

JOHN WYCLIFFE: MORNING STAR OF THE REFORMATION

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INTRODUCTION

Lionized by his nineteenth-century biographers and by Protestant chroniclers of church history, John Wycliffe may be seen dimly through the mists of accumulated centuries as an iconoclastic priest, preaching over a century and a half before the Reformation against the corruption of the Catholic Church. He carries the reputation of being the first translator of the Bible into the English language, and of being the father of the Lollard movement in England.

This paper will reconstruct the historical situation, inquire into the factors of Wycliffe's education and training which influenced his preaching, and examine his English sermons to determine his rightful place in history as a preacher, insofar as the evidence allows.

THE AGE

England, like all of Europe, was dominated by the Catholic Church during the Middle Ages. The Church laid claim not only to the spiritual affairs of the people, but to many temporal affairs as well, particularly political and economic policies. Politically, the Church insisted that the King ruled by divine right and was subject to the Church in the spiritual and moral realm. Economically, the Church collected tithes and other monies from every Christian country by force of law. Moreover, churchmen were subject, not to civil law, but to ecclesiastical law; thus, the Church insisted on the divine right of Bishops as well.¹

The Most important political event of the fourteenth century in England bearing on this study of Wycliffe was the struggle between the royalists, led by John of Gaunt, and the clerics. The issues of the struggle were economic: John of Gaunt fought the Church's ability to control and drain the country's wealth through its extensive land holdings and its power to tax.² As will be made clear, John of Gaunt was able to exploit Wycliffe's theological teachings in the struggle. Although Wycliffe could not have foreseen (nor was he ever charged with) the violence which ensued, the Peasants' Revolt led by John Ball was a direct result of the clash over who should control the wealth. The compromise which the nobles forced the

peasants to accept marked the end of Wycliffe's in-
fluence at Oxford and the acceleration of his translat-
ing and preaching in English.

While the country was thus exploited by the Church,
sensitive churchmen searched in vain for priests who
would serve the spiritual needs of the people. But the
parish priests, whose main function was to perform the
Sacraments, came to regard their benefices as a source
of income only.⁴ The preaching friars similarly neglect-
ed the deeper needs of the people by reducing their
sermons to entertaining stories while they collected
money for their pains.⁵

That there was official indifference to the plight
of the people was the ironic, yet inevitable, result of
the system for appointing bishops. The bishoprics in
the Church were awarded to those who could administer
the vast lands and wealth of the Church, not necessarily
the most pious candidates. G. M. Trevelyan, the British
historian, stated, "Hence, though the Bishops were likely
to be neither fools nor knaves, they were still less
likely to be saints."⁶

Wycliffe sought to reform the Church's administration
in order to eliminate the disgraceful neglect of the
gospel. The Church, in protecting its vested interests,
forced Wycliffe into a more and more radical position.
This paper will discuss the controversy insofar as it

relates to the English sermons; as shall be shown, Wycliffe was driven by the Church to an appeal to the people, and ultimately, an appeal to history.

THE MAN

Little is known of the early life of John Wycliffe. His father, Roger de Wycliff, was lord of a manor called Wycliffe.⁷ The date of John Wycliffe's birth is unknown, but a date between 1320 and 1324 is probable.⁸

The events in Wycliffe's life which had the most influence upon his preaching may be conveniently examined in two areas: Scholar at Oxford and rector of Lutterworth Church.

Herbert E. Winn, an English editor of Wycliffe's writings, summarized Wycliffe's course of study at Oxford as follows:

First, as a student in Arts, he "ground at grammar" and logic; then, as a Bachelor, he lectured on certain prescribed portions of Aristotle; and was finally awarded the degree of Regent Master of Arts in 1361. There followed a course of equally long duration in Theology. From 1363-1366 Wyclif applied himself to the text of the Vulgate; then for two years to the Sentences of Peter Lombard, the great medieval textbook on the Scriptures. After this he lectured for several years on the Bible and the Sentences, and after various public disputations, was granted the full Doctor of Theology in 1372.⁹

The "grammar and logic" referred to by Winn consisted of the Trivium: one of the three broad areas of the Trivium is rhetoric. Yet one must not make the hasty conclusion that Wycliffe received an education in "the art

of persuasion, beautiful and just." Instead, rhetoric as then conceived was founded in the logical works of Aristotle; Cicero's Topics, De inventione, and De Oratore; the Rhetorica ad Herennium; the Commentaries of Boethius; and Quintilian to a lesser degree.¹⁰ The emphasis in these works is upon inventio; the purpose of narrowing the study of rhetoric to this aspect was to provide a method for selecting and amplifying the text and materials for sermons.¹¹

Indeed, the Rhetoric of Aristotle was unavailable to Wycliffe. Although it was translated from Greek into Latin in the thirteenth century, it is not mentioned at Oxford until 1431, when it was prescribed as an alternative reading with Cicero, Ovid, and Virgil. Even so, whatever the Rhetoric appeared in the Middle Ages, it was usually bound together with Ethica or Politica or both; never with the dialectical works. This arrangement supports the judgment that rhetoric was considered useful primarily in moral philosophy during the time Wycliffe was a student at Oxford.¹²

Wycliffe compiled a brilliant record at Oxford. William W. Capes, a British historian, called him "the last of the great schoolmen before he became known as the earliest of the reformers."¹³ Margaret Deanesly, the Cambridge historian, quoted Arundel, a contemporary figure with Wycliffe, as saying:

In those days flourished master John Wycliffe, rector of the church of Lutterworth, in the

county of Leicester, the most eminent doctor of theology of those times. In philosophy he was reckoned second to none, and in scholastic learning without rival. This man strove greatly to surpass the skill of other men by subtlety of knowledge and the greatness of his ability, and to traverse their opinions¹⁴

Upon earning the degree of Doctor of Theology in 1372, he was retained as a faculty member, and also received successive Church preferments until, in 1374, he was appointed rector of Lutterworth, a church near the
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Leicester home of John of Gaunt.

His brilliance as a schoolman did not mean that he was orthodox, or even that he was diplomatic in his unorthodoxy. On the contrary, he made increasingly controversial statements in a day and age when dissent was not welcome. Not all his thoughts are appropriate here, but mention should be made of at least one; his doctrine of the "dominion of grace."

As stated above, the Church insisted on both the divine right of Kings and of Bishops to reign in their respective spheres. Wycliffe's theory of "dominion of grace" rejected the Papal claim to dominion in spiritual powers as well as in temporal possessions. He taught that all dominion, power, or ownership comes from God; and that every man is his own mediator, owning vassalage to no lord or Pope. His theory went further, and stated that dominion is automatically removed from those who

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disregard the laws of God. He emphatically denied the Bishops' right to dictate in either ecclesiastical or political matters.

John of Gaunt, uncle and Protector of the boy-king, Richard II, exploited this radical doctrine and used it against the Church. He became Wycliffe's sponsor, and when charges of heresy were brought against Wycliffe in 1377, he was influential in having the charges dropped.¹⁷

But the Peasants' Revolt turned the tide against John of Gaunt, and Wycliffe (who had been basking in his protection) had unfortunately chosen that moment in history to propose to the parliament the gradual confiscation of all clerical property by special taxation. Charges of heresy were again brought against Wycliffe in 1382, and John of Gaunt could not or would not save him a second time. Wycliffe was convicted by a special council under Archbishop Courtenay of teaching several points of heresy.¹⁸ He was forbidden to teach further at Oxford.

Ejected from Oxford, he retired to his parish at Lutterworth, where he remained until his death on December 31, 1384. In these last years of his life, he did the work for which he is remembered best. It was here that he and his followers are reported to have produced a vernacular Bible,¹⁹ and less spectacularly but more relevant to this paper, he turned from Latin to English for his sermons. In point of fact, the two things are directly interrelated; he himself felt that the preaching was more important than the translating.

THE ENGLISH SERMONS

Another corollary of Wycliffe's doctrine of the dominion of grace was the primacy of preaching. If it were true that the Pope no longer had spiritual dominion over men's souls, then everyone must know and understand the Word of God for himself; hence, it became necessary both to translate and to preach the Word of God in plain English. To Wycliffe's mind, preaching was more important to the Church than administering the Sacraments.²⁰ But the preaching had to be Biblical. He strongly criticized the friars, who preached "poesy" and "fables."²¹ Trevelyan said, "He wanted an entirely different class of preacher, one who should call people to repentance, and make the sermon the great instrument for reformation of life and manners."²²

Prior to 1200, sermons in the Middle Ages were either "postils" (expository sermons based on Biblical texts), or "declarations" (orations developed like essays). Scholasticism added a third type of preaching: dialectic sermons which divided and subdivided the matter used in illustrating a text. As an Oxford schoolman, Wycliffe composed many Latin sermons in the dialectic style. But when he retired to Lutterworth following his heresy conviction, he abandoned both Latin and the dialectic style; and he invoked the past and revived the postil form for his own English sermons.²³ About three

hundred of his English sermons have been preserved (in spite of strong Church efforts to burn them).²⁴ Thomas Arnold, the most authoritative nineteenth-century editor of Wycliffe's works, said, "The authenticity of these sermons, taken as a whole, cannot reasonably be questioned."²⁵

The English sermons are mostly English parallels of Latin sermons,²⁶ but with at least two important differences: length and style. The English sermons are briefer and more popular in style. As to brevity, some of the English sermons consist of only a few notes, while others extend to several pages. Their brevity is due mainly to Wycliffe's change from the dialectic style to the postil, thereby eliminating many tortuous and hair-splitting argumentative passages. As to style, it may be said that Wycliffe, the preacher, spoke to the hearts of his congregation; whereas Wycliffe, the schoolman, spoke to the intellect of the scholars. Robert Vaughan, a nineteenth-century editor and biographer of Wycliffe, said that the preacher was so pre-occupied with the error to be eradicated, or truth to be established, that he forgot the niceties of language and style.²⁷ As Capes put it, "Earnest feeling cannot always pick its words."²⁸

Almost any sermon will yield several vivid examples of the simple, heartfelt style of Wycliffe. For example, the sermon on the Feast of Many Confessors²⁹ expounds upon Matthew x:5ff., the account of Christ's sending out

the twelve disciples. Wycliffe's sermon is a postil which takes each element of the text in order and comments upon it briefly. His theme, to which he returns repeatedly, is that friars and priests have deviated from the teachings of Christ.

For love of this good Lord and dread of his punishing should be two spurs to Christian men to draw in Christ's yoke; but wanting of belief maketh many men dull in this.

If they would have thanks of God, they should flee simony, and neither sell their preaching nor other works that they do.

Popes will have the first fruits of benefices that they give, and bishops a hundred shillings for hallowing one church; this is worth year by year much rent and much money.

And herefore see many priests, that no man that have cure shall live but on God's part, as on tithes and offerings. For thus lived Christ, highest Pope. What are thou, that will not live thus? Wilt thou be greater than Christ that is Lord of all this world?

And thus men should withdraw their hands from friars that beg when they have preached.

Examples such as these could be multiplied from the same sermon. Also worth noting is that Wycliffe has taken his authority completely from the Bible text, to which he refers frequently.

Lechler proposed that Wycliffe had a dual purpose in his English sermons: to preach them to his Lutterworth church, and to use them as models for his informal training school for missionaries whom he called
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 "Poor Priests."

The Poor Priests were thought to be Oxford students, disciples of Wycliffe, who were willing to leave all for their faith. A certain number of them were plain, unlettered men, perhaps laymen.³¹ They went about in robes of undressed wool, preaching from an English translation of the Vulgate (committed to memory, or perhaps they carried one of the Gospels), avoiding unpriestly pursuits such as hunting and chess, and living off the offerings freely given by the people. Above all, they were preachers, and they were rich only in their knowledge of the Word.³²

Strong circumstantial evidence supports this theory: Wycliffe's belief in the primacy of preaching, coupled with the rapid growth of Lollardry in the fifteenth century. Every important doctrine of the Lollards can be found in Wycliffe's teachings;³³ if there were no Poor Priests, something like them would have to be invented.

THE JUDGMENT OF HISTORY

How does history evaluate the English sermons of Wycliffe? Taken in isolation, the exact weight of Wycliffe's English sermons as a part of his total influence on the flow of events cannot be calculated. If he did organize the Poor Priest movement, and provide each of his missionaries with copies of the sermons to

use as outlines in their own evangelizing, or if the sermons were copied by someone else and used for the same purpose without Wycliffe's participation, then the English sermons must weigh heavily in the genesis of Lollardry and, subsequently, in the Protestant Reformation.

Dargan, the Baptist historian, takes the position that Wycliffe was the only great English preacher before the Reformation³⁴ even though the sermons are not wholly free from scholasticism, the use of allegory, or some "Roman Catholic errors."³⁵ But Stacey rightly makes the point that Wycliffe cannot be judged as if Luther and Calvin had already lived--he must be set firmly against his own background: the medieval schools, the unstirred consciences of the English clergy and laity, and the closed Bible of a domineering Church.³⁶

Judged in this context, Wycliffe stands as a focal point, a turning place where Scholasticism and Reformation meet. He has been termed "the last of the Schoolmen and the first of the Reformers."³⁷ His popular³⁸ designation is "the Morning Star of the Reformation."

In regard to the Reformation, Wycliffe's doctrines were not known to Luther; but they were carried to the Continent by John Hus, whose writings were influential³⁹ in the thinking of the German Reformer. Yet the

Reformation was not truly brought into England from Germany; England incubated her own Reformation.

Trevelyan stated conservatively that Wycliffe's "great merit was this, that he appealed from the Latin-reading classes to the English-speaking public."⁴⁰ Trevelyan traced the growth of the Reformation in England to the seeds which Wycliffe planted: "The doctrinal and ritual reformation of religion in England was not a work of the sixteenth century alone....The English mind moves slowly, cautiously, and often silently. The movement in regard to forms of religion began with Wycliffe."⁴¹

John Wycliffe was posthumously excommunicated and his remains were disinterred, burned, and thrown into a river, in 1428, forty-four years after his death, by order of Pope Martin V.⁴² This extraordinary event led Foxe to exclaim in the Acts and Monuments:

So there is no keeping down of verity, but it will spring up and come out of dust and ashes, as appeared right well in this man; for though they digged up his body, burnt his bones, and drowned his ashes, yet the word of God and the truth of his doctrine, with the fruit and success thereof, they could not burn.⁴³

NOTES

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1

George M. Trevelyan, England in the Age of Wycliffe (London, 1935), p. 104 passim.

2

Winston S. Churchill, A History of the English-Speaking Peoples, Vol. I: The Birth of Britain (New York, 1956), p. 360.

3

Ibid., p. 375.

4

Trevelyan, p. 123.

5

Gotthard Lechler, John Wycliffe and His English Precursors (London, 1884), p. 179.

6

Trevelyan, p. 108.

7

Herbert B. Workman, John Wyclif, Vol. I (Oxford, 1926), p. 37.

8

Ibid., p. 21.

9

Herbert E. Winn, Wyclif: Selected English Works (London, 1929), p. xiv.

10

Harry Caplan, "Classical Rhetoric and the Medieval Theory of Preaching," Historical Studies of Rhetoric and Rhetoricians, (ed.) Raymond F. Howes (Ithaca, New York, 1961), p. 80.

11

Ibid., p. 81.

12

James J. Murphy, "Aristotle's Rhetoric in the Middle Ages," QJS, LII (April 1966), pp. III-115 passim.

13

William W. Capes, The English Church in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries (London, 1920), p. 110.

14

Margaret Deanesly, The Lollard Bible and Other Medieval Biblical Versions (Cambridge, 1920), p. 239.

15

Capes, p. 109.

16

Deanesly, p. 206.

17

Lechler, p. 155.

18

Deanesly, p. 235.

19

Ibid., pp. 274-275. His actual translating activity presents another broad area of inquiry which is not relevant here.

20

Capes, p. 129.

21

G. R. Owst, Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England, Rev. Ed. (New York, 1961), pp. 170, 207.

22

Trevelyan, p. 177.

23

Writings of the Reverend and Learned John Wickliff, D. D. (London, 1831), p. 185.

24

Ibid.

25

Thomas Arnold (ed.), Select English Works of John Wiclif, Vol. I. (Oxford, 1869), p. xiii.

26

Winn, p. xxx.

27

Robert Vaughan, The Life and Opinions of John De Wycliffe, D. D. Vol. I (London, 1828), p. 230.

28

Capes, p. 124.

29

Winn, pp. 50-55. All examples which follow are taken from this sermon. Spelling has been modernized by the present writer.

30

Lechler, p. 176.

31

Deanesly reported that even the parish priests were seldom graduates of a University. The Poor Priest movement could hardly have attracted the most highly educated priests, who were recruited to be university professors, lawyers, and civil servants. pp. 157-160 passim.

32

Lewis Sergeant, John Wyclif (New York, 1893), pp. 268-271 passim.

33

John Stacey, John Wyclif and Reform (Philadelphia, 1964), pp. 140-146 passim.

34

Edwin Charles Dargan, A History of Preaching, Vol. I (Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1954), p. 473.

35

Ibid., p. 339.

36

Stacey, pp. 162-163.

37

This is the subtitle of Lewis Sergeant's biography of Wycliffe. See also Capes, p. 110.

38

Dargan, p. 339.

39

Stacey, p. 157.

40

Trevelyan, p. 306.

41

Ibid., p. 351.

42

Sergeant, p. 335.

43

John Foxe, Acts and Monuments, Vol. III, ed. Rev. Stephen Reed Cattley (London, 1837), p. 96.