

# JOHN WYCLIFFE

A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH



FROM PILGRIM FOOTPRINTS  
by Dr. Ken Connolly

# John WYCLIFFE

1324-1384



*"The Morning Star"*

Wycliffe was born in an age of revolution. Civilization in England was being overhauled. This was nowhere more obvious than in the LANGUAGE. Divisional dialects had been losing their appeal since the Norman Conquest of 1066. London grew into a center of commercial trade and regional chieftains decided to barter in a common tongue. Wycliffe was born in this "Middle English" period. The vocabularies of the scholar and the serf were gradually merging together.

Another area of this revolution lay in the field of POLITICS. The barons were not as ready to submit their authority to a central king as the king was to submit his temporal authority to a foreign pope. When King John placed his crown at the feet of a papal legate, foreigners swarmed all over England and took control of all positions, both secular and sacred. This hurt King John when he needed to exert influence on the barons in order to collect taxes from the people for his military ventures. It fueled the fire which led to the Great Chart or "Magna Carta" of June 15, 1215.

At the same time, men's minds were being unshackled by the RENAISSANCE. The University of Paris ejected all their English students in 1167 A.D. Those students arrived in Oxford and founded their own University. By Wycliffe's time Oxford had become Europe's leading university. In England it was now exerting strong influence in religion, politics and commerce. For example, academic accomplish-

ment conditioned promotions in the hierarchy of church government.

The church remained stagnant in all this seething change. They maintained that Latin, the common language for religion among all separate tongues, was still the language of heaven. When King John sold feudal sovereignty to Pope Innocent III, it cost England 12,000 pounds annually, not considering the fact that "tithes" to the pope were five times that of taxes to the king. Financial payments substituted for physical penance. The church became money-hungry and licentious. The "Friar" in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* is a good mirror of these times.

John Wycliffe lifted his voice in the midst of this commotion, this flux of change. The establishment attacked him, but he never so much as flinched at their missiles. In the process he did more than any other man to change the course of English history.

**1324** John Wycliffe was born in the village of Wycliffe, Yorkshire, from which he took his name, only 107 years after the signing of the Magna Carta. The name "Wycliffe" had been associated with that village since the Norman Conquest in 1066. The feudal overlord of the area was John of Gaunt. He later became Wycliffe's patron.

**1340** At the age of 20 Wycliffe was sent to study at Queens College, Oxford. For an unknown reason, he later transferred to Merton College and graduated from that school.



*John of Gaunt*



*The church at Lutterworth.*

**1348** The dreaded Black Death had moved across Europe and by August 1st it had reached Dorchester. By November 1st it was in London. Two hundred people each day died in London alone and were buried in common graves in the district of Smithfield. More than 100,000 perished with this disease. The sobering effect on Wycliffe led to his conversion. His parents became angry and resentful over his conversion.

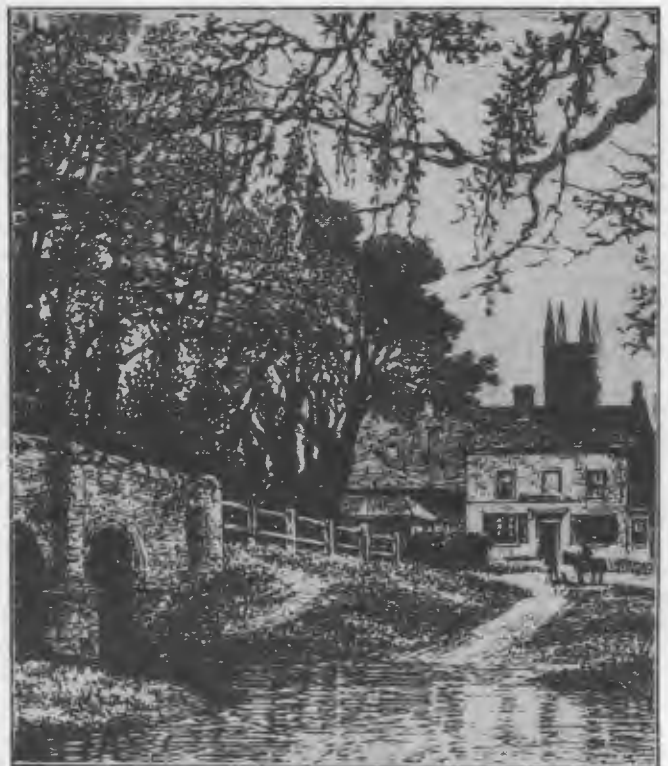
**1356** After 16 years of study, Wycliffe graduated from Merton, the oldest college in Oxford. Upon his graduation, he was appointed the Master of Balliol College, occupying the chief position on its faculty. It took another 16 years for him to graduate with his doctorate degree.

**1360** Wycliffe published a pamphlet, *Objections to the Friars*. It was an exposure of the Begging Friars and it quickly erupted into issues of Parliamentary debate. The church, under the Pope's control, owned one-half of all England's holdings. Parliament started urging action by the king and Wycliffe fanned the flame.

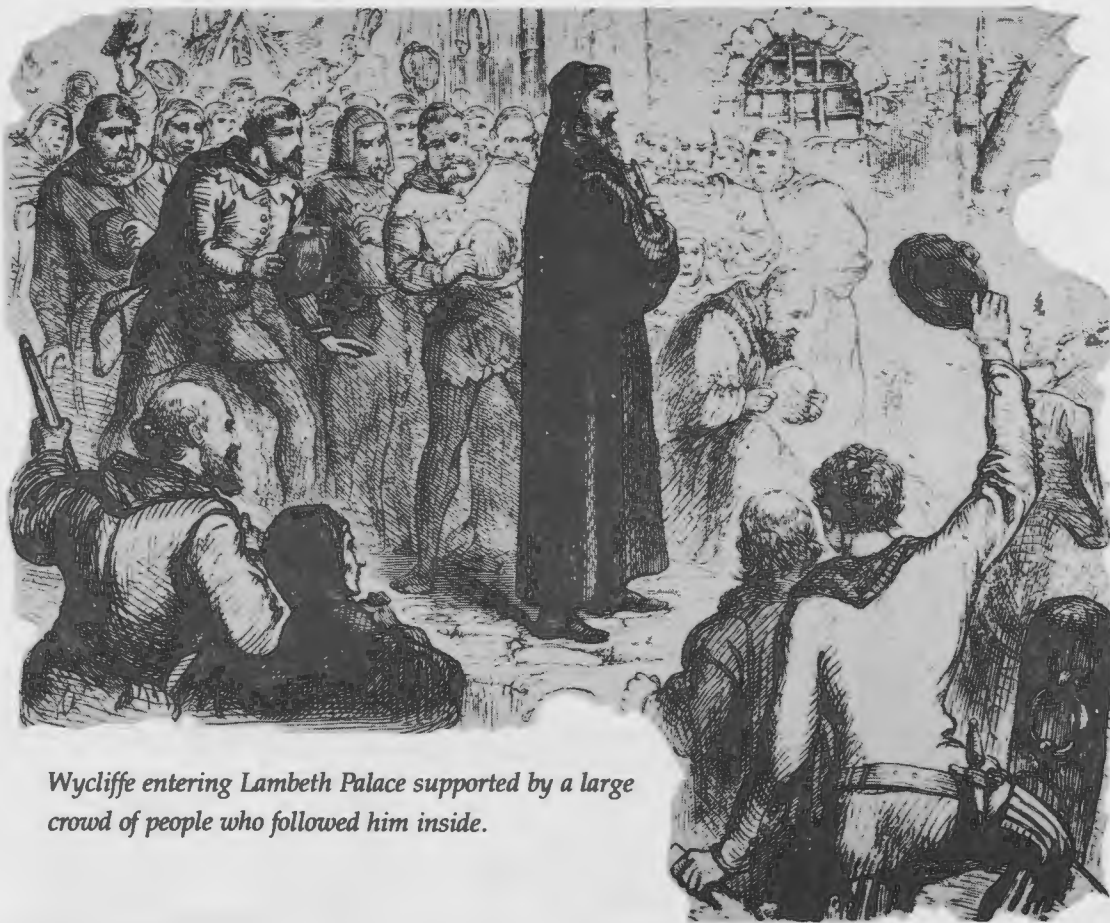
**1361** Wycliffe accepted a "living" at Fillingham in Lincolnshire. A stipulated income automatically passed to the assignee who filled the post.

**1365** Though it is open to question, it is believed that Wycliffe was the "John de Wyclif" of record who was granted the "wardenship" of Canterbury Hall. This position carried considerable prestige.

**1366** A letter of threat was sent from Pope Urban V to King Edward III. The king was ordered to appear at Rome and defend himself. He was charged with default of payment in the annual stipends. Edward appealed to the Parliament



*The River Swift at Lutterworth.*



Wycliffe entering Lambeth Palace supported by a large crowd of people who followed him inside.

and their unanimous decision was that payment should be refused. They contended that no English sovereign was at liberty to surrender the nation's independence.

One Doctor of Theology publicly challenged Wycliffe to defend papal rights. Wycliffe therefore published a tract. To the surprise of the clergy, Wycliffe defended the conclusions of Parliament. He accepted submission to papal authority in ecclesiastical matters; but he defended the right of a country to resist, even with force of arms, all interference, from whatever source, when it impugns any country's inherent liberty and independence.

**1372** Two important events occurred during this year:

First, Wycliffe was awarded his Doctor of Divinity degree. This is noteworthy because, according to papal documents, he was not considered guilty of "heresy" until after this event. Otherwise, the doctorate would not have been conferred.

The second event was the arrival in England of a papal agent, for the purpose of collecting dues. The amount he tried to collect was five times the revenue of the entire kingdom. Insult was added to injury by the pomp and splendor of his entourage. Spacious and luxurious quarters had to be provided for him. The whole event cut Wycliffe to the quick.

**1374** Wycliffe was awarded the rectory of Lutterworth in Leicestershire on April 7th. The appointment was made by the king, not the Pope.

On July 26th he was sent to Bruges, France as a member of a Commission. It became his task to meet with representatives of the Pope and to confer on "Provisions." The brief, which England supported, went as follows:

First, there had been a law passed 12 or 13 years previously known as the *Statute of Provisors of Benefices*. It held that it was wrong to bestow a "living" on any subject, foreign or domestic. Only the king could proffer them and a guilty person would be imprisoned and forced to pay restitution.

The second issue related to "Praemunire." This stringent law forbade the publication of any brief, state paper, or papal bull without the explicit consent of the king. The violation of this law brought banishment and the loss of all property and all civil rights.

The third grievance was against the reigning pontiff, Urban V. It objected to his presumption in summoning a sovereign of England to appear before a papal tribunal.

The King's Commission was wearied by perpetual delays on frivolous pretexts and, after two years of effort, it culminated in failure. Nevertheless, the experience was a benefit to Wycliffe. Like Luther's visit to Rome, this opened Wycliffe's eyes to the need for a reform. It also brought John of Gaunt, the Duke of Lancaster and an extremely wealthy man of royal blood, to become his sponsor. This assured Wycliffe's financial security.

**1376** The Commission made its report to the "Good Parliament." A bill was introduced specifying ecclesiastical abuses under 140 titles. Historians agree that the similarity



*Preaching at St. Paul's Cross.*

between the bill and Wycliffe's lectures to his students on civil lordship induce the conclusion that Wycliffe strongly influenced the drafting of the bill.

There was a dual thesis to the bill: It was, first, that all property was subject to civil power and, secondly, an unrighteous clergy, being a violation of innate claim, should therefore be subject to the loss of property by civil authority.

**1377** On February 19th, Archbishop Sudbury summoned Wycliffe to answer his critics at St. Paul's Cathedral. William Courtenay, the Bishop of London and a maternal great-grandson of Edward I, presided. The Duke of Lancaster was also present, along with five theologians who would defend Wycliffe. Courtenay seethed with dislike for the Duke and, to Wycliffe's advantage, the presence of both balanced the scales somewhat.

The halls were packed to their capacity. The Grand Marshal requested Wycliffe to be seated. He responded: "No! For the accused to sit before his judges is neither lawful nor decent; he must and shall stand." These comments aroused such public response that a riot ensued and the trial had to be adjourned.

The Mendicant Order of monks who had drawn up the charges against Wycliffe now addressed their grievances to the Pope. They accused Wycliffe of doctrinal error on 19 separate issues. Pope Gregory XI, on May 22nd, issued five bulls against Wycliffe. They were directed to the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Bishop of London, the University of Oxford and the king.

**1378** Wycliffe was summoned again to appear at St. Paul's Cathedral "within thirty days." The hearing was later changed to take place at Lambeth Palace, the Archbishop's residence. It also was packed with an audience sympathetic to Wycliffe. They chanted: "The Pope's briefs should have no effect in England without the King's consent. Every man is master in his own house." The tenor of the judges' attitudes changed later when an officer from the court of the Queen Mother entered. He announced to the judges that, on her behalf, no judgment was to be brought against Wycliffe at this time. This trial also ended without the bishops accomplishing their objectives.

The Wycliffe crisis had faded by the time Pope Gregory XI died in March. For the previous 70 years the popes had been ruling from Avignon, France, and had been puppets to the French kings. The cardinals appointed Urban VI to become the new pope and to rule from Rome. The French therefore appointed their own pope, Clement VII, to rule from Avignon, and this commenced a 30-year schism.

By this time Wycliffe had reached the conclusion that the future of England was determined by the voice that spoke to the people, so he organized those students who had studied under him at Oxford. They became known as "Lollards," which means either "mumblers of prayers" or "wanderers." Both meanings aptly describe them.

To provide these men with the tools they would need to protect themselves, he began translating the Bible from the Latin Vulgate into the English tongue. It should be noted that each copy was handwritten, taking 10 months for each



*Wycliffe's books being burnt at Prague.*

copy to be written and costing 40 pounds, while a priest earned only seven pounds a year. It was banned and burned in every country known to have succumbed to Wycliffe's influence. However, they must have been laboriously produced in prolific quantity, because today, over 600 years later, we can still locate 170 of the original copies. (Tyndale's New Testament, on the other hand, coming 150 years later, has only two known copies in existence.)

**1379** This was a year of writing for Wycliffe. Besides his translating, he wrote tracts on the Scriptures, the Church, the King and the Papal powers. His *De Official Regis* is considered "a declaration of war against the papal monarchy," according to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.



*Wycliffe's Bible at Hereford Cathedral.*

**1381** This was the year that he published his famous tract, *De Eucharistia*. It was a direct assault on the doctrine of transubstantiation. He labeled it "blasphemous folly." He stated that he "dare not affirm" that the bread, after consecration, is "essentially, substantially, corporeally and identically" the body of Christ. He held a view more closely aligned with that of "consubstantiation." This was Luther's view 125 years later.

Dr. William Barton, the Chancellor of Oxford, along with 12 other doctors, condemned his tract and interrupted his classroom lectures. Even his patron, John of Gaunt, tried to restrain him, but it only caused a rift between them. That rift widened when John Bull, one of Wycliffe's disciples, became involved with Wat Taylor in the Peasant's Revolt, and Bull "confessed" that he had learned his subversive doctrines from Wycliffe himself.

**1382** The translation of the New Testament was completed the previous year and was now ready for distribution. Jerome's Vulgate, in Latin, alone survived for distribution until Wycliffe's translation arrived. It had been decreed by the church in the early 13th century: "We forbid the laity to possess any of the books of the Old and New Testaments... but having any of these books translated into the vulgar tongue, we strictly forbid." That attitude was dominant. Bishop Arundel, for example, later stated: "This pestilent and most wretched John Wycliffe, of damnable



*Wycliffe tried at Oxford.*

memory, a child of the old devil, and himself a pupil of antichrist...crowned his wickedness by translating the Scriptures into the mother tongue."

The Lollards were only young Oxford students who were "clerks of the church." They had neither income nor the approval of a bishop. They wore no shoes and covered themselves with ankle-length, russet-colored gowns with deep pockets, possessing nothing but a staff and a copy of the New Testament. They preached in churches when

allowed, or in churchyards, village greens, public squares, fields, or at firesides. They addressed both commoners and noblemen. Because they believed that every believer was a priest, they practiced baptism and the Lord's supper, the only two ordinances that they were taught to accept. Their converts frequently organized a vanguard and rearguard for the preacher's protection.

Upon the death of Sudbury, William Courtenay had become the archbishop. Determined to erase "Wycliffeism,"



*King John humbling himself before the Papal Legate.*

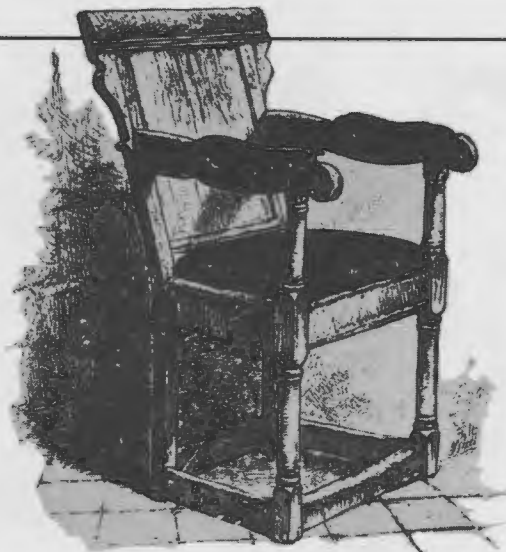
*An inscription on the memorial to him in Lutterworth Parish Church, dated 1837, read as follows:*

SACRED TO THE MEMORY OF JOHN WICLIF  
THE EARLIEST CHAMPION OF ECCLESIASTICAL REFORMATION IN ENGLAND,  
HE WAS BORN IN YORKSHIRE IN THE YEAR 1324,  
IN THE YEAR 1375 HE WAS PRESENTED TO THE RECTORY OF LUTTERWORTH:  
WHERE HE DIED ON THE 31st DECEMBER 1384,  
AT OXFORD HE ACQUIRED NOT ONLY THE RENOWN OF A CONSUMMATE SCHOOLMAN,  
BUT THE FAR MORE GLORIOUS TITLE OF THE EVANGELIC DOCTOR  
HIS WHOLE LIFE WAS ONE IMPETUOUS STRUGGLE AGAINST THE CORRUPTIONS  
AND ENCROACHMENTS OF THE PAPAL COURT,  
AND THE IMPOSTURES OF ITS DEVOTED AUXILIARIES, THE MENDICANT FRATERNITIES,  
HIS LABOURS IN THE CAUSE OF SCRIPTURAL TRUTH  
WERE CROWNED BY ONE IMMORTAL ACHIEVEMENT,  
HIS TRANSLATION OF THE BIBLE INTO THE ENGLISH TONGUE.  
THIS MIGHTY WORK DREW ON HIM, INDEED, THE BITTER HATRED  
OF ALL WHO WERE MAKING MERCHANDIZE OF THE POPULAR CREDULITY AND IGNORANCE:  
BUT HE FOUND AN ABUNDANT REWARD IN THE BLESSING OF HIS COUNTRYMEN,  
OF EVERY RANK AND AGE, TO WHOM HE UNFOLDED THE WORDS OF ETERNAL LIFE.  
HIS MORTAL REMAINS WERE INTERRED NEAR THIS SPOT:  
BUT THEY WERE NOT ALLOWED TO REST IN PEACE:  
AFTER THE LAPSE OF MANY YEARS,  
HIS BONES WERE DRAGGED FROM THE GRAVE, AND CONSIGNED TO THE FLAMES:  
AND HIS ASHES WERE CAST INTO THE WATERS OF THE ADJOINING STREAM.

he assembled a Black Friar's Synod on May 17th. It consisted of bishops, theologians and canonists who examined Wycliffe's writings and persuaded the House of Lords that he was guilty of heresy on 26 separate counts. Their proceedings were disrupted by an earthquake, but they persisted. They did succeed in getting the king to order the imprisonment of any who preached this view. What the House of Lords passed, however, the House of Commons overturned and Courtenay reevaluated his position, because his predecessor lost his life for overstepping the bounds of his authority.

A great tribute to those Lollards is deserved. Wycliffe estimated that during his lifetime one-third of the priests rejected the doctrine of transubstantiation. The Black Friar's Synod succeeded in attaching guilt to any who "hold, teach, preach or defend... or favor publicly or privately" what Wycliffe taught. Oxford was the first to be victimized. In 1401, when Henry IV came to power, burning of the Lollards started. Lord Cobham, though a friend of King Henry V, was deserted by the king and publicly burned in 1413. Parliament later passed a law requiring all sheriffs, when taking office, to swear to find any who would read the Bible in English. They must "forfeit land, cattle, body, life and goods, and so be condemned for heretics to God." They were to be hanged as traitors and burned as heretics at the same time.

So many Lollards were burned that to this day a section of Norwich is known as the "Lollard's Pit," and a Baptist church in Tewkesbury today can, through its "Minute Book," trace its origin back to a Lollard community. An immense debt is owed by Christianity to these men who "endured as seeing the invisible."



*Wycliffe's chair at Lutterworth, which is believed by some to be the one in which he was carried to the rectory after his final stroke.*

**1383** Wycliffe was ordered to a trial at Oxford. He was judged by bishops and doctors. His arguments had left them without an impressive response, so that he simply turned his back on the court while it was still in process and went back home to Lutterworth.

It was later this same year that he suffered his first paralytic stroke.





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