

The Dr. Gene Scott Bible Collection

STATION 10: WYCLIFFE: The "Morning Star" of the Reformation



Overview of Station 10; note Wycliffe's portrait

John of Wycliffe, of noble birth, was born before 1324; even as a student at Oxford, in 1356, he "published" a tract, "The Last Age of the Church," which looked at the sad state of Europe, morally and ecclesiastically, and found a counterpoint to its depravity in the love and intercession of the Redeemer. Wycliffe entered the priesthood; by 1360, at Oxford, he was outspokenly opposed to the Mendicant Friars, once itinerant clerics, but by then reveled in wealth and power as the direct agents of the Pope. Wycliffe, like Luther some time later, attacked corruptions with the Bible in hand, "feeling his way into the clearer light of truth."

In 1366 Wycliffe, as Professor of Sacred Theology at Oxford, convinced himself that the sacred Word needed to be read and preached in a form people could understand. After being a Commissioner negotiating with papal emissaries at Bruges, observing first hand the venality and corruption of the Roman courtiers ("Antichrist stood revealed before him"), he returned to England, where his open expression of his doctrines on reform landed him in hot water with the clerical establishment. About 1376, Wycliffe undertook his great task of translating the Bible into English, from the Latin Vulgate version, knowing full well the Pope would prohibit its "publication" (which in those days before printing meant reading a manuscript aloud, or

making it available for copying).

The translation was completed about 1380, and "publication" commenced immediately - as did opposition to it. His chief opponent, Henry Knighton, canon of Leicester, said,

*"And so the gospel
pearl is cast abroad,
to be trodden underfoot
of swine; and what was
dear to clergy and
laity is now rendered,
as it were, the common
jest of both; so that
the gem of the Church
becomes the derision of
laymen, and that is now
their's forever..."*

Wycliffe was the right man at the right time, for the English language was no longer exclusively for use by peasants, but was spoken at court as well. The easing of feudalism, the rise of commerce, and the general disgust with the corruption and vices of the clergy made Wycliffe's plan of widespread publication both popular and timely. Wycliffe died in December 1385; Knighton commented that Wycliffe's followers, preachers of the Gospel in the people's language, were so numerous that if two people met on a road, one was bound to be a "Wycliffite."

A bill in the House of Lords in 1390 to suppress Wycliffe's version was defeated, in part because of the argument that if it were to be suppressed because it led to heresy, then the Latin Bible, source of the greatest percentage of heresies, should be treated equally. A convocation at Oxford in 1408 banned translation and publication of the Scriptures except under ecclesiastical approval, prohibiting public and private reading of any translation from Wycliffe onwards. This, the only authoritative prohibition of English scriptures, hung suspended, an instrument of official terror, over the heads of all who dared read the Word in their own tongue.

In 1415, Wycliffe was branded a heretic by the Council of Constance, which ordered his bones disinterred and thrown far from Holy Ground; this was done in 1428. After Wycliffe's death, a revised version of his Bible began to circulate, attributed to John Purvey, a staunch "Lollard" (as Wycliffe's followers were known) who recanted in 1401. Purvey's version deliberately omitted Wycliffe's name - no need to remind anyone of the prohibitions!

What Wycliffe undertook, and others carried on, became the predominant English version throughout the 15th century and the beginning of the 16th, until the time of Tyndale, when

newly discovered manuscripts in Greek and Hebrew rendered any translation solely out of the Vulgate obsolete. In fact, none of Wycliffe's version was printed until 1731 (the New Testament), and the complete Wycliffe Bible had to wait until 1850! The Wycliffe material shown at Station 10 includes:



The first printed edition of Wycliffe's Testament;

*Click on the picture
for a closer view.*

- **Wycliffe's Testament - First Printed Edition** - Only 160 examples were printed in 1731. The one shown is one of eleven "large paper" copies printed, and the only such example in private hands.



Second printed edition of Wycliffe's Testament;

*Click on the picture
for a closer view.*

- **Wycliffe's Testament - Second Printed Edition** - 1810, with the text being that of the Purvey revision from two early 15th century manuscripts.
- **Wycliffe's Testament - Third Printed Edition** - Produced in "Black Letter" type in 1848, and based on an older, "unrevised" manuscript.



First complete printed edition of Wycliffe's complete Bible;

*Click on the picture
for a closer view.*

- **First Complete Printed Wycliffe Bible** - Printed at Oxford in 1850, in four volumes, including a description of all extant Wycliffe manuscripts known at the time.

STATION LOCATION MAP

Below is a floor plan map of the Cathedral in 3 sections, one for each level. The first section is the Lower Level, the second is the Foyer Level, and the third is the Mezzanine Level. This station is located in the "Smoking Room" on the Lower Level at the red #10.



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