, yet never resting until he had completed his gigantic task. The absence of printed copies² made conjecture and romance easy, the more

so as there was as yet no scientific study of Middle English in its various dialectic forms, and no Early English Text Society to make this possible. But in 1850 the publication in four magnificent volumes by J. Forshall and J. Madden of Wyclif's Bible in its entirety gave no further excuse for substituting tradition for knowledge. This monumental work conclusively showed that the so-called Wyclif Bible existed in two forms; the one form an earlier version, a literal construe scarcely English in its structure; the other or later form alone deserving the name of a translation. The earlier version was seen to be composite in origin. The Old Testament, up to Baruch iii. 20, claimed to be the work of a prominent Oxford lollard, an associate of Wyclif, Nicholas Hereford. There Hereford's share ended, as is shown by a manuscript now in the Bodleian of which a facsimile was published by the editors. The cause of the abrupt termination was the citation of Hereford before the council of bishops at the Blackfriars, May, 1382, and his subsequent flight to Rome in a vain appeal to the Pope. In addition to Hereford, whose style was stiff and pedantic, and whose dialect was west midland, there is evidence in the Bodleian manuscript of four other contributors. What part of the whole, if any, was by Wyclif was not determined. A manuscript in the British Museum assigns to him the translation of Clement of Llanthony's *Harmony of*

¹*The Lollard Bible and other Medieval Biblical Versions.* By Margaret Deanesly. Cambridge University Press, 31s 6d. net.

²There were partial editions. Purvey's New Testament was printed by J. Lewis in 1731, by H. Baber in 1810, and by S. Baxter in 1841 in his *Hexapla*, in each case assigned to Wyclif, while Adam Clarke had printed the *Song of Solomon* in his Commentary (1808). The older Wyclif version of the New Testament was first published in 1848 by Lea Wilson.

the Gospels, ¹ which was appended to the version. The editors of 1850 believed that he had translated the Gospels, on evidence which later research has shown to be unsatisfactory. ² It was generally accepted also that Wyclif had translated the Apocalypse, a copy of which, belonging to the martyrologist, John Foxe, is now in the library of Trinity, Cambridge. This work was written in a northern or north midland dialect. This dialect, it was assumed, Wyclif, the Yorkshireman, would use. But this book is now shown to be a verbal rendering of a twelfth-century Apocalypse in Norman-French, of which three forms or versions still exist, the earliest dating from 1340—1370.

The second version was deemed by the editors of 1850 to be in the main the work of the prominent Oxford lollard, John Purvey. Purvey, who had probably taken part in the first translation, now smoothed out its harsh literalness, added prologues and epilogues to the various books and a General Prologue to the Old Testament, and produced a translation in worthy English. Of this translation 140 manuscripts still exist, as distinct from the 30 manuscripts of the earlier version. By the accident of history the credit for this translation in the popular judgement has been almost wholly assigned to Wyclif. Even by Forshall and Madden it was assumed that the work of revision of the first version was begun, if not finished, in Wyclif's lifetime, under his inspiration and direction. Purvey, it is true, became known to scholars, and attention was directed to his other writings, especially after the

publication in 1851³ by J. Forshall of Purvey's *Ecclesiae Regimen*, or, as the editor preferred to call it, *The Remonstrance*. That Purvey had held an eminent position among the lollards was evidenced by Thomas Netter, of Saffron Walden, the great opponent of lollardy, who had called him 'the library of lollards,' 'the glosser of Wyclif.' As a contemporary chronicler who lived not far from Lutterworth tells us, Purvey had 'drunk deep' of Wyclif's 'most secret teaching,' and had been his 'inseparable companion' to the end, living with him at Lutterworth as his secretary. Scholars also recalled Purvey's sad relapse. After being 'grievously tormented and punished' in the archbishop's 'foul dishonest' prison at Saltwood, Purvey had been brought before Convocation at St. Paul's on Monday, February 28, 1401. Frightened by the burning of Sawtre on Wednesday, March 2, 1401, on Sunday, March 6 Purvey had read in English a recantation at sermon time at St. Paul's Cross, a copy of which in Latin has come down to us. He had been rewarded by Archbishop Arundel with the presentation on the following August 11 to the living of West Hythe, a mile from the archbishop's prison of Saltwood. 'There,' ¹ said Arundel to the lollard Thorpe, 'I heard more complaints about his covetousness for tithes and other misdoings than I did of all men that were advanced within my diocese.' 'Sir,' replied Thorpe, 'Purvey is neither with you now for the benefice ye gave him, nor holdeth he faithfully with the learning that he taught and writ beforetime; and thus he showeth himself to be (neither) hot nor cold.' Arundel's answer was to utter threats against Purvey as a 'false harlot.' Purvey already had wisely removed

¹For Clement, prior of Llanthony, near Gloucester (†1190), see *Dict. Nat. Biog.*, 1st Supplement.

²See E. D. Jones, *The Authenticity of Some English Works ascribed to Wyclif in Anglia*, xxx. 261 f.

himself from residence near Saltwood. Four years before Arundel's threats he had resigned his living (October 8, 1403). Until recently his later career was scarcely known. It was surmised that he resumed his lollardy, and there was some evidence for his imprisonment by Archbishop Chichele. Miss Deanesly's researches enable us to fill up some of the gaps in Purvey's life by establishing his authorship of two tracts, both of which she has printed. From these we see that for some years after 1403 he engaged in controversy in defence of vernacular bibles. That Purvey ended his life either in hiding or in some bishop's gaol appears certain. But the date of his death is unknown. A doubtful monogram, written in a small but clear hand, in a lollard manuscript of 1427, 'J. Perney,' and also a Latin distich in the same manuscript

Christus homofactus
J. P. prosperet actus

would appear to show that he was alive in 1427. Netter, also writing in 1427, tells us: 'I have in my hands now a book taken from John Purvey in prison.' 2

The mention of Purvey has led us into a digression. Our apology must be the reverence we feel for this first real translator of the English Bible. For this translation was almost wholly his work, nor is there any reason to believe that any part of it was finished in Wyclif's lifetime. Though the gospels were finished about 1387, and a copy of the same presented to Richard's queen, Anne

¹Thorpe's dairy of his imprisonment in 1407 is one of the most interesting human documents we possess. It can be read in Foxe or in other modern reprints.

²In the third chapter of this work, Purvey claimed that women should be allowed to preach.

³Articles republished in 1897 in Gasquet's *An Old English Bible*.

of Bohemia, the whole work was not completed until 1395—6. But to return. For forty years the conclusions set out by Forshall and Madden were generally accepted. In 1893, however, Abbot Gasquet—for he had not at that time been elevated to the purple—astonished the world of scholars by claiming that Wyclif's Bible was not a lollard work at all, but was a sort of authorised version of the Scriptures sanctioned by the medieval Church, the reading of which, if not exactly encouraged, was certainly not prohibited. He further maintained that Wyclif's alleged translation was by no means the earliest translation of the Bible into English, but was one only of several translations made before and in his times, of some of which the Church had approved.

Gasquet's conclusions—so damaging to the reputation of Wyclif, so subversive of Protestant tradition—were based upon two lines of evidence. He took for granted that any Bible translated by Wyclif or his followers must necessarily savour of his errors. He examined the two Wyclif versions, and, apart from Purvey's *General Prologue* in the second version, could find no heresy in them. He therefore decided that they must have been the work of orthodox writers, whose names history had not recorded. The wide distribution of these bibles, their numerous manuscripts, the fact that several were possessed by ecclesiastics, led him to infer that they were 'authorized versions,' and, as a necessary conclusion, to overthrow, as he thought, the whole traditional Protestant view as to the attitude of the medieval Church to vernacular Scriptures.

In addition to this à priori reasoning Gasquet adduced positive evidence. He reminded us of a statement of

Sir Thomas More. In his famous *Dialogue*, published as part of his controversy with Tindale, More discusses the question whether or not the Bible may be read in English. He maintains that 'the Holy Bible was long before his' ('the great arch-heretic Wyclif's') 'day by virtuous and well learned men translated into the English tongue.' 'Wyclif,' he adds,

purposely corrupted the holy text, maliciously placing therein such words as might in the reader's ear serve for the proof of such heresies as he went about for to sow, which he not only set forth with his own translation of the Bible, but also with certain prologues and glosses which he had made thereon.

In the following chapter More once more repeated this statement. He is dealing with the charge brought forward by Tindale, that the Romanists have burned the English Bible. He replies:

If this were so, then were it in my mind not well done. But I believe ye mistake it. How be it, what ye have seen I cannot say. But myself have seen and could show you Bibles fair and old written in English which have been known and seen by the bishop of the diocese, and left in laymen's hands (women's, too, such as be known for good and catholic folk), who used it with devotion and soberness. But, of truth, all such as are found in the hands of heretics they use to take away. But they do cause none to be burned, so far as ever I could wit, but only such as be found faulty. Whereof many be set forth with evil prologues or glosses maliciously made by Wyclif and other heretics. For no good man, I ween, would be so mad as to burn up the Bible wherein they found no fault, nor any law that letted (hindered) it be looked on and read.

More further maintained, on the doubtful evidence of an ambiguous reading in the seventh constitution of Oxford, (1408)—the council that suppressed Wyclif's Bible—that 'to have the Bible in English was no hurt.'

More did not stand alone. Foxe also tells us that 'before John Wyclif

was born, the whole body of the Scriptures was by sundry men translated into our mother tongue.' Ussher repeated the same statement with more circumstance in his *Preface to the Authorized Version of 1611*:

And about that time, even in our own King Richard the Second's day, John Trevisa translated them into English, and many English Bibles in written hand are yet to be seen with diverse; translated, as is very probable, in that age.

Ussher derived his information about Trevisa—a famous 'turner' or translator of the age, and a fellow lodger with Wyclif at Queen's College after the Reformer's expulsion from Canterbury Hall—from Caxton. But all search for Trevisa's translation has proved vain, while more accurate knowledge of his life leads us to conclude that he was unlikely to have attempted it.

Gasquet's eminence as a scholar, and the apparent strength of the evidence that he brought forward from More, secured wide acceptance of his positions, in spite of the arguments of the late learned Wyclif scholar, F. Matthews, and of a searching article in the *Church Quarterly Review*, January, 1901. Gasquet's contentions were considerably strengthened by the researches of the next ten years. Libraries were searched and catalogued by Dr. M. R. James and others, and their buried treasures brought to light. These included several vernacular translations. Though none of these were of the whole Bible, they showed that More and Gasquet had not argued without some justification. The attention of scholars was first directed to the English translation of the Psalter, together with extracts from Job and Jeremiah made by the Yorkshire hermit, Richard Rolle, of Hampole,

near Doncaster,² in the years when Wyclif was still a lad at home. Rolle's *Psalter* exists in various forms. The earliest would appear to be a metrical version in Northern or West Midland English made between 1300 and 1350. But this cannot with any certainty be ascribed to Rolle himself. This metrical anonymous version, however, was extensively copied—at least 23 MSS. are still extant—and passed under Rolle's name. More certain is the Latin version followed by an English translation, if such a mere literal construe can be called. In later days the lollards took to issuing Rolle's *Psalter* with glosses of their own inserted, but whether this was done in Wyclif's lifetime is uncertain.

In 1902 Miss A. C. Paues printed what she called, somewhat loosely, *A Fourteenth-Century Biblical Version*, which she dated as anterior to Wyclif. Those whose knowledge of the work was confined to little more than the title considered that here, at any rate so far as the New Testament was concerned, was More's last version. In reality the version is not one, but a collection in the same cover of two separate works. The one, a translation of the Pauline and catholic epistles in which the Latin is rendered with clearness and idiomatic ease was the work, it would seem, of a man of Kent or the south-eastern counties. This part was the original, to which was afterwards added a

southern transcript of a version made in the north-east midland of the catholic epistles, the Acts and the first six chapters of St. Matthew. Of these Matthew, Acts ii. and iii., John and Jude seem to be borrowed from a still earlier version. The northern version is the work of a poor Latin scholar,³ but in clearness of expression and idiomatic use of English both versions, in the judgment of the scholars who have studied them, are superior to Wyclif's, while the southern version is on an equality even with Purvey's. It is interesting to note that both the northern and southern versions made less use of French loan words than either Wyclif or Purvey.

This version, both in its northern and southern forms, according to Miss Paues was perfectly orthodox and intended for a nunnery. But the rejection of a monastic origin is strengthened by the signs that the writer, though not an extreme lollard, was in sympathy with the movement, as is shown by his giving a translation for the 'lewd' of the 'bare text' without the Latin side by side, and without glosses. The reference to the obtaining forgiveness by confession to God only also smells of lollardy. Possibly the writer of the southern version, as Miss Deanesly suggests, was one of the five who wrote Nicholas Hereford's original manuscript now in the Bodleian, one of whom appears to hail from Kent. But this is conjecture, and we are equally uncertain as to the year. If a lollard, the date would probably be earlier than the completion of Purvey's version. The reference to the danger of 'death' for making such a version would point to a time when persecution had begun, possibly after the passing of Wyclif. But this last must not be

²For Rolle and his works, see *Camb. Hist. of English Literature*, ii. 43-8; C. Horstmann, *Yorkshire Writers—Richard Rolle of Hampole*, 2 vols., 1895-6, and J. E. Wells, *A Manual of the Writings in Middle English* (Yale, Univ. Press, 1916, 11c., with new appendix, 1920). This invaluable work, owing to the war and the difficulties of importing it, is not yet so well known in England as it should be. Rolle's *Job* still exists only in MSS. in the British Museum. Rolle's *Psalter* was edited by H. B. Bransley (Oxford, 1884).

³Some of my readers may be interested in the following 'howler', among many. The author translates 'Philippus, quae est prima partis Macedoniae civitas colonia' (see Vulgate, Acts xvi. 12) 'the city of Cologne.'

pressed too far, for references to death and danger do not always imply any legal warrant. All that is certain is that the northern and southern versions were united in one manuscript about 1400.

In addition to the New Testament published by Miss Paues there existed also an English version of the Synoptic Gospels, with the Latin text and a gloss mainly translated from Peter Lombard. The writer tells us that he 'was stirred up to begin of (by) one that I suppose verily was God's servant,' for 'the gospel is rule by which each Christian man ought to live,' phrases which strongly point to the influence of Wyclif and his teaching. There are reasons for believing that it was by the author of a lollard work called *The Pore Caitif*.¹ There has also survived in a single manuscript a 'very literal and stiff translation' of the *Pauline Epistles*,² practically a construe from Latin into 'rough and pedestrian' English. This version, which shows an anti-Wycliffite tendency, was made about the close of the fourteenth century, not for the public but for the author's own use in giving instruction, possibly, as Miss Deanesly suggests, in the Lincoln cathedral school. All these versions were written in a northern or north midland dialect; in fact the 'earliest home of the English Bible was the North of England.' Lest our Yorkshire readers boast overmuch we add that the fact may be accounted for by the greater ignorance of French and Latin in the North

than in the more cultured South. From the North also came, probably from near Durham, the various rhymed gospels, MSS. of which were once very numerous, now generally known as *The Northern Homily Collection*.³ Whether Wyclif, who was born not far from Durham, would be acquainted with any of these in his earlier days we cannot say.

From this hurried survey of the various translations of the age we can see at once how strangely the tide was flowing in Wyclif's day towards a vernacular Bible. Wyclif's translation—for we may still continue with advantage to give his name to the vernacular editions, of which, as Archbishop Arundel told us, he was 'the instigator'—it is clear, formed part of a movement manifesting itself in many separate efforts. But our survey also shows us that none of these translations were other than partial, and that the supposed pre-Wyclif Bible of More and Gasquet does not exist, at any rate has not yet been brought to light. In all probability More mistook for an earlier translation either Wyclif's first version, as distinct from Purvey's—for it was Purvey's version that More was acquainted with—or possibly a copy of the Anglo-Saxon version.¹ Apart also from the translation of the Apocalypse 'the reasons for believing that any biblical version, or part of it, substantially preceded the Wycliffite ones are small.... Even the midland glossed gospels, almost certainly the earliest, were written through Wycliffite inspiration.'³

Cardinal Gasquet, in his scepticism as to the origin of the Wycliffite versions, made a point from the fact that neither Wyclif's nor Purvey's version correspond in the slightest with the complete translation of the Sunday

¹See Well's *Manual*, 407, 482.

²Edited by Miss M. J. Powell for the Early English Text Society in 1916.

³See Wells, *l.c.*, 289 ff.

¹Purvey tells us, writing in 1405, that 'there was a man of London, his name was Wyring, had a Bible in English of northern speech, and it seemed two hundred year old'—evidently the Anglo-Saxon version of Abbott Aelfric of Bynsham (†1020).

³Deanesly, *op. cit.* 315.

Gospels, given by Wyclif in his English Sermons. 4 Until recently this was explained away by supposing that Wyclif when preaching would have the Vulgate open before him and made his translation as he went along. But it is scarcely probable that Wyclif would find time—for his life is incredibly full—to write out in full his English sermons. The *Sermons* in their present form are more likely to be the transcript from his notes, made by one of his assistants for the benefit of his poor priests or travelling preachers. But the vernacular gospels in Wyclif's *Sermons* prove how strongly the tide was flowing towards translation, as well as the slow stages by which the translation of a complete Bible was reached. We have, in fact, no less than three prose translations still surviving of the Sunday Gospels with homilies attached. The best known of these is that of Wyclif to which we have referred, the popularity of which is evidenced by the survival of 19 manuscripts, in spite of all the efforts to suppress Wyclif's works. Here homily and translation are interwoven. Strange to say, here once Wyclif gives two sermons on the same Gospel, but the translation is completely different, a fact which would seem to point to different assistant translators. The *Sermons*, therefore, give us one of Wyclif's essays in Gospel translation. But the fact that they are more free from the clumsy renderings and attempts to follow the Latin word order so characteristic of the Wyclif version would seem to point to a date intermediate between Wyclif's version and Purvey's, or else to show—and this seems to me the more probable—that they were

edited by one of his followers. If translated by Wyclif they are conclusive proof that he had nothing to do with the clumsy paraphrases of the Gospels in the first version. There were also two other prose translations of the Sunday Gospels, one existing in four manuscripts and the other in two. The writer of the first, who lived apparently after Wyclif's death, expected considerable opposition, and in consequence 'my name,' he wrote, 'will I not name for the enemies that might hear it.' The second was written about 1400.

We have dwelt at such length on the problems connected with the lollard translations that we must forbear all examination of the other contention of Sir Thomas More and Dr. Gasquet, that the Church before the Reformation did not discourage vernacular Scriptures. The main part of Miss Deanesly's work is the careful collection of all the evidence as to the attitude of the medieval Church to the use of the Bible by the laity both in England and abroad. The result is to demolish altogether Dr. Gasquet's arguments and to show that in the main, stripped of its excesses, the old Protestant tradition was correct. On the Continent the demand for vernacular Scriptures would appear to have been the work of the German mystics, Friends of God, and Brethren of the Common Life in the Rhine Valley, and was frowned upon both by the parochial clergy and the friars. But the denunciation of vernacular Scriptures was by no means unanimous and ranged from the cautious pronouncements of the Roman Curia, e. t. that of Gregory XI in 1375, and of the larger synods, down to the wild utterances of individual bishops and controversial friars and inquisitors.

⁴These were published by T. Arnold, *Select English Works of J. Wyclif*, 3 vols., Oxford, 1871.

Some of the opponents refused to allow the literal translation of any part, unaccompanied by an explanation, lest it should be wrested to a wrong meaning. The more moderate insisted on the sacred Vulgate being published side by side with the consuetudine; or that the vernacular Scriptures should be licensed and supervised, this last the characteristic compromise of the synod of Oxford. This skilful provision gave the authorities all

they desired. Licences could be granted to the rich and powerful, and also to well-known priests or monasteries, but for the poor to have a copy of the English Bible without a license was to have taken the first step towards the fire both for book and owner. The self-education of the laity in spiritual things through the spread of vernacular Scriptures was no part of the business of the medieval Church.¹

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CARLYLE AND EMERSON

BY J. M. SLOAN

From *The Landmark*, April

(ORGAN OF THE 'ENGLISH SPEAKING UNION')

ON a brilliant Sunday in August, 1833, Emerson arrived on the moors at Craigenputtock. He was a widower at thirty, interested in letters and philosophy, who had made a first visit to Europe attracted by several living writers, one of whom was Thomas Carlyle, whose *Essays*, as they appeared in the *Reviews* had suggested to him the arrival of a new prophet, especially the essay entitled 'Characteristics.' He drove from Dumfries to Craigenputtock furnished with an introduction from Stuart Mill, was warmly welcomed, and invited to stay overnight.

Carlyle was then in his thirty-eighth year, and denied his niche, 'a lonely scholar nourishing his mighty heart.' He had written 'Sartor' two years before, but failed to find a publisher for the manuscript, which his gifted wife read and returned to

her despondent partner in the struggle saying: 'It is a work of genius, dear!' Upon the exiled Carlyles the winsome young American dropped like 'an angel out of the clouds,' a messenger of hope, a call to self-confidence. Jane Welsh described the visit as 'an enchantment, which left her weeping that it was only one day.' To Carlyle the stranger was an 'apparition.' He told his mother that the American was 'one of the most lovable creatures in himself we had ever looked upon,' and added: 'Jane says it is the first journey since Noah's Deluge undertaken to Craigenputtock for such a purpose.' Emerson, who found Carlyle 'one of the most simple and frank of men,' has left us a graphic account of the visit in his 'English Traits.'

Emerson instructed Fraser, the London publisher, to send him his magazine, in which 'Sartor' was about to appear in instalments. After four

¹ For a good account of medieval religious life, I may commend B. L. Manning's *The People's Faith in the Time of Wyclif* (1919).