

1. "Redde Quod Debes? William Langland, John Wyclif, and the Quest for Salvation"
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***Redde quod debes?* William Langland, John Wyclif, and the Quest for Salvation**

ABSTRACT

In his magisterial study *Thomas Cranmer: A Life*, Diarmaid MacCulloch chronicles his subject's role in the tumultuous events of the Tudor Reformations. Cranmer, MacCulloch writes, began his ecclesiastical career as a devout medieval Catholic and ended it as an evangelical Archbishop of Canterbury opposed to traditional teachings on justification and the eucharist. In particular, Cranmer's rejection of Catholic soteriology in favor of the Lutheran idea of justification by grace through faith had a significant effect on the theology of the Anglican church, but it is important for students of both the Middle Ages and the Reformation to remember that the sixteenth century was not the first time in English history when these two schemes of salvation came into conflict.

"*Redde quod debes?* William Langland, John Wyclif, and the Quest for Salvation" aims to contrast the soteriology which William Langland proposes in his vernacular poem *Piers Plowman* with the equivalent scheme in the writings of John Wyclif and his Lollard disciples, placing both against the background of fourteenth-century scholastic theology.

The soteriological writings of the Dominican Robert Holcot, especially his famous dictum, "God will not deny God's grace to any of those who do what is in them," provide a context within which to compare Langland and Wyclif (*Lectures on Wisdom*, 48 C). In a 1962 article in the *Harvard Theological Review*, Heiko A. Oberman connects this maxim with Holcot's epistemological skepticism as well as with his writings on justification. While Oberman's chief interest is in the manner in which the development of Luther's theology can be understood as a reaction against Holcot's ideas, Oberman also helpfully expounds Holcot's soteriology, arguing that in the tradition of the dialectic of the two powers of God, Holcot uses the *facere quod in se est* to bridge the gap between Augustinian predestinarianism and a Pelagian scheme in which human beings can earn grace and ultimately, in cooperation with grace, their salvation (328). This may indeed have been Holcot's intent, but a strong case may be made that Holcot's soteriology is, in fact, self-contradictory: if predestinarianism holds true, and if God's predestination is not based on foreknowledge of future good works, then it is difficult to see how human beings' attempts to live out the *facere quod in se est* can alter an eternal, divine decree.

Oberman fails to grasp these implications of Holcot's soteriological scheme, but if we recognize that the contradictions in Holcot's thought can only be resolved if we adopt either his predestinarianism or the notion of the *facere quod in se est*, the contrasting poles in his theology of salvation provide a useful rubric within which to compare Langland and the Lollards. Significantly, as is not the case with other theological tractates, the writings of Wyclif and his disciples are almost uniformly of one mind with regard to soteriology, and it is possible to refer to Wyclif's works and Wycliffite texts without making significant distinctions between the content of the two.

Faced with the challenge of Holcot's self-contradiction, Langland and the Wycliffites respectively opt for the two focal points of Holcot's thought. On the one hand, Langland adopts the theology of the *facere quod in se est* in his soteriological maxim, *redde quod debes*, while on the other, the Lollards develop a theology of double predestination.

That Langland's poem is chiefly concerned with soteriology is evident, pictorially, from the dualism of its first scene and, dialectically, from the conversation between Will and Holy Church in Passus I. The contrasting images of the "tour on a toft" and the "dongeon... with dediches and derke and dredfulle of sighte" place all human endeavor within the eschatological framework of heaven and hell, and Will's reactions to learning that the woman with whom he is conversing is Holy Church demonstrates our narrator's abiding concern for his salvation (Prol.14, 15-6). Indeed, he first falls to his knees "and cried hire of grace"; then, he asks the question which frames the remainder of the poem: "Teche me to no tresor, but tel me this ilke / How I may save my soule, that seint art yholden" (I.79, 83-4).

The various characters Will encounters in his journeys offer different responses to this question, but in his final three passus, Langland makes it evident which scheme of salvation he himself endorses. Describing the events of Jesus' life in terms of the familiar trio of Dowel, Dobet, and Dobest, Conscience connects Christ's "Dobest" with the foundation of the church and its salvific function: Christ gives Piers the power to absolve all those who "in covenant... come and kneweliche to paye / To Piers pardon the Plowman—*Redde quod debes*" (XIX.187-8). What exactly, though, does it mean to pay *redde quod debes*? The phrase itself comes from the New Testament parable of the talents, but Langland uses it in a sense analogous to Holcot's *facere quod in se est*. For Langland, what is owed is precisely faith in God, contrition for sin, and hope (the Samaritan so summarizes the teachings of Abraham/Faith and Spes in Passus

XVII), and Langland tells us that only those who pay *redde quod debes* are members of the church and may receive the sacraments. Since Christ will “rewarde hym right wel that *reddit quod debet*,” we may draw two comparisons with Holcot’s soteriology: first, that there is a connection between *redde quod debes* or *facere quod in se est* and salvation, and second, that in either paying what one owes or doing what is in one, one can affect one’s own place in the eschaton (XIX.194). (As to why Langland develops a new formulation rather than directly quoting Holcot’s maxim, we may plead both the constraints of poetics and, more importantly, an interest in avoiding the “sophistrie” he identifies with the scholastic theology of the friars.)

In her 1981 book *Piers Plowman and the Moderni* and a chapter in her book *Medieval Readers and Writers: 1350–1400*, published the same year, Janet Coleman makes similar connections, but she draws a parallel between *facere quod in se est* and Langland’s characters Dobet and Dobest rather than his use of the phrase *redde quod debes* (*Medieval Readers and Writers*, 242). Nevertheless, she makes the point that “the proper education of the will, to enable it to engage in activities leading to salvation, is the propelling theme of *Piers Plowman*,” which underscores the manner in which Langland, while adopting part of Holcot’s soteriological scheme, nevertheless rejects predestinarianism (246). Coleman’s contributions, which helpfully situate *Piers* within the context of fourteenth-century scholasticism, have been underestimated, and discussions of Langland’s soteriology have often dwelt so exclusively on the pardon scene of Passus VII as to ignore the events of Passus XVIII–XX.

What we have said about Langland’s views on salvation contrasts in no small way with Wycliffite soteriology. Anne Hudson tells us that “for Wyclif the church consisted in the *congregatio predestinatorum*, the body of those predestined by God for salvation; the *congregatio prescitorum*, the body of those foreknown to damnation, were not, and could not at any time be, part of the church” (*Premature Reformation*, 314–5). If we consider both Wyclif’s *De Ecclesia*, in which he articulates an Augustinian view of the church entailing a particularly tenacious form of predestinarianism, and *The Lanterne of Liȝt*, a vernacular Wycliffite text which develops a tripartite ecclesiology equally dependent upon the doctrine of predestination, the radical extent to which the Wycliffites’ soteriology is opposed to Langland’s is clear.

The *Lanterne*’s ecclesiology rests upon the distinctions between God’s church, which consists exclusively of the predestined; the devil’s church, which consists only of those foreknown to damnation; and the material church, which is identical with the community of

believers on earth and which includes members of both God's and the devil's churches. Since membership in either God's church or the devil's church depends solely upon God's election and is independent from the good works which one might perform, notions like *redde quod debes* and *facere quod in se est* have no place in Wycliffite thought. On some accounts, this view is problematic insofar as it raises dilemmas such as "the possibility for those predestined to salvation to commit sin, and of the moral responsibility of those foreknown to damnation for their predetermined evil acts," but considered in its proper theological context, it is consistent with a tradition ranging from Augustine through to Luther and the later Reformers (Hudson, 324). Its problems lie more with the challenges it poses to Christian belief in an omnibenevolent God, but sadly, little scholarship has been devoted to Wycliffite soteriology. Usually, as in Hudson's work, soteriology receives attention only in the context of ecclesiology, but it seems that for both Langland and the Lollards, the order should be reversed: their respective ecclesiologies are soteriologically driven.

While Holy Church is indeed the character whom Will first asks how he might be saved, and while the cataclysms of Passus XIX and XX find Will, Conscience, and their counterparts sheltered within the barn of "Unitee Holy Chirche," it remains the case that Langland's account of the building of the church follows the scene in which Christ gives Piers the power to receive *redde quod debes* as "my procuratour and my reve, / And registrer" (XIX.383, 260-1). The church, on Langland's view, consists of those who have paid *redde quod debes* and, having done so, who are entitled to take part in its sacraments and to take refuge under its eaves. The eucharist, for instance, is available "in helpe of hir heele ones in a monthe, / Or as ofte as thei hadde nede, tho that hadde ypaied / To Piers pardon the Plowman, *redde quod debes*" (XIX.391-3). Those who have done what is necessary to merit their salvation, in the tradition of Holcot's *facere quod in se est*, comprise Holy Church. As far as the Wycliffites are concerned, our case may be made more simply: we have seen that God's church consists of the predestined, and it should be obvious that if predestination is the only criterion for membership in God's church (and the opposite is the same for the devil's church), then Wyclif's ecclesiology draws upon his soteriology, just as it draws upon Holcot's doctrine "of unmerited grace and predestination without cause" (Oberman, 325-6).

Many more interesting things remain to be said about the similarities and differences between Langland's theology and that of the Lollards, especially where ecclesiological questions

like the papal primacy, the validity of the hierarchy and of the fraternal vocation, and the disendowment of the religious orders are concerned. Bringing into focus their different responses to the theological question of soteriology, however, helps to situate both *Piers Plowman* and the Wycliffites' writings in an historical context which includes not only the political and social events of the late fourteenth century but also the contemporaneous tradition of scholastic theology.

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