Biblical Interpretation in the Middle Ages

Two generations of intense scholarship have overthrown the old Protestant opinion that medieval Europe was a civilization that abused or disregarded the Bible. The Bible informed religious beliefs, popular piety, the academic study of theology, literature and literary attitudes, monasticism and art. Its interpretation was consistent with scholarly attitudes toward nature, science, history and politics. The Bible not only informed theology but also was at the center of much cultivated human imagination in the Middle Ages. To study the history of its interpretation during those centuries, when the societies of Europe and much of their common religion first took definite shape, is to examine origins of what, after 1500, became a culture of global influence—modern Western Christianity.

Books and Commentaries

The Christian Bible was a book of distinct form. The Jewish Scriptures mostly retained the shape they had enjoyed in late antiquity, but Christians, beginning in the second century, abandoned scrolls for another structure, the codex, a book of leaves of papyrus, then parchment (and beginning in the fourteenth century in Europe, paper), folded into sections and sewn together between two boards. By the end of the fourth century in Western Christianity, sixty-six books with an additional eight books of less certain authenticity were accepted as canonical Scripture, yet the border distinguishing these books from other kinds of sacred literature was neither frozen nor fluid but somewhere in between. This can be seen in the codices themselves.

*Jerome’s (c. 340-420) translation of the Bible, the Vulgate, which became the Bible primarily used in the medieval West, was usually copied with prologues, brief texts that served to introduce the sections and books of Scripture. Though Jerome’s authorship was presumed for many of these prologues, he was responsible for only some of them. They incorporate material of surprising authorship: the Pelagian prologue to the Pauline epistles that circulated with most Vulgate manuscripts, for example, and the Monarchian text that hid awkwardly beneath a first sentence taken from a letter of Jerome in the prologue to the Catholic Epistles, the book of Acts and the Apocalypse, the last section of the medieval New Testament (see Schild, 69-102, for a discussion of the prologues).

Medieval scholars knew that these texts were not Scripture, although they did not know the unorthodox origins of some of them. But the physical form of the Bibles they used nevertheless displayed well the intimate connection of Scripture and the interpretation that they made. The Bible was a library of documents that gave the record of salvation from the past to the future, and reflection on those documents was expected to be taken up into their world of thought. The monastic library, according to *Hugh of St. Victor (d. 1141), ought to be organized according to biblical categories: the Old Testament section should include pseudopigrapha, together with law, prophets and hagiography, and the New Testament section should include de-
crees, or the authoritative pronouncements of popes, bishops, councils and church fathers in the canon law, and the writings of the “fathers and doctors of the church” (Petitmengen, 42).

Those Bibles designed for study often combined Scripture and exegesis by adding glosses to the page (see Petitmengen, 35). Glosses, in what are known as glossed Bibles, were brief explanatory notes added between the lines (interlinear glosses) and longer explanations mostly taken from patristic literature and placed in the margins (marginal glosses, a technique also found in Jewish commentaries on the Talmud; see Lobrichon, 98; Waxman, 1:250-80; Grabois, 234-35). The earliest biblical glosses known in the West were probably written in Northumbria and Ireland by the turn of the eighth to ninth centuries (Lobrichon, 98-99), but the technique did not catch on until the third quarter of the eleventh century, in the monastic and cathedral schools that spawned the beginnings of scholasticism in the north of France (see Landgraf, 39-47; de Ghellinck 1948; Châtillon; De Hamel; Lobrichon, 99-110; Smalley 1964, 46-52).

Glosses were first applied to single books that were interpreted by a school’s master. They gradually assumed a more uniform design, while eventually, especially under the influence of Anselm of Laon (d. 1107), gathering patristic exegetical opinion for the whole Bible. They finally enjoyed good distribution after the mid-twelfth century, apparently from a center of production at Paris, whose famous schools attracted book-buying students and teachers from throughout Christendom. Around 1220 the first complete glossed Bibles were produced. About the same time what was by then a more or less standard text came to be called the Glossa ordinaria, the Ordinary Gloss to Scripture; its status promoted if not at first achieved in connection with the theology faculty of the new university of Paris (Lobrichon, 101, 103, 112-14; Froelich and Gibson provide a facsimile reprint of the edition that best preserves the format and content of the final form of the Glossa ordinaria).

The Ordinary Gloss exercised tremendous influence in the schools through the rest of the Middle Ages, even though its production in Western Europe seems to have been on the wane by 1300 (Lobrichon, 101 n. 18, 110). There developed other kinds of exegetical literature. In the Middle Ages, these books were not called commentaries (see Froelich 1987). A somewhat indistinct nomenclature reveals the openness of the emerging genres. While glosses multiplied in the twelfth century, scholars also collected topical opinions in books of sentences (the school of Laon again playing an important role), and they explored contradicting authorities and problems of interpretation in books of questions (Landgraf, 35-39, 40-42; de Ghellinck 1948, 133-48). Some of these were taken from the exegesis of masters like Anselm of Laon. Other works, like the commentary on the Psalms of Bruno the Carthusian, founder of the Carthusian order (d. 1101), integrated the treatment of questions into exegetical work, while the commentary on the Pauline epistles also posed questions answered by arguments derived from Paul, proofs discovered by considering the circumstances, subject matter and intention of the author (Châtillon, 172-75).

In connection with the school of St. Victor in the second and third quarters of the twelfth century, a variety of works on theology and on the Old Testament clarified the distinctions between “historical” and “spiritual” meanings, according to principles adapted from Augustine’s On Christian Doctrine and explained in the Didascalicon of Hugh of St. Victor, principles that could serve either literal exegesis (at the hands of *Andrew of St. Victor [1110-1175]) or the spiritual senses (at the hands of Richard of St. Victor [d. 1173]). The clarity achieved at St. Victor allowed *Peter Comestor, a master at Paris and chancellor of the school of Notre Dame, to succumb to the pleas of his friends and compile, by 1175, the knowledge scattered through-
out the Bible and its glosses within a coherent and continuous narrative. The result came to be known as the *Historia scholastica*, the first comprehensive and fairly coherent treatment of the Bible in Europe and one of the most widely used exegetical works of the later Middle Ages (Smalley 1964, 179; Châtillon, 195). But this form of exegetical writing did not immediately provoke imitators. Rather, it took its place beside the Ordinary Gloss.

A consistent and coherent kind of literature employed widely by professional interpreters (that is, theologians) did not arise until the second quarter of the thirteenth century. That kind of commentary was developed at the Dominican school at the University of Paris under the leadership of a master there, *Hugh of St. Cher* (1195-1263), and it was given the inexplicable name *postilla* (*post illa*, “after that” or “after those things,” though no one knows to what “that” refers). The postilla was a running commentary, ordinarily composed at school, especially the schools of the mendicant orders in the thirteenth century. (The four principal mendicant orders were the Franciscans, the Dominicans, the Augustinian Hermits and the Carmelites, whose theologians played an important role in the development of scholastic exegesis.) Originally the postilla was supposed to complement the Ordinary Gloss, which compiled patristic opinion, by adding interpretations from the principal exegetes of the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries.

Although this new form of exegetical literature came to dominate biblical interpretation, it never did so exclusively. Scholars could still compose questions on a book of the Bible as late as the 1360s, as a master at the University of Oxford, *Johannes Klenk* (c. 1310-1374), did. And by the mid-fourteenth century the name *postilla* was used in central Europe not only for running commentaries but also for sermon collections. The classic postilla is represented in some of the greatest achievements of scholastic interpretation: the commentaries of *Bonaventure* (1221-1274) and *Thomas Aquinas* (1224/25-1274) in the mid-thirteenth century and of the Dominican *Nicholas of Gorran* (1232-1295) in the fourth quarter of that century, the postilla of the Franciscan *Nicholas of Lyra* (c. 1270-1349) in the second quarter of the fourteenth century, the commentaries of *John Wyclif* (c. 1333-1384) in the third and fourth quarters of that century and the commentaries of *Denys the Carthusian* (also known as Denys van Lecenwen [1402/4-1471]) in the second and third quarters of the fifteenth century. One early fourteenth-century interpreter, the Franciscan *Pierre Aureol*, made a handy *Compendium* to rival the old *Historia scholastica*.

In addition to the erratic appearance of questions on a book of the Bible, some interpreters continued to gloss Bibles (a Dominican, *Johann Müntzinger*, in the second quarter of the fourteenth century, and an Augustinian Hermit, *Martin Luther*, in a commentary on Psalms [1513-1515]). Others, like *Meister Eckhart* (c. 1260-c. 1328), wrote commentaries with a strong mystical and theological bent that defy easy classification. Still others, like the Dominican *Robert Holcot* (c. 1290-1349) and the Augustinian Hermit *Heinrich of Friemar* (d. c. 1355), wrote commentaries with a pronounced moral or homiletical bias. Even at its later stage of development, the medieval commentary remained a book with loose ends, a living if sometimes evasive genre.

The requirements of universities encouraged the production of exegetical literature. Both the Bible and *Peter Lombard’s* (c. 1160-1160) *Four Books of Sentences* were the standard texts of theology there, and the university’s curriculum, at times in a less regular form, also trickled into the widely distributed schools of the mendicant orders (Asztalos, 417-20; Verger, 175-203). Scholastic interpreters drew from twelfth-century accomplishments: the *Glossa ordinaria* and
the Historia scholastica. They also devised new tools of study, beginning with an edition of the Bible, which Stephen *Langton (c. 1150-1228) divided into chapters shortly before 1203, a task completed by another scholar, Thomas Gallus (c. 1200-1246), who divided the chapters into paragraphs.

Langton’s work became the standard edition of the Bible at Paris, and from there it moved to all universities. At the Parisian Dominican cloister of St. Jacques, friars made an alphabetical concordance of Latin terms that covered the Old and New Testaments, probably between 1230 and 1235 (the new chapter divisions provided an efficient means of referencing). It was succeeded by a deluxe bookstore edition put together by 1275, which enjoyed wide distribution. Interpreters also used concordances to canon law as a source of authoritative opinions, and two concordances composed in the fourteenth century harmonized canon law and Scripture. One of these concordances was composed by an abbot, Jean of Nivelles, and another by a Bolognese law professor, Johannes Calderinus.

The Ordinary Gloss, the Historia scholastica, postilla and concordances, together with a Bible divided into chapters, became the chief tools of scholastic exegesis. They were not the only means of biblical interpretation, however. Interpretation also occurred in sermons, in art, in devotional literature and derivatively even in saints’ legends, which quote Scripture, especially the narratives of the passion of Christ, both directly and by alluding to older stories and images. But the tools of exegesis made up a technology of exposition that navigated the realms of authoritative, reliable thought within the Bible and outside of it. What did that technology produce?

Ways to Understand

In the eleventh century, scholars began to collect questions, and sentences were introducing a separation of logically disciplined theology from exegesis (de Ghellinck 1947; Smalley 1964, 271; De Vooght, 27-28). The difference between exegesis and reflection was thought to be complementary, not adversarial, and consistent with the nature of language and with the composition of the universe. The Victorines were the great theorists of this complementary difference, and it was best expressed in a brief sentence by one of them: “not only words, but also things are representational” (Richard of St. Victor Excerptiones 2.3 [PL 177:205]; Ohly, 1-31). The Victorines believed that this theory of signification explained how the Bible, a literary product, was like all literature and better than all literature at the same time. Words mediate knowledge of the subject matter of a piece of writing; pagan (that is, classical) writing does only that; it tells a story. But “in divine literature not only do meanings signify things, those things signify other things. Whence it is clear how greatly useful knowledge of the [liberal] arts is for understanding the divine scriptures” (Richard of St. Victor Speculum ecclesiae [PL 177:375]). In other words, the Bible not only tells stories, but also the minute elements of a story—rocks, trees, virtually any objects—in turn function as signs that indicate meanings that may have nothing to do with the biblical passage. But those meanings were believed to be closer to spiritual truth. They were called the spiritual senses or allegory.

Belief in creation buttressed the theory of allegory. Creation was a divine work, and the qualities of created things, their properties, betrayed the character of their maker. “All nature bespeaks God. All nature teaches human beings. All nature imparts reason, and there is nothing barren in the universe” (Hugh of St. Victor Didascalion 6.5 [PL 176:805]). The visible world was the necessary starting point of knowledge of God, and sacred literature functioned in the
same way. What distinguished the Bible from other literature was not magical language but accurate representation of the real connection between visible and invisible reality, between a microscopic perspective on particular objects and a macroscopic, abstract perspective on the universe. Therefore it was necessary to start with the most tangible things, the books, their histories and their manner of speaking, and to move very gradually and scientifically, girded with the liberal arts, from sign to thing to divine matters.

The progressive movement from biblical texts to abstract religious knowledge began with literal, historical meaning. Scholars who played a key role in the consolidation of gloss technique—Lanfranc, abbot of Bec (d. 1089), Berengar of Tours (d. 1088), Drogon of Paris (late eleventh century) and Bruno the Carthusian (c. 1030-1101)—promoted the use of grammar, rhetoric and dialectic in literal interpretation, techniques that were especially evident in the exegesis of the school of Laon at the turn of the eleventh to twelfth centuries and in the work of its most important teacher, Anselm of Laon (d. 1117) (Lobrichon, 105). The Victorines built on those foundations and demonstrated how the labor was prerequisite to spiritual knowledge. The result was a new sophistication in literal exegesis, represented by Andrew of St. Victor's Hebrew scholarship, in his recourse to rabbinical commentary for historical information and in his association of literal meaning with theological argument (Smalley 1964, 112-95; Berndt 1991). His accomplishment was only superseded nearly two hundred years later by the Old Testament sections of Nicholas of Lyra's postilla.

The difference between literal and spiritual senses seemed clear. The fourfold division of meanings laid out by John Cassian (c. 360-c. 435) in the early fifth century now was taken to describe the standard alternatives. It was expressed in a rhyme repeated at the beginning of Nicholas of Lyra's postilla:

The letter teaches events
allegory what you should believe
tropology what you should do
analogy where you should aim.

The typical example is Jerusalem, which comes straight from Cassian (Collationes 19.8). According to history, Jerusalem is a city of the Jews. According to allegory, it is the church. According to tropology, it is the human soul. According to analogy, it is the heavenly city of God. This was a cliché, and like most clichés it exaggerated the obvious: that biblical texts and nouns yielded historical meanings more remote from the reader or the reader's word and other meanings that touched on a present religious life—the church, the moral condition of the soul, the future. The fourfold sense indicated a process of abstraction and the possibility of literal movement, seldom if ever a procedure for chopping Bible passages into quarters.

But theologians had difficulty assuming that the literal sense of the Bible was indeed remote from contemporary readers. In the thirteenth century, following precedents set by Andrew of St. Victor, some theologians—Aquinas perhaps was the most famous—constructed their discipline as a unique human science about divine things, and in this science the literal sense of Scripture was to exercise a definitive role (Lang, Chenu, Berndt 1991 and 1995). Nevertheless scholars did not always restrict themselves to literal meanings when they argued. Moreover, the elaborate use of the spiritual senses in preaching suggests that people generally took allegory as persuasive interpretation (Smalley 1985; Winkler, 65-69).

In some books of the Bible the language seemed literally spiritual. Bonaventure and
Aquinas recognized a multiple literal sense and a “parabolic” meaning of texts (de Lubac, 2/2283; Winkler, 7-8). According to Nicholas of Lyra, some psalms refer to Christ according to their historical meaning, not according to allegory as the classical fourfold division of senses would imply. Late medieval interpreters like Lyra, Paul of Burgos (1351-1435), Matthew Döring and Jean Gerson (1363-1429) argued that prophets wrote with a view to their own circumstances and with the intention of predicting the coming of Christ—a double literal sense in the prophets (Werbeck, 120-21, 130). How could the difference of literal from spiritual senses be absolute?

In late antiquity, Christians had argued that some Old Testament texts required allegorical interpretation; they would otherwise appear absurd or obscene. That point was not forgotten in the late Middle Ages. But it had lost some of its force. Denys the Carthusian once criticized theologians who say that “the literal meaning is that which is first signified by the literal words” while claiming that there are places in Scripture, “especially the Prophets,” impossible to interpret literally. He offers an alternative directly opposite the Victorine theory of biblical signification, built on the idea of authorial intention. The literal sense is the meaning first intended by the author; therefore “every passage of holy Scripture has a literal meaning, which is not always what is first signified by the literal words, but is often what is designated through the thing that is signified by the literal words” (Denys the Carthusian [Dionysius Carthusianus] Ennaratio in Jobart. 13, 4;362-63). What the Victorines called spiritual meaning, Denys calls literal. Even Nicholas of Lyra was too allegorical, by occasionally appealing to a sense “rather mystical and spiritual than literal,” for example, in his exegesis of Jacob's deathbed speech to his son. Jacob, Denys argued, “speaks metaphorically . . . namely through similes of corporeal things. In such language, the literal sense is not what is immediately signified through terms but what is signified through those things, according to their properties and the similarities to that which is principally designated.” He rehearses examples: a lion is David, “or rather Christ”; a vine “literally designates the synagogue, Christ, and even the church” (Denys the Carthusian Ennaratio in Genesis art. 100, 1:444).

These theologians needed the help of Desiderius Erasmus (1466-1536). Scholars began to recognize that what often in the twelfth century was described as a quality of thought beyond speech in fact was a quality of speech (Brinkmann, 214-26; Winkler, 85-89). In the late Middle Ages interpreters still talked about progressively abstract knowledge and literal meaning as analogous to knowledge of the natural world. For example, the Carmelite John Baconthorpe (c. 1290-1346) described cognition according to the “fourfold sense” of natural knowledge. The first is literal, in which one proceeds from ideas in one’s mind to ideas of nature itself, much the way one moves from the letter of the Bible to a thing indicated by it. This begins an abstract movement that can go in three directions: to God (spiritual knowledge), to the forms of natural things (figurative knowledge) or to human society (moral knowledge).

Aureol had a more poetic way of expressing similar convictions. He encouraged his reader to ascend from the corporeal to the spiritual: to take “the brisk flight of meditation,” “like birds,” by seeking profound meaning in the sacred letter, by going from term to meaning, from meaning to matter, from matter to reason and from reason to the truth. Truth is derived from the “literal understanding, the superficial meaning, the plain discourse of the narrative” (Compendium litteralis sensus totius divinae Scripturae, ff. 2vb-3ra). But a gradual, rhetorical turn in the way scholars understood literal meaning reduced the difference between literal and spiritual interpretations: it looked like a fine distinction, but it was not quite so relevant anymore (see.
S. M. de of St. and this characteristic reflects their conviction that biblical language informed their intellectual life is incomplete without it. Much work remains in the Gospel with the Lord's Speech, within its context, theologians adapted Aristotle’s theory of causation for the interpretation of Scripture as literature, and this helped them clarify the importance of human, historical authors with circumstantial intentions that determined meanings (Minnis 1988a, 1988b). But the causes were multiple, and they always included divine authorship. The exegesis of people as scholastic as Aquinas, a champion of authorial intention, or as mystical as Meister Eckhart was extremely doctrinal, and this characteristic reflects their conviction that biblical language informed their intellectual enterprise. It was also reflected in the continued appearance of questions and digressions within carefully executed works, like Baconthorpe’s commentary on the Gospel according to Matthew with its discussions of political theory or Jacques Fournier’s commentary on the same Gospel with its refutation of textbook heresies, and in hasty expositions, such as Müntzinger’s gloss to the Lord’s Prayer. The use of digressions was consistent with common opinions about the authority of Scripture and with the desire, even among interpreters critical of the church, like Wydclif, to find interpretations consistent with church tradition.

Before the twelfth century, the Bible had been a monastic text; now it became a professional text for clergy and their teachers. Bible study was a workshop of ideas. One’s knowledge of medieval intellectual life is incomplete without it. Much work remains to be done both in bringing unpublished commentaries to light and in the study of the convergence of Bible study, the religious imagination of thought at play in it and popular culture.

Bibliography


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