



## The Best Book of All, and How it Came to Us

### *Wycliffe Bible*

Years rolled away; and with the flight of time great changes took place in the condition of the British people. The Normans were victorious at the great battle of Hastings in 1066, and the conquerors introduced a new element into the life and speech of the nation. Slowly but surely this element was engrafted upon the old Anglo-Saxon, and the English language received that shape and being which it has manifested ever since. When the language was ready, then God raised up a man to use it in His service, for His glory, and for the nation's welfare. This was Wycliffe, the commanding genius of the 14<sup>th</sup> century and "the Morning Star of the Reformation." Space will only admit of a very brief sketch of his life as a patriot, writer, and reformer. We are chiefly concerned with him here as a translator. But we must not forget that the work of reformation and translation started from the same source and went on side by side. The Bible, long neglected and little known, was brought to light and studied. Its saving truths took possession of pious souls. Then they were filled with the longing, on the one hand to bring back the doctrine and practice of religion to its inspired standard, and, on the other hand, to make it accessible and free to all sorts and conditions of men. Wycliffe welcomed it to his own heart as his delight and counsellor; and, by the Spirit's blessing, it converted him into a humble believer in Christ, a genuine lover of his country, a noble author, a fearless reformer, and a faithful translator. Born in the village of Yorkshire, from which he derived his name, he gave early promise, even in that remote home, of the rare talents and devotion to study for which he was afterwards famous. It is probable that he was still very young when he entered Oxford University, but he soon distinguished himself by his ability and industry. He did not hurry through his course, "they were not misers of their time in those days," but in due season he obtained his degree and was appointed as one of the University lecturers. Unlike the other professors, he used his position to teach the students out of the Word of God. This novel teaching, given with the power and earnestness of a master-mind and a righteous soul, soon attracted numbers and exercised a far-reaching influence. Many must have received first and deep impressions of Divine truth while listening to him in Merton and Balliol Colleges and in Canterbury Hall.

In due time God called him to take his part on another and a wider stage. His voice was heard in the Parliament of the realm denouncing papal tyranny and exaction, and boldly vindicating the rights and liberties of the English people. In 1374 he was sent as one of the Royal Commissioners to Bruges to treat with the Roman Legates about the independence of the British crown and kingdom. His intercourse with the Pope's agents and the insight which he got into their wickedness, made much the same impression upon him as Luther afterwards received from his celebrated visit to Rome; and he returned to England a more determined reformer than ever.

It is needless to say that he could not carry on this work without exciting the hatred and opposition of priest and friars, and even of the Pope himself.

Five Papal Bulls were launched against him by Gregory XI, but these terrible documents were powerless to do him real harm. More than once he was cited to appear before the ecclesiastical authorities and to stand his trial for heresy. In the beginning of his troubles he had a powerful friend in John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster; and he even enjoyed royal favour and patronage.

But later in life he had none to take his part, he was condemned at the Black-friars Priory in London, and yet, by some means or other, he was saved from a fiery martyrdom. In his treatise on The Truth of Holy Scripture, he expressed his expectation of being burned to death. However, God had not so decreed it for him.

The last days of his life were spent quietly in his vicarage at Lutterworth. On December 31, 1384, he was stricken down by paralysis while officiating in his Church, and before the dawn of the new year he passed out of time into eternity.

The malice of his enemies pursued his mortal remains. His bones were dug up and burned and their ashes thrown over the bridge into the Swift.

Then, to use the often-quoted illustration, *"the Swift bore them to the Severn, the Severn carried them to the narrow seas, the narrow seas in turn swept them outward to the ocean; a fit emblem of his doctrine which, from its small beginning, has now spread over the world."*

## **Wycliffe's Translation**

But this great reformer before the Reformation was not only a scholar and an enthusiastic patriot, he was also a practical man; he saw that the appeal must be made to the people, and that they must have the means of judging between truth and error in their own hands. He also saw that, by the suppression of the Bible, they were deprived of their God-given rights and of the one way by which they might know the real religion of Christ Jesus. Moreover, he knew very well that the darkness of the superstition and idolatry, everywhere prevalent, could only be dispelled by the light of the Holy Word itself. Lechler gives good reasons for believing that the Preface to the Gospel Harmony was written by Wycliffe, and in that preface it is laid down as a great fundamental principle that *"Christians ought to travail day and night upon the text of Holy Writ, especially upon the Gospel in their Mother tongue."*

## **Wycliffe's Helpers — Nicholas Hereford**

But he not only contended for this principle, he also worked upon it. He succeeded in translating the New Testament; his friend Nicholas Hereford helped him with the Old; and two years before his death he had the joy of publishing the first English Bible, and giving to his countrymen the means of hearing and reading in their own tongue the wonderful works of God.

He also appointed godly men, full of zeal and piety, to go through the land, bringing with them copies of the new version. And these "poor preachers," as they were called, took every opportunity of setting its saving truths before the people. In town and country, streets and market places, open highways and private houses, they read and expounded the Holy Scriptures, until Gospel light broke in upon the long prevailing darkness, and numbers exchanged their superstitions and idolatries for the pure religion of Jesus Christ. These afterwards, under the nickname of Lollards, became a well-known and widely diffused army of witnesses for the Saviour during the long night of gloom and trouble which preceded the Reformation dawn.

## **Richard Purvey**

Four years after Wycliffe's death, a revision of his English Bible was made under the direction of one Richard Purvey, who calls himself *"a simple creature,"* but who was wise enough to employ some learned men, *"good and cunning fellows,"* to help him in the work. Probably this revision was more widely circulated even than its original. But, at any rate, many copies of both must have been written out, and they became the seed of the great revival of the sixteenth century, which has since yielded such abundant harvest all the world over. (The fact that 170 copies have survived the persecutions of men and the wear and tear of time is a strong testimony to the large numbers which must have been in circulation.)

## ***Here are some Extracts from Wycliffe's Bible:***

### **The Gospel of Matheu, Chapter xvi verses 18 to 21.**

18. And Y seye to thee for thou art Petre and vpon this stoon I shall bilde my churche and the gatis of helle shulen nat han migt ageins it.

19. And to thee I shal geue the keies of the kyngdam of heuenes ; and what euer thou shalt bynde vpon erthe shal be bounden and in heuenes ; and what euer thou shalt vnbynde vpon erthe shal be vnbounden and in heuenes.
20. Thanne he comaundide to his disciplis that thei shulden seie to no man, that he was Crist.

**The Gospel of Mark Chapter i verses 1 to 4.**

1. The bigynnyng of the gospel of Jhesu Crist, the sone of God.
2. As it is writun in Ysaie, the prophete, Lo! I snde myn angel bifore thi face, that schal make thi weye redy before thee.
3. The voice of oon cryinge in desert. Make ye redy the weye of the Lord, make ye his pathis rigtful.
4. Jhon was in desert baptisyng, and preachinge the baptyng of penance into remiszioun of synnes.

**The Gospel of Luke. Chapter xxiv verses 13 to 17.**

- 13 And lo! tweyne of hem wenten in that day to a castel, that was fro Jerusalem in space of sixty furlongis, by name Emaws.
- 14 And thei spaken to gidere of alle thes thingis that hadden falle.
- 15 And it was don while thei talkiden, and sougten with hem silf, Jhesu hi msilf neigyng, wente with hem.
- 16 Sothli her ygen weren hulden lest thei knewen him.
- 17 And he seide to hem Whiche ben thes wordis, that ye speken to gidere goyng and ye ben sorwful?

**The Gospel of Joon. Chapter i verses 1 to 5.**

1. In the bigynnyng was the word, and the word was at God, and God was the word.
2. This was in the bigynnyng at God.
3. Alle thingis ben maad by hym, and with outen him is maad nogt, that thing that is maad.
4. Was lyf in him, and the lyf was the light of men;
5. And the ligt schyneth in derknessis, and derknessis token not it.

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**Note:**

When John Wycliffe and others completed the first English translation of the entire Bible from the Latin Vulgate, the church authorities did all they could to destroy it. Copies had to be written by hand and in secret. Wycliffe distributed parts of them to his followers, called Lollards, who travelled over all England reading them to the people. Many who read and listened were punished, and some were burned at the stake.

Wycliffe himself died in 1384, before he could be punished, but in 1428, at the direction of church authorities, his body was dug up and burned. The ashes were thrown into a nearby stream. The Wycliffe Bible, despite persecutions, was widely used throughout the Fifteenth century. Some people paid the equivalent of more than two hundred dollars for a complete Bible, and others gave a load of hay for a few chapters from a single book. The Word of God was precious in those days.

Courtesy American Bible Society