

**A speculation of the social circumstance of England
in the pre-Reformation period
— An investigation of the issue
on Biblical translation from Latin into English**

Shinobu Wada

‘þe lewid puple criep aftir holi writ to kunne it’ .

(Wycliffite Bible, Prologue)

1. Introduction

John Wyclif is generally known as a defier against the authority of the minister and the church in his days, and the first translator of the Bible into English.¹ For the reason, he was to suffer persecution from these authorities. His real action as the resistance to them, however, had spread his notion that the true words in the Bible should be well grasped by the laity.² Afterwards His belief was taken over by his followers, that is, the Lollards or the Wycliffite. The approach of his and his followers’ biblical translation caused some upsurge of the emotion against the decomposition of the church in the late fourteen century. In terms of the boosting awareness and taking action on the reformation and revolution of the church, his effort of the work like as translating the Bible is valuable back in those days. In addition to that, their translation also contributes to the literature and education in the age of England.³ The biblical translation besides Wyclif’s other writings was strictly condemned

¹ *Workman (1926), vol. 2, p.149.*

² *Hudson (1978), p. 6.*

³ *Hudson (1978), p. 13.*

by the authority of the church. The view against the church was threatening and would trigger the common attention among people to the collapse of the hierarchy in the church. Accordingly, the translation seems to have been two incentives. The one is generated from an officially ecclesiastical, but partly political point of view, which shows the desire to banish the odious records for the clergy in the hierarchy. The other is made up of the view of the laical people, and thereunder, the Wycliffite wanted to let common people practice their doctrines as an underground movement.

So as to examine the influence of the Wycliffite biblical translation in social situation in the late medieval England, we will look at the difference between the Early Version of Wycliffite Bible and the Later one, in addition to the comparison with these English texts and the Vulgate in Latin. Moreover, and then, we will point out the paradox of his ideology in his work of the new biblical translation of Latin into English, and the social circumstance of England in this time. It is Writings of Wyclif and his followers that show the paradox of the acceptance of his biblical translation.

2. Wyclif and the Bible

In fact, some groups of the biblical translators except Wyclif himself certainly existed in the late fourteenth century. The period is said, as it were, to have been at the height of the translation of the Bible. The writings named the Wycliffite Bible came to become well known in the world from the end of the fourteenth century shortly after his death, because of an uncertainty of full evidence that Wyclif was responsible for his works and the presence of many manuscripts concerning them in the Western Europe.⁴

⁴ *The Cambridge History of the Bible*, vol. 2, pp. 387-88.

The importance of what Wyclif had done is shown in his achievement of English translation of the Bible in Latin, not the Psalter. English translation of Psalter was more popular than that of the Bible in the earlier part of the century.⁵ His purpose of translating the Bible must have been derived from his creed, because the translation of the Bible, unlike the story in Psalter, was clear and accurate so that the clergy who had the same sort of creed as Wyclif and the Wycliffite could preach Christianity of real value to their common people and let them lead their holy lives on earth. His intention of carrying the true sense in the Bible and Wyclif's performance came across his followers, and then who were called the Lollards or the Wycliffite, after his death the movement was to wield influence around the Western Europe afterwards as one of the basic concepts for the attitude to accessing the Bible to understand it much better than before.

Wyclif's defiance against the church, of course, was to be followed by the Wycliffites who were also objected to from the church alike. It was the interpretation of the Bible that they assumedly considered to be problematic against the church. The medieval church of the day insisted that we should need the fourfold ways of thinking in order to develop an advanced understanding of the Bible. They are literal, allegorical, topological and analogical.⁶ Since the priests definitively considered lay people as too difficult and impotent to understand what the Bible says, they made no question that the laity was unable to understand the true sense of the Bible. As mentioned above, the translation of Psalter rather than that of the Bible seems to have been common and natural in terms of the conveyance of Christian attitude of mind to the laity in the time. The treatment of the Bible

⁵ *The Cambridge History of the Bible*, vol. 2, p. 389.

⁶ Workman (1926), pp. 151-52.

was the monopoly of the medieval church, so that the organization, besides decision-making authority over the interpretation of it, had greatly taken advantage of the authority in Christianity to have enormous influence throughout the European society. If all the lay people had perfectly understood Providence in the Bible, they could at times have been doubtful about the content to rightly preach and convey the words from the Bible, as well as God. As a result, the church asserted the importance of understanding the Vulgate, which was written in Latin and if not letting the laity follow the original in Latin, the priests in the church regarded them as heresy against Christianity.⁷ However, some in the late medieval period had already realised that such priests in the church were less learned in the Bible itself. The movement against the corruption in the church which the Wycliffites was to give rise to, therefore, was a logical conclusion with good and precise timing, and the fate of the church also was expected likewise.

3. The Earlier Version and the Later Version of the Wycliffite Bible

The Wycliffite Bible has been kept in innumerable manuscripts, which can be divided into two types; one is the Earlier Version text of translation (EV) made in approximately 1384, and the other the Later Version text (LV) which was completed in around 1395. Each type of the versions shows different consciousness of the composers, for example, the earlier version seems to be translated word for word for the laity who could not read Latin, while the later version is a new translation of the Latin Bible. The precise dating of the two versions is hard to decide precisely. It is not certain how much Wyclif himself was involved in the work of EV, though the date of it was presumably

⁷ *The Cambridge History of the Bible*, vol. 2, p. 391.

1380's. In LV, on the other hand, its manuscript of Bodleian Library Fairfax 2 has the date of 1408 in the final colophon. However, there are some problems of distinguishing the date. 'General Prologue' in the text suggests that LV was completed some time between 1395 and 1397.⁸ As can be seen, there is a time lag of some twenty years between the date of the two versions of the Biblical translation.

4. Textual comparison of the two versions

With reference to examining the texts between EV and LV texts, we need to take consideration of some difference of the expressions in the translation of the two types. In terms of the style of them, EV is a very literal, stilted and at times unintelligible rendering, partly because of a feature of word for word translation, and LV is relevantly a fluent, idiomatic version as a translation of the Bible.⁹ Firstly, we will see the differences of these two versions concerning Luke 15, 11-32, which is well-known as the Prodigal Son. And secondly we will compare these texts with the same part in the Vulgate, which is said to be the original Latin text of the Wycliffite Bible. The church regarded it as the canons of the interpretation of Scripture. Accordingly, the comparison of these two versions of the Wycliffite Bible to the Vulgate will come into view of our comprehension of the effect of the biblical translation in this period.

First of all, we can sometimes find that 'forsoþe' ('forsooth' in Modern English) and 'sopli' in EV is replaced with 'and' or 'but' in LV:¹⁰

⁸ Hudson (1988), pp. 246-47.

⁹ Hudson (1988), pp. 238-39.

¹⁰ The examples of EV and LV are quoted from Hudson (1988), pp. 46-47.

- 15:11 (EV) Forsoþe, he seiþ,...
(LV) And, he seide,...
- 15:17 (EV) Soþli he, turned aþeen into hymself,...
(LV) And he turnyde aþen into hymself,...
- 15:18 (EV) forsoþe [I] pershe heer in hungir.
(LV) and I perisshe here þoruþ hungur.
- 15:20 (EV) Soþli whan he was 3it ferr,...
(LV) And whan he was 3it afeer,...
- 15:22 (EV) Forsoþe þe fader seide to his seruantis...
(LV) And þe fadir seide to hise seruauntis...
- 15:25 (EV) Forsoþe his eldere sone was in þe feeld,...
(LV) But his eeldere sone was in þe feeld,...
- 15:28 (EV) Forsoþe he was wroþ...
(LV) And he was wrooþ,...
- 15:32 (EV) Forsoþe it bihofte to eten plenteuously...
(LV) But it bihofte to make feest...
- (All underlines are mine, as the same below.)

These examples show that the use of words, ‘forsoþe’ or ‘soþli’, in EV puts great emphasis on veracity of the translator when he told the story, but the expression in LV is superseded by conjunctions, ‘and’ or ‘but’, so that these conjunctions seem to play a mere role as the connection between sentences and have no effect more than that. This change may lose some savor of a lesson Christian should take heed of, but in light of a fluent and plain flow in the story, LV seems to be better because of less insistence of words in the text. In terms of getting a better understanding of the context, the latter, the use of ‘and’ or ‘but’ may be suitable for the laity, because of simplicity of the text. In the equivalent of Old English text, ‘soðlice’, which is an antecedent of ‘soþli’ in the history of the English language, is often

used, so EV may have been much influenced by the tradition of the language.¹¹ In the Vugate, the adverbial expression like this is omitted. LV, in the point, is concerned about the possibility that its text was thought to be the basis as the translation from the Vulgate Latin original text.¹²

In the next examples, the word, 'substance', in EV is replaced with 'catel' or 'goodis' in LV:

15:12 (EV) ...'Fader, 3if to me þe porcion of substance þat bifalleht me.'

(LV) ...'Fadir, 3eue me þe porcion of catel þat fallip to me.'

15:13 (EV) And he departede to hem þe substance.

(LV) And he departide to hem þe catel.

15.13 (EV)...and þere wastede his substance in liuynge lecherously.

(LV) ...and þere he wastide hise goodis in lyuynge lecherously.

The words in these two versions apparently shift from sort of a rigid word to simple one. And the former expression, 'substance', has an abstract meaning of the word, but the latter gives us a real image, 'cattle' and 'goods', respectively. Thus we can readily conjecture that the writers, who are the Wycliffites, felt the necessity of the change into plain expressions for giving the laity in their country a better understanding of the truth written in the Bible. Furthermore, as compared with the Vulgate in these parts, we can get another notion different from the previous examples. These following examples are from 15:12-13 in the Vulgate:

¹¹ Mitchell (1995), pp 256-57.

¹² Biblia Sacra, II, pp. 1638-39.

15:12 et dixit adulescentior ex illis parti pater da mihi portionem
substantiae quae me contingit et divisit illis substantiam
15:13 et non post multos dies congregatis omnibus adulescentior
filius peregre profectus est in regionem loginquam
et ibi dissipavit substantiam suam vivendo luxuose

In the Latin Vulgate text, the word, 'substantia', is used as the equivalents to the parts in the two English versions. We may judge, in view of this, that the translation of EV text follows the original Latin text more closely than LV text. Plainness and understandability with which this evangelistic text was given to the laity would have been some issue for the preachers using EV text. The decision to change into the later one, LV, may have bred discord even to the text compilers, and the result is now left us. Thereupon, we cannot help admitting the choice of the history, and judging from this choice, we can suppose that it is a chief aim for the writers in the later period after Wyclif to find another device so that the laity in England could most easily understand the real meaning in the Bible. LV was to be suitable for the English people in the age.

Finally, we will look at the difference in the scene of a feast between EV and LV texts.

15:23 (EV) ...and ete wee and glade wee in plenteuous eting,...
(LV) ...and eete we and make we feeste,...
15:32 (EV) Forsope it bihofte to eten plenteuously and to
ioʒen,...
(LV) But it bihofte to make feest and to haue ioie,...

Here is a difference of the above expressions: 'eten plenteuously', which means 'eating plentifully' in Modern English, in EV and 'make

feest' in LV, which has a meaning of 'making a feast (for eating)'. The former makes use of the words showing the fact of just much eating with gladness, by which we will take the notion that the younger son was given plenty of property. On the other hand, the later version adopted, as an equivalent for this expression, the words of making a feast, which simply transmit the situation warts and all. In this part, the Vulgate says as mentioned below:

15:23 et adducite vitulum saginatum et occidite
et manducemus et epulemur

The word of 'epulemur' has the meaning of 'feast', so LV text is a faithful translation in this view. In OE version of the Prodigal Son, the equivalent word of it is 'gewistfullian', which means 'to feast' in Modern English. LV takes over an image of feast from the Vulgate Latin original text as well as the Old English version. The word of 'feast', also regarding its meaning, may have become common to people in the late medieval period besides the high class like kings and nobles. Thus, the word itself may have been adopted because it is a well-known word to everyone since the ancient times.

5. Conclusion

The Wycliffite certainly seems to have worried about the way to introduce the true meaning of the Bible into their people. Wyclif and his followers should not have spoken of the radical notion about their new Biblical translation and must have realised that they played an important role of the church, which had absolute authority to deal with the Bible in England. The intention of the Wycliffite making their new translation of the Bible, however, did serve the interest of

the laity in the country. Since they faced the collapse of the church in both England and Europe, he determined to detect the misleading definition of the Bible completely ruled by church. In this period, we may discover that he had the feeling of the 'paradox' on his work of the biblical translation. That is why the purpose of the translation seems to have been ambiguous in terms of for what and whom the Bible was at different time points. In spite of the paradox of the Biblical translation, the circulation of the new English translation of the Bible definitely had a great effect on political, ecclesiastical world in the late Medieval England. Then, it led to the Reformation in the new era throughout Europe including England. In response to that, English language also was to be changed greatly henceforth.

Works cited

Primary sources

Hudson, Anne, ed., *Selections from English Wycliffite Writings*
(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978)

Mitchell, Bruce, *An Invitation to Old English & Anglo-Saxon England*
(Oxford: Blackwell, 1995)

Weber, Robert, and others, eds, *Biblia Sacra: Iuxta Vulgatam
Versionem*, vol. 2 (Stuttgart: Württembergische Bibelanstalt, 1969)

Secondary sources

Lampe, G. W. H., ed. *The Cambridge History of the Bible: The West
from the Fathers to the Reformation*, vol.2 (Cambridge: Cambridge
University Press, 1969)

Hudson, Anne, *The Premature Reformation* (Oxford: Oxford University
Press, 1988)

Workman, Herbert B., *John Wyclif: A Study of the English Medieval
Church*, vol. 2 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1926)