

HIST 406a
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By submitting this essay, I attest that it is my own work, completed in accordance with University regulations.—Louisa Inskip

Lollard Bible Translation: Severing the Connection
Between Language and Intellectual Privilege

by Louisa Inskip

The Lollard Bible, an English translation of the entire Vulgate that was completed in the final two decades of the fourteenth century by followers of John Wycliffe, was the first comprehensive vernacular translation of scripture in western Europe that was intended for popular use. A translation into French had been commissioned for Charles V, king of France, but it did not circulate widely outside the court.¹ Partial renderings of scripture into vernacular—both in what is now Great Britain and in continental Europe—had existed at least since the time of Bede, a Northumbrian monk who translated the book of John in the early eighth century.² Such selections, however, were created primarily for the teaching of lay people and for lower clergy ignorant of Latin. Thus, only sections useful for instruction—primarily the gospels, the epistles, and the psalms—were available in the vernacular.³ Educated clergy, then, had control over which portions of Scripture illiterate laity could access. The advent of the English Wycliffite Bible was a watershed event in the history of western Christianity because it made the entirety of canonized scripture directly available to anyone who could read vernacular English or have it read to them.

This paper will explore four questions regarding the Lollard Bible. First, who were the translators and why did they undertake their task? Second, what methods did they use? Third,

¹ Margaret Deanesly, *The Significance of the Lollard Bible* (London, 1951), 4.

² John D. Long, *The Bible in English: John Wycliffe and William Tyndale* (New York, 1998), 34-35.

³ Deanesly, *The Significance of the Lollard Bible*, 4.

what was the Catholic Church's stance regarding vernacular translation and how did the Lollards respond to it? Finally, what influence did the Wycliffite Bible actually have on contemporary and subsequent religious history; were the actual results similar to those Wycliffe and his followers had envisioned? John Wycliffe aimed to bring about a return to the primitive Church as it existed during the time of the apostles. Through the translation of scripture into vernacular English, his followers sought to further this goal by enabling lay people both to hold clergy accountable for their behavior and to study and apply God's law more directly to their own lives. Although the translation project did not effect a return to the apostolic Church, it did increase popular access to theology, scholarship, and independent thought.

Translation of the Lollard Bible took place in the final two decades of the fourteenth century, probably at Oxford. Scholars roughly divide surviving manuscripts of the Bible into two versions—an Early Version (EV), which closely follows Latin syntax, and a Later Version (LV) in more idiomatic English. The EV was most likely composed between 1380 and 1384, while contextual evidence in the General Prologue, six of the nine surviving copies of which are attached to manuscripts of the LV, indicates 1395-1397 as a plausible range of dates for the origin of the LV.⁴ Since Wycliffe died in 1384, he could not have participated directly in compiling the LV. Modern scholars generally agree that considering the volume of academic writings Wycliffe completed in the last five years of his life, he probably did not translate EV himself either although he may have instigated the project. Whatever Wycliffe's direct involvement, the Lollard translators would certainly have been inspired by his advocacy of scriptural authority and vernacular translation in such works as *On the Truth of Holy Scripture* and *De Officio Pastoralis*. Who, then, translated the works? Evidence from several manuscripts

⁴ Deansley, *The Significance of the Lollard Bible*, 3; Anne Hudson, *The Premature Reformation: Wycliffite Texts and Lollard History* (Oxford 1988), 247.

suggests that Nicholas Hereford, a radical Lollard and Oxford master of arts, was responsible for translating EV through Baruch 3:20. Scholars have very made very tenuous arguments in favor of assigning responsibility for the remainder of EV as well as the entire LV to John Purvey, Wycliffe's secretary and one of his most devoted followers. Hudson, however, asserts that scholars misplace their efforts in seeking a sole translator due to the clear and more compelling fact that translating the two large folio volumes of the Vulgate was a collaborative project.⁵ Indeed, an original manuscript of the EV was written in five hands, and in the General Prologue the translator of LV says that he "hadde myche trauaile with diuerse felawis and helperis."⁶ A number of educated Lollards worked toward a common purpose.

The translators most likely had in mind Wycliffe's vision of a return to the "primitive Church" detailed in the Gospels; creating an English Bible could further this goal in two ways.⁷ First, it would serve as an authority with which to challenge fourteenth century canonists, who had made significant Church reform impossible as they assigned nearly unlimited power to the pope.⁸ Although canon law had by Wycliffe's time taken the place of scripture in defining Church jurisdiction, Wycliffites considered "Goddis law" as expounded in scripture the only source of rules for the conduct of men and the role of Church.⁹ By creating an English Bible, the translators asserted the independence and supremacy of "Goddis law" from the corrupt external trappings of the Church and the interpretations placed upon it by a corrupt clergy. In a similar vein, possessing an English Bible would enable all believers to hold clergy accountable for practices that scripture did not justify, such as the holding of secular office. Ng observes, "If not

⁵ Hudson, *The Premature Reformation*, 241-242.

⁶ Deanesly, *The Significance of the Lollard Bible*, 3; Prologue to the Wycliffite Bible, Chapter 15, in Hudson, ed., *Selections from English Wycliffite Writings* (Toronto 1997), 67.

⁷ Deanesly, *The Significance of the Lollard Bible*, 23.

⁸ Deanesly, *The Significance of the Lollard Bible*, 8,15.

⁹ Deanesly, *The Significance of the Lollard Bible*, 8.

a contractual promise between ruler and ruled, scripture nonetheless serves as a possible template for redress because it is a promise made by God to hold rulers accountable.”¹⁰ Second, in addition to holding members of Church hierarchy responsible for their actions, access to scripture in English would enable the laity to come to know God’s law directly without priests as intermediaries. As one Wycliffite wrote, “To hem that shulen be sauid the herynge and the redyng of the word of God ben the beest and moost trewe meenis of her saluacion.”¹¹ Lollards believed that Christians follow God most closely when they study His law in scripture. In fact, Wycliffites disdained modern criticism of the Bible, approving only of exegesis by the Church Fathers whose interpretations were in accord with scripture.¹² Wycliffe and his followers believed in providing Christians with an unglossed text to enable them both to check corrupt clergy members’ transgressions and to follow God’s law independent of their guidance, two purposes that would, ideally, return the Church to its apostolic purity. The philosophy and techniques the translators employed attest to this.

First of all, although the Lollards felt that God’s message is found chiefly in the Gospels and the Epistles, and although they had very specific opinions regarding the correct interpretation of scripture, the translators sought as far as possible to present a complete and unbiased rendering of the entire Bible in English. 250 manuscripts of the Wycliffite Bible survive today in various degrees of completeness. Of these, 21 contain or probably once contained the complete Bible, while 89 comprise the New Testament only, 15 the Gospels, and 4 the Epistles. This distribution, verified by episcopal records of seizures from heresy suspects, indicates the

¹⁰ Su Fang Ng, “Translation, Interpretation, and Heresy: The Wycliffite Bible, Tyndale’s Bible, and the Contested Origin,” *Studies in Philology* 98 (Summer 2001): 324.

¹¹ Hudson. *The Premature Reformation*, 273.

¹² Hudson, *The Premature Reformation*, 275; Kantik Ghosh, *The Wycliffite Heresy: Authority and the Interpretation of Texts* (New York 2002), 1.

Lollards' general assessment of the relative importance of the various sections of the Bible.¹³

However, instead of translating the Gospels into English first, the translators apparently worked from the beginning of the Old Testament to the end of the New—the increased readability of the translated Gospels in comparison to the Latinized English prose of the Old Testament translation in the EV suggests that the fluency of translation increased as the scholars worked from beginning to end of the Bible.¹⁴

Thus, although the translators most likely had personal opinions regarding the merit of various sections of the Bible, they aimed to present a transparent rendering of scripture as true as possible to God's original meaning, saving polemic and interpretation for separate documents such as the General Prologue. The same is true, with one exception, of the surviving manuscripts of the Glossed Gospels, in which the Lollard compilers sought to disinterestedly bring together the commentary of great scholars on each of four gospel books.¹⁵ Lollard translators and biblical scholars, then, did not seek to distort the words of God or other critics to their own advantage; while they aimed to forward Wycliffite doctrine in documents of their own authorship, they respected the integrity of text they did not create and thus empowered Christians to make their own judgements from genuine documents.

Chapter fifteen of the General Prologue, attributed without certainty to John Purvey, provides the primary source of insight into how the translators went about their work. Nine copies of the Prologue survive, six attached to LV manuscripts, two to revised EV manuscripts, and one standing alone. It is important to note that about 200 LV manuscripts exist without the

¹³ Hudson, *The Premature Reformation*, 232.

¹⁴ Hudson, *The Premature Reformation*, 240.

¹⁵ Hudson, *The Premature Reformation*, 258. The exception is the York Minster XVI.D.2 manuscript, which, unlike the others, was selectively compiled for Sunday mass lections. The manuscript quotes at a high frequency authors whose views coincide with Lollard interpretations.

Prologue attached—the tract is not considered a frequent or customary part of the LV.¹⁶ A reference to a parliamentary session in Chapter fifteen may suggest 1397 as the date of composition. The author of the Prologue explains that he and his colleagues took four steps to create the idiomatic LV:

First this symple creature hadde myche trauaile with diuerse felawais and helperis to gedere manie elde biblis, and othere doctouris and comune glosis, and to make oo Latyn bible sumdel trewe; and thane to studie it of the newe, the text with the glose, and othere doctouris as he mighte gete, and speciali Lire on the elde testament that helpide ful myche in this werk. The thridde tyme to counseile with elde gramariens and elde dyuynis of harde wordis and harde sentencis, hou tho mighten best be vnderstonden and translated. The fourthe tyme to translate as cleerli as he coude to the sentence, and to haue manie gode gelawis and kunnyngge at the correcting of the translacioun.¹⁷

In other words, the translators first examine various Latin texts of the Bible to decide upon a reliable one and, second, look at the scripture in relation to glosses of the great exegetes. Then, they study the syntax and grammar of the Latin text and finally translate and revise the product. Many scholars, following Forshall and Madden’s work of the mid-nineteenth century, have assumed that these four stages describe translation of the LV alone, deeming the EV and the LV to be independent entities. Deanesly subscribes to this point, suggesting that Wyclif inspired the literal, word-for-word EV translation not for dissemination to the masses but primarily for his own use, that of his academic followers, and that of members of his patron John of Gaunt’s “lay party” (who were seeking to impoverish the Avignon clergy) as a “new authority” against canon law.¹⁸ In her analysis, the LV was commissioned after Wycliffe’s death to aid common Lollards learning scripture by heart.¹⁹ Hudson and Barisone disagree with Deanesly, asserting that the

¹⁶ Notes to Prologue to Wycliffite Bible, Chapter 15, in Hudson, ed., *Selections from English Wycliffite Writings* (Toronto 1997), 173; Hudson, *The Premature Reformation*, 237.

¹⁷ Prologue to Wycliffite Bible. Chapter 15, 67-68.

¹⁸ Deanesly, *Significance of the Lollard Bible*, 8.

¹⁹ Deanesly, *Significance of the Lollard Bible*, 8.

four steps encompass the translation of both versions, with EV corresponding to the third step as a preliminary translation meant for studying syntactical difficulties.²⁰ Two characteristics of the extant manuscripts support this point. First, scholars have discovered that manuscripts initially deemed EV's exhibit varying degrees of English fluency, suggesting that progress toward the LV was a continuous revision of the EV.²¹ Second, unlike the EV Bibles, in which fluency is higher in later parts of the Bible, the LV text is linguistically consistent, suggesting that it resulted from extensive revision.²² This second argument bears the implication that when the Lollard translators began work on the Early Version of the Wycliffite Bible, they had in mind all along a more readable translation for popular use.

The following passage from the General Prologue illustrates the philosophy behind the idiomatic nature of the Later Version:

First it is to knowe that the beste translating is, out of Latyn into English, to translate aftir the sentence and not oneli aftir the wordis, so not fer fro the lettre; and if the lettre mai not by suid in the translating, let the sentence euere be hool and open, for the wordis owent to serve to the entent and sentence, and ellis the wordis ben superflu either false.²³

In other words, the translators sought to render the import of the text in clear English rather than retaining Latin syntax that might obscure meaning. This necessitated relying on context to modify the grammatical constructions and word order of the Latin sentences. The phrase “Dominum formidabunt aduersarii eius,” for instance, translates word for word into English as “the Lorde hise aduersaries shulen drede,” but it is better understood in English as “the aduersaries of the Lord shulen drede him.” The translators also had to determine from context the

²⁰ Hudson, *The Premature Reformation*, 243; Ermanno Barisone, “Wyclif and His Followers on the Method of Translation,” in *John Wyclif e las tradizione degli studi biblici in Inghilterra* (Genova 1987), 145.

²¹ Hudson, *The Premature Reformation*, 239.

²² Hudson, *The Premature Reformation*, 246.

²³ Prologue to Wycliffite Bible, Chapter 15, 68.

best translation of ablative absolute constructions. The phrase “maistir redinge, I stonde,” could be translated temporally (“while the maistir redith, I stonde”), conditionally (“if the maistir redith, I stonde”), causally (“for the maistir redith, I stonde”), concessively, etc. Other modifications included supplying missing words to Latin elliptical constructions and distinguishing the correct use of homonyms, all with the goal of making the text more “open” to understanding in English.²⁴ The author notes, however, that in addition to possessing a thorough knowledge of both Latin and English, translators should also

liue a clene lif and be ful deuout in preiers and haue not his wit ocupied bouthe worldli and thingis, that the Holi Spiryte, autour of wisdom and kunnyng and truthe, dresse him in his werk and suffre him for not to erre.²⁵

To grasp and be able to render in English the correct meaning of scripture, the translators had to live morally and piously so that God would deem them worthy of understanding His law. The Lollard translators believed that God had assigned definite meanings to scripture; their task, requiring spiritual as well as intellectual fitness, was to translate the Bible into English in such a way that these meanings would be apparent in the text.

How did English Church officials react to vernacular translation of scripture? Ghosh suggests that the Church came to perceive the translations as a threat only after a delayed reaction because previous to the work of the Bible translators and of other Lollards in translating and popularizing Wycliffe’s academic works, heresy had resulted primarily from heterodox preaching.²⁶ As late as 1401 at Oxford, supporting vernacular translation in debates did not put one at risk for charges of heresy.²⁷ Official censorship finally came with Archbishop Arundel’s Constitutions, drafted in 1407 and implemented in 1409, which, in addition to limiting

²⁴ Prologue to Wycliffite Bible, Chapter 15, 68,71.

²⁵ Prologue to Wycliffite Bible, Chapter 15, 71.

²⁶ Ghosh, *The Wycliffite Heresy*, 109-110.

²⁷ Anne Hudson, *Lollards and their Books* (London 1985), 83.

theological discussion at Oxford and curtailling dissemination of Wycliffe's scholarly works, forbade ownership without permission of any vernacular translations of the Bible. After this legislation was set in place, ownership of the Wycliffite Bible could and did bring charges of heresy.

Previous to the existence of the Constitutions, however, what Hudson and Deansley refer to as a debate over the issue of translation took place at Oxford at the turn of the century.²⁸ The substance of the the exchange is preserved in the writings of three men: that of Fransiscan friar William Butler, c. 1401, that of the Dominican Thomas Palmer, most likely written in 1400 but definitely before 1407, and that of the orthodox academic Master Richard Ullerston probably written in 1401.²⁹ A comparison of the views of these men on translation with those presented by Wycliffites in their own texts reveals much about scholarly reception of the English Wycliffite Bible.³⁰ Butler's polemical treatise stresses Dionysian/Ockhamite ideals of the sanctity of hierarchical authority and the unfitness of the laity to interpret the Bible for itself. Citing Augustine's *De Moribus Ecclesiae Catholicae*, Butler asserts that authority in itself—i.e. that of the Church—is a prerequisite for possessing the capacity to correctly interpret scripture. Although the laity may perhaps be able to perform literal readings of scripture, it is not equipped to confront scriptural ambiguities as are the clergy by virtue of their authority; the danger is too great that the laity will fall into heresy if granted unsupervised access to the Bible. Butler justifies his assertion by noting first of all that higher order angels restrict the access of lower angels to certain books, and secondly by invoking the popular concept of the Church as the mystical body of Christ. According to this interpretation, the laity constitutes the stomach of the

²⁸ Hudson, *Lollards and their Books*, 67.

²⁹ Ghosh. *The Wycliffite Heresy*, 86.

³⁰ For a discussion on the extant manuscripts in which these tracts appear, see Hudson's *Lollards and their Books*, 67-84.

church to which food, or scriptural teachings, comes already partially digested; it is the duty of the clergy to perform this preliminary digestion, filtering through scripture to decide which passages and interpretations will benefit the laity. Butler asserts that the role of the laity consists not in striving to acquire concrete knowledge of God's will and law, but in the intellectually passive tasks of prayer and maintaining their faith.³¹

Palmer, also writing against translation (but, unlike Butler, specifically identifying the Lollards as his opponents) focuses on the challenges of conveying scriptural meanings from one language into another. He notes that there exist only two modes of translation—"word-for-word," which maintains the syntax of the original language, or "meaning-for-meaning," which attempts to clearly transfer the "literal sense" of each sentence between languages. English, Palmer asserts, does not have an adequate vocabulary to make a word-for-word translation from Latin possible. He next debunks the Wycliffite assumptions that the Bible has a single literal sense and that a literal reading constitutes the only valid one; many passages have multiple literal interpretations as well as allegorical import. All of these would be difficult for translators to detect let alone convey from a highly sophisticated language to a less organized one. Ghosh notes, however, that Palmer fails to acknowledge that Wyclif's definition of "literal sense" depended in part on the intention of the author—God—and thus occasionally allowed interpretations that were not literal in the strictest definition.³²

Although no surviving Lollard texts contain direct replies to Butler or Palmer, the corpus of Wycliffite writings in favor of translation addresses many of their points. Wycliffe rejected Butler's concept of an external hierarchy, believing rather in an "internalised...hierarchy defined

³¹ Ghosh, *The Wycliffite Heresy*, 93-99.

³² Ghosh, *The Wycliffite Heresy*, 101-102.

in terms of purity, enlightenment, and *recte vivendi*.³³ Lollards did not, then, accept the notion that only a cleric was, by virtue of his position, capable of interpreting the Bible. In fact, they pointed out the existence of a large class of educated lay people better intellectually equipped to handle the task than many members of the clergy.³⁴ The writer of the General Prologue presents a number of arguments for translation. In response to the hypothetical objection that Lollards should not translate Jerome's Bible because they are not as holy as he, the author notes that the same argument could have been made to prevent Jerome from translating the Septuagint into Latin and asserts that no man, not even a member of the Church hierarchy, should presume to perform God's task of judging the holiness of other men:

For seynt Ierom was not so holi as the apostlis and euangelistis whos bokis he translade into Latyn, neither hadde so highe giftis of the Holi Gost as thei hadden. And myche more the seuenti translaturis weren not so holi as Moises and the profetis, and speciali Dauith, neither thei hadden so greete giftis of God as Moises and the profetis hadden....And dispute [English clergymen] not of the holynesse of men now lyunge in this deadli lif, for thei kunnen not theron, and it is reseruid oneli to Goddis doom.³⁵

Later on, he cites a number of precedents for vernacular translation, noting that in the early years of Christianity, anyone who felt that he knew Greek and Latin well enough was considered fit to translate between the two languages.³⁶ Further recalling the monk Bede and King Alfred—the great Anglo-Saxon translators—as well as “Frenshe men, Beemers, and Britons” who have selections of scripture in their own language, he makes a trenchant statement:

Whi shulden not English men haue the same [vernacular scripture] in here modir langage? I can not wite, no but for falsnesse and necligence of clerkis, either for oure puple is not worthi to haue so greet grace and gifte of God, in peyne of here olde synnes.³⁷

³³ Ghosh, *The Wycliffite Heresy*, 96.

³⁴ Ghosh, *The Wycliffite Heresy*, 240.

³⁵ Prologue to the Wycliffite Bible, Chapter 15, 69-70.

³⁶ Prologue to the Wycliffite Bible, Chapter 15, 70-71.

³⁷ Prologue to the Wycliffite Bible, Chapter 15, 71.

In other words, either members of the English clergy had been remiss by not making scripture available in the vernacular, or their occupation—guiding English Catholics to salvation—was futile because Englishmen were not worthy of God’s Grace. This quotation is an interesting rhetorical maneuver because it forces the English clergy to choose between two unappealing alternatives, forcing them to admit the necessity of vernacular translation to avoid the suggestion that their lives’ work contributed nothing to the salvation of English souls.

The following statement comes at the beginning of Chapter fifteen of the General Prologue:

The postlis... hadden autorite to writen holi writ, for bi that same that the apostlis writiden here scripturis bi autorite, and confermyng of the Holi Gost, it is holi scripture and feith of cristene men, and this dignite hath no man aftir hem, be he neuere so holi, neuere so kunnyng, as Ierom witnesssith on that vers.³⁸

This passage, by assigning sole responsibility for the creation of scripture to the apostles, debunks the notion that the Vulgate, itself a translation, has any intrinsic authority over other versions. As a result, the passage also suggests that the established Church does not possess exclusive rights to interpret scripture or to arbitrarily determine an authoritative text. Ng argues that assertions such as this one lie at the core of the Church’s justification for viewing vernacular translation as a threat. Although the obstacles that Palmer cited to creating a good translation of scripture are real, these arguably apply to translation of between any two languages, including Hebrew and Latin as in the case of the Vulgate. Opponents to translation cited these problems along with lay interpretive ineptitude to mask the deeper concern that translations would threaten the prestige/professional status of the clergy and established Church by endorsing and enabling

³⁸ Prologue to Wycliffite Bible, 67.

laity to study God's law directly, without mediation.³⁹ Not only, as Butler asserted, does allowing the laity direct access to scripture increase the risk that they will develop heterodox views; by translating the Bible into English, the Lollards were symbolically depriving the Catholic Church of its claim to authority over interpretation of God's law.

Unlike Palmer and Butler, the orthodox scholar Richard Ullerston writes in favor of vernacular translation, agreeing with many of the Wycliffites' arguments in favor of it. Ullerston organizes his work as an exchange between two scholars, one an advocate and one an opponent of translation; he favors the former. Oddly, although he most likely wrote at the same time Butler and Palmer were doing so, he appears in his text completely oblivious to the potential threats the Wycliffite Bible posed to orthodox doctrine and Church authority. At one point in the document, he dismisses the notion that lay access to scripture will result in the obsolescence of the clergy, the sacraments, and the established Church by invoking the "principle of decorum," namely that everyone has an assigned place that they keep in spite of disturbance—allowing the laity to read scripture may well enhance their devotion, but it will not displace the clergy from its accustomed role of administering the sacrament.⁴⁰ Ullerston, despite all his theological knowledge, fails to consider the very real possibility that widespread lay access to scripture might trump the principle of decorum. Ghosh argues that although Ullerston wrote his tract contemporaneously with Palmer and Butler at the turn of the century, the piece better represents Church attitudes toward vernacular scripture in the early 1390's. Previous to the publication of the Wycliffite Bible, the Church never had occasion to fathom the implications of popular access to the entirety

³⁹ Ng, "Translation, Interpretation, and Heresy," 327.

⁴⁰ Ghosh, *The Wycliffite Heresy*, 90.

of scripture. When this situation became a reality, the Church had to drastically reshape its attitude.⁴¹

Wycliffe's followers translated the Vulgate into English to further their leader's vision of a return to the simple church as it existed in the time of the apostles. An English Bible would forward this goal by empowering the laity both to hold clergy accountable for practices not justified in scripture and to follow God's law as closely as possible in their own lives. To what extent did the Wycliffite Bible advance these goals in reality? What other effects did the Wycliffite Bible have on contemporary and subsequent religious history? Deanesly, maintaining that the translation did not have nearly as great an impact on the populace as some scholars assert, cites logistical difficulties to circulation of the text. These included the facts that the majority of the population was illiterate even in the English language and that with the advent of the printing press over a century away, parchment Bibles were so expensive that not even parish priests, but only higher clergy could afford them.⁴² Deanesly is probably accurate in her assertion that the majority of the population did not own complete Bibles in either English or Latin. It does not follow, however, that the Lollard Bible did not circulate widely or have an enormous impact on society. The fact that surviving copies of the more readable Later Version manuscripts exceed those of Early Version manuscripts by five to one suggests strongly that the Wycliffite Bible underwent a high degree of popular usage.⁴³ That 250 EV and LV manuscripts survive is impressive considering the suppression that resulted from Arundel's Constitutions. Hudson cites evidence that Lollard communities purchased texts jointly and shared them among members, as well as the fact that surviving copies of the Wycliffite Bible were owned by laypeople ranging in

⁴¹ Ghosh, *The Wycliffite Heresy*, 110-111.

⁴² Deanesly, *The Significance of the Lollard Bible*, 6.

⁴³ Hudson, *The Premature Reformation*, 237.

social class from noble to notary.⁴⁴ The frequency with which episcopal councils confiscated vernacular scripture from heresy suspects also attests to widespread lay possession of the translations.⁴⁵ Clearly, the text circulated among the laity, but what effect did it have on them and generations to follow?

It would be absurd to argue that the Wycliffite Bible or any other efforts of the Lollards effected a return to the “primitive Church.” However, the text did enable the laity to engage in theological thought by breaking down the Latin barriers that once protected the intellectual exclusivity of the clergy. The Wycliffite Bible also lent credibility to the English language at a time when the prestige of Latin was waning along with that of the papacy in light of the Babylonian Captivity.⁴⁶ Little more than a century after the Lollard scholars finished the translation, William Tyndale engaged in scholarly disputes in English with Sir Thomas More, whereas Wyclif had written his academic works in Latin. The Wycliffite Bible, then, facilitated the transition of scholarly language in England from Latin to vernacular, opening the worlds of ecclesiastical scholarship and academia in general to the populace. Arguably, the Protestant sectarianism that is an integral part of modern Christianity resulted from what the Wycliffite translators made possible for laity who could read vernacular English or have it read to them: independent interpretation of scripture and substantive theological thought.⁴⁷ Although the Wycliffites did not effect a return to the apostolic church, they did succeed in removing an artificial construct that previously prevented capable laity from studying God’s law directly and even from thinking for themselves generally.

⁴⁴ Hudson, *The Premature Reformation*, 233.

⁴⁵ John Fines, “Heresy Trials in the Diocese of Coventry and Lichfield,” *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 14, no. 1 (April 1963), 160-174.

⁴⁶ Barisone, *Wyclif and His Followers on the Method of Translation*, 144.

⁴⁷ Ng, *Translation, Interpretation, and Heresy*, 338.

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