

## THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE LOLLARD BIBLE

**M**Y 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

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

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