

How common or uncommon was it for such a book as Richard III's English bible to be owned in the fifteenth century? Was his Bible, as the references stated, the translation by Wycliffe? If it was, it would imply several things. First, that Richard was vaguely heterodox, not quite the true son of the Church that he has been thought by us. Alternatively, that Lollard opinions must somehow have become "softened" in the hundred years since their inception in the mid-fourteenth century, and the rooting out of the Lollards and their writings (among which must be included any translation of Scripture made in pursuance of their ends) must have slackened off considerably by Richard's time. Had Lollardy become tolerated by then? Was the heresy of 1380 and onwards the accepted thought of 1480? Or did Richard defy a ban on English Scriptures which the Church authorities were too worldly-wise to press in the case of Royal Duke? Was he so eager to read the Bible in his mother tongue for himself that he scorned the reactionary, hidebound churchmen who forbade it?

None of these propositions seem to me to ring true. The teachings of the Lollards were not such as to secure tolerance for them in a mere one hundred years. Their contempt for authority, their rejection of the Mass, their weird "Levelling" social theories, all ensured opposition from Church, State, and most sensible people of all classes throughout the fifteenth century. I did not believe, either, that there was a ban on all English Bible production or reading: in the fifteenth century, after the invention of movable type, Bibles in German, French, Spanish and other languages (as well as Latin, naturally) were multiplied by the printing press, all the translations emanating from orthodox Catholic sources and made for use in churches as well as by private persons. If other European languages, why not English, whether in print or manuscript? One could, however, well understand a ban on erroneous translations or on those not submitted for Church approval; such a ban would be considered as no more than the duty of the Church as guardian of the Faith.

The dilemma is clear: Richard's Wycliffite Bible was either banned or allowed to be used. If it was banned, Richard was almost a "secret heretic"—a most unlikely role, in my opinion. If it was allowed, then either Lollard heresies were by then regarded as innocuous, or it contained no Lollard heresies. But if it was by Wycliffe it must have contained some in the prologue even if not in the actual text. So did Wycliffe write the "Wycliffite" Bible at all?

This conclusion is startling. It seems impossible. In fact one almost sheered off it altogether and dropped the whole problem as too complicated to hope to solve. It was just another of those mysteries surrounding Richard, of the "That shalt thou know hereafter" type.

Then the Richard III Exhibition in the National Portrait Gallery came up, and one of the books in it was this very Bible of Richard's, labelled in the Catalogue as the Wycliffite version, New Testament only, circa 1390. It was not displayed to best advantage, perhaps, and after peering at it to try to see his ownership mark I passed it by. But the question was raised again and having already begun some work on mediaeval prayer-books I thought it only a small

step to Bibles. I then found a book in which the whole issue outlined above was very fully explored by F. A. (Cardinal) Gasquet, in 1897.¹ He resolved the problem into four questions: what evidence was there to ascribe the first English translation of the whole, or part, of the Bible to Wycliffe? How far did Wycliffe's immediate followers assist in composing the work, and later ones in disseminating it? What prohibitions existed against reading the Scriptures in English? Did an approved English version exist?

Only two pre-Reformation English texts of the whole Bible exist (though the Gospels, the Psalms, the Pentateuch and other sections of both Testaments had many times been translated into English ever since there had been a reading public for the language, and into Anglo-Saxon, Norman French and so on before that). These two full texts are the ones assumed to be by Wycliffe or his followers, and as such were printed in Forshall and Madden's monumental work.² What is the evidence connecting Wycliffe with either or both of these texts? The opinion among scholars is that only the New Testament could actually be Wycliffe's work, and even this ascription is uncertain. Because of the difference in style between this New Testament and the Old (by another hand) Wycliffe may, it is thought, have begun a revision, which he did not live to finish; this revision is the second of the received texts. The names of two disciples of his, John Purvey and Nicholas Hereford, are connected with both editions. So much for the opinions.

Contrary to established legend, Wycliffe, in his undoubted writings, does not specially advocate having the Scriptures in the vernacular, except insofar as this is implied by his claim that the Bible is the sole guide of faith and practice for all. But obviously, Biblical ideals could be put before people in sermons just as well as by reading, and by reading in Latin as well as by doing so in English. In any case, there was no way yet of reproducing many copies, and few could have read them for themselves even if there had been.

Many contemporaries wrote about Wycliffe and his teachings, some for, some against, but, of these, only three or four even mention any connection between him and either a translation of Scripture or a desire to encourage people to read the Bible in English. One is a rumour referred to in 1411 by John Hus in Bohemia, that Wycliffe had translated the whole Bible from Latin to English. Another is a complaint by Henry Knyghton, a Canon of Leicester, that Wycliffe had made "the Gospel of Christ" cheap and common by translating it. Archbishop Arundel, in a letter to the Pope in 1412, detailed two hundred and seventy-six of Wycliffe's errors, and in one of these articles mentioned that he had propagated them in translations of parts of Holy Writ. In 1408, in a Church Council at Oxford, books, booklets or tracts containing translations of Biblical texts by Wycliffe were banned.

The Lollards as a sect laid no great stress on reading the Bible in English, and were certainly not persecuted for doing so. The examinations of many of them are still on record, with the list of over thirty of the most frequently asked questions. These embraced many aspects of Christian faith and practice—but

1. Gasquet, Francis Aidan. *The Old English Bible, and other essays*. London, 1897. (pp. 102-178: *The Pre-Reformation English Bible*.)

2. Forshall, Josiah and Madden, Sir Frederic, editors. *The Holy Bible, containing the Old and New Testaments; with the apocryphal books, in the earliest English versions made from the Latin Vulgate by John Wycliffe and his followers*. 4 vols. Oxford, 1850.

did not include any mention of the vernacular Scriptures. Neither did the Lollards who abjured or recanted make a point of rejecting any such "error." When the houses and property of Lollards were searched, as very frequently happened throughout the fifteenth century, it was to look for books in English or Latin containing heretical opinions, not for English Bibles; nor are English Scriptures as such mentioned as being found. Those who might reply that they were taken for granted, that is, too important to have to mention specifically, have no experience of the detail always given in warrants, and all other legal documents, of the time. (Incidentally, this is what makes Henry Tudor's oblique reference in Richard's attainder to the "shedding of infants' blood" so unreliable as evidence that Henry believed, or wanted other people to believe, that Richard was responsible for the deaths of the Princes. But that is by the way.) If English Bibles had been looked for they would have appeared in the warrants, and *vice versa*.

So if Wycliffe did write a translation of the Bible, did copies of it survive the searching for and destruction of the Lollards and their writings? Secondly, if his text did survive, is it the version we find in the many well-written copies collated and printed by Forshall and Madden as the Wycliffite Scriptures?

What I have already written would seem to indicate that without stronger evidence it would be rash to assent to all the propositions above. What, then, has ensured their acceptance? It is the assumption that the English Church in the Middle Ages rigorously suppressed Bible-reading in English, so that any English Bibles which survive *must* be the work of those hostile to the Church, in particular Wycliffe, and survived in spite of all that the authorities could do to destroy them. The assumption lends an attractive air of romance to the story of the Lollards, persecuted but reading their Bibles by rushlight before the officers hammered on the door at dead of night to drag them away at the behest of the wicked Bishops, who wanted to keep the Word of God from them lest they get above themselves. It is quite unfounded. The Church certainly did not inhibit Bible-reading by anyone, in any language, as has already been shown. The prohibition pointed to as the ban on the English Bible—at the Council of Oxford, 1408—was not a blanket condemnation but a ban on any translation not seen and approved by the diocesan (that is, the bishop), or, if necessary, by the Provincial Council, as a good and faithful rendering. This, as will be agreed, makes all the difference, and there is ample evidence to show that it was so understood and acted upon in the fifteenth century. The Church did destroy one English Bible, as Sir Thomas More relates. It was in the case of Richard Hun, whose copy contained words insulting the Blessed Sacrament. It was *thus* thought to be a Lollard version, and was therefore burnt, after the errors in it were read out at Paul's Cross to the people, who were invited to examine the book for themselves.

This leads us to the question of the present "Wycliffite Scriptures." Firstly, these texts contain nothing that could be construed as in any way contrary to Church teachings, and certainly nothing of the nature of what must have been in Hun's Bible. Indeed, the Prologue to the second (revised) version speaks of the care taken by the translator to use the best glossaries and the works of the most learned commentators and doctors of the Church—all very orthodox, which Wycliffe and his followers certainly were not.

Several of the many copies of these Scriptures which still exist have annotations and additions which make them suitable for use in church services. Richard's own copy has a Kalendar with the appropriate Lessons noted in it; other copies have tables of the Epistles and Gospels read each Sunday. The Lollards set no store by the Mass or church services in general, and would have had no use for such tables: they specialised in lay preaching. Few priests became Lollards, and most of those who did, soon returned to the Church.

Forshall and Madden note the owners of surviving copies, and the list is impressively full of kings, princes, religious houses, bishops—men of position, hostile to Lollard aims, and of undoubted orthodoxy. Examples are Henry VI, Richard, Humphrey of Gloucester, the London Charterhouse, Henry VII, Thomas of Woodstock. The last named, who died in 1397, was the friend of the Archbishop Arundel who is known to have been utterly opposed to the Lollards and, supposedly, to an English Bible. (The sixteenth century historian Strype says that Anne of Bohemia owned a copy of the Gospels in English, for which her piety was commended by Archbishop Arundel, to whom she had sent the translation for his approval.) A nun of the Abbey of Barking owned a copy which contained a tract by Richard Rolle of Hampole, the widely-read fourteenth century English mystic. One copy was owned by the Marian bishop, Bonner, another by the Prior of St. John's, Clerkenwell. Other copies were mentioned in wills openly proved in the Bishops' Courts; some were bequeathed to convents, abbeys, or churches. One was left to the St. Nicholas Chantry of Holy Trinity Church, York, by its chaplain John Hopton in 1394; another was left to Syon, a religious house famed for its exemplary piety and learning.

Many of these volumes are large and well-executed, with painted borders and ornamentation. Could such books have been made or used, or meant for use, by the small, persecuted sect who read the Bible, we are told, clandestinely? And many of the copies, remember, like Thomas of Woodstock's and Richard's own, originated in the 1380's and 1390's, the very time when the searchings and confiscations were at their height.

A final point is that Wycliffe, when he quotes extracts from the Scriptures never uses "his" translation, but Bishop Pecock in his work *refuting* Wycliffe's arguments always quotes from the version commonly known as Wycliffite. There is even some evidence that churches which had Biblical texts painted on their walls used the "Wycliffite" version.

The conclusion is inescapable that the English Bible thought to be the proscribed work of John Wycliffe is in fact a perfectly orthodox, approved translation widely used by English Catholics in the fifteenth century, with the consent and even encouragement of the Church. If Wycliffe ever did make a Scriptural translation either of some texts, or the New Testament (but not the whole Bible), the copies made of it must be presumed to have perished, like Hun's. Wycliffe himself ended his days quietly, having recanted at least so far as to be allowed to live unmolested at Lutterworth, where he died in 1384 of a stroke, while hearing Mass. Of his two companions, Purvey made his peace with the Church, while Hereford did the same, and, after holding ecclesiastical offices in the diocese of Hereford, resigned them and died a Carthusian monk.

In the light of further and more recent research this article lays itself open to discussion as well as refutation. The writer fully appreciates this point and is willing to accept this responsibility and welcomes any criticisms that may arise.