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JOHN WYCLIFFE, 1320(?)-1384.

THE MAN AND HIS MESSAGE.

THE CHURCH IN FOURTEENTH-CENTURY ENGLAND.

By John Knipe.

THE Coming of John Wycliffe into public life in the England of Edward III's reign has a striking parallel in the ancient Hebrew prophecy: "But the Lord from the North has raised One."

The prophet is speaking of the dearth of spiritual religion; a man should come from the North, sent by God in pity of their need. The North is a symbol of strength and of freshness, and like the breath of the north wind, the Messenger should revive religion from the dead formalism of outward observance until it became something alive and throbbing, something which hurt, something which men cared for, something which would be of supreme importance in the life of the nation.

That is an epitome of the influence of John Wycliffe upon England. He, too, came from the North, that hardy, rugged North which breathes the spirit of independence and is no lover of forms. The studious, long-headed, resolute Yorkshireman who shook the land with the power of his doctrine, was not in his youth, not filled with its heady passion, fiery ardour and impatience, for it was in the sober time of ripe middle age that John Wycliffe was called to be a public servant, and from what is recorded he seems never to have doubted or hesitated in response to that summons, just as he never sought advancement or favour, simply accepting each fresh responsibility men offered him. He was a born leader of men. Christendom was passing through days of much evil. The Popes in succession preferred to live in luxury at Avignon, enjoying the soft Provençal climate and the security of their lives under the protection of the French kings. From Clement V in 1305 to Gregory XI in 1377 the pleasant dalliance of each Pontiff and Curia in the Midi is curiously styled the "Babylonian captivity" by the chroniclers.

At any rate, the Papal Court were most willing captives! Catherine of Siena had a hard job when she undertook to persuade the Holy Father to return to Rome. She spent some time in Avignon alternately wheedling and bullying the weak old man in her ultra-pious fashion. The reluctance of Pope Gregory in 1377 shows how low an ebb the Papacy had reached in the preceding years.

Naturally the sloth and indifference to spiritual concerns which marked the Avignon sojourning had its reaction in England. Bishops and abbots lived in palaces and manors with their armed retainers, more like great nobles than Churchmen.[1] They had become in very truth "Lords over the flock," while the parochial

[1] The word was then used in the sense of ecclesiastic.

clergy or "seculars" were ignorant men, often of peasant stock, some unable to do more than to read their Breviaries and mumble their masses, existing on a miserable "pittance," defrauded of their tithes by the system of absenteeism and barefaced robbery called "Appropriations"—to which reference will be made in chronological order in the following reign of Richard II, when the scandal was properly denounced—notably in 1381.

Worst of all, the good name of the Church was disgraced by a horde of idlers in minor orders, Ostiaries (doorkeepers), Exorcists, Lectors, Acolytes, Sub-deacons, who lived by knavery, often as licensed thieves and beggars, under the protection of the Church, those "Criminous Clerks" who escaped the King's justice and cheated the gallows with the profane mockery of the "Neck-verse," the muttered phrase of a Latin Psalm, commonly the Miserere. These masterless rogues were too leniently dealt with in the diocesan tribunals or "Courts Christian," whose judgments were notoriously corrupt. A modern historian dryly commented that it had become a favourite topic of discussion among the laity by the fourteenth century to speculate on the chances of a defunct archdeacon getting to Heaven. Some indeed thought he had little hope of Purgatory even! They were not uncharitably minded towards archdeacons as men; they were repelled by the horrible traffic in livings, and the avarice of the Courts over which the archdeacon presided as the responsible official. Chaucer reflected scathingly on the "archdeacon's curse:"

> "'I have,' quod he, 'of summons here a bill
> On pain of cursing look that thou be
> To-morn before the archdeacon's knee
> T'answer to the Court of certain things!
>
> "'May I not ask a libel (leave), Sir Summ'ner,
> And answer there by my Procurator?'
>
> "'Yes,' quod the Summ'ner, 'pay anon, let see,
> Twelve pence to me and I will thee acquit.'"

These lines from the *Canterbury Tales* tell us what Chaucer thought of the blackmailing practised by the Summoner or archdeacon's tipstaff.

William Langland, in his poem "The Vision of Piers Plowman," tells how "Lady Meed" (Bribery) corrupted the Church.

> "Ye deans and ye sub-deans, now draw you together,
> Archdeacons, officials and registrars all,
> Be saddled with silver, our sins to allow,
> Adultery, divorces, and doubling of debts,
> And payments for bishops that visit abroad." (Passus, II.)

The laity were "polled and peeled"—taxed and skinned—by every kind of ecclesiastical exaction, so that one wonders how men paid the King's taxes, extra heavy from the cost of the French Wars, when the Church took its toll in Peter's Pence or Rome-Scot, "Voluntary" Papal Offerings, Probate, Tithes, Parish Fees,

Masses for the Dead, Church Dues paid to absentee Rectors, Mortuaries or funeral takings (either the pall or its equivalent in coin), Pilgrimage Fees, Pardons, Indulgences, Reliquaries, Roods, Shrines, Miraculous Images and Holy Wells, Festival Lights and Votive Candles and Offerings, and Licences for purposes both holy and unholy; the worst example being the "Stews of Southwark" (houses of ill-repute), which contributed annually a large sum to the coffers of the Bishop of Winchester, this money being reckoned as a regular source of his income, and the episcopal conscience being unperturbed. Turning to the Convents, we find that the great Abbeys imposed Feudal Dues, besides Pasture, Corn and Mill Rights, as at St. Albans, where the monks kept the Common Millstones in the Cloister "to witness that none might grind his corn save at the Abbey Mill." The Monasteries sent round their "Limitors"; members assigned a certain beat in which to beg for alms from all who lived within that "limit." This seems to have been a practice confined to the Mendicant Orders.

"'I am Wrath,' quoth he; 'I once was a friar,
And the convent-gardener, to graft young shoots.
On "limiters" and "lectors" such lies I engrafted.'" (P. Plowman.)

And of course the begging friars demanded and got food and lodging gratis. In a rough, homely fashion they were preferred to monks who lived aloof from their fellow-men. The friars cheated and lied, they were greedy and often idle, but they told good stories, imposed light penances, and were equally at home with small and great. Chaucer's Friar, who turns the cat off the settle before he sits down, lets us know at once he took the cosy corner by the fire when he visited the sick.

"'Thomas,' quod he, 'God ease you! Full oft
Have I upon this bench fared full well.
Here have I eaten many a merry meal.'"

He proceeds to flatter the goodwife, whom he embraces as his "sister dear," and tells her he

"Saw not this day so fair a wife
In all the church, God so save me!"

The furious husband listens to the Friar, who orders his own dinner at the wife's invitation, speaking with mock modesty thus:

"'Have I naught of a capon but the liver?
'And of your soft bread [wheaten loaf, then a dainty] naught but a shiver [thin slice]?
And after that a roasted pig's head?
(But that I would no beast for me were dead).
I am a man of little sustenance.
The body is aye so ready and penible
To wake, the stomach is destroyed.'"

He does not get his tit-bits, for while the wife goes off to the kitchen, he offers absolution for money, and the sick farmer turns on him in a rage until the serving-men rush into the room and drive the friar out.

It tells a sad tale for the state of institutional religion when men like Chaucer's greedy Friar were the spiritual guides of the people. And the poet in his famous poem has followed the custom of contemporary satirists, for " the hero of a story of gallantry is generally a churchman " (*vide* " The Reeve's Tale "). The acknowledged authority on the Middle Ages, Mr. Trevelyan, has observed : " It was inevitable . . . when such an enormous proportion of the people was bound by religious vows of celibacy, and had at the same time the professional right of entry to families, that the peace of households should be frequently disturbed."

There is one fine character portrait of a churchman in Chaucer that in fairness should be mentioned, his " Poor Parson." The description is one of such beauty that it seems as if the poet was describing not only his ideal, but someone who resembled an acquaintance ; possibly, even, a near friend.

" But rich he was of holy thought and work.
He was also a learned man, a clerk. . . .
Benign he was and wonder diligent,
And in adversity full patient :
And such he y-proved often sith
Full loth were he to cursen for his tythes [curse, excommunicate].
But rather would he give, out of doubt,
Unto his poor parish'ners about."

Chaucer tells us that instead of excommunicating his flock for non-payment of tithe, the " Poor Parson " gave alms to those who defaulted if he doubted that they could pay him.

" Wide was his parish and houses far asunder
But he nor left not, for rain or thunder,
In sickness nor in mischief, to visit
The farest in his parish, much and light [often]."

In the mirror of the good man's example is shown what others failed to do. Now the poet changes his tone to a sharper key :

" He set not his benefice to hire,
And left his sheep encumbered in the mire,
And ran to London, unto Saint Pauls
To seeken him a chantery for souls."

Here Chaucer scourges the common practice of appointing an underpaid substitute or vicar, while the rector bribed the Consistory officials of the Bishop of London in order to get for himself the sinecure of some well-endowed Chantry or private Chapel, founded by a rich merchant or noble with a fixed stipend to pay a Soul-Priest to sing a daily mass for the dead benefactor. He refers, obviously, to the notorious " Pardon Cloister " of Old Saint Paul's Cathedral ; it filled one side of a large quadrangle and was a regular mart for traffic in Masses and Pardons, the side wall being covered with the most gruesome pictures of souls in the torments of Purgatory and Hell. This cloister became an object of peculiar odium to the Londoners and it was pulled down at the Reformation (1548),

" Or with a brotherhood to be withhold
But dwelt at home and kept well his fold,
So that the wolf nor made it not miscarry;
He was a shepherd and no mercenary."

The poem is attributed to the latter half of the century, but the abuses which Chaucer exposes so mercilessly are more sharply satirised by William Langland in his " Vision of Piers Plowman," which is of much earlier date. Some have thought that the original of the " Poor Parson " was John Wycliffe himself, and we know that both he and Chaucer had the same royal patron, John of Gaunt. Certainly Chaucer must have known Wycliffe. And with this comparison in mind one may grasp some idea of the life of the age in which both lived, a vision of the past which can only be caught in glimpses from contemporary writers, the close of the brilliant epoch of Chivalry and the transition to the slow progress of English civil liberty and the final abolition of serfdom.

Early Life of Wycliffe. He becomes a " Poor Scholar of the Halls."

The year of his birth is unknown and the date can only be inferred by what he has stated in his own writings and certain documents and official records at Oxford. It used to be supposed that he was born in 1324, but careful examination suggests that the actual year was either 1320 or a little earlier. His portrait at Knole is that of a man of sixty or more. His birthplace was Spresswell, a hamlet in the North Riding of Yorkshire, near Old Richmond. It is curious that there should have been any doubt of the locality, for the village of Wycliffe is only half a mile distant. His family seem to have been poor relations of the Wycliffes of Wycliffe, who from the time of the Conquest were lords of the manor and patrons of the living.

He came therefore from pure Saxon stock and his kin were an old gentle family of Yorkshire franklins. There are local allusions in his works, and he was familiar with the traditions of the countryside and very proud of his Northern origin.

There was some connection between the Wycliffes of the Manor and their powerful neighbours the Balliols of Barnard Castle on the Tees. As a lad young John Wycliffe seems to have attracted the notice of the Castle ; possibly the eager boy knew the lord's chaplain through the village priest of Wycliffe, who was very likely his tutor, and from whom he could learn elementary Latin grammar. It does appear that his parents dedicated him almost from his birth to the priesthood and that he went to Oxford about the age of fourteen.

Balliol College was founded for the education of poor scholars. It is almost certain that young Wycliffe was nominated to a vacancy there through the goodwill of the family patrons. In 1361 a William Wycliffe, Fellow of Balliol, was presented to Wycliffe living by John Wycliffe of Wycliffe, which shows a link between the Manor and Barnard Castle.

Boys who were educated as clerks often travelled in the care of " Bringers of Scholars," who were a licensed escort attached to

the Universities. There were also the public carriers between the villages and the towns; but young Wycliffe probably rode to York with the Balliol retainers, while the guest-houses of the numerous monasteries would be preferred to the wayside inns for a night's lodging. He reached Oxford and was entered as a poor scholar at Balliol Hall about 1335, if we accept the most likely tradition. When the Yorkshire lad rode into the city of his dreams his keen eyes, accustomed to the far spaces of the dales and moors, would note eagerly the Five Halls of the existing University. His own future residence, Balliol, was the oldest foundation, for it dated from 1260; next was Merton, 1274; Exeter, 1314; Oriel, 1324, and University, 1332. The word "College" was not used in the modern sense. Students were divided into those who had "determined" or taken their B.A. and mere lads who studied in a kind of Grammar School or Gymnasium. These boys were also included as members of the University, which made the famous Archbishop, Fitzralph of Armagh, protest it was a scandal, when students were below the age of fourteen. He was Chancellor of Oxford from 1333 to 1347. Wycliffe would attend some of his lectures after he "determined in Arts."

Queen's Hall was not founded until 1340. The Head of each Hall was called Warden or President, and the scholars were divided into "Nations," Northerners and Southerners, "Boreales and Australes."

Of course Wycliffe was enrolled as a "Borealis," which was the Party which maintained the right of national self-government. The head of each Nation was the Procurator, hence Proctor.

The curriculum of studies was spread over roughly four years; and they kept more or less to the older divisions of the Trivium and the Quadrivium of the Seven Liberal Arts, which were compulsory at Balliol Hall, and until 1340 the Fellows were not allowed to take degrees in Divinity. "Men were not then misers of their time." Ten years' study was an average residence, and the quiet, busy life of the mediæval University appealed to those of peaceful but not rigidly ascetic turn of mind, men who enjoyed the scholar's intercourse with each other and disliked the gossiping seclusion of the cloister, with its narrow interests and monotonous services. Convents had grown rich and degenerate; the Halls were modern, full of fresh life and vigour, the wax scarce set on their charters. Thus in Wycliffe's day the membership roll had swollen to the number of over thirty thousand resident scholars and clerks of the University. All study was in the Latin tongue. Greek was unknown, except to a very few (Roger Bacon had been learned enough to read Greek), and French was generally spoken by the Dons and men of good birth. The chief study of the Trivium was *Logic*, comprising Grammar, Dialectics and Rhetoric, and the principal author was Aristotle. Metaphysics, or "Speculative Logic," was included, and the students were termed *Logici*. The great aim was to train minds for those public "Acts of Disputation" which were a sort of intellectual tournament, the delight and pride of the learned.

Wycliffe had a natural bent for Rhetoric, and he soon proved himself both a ready writer, speaker, and an insatiable reader. Virgil, Priscian, Donatus and Terence were read in Grammar; Boethius in Logic. From the Trivium he passed to the branches of Physics, with Geometry, Music, and Astronomy; these were classed as the Mathematical Sciences, while Chemistry and Physics were reckoned a branch of Natural Philosophy, which seems rather an odd classification to modern minds. Of real Science in its present meaning they knew almost nothing. The order was fixed, but they seem to have continued with advanced courses in the Three Philosophies after determination, and sometimes postponed studying subjects in the minor Arts until they had taken the B.A.

Wycliffe had a versatile intellect: he was much interested in the various branches of Mathematics.

"When I was still young I addicted myself to a great variety of favourite pursuits, I made extensive collections from manuals on optics, on properties of light."

Possibly he knew the first scientist of the day, Thomas Bradwardine, the theologian and astronomer, who was then living in Oxford (1349).

Having taken his M.A., Wycliffe decided to "incept" in Theology, then called the "Queen of Sciences." The Divinity degrees were the highest, and he could only gratify his passion for study by becoming a clerk. Theology was not read at Balliol, and the endowment for the "poor scholars" was barely sufficient to maintain "the many students and clerks in residence . . .; each received only eight farthings weekly, and as soon as they became Masters in Arts they had immediately to leave . . ." (Incorporation Bull, Archives of Balliol, 1361).

Wycliffe could not take his Divinity degrees at Balliol—for though six Fellowships were founded in 1340 whose holders must "incept in Theology within thirteen years," he had not the requisite means to live as a Fellow, and probably was not more than nineteen when he "incepted in Arts." After, he seems to have entered at Merton to read for the B.D. All this early part of his life is very obscure, but his name appears on the Rolls of Merton Hall, in 1356, as the Seneschal, and he must previously have been a Fellow. Some have thought that a namesake is meant (as will be seen in another incident); the tradition of Merton has always declared from the first that the "John Wyklif" on the Hall register was the Reformer. It was so believed a few years after his death, and it was a current practice for students to reside in different Halls at various epochs.

All we know of him is that he was acknowledged to be a man of upright character and pure life. He has left no account of any spiritual experience or conversion, and his motive for choosing to be a "secular clerk" was certainly not that of "a fisher of men." He was simply an orthodox Divinity student when he listened to the first lectures on the Sacra Pagina (Holy Writ) delivered by some young clerks holding the B.D. who were known as *Biblici*, the preliminary Course being styled the Biblical. They taught the study of the Vul-

gate and its Expositio, or Interpretation with Glosses. All mediæval Bible study was a development of Glosses. They knew nothing of Hebrew or Greek Testament. There was no Historical Criticism and little Exegesis. Learned discussions followed the lecture proper on questions shaped as "disputational excursus."

But from these lectures, dry as sawdust though they were, Wycliffe drew the inspiration of his future life. He was powerfully attracted to the deeper study of Holy Scripture as the source of religion, and as the supreme authority in faith and morals. The Avignon Popes were heartily despised in England and the vices of their Court inevitably discredited the Vicar of Christ. It was John Wycliffe who first perceived that the true standard of the Church should be the Evangelical doctrine. He was struck by the coldness shown towards the practical teaching of the Gospels. About this time he was probably ordained, at least when he took his B.D. The Systematic Course followed after he had taken his "Bachelorship" of the Sacred Page. The text-book *par excellence* was the "Sentences" of Peter Lombard (and the higher degrees in Divinity were held by the lecturers or *Sententiarii*); next they ranked Aquinas, his "Summa," the writings of Bishop Grossetête, and the Fathers, especially Augustine, with exhaustive study of Canon Law. Wycliffe also took Civil Law and Jurisprudence (especially Roman Law). In fact there was hardly a branch of known learning that he did not master and he finally "incepted in Divinity as Licentiate of Theology" about 1345.

Lecturer in Divinity and Philosophy, 1345–66.

The whole character of Wycliffe's tracts, pamphlets and larger works is so based upon the authority of Holy Scripture that his lectures must have breathed the same spirit. We know that he turned aside from the "wearisome reiterations of the schoolmen," who wasted an incredible amount of time in trivial and childish speculations; one Disputation seriously discussed "How many angels could stand on the point of a needle?" and another theologian propounded "How long did it take Gabriel to fly from Heaven to Our Lady in Nazareth?" The hair-splitting of Glosses encouraged such subjects. Thus upon Oxford, where the spirit of inquiry was stirring, the vigorous lectures of the keen Yorkshire mind, trained as well as acute, came like new wine pouring into the cracking wine-skins of the schoolmen; instead of their idle fancies Wycliffe challenged the thought of his age to a sense of values; of the Church, of Worship, of Loyalty human and Divine, of Social Order and of Individual Responsibility. At this period he kept strictly within the bounds of Catholic dogma. He expounded and discussed but did not denounce or condemn; only his point of view differed from other lecturers.

That the University was proud of Wycliffe cannot be denied by his enemies. Fellow and Seneschal of Merton in 1356, he was made First Fellow and then Master of Balliol by 1361. There are four documents referring to him as "Magister seu Custos Aulae de

Ballioli," by which authority he took possession of the Abbotesley living, presented to the Hall by the patron, Sir William Fenton, to augment the endowment of the poor scholars, who henceforth received the sum of "twelve farthings weekly."

In May of the same year he accepted the Balliol living of Fillingham, in Lincolnshire, and at once resigned his Mastership. But he remained one of the "Magistri Regentes," members of the University Council, and he does not appear to have resided at his Cure, for the Account Books of the new Queen's Hall have an entry of his payment for renting a room in 1363, and in 1368 the Acts of the See of Lincoln record how the Bishop granted Wycliffe's request for two years' non-residence in order to study Divinity, which seems to imply that he was then reading for his D.D., though this is uncertain. He retained his vote and University privileges but the stipend of his Cure afforded him the necessary means of living or he could not have continued to study in Oxford.

In December, 1365, his friend and fellow-scholar, Archbishop Islip, nominated him to be Warden of his newly-founded Canterbury Hall. This is now generally accepted, since the "John of Wyclyve," parish priest of Mayfield, does not appear to have been of sufficient prominence to fill the post, and he remained in possession of Mayfield until 1380, when he was given the adjacent living of Horsted Keynes and died a Prebend of Chichester in 1383. The only reasons for supposing he was the real Warden of Islip's Hall are, that the Archbishop dated his Charter from his Mayfield Manor, and was thinking of endowing his foundation with that revenue, and the spelling of the name as "Wyclyve." But Islip described his nominee as "Magister in Artibus," and he would choose a prominent lecturer in theology. There had been trouble over the mixed foundation of Canterbury Hall, which was originally intended for four of the Benedictines of Christ Church, Canterbury, and eight secular clerks; that is, eleven scholars and the Head. Woodhall, the first Warden, was a quarrelsome monk, and the eight seculars disputed his authority, while the usual jealousies divided regulars and seculars. Archbishop Islip therefore changed his foundation; deposing Woodhall and expelling the monks, he nominated Wycliffe and three other secular clerks.

In appointing Wycliffe as his new Warden, Islip stated that he was chosen for his great learning, his fidelity, discretion and diligence, and a life without reproach in the eyes of all men.

Chaucer's final description of the Clerk of Oxenford justly applies to John Wycliffe in 1365, the prime of his life:

> "Sounding in moral virtue was his speech,
> And gladly would he learn and gladly teach."

(To be continued.)