Introduction: New Directions in Research on the First English Bible

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The Wycliffite Bible (WB) is the first complete translation of the Bible in English and the most widely disseminated medieval English text: it survives in over 250 copies by far outnumbering other popular literary and non-literary works. It is also arguably the most complex of medieval English texts. It is a collection of books in prose and verse, and academic prologues that circulated separately, and in selections and order that varied in individual manuscripts. The authorship and date of the translation are unknown, but it is likely to be a long-term work of several scholars based in Oxford in the late 14th century. The manuscript tradition of WB is highly complex with copies of different dates preserving different versions of the translation. What is currently known as the Earlier (EV) and Later (LV) versions reflect two major stages in the work on the translation and its revision, probably by different groups of academic translators, but these were not stable texts and do not cover the full variety of versions in circulation. As became increasingly clear to scholars starting with Forshall and Madden, all surviving manuscripts of EV show evidence of modification in the direction of LV, and this revision was not a linear or always strictly controlled process. A number of copies have idiosyncratic texts resulting from diverse efforts at revision, and there is evidence that both versions continued to be used and influenced each other in the 15th century. To add to this complexity, the translation was circulated with a plethora of companion texts, including commentary, various liturgical aids, such as calendars and lectionaries, exegetical aids, such as lists of biblical books and capitula-lists, non-Wycliffite translations and adaptations of parts of the Bible and a range of devotional and catechetical works. The origin of texts preserved in forms closely related to the translation, such as commentary and liturgical materials, requires further study, but it is likely that at least some of them are the work of the original translators.

Many questions about WB remain unanswered in spite of a recent renewal of scholarly interest, most evident in the publication of Mary Dove’s The First English Bible (2007) and The Earliest Advocates of the English Bible (2011). These questions relate to the authorship of WB, its production, dissemination, audience, use, reception and impact, as well as its relationship to other national traditions of biblical translation. The present collection aims to contribute to
the study of all these topics, to raise further questions and hopefully to inspire and facilitate future research.

Contributions to the present volume illuminate WB in many new ways and what follows highlights some, but by no means all, areas where research published here demands revision of earlier views.

1. First of all, the scale of the WB project, much underappreciated in the past, becomes easier to comprehend. Recent research indicates that it was not simply a biblical translation but part of a network of connected editorial enterprises. These are likely to have included the creation of some of the para-biblical materials circulated with the translation, but also possibly other large-scale contemporary projects. As Anne Hudson argues in her essay on the origin and textual tradition of WB, the *Glossed Gospels* use both versions of the translation, and the commentary in the *Glossed Gospels* and Wycliffite revision of Richard Rolle’s *English Psalter* occurs in biblical books least explored in the WB tradition, raising the possibility that all these texts are an outcome of connected efforts and were designed to be complementary. Further research is likely to reveal other evidence of the unique achievement of scholars behind WB.

2. Traditional accounts of WB still regard the translations as produced for a lay audience without the knowledge of Latin, as a deliberate attempt to loosen the hold of the clergy, and especially of the higher clerical orders, on the primary source of religious belief and practice. This view agrees poorly with the overarching scholarly nature of the translation and its manuscripts that offer little to accommodate a less learned user. The presentation of the biblical text in the manuscripts reflects concentrated interest in its accuracy and authority, and it seems likely that only a learned reader would have been able to appreciate some of the commonest devices displayed. Jerome’s prologues, as Kantik Ghosh observes, allusive and rhetorically complex, would in large part be comprehensible only to those who were fully able to make sense of the Latin as well, and appreciate not only text-critical and hermeneutic comments, but the whole set of mind and methods underpinning academic discourse. Marginal commentary that accompanies the translation in several manuscripts shows, as demonstrated by Michael Kuczynski and Anne Hudson, persistent involvement with the differences between Latin, Hebrew and other biblical versions and the accuracy of their rendering of the text. This interest is much more common and prominent than any ideological preoccupations, notoriously rare in WB manuscripts.