

JOHN WICLIF

His Life, Times, and Teachings



Arthur R. Pennington

JOHN WICLIF

His Life, Times, and Teaching

BY THE
REV. ARTHUR ROBERT PENNINGTON, M.A.
CANON NON-RESIDENTIARY OF LINCOLN;
AND
RECTOR OF UTTERBY, LINCOLNSHIRE.

AUTHOR OF "THE LIFE OF ERASMUS"; EPOCHS OF THE PAPACY,"
ETC.

PUBLISHED UNDER THE DIRECTION OF THE TRACT COMMITTEE.

LONDON:
SOCIETY FOR PROMOTING CHRISTIAN KNOWLEDGE,
NORTHUMBERLAND AVENUE, CHARING CROSS, W.C.;
43, QUEEN VICTORIA STREET, E.C.;
26, ST. GEORGE'S PLACE, HYDE PARK CORNER, S.W.
BRIGHTON; 135, NORTH STREET.
NEW YORK: E. & J. B. YOUNG & CO
1884.

Copyright © 2025 by H. D. Williams
All Rights Reserved
Printed in the United States of America

ISBN 978-8-9934030-6-9

All Scripture quotes are from the King James Bible except those verses compared and then the source is identified.

No part of this work may be reproduced without the expressed consent of the publisher, except for brief quotes, whether by electronic, photocopying, recording, or information storage and retrieval systems.

Address All Inquiries To:
THE OLD PATHS PUBLICATIONS, Inc.
Web: www.theoldpathspublications.com
E-mail: TOP@theoldpathspublications.com

PUBLISHER’S COMMENT

We decided to republish this volume, “*John Wiclif, His Live, Times, and Teaching*” which was written in 188 because:

- (1) it was so thoroughly researched and
- (2) so many modern controversies reported in a previous work, “*Wycliffe Controversies*,” by Dr. H. D. Williams in 2008 were covered and resolved concerning Dr. John de Wiclif in this volume by Dr. Pennington. This work of 1884 was previously unknown to the author of “*Wycliffe Controversies*.” It has many insights into the clashes about Wycliffe. (There are many different spellings of his name).

For example, Dr. Pennington, clearly identifies the text that Wyclif used to translate the first English translation. Was it the Old Latin texts or the Latin Vulgate? He said:

“The New Testament was probably translated by Wiclif. We come to this conclusion, because the same style is observable throughout it. Wiclif was, however, ignorant of Greek. The translation was, therefore, made from the Latin Vulgate. The consequence is that it does not always faithfully represent the original Greek or Hebrew. Thus, there are two remarkable passages in the Epistles of St. Peter, which stand thus in Wiclif's Bible, and the authorized version, respectively: -

1 Peter, c. iii., v. 22.

| Wiclif | Authorised Version |
|----------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------|
| That is in the righthalf of God, he swolewinge deeth, or | Who is gone into heaven and is on the right hand of God; angels and |

| | |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|
| <i>destrinyng</i> e, <i>that</i> we <i>shulde be maad eyres of</i> <i>euerlastinge lijf</i> ; he gon vnto heuen, aungels, and powers, and vertues, maad sugettes to him. | authorities and powers being made subject unto him. |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|

Again, 2 Peter, i., v. 10:

| | |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Wherefore, britheren, more bisye ye, that <i>bi goode werkis</i> ye make youre clepyng and chesyng certeyn. | Wherefore, the rather, brethren, give diligence to make your calling and election sure. |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

“The interpolated words (printed in italics) are in the Vulgate: “Swallowing death, that we might be made heirs of eternal life,” and “by good works.” The translation of the Old Testament was taken in hand at the same time with the translation of the New, or within a short time of its completion. We learn, from a remark on a copy of the original manuscript, added not long after it was made, that the translation was executed by Nicholas of Hereford. The original, and the copy, which have been preserved in the Bodleian Library, at Oxford, end abruptly in the middle of a sentence in the book of Baruch, chap. iii. v. 20. [Wiclifite Versions, preface, p. xvii] This fact seems to indicate that the translator was suddenly interrupted in his work. Now, we learn that Nicholas Hereford was cited, in May, 1382-as we shall see in the next chapter to appear before a provincial synod, in

London, to answer for a sermon preached on Ascension Day before the University, and that he was excommunicated on July 1. ["Fascic. Zizan.," p. 250.] He afterwards went to Rome to appeal against the sentence. He was here thrown into prison, where he remained for some years, but was afterwards released by the populace during an insurrection and returned to England. The translation, thus interrupted, was probably completed by Wiclif." [see pp. 164-165]

It is our hope at "The Old Paths Publications" that those interested in this biography about Wyciffe the "Morning Star of the Reformation," "first reformer," "the first to translate the bible into English,"...will appreciate the information contained in this volume.

The footnotes were interposed into the text because of formatting issues and an abbreviated "Table of Contents" was added for clarity. Please excuse any spelling errors that are not Old English or any references that are blurred. Many thanks,

H. D. Williams, M. D., Ph.D.,
President of The Old Paths Publications
December 2025

SAMPLE PAGES

PREFACE

"To the memory of one of the greatest of Englishmen, his country has been singularly and painfully ungrateful. On most of us the dim image looks down, like the portrait of the first of a long line of kings, without personality or expression—he is the first of the Reformers." ["Fasciculi Zizaniorum," Introduction, p. xlvi.]

These were the words of the late Professor Shirley, who laboured to impress his fellow-countrymen with a deep conviction of the debt of gratitude which they owe to John Wiclif. He has indeed conferred the greatest benefits upon them. He first translated the whole Bible into the language of the English people, and distributed it by means of his "Poor Priests" among all classes. He was, as we shall see, the writer of numberless books and tracts, connected with the most important religious questions of the day, which were designed to aid in the Reformation of the Church and the spiritual and moral regeneration of his fellow-countrymen. Through his English works, he became the father of our English prose. While we admit the important part played by the character of Henry VIII., we ought to see that a gradual education of the English people for the Reformation had been advancing beneath the surface of society since Wiclif's time, to which he was instrumental. By means of his works, the principles of the Reformation were conveyed through Bohemia to Germany, where they assisted Luther in effecting the Reformation associated with him.

These subjects will be brought forward in the following work. The wonder is that the illustrious man on whom Dr. Shirley pronounced his glowing eulogium should have been comparatively forgotten. Many men are now remembered and honoured by their fellow-countrymen whose services, when compared with those of Wiclif, sink into utter insignificance. The causes have been well stated by Professor Montagu Burrows, of Oxford, in an admirable work, "Wiclif's Place in History," recently published. [Wiclif's Place in History," pp. 8-22.] One of those causes must be looked for in the persistent efforts of the unreformed Church to place his opinions under ban and anathema, and to destroy every trace of his work. The members of that Church felt that, if he were successful, their ecclesiastical and doctrinal system must utterly perish. They were only too successful also in identifying the Reformer with the extreme socialistic and revolutionary dogmas which, as we shall see in the following work, he would have utterly repudiated. This is only one case out of many in which the followers of a great leader depart from or go beyond the teaching "of one to whom they owed their origin. Another cause has been the expression of his opinions in the language of the Scholastic Philosophy, well understood in his day, but obscure in the present day, from which those who do not understand it have obtained matter of accusation against him.

But the principal causes of the prejudice in the minds of some against him are, that they have formed their estimate of him from the works of his opponents, or from works incorrectly attributed to him; that they have had at their service only very small portions of his own works; and that they have judged him by articles unfairly taken from his writings by Synods which were

determined to procure his condemnation. Other causes have been the uncertain date of his writings, and the neglect, as we shall see in the following work, to attend to his progressive development. Dr. Shirley, writing in 1858, states—"Of his original English works, nothing beyond one or two short tracts has seen the light." [Fasciculi Zizaniorum," p. xlvi.] Of the great mass of Wiclif's Latin works, only one treatise of importance, the "Trialogus," has, up to this year, been printed. This work, published abroad in 1525, eighty years after the invention of printing, and again in 1753, was edited by Dr. Lechler, in 1869, for the Oxford University Press. Many of his other Latin works are buried in manuscript at Vienna. One of the most important of these is his great work, the "Summa in Theologia," containing his celebrated Theory of Dominion, without which we cannot fully understand his position. Professor Montagu Burrows has instituted a comparison between this work and Hooker's "Ecclesiastical Polity." [*"Wiclif's Place in History,"* pp. 62-68.] After the death of Anne of Bohemia, the wife of Richard II., the works were carried by her attendants to that country for safety. They were also taken to Bohemia by others. Bohemian hands were employed at the beginning of the fifteenth century, when the spirit of Wiclif took a strong hold of the inhabitants of Bohemia, in multiplying copies of them. The Imperial Library at Vienna possesses about forty volumes, consisting chiefly of unprinted Latin works of Wiclif, of which, in some instances, not a copy is to be found in England. They were removed to Vienna on the dissolution of the monasteries in the last century by the Emperor Joseph II. But, without these, it is impossible to form a correct opinion of him as a Reformer. The importance of the contents too, in the case of the Latin works, is far

superior to that of the English. Dr. Lechler writes thus: [Lorimer's translation of Lechler's "Life," vol. ii., p. 325.] "Scientifically considered, it is only the Latin works which are of value. Wiclif's philosophical and theological position can only be learned from them with certainty and thoroughness; while his English writings are chiefly valuable, in part for the history of the English language and literature, and in part for our knowledge of the influence of Wiclif upon the English people."

We must not, therefore, be surprised to find that, from the operation of these causes, many have formed an erroneous or indistinct conception of the illustrious Reformer. He is still "without personality or expression." Many admit that he influenced men of his own age and succeeding generations; but few understand the nature of that influence. The truth of some of the preceding observations may be illustrated by a reference to his biographers. Professor Burrows has given an excellent sketch of them. ["Wiclif's. Place in History," pp. 24-38.] Foxe, in his "Acts and Monuments," while he explained the full nature of the reforms which Wiclif was anxious to promote, gives us generally an incorrect impression of him, because he had only a slight knowledge of his works, which he confuses with those of his followers. He omits, too, all reference to the translation of the Bible. Dr. James wrote a learned "Apology" for Wiclif in 1608, and Lewis his admirable history of "Wiclif's Life and Sufferings" in 1720, both which works may be used with advantage in the present day. We have, however, since they wrote, obtained additional information about Wiclif, so that parts of their works are inaccurate. They do not seem to have been aware of his progressive development. Dr. James was intensely disgusted with the "garbling" of the Reformer's opinions" which had

been carried on for many years by his enemies. Wood, in his "History and Antiquities of Oxford," and Jeremy Collier, the Non-juror, whose "Ecclesiastical History," published in Queen Anne's reign, has always been a standard authority, have ascribed to him opinions and motives which they have borrowed from the works of his opponents. Lingard not only studiously endeavours to represent Wiclif in an unfavourable point of view, but also quotes his opinions from works which may not have been written by him, and has grossly misrepresented his opinions on the Sacraments.

We now come to more modern times. Dr. Vaughan deserves the greatest credit for his painstaking works on the "Life of Wiclif." They have been the chief means of bringing his work before the English people. But, since he wrote, additional information as to Wiclif has been obtained, which renders some of his statements inaccurate. Le Bas' "Life" is no longer trustworthy, because it was written before Lechler and others had carefully examined Wiclifite literature. He seems, too, to have wanted that critical spirit which might have enabled him to discover oft-repeated fallacies; but he has given, on the whole, a fair representation of the opinions of Wiclif. Dean Hook, to whom as a Church historian we are generally so much indebted, as we shall see in the following work, has brought charges against Wiclif which a more careful examination of his writings would have convinced him could not be sustained. He has erred in following the Church historian, Milner. The author cannot agree with him in thinking that Milner has written the "Life of Wiclif" with "singular discretion and impartiality." ["Lives of the Archbishops," vol. iii. , p. 84.] On the contrary, he often

allows his prejudice against Wiclif to warp his judgment. He also erred, as we shall see, because he was ignorant of his development and of the dates of Wiclif's works. Thus he thought that Wiclif was receding from the position which he once occupied-an entire mistake. Chancellor Massingberd's able account of Wiclif, and Milman's excellent sketch, may be criticised because they want information. The former has quoted as Wiclif's, works which he did not write. He would have written a better account of him if he had seen that we must compare statements made in some of his works with those made in others, in order that we may form a correct judgment respecting them. Dean Milman has erred, as the following work will show, in saying that Wiclif "did not offer a new system of doctrine to the religious necessities of man," and that "from Wiclifism it would be difficult, perhaps impossible, to frame Articles like those of the Church of England." ["Latin Christianity," vol. viii, p. 203] They would both have been gainers if the opportunity had been given to them of exploring the spacious field of Wiclifite literature which is now being gradually unfolded to our view.

The author does not, then, think that on any one life, or sketch of his life, for the reasons just given, full reliance can be placed. As a large majority have gained their knowledge of him from those works, they have often formed an impression of him in some respects erroneous. But the darkness which surrounded him is now passing away. The late Walter Waddington Shirley, Regius Professor of Ecclesiastical History at Oxford, laboured to dispel it. He is chiefly known by a Catalogue of the works of Wiclif which he has ascertained to be genuine, with the dates of the years when they were written, as well as by an admirable preface to the

“Fasciculi Zizaniorum,” or “John Wiclif's Tares,” a collection of documents, the work of T. Netter of Walden, the great opponent of Wiclif. It includes also other matter which makes that title inaccurate. Dr. Buddensieg, in his able Preface to the Polemical Works, recently published, observes: “Shirley ranks far above all his predecessors in the minuteness of his research and his penetrating judgment, and has left indispensable aid to his successors in the province of Wiclif research.” [Page iv.] Others have followed in the same department of research. We thus know very well his genuine works, and the dates of many of them. The “Select English Works” have been printed in accordance with Dr. Shirley's wish, by the University Press at Oxford, and have been edited by Mr. T. Arnold; and other English works, omitted by Arnold, have been published by Mr. F. Matthew for the early English Text Society. But, as we shall see in the following work, the greatest credit is due to a foreigner, Dr. Lechler, who has given us an admirable life, the result of the examination of the works of Dr. Shirley and others, and of the unpublished Latin Manuscripts at Vienna. Through the publication of this “Life,” we are able to correct some errors in regard to his career. This work has been well translated and edited by Dr. Lorimer. [When there are references in the following work to Lechler's “Life,” they are made to the English translation.]

The Wiclif Society, too, has been founded for the purpose of removing from England the disgrace of having left in manuscript the most important works of her great early Reformer. Among these may be mentioned especially the Latin Manuscripts at Vienna. Other works will follow the Polemical Works just referred to. We cannot expect to add to the information which may thus be obtained any from the archives at Rome, the

examination of which is now allowed by the Pope. Dr. Lorimer informs us that they have been examined by competent persons, and that they add nothing to our previous knowledge of Wiclif. [Lechler's "Life," vol. ii. , p. 320; note by Lorimer.]

We shall, therefore, now soon be in a position to do full justice to Wiclif. We shall be able to gaze on his living and breathing image as it is brought before us in his works; we shall not see the disfigured and distorted lineaments exhibited to us in works not his own, and in those of his opponents. We shall also be able, to use the words of Dr. Buddensieg in the preface to the Polemical Works, "to trace the growth and development of a great nation in the person of its greatest representative." [Page vi] The author hopes that the following work may contribute to the knowledge of Wiclif. He has consulted all the available sources of information, including the Polemical Works, and has endeavoured to form a just estimate of his character, opinions, and work. Professor Burrows has kindly aided him by examining the proof-sheets. He has taken the place of the late Professor Shirley at Oxford in his efforts to excite an interest in the subject. He can only express his earnest hope that the result of a more careful examination of Wiclif's work this year, when prominence will be given to him through the celebration of the Quincentenary of his death, will be a deeper conviction that he was largely instrumental to the Reformation, not only in England but also on the continent of Europe.

CONTENTS ABBREVIATED

| | |
|-------------------------------------------------|-----|
| PUBLISHER'S COMMENT | 3 |
| PREFACE..... | 7 |
| CONTENTS ABBREVIATED | 15 |
| CONTENTS..... | 17 |
| JOHN WICLIF | 23 |
| HIS LIFE, TIMES, AND TEACHING. | 23 |
| CHAPTER I. | 23 |
| WICLIF IN HIS NATIVE PLACE. | 23 |
| CHAPTER II..... | 35 |
| WICLIF IN OXFORD.- 1335-1367. | 35 |
| CHAPTER III..... | 79 |
| WICLIF AS A POLITICIAN. | 79 |
| 1366-1378..... | 79 |
| CHAPTER IV..... | 135 |
| WICLIF'S "POOR PRIESTS. " | 135 |
| CHAPTER V..... | 151 |
| WICLIF'S TRANSLATION OF THE BIBLE. | 151 |
| CHAPTER VI | 175 |
| WICLIF AS A REFORMER IN DOCTRINE | 175 |
| 1378-1382 | 175 |
| CHAPTER VII..... | 213 |
| WICLIF IN LUTTERWORTH. | 213 |
| CHAPTER VIII..... | 233 |
| WICLIF'S OPINIONS..... | 233 |
| CHAPTER IX..... | 263 |
| WICLIF'S INFLUENCE ON THE REFORMATION. | 263 |

SAMPLE PAGES