

No Other Foundation, A History of the Church, part 2

The 'Babylonian Captivity'-- The Gospel in the Middle Ages, 500-1500 AD

By Dr. Michael A. G. Haykin

Augustine died on August, 430. As he lay dying, with portions of the Psalms copied out and pasted on to the walls around his death bed for him to meditate on, his world, that of Roman culture and literature, was dying with him. At the city gates of Hippo were a barbarian people known as the Vandals from far-away Denmark ! The fall of the Western Roman Empire had begun with the invasion of what is now modern France during the winter of 406. That year the Rhine, which was the natural frontier of the Western Roman Empire froze, and a number of Germanic peoples crossed over to ravage Gaul, now modern France, and Spain, and then into North Africa--the Franks, Burgundians, the Goths, and the Vandals. They were never driven out. On August 24 410 , Rome itself, for 3 days was sacked by the Visigoths. Although the Western Roman Empire was to formally continue for another sixty years or so, the Western Roman Empire had ceased to be a political or military power.

Impact of the Fall of the Roman Empire

How did the fall of the Roman Empire impact the life of those living in what became Europe ?

- Ushered in a millennium of illiteracy. This meant a loss of biblical literacy, and as we shall see, rampant growth of religious superstition.
- Essentially destroyed urban culture until the 1200's when it reappeared in Northern Italy . Christianity became a rural phenomenon. Very different from Christianity in the Roman Empire .
- Into the power vacuum caused by the collapse of Roman rule stepped the Roman papacy. By the time of Constantine , a hierarchical model of ministry was pretty well uniform in the Church, where the church was governed by bishops. In the mid-fifth century, as Roman political rule began to wane, a bishop of Rome named Leo I (Bishop of Rome, 440-461), asserted that all legitimate authority came through him and he sought to buttress this assertion with the argument that he was the heir of Peter, whom the Lord Jesus had made the one who admitted people to heaven and the foundation of the Church (Matthew 16:16-18).

Medieval Roman Catholicism

Well, let's see how all of this works itself out in what we call the medieval Roman Catholic Church, that spanned the period from 500-1500. Due to the loss of literacy, the Bible became a closed book, thus, it is not surprising that medieval men and women were deeply superstitious. Illiteracy was easily over 90%. By the late Middle Ages some of the priests could not even read or write. They would memorize the Mass, but were unable to open the Scriptures.

As a good example of superstition, take, for example, the extensive use of what are called "relics." It was believed that the relics, i.e. parts of the bodies of "saints" and holy objects, had within them various innate powers that could aid their owner or bearer. The origin of such an idea lay back in the Roman idea of holiness as comprising something spatial. A person who lived a holy life accumulated holiness, as it were, in his body--and the body continued to radiate holiness after his/her death. Thus, a part of the saint's body could become a channel for transmitting this holiness, or act as a reservoir of holiness.

By the Middle Ages the preservation and sale of relics was big business. For example, after the murder of Thomas Beckett on 29 December 1170 in Canterbury Cathedral, his body was placed before the

altar, where the monks kept watch all night to collect any more blood that flowed from his wounds. Later, some of the poor of Canterbury came and dipped rags in the blood of the martyr; one used such a rag to supposedly cure a paralyzed wife. Another of the Beckett relics was reportedly used to put out a fire: affixed to the end of a long pole, the owner of the home used the pole to drive away the flames by pointing it at the conflagration.

Another good example relates to Hugh of Lincoln (c. 1140-1200), whose tomb became second only to that of Thomas Beckett as an English shrine of devotion. While a guest at the abbey of Fécamp, Hugh was allowed to see the arm of Mary Magdalene, which, according to one account, "was tightly wrapped in cloth bandages that the monks had never dared to open. In spite of the furious protests of the surrounding monks he took out a knife, cut open the wrapping, and tried to break a piece off. On finding it too hard he bit at a finger with his teeth... and by this means broke off two fragments which he handed to his biographer for safe-keeping." [1] Ultimately this confidence in relics was a confidence in the saints.

Alongside this emphasis on the saints was a growing reverence for Mary. Especially from the twelfth century onwards, there was a rapid expansion of the cult of Mary. For example, a synod in Paris in 1210 required knowledge of "Hail Mary" by all believers along with the Creed and Lord's Prayer. In 1349--the year of the Black Death--flagellants revealed that Mary had succeeded in preventing the end of the world, which God had scheduled for September 10 of that year. [2] Thus, there arose in the late Middle Ages a contrast between Christ the judge and Mary the merciful intercessor. The Reformers would pose this question to their contemporaries: "Who saves us--Christ or Mary?"

Late medieval reflection on the way of salvation was also clouded in spiritual darkness. A number of late medieval theologians emphasized, on the basis of such passages as James 4:8--"Draw near to God and He will draw near to you"--and Zechariah 1:3--"Return to Me...and I will return to you"--that a person who did his/her best on the basis of his/her natural ability would be rewarded with grace by God. If that person then co-operated with this grace--which was given regularly through the sacraments--he or she would eventually win the reward of eternal life. In this understanding of salvation, one could initiate one's own salvation.

There were missions during the medieval period, but really apart from those initiated by the Celtic Church--of which the founder was Patrick (c. 390-460)--and which were the most vital Christian force in Europe between 500 and 800, these missions sought to bring people into obedience to the Pope. It should also be noted that some of the missions used military force to compel conversion. The classic illustration here is the conversion of the Saxons in the mid- to late eighth century. The use of the maxim *compelle intrare* (based on Luke 14:23 , Vg.) to justify this practice resulted in large numbers being added to the Church formally. However, these individuals had no heart adhesion to the truths of Christianity. Christianity thus became for many a veneer. "Christianity became a matter of outward practices and obedience to rules." [3]

And this brings us to one final characteristic of medieval Roman Catholicism that needs to be mentioned and that is the authoritarianism and corruption of the Papacy. Boniface VIII, Pope from 1294 to 1303, could declare in the papal bull *Unam Sanctam* (18/11/1302) that outside the visible Church of Rome "there is neither salvation nor remission of sins." He compared the church to Noah's ark. Just as the ark had but one helmsman, Noah, so the church has only one pilot, Christ, and the one who acts on his behalf, that is, Christ's vicar, namely, the Apostle Peter, and Peter's successor, the Pope. Thus, Boniface concluded: "It is altogether necessary to salvation for every human creature to be subject to the Roman pontiff." Yet, at the same time as this pompous declaration there was immense corruption in the papal palace: nepotism, sexual immorality, worldliness to the core. And this corruption permeated the church. Thus, there was a saying in France : "If you want to go to hell, become a priest."

No wonder Martin Luther spoke of this period as "the Babylonian captivity" of the Church, comparing it to the time when God's Old Covenant people were in exile in Babylon for seventy years.

Keeping the Faith -- The Example of John Wycliffe

Where was the gospel in all of this? Well, there were some who, while their faith was not that of the New Testament church in all of its fullness, nonetheless had a deep Christian piety. For example, Anselm of Canterbury (c. 1033-1109) or Bernard of Clairvaux (1091-1153) who wrote this hymn:

Jesus, the very thought of thee
With sweetness fills my breast;
But sweeter far thy face to see,
And in thy presence rest.

Nor voice can sing, nor heart can frame,
Nor can the mem'ry find,
A sweeter sound than thy blest Name,
O Saviour of mankind.

O Hope of ev'ry contrite heart,
O Joy of all the meek,
To those who fall, how kind thou art!
How good to those who seek!

But what to those who find? Ah, this
Nor tongue nor pen can show:
The love of Jesus, what it is
None but his loved ones know.

Jesus, our only Joy be thou,
As thou our Prize wilt be;
Jesus, be thou our Glory now,
And through eternity.

And there were others who protested against Rome and sought to keep the faith. Examples: Pierre Valdes (died between 1205-1218), John Wycliffe (c .1330-1384), Jan Hus (d.1415). Let us consider John Wycliffe, the so-called Morningstar of the Reformation.

Wycliffe was born about 1330 in the present-day North Riding of Yorkshire, England. Almost no record of his early years exists. Actually, it is not until the last dozen years of his life when he entered into theological debate that we have a full record of him. The greater part of his life was spent in the University of Oxford .

During the 1360s he was lecturing and writing at Oxford on philosophy, and became known as one of the foremost philosophers at that university. But he was also studying theology, for he received his B.D. in 1369 and about 1372 obtained a Doctorate in Theology. He was soon recognized as the leading theologian and philosopher of the age at Oxford . This would have meant that he was second to none in Europe , for Oxford had, for a brief time, eclipsed Paris in academic leadership.

The following description of Wycliffe's physical appearance is drawn from several portraits of unquestioned originality still in existence: "a tall thin figure, covered with a long light gown of black colour, with a girdle about his body; the head, adorned with a full, flowing beard, exhibiting features keen and sharply cut; the eye clear and penetrating; the lips firmly closed in token of resolution--the whole man wearing an aspect of lofty earnestness and replete with dignity and character."

After receiving his doctoral degree Wycliffe became increasingly known for his radical theological views--radical that is from the point of view of the Roman Church--and increasingly outspoken with regard to the need for church reform. In *On the Truth of Sacred Scripture* (1378) Wycliffe defended the authority and inerrancy of the Scriptures.

It is this writing and his constant appeal to Scripture that led contemporaries to call Wycliffe the doctor evangelicus, the "Evangelical Doctor." The book had three goals.

1. First, to show that the Bible is free from error and that its authority derives from its divine authorship. "It is impossible," he asserted, "for any part of Holy Scripture to be wrong." [4] If one finds a contradiction in it, then one's interpretation is wrong.

2. Second, the Bible is the standard by which all doctrine must be measured. By Wycliffe's day, there were two views regarding the authority of Scripture. For some, like an earlier theologian named Anselm, Scripture was the foundation for all doctrinal knowledge. In the case of any dispute Scripture would have the final say. The other perspective viewed tradition as exemplified in the teachers of the Church as having equal authority as Scripture. Wycliffe himself "appealed to the Bible at every turn as his final authority." [5] As a result he was not afraid to say that "it is clear that the Roman Church can err in articles of faith." [6] As he declared: "The Bible ... alone is the supreme law that is to rule Church, State, and Christian life, without human traditions and statutes." Wycliffe's view of the all-sufficiency of Scripture is in sharp contrast with that of many other medieval theologians who ranked tradition alongside Scripture. This led him to place a great emphasis on preaching. He could state: "The preaching of the Word of God is an act more solemn than the... Sacrament." [7] Again, he could state: "Praying is good, but not so good as preaching." [8]

3. Third, because the Bible contains the truth, it must be made available to all in the church, laity as well as clergy. "Christ and His Apostles taught the people in the language best known to them," Wycliffe noted. Therefore, he continued, "doctrine should not only be in Latin but in the vulgar [i.e. common] tongue and, as the faith of the church is contained in the Scriptures, the more these are known in a true sense the better. ... [therefore] believers should have the Scriptures in a language which they fully understand."

The last conviction would lead to Wycliffe and his followers becoming involved in the translation of the Scriptures. One translation appeared in 1384: a literal translation, word for word, even retaining the Latin syntax and word order. Wycliffe was involved definitely as the coordinator of the translation, possibly also the translator. A second version appeared after Wycliffe's death. It translated meaning for meaning, and appeared c. 1395-1396.

The clergy of his day, even had they desired to use them, had the Scriptures only in the Latin Vulgate, or occasionally Norman French. Only fragments of the Bible could be found in English, and these were scarcely accessible to the masses of people. Serving as the inspiration of the activity, Wycliffe lived to see the first complete English translation of the Bible. This first effort immediately prompted work on a revision, which was completed after Wycliffe's death, yet came to be identified as the "Wycliffe Bible."

In 1378 and 1379, Wycliffe worked on three other treatises, of which one was *On the Power of the Pope*. In this he bluntly declared:

- "A man may be reputed the Vicar of Christ by all human solemnity, rite, and reputation, and yet be a fearful devil... I say that neither he nor anyone else is Vicar of Christ or of Peter unless he leaves worldly ways and imitates their conduct; and thus it is possible for a pretended Bishop of Rome to be the head of the members of the devil."
- "The Catholic truth which I have often repeated consists in this: that no pope, bishop, abbot, or any spiritual prelate is to be believed or obeyed except in so far as he says or commands the law of Christ."

In his criticism of the Papacy, and indeed of the entire Roman hierarchy, Wycliffe pointed to the absence from the Bible of any mention of popes, cardinals, or bishops. He rejected the claim that the Pope had succeeded Peter as the head of the church. In fact, he argued Peter had not even been Bishop of Rome. Nor was Rome supreme among the local churches of that era: Antioch, Alexandria and Jerusalem at least had been her equals. The foundation of the church in Matthew 16:18-19, i.e. the rock, he interpreted as Christ himself, not Peter. [9] In later works Wycliffe advocates the abolition of the papacy, for, he said, the Pope was in reality the Antichrist. [10]

Wycliffe died on the final day of 1384, after having suffered a stroke three days earlier. He was later condemned as a heretic by Rome and in 1428 his bones were dug up and burnt. The ashes were taken to the nearby river, the River Swift, where they were scattered on its waters. But as a later church historian Thomas Fuller put it: the "brook [Swift] has conveyed his ashes into Avon, Avon into Severn, Severn into the narrow seas, they into the main ocean. And thus the ashes of Wycliffe are the emblem of his doctrine, which now is dispersed all the world over." It is noteworthy that when Martin Luther's teachings first came to England in the early 1520s, it was attacked by none other than Henry VIII as "pure Wyclifism." [11]

Notes:

[1] David Sox, *Relics and Shrines* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1985), 44.

[2] Adrian H. Bredero, *Christendom and Christianity in the Middle Ages*, trans. Reinder Bruinsma (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1994), 339.

[3] André Vauchez, *The Spirituality of the Medieval West From the Eighth to the Twelfth Century*, trans. Colette Friedlander (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1993), 13.

[4] Cited Stacey, *John Wyclif and Reform*, 83.

[5] Stacey, *John Wyclif and Reform*, 79.

[6] *On the Eucharist*, ed. and trans. Ford Lewis Battles in Matthew Spinka, ed., *Advocates of Reform From Wyclif to Erasmus* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1953), 69.

[7] *On the Eucharist*, ed. and trans. Battles in Spinka, ed., *Advocates of Reform*, 82.

[8] Cited *On the Eucharist*, ed. and trans. Battles in Spinka, ed., *Advocates of Reform*, 82.

[9] Gordon Leff, "Wycliff and Hus: A Doctrinal Comparison" in Anthony Kenny, ed., *Wyclif in his Times* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 114-115.

[10] Spinka, "John Wyclif, Advocate of Radical Reform" in his ed., *Advocates of Reform*, 28.

[11] Anthony Kenny, "The Accursed Memory: The Counter-Reformation Reputation of John Wyclif" in *ibid.*, 159.