



John Wycliffe: Morning Star of the Reformation

The history of John Wycliffe is crucial to a true understanding of British, European, and indeed of world history. I will be so bold as to say that, were it not — under God — for my fellow Yorkshireman John Wycliffe, there would not be a William Tyndale, there would certainly not be a Trinitarian Bible Society, and the course of British, European, world — and even Scottish — history would have run a different course than it has done.

While Wycliffe was at Canterbury Hall, Oxford, in 1367, he had as a student a certain Geoffrey Chaucer who, following the steps of his master, reflected much in his *Canterbury Tales* upon the corruptions of the clergy. But also at the same time he portrays his master John Wycliffe in his description of the 'Poor Parson':

*A good man was ther of religioun,
And was a poure Persounn of a toun,
But riche he was of hooly thoght and werk.
He was also a lerned man, a clerk
That Cristes gospel trewely wolde preche;
His parissshens devoutly wolde he teche.
Beniyne he was, and wonder diligent,
And in adversity ful patient,
And such he was ypreved ofte sithes...*

*Wyde was his parisshe, and houses fer asonder,
But he ne left nat, for reyn ne thonder,
In sicknesse nor in meschief, to visite
The ferreste in his parish, much and lite,
Upon his feet, and in his hand a staf.
The noble ensample to his sheep he Yaf...*

*He was a shepherde and noght a mercenarie,
And though he hooly were and vertuous,
He was to sinful men nat despitous,
Ne of his speche daungerous ne digne,
But hin is techyng discreet and benygne.
To drawen folk to hevene by fairnesse,
By good ensample, was his bisynesse...*

*A bettere preest I trowe that nowthere noon ys.
He waited after no pompe and reverence,
Ne maked him a spiced conscience,
But Cristes loore, and his apostles twelve,
He taught, and first he folwed it hymselfe.¹*

John Wycliffe was born in the year 1320, just to the north of the road that now runs from Scotch Corner to Penrith — part of what we know as the A66. A little to the east of the market town of Barnard Castle in Teesdale, Co. Durham, lies the little hamlet of Wycliffe-on-Tees, the ancestral home of John de Wycliffe. He died some one hundred and fifty miles away, at Lutterworth in Leicestershire, on 31 December 1384.

Wycliffe's life was closely connected to Oxford. He was, in succession, Fellow at Merton, Master of Balliol, and Warden of Canterbury Hall. In 1372 he was presented by the King to the Rectory of Lutterworth.² It was from Lutterworth in 1374 that Wycliffe directed his poor preachers, the Lollards. These were often referred to as poor priests or true men who preached. Wycliffe believed in the primacy of preaching. Listen to him as he preaches:

*O marvellous power of the divine seed! It overturns strong warriors, softens hearts as hard as stone, and renews in the divine image men brutalised by sin and infinitely far from God.*³

For Wycliffe preaching was the most important duty of the clergy; over 360 of his sermons survive. Listen again to the evangelical doctor preaching:

*Lift up, wretches, the eyes of your souls and behold Him in whom was no spot of sin, what pain He suffered, for the sin of man. He sweat blood and water to wash thee of sin. He was bound and beaten with scourges, the blood running down his sides, that thou shouldest keep thy body clean in His service. He was crowned with thorns that you should think on Him and flee all cursed malice. He was nailed to the Cross with sharp nails through hands and feet, and stung to the heart with a sharp spear, that thy five wits should be ruled by Him.*⁴

Oh, for such preaching today!

He instructed his poor preachers to appeal to Holy Scriptures in all their exhortations and in all their instructions. In fact Wycliffe considered the Scriptures to be divine and therefore of absolute authority in all matters of faith and practice. He had gradually come to this conclusion. In his great work *Trialogus* he writes:

*We do not sincerely believe in the Lord Jesus Christ or we should abide by the authority of His word, especially that of the evangelists ... Inasmuch as it is the will of the Holy Spirit that our attention should not be dispersed over a large number of objects, but concerned on one sufficient source of instruction, it is His pleasure that the books of the old and new law should be read and studied, and that men should not be taken up with other books, which, true as they maybe, and containing Scripture truth as they may, by implication, are not to be confided in without caution or limitation.*⁵

What a warning that is to those of us who are preachers!

Again Wycliffe is quoted as saying, '*it is impossible that any word or any deed of the Christian should be of equal authority with Holy Scripture*'. When, therefore, the Pope asserts that his decrees in matters of faith have the same authority as the Gospel, he is, in Wycliffe's opinion, guilty of blasphemy, because he arrogates to himself the attributes and prerogatives of Deity.⁶

Because of his view of the authority and the sufficiency of Scripture, Wycliffe earned the title the 'Evangelical Doctor' or the 'Gospel Doctor'.

He had an amazing knowledge of Scripture. He took the different parts of Scripture in close connection and made Scripture its own interpreter, '*comparing spiritual things with spiritual*' (1 Corinthians 2:13). He dug deep into the vast mine of Scriptural truth, being fully assured that, if he laboured prayerfully in the work, its treasures would be more and more unfolded to his astonished and to his delighted view.

*The deep veneration which he felt for Holy Scripture, and the supreme importance which he attached to it, led him naturally to the conclusion that the people ought to be allowed to read it in their own tongues. He expressed that view in his **Wicket**, 'Those who call it heresy to speak of Holy Scriptures in English must be prepared to condemn the Holy Ghost, who gave it in tongues to the Apostles of Christ, to speak the word of God in all languages that were ordained under heaven.'*⁷

Again in another of his great works, *Dialogus, sive Speculum Ecclesie Militantis* (Dialogue, or The Mirror of Temporal Lords), Wycliffe writes,

*'Those heretics are not to be heard who fancy that secular men ought not to know the law of God; but that it is enough for them to know what priests and prelates tell them by word of mouth; for Scripture is the faith of the Church, and the more it is known in an orthodox sense the better. Therefore, as secular men ought to know the faith, so it is to be taught them in whatever language is best known to them'*⁸

In the summer of 1378 Wycliffe completed his great treatise entitled *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae* (*The Truth of Holy Scripture*), in which he says,

*The Bible is the Divine Word of God in Christ, infallible, a sole authority, lay lords should read and defend it. No man is so rude a scholar but that he may learn the Gospel in his simplicity.*⁹

*The Bible, the whole un mutilated Bible; the Bible distributed in a tongue understood by the people; the Bible uncorrupted by the false glosses of that Church which claims for itself an exclusive right to interpret the Scriptures, was to be the moral lever by which his country was to be raised from her present state of degradation.*¹⁰

That is the case today as well. But in 1382 that was a sublime concept. Difficulties stood in the way of the design of Wycliffe, a design that embraced not only the literal translation of the Bible but also its circulation among all ranks and orders of his fellow countrymen. Many would have shrunk back, terrified by the prospect of formidable opposition and persecution: bishops, priests and other laity might have been expected to have bound together in a dark confederacy against him. Wycliffe stood in a position of comparative isolation.

The translators of Wycliffe's Bible are wrapped in obscurity. We scarcely find in Wycliffe's writings any reference to the progress of that great work he and those who aided him were afraid that if they blazed the matter abroad, the powerful hand of authority would prevent them continuing the translation and would inflict severe persecution upon them. The consequence therefore is that we are ignorant of the stages of the work which prepared the way for the Reformation and the spiritual destiny that awaited millions through the following centuries.

The Bible was completed by the end of the year 1382. In all probability it was John Wycliffe who translated the New Testament and Nicholas of Hereford the Old Testament. When Nicholas was forced to flee in 1382, the Bible was then revised in a free style by John Purvey, the 'Librarian of the Lollards'. In addition to Nicholas and Purvey, Wycliffe was also aided by other disciples, perhaps former Oxford scholars. It was an exact, literal translation of the Latin Vulgate into English, the language of the people.

So great was the eagerness to possess Wycliffe's Bible that those who could not procure the volume of the Book would give a load of hay for just a few chapters. They would hide the forbidden treasures under the floors of their houses, and expose their lives to danger rather than surrender the Book. They would sit up all night, their doors being shut for fear of surprise, reading or hearing others read the Word of God. They would bury themselves in the woods and there converse with it in silence and solitude. They would be attending their flocks in the field, stealing an hour for drinking in the good tidings of grace and salvation.

Wycliffe's Bible marks an epoch in the development of the English language. Thus, while his pupil Chaucer was labouring to settle the English tongue among the higher classes, Wycliffe established it yet more permanently for his fellow countrymen in language at once simple and beautiful. It was the great work which hastened on the Reformation in England and in Europe. At once, upon each publication, the hierarchy and clergy of the Roman church were filled with terror and indignation: they knew their occupation was gone if the laity were permitted to look inside a Bible and read its pages.

Henry Knighton, fourteenth century canon at the Augustinian Abbey of St Mary in Leicester and chronicler, writes somewhat scathingly of John Wycliffe,

This Master John Wyclif has translated into English the gospel which Christ gave to his clergy and doctors of the Church, to be by them communicated to the weaker sort, and the

*laity according to their need. Thence by his means it is become vulgar and more open to laymen and women who can read it than it is to lettered Clerks of good intelligence. Thus the pearl of the Gospel is scattered abroad and trodden underfoot by swine. The Jewel of the Clerics is become the sport of the laity. What before was the heavenly talent for Clerks and Doctors of the Church is now common property.*¹¹

And again, Archbishop Arundel, in a letter to Pope John XXII asking him to condemn the heresy of Wycliffe and his followers, after severe vituperation writes, *'that wretched and pestilent fellow, son of the Serpent, herald and child of Antichrist, has completed his malice by devising a translation of the Scriptures into the mother tongue'*.¹²

Papal bulls flew thick and fast from both popes — the one at Rome and also the one at Avignon! Wycliffe publicly said of them,

*The warring Popes were two dogs fighting for a bone. Princes should take the bone away and reduce them to the simple poverty of Christ. It was bad enough that many thousands should die and England be sucked dry by begging Friars promoting the Crusade for money, but much worse that their victims were killed in their sins deluded by Antichrist's pretended absolution and promises of immediate entry into heaven.*¹³

Pope Gregory, in a papal bull issued on 31 May 1377, declared that,

*John Wyclif, Rector of Lutterworth, Professor of Divinity (if only he were not a Master of Errors!), has rashly proceeded to such a detestable degree of madness as to assert, dogmatise and publicly preach erroneous propositions, false, contrary to the faith and which threaten to overthrow the whole Church! Therefore they should cause the said Wyclif to be arrested and laid in gaol, where they should obtain his confession and transmit it to him ... furthermore they must keep the said Wyclif in custody in chains until further orders.*¹⁴

Archbishop Arundel and Convocation issued the following stringent prohibition in 1408,

*That no unauthorised person should hereafter translate any portion of Holy Scripture into English ... and that no such book ... should be read, either in whole or part, publicly or privately, that was composed in the time of John Wyclif, or since, under the penalty of the greater excommunication, till the said translation be approved by the Bishop of the diocese.*¹⁵

Wycliffe had fully counted the cost; he weighed the consequences of his actions. He knew that his life and that of others would be endangered. He wrote in that great work the *Triologus*,

*We have no need to go among the heathen in order to die a martyr's death. We have only to preach persistently the law of Christ in the hearing of Caesar's (the Pope's) prelates, and instantly we shall have a flourishing martyrdom, if we hold out in faith and patience.*¹⁶

Through the efforts of Wycliffe's poor preachers and others, the Scriptures were circulated and their pages opened to the delighted view of many thousands of his fellow countrymen. These poor priests, the Lollards, lived in poverty and preached the Gospel to the common people in simplicity. It was they who carried the torch of the English Bible from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and into the sixteenth. Through their incessant labours, the people were led to see that the church of Rome had corrupted the faith once delivered unto the saints, and they cast off the superstitions of their forefathers.

In the last two years of his life, Wycliffe devoted himself to writing. Dr. Ann Hudson of Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford, has identified 132 writings of Wycliffe, some 82 in Latin and the remainder in English.¹⁷ Many of these works were to be found in Bohemia. In 1401, Jerome of Prague returned home from Oxford, bearing with him a painting which he hung in his rooms showing Wycliffe as the Prince of Philosophers, and also a copy of Wycliffe's *Triologus* written out with his own hand. Jerome said in a public disputation that, *'Young men and students ... who did not study the books of Wyclif would never find the root of knowledge'*.¹⁸ Soon afterwards John Huss,

Jerome's fellow reformer and martyr, translated that treatise into Czech, with striking results in Bohemia. In the following century Martin Luther possessed such a copy of Wycliffe's work.

The last large work attempted by Wycliffe was his *Sermon on the Mount*. Come with me for a few moments in your imagination to that little Rectory at Lutterworth; there Wycliffe writes his last pages in a silence broken only by the scratching of a quill pen or by the fall of ashes in the hearth. His lofty brow careworn by study, pain and suffering, the left leg shrunken and lame, the trembling active eager hand, the whole figure broken prematurely, yet indomitable to the end, following the lone dictates of conscience.

His final work was divided into two parts, of which the last was entitled *De Antichristo* (*About Antichrist*). In these, beginning with the bishop of Rome down to the various blind guides of the Roman church, he repeated with clarity and power Christ's denunciation, 'Woe unto you, Pharisees, hypocrites!' (cf. Matthew 23:25). Like Luther at the Diet of Worms, he remained unshaken, proclaiming in *Triologus*, 'if there were a hundred Popes, and every Friar a Cardinal, their opinions on matters of faith, were only to be accepted in so far as they agreed with Scripture'.¹⁹

Wycliffe asserted the total sufficiency and authority of God's Law, so much so that when John Huss copied this treatise, he called it *The Sufficiency of God's Law*. Wycliffe ended by declaring that he was willing to be taught the truth according to the Scripture, but otherwise he was willing to face death as a martyr and so pass to eternal bliss. In deep humility he confessed in *Triologus*, 'I am ignorant of much because of the loftiness of the subject, but in the Fatherland I shall see clearly the views about which now I only stammer'.²⁰ In answer to the interrogation of Archbishop Arundel, William Thorpe, a brave Lollard, described Wycliffe as 'the most virtuous and godly wise man that I heard of or knew'.²¹

Wycliffe spent his last days at Lutterworth in much pain. His indefatigable energy, a distinguishing feature of his character, had gradually worn out the material tabernacle of his body. His personal character was unimpeachable, for even his enemies have not uttered a syllable against his personal character. At the close of his life, following a stroke in 1382, he had to be carried by others into the pulpit. Thorpe, his friend, refers to him as, 'emaciated frame, spare and well nigh destitute of strength'.²²

Perhaps his last sermon was on the text of John 21:15-17:

'So when they had dined, Jesus saith to Simon Peter, Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me more than these? He saith unto him, Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love thee. He saith unto him, Feed my lambs... Feed my sheep... Feed my sheep: Listen to the final words that came from the lips of John Wycliffe,

*Christ taught the Apostles to feed his sheep in pastures of Holy Writ, not in rotten pastures as are fables and lies of men. The pasture evermore green with truths that never fail is the Law of Holy Writ that endureth in the other world. But because a good shepherd should keep his sheep from wolves, defend them from scabs, and from rending, therefore Christ bade Peter thrice that he should keep his sheep. Christ taught not his shepherd to raise a Crusade and kill his sheep with the lambs and spoil them of their goods. This is Antichrist's teaching that the Fiend has brought in and by this it is known that these are not Peter's vicars!'*²³

Many of his friends had, like Demas (2 Timothy 4:10), forsaken him. His friend and colleague Nicholas of Hereford was imprisoned for life by Pope Urban VI in the dungeons of St Angelo in Rome. Wycliffe stood alone, with the sword of persecution suspended by a thread hanging over him; but still with voice and pen he laboured incessantly to affect a reform of the church. He unflinchingly had denounced the arrogance of the priests and their corruptions of the truth of God's Word. He had seen his teaching condemned and his itinerant followers harassed, and had been warned by that first stroke that his days were numbered. Nevertheless he worked with feverish haste before night should fall, with a mind obdurate and inflexible, to leave a mass of precious seed to be drawn upon and broadcast by his disciples throughout the land after his death. Wycliffe

feared neither king nor antichrist and his cardinals. If need be, Wycliffe was prepared to die for the cause of God and Truth.

In 1383 Wycliffe was summoned by the Pope to Rome to answer charges of heresy. He replied in *De Citationibus Frivolis*, 'So a certain feeble and lame man, cited by the Curia, replies that he is prevented by a royal prohibition, the KING of Kings has effectually willed it that he shall not go'.²⁴

On 28 December 1384 he suffered a stroke in his church at Lutterworth whilst conducting the service of the Lord's Supper; he was carried to his house, where he breathed his last on 31 December 1384. Thomas Walsingham, Benedictine monk and chronicler, announced that,

*on the Feast of the Passion of St. Thomas of Canterbury, John Wycliffe, that instrument of the Devil, the enemy of the Church, the confusion of men, the idol of heresy, the mirror of hypocrisy, the nourisher of schism, was, by the rightful doom of God, smitten with a horrible paralysis throughout his body. And this vengeance fell upon him on St Thomas Day, but he died not until St. Sylvester Day. And worthily was he smitten on St. Thomas Day, against whom (Thomas a Becket) he had greatly offended, stopping men of that pilgrimage. And conveniently died he in Sylvester Feast, against whom he venomously barked, and breathed out his malicious spirit unto the abodes of darkness.*²⁵

At the Council of Constance, the church of Rome determined to wreak her impotent fury upon Wycliffe's bones. Accordingly, in 1415 a decree was passed branding Wycliffe as a heretic, and directing that his body and bones should be taken from consecrated ground and thrown away from the burial of the church. That decree was carried out in 1428, forty-four years after his death.

Come, let us picture the scene in Lutterworth Church as we wander back to that distant age. Around the grave, in the chancel, we see Chichele, Archbishop of Canterbury; there is Bishop Fleming of Lincoln, once a devoted follower of Wycliffe, and other dignitaries and clergy, anxious to display their enmity to one who had denounced the corruptions of their church. The church is crowded with the officials and townspeople who are attracted by the novelty of the spectacle. The sound of the pickaxe falls on the ear. Slowly rising through the opening made is seen the coffin of Wycliffe. It is placed on the shoulders of men; it is carried through that door in the chancel, down that winding road to the River Swift, which glides along tranquilly at the foot of the hill. A fire is then kindled on the bridge; the bones of Wycliffe are taken out of the coffin and are flung into it. They were reduced to ashes, which were afterwards cast into the River Swift.

Many in that crowd would doubtless behold with tears the indignities there offered to the remains of one to whom they had listened in their youth, as he had spoken to them of the love of the Saviour, as he had warned them to prepare for death, judgment, and eternity; of one who had often visited them in their homes, and spoken to them in the time of sickness and sorrow, pouring the oil and wine of heavenly consolation into the wounded spirit.

*This brook hath conveyed his ashes into Avon, Avon into Severn, Severn into the narrow seas, they into the main ocean. And thus the ashes of Wickliffe are the emblem of his doctrine, which is now dispersed all the world over.*²⁶

Wycliffe is, in my opinion, the greatest man that our country has ever produced. He had a burning love for Christ, an ardent desire for the salvation of souls and an unquenchable desire to have the Word of God translated and distributed throughout the land. He truly was and is '*The Morning Star of the Reformation*'.

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Endnotes:

- ¹ F. N. Robinson, ed., *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, 2nd ed. (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1966), pp. 21-22.
- ² That is, he was put in charge of the church and parish there.
- ³ Lewis Lupton, *Wyclif's Wicket: Sign of a Credible Faith* vol. XVI of *The History of the Geneva Bible*, (Cambridge, England: Burlington Press, 1984), p. 77.
- ⁴ Ibid., p. 78
- ⁵ *Triologus*, lib. lii, cap. xxxi, pp. 239-240.
- ⁶ Arthur R Pennington, *John Wiclif: His Life, Times and Teaching* (London, England: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1884), p. 151
- ⁷ Ibid., p. 153.
- ⁸ Ibid.
- ⁹ Lupton, p. 104
- ¹⁰ Pennington, p. 154
- ¹¹ Lupton, pp. 109-110
- ¹² Ibid., p.110
- ¹³ Ibid., p. 161
- ¹⁴ Ibid., p. 96
- ¹⁵ Quoted by Pennington, p. 174.
- ¹⁶ *Triologus*, lib. lii., c.15, p. 181.
- ¹⁷ Ann Hudson, ed., *Selections from English Wycliffite Writings* (Cambridge, England: 1978), p. 3, quoted in *Michael Jones and Malcolm Vale, eds., England and Her Neighbours, 1066-1453: essays in honour of Pierre Chaplain* (London, England: The Hambledon Press, 1989), p. 228.
- ¹⁸ H. B. Workman, *John Wyclif: A Study of the English Medieval Church*, 2 vols. (Oxford, England: The Clarendon Press, 1926), 1.8.
- ¹⁹ Lupton, p. 158.
- ²⁰ Ibid.
- ²¹ Ibid., p. 80.
- ²² Ibid., p. 165.
- ²³ Ibid., p. 162.
- ²⁴ Ibid., p. 165.
- ²⁵ Ibid., p.170.
- ²⁶ Thomas Fuller, *The Church History of Britain: From the Birth of Jesus Christ Until the Year MDCXLVII*, 3 vols. (London, England: Thomas Tegg and Son, 1837), 1.493.