

The History of the Reformation...Part 4

HOW GOD
IN KINDNESS
PROVIDED
US AN
ENGLISH
BIBLE



The Latin Vulgate...

The Bible Up to the Time of Wycliffe

In 1377, the English Parliament implemented a new tax...a poll tax. It was levied against every man and woman in England. It was even levied against adolescents above a certain age. It was not terribly high as taxes go...only four pence a year per person. Still, from the very beginning of its implementation it caused an enormous amount of anxiety and anger across England. That anxiety...that anger was especially intense among peasant farmers and yeoman...lower class tradesmen.

While everyone had to pay the tax, the tax hit the lower class much harder than it did the nobility.

The purpose of the tax was to help finance the continued war effort against France. I mentioned last week that the ongoing 100 Years War between France and England caused enormous suffering in both England and France. The increase in revenue was needed because of the reduced population. Plague had wiped out somewhere between one third to one half of the population. As a result of the

plague, the crown had fewer subjects paying tax and therefore received less tax revenue. Fewer people meant fewer coins in the treasury. So politicians...why is this not surprising...politicians decided to raise taxes on those who had survived the onslaught of the plague. Fewer people paying taxes meant everyone had to do their share by paying more.

That sort of attitude on the part of the government outraged peasants and yeoman alike. It turned the lower classes against the Parliament, against the church, and especially against the King's Privy Council.

You can understand why.

Only a few decades before many of the peasants and yeomen had been under the bondage of feudal overlords. They worked for their feudal landowners at something like slave's wages. They were linked inextricably to the land and unable to break away from the servitude they were under. The plague had changed all that; in a sense, it ended feudalism and delivered countless peasants from the bondage of serfdom. The plague had reduced the labor force so drastically that peasants and yeomen alike were able for the very first time to demand and receive higher wages. Peasants and yeomen began to flex their economic muscle, but now the crown seemed to want to put them back in their place...to take the increase wages they were receiving back.

I mean think about it. To the peasants the poll tax must have seemed like a government conspiracy to rob them of their new higher standard of living.

The peasants grumbled.

The government, of course, refused to listen. In fact, the government squeezed the lower class even harder. It continued the tax into the next year...1379. The government was so pleased with the additional revenue it received that in 1380 it tripled the poll tax to twelve pence per year.¹

Protests and demonstrations broke out against the government.

The country became a powder keg with a very short fuse.

In 1381 an unnamed tax collector lit the fuse. Here's what happened.

In county Kent, an unnamed tax collector was making his rounds trying to access what kind of revenue he was going to be able to collect. As he was making his rounds, he ran into a young girl that he believed to be older than she made out. It is not quite clear what happened next, but most historians believed he sexually assaulted the young girl in an attempt to discern whether or not she was older than she claimed.²

When her father, Walter, found out what happened he tracked down the tax collector and beat his brains out with a hammer. Walter was tiler...a man who installed roofing tiles. The event and subsequent history has more or less renamed him as Wat Tyler.

When the other peasants and yeomen learned what Tyler had done they flocked to him in droves. Within a matter of days, Wat Tyler had gathered 100,000 men around him. They marched on Canterbury raising a ruckus as they went, beating government officials and tax collectors along the way.

When they got to Maidstone they freed the radical preacher John Ball. John Ball was a sort of travelling itinerant preacher who advocated the destruction of all churches. He also advocated that church property be split up and divided among the peasants. He was widely believed to be a follower of Wycliffe and there were places where what they taught aligned, but Ball was clearly a lot more radical than Wycliffe. Anyway, Ball preached to the assembled rioters at Blackeath and worked the rioters up to a frenzy.

This is the most famous part of Ball's sermon.:

“When Adam delved (did plow) and Eve span (did spin), ‘Who was then the gentleman?’ From the beginning all men by nature were created alike, and our bondage or servitude came in by the unjust oppression of naughty men. For if God would have had any bondmen from the beginning, he would have appointed who should be bond, and who free. And therefore I exhort you to consider that now the time is come, appointed to us by God, in which ye may (if ye will) cast off the yoke of bondage, and recover liberty.”

From Canterbury they moved on to London, burning and looting as they went. In London, they cornered the High Chancellor and the Lord High Treasurer at the Tower of London. The High Chancellor also happened to be the Archbishop of Canterbury. His name was Sudbury. They drug him to a nearby hill and after eight blows to his neck managed to cut off his head. They stuck it on a pike, and marched on to where the king was holed up with his family.

Two days later, after the rioters swore oaths of loyalty to the king, King Richard, the boy king of England, met with them and Wat Tyler at Smithfield. Richard conceded to every demand Tyler made. At some point in the meeting, Wat Tyler called for water to drink and either spat out the water near the King's feet or made

some sort of crude gesture like gargling the water in the King's presence which caused the Mayor of London to jerk out a short sword and drive it into Wat Tyler's throat. The crowd was thrown into confusion until the young king volunteered to lead the protestors himself.³ He promptly led them out of London eventually dismissing them to their homes. After the crowds were dispersed the government methodically rounded up all its leaders and executed them.

Altogether, they executed somewhere between 1,500 and 1,700 peasants.

Now I tell that whole story not just to show the kind of tension that permeated Wycliffe's world but to continue my theme that God's providence and infinite wisdom lay behind the events of history that led to Wycliffe and Tyndale being instruments in God's hand to give us an English Bible.

You will remember if you were here last week that I made the point that the Bishop of London, a man named William Courtenay, attempted to try John Wycliffe at St. Paul's in London and that prior to the trial the men defending Wycliffe got into an argument as to whether Wycliffe would be allowed to sit or whether he would be made to stand during the questioning. The argument got so intense that the trial never actually took place. John of Gaunt, the Duke of Lancaster, and the four Dominican friars with Wycliffe fought their way with swords out of St. Paul's and escorted Wycliffe back to Oxford where he was placed under house arrest. No doubt Wycliffe would have been tried eventually and executed if not for the fact that the very next year the Great Schism occurred in the Catholic Church and the papacy was divided so that now instead of being one Pope in France or in Italy there were two popes, one in Avignon and one in Rome. The divided papacy and

the confusion that it caused allowed the English Parliament to more or less ignore any directives by the church against Wycliffe.

That fact gave Wycliffe between four and five years of uninterrupted peace in which to write against the church and to supervise a translation of the Bible. Wycliffe was able to write freely and without interference. He wrote against the Pope and against the doctrine of transubstantiation. He formulated his ideas about the freedom of the individual to relate to God without the help or interference of the Church. He pressed to make that a possibility by encouraging a number of Lollard minded scholars to help him translate the Bible into English. He even wrote to Parliament explaining his views in a number of clear and easy to understand theses.⁴

The Peasant's Revolt, however, threatened to put an end to Wycliffe's time of peace. It threatened to undo it because when Wat Tyler's peasant army beheaded Sudbury they beheaded a man who was by in large sympathetic to both Wycliffe and the Lollards. When King Richard was forced to replace the murdered Sudbury, he appointed the one man in England who was the least sympathetic to Wycliffe. He appointed the very man who had attempted to try him four years earlier. He appointed William Courtenay to be Sudbury's replacement as the new Archbishop of Canterbury and as High Chancellor.

Courtenay wasted no time in moving against Wycliffe. He made every attempt to connect the Wat Tyler rebellion to Wycliffe. He reasoned that since Tyler and John Ball were sympathetic to Wycliffe, it was probably Wycliffe that sparked their actions.⁵

Five months later Courtenay called for a Synod at Blackfriars and tried Wycliffe in abstentia. During the Synod, the men that composed it worked their way through a list of propositions gathered from Wycliffe's writing. They judged fourteen of them to be in error, and they judged ten of them to be heretical.

Just as the synod was about to pass judgment on Wycliffe a powerful earthquake rocked London toppling a number of towers and destroying houses and generally wreaking havoc on the city. The priest and scholars at Blackfriars fled into the street because they thought the earthquake had been sent by God to pronounce judgment on both them and their synod. But Courtenay, driven by his hatred for Wycliffe, was up to the challenge.

He ordered them all back inside and explained that the earthquake was simply the earth's way of ridding itself of noxious and poisonous vapors that build up inside the earth. An earthquake was nothing more than the earth passing gas.⁶ He then added it was their responsibility to empower the church to do the same thing with the noxious and poisonous vapors that had built up in it...and by that he meant to get rid of Wycliffe.

They condemned Wycliffe's doctrines though not Wycliffe personally and went on to excommunicate a number of the young scholars associated with Wycliffe, Hereford, Repyndon, Aston, and Bedeman.⁷ The idea, I think, was to divide and conquer...to get rid of Wycliffe, to strip away his supporters, to suppress his teaching, and then finally to imprison or execute him. Eventually, Courtenay was able to bring enough pressure against Oxford that Wycliffe too was banned from the school.

That same year, Wycliffe retired from Oxford to Lutterworth.

Once he was gone from the school, his books were rounded up and burned. Fortunately, Wycliffe carried most of his books, tracts, and sermons with him. No doubt Courtenay would have finally succeeded against Wycliffe had two things not happened.

The House of Commons stepped in and prevented him from carrying out any of his designs against the Lollards, and secondly Wycliffe had a severe stroke just months after he retired to Lutterworth.⁸ That was in 1382.

I think both Courtenay and those that opposed him thought Wycliffe was about to die. In fact, I think there was an unspoken consensus to simply let nature take its course. Of course, Wycliffe did not die. His greatest and most important success lay in front of him.

In 1383, the Italian Pope called for a new crusade against the French Pope and offered anew the idea of obtaining a religious indulgence for getting rid of true papacy's enemies. Wycliffe, of course, wrote against that in scathing terms. He wrote relentlessly against transubstantiation. He wrote against the wickedness of the mendicant friars. He wrote against the greed and insolence of the church. But in the background there was a slow rhythmic pulse behind all he wrote...finish the Bible, preach the Bible; finish the Bible, preach the Bible; finish the Bible, preach the Bible.

In 1382, the first version of the Wycliffe Bible appeared. There is a sense in which it was remarkable. There is also a sense in which it was terrible. It was a terribly wooden translation...a word for word translation that was almost impossible to

read. Most of the translation has been attributed to Nicholas Hereford, the young Lollard I mentioned a few moments ago as having been excommunicated by Courtenay. Still, people clamored to get a copy. Everyone wanted to read it. But they were hard to produce. It took somewhere between six months and year to hand copy a single Bible. It was so prized that those who possessed copies sometimes rented them out to others. The standard price or rental fee was a load of hay for one day with the text.

Wycliffe and his associates hurried to smooth out the translation. In 1384, they updated the translation and it was spread far and wide across England. Later on it too would be suppressed. In fact, it would eventually become a capital offense to own or to distribute a Wycliffe Bible. By Tyndale's day a hundred and fifty years later, people were being killed not just for having an English Bible but for things far less sinister, things like teaching one's children to say the Creed or the Lord's Prayer in English.

Part of that suppression started in 1401 when Parliament passed the law *De Haeretico Comburendo* authorizing the punishment of heretics by burning them at the stake.⁹ This law was one of the strictest religious censorship statutes ever enacted in England.

The statute declared there were "different false and perverse people of a certain new sect who make and write books; they do wickedly instruct and inform people and commit subversion of the said catholic faith".¹⁰

The sect alluded to in the law is of course the Lollards, the followers of John Wycliffe. The law *De Haeretico Comburendo* was passed some seventeen years after Wycliffe's death, but it was aimed against Wycliffe just the same.

De heretico comburendo urged "that this wicked sect, preachings, doctrines, and opinions, should from henceforth cease and be utterly destroyed," and it declared "that anyone having such books or any writings of such wicked doctrine and opinions, shall deliver or cause to be delivered such books and writings to the one in charge of the diocese within forty days from the time of the proclamation of this ordinance and statute."

"And if any person...fails to deliver such books, the one in charge of the diocese shall cause such persons to be arrested. If they fail to abjure their heretical beliefs, or relapse after an initial abjuration, they shall be burnt, that such punishment may strike fear into the minds of others."

That was the action of the civil magistrate.

The ecclesiastical powers were not to be outdone. They added a new twist.

In 1408 the English clergy, meeting at Oxford under the direction of Archbishop Thomas Arundel, passed what are known as the "Constitutions of Oxford." These laws outlawed the reading and translation of the Scriptures into the English vernacular without the permission of the bishop. The laws declared the English translation of the Bible to be illegal. Those who were discovered with copies could be charged with heresy. The Constitutions of Oxford remained in effect for nearly one hundred and thirty years until King Henry VIII licensed the Matthews Bible to circulate in 1537.¹¹

Now up until that time, Wycliffe's Bible was not illegal. It was unauthorized by the church but not illegal. Up until that time, you could own and read a Wycliffe Bible without serious repercussion. But when you combine these two laws, *De Haeretico Comburendo* and the *Constitutions of Oxford* together owning or reading the Bible in English warranted the death penalty.

De Haeretico Comburendo ruled heresy was punishable by fire.

The *Constitutions of Oxford* ruled having or reading an English Bible was heretical.

You can see how they fit hand in hand and how they would come to be a terror. But all that was still twenty years away.

Wycliffe died on the last day of December 1384. He was attending Mass at St. Mary's and the moment the priest lifted the bread in the Mass to consecrate it, Wycliffe suffered a dreadful stroke and slid out of his chair onto the floor.¹² He was carried out the side door of the church to his home where he died peaceably a few days later without ever regaining the ability to speak.

He was buried in good standing with the Roman Church. His views were condemned but Wycliffe himself was not condemned or excommunicated until the Council of Constance in 1415. No, Wycliffe would rest quietly in the consecrated ground of St. Mary's for some forty-four years until as I mentioned last week a group of men snuck into the church, uncovered his grave, and burned his bones at the stake.

So what are we to make of the life and work of Wycliffe.

Well for one thing, I think it is important to note that the entirety of our life is important to God. Our life is not to be lived for Christ simply while we are young, or while we are middle-aged or even when we are old. We are to live our whole life before God in gratitude. We are to do that while we are busy raising our children, or trying to buy new carpet, or even when we are trying to get figure out how to collect our Medicare benefits.

There is no point in our life when we are too young and inexperienced or too old and forgetful in which our life is to be anything other than fully committed to the Lord. Wycliffe shows us that in spades. He spent nearly his entire life in service to Christ as an academic at Oxford only to be pushed out at Oxford in the end. But that did not cause him to quit or sit in idle bitterness. No, the very time in which the church thought it had finally marginalized him was the moment God used him most fully to accomplish his purpose.

Secondly, I think Wycliffe's life should remind us that righteousness and true holiness will always be opposed by the world, the flesh, and the devil. It ought to remind us that we are not our own but are rather his workmanship created for good works in Christ Jesus. It ought to remind us, I think, that living any sort of fully committed, fully engaged Christian life will bring us a measure of opposition and heartache.

Finally, Wycliffe's life ought to remind us that the Word of God must have a place of centrality in our life. It is not simply a tool for directing our lives. It is not simply a handbook for living. It is rather like a fountain from which our never-ending thirst must be satisfied. We must drink from it; grow from it; live out of it. It is the

principle means God has ordained to bring us to Christ, to grow us in Christ, and even to sustain us in Christ.

We must drink deeply from it corporately and individually all the days of our lives.

Now I want to take the few moments we have to introduce you the text Wycliffe had at his disposal. This will be crucial to understanding the difference between the work of Wycliffe and Tyndale.

The Old Testament was written over a period of somewhere around a thousand years. If we use the most conservative dates, and I think we should, that would mean that the Old Testament was written between 1400 B.C. and 480 to 400 B.C.

It is possible, even likely, that parts of the Old Testament were derived from an earlier oral tradition but that does not mean that Old Testament authors simply wrote down what they had learned by memory. No, the Holy Spirit moved men along both in what they wrote and how they arranged what they wrote.

The bulk of the Old Testament was written in Hebrew with a smattering of it being written in Aramaic.

As the Old Testament was being finalized, the nation of Israel was continually being disrupted and displaced. Jews went dispersed time and time again because of their disobedience to their covenant with God. The two major displacements occurred in 722 B.C. when the northern tribes were carried off to Assyria and again

in 586 B.C. when the southern tribes, Judah and Benjamin were carried off to Babylon.

As a result of these displacements, more Jews came to live outside of Palestine than were living in it. Many Jews also relocated to Egypt.

Shortly after the Jews became spread throughout the Middle East, Alexander the Great conquered the known world. The principle impact of his success was that the entire world came to have a dominant language of business and trade. That language was Koine Greek...a sort of common Greek.

Those Jews outside of the Holy Land eventually came to embrace that language and their mastery of Hebrew gave way to a mastery of Greek. That was especially true of the Jews living in Egypt. As a result, the Jews in Egypt felt compelled to make their own translation of the Hebrew Old Testament in Greek. This translation occurred roughly around 250 B.C.

It was called the LXX or Septuagint. It was called that because tradition says there were 70 Hebrew scholars involved in its translation.

Let's review.

The Old Testament was originally written in Hebrew over a thousand year period stretching from 1400-400 B.C. After the dispersion of the Jews from the land of Palestine, it was translated into Greek, into the Septuagint, around 250 B.C.

The Greek New Testament took much less time to complete than did the Old Testament. It was written somewhere between 50-100 A.D. It was, of course, written in Greek. Now it was written in stages, of course, but it was basically complete by the end of the first century A.D.

As the Roman Empire spread worldwide, the dominant language of trade and travel began to change at least in the west from Greek to Latin. As the church grew, hundreds of Latin translations of the Bible, especially the New Testament, sprang up. The most famous of these translations was called the Old Latin. There was no standard translation of the Bible in Latin.

Around 385 A.D., the Bishop of Rome asked St. Jerome to create a new Latin text of the Bible for the Latin speaking church. Jerome did so using the very best Greek and Hebrew manuscripts he could find. His translation was not well-received at the beginning but later became the authorized text of the Bible. It remained so for over 1,000 years. It was called the Latin Vulgate.

Along the way, of course, it was copied and recopied and added to and messed with. There were no printing presses so variations of the text sprang up as might well imagine.

The Vulgate was the translation of the Medieval Church. It was the text that Wycliffe used to translate his English Bible. That means, at very best, Wycliffe's Bible was a translation of a translation or perhaps in the Old Testament a translation of a translation of a translation.

The reason Wycliffe wanted to translate the Bible into English was because so few people knew or read Latin. Only the more educated scholars and priests knew Latin. Most of the nobility in England read and spoke Norman, an early dialect of French.

Of course Wycliffe's desire was not just to put the Bible into English. Rather, it was to liberate the gospel from the bondage of incoherent Latin.

Now in 1516, right at the beginning of the Reformation, Erasmus edited and printed a Greek New Testament. It was the first edition of the Greek New Testament ever printed or published. Now Erasmus was not principally interested in the Greek New Testament. Rather he was interested in providing a better Latin New Testament, a corrected and updated version.

Erasmus was a loyal Catholic. He did not want to get rid of the Latin Bible. He wanted to update and improve it.

His Greek New Testament was printed alongside his updated Latin Vulgate. Because it was rushed to the printing press to be the first Greek New Testament ever printed it was filled with errors.

Erasmus reprinted a corrected version three years later in 1519. Luther used Erasmus' second edition of the Greek New Testament as his basis for this German translation of the Bible.

Erasmus then printed a third edition of his Greek New Testament in 1522. It was the edition William Tyndale used for his translation of the Bible into English. You

can see that Tyndale's version was a much better translation of the Bible coming directly from the Hebrew Old Testament and the Greek New Testament filtered being through the Latin Vulgate.

Wycliffe was first to translate the Bible into English but Tyndale was the first to do an English translation based on the original texts.

Are there any questions? Let's pray.

¹ John Laird Wilson, *Life of Wycliffe* (New York: Funk and Wagnals, 1884), 184.

² Wilson, 184.

³ Wilson, 188.

⁴ Wilson, 195.

⁵ Wilson, 190.

⁶ Lewis Sargent, *John Wycliffe* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1893), 304.

⁷ Reginald Lane Poole, *Wycliffe and Movements for Reform* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1889), 109.

⁸ Poole, 110.

⁹ See my lesson included in my series on Luther.

<http://www.posttenebraslux.com/adobe%20pdf%20files/reformation/Lesson%2004...De%20Haeretic%20Comburendo.pdf>

¹⁰ *Statutes of the Realm 2:125-28:2 Henry IV*. See <http://www.ric.edu/faculty/rpotter/heretico.html>
I have simplified the language of the law for this lesson.

¹¹ http://www.solagroup.org/articles/historyofthebible/hotb_0006.html

¹² Sargent, 334-5.