

# Review of 'The Courtly and Commercial Art of the Wycliffite Bible

Eyal Poleg

*Reviews in History*

## Cite this paper

Downloaded from [Academia.edu](#) 

[Get the citation in MLA, APA, or Chicago styles](#)

## Related papers

[Download a PDF Pack](#) of the best related papers 



[Wycliffite Bibles as Orthodoxy](#)

Eyal Poleg

[Canon Wars and Outlier Manuscripts: Gospel Harmony in the Lollard Controversy](#)

Elizabeth Schirmer

[The earliest evidence for anti-Lollard polemics in medieval Scotland](#)

Eyal Poleg

## The Courtly and Commercial Art of the Wycliffite Bible

**Review Number:** 1774

**Publish date:** Thursday, 4 June, 2015

**Author:** Kathleen E. Kennedy

**ISBN:** 9782503547527

**Date of Publication:** 2014

**Price:** £60.00

**Pages:** 234pp.

**Publisher:** Brepols

**Publisher url:** [http://www.brepols.net/Pages/ShowProduct.aspx?prod\\_id=IS-9782503547527-1](http://www.brepols.net/Pages/ShowProduct.aspx?prod_id=IS-9782503547527-1)

**Place of Publication:** Turnhout

**Reviewer:** Eyal Poleg

As this book begins (p. 1), the author marvels how the art of the Wycliffite Bible, one of the most popular books in late medieval England, has not been studied systematically. The answer lies in the historiography of the Wycliffite Bible. Kennedy suggests that the ‘Shadow of the Reformation’ has created a binary view of Wycliffite Bibles, linking them to heresy and illegality. As the name suggests, Wycliffite Bibles have commonly been linked to John Wyclif and the movement which was opposed by the English church in the 15th and early 16th centuries. This book’s greatest contribution, in my eyes, is not in countering this assumption and ascribing these Bibles to orthodox production and ownership (which she nevertheless does throughout the book). Rather, especially in its stronger second half, it brings a new discourse to the study of Wycliffite Bibles. In place of heresy and belief, Kennedy discusses artistic influences, workshops and styles. This brings manuscripts of the Wycliffite Bible into the realm of book production and usage, thus providing an important contribution to the study of late medieval England.

The first introductory chapter ‘Wycliffite Bibles have art?’ clearly states the book’s aims and methodologies. Traditionally, scholarship on Wycliffite Bibles has been examining the link between these Bibles and Lollardy, in a discussion that favoured text to appearance. Recently, this link has been challenged in a series of publications, which have demonstrated a widening gap between the manuscript evidence and the diffused movement that emanated from Wyclif’s circle.<sup>(1)</sup> Even these works have mostly failed to address the art of these manuscripts. This is a considerable lacuna. As demonstrated in this chapter and throughout this book, such a study corroborates previous scholarship to reveal how ‘the art in these volumes challenges straightforward claims of the Wycliffite Bible’s illegality’ (p. 1). This continues in a series of ‘rationalisations’ which serves to briefly refute common assumptions on the Wycliffite Bible. These could also be structured as a series of alleged oppositions, which are harmonised by the book’s detailed examination of the material evidence:

- Legal status and production. Archbishop Arundel’s 1407/09 Constitutions prohibited new and unauthorised translations of the Bible. They are at odds with the surge of Wycliffite Bibles in subsequent years.
- Centre and periphery. The tension between London and the provinces in the production and dissemination of Wycliffite Bibles is taken up by the identification of provincial scribes and artists in

subsequent chapters.

- Appearance and identity. Linking lavish Bibles with orthodoxy, and ‘scruffy’ ones with Lollardy is refuted through the notion of booklet production of chapter three
- Lollardy and iconoclasm. This is challenged by deconstructing both the notion of Lollardy and showing the similarities between Lollard Bibles and other contemporary books.

Chapter two, ‘The elegant apparatus of Wycliffite Bibles’, ends with the digitally inspired assertion that ‘[a]bove all, this beautiful set of finding-aids works so intuitively that we do not at first register its utility, but rather its aesthetics; Sir Ive would be inspired’ (p. 34). This chapter aims to examine the form and function of the Wycliffite Bible, following a hierarchy of script and illumination which links to questions of use and mnemonics. Along the way it demonstrates the similarity between the nature of Wycliffite Bibles and other contemporary works, as, for example, in the similar percentage of un-illuminated manuscripts of the Wycliffe Bibles and the Canterbury Tales. The chapter provides an insight into the mindset of stationers and patrons in their choice of design, from the options available to them, through the associated costs at a time when materials were commonly cheaper than labour, to the creation of an efficient retrieval system. While some arguments could be debated (e.g. the signalling out of Genesis and Matthew was not due to the books’ intrinsic value, but their position at the head of the Old and New Testaments), the chapter moves our attention to the appearance of the Wycliffe Bible, treating it as any other contemporary manuscript. This is most evident in the fascinating and seldom-performed comparison between these Bibles and parliamentary statutes. From the origins of the glossed books and the Late Medieval (Latin) Bible, the similarity and co-dependency of legal and biblical manuscripts is staggering and under-explored. Here, a comparison between a Wycliffite Bible and parliamentary statutes shows how close these two classes of manuscripts are, and is substantiated in chapter seven, where the same artist is revealed behind a Wycliffite Bible and parliamentary statutes.

Some of the book’s most important arguments come in chapter three, ‘Scripture “on spec”? Pamphlet production of the Wycliffite Bible’. There, the move away from ‘the traps in which the traditional binaries of lollard and orthodox belief have left scholars’ (p. 40) leads Kennedy to consider new ways of looking at the Wycliffe Bible. Looking at the production and use of booklets, and drawing on cutting-edge theories of the field, Kennedy advocates a fascinating idea, seeing these manuscripts as ‘hospitable’. She claims that booklets of individual books of the Wycliffite Bible, which are often found in anthologies and composite books, were intentionally produced by scribes anticipating such a use. This breaks away from a dichotomous view which contrasted scruffy booklets and lavish manuscripts, suggesting the latter emanated from professional production, while the former linked to the little-documented Lollard production. Rather, Kennedy argues that these booklets were produced professionally to fit within a hospitable (and often orthodox) environment. This is evident in the nature of the books and in their appearance. This chapter has great potential to transform the way we think about Wycliffite Bibles, not as a self-sufficient genre, but as one that is in constant dialogue with other texts. However, this move necessitates a closer analysis of the manuscript evidence. A more detailed codicological analysis of size, gathering and ruling would help substantiate Kennedy’s argument. In order to examine this, I had a look at British Library Additional MS 41175, an anthology containing the gospels of Matthew and Mark (in the EV, based on the Glossed Gospels, discussed in chapter four). Examining the structure of the book consolidates Kennedy’s argument for independent circulation as booklets. Both Gospels are written in quires of eight folios, with two important exceptions: the end of Matthew is an eight-folio quire wanting the last folio (a stub is still visible); Mark begins on a new quire, and ends in an unusual quire of four folios. This substantiates the suggestion that these quires were created ad-hoc, and integrated by a later user into a newly constructed anthology. The construction of books on individual quires is a wasteful use of parchment, and was not common in Latin Bibles. It makes perfect sense if these Gospels were sold as off the peg booklets, as suggested by Kennedy.

‘The last historiated English bible’ of chapter four could be the lavishly illuminated ‘Big Bible’, British Library Royal MS 1.E.ix. It could also be any of the three historiated Wycliffite Bibles produced in England between 1440 and 1480. This study leads Kennedy to portray the similarities between English and Latin Bible production in England (the latter on the decline in the period under consideration). A general decrease

in the production of illuminated books in 15th-century England helps contextualise Wycliffite Bibles not within an iconoclastic Lollard milieu, but rather within English book culture at large. Looking at the decoration of these Bibles (Kennedy's demonstrable forte) shows the links between appearance and patronage; how historiated and illuminated initials and borders appear in books used by monarchs, nobles and the clergy. Some of the arguments are harder to substantiate, as, for example, the link between a small image of the Cherub and the preaching of the Franciscans (the common images of the Cherub, which incidentally are integrated into a few Latin Bibles in late medieval England, were useful in the construction of sermons, but typically much larger and significantly more elaborate). In this journey we visit well known manuscripts and groups (such as the Bohun group, in an analysis heavily dependent on Sandler), or the pasting of initials cut from the Magna glossatura into a Wycliffite Bible (where Kennedy argues convincingly for an early-modern dating of this pasting). It takes the reader out of London, to the works of an Austin friar in Pleshey Castle (Essex), to the North of England and to Norwich, where provincial artists produced high-end books.

Chapter five, 'The Big Bible's borders and beyond', is the most art-historical in nature. It follows the works of individual artists to discuss changes in style and production. Along the way it minimises the impact of Arundel's constitutions, confirming that 1409 cannot be seen as a watershed in the production of the Wycliffe Bible. Kennedy traces the team working with the Continental artist Herman Scheerre, seeing their footprints in a variety of Wycliffite New Testaments, as well as in legal and liturgical manuscripts (putting, once more, the Wycliffite Bible in the context of licit book production). This group's 'trendsetting' style (dubbed 'London style') was emulated in other Wycliffite New Testaments, as well as in literary and liturgical books. Kennedy's strength is in the ability to link this style with less-illuminated books, through a deep analysis of illuminated borders and lesser initials. Moving to a brief exploration of script, Kennedy treads on familiar grounds in identifying the intentionally archaic script of the Wycliffite Bible, with an additional (and slightly rushed) stab at more elaborate scripts.

The emphasis on specific artists underpins also chapter six, 'Following the corpus master'. It traces another Continental artist, responsible also for a well-known miniature of Chaucer. His work was continued by several imitating apprentices (named 'followers' and thus revising the common suggestion of a single apprentice), whose style is evident in c.12 manuscripts of the Wycliffite Bible. They worked for noble patrons within a commercial milieu (differing here from their master), decorating manuscripts smaller than the one discussed in the previous chapter. The chapter then moves to consider scribes. Much like the Continental background of some artists, Kennedy discusses a scribe whose unease with English supports Continental origins. Further study is dedicated to the 'Twisted-ribbon scribe', a term based on this scribe's choice for decorated catchwords. More work would substantiate such an analysis, especially a much-needed detailed palaeographical examination of the variety of hands in Wycliffite Bibles. The 'Twisted-ribbon scribe' is responsible for several manuscripts illuminated by the followers, revealing ad-hoc teams of scribes and illuminators. Kennedy's work then becomes more complex as the styles she describes had gained popularity, and subsequently imitated by other scribes and artists. As before, this chapter reveals much on book production in late medieval England and the joint craftsmanship necessary to produce illuminated manuscripts.

The final chapter, 'Renew, reuse, recycle', addresses the afterlife of Wycliffite Bibles both as text and object. It traces the recycling of the translation of the Wycliffite Bible in English books of hours in the 15th and 16th century. Manuscripts of the Wycliffite Bible were not left idle. They were used and personalised by different patrons from provincial gentry and urban patriciate, to Henry VII, whose modifications of the Wycliffite Bible, which is currently British Library, Royal MS 1.C.viii (presented in chapter four), assisted in substantiating his affinity to Henry VI. Images inserted into Wycliffite Bibles denote orthodox usage, from emphasis on the Eucharist to blood relics and the centrality of penance. However, using images to demonstrate how these Bibles were read as an act of devotion is not straightforward, and could be further developed by paying more attention to the uses of Tables of Lessons in these Bibles. These images also reveal, like other manuscripts of the early print era, the complex relationship between manuscripts and printed books, as manuscript images often imitated the appearance of printed woodblocks. The chapter ends

with a quick tour of the 16th century, quickly visiting Foxe's depiction of Wycliffe as a proto-martyr, Thomas More's celebrated comment on an orthodox early English Bible and Tyndale's Bible. The book contains two appendices: 'Guide to Digital Images' (discussed below) and 'Table of Copies of the Wycliffite Bible', which adds very little information beyond the one found in Dove.[\(2\)](#)

This is an important book, which is not perfect. Tighter editing would have assisted in clearing the prose, avoiding repetitions, and omitting nebulous phrases (understanding 'scripture in English must be plotted in four dimensions just as vectors, which express motion through three-dimensional space and time' (p. 41) was beyond this reviewer). It also lacks a conclusion, which would have served to consolidate the discussion. More important is the question of images. I expect the complete lack of colour plates to be an issue of much concern to the author, as it is to this reviewer. Still, it merits reiterating. Publishing a book such as this, with intricate analyses of ink and texture, image and illuminators, without a single colour plate, is no less than a sin. The book contains 58 b/w figures, which are extremely useful. Still they cannot do justice to the richness of the manuscript evidence. The cover image and the meticulous list of URLs provided by the author (appendix one) help mitigate this. However, readers unfamiliar with the manuscript culture of the Wycliffite Bible will find this lack a considerable hindrance. Would the author consider creating an accompanying website, where images and URLs could be provided under one roof and updated regularly? This would prove invaluable assistance to readers as they navigate through the author's careful reading of the manuscript evidence in all its intricacy, and follow the author's intention to make this an interactive guidebook (p. 4).

This book can be seen as an important part of the 'rehabilitation movement' of the Wycliffite Bible, seeking to place these manuscripts (also) in orthodox hands. To other works on specific manuscripts, on codicology, usage, text and provenance, it adds the prism of art to demonstrate how these manuscripts should be seen as part of the wider book culture of late medieval England. It shifts attention and discourse from question of heresy to those of book production and use. As such it should be read not only by scholars of Lollardy and late medieval religion, but also by those interested in book history and the culture of late medieval England. Kennedy admits the book is not designed to be the final word on the topic. It is, nevertheless, the start of a fascinating discussion.

## Notes

1. See for example the articles of Matti Peikola and Elizabeth Solopova, in *Form and Function in the Late Medieval Bible*, ed. Eyal Poleg and Laura Light (Leiden, 2013), pp. 333–78.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Mary Dove, *The First English Bible: The Text and Context of the Wycliffite Versions* (Cambridge, 2007), pp. 235–66, 281–306.[Back to \(2\)](#)

---

**Source URL:** <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/1774>

## Links

[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/106533>

Elia Fournier, L'iconographie de la Bible historique (Répertoire Iconographique de la Littérature du Moyen Âge 2.)  
Turnhout: Brepols, 2012. Paper. And Trans., The Tree: Symbol, Allegory, and Mnemonic Device in Medieval Art and Thought.  
Turnhout: Brepols, 2014. Paper. The first introductory chapter "Wycliffite Bibles have art?" clearly states the book's aims and methodologies. Traditionally, scholarship on Wycliffite Bibles has been examining the link between these Bibles and Lollardy, in a discussion that favoured text to appearance. This chapter aims to examine the form and function of the Wycliffite Bible, following a hierarchy of script and illumination which links to questions of use and mnemonics. Along the way it demonstrates the similarity between the nature of Wycliffite Bibles and other contemporary works, as, for example, in the similar percentage of un-illuminated manuscripts of the Wycliffe Bibles and the Canterbury Tales. The Courtly and Commercial Art of the Wycliffite Bible by Kathleen E. Kennedy (pp. 382-385). Review by: Sonja Drimmer. DOI: 10.5406/jenglgermphil.116.3.0382. The Courtly and Commercial Art of the Wycliffite Bible has been added to your Cart. Add gift options. Buy used: \$77.68. + \$3.99 shipping. Used: Very Good | Details. Sold by cathyshalfpricebks. "This volume will serve as a useful introduction to the decoration found in Wycliffite Bibles. Certainly, the evidence gathered here demonstrates how mainstream these English Bibles were in the fifteenth century." - Laura Light, The Medieval Review. Product details. Item Weight : 1.45 pounds. Hardcover : 234 pages. ISBN-10 : 2503547524.