

Making Our Way



A McMAHON / CHEYNE PODCAST

Season 2 - Episode 7

10/23/24

"Wycliffe's Bones"

Our Hosts

Janet Cheyne McMahon is a lover of family, dogs, nature, travel, books, and music. Born south of the Mason-Dixon line, she left after 9 months for parts north, landing eventually in Michigan, which will always be “where I’m from.”

Love of learning led Jan to a Bachelor of Arts (History, Political Science) at the University of Michigan-Dearborn (Go Blue), and a Master of Arts (Library and Information Science) at the University of South Florida. Amid all that, studied for a time with Rob at Colorado State University, a pivotal time in their lives.

Worked at the U of M-Dearborn Library, and then The Salvation Army Florida Divisional Headquarters, with the greatest reward being in serving as the Divisional Librarian. A librarian is who Jan is “in my soul.”

Jan and Rob have made our home in Florida since 1983, and live now in retirement with their dog, Skye, who makes it all the best adventure. They travel as much as possible, spending time in nature and in diverse places on this amazing planet. It has all been, and continues to be a fascinating journey, with hope of making a difference, in small ways, by being brave enough to speak and act on behalf of others.

Rob McMahon is a native Michigander, born in Saginaw and raised in the suburbs of Detroit. Rob attended Michigan State University, graduating in 1978 with a Bachelor of Science degree. He did graduate studies at the University of Michigan and the University of South Florida. Rob is retired, having spent 36 years in public education teaching both high school chemistry and biology and middle school science. He worked as a total quality management trainer for the Pinellas County School District and served four years as the president of the Pinellas Classroom Teachers Association. Rob cofounded a non-profit total quality management training center, The Learning Co-op, for Teacher Unions interested in applying the W. Edwards Deming continuous improvement principles to their day-to-day operations. He worked with teacher unions in Colorado, Maryland, New Mexico, North Dakota, Texas and Michigan. He also worked in a similar capacity with Jim Shipley & Associates. In retirement Rob has written a series of science related children’s books, and enjoys traveling with his wife, Jan, and their black Labrador Retriever, Skye.

Deanna Cheyne, born in St. John’s, Newfoundland, earned a Bachelor’s Degree in Vocal Performance from the University of Toronto (1996), studying with such luminaries as Elmer Eisler, Doreen Rao, Greta Kraus, Lois Marshall, and Rosemarie Landry.

Dee taught music at Mississauga Christian Academy, served as music director for Meadowvale Bible Baptist Church (Mississauga, Ontario), served as Assistant Divisional Music Director for The Salvation Army in Florida, is a former member of Tampa’s Master Chorale, and, for the past 18 years, has been a public school teacher.

Dee has visit 36 of the 50 U.S. states, and 12 countries. Her favorite destinations include France, Prague, New Orleans, National Parks, & Hawaii.

Dee & Jim live in Florida with Brigus (Golden Retriever) and Pip (Teacup Yorkie).

James Cheyne, born in Galesburg, Illinois, earned a Bachelor of Music degree (Theory and Composition) from Michigan State University (1978); and a Master of Music degree (Theory and Composition) from the University of Illinois - Urbana/Champaign (1981), studying with David Liptak, Salvatore Martirano, and Ben Johnston.

Jim has served as music director for The Salvation Army in Central Illinois & Eastern Iowa, Orlando Area Command, and the Florida Division, served as a pastor with The Salvation Army, and was a public school teacher for 17 years.

In travel so far, Jim has visited 50 states and 27 countries. His favorite travel destinations include National Parks, New Orleans, Newfoundland, Argentina, Prague, & France.

Jim continues to write music and support Dee’s musical endeavors, and cooks whenever absolutely necessary. Jim & Dee live in Florida with their dogs Brigus & Pip.



L-R: Brigus, Jim, Deanna, Skye, Jan, Rob.
Inset: Pip

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Wycliffe's Bones

Season 2; Episode 7

10/23/2024

Host: Jim

"Knowledge is Power." In the wake of The Black Death in the 14th century, the translation of scripture into the vernacular signals a power shift in Europe at the dawn of the Renaissance.

JIM: Just a word at the outset. Our goal is to create a podcast that can be enjoyed by all members of the family. That being said, I would caution that this episode includes descriptions of violence that some might find disturbing. So listener discretion is advised.

[music]

Knowledge is power. That phrase encourages us to better ourselves, to think for ourselves, to believe for ourselves. It summons us to supply ourselves with the learning and the perspective necessary for confident, enlightened, reliable thought. Naturally, knowledge is power has a corollary. And for our British listeners, I have just mispronounced the word corollary. And that corollary is this, ignorance is weakness, and everyone who holds power knows it. The authoritarian gains and maintains power by controlling what the masses know. He sets up official outlets of information, calls his propaganda "truth," and then suppresses and discredits everybody else. Which is why the authoritarian's most potent enemy is an educated and informed citizenry. It is at the hands of an educated and informed citizenry that illegitimate power shrivels and the common good flourishes. Someone once said, "History does not repeat itself, but it does rhyme." So, let's open our hymnals to the pre-dawn of the Renaissance, 14th century England, where Western Europe is about to take a giant leap forward, in this episode we call, "Wycliffe's Bones." Oh, one disclaimer: In this story, any resemblance to persons and events of the present day is unavoidable.

[music]

The Middle Ages, or the so-called Dark Ages, were perhaps never so dark as during the Black Death in the middle of the 14th century, which consumed - what? - somewhere between 30 and 60 percent of Europe's population. It was complete devastation. And what were people to make of it? No one at the time had a clue about a bacterium that infected fleas, that in turn infected rats, that then infected humans. Without that explanation, what did they have? Turns out, the authority of the day, let's call it the Church, turned to two ready answers. One, the Black Death was God's punishment for grave sin. Two, the Jews were poisoning the wells. In other words, blame your problems on yourself, or if you prefer, blame your problems on this minority you're forced to live with. See, history rhymes.

[music]

The Black Death, though, was such a catastrophic event that these stock explanations did

not work their usual magic. Some accepted it, of course, as they always had done, particularly those who had already been conditioned to hate Jews. But not all were under that spell, and the Church's authority in such matters received more than its usual share of skepticism.

In a larger historical view, the Black Death signaled the decline of a social order that had held sway for centuries. For the Church's part, not only was their authority in explaining the catastrophe called into question, but internal strife that it normally could keep hidden reached very public view in the Great Papal Schism of 1378, when the Church suffered the embarrassment of having not one, but two, popes, two rival popes, one in Avignon and one in Rome, both of whom claimed the exclusive title of Vicar of Christ. While the Church bothered itself with this crisis, commoners were on the upswing. In the wake of the Black Death, which had claimed so many lives, laborers were hard to find, so laborers could command unprecedented fees for their labor. Then, when officials enacted a poll tax to effectively strip them of their newfound wealth, commoners pushed for political power in the Peasants' Revolt of 1381.

With the Church's economic and political power in question, there was one power the Church had that was not in question, at least not yet. That was the power of knowledge, specifically, knowledge of the Scriptures. Imagine you're a congregant attending Mass, and a priest performs the Mass with his back turned to you facing an altar, says some words in a language you do not understand, and produces the miracle of the Body and Blood of Christ in substance for your salvation right before your eyes. That is power. But someone is about to try to remove that power from the priests and place it in your hands. So, let's meet John Wycliffe.

[Music]

Born in Yorkshire, England, John Wycliffe would have been in his mid-twenties when the Black Death consumed Europe. He was educated at Oxford, where he then became professor of theology. He was a scholastic philosopher and a Catholic priest. His biographers call him the Morningstar of the Reformation. And here's why.

Wycliffe knew the Church well, and he knew Scripture well, and he began to notice some disparities between the two. He saw clergy vying for political power and enjoying accumulated wealth. He saw elements in the Church life and practice for which he found no support in the Bible: monasticism, the papacy, elements of the Mass, transubstantiation, and so on. But Wycliffe did more than notice these problems. He began to write about them, and he wrote in a way the general public could understand. Moreover, he reasoned that since Scripture is the foundation for Christian faith and practice, every person, whether priest or layperson, should have access to Scripture to read it for themselves. Knowledge is power.

This was a truly revolutionary idea, and thus began a project of translating the thousand-year-old Latin Vulgate into the common language of the day, into Middle English. It is not certain how much translation Wycliffe did himself, but his influence created a cottage industry of so-called "Wycliffe's Bibles," and these were all hand-copied. Gutenberg's movable type was still half a century in the future, and the printing press would not reach England for over 30 years after that. And the great number of Bibles produced and their diversity testifies to the great interest and energy this project attracted.

[Music ends]

The Bibles appeared over the period from 1382 to 1395. At first they were rough word-for-word translations of the Latin Vulgate. In time, though, thought-for-thought translations appeared, and everyone could hear Scripture for the first time in a language they could understand. Listen.

“For God loved so the world that he gave his own begotten Son, that each man that believes in him perishes not, but has everlasting life.”

“Charity is patient. It is benign. Charity envies not... It suffers all things. It believes all things. It hopes all things. It sustains all things... And now dwells faith, hope, and charity, these three. But the most of these is charity.”

“What then shall we say to these things, if God for us, who is against us?... But I am certain that neither death, neither life, neither angels, neither principalities, neither virtues, neither present things, neither things to come, neither strength, neither height, neither depth, neither no other creature may depart us from the charity of God, that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Can you imagine reading such words for yourself in your own language for the very first time having never read these words before? A revolution was at hand.

[Music ends]

How did the church respond to this? Wycliffe’s writings were labeled, according to their seriousness, as erroneous or heretical. Wycliffe was examined on charges of heresy, but he was well connected with nobility and other officials, and so was spared the usual fury of the church’s retribution.

The most famous of his trials occurred in 1382 in Blackheath, London. Wycliffe was called to answer 24 charges, and just as the Archbishop of Canterbury was about to deliver his verdict, an earthquake struck, panicking everyone in attendance. No one was around to explain plate tectonics, so many took this as evidence of God’s intervention on Wycliffe’s behalf. But the Archbishop offered an explanation based on the science of the day. The earthquake, he said, was the result of “noxious vapors” that had built up in the earth, and once they were released, all would be well. What’s more, he latched on an analogy. Wycliffe, he said, too, was a “noxious vapor,” and once expelled, all would be well.

People, it seems, will take any explanation, even pseudoscience, over no explanation at all, and if pseudoscience supports what you want to believe, then what it says is beyond doubt, or so goes the rhyme.

So, once the vapors cleared, of the 24 counts against Wycliffe, 10 were pronounced to be heresies and 14 to be doubtful. Wycliffe’s life, however, was spared. Now, I don’t believe in karma, but I don’t mind noting that while the Archbishop of Canterbury was condemning Wycliffe, the earthquake felled the bell tower at Canterbury Cathedral.

Followers of Wycliffe earned the dismissive nickname of “Lollards,” probably derived from a Dutch word that meant “mumblers.” It was a pejorative, a word of contempt, because nothing signals civil, respectful discourse quite so well as name-calling.

Some of the new Bibles included writings by Wycliffe and were called “Lollard Bibles,” and

as many as the Church could get its hands on were burned. It seems name-calling and book-burning are the weapons of choice when one's use of reason fails.

This account of burning Bibles reminds me of a more recent episode. Bruce Metzger, noted Bible scholar and translator, was a contributor to the 1952 translation project that brought us the Revised Standard Version. One notorious change from the King James Version occurred at Isaiah 7:14, where the Greek translation used a word meaning "virgin," but it translated a Hebrew word that means only "young woman." This, by the way, is the passage Matthew quotes when talking about Mary, mother of Jesus. So when the Revised Standard Version was published in 1952, someone took it on himself to burn it because of this change, saying, "They took the virgin birth out of the Bible," and they sent the ashes to Bruce Metzger. For his part, Metzger enjoyed showing the box with the ashes of the Bible, and quipped, "At least today, they burn the Bible, and not its translator."

Which brings us to Jan Hus.

[music]

Prague, in the Czech Republic, is well known to all fans of Mozart. His operas, Don Giovanni and La Clemenza di Tito, were premiered there, as was his Prague Symphony. One can still visit the Estates Theater and stand where Mozart stood, as conductor. It's the only theater still standing where Mozart performed. Mozart is also known to have improvised on the Chapel Organ at Strahov Monastery, up in the hills overlooking Prague. Strahov Monastery was founded in 1134. It's where Dee and I stayed during our visit.

The monastery is home to two beautiful libraries. One is in Theological Hall, the other is in Philosophical Hall, and I would love to know how those two collections differ. But our entrance fee allowed us only to look, not to touch.

Our daily strolls into the heart of the city took us past the vineyards, past St. Nicholas Church of the Lesser Town Square, across the Charles Bridge that spans the Vltava River, and to yet another St. Nicholas Church in the Old Town Square - the square with the famous astronomical clock. We ate at a café bordering the square and had full view of a memorial statue of Jan Hus.

Like Wycliffe, Hus was a Catholic priest. Greatly influenced by Wycliffe's writings, Hus too decried the moral decay of the Catholic Church, its worldly entanglements, and advocated mass be celebrated not in Latin, but in the vernacular. And in line with our "knowledge is power" theme, he produced a translation of the Bible into the Czech language.

[Music ends]

Meanwhile, the Church, striving to unite itself and to expel any dissent, called the Council of Constance in 1414, at which the Papal Schism was resolved, and to which Jan Hus was called to defend his views. Hus was wary of walking into the lion's den, but the King himself, King Sigismund, guaranteed Hus safe passage. And with this assurance, Hus traveled to the Council, failing to notice the King's safe passage guarantee was only for his travels to the Council. Once there, Hus was tried for heresy and ordered to recant. Hus agreed to recant should any of his teachings be proven to him to be against Scripture. As none were, he refused to recant, was handed over to the secular authorities, and was burned at the stake.

In uniting the Papacy, the Council of Constance deposed the current Popes and elected

Pope Martin V as the sole Vicar of Christ. Seeking to dissolve any further descent, Pope Martin engaged in a crusade against all supporters of Hus and Wycliffe in what is now known as the Hussite Wars. But knowledge is power, and despite the Church's brutal reminders of its superiority in all matters spiritual, the call for reform of the Church continued, and with it, the desire that Scripture and Mass be translated into the vernacular. Unauthorized Bible translations were forbidden by law in England, but not on the Continent, where an Italian version appeared in 1471, a French translation appeared in 1530, and of course, Luther's famous translation in 1534.

And what of Wycliffe's bones? We'll get to that, but first...

[Music]

In England, one William Tyndale, a Master of Arts and a scholar, saw the need for a competent English translation of the Bible, not from the Latin as Wycliffe had done, but from the original Hebrew and Greek. And Tyndale knew not only Latin, but also Hebrew and Greek, making him a perfect choice as translator. Tyndale, however, was not granted permission for his translation, so he left England and headed for the Continent, finding no language barrier there since he was also fluent in Spanish and French and Italian and German.

Tyndale's movements in Europe are not well documented, but New Testaments in English began appearing in secret shipments from Antwerp. While most Bibles of the day were large and made to sit on pulpits or tables, these were small volumes, just a few inches in height, and could easily be carried around hidden under garments. To own one was a crime, and brought its owner under suspicion of being a heretic.

Tyndale was hunted by religious authorities, and was finally betrayed by a man paid for his services. While under arrest, Tyndale continued translating Scripture, but did not complete the work before his trial and conviction on charges of Lutheran heresy in 1536.

[Music ends]

It is said that Tyndale's executioners in an act of mercy strangled Tyndale so he would not die from the flames. It is also said that Tyndale recovered consciousness before the flames had finished their work.

Ironically, the King of England - and we're talking about Henry VIII here - the King of England did finally approve the printing of English translations of the Bible. One was called the Matthews' Bible, and it was published the year after Tyndale's death. The publisher, John Rogers, had invented the name Thomas Matthews to hide the true source of the work. And that source? The Thomas Matthews' Bible included all of the translation work William Tyndale had completed before his execution.

In my brief time in the pulpit, I've spoken twice on the topic of Bible translations. The first time, I was 14 or 15, and our pastor, Major Herb Luhn, gave up his Sunday night pulpit spot to three laypersons to speak on different topics. One speaker, I can't remember. Another was Dave McMahan, Rob's father. I was the third, and Major Luhn wanted me to convince other young people to use modern translations of the Bible if the King James Bibles in the pews seemed too dated. I remember thinking I did a miserable job.

The other time was in 1991, shortly after my ordination, when I hit on the idea that whatever

translation each of us favored, the real translation of Scripture occurred in the lives we led, that how we lived might be the only Scripture that some people would ever know. I remember thinking I did a pretty good job. And as I basked in that thought, Phil Needham, the principal of our seminary during my first year, came up and said, "You know, William Booth gave that same sermon a hundred years ago." So much for innovation. Oh, well, good company, I guess.

Oh, Wycliffe's Bones. Wycliffe died of natural causes, making him unavailable for the punishment that a church in full power would usually mete out for a heretic. It was years later, however, at the same Council of Constantce that had burned Jan Hus, that Wycliffe was declared a heretic, unfit for burial in sacred soil. So, in 1428, his body was exhumed, and Wycliffe's bones were burned, and the ashes cast into the river Swift. There is some question, though, if the gravediggers came up with the correct remains. Maybe they got his neighbor by mistake. Oh, well, even the church has to take some matters on faith. It is important to note that the church would create such great thinkers as these, even if the church is at times slow to respond to their thought.

[Music begins]

Knowledge is power. To know something for oneself, not because one's group thinks it, not because one has been told it, not because it's the latest fashion or the latest talking point of the current election cycle, and not because one has seen the wisdom of not swimming against the current. To know something for oneself is to hold a power no one can take from you.

So I'll close with a poem my mother taught me a long time ago, which I memorized, and a mutter to myself, now and then.

*God gave us two ends with a common link;
With one we sit, with the other we think;
Success depends on which you choose:
Heads you win, tails you lose.*

Until next time.

[Music ends]