Introduction

'The heart of Lollardy,' David Daniell says, 'was its English Bible', and the first complete translation of the Bible from Latin into English, by the Oxford philosopher and theologian John Wyclif and men associated with him, is generally recogized as the most substantial achievement of the Wycliffite movement. Studies of the writings of the Wycliffites have shifted, in the past thirty years, from the periphery to the centre of research into the literature, history and culture of England at the end of the Middle Ages, but this is the first book on the Wycliffite translation of the Bible since Margaret Deanesly's *The Lollard Bible and Other Medieval Biblical Versions*, published just after the First World War.

This new study examines both the text and the context of the first English Bible. It begins by positioning the decision to translate the Bible in the context of the rise of lay literacy and the emergence of vernacular culture, and by assessing the nature and impact of the opposition to biblical translation. The arguments for a Bible in English were extremely strong, but clerical antagonism towards the Bible associated with Wyclif culminated, in 1409, in the promulgation of ecclesiastical legislation prohibiting the use of any recent, unlicensed translation. This prohibition remained in place until 1529. While a number of magnates and members of religious orders are known to have owned Wycliffite Bible manuscripts, most pre-Reformation owners were reluctant to name themselves in their copies, because possession of scripture in English was *prima facie* grounds for suspicion of heresy, and a heresy trial could result in imprisonment, excommunication and even death by burning. Nevertheless, some two hundred and fifty manuscripts of the Wycliffite Bible, or parts of it, survive, considerably more than of any other text in Middle English (details of all surviving mansucripts known to me are listed in the Index of manuscripts of the Wycliffite Bible). More than a third of the manuscripts contain a lectionary indicating which epistles and gospels are to be read at mass throughout the year, suggesting that

the stationers who produced them anticipated a predominantly devout and orthodox readership.

Early evidence names Wyclif, Nicholas Hereford and John Trevisa as translators of the first English Bible, but in pre-Reformation copies attributions of authorship are extremely scarce. I trace the fascinating history of speculation about the identity of the translators, ranging from scrupulous bibliographical and historical scholarship to the frank guess on the part of the early eighteenth-century Cambridge theologian Daniel Waterland that John Purvey had an important role. My view is that Wyclif instigated the project, that work began in the early 1370s in the Queen's College, Oxford, and that Wyclif, Hereford and Trevisa all played a part in the translation. My investigation of the editorial decisions made during the translation process, my analysis of the development of the translation itself, my exploration of the relationship between translation and interpretation, and my estimate of the level of accuracy of the text – or rather, texts – are all based on internal evidence from Wycliffite Bible manuscripts. There is no external evidence, and I have found myself using the word 'probably' again and again.

The textual tradition is highly complex, and the endemic complications of medieval textual production must have been exacerbated by the increasing suspicion with which Wyclif and his associates were regarded, especially after Wyclif's withdrawal from Oxford to Lutterworth in the autumn of 1381. A project of enormous dimensions was matched with changing personnel and limited and aleatory resources; plans made at one stage may have seemed hopelessly unrealistic at another. The project was certainly not defined down to the last detail from the start and professionally executed in impeccable order, like the project of an ideal applicant to a twenty-first-century research-funding body. Editorial decisions were probably made very informally, and there were some changes of direction which seem to have led to disagreement among the translators. The logistical difficulties of the enterprise serve to heighten our estimate of the translators' overall achievement.

Only twenty complete Wycliffite Bibles survive, with evidence for perhaps seventeen more (these Bibles and other select manuscripts are fully described in Appendix 4). Several of these Bibles make frequent appearances in these pages. The scribes who wrote them were clearly professionals, and the English Bible closely resembles the late-medieval Latin Bible in format and decoration as well as content. More than two-thirds of surviving manuscripts contain only books of the New Testament. Josiah Forshall and Frederic Madden, in their admirable 1850 edition of the Wycliffite Bible (which was twenty years in the making), presented two versions of the

translation side by side, 'Earlier' and 'Later', the Earlier Version a closely literal rendering of the Latin Bible and the Later Version a more idiomatic revision. Manuscripts of the Later Version outnumber manuscripts of the Earlier Version by more than five to one. The distinctiveness of the versions is confirmed and elaborated on here, although Conrad Lindberg's extensive editorial work on the Wycliffite Bible has demonstrated that revision was an ongoing process throughout the translation project, and, indeed, after the Later Version had been completed. For all books of the Bible except Judges and Baruch, which are edited in both versions by Lindberg, we still depend on Forshall and Madden's edition of the Later Version, the base text of which, British Library Royal 1. C. VIII, is in part a revised version of the Later Version (from Genesis to Numbers 20 and from Psalms to the end of the Old Testament). All readings from the Later Version included in this study have, however, been checked against the manuscripts, and additions and select emendations to Forshall and Madden's text of the Later Version are recorded in Appendix 2. A new edition of the Later Version of the Wycliffite Bible, much to be desired, seems unlikely to appear any time soon, but one of the aims of this study is to prepare the ground for a new edition.

Why were two separate versions of the translation in circulation? Wycliffite Bibles in the Earlier Version differ from Bibles in the Later Version in content (the contents of the versions are detailed in Appendix 1), in the underlying Latin text and in translational idiom. The implications of the differences between the two versions for the translation process as a whole are examined here for the first time. I argue that the Earlier Version was never intended to be copied as a translation in its own right, but that the translators producing the Later Version lost control of what happened to the Earlier Version in the early 1380s. The Wycliffites who arranged to have the Bible copied in the Earlier Version almost certainly knew that stylistic and textual work on the translation were still in progress, but they chose to go ahead without waiting for the Later Version to be completed. The independence of the versions is underlined by the fact that in the New Testament a few manuscripts of the Earlier Version contain textual revisions not found in the Later Version.

The translator who represents himself as being in charge of the production of the Later Version composed two English prologues, a prologue to the Prophets (prefixed to the book of Isaiah), and a prologue to the Bible as a whole (which I shall refer to as the Prologue with a capital 'P'). Although the Prologue is consensually attributed to Purvey, there is no evidence for this, and in these pages it is treated as an anonymous work. Both English

prologues help us to understand the translators' purposes (although the writer may not in fact speak for them all), their expectations of their readers, and the ways in which they interpreted the biblical text and invited their readers to interpret the biblical text. They did not leave the reader alone with the biblical text and the Holy Spirit for guidance. The prologue to the Prophets asserts that Isaiah is 'ful opyn' (readily comprehensible), but proceeds to give advice about how to interpret 'þe derk (obscure) places of þe profetis'. The Prologue initiates English readers into the tradition of biblical interpretation, from Augustine of Hippo to the fourteenth-century Franciscan Nicholas of Lyra.

The final chapter of the Prologue claims that the text of the first English Bible is both clear and accurate. The translators are careful to avoid adding words unnecessarily, but where an exact translation of the Latin is obscure they often include explanatory glosses within the text, and sometimes also in the margin. The glosses derive principally from a translation of Lyra, made, I argue, by the translators themselves to assist with the revision process. Throughout the Old Testament, the translators seem to have intended to draw the reader's attention to differences between the Latin text and the Hebrew original, but the programme of marginal glosses survives only in an incomplete state (for additions to Forshall and Madden's record of the glosses, see Appendix 2). During the revision process, the translators made considerable efforts to establish an authoritative text of the Latin Bible, and the text of the Later Version is, as the Prologue claims, more accurate than the text of 'comune Latyn Biblis', and much more accurate than the Earlier Version, although it seems to have been completed in haste. Select readings from the Earlier and Later Versions are compared with each other, and with readings from a selection of late-medieval Latin Bibles and French Bibles, in Appendix 3.

As a result of the Wycliffite enterprise, the biblical canon in its entirety was made accessible for the first time to the reader literate in English but not in Latin. Forshall and Madden were confident that this was one of the principal causes of the Reformation, but our evaluation of the effects of the translation must be far more cautious and provisional, and far less partisan (I have done my utmost to avoid slanted preconceptions throughout this book). One effect of the Wycliffite enterprise which has scarcely been recognized is that the English reader literate in Latin could for the first time read the whole Bible in his or her native tongue, in a translation commanding confidence and respect as a literal and meaningful rendering of a carefully edited original. For such a reader, reading in translation would defamiliarize the well-known Latin, and sharpen awareness that the Latin

was a translation, too. Chaucer may have been one such reader. The preface to the *Treatise on the Astrolabe* seems to be his contribution to the debate about the desirability or otherwise of biblical translation, the subject of the first chapter of this book.

It should be noted that all biblical references (unless otherwise stated) are to the Vulgate Bible, and in Psalms to the Gallican Psalter, unless otherwise stated.

CHAPTER 1

The Bible debate

The earliest unambiguous reference to John Wyclif as a translator of holy scripture takes us to the heart of the medieval English debate about the desirability of translating the Bible from Latin into English. The chronicler Henry Knighton, a canon at the Augustinian Abbey of St Mary in Leicester, combines a statement that Wyclif has translated the gospel with an argument about why it should never have been translated. In his composite chronicle entry on the Wycliffite heretics and their errors, dated 1382 but written c. 1390, he laments that

Magister Iohannes Wyclif evangelium quod Cristus contulit clericis et ecclesie doctoribus, ut ipsi laycis et infirmioribus personis secundum temporis exigenciam et personarum indigenciam cum mentis eorum esurie dulciter ministrarent, transtulit de latino in anglicam linguam non angelicam. Unde per ipsum fit vulgare et magis apertum laicis et mulieribus legere scientibus quam solet esse clericis admodum litteratis et bene intelligentibus, et sic evangelica margarita spargitur et a porcis conculcatur.[1]

(Master John Wyclif translated from Latin into the English language – very far from being the language of angels![2] – the gospel that Christ gave to the clergy and doctors of the church, for them to administer sweetly as mental nourishment to laypeople and to the infirm, according to the necessity of the time and the people's need. As a consequence, the gospel has become more common and more open to laymen and even to women who know how to read than it customarily is to moderately well-educated clergy of good intelligence. Thus the pearl of the gospel is scattered abroad and trodden underfoot by swine.)

[1] Geoffrey H. Martin, ed., *Knighton's Chronicle, 1337–1396* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), pp. 242–4 (my translation). On the date of Knighton's entry on Wyclif and the Wycliffites, referring to events of 1381–7, see pp. xvi–xvii, 283 (Knighton mentions Nicholas Hereford's imprisonment in 1387, but not his rehabilitation in 1392); on Knighton and Lollardy, see pp. xlii–xlvi.

[2] An ironic reference to Bede's story about Gregory the Great and the English slaves ('non angli sed angeli'): *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ed. B. Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors, vol. I (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), pp. 134–5.

Knighton has in mind the verse from Matthew's Gospel 'Do not give anything holy to dogs, or throw your pearls in front of pigs, in case they should tread them beneath their feet' (7:6).[3] He has no doubt that Matthew's words can be interpreted in relation to the laity trampling on sacred scripture; the 'evangelica margarita' was one of the privileges Christ reserved for the clergy, and above all the most highly educated, the doctors. The fact that Wyclif was one of these (he became a doctor of divinity in 1371/2) must have exacerbated Knighton's distress.[4]

It seems to Knighton that because Wyclif has translated the *evangelium* (by which he probably means the Gospels, but may mean the New Testament, or even 'scripture' more generally), the average cleric in England at the end of the fourteenth century has less access to the gospel in Latin than a literate layperson has to the gospel translated into English. Since biblical translation makes the gospel *vulgare* and *apertum*, smudging the traditional boundaries between clergy and laity – laymen even think their mother-tongue is 'better and worthier than the Latin language' ('melior et dignior quam lingua latina') – it is (in Knighton's view) one of the signs of the proximity of the end of the world that Wyclif should have undertaken it.[5] Wyclif's is not so much a translation as an apocalyptic deformation of the gospel.

Knighton's testimony about Wyclif's involvement in biblical translation is important, since he was (as the editor of his Chronicle, Geoffrey Martin, demonstrates) 'a close observer of the phenomenon [of Lollardy] with access to some particular sources of information about it'.[6] The process of formation of the Wycliffite Bible, and the roles played by Wyclif and others in the project, will be investigated later in this study. Here, we are concerned with the expectations about the consequences of translation of those who did, and those who did not, want the Bible to be translated, and what these expectations reveal about the cultural, political and religious

[3] Unless otherwise stated, translations from the Latin Bible are my own, and as literal as possible.

[4] On Wyclif's career, see *BRUO*, III.2103–6; Anne Hudson and Anthony Kenny, *ODNB* LX (2004), pp. 616–30; Andrew E. Larsen, 'John Wyclif, c. 1331–1384', in Ian C. Levy, ed., *A Companion to John Wyclif: Late Medieval Theologian* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), pp. 1–65; Michael Wilks, 'John Wyclif: Reformer', in Hudson, ed., *Wyclif: Political Ideas and Practice: Papers by Michael Wilks* (Oxford: Oxbow, 2000), pp. 1–15, and Herbert B. Workman, *John Wyclif: A Study of the English Medieval Church*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1926). Larsen argues that Wyclif was born between 1330 and 1335, probably closer to 1335 (pp. 9–12).

[5] Knighton quotes the eight signs of the end of the world from Guillaume de Saint-Amour's anti-fraternal *De Periculis Nouissimorum Temporum*, written in 1255; Martin, pp. 244–50 (quot. at 248).

[6] 'Knighton's Lollards', in Margaret Aston and Colin Richmond, eds., *Lollardy and the Gentry in the Later Middle Ages* (Stroud: Sutton, 1997), pp. 28–40, quot. at 28; also Hudson, *PR*, pp. 43–4, 240–2.

contexts within which the Latin Bible was translated into English for the first time. It makes sense to Knighton that the translator of the gospel is a declared heretic. His understanding of the hierarchical relation between Christ, doctors, clergy, laymen and the *infirmiores* (women, children and lunatics) precludes orthodox clerics translating the Bible. He had evidently been privy to debates about biblical translation, since he rehearses here two of the arguments recorded elsewhere: that translation derogates from the privilege of the clergy, and that it renders scripture liable to fall into disrepute. The name of Wyclif, however, is not mentioned in any of the large number of texts arguing for or against an English Bible. Only one, the Dominican Thomas Palmer's determination against translation, c. 1401–7, associates the Bible with the Lollards.[7]

Like Knighton, Palmer cites Matthew on not throwing pearls in front of pigs as a proof-text against translation. 'Holy scripture', he argues, 'ought not to be communicated to sinful men in its totality, orally or in writing.'[8] The objection Palmer advances is that Christ gave the traitor Judas, who was 'both a dog and a pig', the eucharist, the holiest of sacraments. If a priest must give the sacrament to a communicant whom he knows to be 'either a dog through infidelity or a pig through filthiness of sins', then by the same token he must not keep holy scripture from a sinful man.[9] Palmer predictably replies that a priest may indeed withhold the sacrament from a notorious sinner, although not from the sinner whose offences are hidden.[10]

Palmer would certainly have been aware of the context in which Pope Innocent III quotes the same verse from Matthew's Gospel, in a letter of 1199 to the laity of Metz, in north-eastern France. The Archbishop of Metz has informed him, says the Pope, that laypeople have translated the Gospels, the Pauline Epistles, the Psalms, Gregory the Great's moral commentary on the book of Job and many other books into French, and some readers of these translations have been reported as preaching, assembling in 'occultis conventiculis' ('secret conventicles'), and failing to honour the sacerdotal office, by omission and by commission.[11] Innocent exhorts the people of Metz not to be like the 'dogs and pigs' of Matthew's Gospel, heretics who reverence neither scripture nor sacraments nor priests. At the same time,

[7] On Palmer, see *BRUO*, III.1421–2, and Sharpe, *HLW*, p. 674; his *determinacio* is preserved in Trinity Coll. Camb. 347, fols. 2v–47v, ed. Deanesly, *LB*, pp. 418–37. On the date, see Hudson, 'The Debate on Bible Translation, Oxford 1401', in *Lollards and their Books* (London: Hambledon Press, 1985), pp. 81–2. Lollards are mentioned in Deanesly, *LB*, p. 421/13–15, p. 425/24; see Ghosh, *WH*, p. 100.

[8] 'Sacra scriptura non est malis totaliter communicanda voce vel scriptura', Deanesly, *LB*, p. 429/23–4. Palmer cites the work of another Oxford Dominican, Nicholas Gorham's *In Apocalypsim*, in support.

[9] 'Vel canem per infidelitatem vel porcum per spurcitiam peccatorum'; *LB*, p. 432/29–30, 36–7.

[10] *LB*, p. 433.

[11] PL CCXIV.695–9; see Deanesly, *LB*, p. 31. *Moralia in Iob* was one of the most widely circulated commentaries throughout the Middle Ages.

Innocent's letter and the chapter of Pope Gregory IX's *Decretals* quoting Innocent's letter *Cum ex iniuncto* assert that 'desire to understand the holy scriptures and eagerness to exhort in accordance with them is not to be reproved but rather commended',[12] and Malcolm Lambert is almost certainly right that Innocent was 'anxious not to extinguish [the] enthusiasm' generated by followers of Peter Valdes.[13]

There is no evidence that the church was hostile to the French Bible completed in around 1260, possibly under the auspices of the Dominicans.[14] Even so, the canon *Cum ex iniuncto* associates lay study of the Bible, particularly in translation, with the likelihood of heretical activity, and from the early thirteenth century onwards there was tension between clerical approval of lay access to the Bible in principle and fear of the consequences in practice.[15]

In England in the late fourteenth century, fear of the consequences of biblical translation is voiced particularly emphatically by friars, and in Wyclif's *Opus Evangelicum*, written in his retirement in Lutterworth (1383–4), it is friars who are identified as the dogs and pigs of Matthew 7:6. Friars claim, according to Wyclif, that the dogs are the laity from whom sacred scripture should be withheld, but they themselves are barking dogs who 'argue aimlessly and uselessly about the text of scripture'.[16] Two of the three surviving Oxford determinations on biblical translation were written by friars, the Dominican Palmer and the Franciscan William Butler, both coming down against translation.[17] The third determination, a debate between two doctors coming down in favour of translation, was written

[12] 'Desiderium intelligendi divinas scripturas et secundum eas studium adhortandi reprehendum non sit, sed potius commendandum', *Decretal. Gregor.* IX, lib.v, tit.vii, c. 12; ed. E. Richter and E. L. Friedberg, *Corpus Iuris Canonici*, vol. II (Leipzig: Tauchnitz, 1881), 784–7, quot. at 785.

[13] *Medieval Heresy*, 3rd edn (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), p. 82; see further Leonard E. Boyle, 'Innocent III and Vernacular Versions of Scripture', in Katherine Walsh and D. Wood, eds., *The Bible in the Medieval World: Essays in Memory of Beryl Smalley*, Studies in Church History, Subsidia 4 (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985), pp. 97–107. On Valdes and the early Waldenses, see Lambert, *Medieval Heresy*, pp. 70–80.

[14] Clive T. Sneddon, 'The "Bible du XIII^{e} siècle": its Medieval Public in the Light of its Manuscript Tradition', in W. Lourdaux and D. Verhelst, eds., *The Bible and Medieval Culture* (Louvain University Press, 1979), pp. 140, 135, 137. See further pp. 83–4, below.

[15] Deanesly's account of the clerical response to translations in European vernaculars is pervasively slanted towards prohibition and discouragement, *LB*, pp. 18–88. For a more balanced account, see *CHB*, II.338–491.

[16] 'Circa textum scripture diffuse et inutiliter altercantur': *Opus Evangelicum*, ed. Johann Loserth, vol. II (London: Wyclif Society, 1895), p. 387/34–5. Matt. 7:6 is the core text of Book III, chs. 38–9, pp. 383–90. On the date, see Williell R. Thomson, *The Latin Writings of John Wyclif* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1983), p. 220. On Matt. 7:6, see further Christina von Nolcken, 'Lay Literacy, the Democratization of God's Law and the Lollards', in John L. Sharpe III and Kimberly Van Kampen, *The Bible As Book: The Manuscript Tradition* (London: British Library, 1998), pp. 182–4.

[17] On Butler, see *BRUO*, I.329, and Sharpe, *HLW*, p. 757; his *determinacio* is preserved in Merton Coll. Oxf. 68, fols. 102r–204v, ed. Deanesly, *LB*, pp. 401–18.

by the secular cleric Richard Ullerston of the Queen's College.[18] Butler's and Ullerston's determinations are both dated 1401: in Oxford at the turn of the fifteenth century, as Anne Hudson says, 'the question of biblical translation could [still] be debated openly, without accusations of heresy being levelled against defenders of the [positive] view'.[19] Yet all three texts speak of profound clerical anxieties about lay access to the Bible.

Like Knighton, Palmer is anxious to keep the boundaries between clergy and laity clearly marked. Knighton's 'moderately well-educated clergy' are not educated well enough for Palmer's purposes: every nation, Palmer argues, needs *clerici* who are sufficiently learned in the language in which scripture is preserved to be able 'to interpret scripture to the people by way of circumlocution'.[20] Knighton supposes that as a consequence of Wyclif's translation laymen and women understand the gospel in English more readily than the average cleric understands it in Latin, as though the only barrier to understanding were the language itself. Palmer would have regarded this as simplistic. *Circumlocutio* – taking a roundabout approach to the words of scripture, glossing and interpreting them for the laity – is necessary, Palmer believes, because access to the naked text, uninterpreted scripture, gave rise to the Arian, Sabellian and Nestorian heresies in the early church, and *a fortiori* could lead 'simple people' into error.[21] With little or no knowledge of the church's tradition of interpretation, an area of knowledge in which doctors of divinity are expert, the laity cannot hope to read and immediately understand what they are reading. For fear of heresy, laypeople should not be allowed to read scripture *ad libitum* even in Latin, according to Butler.[22] Palmer and Butler write as though the threat of heresy were potential rather than actual, but, in the same year in which Butler and Ullerston were writing their determinations on biblical translation, the statute *De Heretico Comburendo* was enacted, signalling a determination to eradicate heresy, specifically the Wycliffite heresy.[23]

[18] On Ullerston, see *BRUO*, III. 1928–9, and Sharpe, *HLW*, pp. 516–17. His incomplete, unedited *determinacio* is in Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibl. 4133, fols. 195r–207v; see Hudson, 'The Debate on Bible Translation', pp. 69–81.

[19] Ibid., p. 83; on the dating of Butler's and Ullerston's treatises, see pp. 67, 75.

[20] 'Populo per circumlocutionem scripturas interpretari'; Deanesly, *LB*, p. 435/13–17.

[21] *LB*, p. 422/9–12.

[22] *LB*, p. 401/14–15; the arguments in favour of translation to which Butler is replying have been excised from the MS (fols. 118–20).

[23] *De Heretico Comburendo* became law on 10 March 1401. Alison McHardy argues that the mandate sent to England by Boniface IX in 1395 was sufficient for the execution of heretics without the need for a statute, but that there was a wish on the part of the Commons for a strong deterrent, '*De Heretico Comburendo*, 1401', in Aston and Richmond, eds., *Lollardy and the Gentry*, pp. 112–26. See