Henry Ansgar Kelly


Henry Ansgar Kelly’s new book on the translation of the Bible into Middle English is “essential reading” for anyone interested in the history of English biblical translation and in late medieval and early modern English religious culture in general. It will appeal especially to scholars and students of what Anne Hudson called, nearly 30 years ago, in a landmark study, the “premature reformation.” Whether “premature” or not, the late fourteenth-century reform movement set in motion by John Wyclif and his followers brought center stage the question—though this was by no means the only question leveled at the ecclesiastical authorities—of whether or not the laity should have access to the Bible in English. Scholars refer to the pro-translation party as the “Wycliffites”; their contemporary orthodox opponents derisively called them “Lollards.” Kelly’s *The Middle English Bible* takes its place alongside recent cutting-edge books and articles on the creation and reception of the so-called “Wycliffite” Bible by the late Mary Dove, Ralph Hanna, Anne Hudson, Fiona Somerset, Elizabeth Solopova, and other scholars who have redefined the field.

To the question, “Was the production and reception of the Middle English translation of the Bible a Wycliffite project?” Kelly answers with an emphatic “No.” The thesis is by no means revolutionary. Different versions of same idea are found in the work of the following scholars, all cited by Kelly: Michael Wilks (1975), Patrick Hornbeck (2010), Ian Johnson (1999, 2010), David Lawton (2008), and (preeminent among students of Wyclif and Lollardy) Anne Hudson (1988). These scholars (and others!) all acknowledge—despite the interpretative nuances that may divide them—that producing or possessing English biblical translations in the 1380s and 1390s was not considered to be the basis for suspecting someone of heretical leanings; it was only after Arundel’s constitutions of 1409 that possession of vernacular biblical texts automatically aroused suspicion of Lollard leanings. Nevertheless, with few exceptions, leading scholars persist in referring to the “Wycliffite” Bible.

Re-reading and re-translating key passages in the relevant documents, Kelly makes a powerful case against the scholarly consensus regarding the so-called Wycliffite Bible and presents an entirely different, rigorously argued assess-

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2 Ibid., 22–26, 238–264.
ment of what the advocates and adversaries of biblical translation really said. The book’s purposefully question-begging title, “The Middle English Bible: A Reassessment” (emphasis added) announces its central thesis, namely, that what many 21st-century scholars still conventionally refer to as “Wycliffite” or “Lollard” English Bible translations (in either the “Early” and slavishly literal, or the “Late” and colloquially idiomatic versions) should more properly be referred to by the theologically neutral descriptor, “Middle English Bible.”

In Chapter One, ‘A History of Judgments on the Middle English Bible,’ Kelly deftly reviews the past and present status questionis. Credit is given to the Benedictine historian Aidan Gasquet, who was the “only one person” to reject the nineteenth-century consensus assigning the translation to Wyclif and his followers. In the footsteps of Gasquet, Kelly sets out to show that the Middle English biblical texts in question were orthodox productions, appropriated by the heretical Wycliffites for their own extra-ecclesiastical purposes, but never totally usurped from the hands of pious English clerics and laymen who wanted to read Holy Scripture in their native language.

In Chapter Two, ‘Five and Twenty Books as “Official” Prologue or Not,’ Kelly’s meticulous stylistic analyses prove that the so-called “General Prologue” was nothing of the kind. The author of the text that we should from now on refer to by its incipit, as Five and Twenty Books, self-identified as a “Simple Creature,” far from being a major participant in the translation project, was a wanna-be: “Since our analysis ... indicates that Simple Creature’s style is not matched anywhere in the LV Old or New Testament, except for four books in the latter, we should conclude that he was not a major force behind the project, and a claim on his part to be the translator would not sit well with the real translators” (p. 30).

Chapter Three, ‘The Bible at Oxford’ (pp. 31–49), tackles the question of where the project of doing the Bible in English was centered. Conventional wisdom says that in terms of Wyclif’s biblical knowledge, availability of Bible manuscripts, and habits of Bible study, it had to be Oxford. Kelly reminds us of Wyclif’s non-heretical stress on the place of biblical translation and study in the fourteenth-century M.A. curriculum. Apart from the heretical “Wycliffite” teachings, there is, as Kelly points out, a sizable body of Latin non-heretical “Wycliffinian” scripturo-centric commentary dating back to as early as 1354, when Wyclif first arrived in Oxford. These early writings reveal facets of “Wycliffian” positions that are independent heretical “Wycliffite” ideas.

In Chapter Four, ‘Oxford Doctors, Archbishop Arundel, and Dives and Pauper on the Advisability of Scripture in English,’ Kelly re-examines the views on vernacularizing Scripture of three of Wyclif’s contemporaries: Thomas Palmer, a Dominican friar; William Butler, a Franciscan friar; and Richard Ullerston, a