

## **A priceless manuscript that heralds the beginning of English-language Christian scripture**

Wycliffite Manuscript, The New Testament. England, 1400–1450. 10 5/8 inches x 7 1/2 inches (270 x 191 mm), 334 pages.

This fifteenth-century manuscript contains the first translation of the New Testament into English. It was created by a group of lay priests known as Lollards, followers of the Oxford theologian John Wyclif (ca. 1330–1384). Wyclif believed that all Christians should have direct access to scripture, which at this time was effectively controlled by Church authorities.

Ecclesiastical anxiety over laymen gaining direct access to a vernacular Bible was not acute during medieval times since books were too rare and expensive, and literacy was limited to clergy and the highest ranks of society. John Wyclif changed all of that. An outspoken critic of the ecclesiastical establishment as well as monastic and doctrinal corruption, Wyclif contributed to the erosion of the Church's power by calling for a Bible in vernacular English.

Wyclif's doctrine of dominion by grace necessitated vernacular Bibles. This doctrine countered the traditional view that spiritual dominion in the Christian world was mediated by the papacy, the head of the ladder of grace, which passed grace on through archbishops, bishops, and priests, on to parishioners. Wyclif taught that all Christians stood in an immediate relationship to God, were directly responsible for obedience to God's law, and were direct recipients of God's grace.

The Lollards produced their Bibles between 1376 and 1450, at a time when the Church was severely weakened by the Great Schism and a power struggle between two rival popes in Rome and Avignon. The moment they were produced, the Wycliffite manuscript Bibles became an object of alarm to the ecclesiastical establishment. In 1409, Thomas Arundel, Archbishop of Canterbury, condemned Wyclif's teachings and forbade the translation of the Bible or the reading of such translations. The prohibition had limited effect.

Wyclif's disciples translated the New Testament with great care, basing it on St. Jerome's fourth-century Latin version (the Vulgate Bible). Their more fluent version of the New testament is dissimilar to the more sonorous renderings commonly quoted today, which were created by later generations.

This copy of the Wycliffite manuscript in Bridwell Library, Southern Methodist University, is bound in late-sixteenth-century dark brown calf over wooden boards. The boards are elaborately gilt in the Lyonnese style with arabesque decorations encompassing the letters "H S." The spine is divided by raised bands that form eight panels; each panel has gilt ornaments between rules. The spine and board edges have been restored and the clasps replaced.

Octavo code: wycnts