CHAPTER 12

The Palaeography of the Wycliffite Bibles in Oxford

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1 Sampling

The following discussion should be seen as piecemeal and highly provisional. I have made no effort to see (or even to sample) the wider range of Wycliffite bibles. Rather, I have relied on much the same sample as Elizabeth Solopova’s forthcoming catalogue of such books, the collection that has randomly found a home in Oxford.1 At its core are sixty-three books that appear in the most recent published listing of copies, Dove (2007), largely based on the researches of Josiah Forshall and Frederic Madden.2 One should note this population actually reflects a much larger one, e.g. in Douce 265, the flyleaves represent an extraneous bifolium, a table of lections from a different manuscript.3

In addition, I have considered my remit broadly, as a survey of ‘Wycliffite scriptural transmission’. As a result, I have included six further Oxford books communicating materials dependent on the Wycliffite Bible. These include three copies of the Glossed Gospels (Oxford, Bodleian Library MSS Bodl. 143, Bodl. 243, and Laud Misc. 235), two copies of Oon of Foure, the translation of Clement of Llantony (Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Bodl. 481 and Oxford, Christ Church MS Allestree L.4.1), and the ‘Bible-summary’ of TCO 93 (lemmata only).4 On the one hand, I have examined (in more detail than I might at times have wished) something like a quarter of surviving Bible production (and I will allude to a few famous copies not in Oxford). However, what follows

1 Elizabeth Solopova, Manuscripts of the Wycliffite Bible in the Bodleian and Oxford College Libraries (Liverpool, 2016).
2 See Dove (2007), pp. 298–303; the fifty eight copies appear in fifty nine volumes, since Dove’s no. 77 (Rawl.C.237/238) is a two-volume set. At pp. 253–64, Dove describes the larger examples, usually whole bibles, in some detail.
3 Other manuscripts are subject to divisions (and thus separate listings) of this sort, e.g. Rawl.C.258 looks to me comprised of two separate elements—the gospels (the only portion bearing the Newcastle Dominican hermit John Lacy’s note of ownership) and the remainder—bound together to make a full NT; the lections at the rear of Rawl.C.259 have certainly been bound in from a book separately produced, etc.
scarcely represents a systematic examination of the Wycliffite Bible, and must be taken as provisional information, remarks that may guide investigation of a wider range of copies.

2 The Source and the Problems

Throughout I here attempt to instantiate a general proposition: that script (palaeography narrowly speaking, or as understood in the common parlance) represents but one decision in book-production, and is never independent of any of the others. A holistic approach is required—and not surprisingly, at least my initial investigations imply that script choice and quality run in accord with other production decisions. These are especially evident in decoration and the degree of formality accorded the production.

The most usual perception about the English books I survey was stated by Christopher de Hamel, ‘Looked at from [a Parisian] perspective, Wycliffite manuscripts of the Scriptures are hardly Bibles at all’.5 By this statement, de Hamel seeks to point out features in many English Bibles that vary from those visible in what he takes to be a normative production. This is the so-called ‘Parisian pocket-Bible’, produced in very large numbers from 1230 to the end of the century—although not just in Paris, but many places, both in northern France and in England. Certainly, books of this sort, thick volumes in small formats (generally under 200 mm high), will have formed, at the time Bibles came to be produced in English, one model conception of what a biblical book should be. Yet certainly, as we shall see, with this model in mind as a universal, the manuscripts of the Wycliffite Bible will look distinctly deviant.

I think that de Hamel is correct in considering the commonplace ‘pocket-book’ as a probable model underlying most English biblical production.6 However, he overlooks one significant issue. As Laura Light, in one of her foundational studies of Parisian production, argues, the term ‘Paris Bible’ describes a textual form, a set of requisite contents (in a reasonably fixed order), not a book-format. Although the ‘pocket-Bibles’ de Hamel prioritises represent perhaps the most common form of delivering such contents, that is scarcely an exclusive form. As Light points out, many books with ‘Paris Bible’ texts from

6 Cf. Dove (2007), pp. 88–92, a discussion of inherited Paris Bible format. Significantly, however, she illustrates the form, not from a ‘pocket-book’; but from the outsized ChCh 145 (figure 5, p. 89). The inscription of gift to Christ Church implies that, down to 1575, this might have been on a lectern in the church at Flore (Nhants.).