

Men of the Kingdom

Wycliffe: The Morning Star

By

GEORGE S. INNIS

Professor of History, Hamline
University



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To My Mother

FOREWORD



FROM the very nature of the series this volume makes no pretense to be a critical life of Wycliffe. The author may express the hope that it does not entirely lack the ear-marks of a student. The five hundredth anniversary of Wycliffe's death led to a searching study of that period of English history, and to a carefully revised edition of his works. One of the results was the publishing of several excellent biographies, Sergeant's, Wilson's, Lane-Poole's, and that mine of information, Trevelyan's *England in the Age of Wycliffe*. From all these and the histories of the period I have stolen with a large hand; not without trying however to follow Horace's dictum—to remind the coin. The records of this period are not abundant, so that the author must supply in some measure the setting. The scientific method of historical study is very valuable for the ascertaining of facts and dates, but popular histories and biographies at least should be written

and read with a generous dose of the imagination. It is an accepted maxim that a great man's life can not be adequately portrayed in prose, it requires the poetic diction and spirit. In this volume I have simply tried to answer the question: What would a busy, earnest man want to know about John Wycliffe and his work?

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Wycliffe: The Morning Star

CHAPTER I.

THE MORNING STAR.

TO FULLY appreciate the title given to Wycliffe—the Morning Star—one needs to arise early and get in touch with the spirit of the morning—the delightful stillness, the great expanse of the eastern heavens, its edge just touched with the coming dawn, the thin crescent of the waning moon, the other stars gathered about the harbinger of day, the first streaks of light in the east, the gradual waking of the world, the crowing of the first cock, the chirping of the birds, and then the glad roundelay, the smoke rising from the chimneys and at last the blowing of the factory whistle, which indicates that the world is awake and at its daily task. In going back to the fourteenth century, the twilight of the modern era, we must be awake, our eyes well opened, with a morning dip and a vigorous rub down, to catch the new stir, the spirit of the early morning that speaks only to a live soul. In studying a past age, and particularly the life

and work of a really great man, we need all the faculties of the mind aroused, our sympathies strong, our prejudices held in leash, and our judgment vigorous and unbiased. In this spirit it will be a pleasure to study the life of him who was the first of the great reformers; the first not only in time, but in insight and purpose and courage, a mighty man of valor, our race leader in the long struggle against ecclesiastical corruption and tyranny.

There is a peculiar significance in Paul's expression: "When the fullness of the time was come, God sent forth His Son." That is the time when God-chosen men appear. The same wise providence which creates the need for a popular leader, also prepares that leader for the occasion. His work, too, is measured not by his ability merely, but by the readiness of the people to hear and profit by his message. Such leaders are in large measure the products of their times, not springing from the head of Zeus fully armed, as leaders sometimes seem, but from a long period of silent preparation, like the century plant gathering for years the peculiar force which blossoms into magnificent flower. Yet in larger measure they are also the molders of their own and succeeding times. Like the Sea of Galilee which gathers up the waters of the streams to the North and pours them out into the swiftly rushing Jordan River, so these men gather up the various and often contra-

dictory forces of their times, and combine them into a mighty stream of general progress. The people of Thessalonica described them as: "These that have turned the world upside down are come hither also." They are the great-souled heroes who redeem their age from littleness, who cause us to stretch ourselves as a boy with growing pains, and make it seem a bigger thing to be a man.

So largely does the world depend upon these men at each stage of its forward movement, that clear-sighted investigators see in them as a class certain well-defined characteristics. They seem to have even a bodily likeness; rather spare, apparently tall, straight, broad-browed, keen eyes, firm lips, determined chin, an appearance of strength and leadership. Much more do they resemble each other in spiritual likeness, in clearness of insight, in determined purpose, in strength of conviction, in resolute will, in devotion to truth, in sincerity of heart, in depth of religious fervor, in open-mindedness, in sympathy for all classes of men. They seem to be even name-sakes, so many of them being called John, according no doubt to the word of the angel to Zacharias; John Chrysostom, John Wycliffe, John Huss, John Milton, John Knox, John Calvin, John Bunyan, and John Wesley. Martin Luther, the greatest of all the reformers differs somewhat from the rest in name and bodily form, but the spiritual likeness is there in all its force.

These men, like their Master, are found worthy to open the seals, to declare to men the counsels of God; men of vigorous personality, able to set the soul on fire and quicken it with divine truth.

It takes in some respects a peculiar kind of mind to appreciate Wycliffe and his work. It is a question whether it does not take the same quality of manhood as the reformers themselves possessed, a similarity of temperament, insight and judgment, to appreciate their characteristics and really do them honor. In studying the life of a race hero, or a man of the kingdom, to get the real benefit or to learn the lesson intended, we must see his life's work so clearly that as in looking at a picture it will stir our emotions, quicken our impulses, be life-enhancing to us. Mr. Berensen, in his art works, says: "In looking at the picture of The Wrestlers, we must feel our own muscles tighten, our breath come more quickly, our whole nature respond to the effort expressed in the scene before us, till we feel as if the elixir of life, not our own sluggish blood, were coursing through our veins." In studying the work of a great man we must feel his life, must sympathize with him, his struggles ours, his defeats ours, his victories ours, his crown the promise and model of our own. Such a one is our protagonist on the great battlefield of the reformation, of the intellectual and moral renaissance, and his worth to us is in the quickened nature that comes from contact with him.

The disposition to honor and glorify the name of Wycliffe is a good omen for our age and race. As the morning star he still points to the now rapidly coming day of spiritual enlightenment and freedom. We can not all be great, but we can all love greatness, courage, moral strength, truth, beauty, a purposeful life. We can be touched by the great on the many sides of our being, spirit answering to spirit, and in this appreciation of nobility lies our greatness, the most valuable quality we can possess. In those sixty years of remarkable development of genius at Athens, the names of whose great men crowd the Classical Dictionary, alertness, intelligence, sympathy of the people, responded to the inspiration of the artist or poet, and made the atmosphere in which he could reach his best fruitage. So long as humanity loves noble men and is proud of their deeds, so long will the human race move onward and upward. Oliver Wendell Holmes represents the great men of the world gathered on pillars around a central statue, that of the Son of man, and on one of the highest of these we will place John Wycliffe, our John.

By the largeness of his nature and his intense sympathy Wycliffe understood the drift of English public opinion, was in spiritual affinity with it, and expressed it so clearly and forcibly that the people recognized it as their own. A great man is one who can see the ideas prevalent in his age, who gathers up its thoughts, feelings, sympathies,

tendencies, and expresses them in a way to bring the more advanced thought, the larger life. Or to be more rhetorical, he is the protagonist for the host of advancing warriors for the truth and right, as Achilles the leader of the Greeks, against the Trojan walls of tradition and authority. The landed aristocracy of England claimed with some show of reason to be the natural representatives of the English people, but with a few noble exceptions they have proven false to their trust. The real natural leaders have been the men who were in heart and soul English, representing the spirit and aims and moral aspirations of their countrymen and embodying them in their lives. As Abraham Lincoln was the American people, not only that he represented the American people in some indefinite way, but that in character and aspirations and impulses he was the American people, as no other man of the nineteenth century was; so with Wycliffe, he was the English people of the age, not of the clergy or upper classes, but of all classes, the richest embodiment of their aims and feelings, their intellectual and religious life.

For centuries the Church misjudged the spirit of Wycliffe's work, and as the records were mostly from his enemies or the ecclesiastical party, the English Church did little to honor him. It was almost four hundred years after his death before men began to understand his relations to English history, and to do justice to the great-souled leader

who supplied the philosophical and Scriptural basis for the Reformation. Wycliffe was the greatest of the pre-reformers, in moral courage, in comprehension of the vital points at issue, in marking the line to which later workmen might hew. Milton said: "He was honored of God to be the first preacher of a general reformation to all Europe." Of the English Reformation he determined the course and the spirit, making it the clearest in purpose, the most enduring in its object, the most efficient in final victory. Then, too, the vital figures in those early times stand out like the shadowy forms from the reflection of the sun on the Hartz Mountains, and seem like Bunyan's Great-Heart, champions whose prowess we admire and in whose valor and goodness we dare trust.

Those critics are right who see in Wycliffe's work the harbinger of Teutonic Christianity. From his ancestry and his temperament he was the exponent of the Teutonic reformation. Bismarck said: "We Germans fear God alone." They worship GOD writ large, as over against man-made perils or superstitions. A clearer, more vital idea of God, always means a reformation, a quickening of the intellectual and moral life. By his intellectual grasp and force of character Wycliffe not only determined the aim and means of the later English reform, but also the political and religious development of the Teutonic races. He represented the Anglo-Saxon elements in English character, its

energy, its perseverance, its love of truth, its depth of reverence, "the martyr spirit which can die but not yield." So forceful was his life that as with the prophet's body in days of old, it seems as if one's soul would be quickened into more vigorous activity by touching the bones of a man who had lived so intensely.

Perhaps we ought not to blame the English hierarchy too severely for not being able to observe the signs of the times. There is a peculiar virulence in ecclesiastical hatred which makes it impossible to appreciate an opponent's work. The largest and stiffest blinkers are on ecclesiastical bridles, and the shut-out world is absolutely non-existent. Prelates and popes, nobles and kings, obscured and distorted the work of Wycliffe for centuries, but the English Reformation came, and the significance of the morning star is at last apparent to a grateful world. There is joy in heaven, too, over the man who will do his work as God appoints it, caring not for honor, wealth or advancement, so that he may finish his course according to the Divine will. As Jeremiah was to seek in the broad places of Jerusalem, so the Holy Spirit is constantly searching in the broad places of the earth for men—men like Wycliffe, who will execute judgment and seek the truth; men who have the force of character and the manliness to do his will, who will not be disobedient to the heavenly vision as it appears to them on the lonely way to Damascus. Blessed are