The First English Bible: A Lost Opportunity

The medieval English Church prohibited the use of of the translation of the Bible made in Wyclif's time. Traditionally, the Wycliffite Bible has been understood as a reformist document, but **Dr Mary Dove** *argues that, contrary to received opinion, the readership was prodominantly devout and orthodox. She sets out the evidence to show that the Church authorities were wrong to suppose that the translators had incorporated heresies into their translation; they were as scholarly as the resources available to them in late 14th century England allowed them to be, and they deserve credit for their achievement in enabling laypeople literate in English access to the book that dominated their culture.*

ONE OF THE major misfortunes in the history of the Church in England is that the first complete translation of the Bible into English was instigated by a man who had a very low opinion of the institutional church of his day, and who did not hesitate to say so.

John Wyclif's castigation of the late-medieval church was rooted in his very high view of the church in its perfect state, at one with Christ, and of the Bible, which he regarded as the law of God. Academic theologians, argued Wyclif, were undermining the truth of scripture by drawing attention to superficial inconsistencies and seeming falsehoods within it (such as the prophet Amos saying 'I am not a prophet', 7:14). Worse, powerful churchmen were deliberately misleading the people by interpreting the Bible according to their own worldly agendas. Wyclif and like-minded Oxford colleagues wanted literate laypeople to be able to read the Bible for themselves. This meant translating the Latin Bible into English.

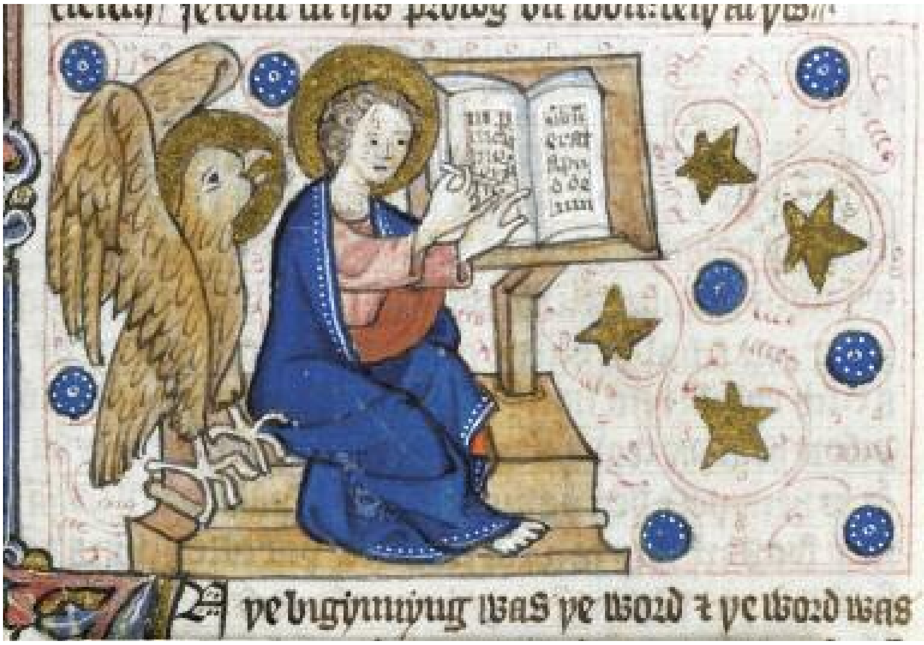
The 'Wycliffite' Bible was some twenty years in the making. A huge project was matched with changing personnel and limited resources. Editorial decisions were probably made very informally, and there were some changes of direction (such as the decision first to include and later to omit the apocryphal 3 Ezra) that led to disagreement among the translators. The logistics were certainly not helped by the increasing suspicion with which Wyclif was regarded, and by his enforced move to the parish of Lutterworth, where he died in 1384.

'Let the Chirche of Engelond approve this trewe and whole translacioun', says the prologue to the first English Bible, completed c.1390. Most Europeans, the prologue points out, already have access to scripture in their mother-tongues, and the Latin Bible, Jerome's Vulgate, was itself a translation from Hebrew and Greek. Several tracts of the time make strong cases for a Bible in English. One writer counters the traditional argument that scripture 'has so many ways of being interpreted, literal and spiritual, that the laity are unable to understand it' with the point that laypeople can no longer be assumed to be ignorant. Well-educated laypeople can understand what they read better than poorly-educated priests are able to do.

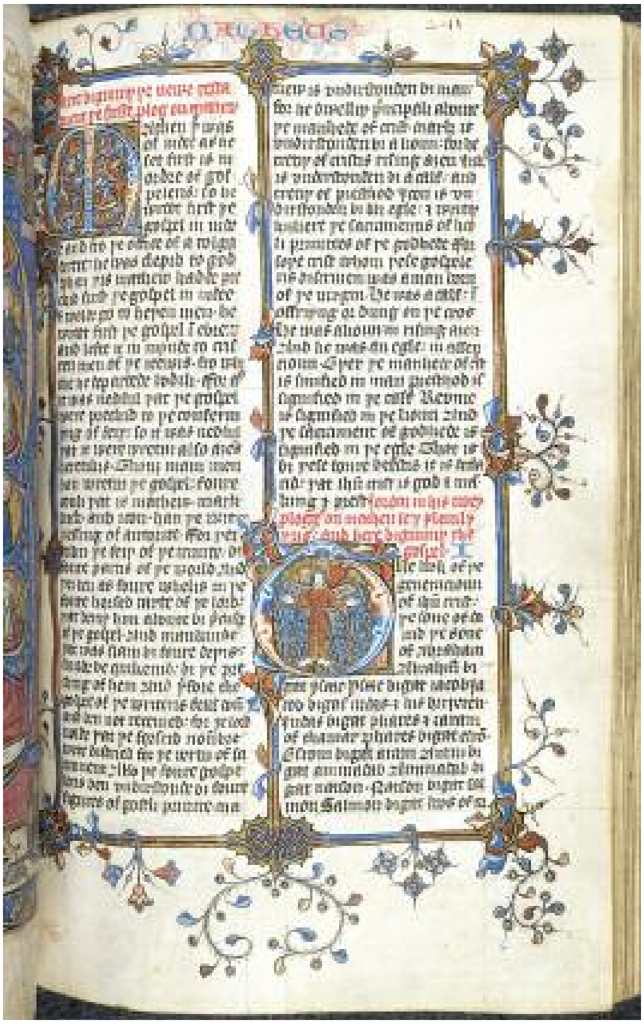
The English Church had not previously made any formal pronouncement about biblical translation. But in 1409 new articles against heresy proscribed any public or private use or dissemination of the translation made in Wyclif's time, and ruled that any new translation required approval by a bishop or a provincial council. The letter Archbishop Arundel sent the Pope with a copy of these articles claimed that the 'pestilent and wretched' Wyclif had 'endeavoured by every means to attack the very faith and sacred doctrine of Holy Church', his translation of the Bible being one of his devilish expedients.

Although the opponents of translation never offered any specific criticisms of the text of the Wycliffite Bible, Sir Thomas More took it for granted that Wyclif had 'purposely corrupted that holy text' by embedding heretical opinions within it. The members of the Church Council who legislated against the Wycliffite Bible probably thought so too. In fact, the translators had worked very hard to produce an English equivalent of the Latin original that was simultaneously literal and intelligible—no easy task.

Echoing Jerome's experience of biblical translation, the writer of the prologue says that in translating from Latin to English a sense for sense rather than word for word translation is best. The translators' first go at 'duas gentes odit anima mea' ('my soul hates two nations', Ecclesiasticus 50:25) was the confusing 'two folkis hatith my soule', too

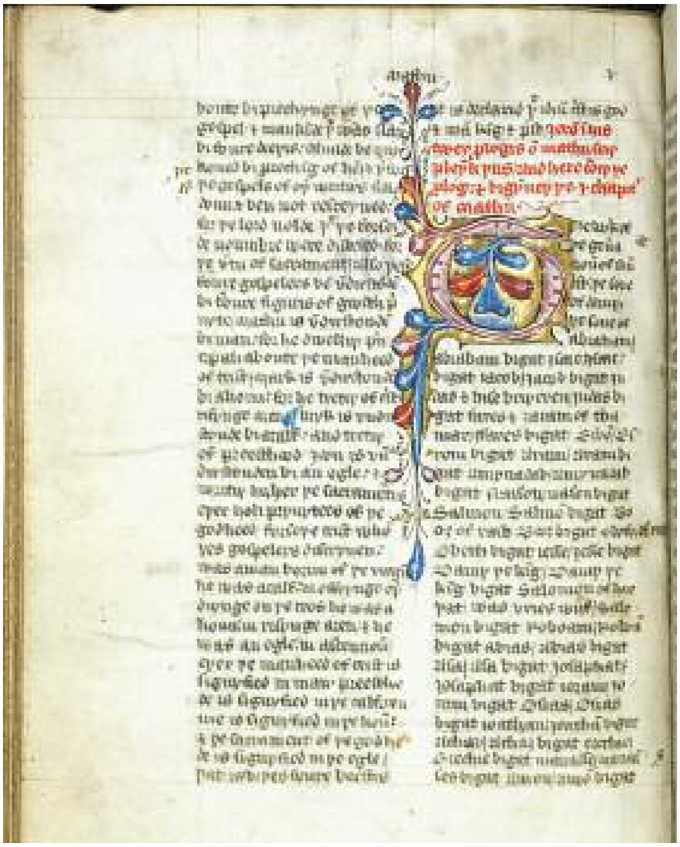

þe bigynnyng was þe word ⁊ þe word was

John the Evangelist, British Library Royal 1. C. VIII, fol.325v. Reproduced by permission of the British Library Board. © The British Library. All rights reserved



Left: *The Four Evangelists, British Library Arundel 104, fol.251r. Reproduced by permission of the British Library Board. © The British Library. All rights reserved*

Below: *Initial at the opening of Matthew, John Rylands Library Eng. 77, fol.16v. Reproduced by courtesy of the University Librarian and Director, The John Rylands University Library, The University of Manchester*



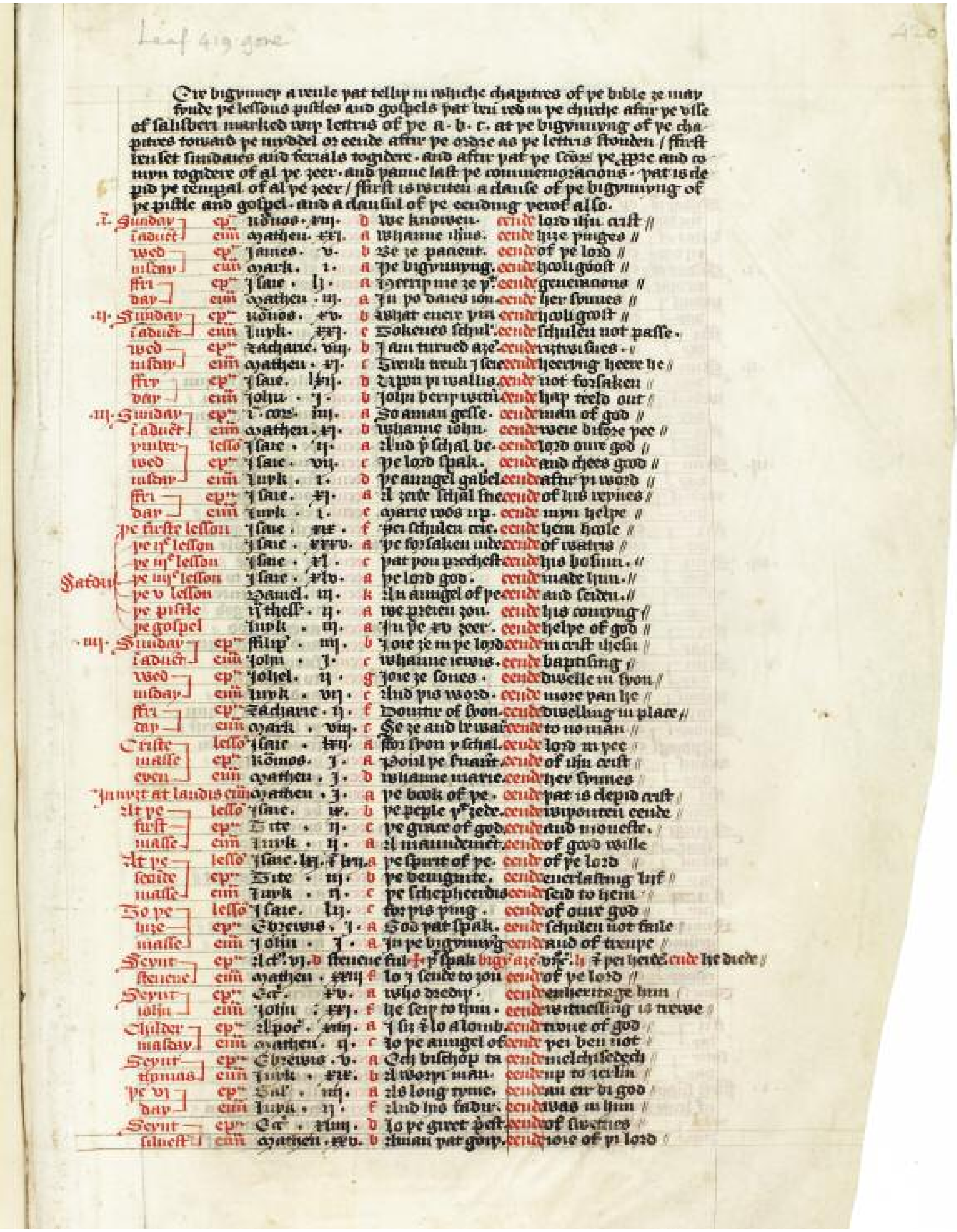
literal to make good sense. Later they turned this into intelligible English by putting the subject first: ‘my soule hatith two folkis’.

The translators were wary of adding words unnecessarily; they wanted to give their readers the whole Bible with nothing added and nothing taken away. But they were conscious that figurative language might trip inexperienced readers up. Indeed, three chapters of the prologue to the Wycliffite Bible are devoted to guidance on how to distinguish between literal and figurative meanings, drawing heavily on Augustine’s *De Doctrina Christiana*. Contrary to what is commonly supposed, Wyclif and the Wycliffite translators did not believe in ‘scripture alone’. They were deeply indebted to the ongoing tradition of interpretation within the church of true believers.

But general rules about biblical interpretation, the translators realized, were not always easy to apply in individual instances. So, when Joshua puts Amalech and his people to flight ‘in the mouth of the sword’ (Exodus 17:13), the Wycliffite Bible reads ‘in the mouth of swerd, that is, bi the scharpnesse of the swerd’. Occasionally the translators cross the fine line between helping the reader to understand the text and interpreting the text. The most striking example is ‘Crist, thou art fairer in schap than the sones of men’ (Psalm 44/45:3). Yes, this psalm was very commonly understood as referring to Christ, but translation has slid into interpretation here.

The translators (who were all biblical professionals) were well aware that over the centuries a number of errors had crept into the text of the Latin Bible. One example is the question Jacob asks Rachel’s father after he has served seven years for her and then been tricked into sleeping with her sister Leah (Genesis 29:25). Many late-medieval Latin Bibles have Jacob asking Laban ‘Why have you secretly brought Leah to me?’ (‘Quare Lyam supposuisti mihi?’). Although this sounds plausible, the translators’ research showed them it was a mistake, and that Jacob actually asks ‘Why have you tricked me?’ (‘Quare imposuisti mihi?’). Accordingly, the Wycliffite Bible reads ‘Whi hast thou disseyved me?’.

The translators rightly claimed that the text of the new English Bible was more accurate than that of most contemporary copies of the Latin Bible. Nevertheless, the 1409 prohibition meant that owning a copy of any part of it was potentially incriminating. William Harry of Tenterden, Kent, on trial in 1428 as a suspected Wycliffite, confessed that he had ‘read various books of holy scripture in the common tongue’ as well as associating with heretics. Harry abjured, but because he lacked sufficient surety for good behaviour he



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Here bigynneþ a reule þat telliþ in whiche chapitres of þe bible ȝe may fynde þe lessouns pistles and gospels þat ben red in þe chirche aftir þe vse of salisberi marked wiþ lettris of þe a. b. c. at þe bigynnyng of þe chapitres toward þe myddel or eende aftir þe ordre as þe lettris stonden / first ben set sundaies and ferials togidere. and aftir þat þe sanctorum þe propre and comyn togidere of al þe ȝeer. and þanne last þe commemoraciouns. þat is clepid þe temporal of al þe ȝeer / first is writen a clause of þe bigynnyng of þe pistle and gospel. and a clausul of þe eending þerof also.

was imprisoned at Archbishop Chichele's pleasure. We do not know when or whether he was released.

Not surprisingly, manuscripts of the first English Bible never name Wyclif as one of the translators, and rarely contain records of pre-Reformation ownership. The only owners who could be sure they would not be suspected of heresy for possessing scripture in English were kings, magnates, members of religious orders and religious foundations. One spectacularly ornate Wycliffite Bible (now Bodley 277) records that 'this book formerly belonged to Henry the Sixth, who gave it to the London Charterhouse'.

Anne Danvers gave her Wycliffite New Testament (now John Rylands Library Eng. 81) to her 'mastre confessor and his bretherne' in Syon Abbey, sending it by her son William on Mid-Lent Sunday 1517. She asked the monks to pray for her family, alive and dead (their names are listed), and for John and Thomas, William's servants. Giving the book away during her lifetime meant she secured monastic intercessions without leaving a volume of scripture in English to be declared as part of her estate. Perhaps it was William who suggested the donation.

What is surprising is that in spite of the prohibition more than 250 manuscripts of the Wycliffite translation survive (though some were certainly written before 1409, and some are only fragments). This is considerably more than of any other text in medieval English, and suggests very widespread use. Most Wycliffite Bible manuscripts look as though they were professionally produced in commercial premises. Very few have the rough parchment and irregular script characteristic of books written by amateur scribes for personal use. If copies of the first English Bible had to be 'kept in hugger mugger' (as Thomas Bowyer notes his family's Wycliffite Bible had to be 'in those superstitious tymes' before the Reformation), there is no evidence that they were made and sold clandestinely.

One buyer decided to insure herself against suspicion of heresy in advance. A note in a handsome New Testament with fine gold initials (now John Rylands Library Eng. 77) says this manuscript cost £4 6s 8d, and that it was 'scrutinized by Doctor Thomas Eborall and Doctor Ive before my mother bought it'. These doctors of theology were masters of Whittington College, a college of clergy attached to the Church of St Michael Paternoster Royal in the City of London. Both men were active in suppressing heresy. The owner of this New Testament was evidently a wealthy and demonstratively orthodox woman.

Opposite: *Opening of the Lectionary in Cambridge University Library Dd. 1. 27, fol.420r. Reproduced by permission of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library*

Eborall and Ive's approval may have been influenced by the fact that the manuscript opens with a lectionary indicating which epistles and gospels are read at mass throughout the year. Only a regular mass-goer would want to know where to look up the readings of the day, and frequent attendance at mass was a way of manifesting orthodoxy (or of masking heresy). More than a third of the surviving Wycliffite Bible manuscripts include a lectionary: doubtless booksellers as well as bookbuyers wanted to divert suspicion. There was no easy way for an official to tell whether a volume of scripture in English was the prohibited translation or not. Only if it opened with the lengthy prologue (and very few did) was it evidently Wycliffite.

Cardinal Gasquet, a member of the papal commission which declared that 'ordinations carried out according to the Anglican rite have been, and are, absolutely null and utterly void', set the Catholic cat among the Protestant pigeons at the end of the nineteenth century by arguing that since manuscripts of the medieval English Bible were produced in large numbers, since some were in unquestionably orthodox ownership and since most were apparently intended for devout readers who attended mass regularly, this Bible must have been authorized, or at least 'semi-official'. *Ergo*, it was not the prohibited Wycliffite translation.

Gasquet's argument is unsustainable—the surviving medieval English Bible is undoubtedly the translation discussed in detail in the Wycliffite prologue, and there is no other complete translation—but the bitterness of the debate Gasquet inaugurated shows us how much was at stake. 'Nothing', wrote Arthur Ogle in 1901, 'has worked more powerfully to divorce [Englishmen's] hearts from the medieval type of discipline and authority than the fact that the first translators of the English Bible achieved their task under the censure of authority'. If Gasquet had been right that the medieval English Church had approved a vernacular Bible, the history of the Reformation would have had to be rewritten.

Arundel's articles against heresy resulted in a situation whereby the perceived orthodoxy of the owner was made to vouch for the orthodoxy of the translation owned. William Harry's books of English scripture were implicated in his heretical activities, while Thomas More mistakenly assumed that the 'bybles fayre and old wryten in Englyshe' that he had seen in the homes of 'good and catholyke folke' could not be Wycliffite Bibles. As a result, the Christian community for which Arundel was responsible was more anxiety-ridden and less united than it had been before the work of translation began. The perception that 'the clergy of this realm hath forbidden all the people to have any scripture translated into our tongue' was very damaging indeed to relations between clergy and laity.

It is tempting to speculate on what might have happened if the ecclesiastical authorities had acted differently. Without going as far as formally approving the translation, they could have enjoyed some of the credit for its success (and if owning it had not been hazardous the number of copies sold might have been even greater). This would have assisted the efforts of the English Church to prevent the spread of what it regarded as dangerous errors and heresies. We can see this more easily than Archbishop Arundel could, of course; not least because we know just how good a translation the first English Bible was. In any case, we look back across the Reformation at an opportunity that was, unhappily, lost.

Dr Dove received a Small Research Grant to fund her research. The volume resulting from her research, *The FIrst English Bible: the Text and Context of the Wycliffite Versions*, is published by Cambridge University Press.