

All Theology is Christology

Essays in Honor of David P. Scaer

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Evangelicals and the Bible in the Middle Ages

By Cameron MacKenzie

BY THE LATE MIDDLE AGES, MANY THEOLOGIANS WERE KNOWN BY so-called bynames. Thomas Aquinas was the *doctor angelicus*, Duns Scotus the *doctor subtilis*, and William of Occam the *venerabilis inceptor*. But what would we call the leading theologians of our time were we to revive this custom? In the case of David Scaer a most appropriate name would be *doctor evangelicus*, since through out his distinguished career, he has exemplified commitment to the gospel. Not only is David Scaer well known in academic circles for his interest and expertise on the four Gospels, more importantly, in his teaching and preaching he has continuously and forcefully articulated the gospel of God's unconditional love for sinners through the incarnate Christ. Indeed, the gospel is so central a theme in his ministry that his colleagues and students could find no more appropriate name for David Scaer than the "evangelical doctor."

Unfortunately, the name "*doctor evangelicus*" already belongs to someone else, the medieval theologian and quondam heretic, John Wycliffe,¹ among whose followers one could hardly place David Scaer. In fact, on certain issues, our evangelical doctor might very well find himself more comfortably aligned with Wycliffe's foes than with his followers, the Lollards. This is readily evident on the issue of the sacrament,² and it may well be the case regarding a second issue that distinguished Lollards and their opponents - the English Bible.

Of course, it is not really the purpose of this essay to demonstrate David Scaer's approval or disapproval of the Wycliffite Bible. However, it does intend to show that the appearance of an English Bible in the late middle ages raised questions regarding biblical interpretation and the office of the ministry that some will find similar to the issues of today, and furthermore, that the critics of that Bible cannot be dismissed simply as opponents of the gospel. In fact, the debate was

less about the nature of the gospel - and neither side understood the gospel in a particularly Lutheran sense - and more about the nature of Christian society, in particular, the extent to which God intended the church as an expression of social egalitarianism.

Although historians disagree about the nature of Wycliffe's personal involvement,³ all acknowledge that a major contribution of Lollardy to the English church was the first complete translation of the entire Bible into English. More manuscripts of this work are extant than of any other work in English from the period including Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*.⁴ Nevertheless, the undertaking was controversial; and in 1407, Thomas Arundel, the archbishop of Canterbury, condemned it along with Wycliffe's work in general at a convocation of the clergy held in Oxford:

No one should read a book, pamphlet, or treatise of this sort [the text of holy scripture] which has been produced recently during the time of John Wycliffe or afterwards, or which shall be produced hereafter, either in part or in whole, either publicly or privately...Whoever does the contrary shall be punished as a favorer of heresies and errors.⁵

In its first appearance, then, the English Bible was associated with John Wycliffe, error, and heresy. Although Arundel justified the entire set of thirteen "constitutions," promulgated at this convocation, by asserting that they would advance "one holy doctrine in the church of God" through the eradication of "evils and scandals that have arisen by reason of perverse preaching and teaching,"⁶ the articles themselves do not condemn any particular false teaching. Instead, they condemn methods ostensibly used for the promotion of error and heresy. Since Wycliffe and his earliest supporters were university men who propagated their views by preaching as well as writing, Arundel sought to control Lollardy by limiting preaching, by regulating the content and methodology of the university classrooms, and by restricting the circulation of written materials, including the English Bible.⁷

As far as Arundel was concerned, a major drawback to the English Bible was its Lollard provenance. But that was not the only problem, for the Oxford Constitutions do not condemn just the heretics' version of the Bible. They challenge any attempt to produce a vernacular Scriptures, "It is a dangerous thing to translate the text of holy scripture from one language into another"; and they mandate that "no one ever after on his own authority should translate any text of holy scripture into the English language or any other" without ecclesiastical permission. But why this concern? What is "dangerous" about translating the Bible? The constitutions provide only a brief rationale, "In the translations themselves it is not easy to preserve the same meaning in all senses."⁸

Now what precisely this means is not clear from these regulations, but other documents from the period indicate the kind of concerns that lay behind this statement. Before Arundel promulgated his constitutions, the question of the vernacular Scriptures had been debated in the university community at Oxford; and Margaret Deanesly has reprinted the determinations of two university masters who rejected the English Bible.⁹ There is also extant a determination from an Oxford advocate of the English Bible, an English translation of which has been printed although not the original Latin.¹⁰ From such documents as these, it is clear that two principal issues lay behind the debate over an English Bible: (1) the nature of the Bible and (2) order in the church.

With respect to the first point, advocates of the vernacular Bible described the Scriptures as a "law...that confers life on those who observe it and death on those who transgress it"; and they summarized its contents as "Things that should be avoided, things that should be feared, things that should be believed, things that should be performed, things that should be hoped for, and other mysteries...all things that are necessary for salvation."¹¹ Clearly, for advocates of the vernacular Bible, it was only right that the source of such salvific information be in English.

Opponents of the English Bible did not deny that the Bible contained instructions for salvation. But they made two additional points. Besides those things that all Christians had to be familiar with, such as the seven deadly sins and the contents of the creed - items that might very well be in English - the Bible included "many other things that the laity are not at all obliged to know or do." These things were difficult, obscure, and useless for laymen to investigate, "beyond their understanding or reason." And should people misread the Scriptures, they might very well fall into error and eternal death.¹²

In addition to maintaining that much of the Bible was not strictly necessary for salvation, opponents of the English Bible contended that the Scriptures were generally inaccessible to laymen because of the sheer difficulty of proper understanding. First of all, there were practical difficulties such as obtaining an accurate copy of the Latin text and then reading it correctly (proper pronunciation, tone of voice and the like).¹³ Then there was the challenge of representing the various sounds of the English language by means of the Roman alphabet.¹⁴

But even if such practical obstacles to translation could be overcome, the opponents of an English Bible also contended that the meaning of the Bible was so integrally attached to its original Latin form that any effort to put it into the English language was destined either to obscurity or to pervert the meaning of the text. Palmer's Determination pointed to deficiencies in English vocabulary as well as differences in structure between the two languages that made it impossible accurately to translate the Bible from Latin into English.

The author argued that English lacked many words corresponding to common Latin terms used in theology like *ens*, *substantia*, and *accidens*. As a result, English would have to use a great many circumlocutions to express the meaning of a Latin original in English; but this in turn would lead to misinterpretation, because there were several meanings in the literal Latin that would get lost in translation.¹⁵

Furthermore, Latin and English so differed in their basic structure that readers of an English Bible could not deal effectively with a long-standing concern of the theologians, viz., the presence of apparent incongruities and mistakes in the text of the Bible.¹⁶ One approach to dealing with such phenomena had been to interpret them figuratively according to the practices of Latin writers and rhetoricians - practices, however, which were not applicable to the English language. Although Palmer's *Determination* offered no specific examples, it seemed to be referring to those departures from the "rules" of ordinary speech that writers sometimes employ for the sake of effect. But the structural differences between the languages would necessitate different figures of speech for such purposes. Latin, the author maintained, creates its rhetorical effects through inflection - adding or subtracting letters or syllables - but since English is basically monosyllabic it cannot employ the same devices. Therefore, a translation of the Bible from Latin into English carries over the "mistakes" but not the figures of speech that explain them.¹⁷

Clearly, for the opponents of the English Bible, the meaning of the Bible was integrally related to its Latin form. Take away the Latin and you inevitably take away the meaning. Proponents, of course, assumed that the translation process itself could separate the meaning from the form; and one of them made the point that when translating, too much attachment to the form of the original actually obscures the meaning. Eight surviving manuscripts of the Wycliffe Bible include an introduction commonly known as the General Prologue, an anonymous work but apparently produced by someone closely associated with the work of translation. The first fourteen chapters of this work include introductions to the various books of the Bible and discuss biblical interpretation. But the final chapter is both a defense and an explanation of how the English Bible actually was prepared.¹⁸

Although not directing itself specifically to many of the objections raised in Palmer's *Determination*, the General Prologue so describes the practice of Bible translation as to persuade the reader that what is before him in the Wycliffite Bible is a faithful rendering of the Word of God. Palmer's *Determination* had argued that it couldn't be done; the General Prologue contends that it has been done, and here's how. Chapter fifteen begins by making the case for the vernacular Scriptures in general ("forasmuch as Christ saith that the gospel shall be preached in all the world" and "with common charity to save all men in our realm which God would have saved"¹⁹) but proceeds to demonstrate the care with which *this* translation has

been undertaken.²⁰

Consequently, the author describes a fourfold procedure for producing the English Bible: (1) collating Latin manuscripts to establish the correct text; (2) studying the text in the light of scholarly commentary and glosses; (3) making decisions regarding the translation of difficult words and phrases with the help of old grammars and the like; and (4) translating into English as clearly as possible - not word for word but meaning for meaning. With respect to this last point, the Prologue explains:

The best translating is, out of Latin into English, to translate after the sentence and not only after the words, so that the sentence be as open or opener in English as in Latin and go not far from the letter; and if the letter may not be followed in the translating, let the sentence ever be whole and open, for the words ought to serve the intent and sentence, and else the words be superfluous or false.²¹

While the author of the General Prologue realizes that statements like Palmer's about the different structures of the Latin and English languages are correct, he does not draw the same conclusion. Meaning comes from Latin words and constructions but is not the same as Latin words and constructions; it can be expressed in English as well. To demonstrate this, he provides examples of how the ablative absolute in Latin can be rendered by various clauses and conjunctions in English; how the tense of a participle may be accommodated to the tense of the main verb; how a relative pronoun can be replaced by its antecedent and a correlative conjunction; and how Latin word order can be changed to conform to English usage. In each case, the resulting English construction presents the same meaning as the Latin but with a different syntax. On the other hand, slavish adherence to the letter obscures the meaning in translation.²²

Thus, the General Prologue makes a persuasive case for translating from Latin to English by demonstrating a familiarity with the challenges of the task and by setting forth means to meet them. But the opponents of the English Bible also contended that in addition to the problems involved in expressing the literal meaning of a Latin text in English, the challenge of uncovering spiritual significations in the letter of the text made the Bible too dangerous for most people to read.²³ "How," asks Palmer's Determination, "can the simple, either illiterate or instructed only in grammar, not make mistakes when they are ignorant of three senses [i.e., allegorical, topological, and anagogical]? Though they have a master, the literal sense, they have no concern for its offspring." Illustrating this difficulty, Butler points to the phrase, the "body of Christ." To confuse the "true body" with the "mystical body"

leads only to confusion and error.²⁴

For Butler and Palmer, the nature of the Bible itself meant that biblical interpretation as well as translation was impossible without the requisite skills and training; and not everybody in the Church was capable of reading and understanding God's will for His people as recorded in the Scriptures. As a consequence, God had entrusted biblical interpretation only to those appointed by Him for the task, viz., the clergy. Therefore, a second great objection to the English Bible was that it subverted God's order in the church by making everybody his own interpreter.

The question of order was an important one in England at the end of the 14th century and the beginning of the next. In addition to the rise of Lollardy, the Peasant's Revolt (1381) and the unsettled reign of Richard II made the consequences of disorder obvious to everyone.²⁵ For William Butler this is a principal objection to an English Bible - not that it is in English but that, being in English, it is intended for all people whereas God's order had reserved it to the few.

According to Butler, the main reason for this limitation of access to the Bible is the deficiency of human intellect, now marred by original sin. When too much data is present to the mind there is ambiguity and when too little obscurity, but both situations are abundantly present in the Scriptures. Thus, the ordinary reader of the Bible is more likely to fall into error than to discover the truth. Although a few men have keen enough minds to understand the biblical text, most do not, so that for Butler, the more people there are who deal with the text, the farther they are from correctly understanding it. For laymen, the best way to know God is by prayer and meditation but not by reading the Bible.²⁶

And this they could safely do without fear of missing out on God's truth, because God in His mercy had established the ministry in order to mediate His truth to people. "The priests," Butler wrote, "receive knowledge of God from the Scriptures and, meditating upon it among themselves, they minister it to the people."²⁷

Butler further explains that God's order for society is hierarchical. In an argument that came originally from Pseudo-Dionysius, Butler contends that "illumination" always proceeds from the higher order to the lower and that the "hierarchy of the church militant should follow the hierarchical arrangement of the church triumphant."²⁸ Elsewhere Butler relies upon Paul's image of the Church as the body of Christ to maintain that every class in society has its own unique function. Thus, laymen should be content to receive knowledge of the Scriptures from the hands of their religious superiors and must not put their hands upon holy things. Butler concludes, "The common people must be advised not to desire to read sacred scripture but rather to follow the advice of James, 'Be swift to hear,' and not be so presumptuous as to read."²⁹

Out of concern for preserving a divinely mandated hierarchical structure in the Church, established to prevent the potential for harm of placing the Bible into the hands of those who were not capable of understanding it, university masters like Thomas Palmer and William Butler warned against translating the Bible into English and churchmen like Thomas Arundel forbade it. But to no avail. The followers of John Wycliffe produced and copied the English Bible.

But how did the advocates of the vernacular Scriptures make their case for the English Bible? What did they have to say about the challenges of interpretation and how did they respond to assertions of clerical privilege in the handling of the sacred text? In the second part of this essay, we will examine early defenses of the English Bible for the themes and arguments that at least some of their countrymen found persuasive.

Returning once again to the General Prologue, we find that it not only presents a procedure for accurately translating Latin into English but also provides a partial answer to the clerical claims of William Butler by distinguishing between office and character. Earlier, Wycliffe had made the argument that the powers of office depend upon office holders being in a state of grace.³⁰ True to that position, the author of the Prologue insists that translators must be pious as well as learned:

He hath need to live a clean life and be full devout in prayers and have not his wit occupied about worldly things, that the Holy Spirit, author of wisdom and cunning and truth, dress him in his work and suffer him not for to err.³¹

This statement should not be read as a claim for inerrancy in the Lollard translation. In fact, the author goes on to welcome constructive criticism of the text ("if any wise man find any defect of the truth of translation, let him set in the true sentence and open of holy writ"). He does, however, insist on the good character and intentions of those who produced the Wycliffe Bible by calling it "the true and whole translation of simple men that would for no good in the earth by their knowledge and power put away the least truth, yea the least letter or title of holy writ." Not their office in the church or university, but their piety guarantees the value of their work.³²

As far as critics of the English Bible are concerned, the General Prologue has no use for them whatever their office. It calls them "worldly clerks" and appeals to "God's law" against them in justifying the translation enterprise. Indeed, it is on account of either the "falseness and negligence" of the clergy or as "punishment of their old sins" upon the English people that they do not yet have the Bible "in their mother tongue." On the other hand, it is important to note that at the time of its

composition, the author of the General Prologue was not yet completely alienated from the church structure, for he still hopes that "the Church of England [would] approve the true and whole translation." In short, he displays disdain for office in comparison to piety without yet completely rejecting the established church and its hierarchy.³³

Besides the General Prologue, there are other documents from the period that make the case for the English Bible. One of the more significant on account of its being republished in the Reformation period is an anonymous English tract entitled by its first publisher, "A Compendious Olde Treatise Shewing that We Ought to Have the Scripture in Englysshe." Although in the vernacular itself, the tract derives from a Latin manuscript by an Oxford master from around 1401 who still felt free to defend the English Bible at the university. Unfortunately, the Latin original has not yet been printed.³⁴

Perhaps the Latin version examined some of the technical questions regarding translation that were raised in Palmer's Determination, but the English tract does not. Instead, it contents itself with maintaining that, whatever the difficulties, the Bible has already been translated lawfully into other vernaculars - the Latin, first of all, but also Spanish, French, German, and Flemish (this last with papal approval!).³⁵ The tract also refers to older English versions, one by Bede and another of "northern speech, which was seen of many men and it seemed two hundred year old" - a point that the Oxford Constitutions seem to acknowledge, since they only prohibit translations done at the time of Wycliffe or thereafter but not before.³⁶

However, the basic argument of this tract in favor of the English Bible is not precedent but piety, "to profit in science of virtues." But piety is not just for some but for all, "O since heathen philosophers would the people to profit in natural science, how much more should Christian men will the people to profit in science of virtues, for so would God."³⁷

And how does the author of this tract know what God wants in the way of "virtues"? From the Bible of course, and he immediately cites passages from both the Old and New Testaments. Moreover, his use of the Scriptures reveals his appreciation for the bare text of Scripture, which he cites extensively and directly. Even though he also cites numerous authorities in this work - from Boethius to Nicholas of Lyra - his usual practice when quoting a text of the Scriptures is to do so without any interpretive comments except his own. For example, to prove his point that God wants all people to know His Word, he uses nine different Bible passages before citing a comment by Lyra on the last. As we have seen, opponents of the vernacular made much of the presumed difficulty in understanding the text; but this tract treats the Bible as if its bare text were clear to the English reader.³⁸

Implicit, therefore, in both his method and his message is something of that ecclesiastical egalitarianism that Butler especially seemed to fear. When the Bible speaks directly to people, what need is there for teachers? Indeed, the implicit comes quite close to being explicit when the author describes the proper course of God's Word:

In the Apocalypse it is written: "The husband and the wife say, 'Come'; and he that hears says he comes." That Christ, that is head of holy church, is the husband; and perfect preachers and doctors, that is the wife, call the people to the ways of heaven; and *each man that heareth calleth other* [emphasis mine].³⁹

It is probably overreaching to see in the above an overt defense of the unlicensed preaching that characterized the Lollards; but it is obviously true that the author thinks that every Christian and not just preachers and teachers has an obligation to inform others regarding "the ways of heaven."

Whereas the arguments of Palmer and Butler would lead one to conclude that only the learned could properly interpret the Scriptures, their opponent minimizes the need for scholarly expertise. The author of this tract contends, for example, that although the apostles were "rude men and fishers," who "been called idiots by Scripture," still they *knew* the Scriptures. For him, this proves that all such ordinary men should know God's "law to his worship and their profit." Furthermore, in answer to the objection that a Bible in the hands of the unlearned would encourage error and heresy, he responds, "We find in Latin more heretics than of all other languages."⁴⁰

In short, the author of "A Compendious Old Treatise" is almost contemptuous of the learned clergy. Although there is no heresy in his tract, there is such an earnestness about the responsibility of each Christian both to know and to tell others about the Scriptures that it has no use for arguments designed to preserve a clerical monopoly of the Bible.

With our next Lollard document, we consider one of the fascinating aspects of the entire movement, viz., the appearance in English of works originally written by Wycliffe himself in Latin. This has occasioned no little debate about who was responsible for these English works⁴¹; but for our purposes, the important point is that a comparison between the Latin original and its English counterpart reveals not only consistency with Wycliffe, but also development from Wycliffe to later Lollards regarding the vernacular Bible.

In particular, Wycliffe's original, *De Officio Pastoralis*, does not include a section explicitly endorsing the English Bible against its critics as does the English version,⁴²

suggesting that the latter must have been prepared after the production of an English Bible and therefore probably also after Wycliffe's death.⁴³

Wycliffe's original does not mention the English Bible. Instead, he argues that two things are necessary for any pastor of the church: piety and true doctrine. The former receives the greater attention in this treatise; but the work of the clergy is also described, "The chief duty of a pastor is to provide his sheep with the Word of God."⁴⁴ And it is that necessity for the Word of God that provides the basis for an English Bible in the vernacular edition of Wycliffe's treatise.

Like the Latin original, the English tract maintains that God's Word is necessary for salvation:

For we should take as an article of faith that God's law passeth all other; both in authority and in truth and in wit. First in authority; for as God passeth men, so God's law must pass in authority man's law...for God's word must ever be true if it be well understood; and this word is more wholesome to men since it is an article of faith and it teacheth to follow Christ, and that must each man do that shall be saved.⁴⁵

The Word is what mediates salvation; therefore, the tract argues, the Word must be available in the language people speak. Otherwise, people will miss out on eternal life:

[If the Gospel were in English] all Christian men, learned and ignorant, who should be saved might always follow Christ and know his teaching and life. But the common people of England know it best in their mother tongue, and thus it is the same thing to prevent such knowledge of the Gospel and to prevent Englishmen from following Christ and coming to heaven.⁴⁶

The position argued here recognizes no need for the priesthood in either its sacerdotal or magisterial capacity. Instead, the Word alone suffices. The question of interpreting that Word hardly seems to arise, "God's knowledge is Holy Scripture that may in no wise be false"; and the author dismisses the claim of those like Butler that God mediates His revelation through men like them as self-serving attempts to conceal their own wickedness:

First, the friars would be thought so necessary to the Englishmen of our kingdom that solely in their knowledge lay the knowledge of God's law, and to tell the people God's law in whatever manner they please. And the second reason

is: Friars would lead the people in teaching them God's law, and thus they would teach some, hide some, and cut off some parts...The third cause...consists in this...All these new orders are afraid that their sins should be known and how their entry into the Church had no divine sanction. Thus out of fear they do not desire that God's law be known in English, for they could not put heresy upon men if English told what they said.⁴⁷

So much for the celestial hierarchy!

However, the author is not so unsophisticated as to think that any translation will be errorless; but even here, he resorts not to "experts," university mendicants like Palmer and Butler, nor even to the clergy *per se* but to the pious for correction: "I well know that there may be faults in unfaithful translating...But let men live a good life, and let many study God's law, and when errors are found, let them who reason well correct them." Thus, true Christianity has very little to do with priest or hierarchy but everything to do with following the Word.⁴⁸

Besides Wycliffe, another name that is often associated with the Lollard debate on behalf of an English Bible is that of John Purvey, Wycliffe's secretary. In fact, many have credited Purvey with editing and producing the so-called Later Version of the Wycliffite Bible around 1396. It seems appropriate, therefore, that we include in our survey of Lollard opinion at least one work that may have come from his hand, a tract on biblical translation from a set of "Twelve Tracts or Sermons."⁴⁹

In this work, Purvey - or whoever the actual author was - defends the vernacular Bible in much the same way that we have already seen: for the sake of salvation, one must know and live according to God's Word. The differences between this tract and those with Latin originals are matters of tone and style. In particular, this tract is less learned and more anti-clerical.

The argumentation is clear and unsophisticated. Although the author purports to prove the proposition, "that each nation may lawfully have holy writ in their mother tongue," his proof amounts to not much more than assertion, supported by a few Bible passages, e.g., Christ's command to preach the gospel to all nations. The theological point he makes is clear - knowledge of God's Word is necessary for all Christians, not just the clergy, monks, or friars:

Much more should the glorious law of God be loved and praised of Christ's children, for all things that man needeth, both bodily and ghostly, is contained in this blessed law, and specially in the gospel. And therefore Christ in the hour of his ascension commanded to his disciples to preach it to all peoples.⁵⁰

Twice the author calls the Scriptures the “sustenance of the soul” and explains that “the word of God maketh firm man’s soul in the Holy Ghost and strong to work thereafter.” In fact, through this Word and man’s work, God effects the glories of heaven: “When the body shall lie stinking in the grave, then the soul that loved this bread [i.e., the Word] and lived thereafter shall be in endless bliss with Jesus her spouse.” Even the incarnation becomes effective for man only through obedience to the Word: “This was the case that Jesus became man and suffered dead on the tree, so that *by keeping of his love* the people might rise from spiritual death and come to the bliss that never shall have end” [emphasis mine].⁵¹

Beyond such assertions, there is really very little debate in this tract. The author seems oblivious to any difficulties of translation (“since the truth of God standeth not in one language more than in another”) or of interpretation (“and here is a rule to Christian folk of what language so ever they be: it is an high sacrifice to God to know holy writ and to do thereafter”). If one grants such premises, the conclusion is obvious: the people should have the Word in their own language.⁵²

Other conclusions follow as well, for if the Word is all-important, where does that leave the sacraments and what is the task of the clergy? Although even from the perspective of the medieval church there is no outright heresy in this tract, it comes close. The sacraments are ignored, and the task of the clergy is reduced to instructing in the Word, “Thus clerks should be glad that the people know God’s law, and they themselves busily by all the good means that they might, should occupy them to make the people know the truth of God’s law.”⁵³

But what if the clergy do not do this? Then the sad truth is that they are false teachers. So the second theme of this tract is that opponents of the vernacular Bible are enemies of God whatever their position in the church. It calls them “kindred of Pharisees,” for “they love not Jesus Christ...but let [i.e., prevent] the gospel to be learned of the people.” The author accuses them of lying (“tell not verily the truth of the Gospel”) and rejects their interpretation of the Word (“gloss it as they liketh”).⁵⁴

The author scorns his opponents’ learning; and, as a matter of fact, this work, unlike the Lollard pieces with Latin originals, contains not a single reference to any patristic or scholastic authority. Learning, he says, means little in comparison to knowing the Word: “Since a craft of great subtlety is much praised of worldly men, much more should the glorious law of God be loved and praised of Christ’s children.” Therefore, whoever prevents the people from having access to the vernacular Scriptures is “cursed of God...a *satanas contrarius* to Christ.”⁵⁵

The comparison of his opponents to our Lord’s opponents is one that the author develops at some length. He reminds his reader that the scribes of Jesus’ day were the “wise men of the law and so they were the clergy of the Jews” and that the

Pharisees were men that “set more by the laws that they had made than they did by the law that God gave to them and the people.” But this is precisely what he finds in the clergy of his day, “Our clerks do now as evil or worse...these feigners say...his [i.e., God’s] law they keep and their own rule both; and this is open falsehood.” Even so, the tract does not set forth much by way of illustrating the faithlessness of the clergy with but one exception: “They pursue Christ in his members, as the Pharisees did his own person...they pursue simple people for they would learn, read, and teach the law of God in their mother tongue.” Thus, opposition to using the vernacular Scriptures demonstrates the iniquity of Lollard opponents.⁵⁶

This tract does not deny the validity of holy orders in so many words, but it comes close to doing so. The author castigates “our bishops and prelates and other false teachers that be in the church,” since through their negligence “the truth of God’s Word be not sown to the people” and through their malice “the true teachers” (perhaps unlicensed preachers complained about in the Oxford Constitutions) as well as the learners of the Word are being persecuted. Furthermore, his prayer is that “Jesus Christ, bishop of our souls” - in contrast to false bishops of the Church - “that he ordain preachers to warn us to leave our sins by preaching of his law.” Obviously, the author feels alienated from the ecclesiastical structure and so it is no surprise that he accuses clergy of the “sin against the Holy Ghost.”⁵⁷

Although this tract is significantly more anti-clerical than the others examined in this essay, probably indicating a time of composition after the hierarchy had joined the friars in opposing the vernacular Scriptures, the message of the tract about the Bible is the same as the others: the vernacular Scriptures are a necessity, because all Christians must follow God’s law. But the simplicity of this contention breaks down the distinction between clergy and lay. Everyone must know, follow, and teach the Word. Also like the other Lollard tracts, this one too fails to justify biblical knowledge for the sake of doctrinal reform. Instead, its emphasis is upon moral reform. Lollard criticism of their foes is directed much more at life-styles than at doctrine. Since their opponents were churchmen, first the friars and then the bishops, the Lollard defense of their Bible smacks of anti-clericalism and, in the extreme, repudiates the Roman clergy.

Such repudiation, however, follows naturally from a doctrine of the Word that so stresses preaching that it obviates the need for any sacraments. The Lollard documents examined here do not reject the sacraments, but they do ignore them. For these defenders of the vernacular Bible, the sacraments have little appeal. What mattered was the Word and that it be taught plainly and truly for the moral improvement of the people. Whether the teachers were ordained or not was unimportant so long as they were pious. Some of the Lollard documents, like the General Prologue, are aware of difficulties in translating or interpreting the Scriptures; however, all the

documents reveal confidence that pious people can understand the vernacular Word, follow it, and so be saved. Nothing else is really necessary.

To spokesmen for the Church such statements were not just ridiculous but also most dangerous. Learned friars like Butler and Palmer knew the pains they had expended in mastering the techniques of scriptural exegesis which permitted them to get behind the letter of the Word and uncover meaning that was both edifying and orthodox. Furthermore, they held their position as teachers of the Church by the mandate of God as mediated through the Church. Therefore, Lollard advocacy of the vernacular Bible was not only fraught with risks that heresy and error would arise but was also an evident attack upon God's established order. Lay people were not supposed to *have* the Bible but to *learn* the Bible - or as much of it as the Church deemed appropriate - from those set to the task by God.

Thus, the Lollards and their opponents did not disagree so much about what faith to believe as they did over the moral obligations of that faith, including the obligation to tell others about the truth. In this conflict, the vernacular Bible became a tool for erasing the distinction between clergy and lay; so the defenders of the established hierarchy found themselves also opposing the English Scriptures. Given the uncertainties in state and society in this period in English history, it is little wonder that opponents of the vernacular Bible reacted with persecution as well as argument, for, after all, they believed that the Lollards were threatening the basic structure of their society; and, indeed, perhaps they were!

Notes

1. This has been the case since at least the first half of the 15th century, as recorded by the Lollard foe, Thomas Netter of Walden. See his *Doctrinale Antiquitatem Fidei Catholicae Ecclesiae*, 3 vols. (Venice: Typis Antonii Bassanesii ad S. Cantianum, 1757-59; reprint ed., Farnborough, Hants: Gregg Press, 1967) 1: 347; 2: 622; 2: 936. For a brief discussion of the name, see Anne Hudson, *The Premature Reformation* (Oxford: Clarendon press, 1988), p. 229.

2. According to Herman Sasse, Wycliffe "paved the way for Reformed Protestantism." Sasse describes Wycliffe's position, "The Words of Institution must be taken figuratively. They are not a *praedicatio identica*, a way of speech which establishes an identity between two beings (as, for example, the sentence, Christ is man), but rather a *praedicatio tropica* which must be understood *figurative vel tropice* or *parabolice*, like the word of Christ that John the Baptist is Elijah." See *This Is My Body* (Adelaide, S.A.: Lutheran Publishing House, 1977), pp. 44-46.

3. Although Wycliffe is referred to as its translator in nearly contemporary records, the facts that the English Bible first began to circulate so late in his life and

that at the same time it was being worked on, he was so heavily involved in writing Latin expositions and defenses of his doctrine make it improbable that he had much to do with it himself. See Hudson, *Premature*, pp. 240-41. Nevertheless, Sven L. Fristedt, *The Wycliffite Bible, Parts I, II, and III* (Stockholm: Almquist & Wicksells, 1953, 1969, and 1973) argues for Wycliffe's personal involvement.

4. For a history of this version of the Bible, see Henry Hargreaves, "The Wycliffite Versions," in Geoffrey W. H. Lampe, ed. *The Cambridge History of the Bible*, 3 vols. (Cambridge: University Press, 1963-70) 2: 387-415. Hudson, *Premature*, p. 231, says that there are about 250 manuscripts of the Bible compared to 64 of *Canterbury Tales*.

5. "*Nec legatur aliquis huiusmodi [textus sacrae scripturae] liber, libellus, aut tractatus iam noviter tempore dicti Iohannis Wycliff, sive citra, compositus aut in posterum componendus, in parte vel in toto, publice, vel occulte....qui contra fecerit, ut fautor haeresis et erroris similiter puniatur.*" David Wilkins, ed., *Concilia Magnae Britanniae et Hiberniae*, 4 vols. (London: n., 1737; reprint ed., Bruxelles: Culture et Civilisation, 1964) 3: 317. In the previous article of these so-called Oxford Constitutions, Arundel banned all of Wycliffe's writings - none was to be bought or sold without the special permission of the university and archbishop. Although the translation in this essay is my own, John Foxe provided one in his *Acts and Monuments*, 8 vols. (London: Seeley, Burnside, and Seeley, 1844-49) 3: 242-48.

6. "*Nos igitur considerantes, quod error, cui non resistitur approbari videtur...volentesque...unamque sanctam doctrinam in ecclesia Dei...seminari debere, ad augmentum fidei et cultus divini, eradicatis primum zizaniis, ac malis, et scandalis, quae ratione perversae praedicationis et doctrinae insanae... orta sunt, et plus verisimiliter oriri poterunt infuturum... statuimus, decernimus, et ordinamus.*" Wilkins 3: 315.

7. The first constitution forbids preaching without a license and several (the fourth, fifth, eighth, and ninth) regulate what and how masters and teachers can treat church doctrine, e.g., "*Nullus...de articulis terminatis per ecclesiam, prout in decretis, decretalibus, et constitutionibus nostris provincialibus, sive locorum synodalibus continetur, nisi ad habendum verum intellectum eorundem...publice aut occulte disputare praesumat.*" In article six, Wycliffe is mentioned by name: none of his books or treatises is to be bought or sold unless examined and approved by at least twelve members of either university and by the primate. Wilkins 3: 315-19. For Arundel's efforts to deal with Lollardy at Oxford, see J. I. Catto, "Wycliff and Wycliffism at Oxford, 1356-1430," in J. I. Catto and Ralph Evans, eds. *History of the University of Oxford*, 6 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992) 2: 232-53.

8. "*Periculosa...res est...textum sacrae scripturae de uno in aliud idioma transferre, eo quod in ipsis translationibus non de facili idem in omnibus sensus retinetur...Statuimus...et*

ordinamus, ut nemo deinceps aliquem textum sacrae scripturae auctoritate sua in linguam Anglicanam, vel aliam transferat." Wilkins 3: 317.

9. Margaret Deanesly, *The Lollard Bible* (Cambridge University Press, 1920). The first of these (pp. 401-18) is a determination by William Butler, a Franciscan master and doctor of theology at Oxford as of 1401. Deanesly ascribes the second document to Thomas Palmer, Dominican master and opponent of Lollardy at Oxford in the 1390's, but Anne Hudson questions the accuracy of this ascription in "The Debate on Bible Translation, Oxford 1401," *English Historical Review* 90(1975): 3. For Butler and Palmer, see A. B. Emden, *A Biographical Register of the University of Oxford to A.D. 1500*, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957) 1: 329 and 3: 1421-22. For a brief description of a determinatio, see Catto, "Wycliffe," 2: 179.

10. Curt F. Bühler, ed., "A Lollard Tract: On Translating the Bible into English," *Medium Aevum* 7(1938): 167-83.

11. "*Omnis lex rite vivendi aliquibus tradita, quae confert vitam observatoribus et mortem transgressoribus, est in lingua eis nota habenda. Sacra scriptura est huiusmodi.*" "*Non solum tenemur scire quae sunt fugienda sed etiam quae timenda, quae credenda; quae sunt facienda, quae sunt speranda, et alia sacramenta, omnia quae necessaria sunt ad salutem.*" "Palmer's Determination," Deanesly, pp. 418-19. This document includes lists of arguments used by each side in the debate. Obviously, these statements come from those sections that present arguments for the Bible. Although this is Palmer's statement of his opponents' views, it fairly represents the position of Wycliffe. See Deanesly, pp. 240-51, and Hudson, "Debate," pp. 15-16.

12. "*Dico, quod lex rite videndi quoad praecepta, et quoad alia quae conferunt vitam, et quoad illa [quae] necessarie requiruntur, est habenda, non tamen quoad alia difficillima et obscura. Secundo dico quod in scripturis aliqua inveniuntur in quibus putamus vitam aeternam habere, et praeter illa sunt multa alia ad quae laici minime obligantur scire vel agere.*" "*Nulla sunt revelanda aliquibus qui non sunt talium capaces; sed multarum difficultatum sacrae scripturae non sunt tales laici capaces. Igitur saltem talia in vulgari nostro non sunt scribenda; ideo Ecclesiastici tertio: 'Plurima sunt supra sensum hominum,' scilicet, transcendunt intellectum et rationem.*" "Palmer's Determination," Deanesly, pp. 435, 422. "*Cavere ergo summe debent pontifices infulati, qui legere, qui praedicare debent scripturas; ne, unde perveniret utilitas, inde praeveniat mortis calamitas.*" "Butler's Determination," Deanesly, p. 404.

13. "Butler's Determination," Deanesly, pp. 401-404. Similar concerns had been expressed by St. Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana* 3.2 (punctuation) and 3.3 (pronunciation); and Jerome, *Preface to the Four Gospels*, had charged that there were "almost as many forms of the text as there were copies [*tot enim sunt exemplaria pene quot codices*]" and had complained of mistakes arising from faulty interpreters or

from presumptuous, inexperience and inattentive scribes.

14. "Palmer's Determination," (Deanesly, p. 428) complains that English sounds like the "grunting of pigs or the bellowing of lions [*grunnitus porcorum vel rugitus leonum*]" and points out that the Roman alphabet has no letter for the "th" sound or the consonantal "y" sound but fails to mention that middle English makes use of two additional letters not found in the Roman alphabet, the thorn and the yogh.

15. "Palmer's Determination," Deanesly, pp. 428-29. Unfortunately, Palmer provides no examples. His point could be the rather elementary one that a particular Latin vocable has a semantic field which is not the same as any English equivalent, but it could also refer to the medieval practice of finding connections between words on the basis of their sound, connections that assisted interpretation but that would no longer be evident in translation. See Robert E. McNally, *The Bible in the Early Middle Ages* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986), pp. 49-50.

16. In *De Doctrina Christiana* 3.10, Augustine laid down this rule, "Whatever there is in the word of God that cannot when taken literally, be referred either to purity of life or soundness of doctrine, you may set down as figurative." [Translation from Philip Schaff, ed. *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, 14 vols. first series (reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1956) 2: 560.] According to G. W. H. Lampe, "The Exposition and Exegesis of Scripture to Gregory the Great," in Lampe, *Cambridge History* 2: 173-83, Augustine, following Origen, also used allegory to explain apparent absurdities and inconsistencies in the literal text.

17. "*Sacra scriptura in multis per figuras et regulas grammaticales...Igitur in nullam linguam quae non regulatur regulis et figuris grammaticalibus est ipsa transferenda...Sed hae figurae non inveniuntur in Anglico, nec in idiomate barbarico...in istis monosyllabis non habent locum tales figurae grammaticales, nec possunt orationes et propositiones ab incongruitate et falsitate per eas salvari.*" "Palmer's Determination," Deanesly, pp. 426-27.

18. The General Prologue has been printed in J. Forshall and J. Madden, eds. *The Holy Bible: Made from the Latin Vulgate by John Wycliffe*, 4 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1850) 1: 1-60. Chapter fifteen has been printed separately in Anne Hudson, ed., *Selections from English Wycliffite Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), pp. 67-72, and is the source of the quotations used in this essay.

19. In this essay, I have used standard spelling and have modernized the vocabulary slightly for all quotations from middle English.

20. Hudson, *Selections*, p. 67.

21. Hudson, *Selections*, p. 68.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 68.

23. Spiritualizing the text was a commonplace of medieval exegesis; and by the

end of the period it was typical to refer to the allegorical, topological, and anagogical senses of a text in addition to the literal. For brief introductions to the topic, see McNally, pp. 53-61, and Robert M. Grant and David Tracy, *A Short History of the Interpretation of the Bible*, 2nd ed. (n.p. Fortress, 1984), pp. 83-91. For more thorough treatments, see Beryl Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages* ((Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1964) and Samuel J. Preus, *From Shadow to Promise* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969).

24. "*Quomodo simplices illiterati, vel sola grammatica in structi, illos pullos trium sensuum ignorantes, non errarent habentes magistrum, scilicet literalem sensum, tamen de pullis non curantes?*" "Palmer's Determination," Deanesly, p. 424; and "Butler's Determination," Deanesly, p. 411.

25. For a description of the social unrest at the end of the 14th century, see May McKisack, *The Fourteenth Century, 1307-1399* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959), ch. 13-16.

26. "*Mihi videtur quod consulere populum ad haec duo media (scilicet, cogitare et orare), foret consilium sanius quam consulere quod scriptura vulgariter translata tradenda sit laicis.*" "Butler's Determination," Deanesly, pp. 404-406.

27. "*Sacerdotes accipiant scientiam per scripturas de Deo et meditantés apud se toto populo subministrant.*" *Ibid.*, p. 416 [citing Chrysostom]. Butler, p. 401, also pointed to the universities as ecclesiastical institutions established for the sake of teaching the Scriptures.

28. "*Hierarchia ecclesiae militantis sequi debet hierarchicam dispositionem ecclesiae triumphantis; ergo illuminatio passiva vianium de ordine inferiori dependere debet complete a volitiva vianium in ordine superiori.*" *Ibid.* p. 407. For an introduction to the thought of Pseudo-Dionysius and his influence upon medieval schoolmen, see *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, v. 1- (Paris: Beauchesne, 1932-) 3: 244-429, and *Theologische Realenzyklopädie*, v. 1- (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1977-) 8: 772-80.

29. "*Consulendum est vulgari populo ne scripturam sacram legere cupiant, sed sint secundum Iacobi consilium, 'veloces ad audiendum,' et non praesumptuosi aliquatenus ad legendum.*" *Ibid.*, pp. 402-403.

30. See Catto, "Wycliffe," pp. 200-204, and Gordon Leff, *Heresy in the Later Middle Ages*, 2 vols. (Manchester, England: Manchester University Press, 1967) 2: 546-49.

31. Hudson, *Selections*, p. 71.

32. *Ibid.* pp. 68, 70.

33. *Ibid.*, pp. 70-71.

34. *A Compendious Olde Treatise Shewing that We Ought to Have the Scripture in Englysshe* (Hessen: Hans Luft, 1530), STC 3021. John Foxe also incorporated it into

his *Acts and Monuments* (4: 671-76). It is also available in two modern editions: Deanesly, pp. 437-45, and Curt F. Bühler, "A Lollard Tract: On Translating the Bible into English," *Medium Aevum* 7(1938): 167-83. Citations in this essay are from Bühler.

Anne Hudson, "Debate," pp. 3-11, has examined the Latin original, available in a single manuscript, Vienna Hofbibliothek Ms. 4133, and a fragment of another, Gonville and Caius College Cambridge Ms. 803/807 frag. 36, and identified its author as Richard Ullerston, Oxford master and a defender of orthodoxy. For Ullerston, see Catto, pp. 228, 239-40.

35. Bühler, pp. 173, 181, suggests that the reference to a Flemish Bible is to the *Rijmbijbel* of Jacob van Maerlant (c. 1235-1300). See W. B. Lockwood, "Vernacular Scriptures in Germany and the Low Countries before 1500," in Lampe, *Cambridge History* 2: 430-31.

36. Bühler, p. 174, and Wilkins 3: 317.

37. Bühler, p. 171.

38. Ibid. pp. 171-73.

39. Ibid. p. 171.

40. Ibid. p. 172.

41. Ernest W. Talbert and S. Harrison Thomson, "Wycliffe and His Followers," in J. B. Severs, ed. *A Manual of the Writings in Middle English* (New Haven: Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1970) 2: 354-80, 517-33, list the English Wycliffite works but are very tentative regarding authorship. The standard biographer of Wycliffe argues that some of the English works are from Wycliffe's own hand and that many others were written from Latin at his direction. See Herbert B. Workman, *John Wycliffe*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1926) 2: 329-32. But Hudson, *Selections*, pp. 8-10, disputes the idea that any of the English writings can be attributed to Wycliffe directly.

42. Deanesly, p. 378. For the Latin text, see Johannis de Wiclif, *Tractatus de Officio Pastoralis*, ed. by G. V. Lechler (Lipsiae: Apud A. Edelmannum, 1863). In his introduction, pp. 3-4, Lechler argues for 1378 as a date of composition, since Wycliffe's criticisms of opponents are couched cautiously and in none of his references to the mass does he attack transubstantiation. For the middle English version, see F. W. Matthew, ed., *The English Works of Wycliffe Hitherto Unprinted* (London: Early English Text Society, 1880), pp. 405-57. A modern English translation of the Latin along with chapter fifteen from the middle English (i.e., the section on Bible translations) can be found in Matthew Spinka, ed. *Advocates of Reform* (Phil.: Westminster Press, 1953), pp. 32-60.

43. The Wycliffite Bible exists in at least two distinct versions, although there

are also manuscripts that are intermediary forms between them. The early version has been dated to around 1382 which coincides with Wycliffe's exile from Oxford. He died two years later. The later version, which exists in many more manuscripts than the earlier one, was produced in the 1390's. See Hudson, *Premature*, pp. 238-47.

It seems likely that a tract defending the English Bible from its critics would arise after it had been circulating for a time. On the other hand, since it identifies the Bible's critics as the "friars" and appeals to the "lords *and bishops*" (Matthew, pp. 429-30) a date of composition for the English version of *De Officio Pastoralis* before 1407 and Arundel's condemnation seems most likely.

44. "*Duo autem sunt, que pertinent statui pastoralis, scilicet pastoris sanctitas et doctrine sue salubritas*" and "*Et utrobique precipuum officium pastoris videtur seminare suis ovibus verbum dei.*" Lechler, pp. 7, 31.

45. Matthew, p. 438.

46. Spinka, pp. 50-51. Cf. Matthew, p. 430.

47. Ibid.

48. Ibid.

49. For Purvey's life and career, see K. B. McFarlane, *John Wycliffe and the Beginnings of English Nonconformity* (New York: Macmillan, 1953), pp. 119-20, 127, 152-53; Deanesly, pp. 252-86, 376-81; and Leslie Stephen and Sidney Lee, eds. *The Dictionary of National Biography*, 22 vols. (London: Oxford University Press, 1949-50) 16: 494-95. The tract is from manuscript, Cambridge University Library li. 6. 26, and has been printed in Hudson, *Selections*, pp. 107-109. For a description and list of the works usually ascribed to Purvey, see Talbert and Thomson, pp. 368-70, 528-29. However, Hudson, *Selections*, pp. 145, 173, 198, disputes Deanesly's ascriptions to Purvey. What are most important for our purposes, however, is not who wrote the tract but what it says.

50. Hudson, *Selections*, pp. 107-108.

51. Ibid.

52. Ibid.

53. Ibid. p. 108.

54. Ibid. p. 107.

55. Ibid. pp. 107-108.

56. Ibid. pp. 108-109.

57. Ibid.