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Wycliffe New Testament Facsimile

1246 words

“A Commitment to Scripture: The Wycliffe English Bible”

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Although most people read the Bible in their native language today, biblical translations were once disparaged. In the words of modern Jewish Poet Hayimm Nachman Bialik, “He who reads the Bible in translation is like a man who kisses his bride through a veil” (qtd. In MacGregor 190). Nonetheless, MacGregor responds to Bialik’s view by insisting that the “translator’s task is to make it as gossamer-fine a veil as may be” and “even the most beautiful of women may be enhanced by a veil” (190). One can only imagine that the master translator John Wycliffe would more than agree with MacGregor’s argument. For it was Wycliffe who translated the Bible from Latin Vulgate to English producing the first complete Bible in English. An original fourteenth century Wycliffe Bible Leaf along with a facsimile of the Wycliffe Bible can be found on display in Houston Christian University’s Dunham Bible Museum. This artifact is a testament to the sacrifices people have made to further the word of God.

Although the Wycliffe Bible is often celebrated today, the Roman Catholic Church in England was predictably opposed to an English translation of the Bible. Houston Christian University’s facsimile copy of the Wycliffe New Testament printed in 1986 includes an introduction by Donald L. Brake where he mentions that England converted to Christianity in the sixth and seventh centuries. However, medieval Englishmen believed the Bible should only be accessible to the elite and that it was the duty of a priest to read the Bible in Latin. This made it virtually impossible for the laity, who were unfamiliar with Latin, to read the Bible or understand church services (v).

In opposition to the restriction of a common-language Bible, Wycliffe sacrificed his post as a Roman Catholic Priest because he was convinced that Scripture needed to be understood and obeyed. Not only did he refer to the priests as “Heretics,” he also claimed that knowledge

imparted by the priest through word of mouth did not “deserve to be listened to” because a priest’s knowledge undermines firsthand knowledge of Scripture (Brake vii). Instead, Wycliffe announces that “Holy Scripture is the faith of the Church” (vii). Because the laity should know faith, he believed it was not only necessary for each person to have his own copy of the Bible but that it was also important for Scripture to be taught in a language they could comprehend. However, because the strength of the church relied on the authority of the priest, biblical ignorance was necessary for the Church to maintain power (xvii).

Nevertheless, Brake clarifies that while it was not illegal to produce a vernacular translation of the Bible, “translations used to popularize the reading of the Bible among the people were prohibited immediately” (xxvii n45). Consequently, the Oxford Council summoned in 1407-08 mandated that no translations of Scripture into English should be made unless allowed by the council providential (xvii). Although the Roman Catholic Church in England was opposed to production of the Wycliffe Bible, Wycliffe and his translation popularized the idea of “distinguishing between the Bible and the teaching of the Church and its doctors” (Workman 141). Thus, while the Roman Catholic Church in England attempted to hinder the impact of the translation, the Wycliffe Bible was nonetheless vastly important because it redefined how people viewed Scripture by placing Divine Scripture above traditional Church authority.

Approximately, two hundred and fifty copies of the manuscript exist today. In the facsimile of the Wycliffe Bible displayed in the Dunham Bible Museum, there is a note from Thomas Hearne dated from 1719 in which he claims to have received the original manuscript from Edward Etterick. Interestingly enough, it is possible that this is the same Thomas Hearne (1678-1735) who was a British diarist and antiquarian (“Thomas Hearne”). Hearne was a non-juror who refused to swear allegiance to King George I leading to his forced withdrawal from his

position of Second-keeper of the Bodleian” (Shugrue 233). Because non-jurors also stood “for the right of the Church to independence in spiritual matters,” Hearne most likely sacrificed his librarianship for both political and religious reasons (Gaskoin). Therefore, Thomas Hearne and John Wycliffe are similar in the sense that both men made sacrifices for their religious convictions.

While most scholars generally assume the first versions of Wycliffe’s biblical translations are the work of Wycliffe and a few of his disciples, later versions are usually attributed to John Purvey (c1353-1428), Wycliffe’s secretary who was imprisoned twice for rejecting the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church (Brake x, xi). The facsimile Houston Christian University owns is an exact copy of one of John Purvey’s later revisions. Although both versions may appear slightly similar, Purvey’s revised version lacks the awe-inspiring art included in many of the earlier versions attributed to Wycliffe. The two figures below represent the differing artwork between the two versions.



Figure 2. Early Version of Wycliffe Bible held by British Library.

Taken from <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/wycliffite-bible>.

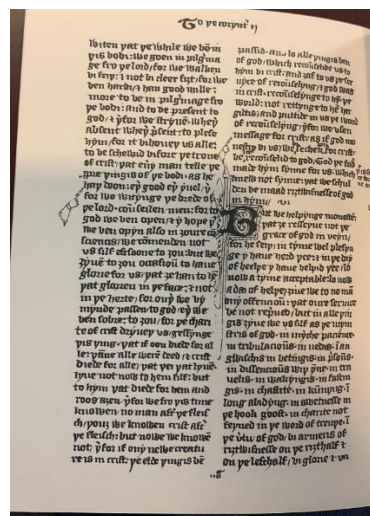


Figure 3. Wycliffe New Testament Facsimile.

Photo by Alyssa Jemela

As shown above, the later version of the Wycliffe Bible does not include the decorated borders and floral depictions seen in the early version. However, because there are less

depictions of art, the later versions were slightly less expensive and represent “the more typical Bible read by the masses” (Brake xxiii). Additionally, because John Purvey was arrested twice for his religious convictions, he relates to John Wycliffe and Thomas Hearne who also made sacrifices in order to further the word of God.

While Houston Christian University’s facsimile does not include the sublime artwork included in earlier versions of the Wycliffe Bible, it does include multiple manicasulas or “little hands.” A manicaula is simply a term used for a small hand with an outstretched index finger. These hands were a medieval tradition mostly added by a reader and allow us to assess what a reader “found important about a book or a collection of books” (Kkwakel). In the Dunham Bible Museum, one manicaula can be viewed at the bottom of the right page on the displayed facsimile pointing to the word “Christ” as seen in figure 3. This most likely suggests that a medieval reader drew the small hand while reading through the original manuscript. Additionally, these manicasulas are not present in a few other Wycliffe Bible manuscripts, such as the fourteenth-century manuscript owned by Yale University as seen in figures 4 and 5. While both pages of the Yale University manuscript are from the same section as the Wycliffe New Testament facsimile, the manicaula is nowhere in sight. Thus, the facsimile is unique due to the fact that there’s a kind of fingerprint left by a medieval reader but also because the original manuscript was once owned by an impressive British antiquarian, booklover, and man of conscience.

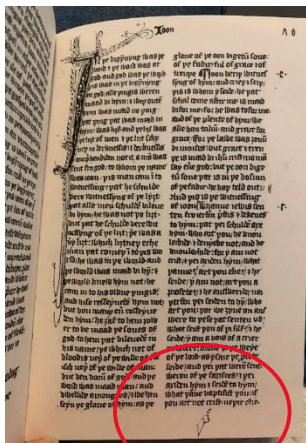


Figure 3. Wycliffe New Testament Facsimile John 1.

Photo by Alyssa Jemela

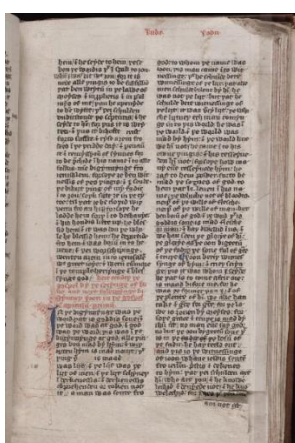


Figure 4. Wycliffe New Testament Manuscript held by Yale University John 1.

Taken from <https://collections.library.yale.edu/catalog/2004>

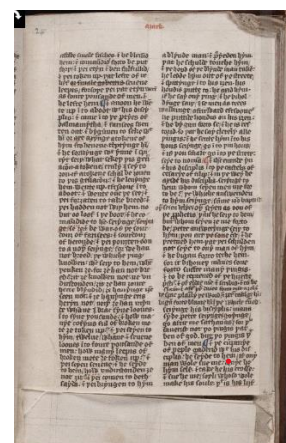


Figure 5. Wycliffe New Testament Manuscript held by Yale University John 1 page 2.

Taken from <https://collections.library.yale.edu/catalog/2004992>.

Without a doubt, the Wycliffe Bible is crucial to the Dunham Bible Museum because it played an indisputable role in the story of the Bible. Although the Roman Catholic Church in England prohibited translations of the Bible used to popularize reading among the laity, the Wycliffe Bible nevertheless reformed the way people viewed Scripture. The Wycliffe New Testament facsimile supports Houston Christian University's commitment to Scripture because the Wycliffe Bible mobilized the idea that firsthand knowledge of sacred Scripture was essential to Christian living, even among the laity. In addition to the fact that the Wycliffe New Testament facsimile is the reproduction of a unique manuscript, students should continue to learn about the Wycliffe Bible in order to not only better understand the word of God, but also to appreciate the sacrifices others have made to promote its message.

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