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978-0-521-42393-9 - The Language and Logic of the Bible: The Earlier Middle Ages

G. R. Evans

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OF THE BIBLE

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Published by the Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia

© Cambridge University Press 1984

First published 1984

First paperback edition 1991

Reprinted 1996

Library of Congress catalogue card number: 84-3175

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Evans, G.R.

The language and logic of the Bible

1. Bible — Criticism, interpretation, etc.
— History — Early church, ca 30-600
2. Bible — Criticism, interpretation, etc. —
History — Middle Ages, 600-1500
1. Title

220.6'09'02 BS500

ISBN 0 521 26371 9 hardback

ISBN 0 521 42393 7 paperback

Transferred to digital printing 2000

Cambridge University Press

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PREFACE

For a thousand years in the West, from the fall of the Roman Empire to the Reformation, almost every man of culture and scholarship was a Christian, and most were clerics. Under the Church's guidance, the Bible was regarded as incomparably the most important book. In principle, everything else was studied in connection with it, in the light of its teaching, or in the hope of throwing light on what was difficult to understand in the text of Scripture. No task could be more urgent. Upon it depended the completion of the redemption of mankind. Sin lingered in the world, and although God had sent his Son to save fallen men and original sin no longer presented an insuperable barrier, each of the future citizens of heaven had need of divine instruction if he was to grow more perfect in this life. In the Bible God had provided detailed teaching and help for the faithful.

Even when, in the later Middle Ages, natural science or logic or the higher studies of law or medicine attracted fine minds and strong interest in their own right, theological questions and problems of exegesis presented themselves. Henry of Langenstein found it helpful to arrange a series of studies on scientific problems (in physics, optics, zoology, and so on) in an order dictated by the six days of creation as they are described in Genesis. It must of course have been the case that a number of scholars were drawn to these subsidiary subjects for their own sake, and secretly had little use for their theological application. But the study of such matters continued to be justified by the need to understand the Bible better.

Between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries two developments took place which, while they did not alter the fundamental principles of mediaeval exegesis, greatly added to its sophistication and brought it, in one area at least, to a high point of development in critical method.

The study of grammar had become an essential preliminary to the study of the Bible in Latin once Latin ceased to be a vernacular

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language. It raised a number of difficulties for the reader of Scripture because the text often failed to conform to the rules of syntax, or to use words in the usual way. In an attempt to resolve these problems some scholars explored the underlying structures of language and epistemological questions, and began to bring together the teaching of Aristotle and Boethius on the first principles of logic and the laws of the grammarians. As they tried to explain obscurities in the Bible in this way they were struck again and again – as Augustine and Gregory had been – by the inadequacy of human language. They confronted, with greater technical skill and newly sharpened tools, the problem of the nature of theological language.

Out of this work came many of the questions which led to the framing of theology as a new academic discipline. Questions about points of doctrine which the text raised were treated more fully under the pressure of student demand, until a systematic theology began to emerge. Attention to the details of the text was accompanied by a larger view of the place of each passage in the scheme of Christian theology, not for the first time, but in an altogether more comprehensive way.

This study is concerned primarily with the new work on the language of the Bible, and on the nature of theological language in general, which was one of the highest achievements of the theologians of the earlier Middle Ages. At a philosophical level they had something to say about the problem which has recently come to seem impressive, and of lasting value, in the light of modern work on the philosophy of language.¹ Their efforts carried through into preaching and pastoral work only in a much diluted form, and a good deal of its significance was to be lost upon the scholars of the Reformation, who rejected what seemed to them a debased scholasticism. But that is another story and must await another volume.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I should like to thank especially Professor C.N.L. Brooke, Dr D.P. Henry and Dr B. Smalley for their kindness in reading this book at various stages in its writing, and making suggestions. It is dedicated to Beryl Smalley in gratitude for her teaching and friendship.

ABBREVIATIONS

AHDLMA	<i>Archives d'histoire doctrinale et littéraire du moyen âge</i>
Beiträge	Beiträge zur Geschichte der Philosophie und Theologie des Mittelalters
<i>Cahiers</i>	<i>Cahiers de l'Institut Grec et Latin du Moyen Age, Copenhague</i>
CCCM	Corpus Christianorum Continuatio Medievalis
CCSL	Corpus Christianorum Series Latina
CSEL	Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum
<i>JTS</i>	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>
LM	<i>Logica Modernorum</i> , ed. L.M. de Rijk (Assen, 1967)
MARS	<i>Mediaeval and Renaissance Studies</i>
MGH	Monumenta Germaniae Historica: Quellen zur Geistesgeschichte des Mittelalters
PL	Patrologia Latina, ed. J.P. Migne (Paris, 1841ff.)
RBén	<i>Revue Bénédictine</i>
RTAM	<i>Recherches de théologie ancienne et médiévale</i>
SC	Sources chrétiennes
SSL	Spicilegium Sacrum Lovaniense

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

ALAN OF LILLE (d. 1202), was called *doctor universalis* because of the range of his knowledge. He taught at Paris and Montpellier in the second half of the twelfth century.

ALCUIN (fl. late eighth century), served Charlemagne in the palace school at Aachen, teaching grammar, logic and the study of the Bible, and reformed the liturgy.

ANSELM OF CANTERBURY (1033–1109), prior of Bec from 1063; abbot of Bec from 1078; archbishop of Canterbury, 1093–1109; theologian and teacher of the elements of the *artes* as aids to the study of the Bible.

ANSELM OF HAVELBERG (mid-twelfth century), visited Constantinople where he engaged in discussions with Greek theologians on the Procession of the Holy Spirit; author of a book on the problem which begins with a survey of the unfolding of human history as a continuation of the biblical narrative.

ANSELM OF LAON (d. 1117), ran the cathedral school at Laon with his brother Ralph; was, in his day, famous as a lecturer on the Bible; a major influence in the forming of the *Glossa Ordinaria*.

AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO (354–430), an African convert to Christianity who did more than any other Latin Father to work out the implications of Christian doctrine into a system of thought, and whose homilies and lectures on the Bible became standard works in mediaeval exegesis.

BEDE (672–735), product of the northern English monasteries of Wearmouth and Jarrow, to which Benedict Biscop brought the books he had collected on the Continent. Bede wrote a good deal of seminal scriptural commentary, as well as handbooks on dating and other mathematical matters, and his *Ecclesiastical History*.

BERENGAR OF TOURS (fl. mid-eleventh century), proponent of the use of grammar and dialectic in scriptural exegesis.

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- BERNARD OF CLAIRVAUX (1090–1153), abbot of Clairvaux and adviser of popes. Author of a series of sermons on the Song of Songs which had an enormous influence, and made use, among other sources, of Origen.
- BOETHIUS (c. 480–c. 524), translator of the logical works of Aristotle which cover the first stages of the syllabus; author of a series of short theological treatises which make use of logical principles.
- ERIUGENA, JOHN SCOTUS (c. 810–c. 877), an Irishman who taught under the patronage of the Emperor Charles the Bald of the Franks. He knew Greek and translated the works of Pseudo-Dionysius among others. He was involved in the controversy over predestination which arose about the figure of Godescalc.
- ERNALD, ABBOT OF BONNEVAL (mid-twelfth century), biographer of St Bernard of Clairvaux and author of writings on the Bible.
- GILBERT CRISPIN (abbot of Westminster from 1085), a pupil of Anselm of Canterbury and author in his own right of several theological treatises, notably a disputation between a Jew and a Christian.
- GILBERT OF POITIERS (1076–1154), a controversial bishop whose purported views on the doctrine of the Trinity, developed in his lectures on Boethius' theological tractates, were condemned at the synod of Reims in 1148; his scriptural commentaries on several books of the Bible survive.
- GILBERT THE UNIVERSAL (mid-twelfth century), bishop of London, contributed important elements to the *Glossa Ordinaria*.
- GODESCALC OF ORBAIS (ninth century), controversial writer on predestination.
- GREGORY THE GREAT (540–604), the most important Western influence in encouraging exegetes to divide the meanings of Scripture into the literal, allegorical, tropological and anagogical; author of homilies on the Gospels, Ezekiel and other books of the Old Testament which became standard sources of comment.
- HUGH OF ST VICTOR (c. 1096–1141), studied under William of Champeaux, master of Peter Abelard, and taught the elements of the liberal arts and scriptural commentary in the school at St Victor in Paris. His sensible, schoolmasterly approach reveals a consummate grasp of essentials and a capacity for putting things simply.
- ISIDORE OF SEVILLE (570–636), bishop and encyclopaedist.
- JEROME (fl. late fourth century), equipped himself with Hebrew and

made the Vulgate translation of the Bible from Greek and Hebrew, at the Pope's request, to provide a standard Latin version. In time his translation supplanted the Old Latin versions which were current in the Western Empire and contained a number of errors.

LANFRANC (1010–89), lectured at Bec on the liberal arts and some books of the Bible, before he became archbishop of Canterbury.

MANEGOLD OF LAUTENBACH (c. 1045 to early twelfth century), contributed to the work which went to the forming of the *Glossa Ordinaria*.

ODO OF MORIMOND (mid-twelfth century), abbot of the Cistercian house of Morimond and author of a study of Scripture's numbers.

ORIGEN (c. 184/5–c. 254), one of the Alexandrian Fathers, whose theology was not always orthodox by later standards, but who exerted an enormous influence in favour of the use of higher, 'spiritual' interpretations of the Bible.

PETER ABELARD (1079–1142), made his name as a teacher of logic, and then took to theology, to the disgust of St Bernard of Clairvaux. His Commentary on Romans is his principal surviving work of exegesis. It contains an account of the reason for the Incarnation which makes Christ's primary purpose the setting of an example to man.

PETER THE CHANTER (d. 1197), author of a manual on the use of the Bible in preaching, and a number of advanced study-aids for students of the Sacred Page.

PETER COMESTOR (late twelfth century), commentator on Peter Lombard's *Sententiae* and master of theology at Paris.

PETER LOMBARD (c. 1100–60), compiled the *Sententiae* which became a standard theological textbook throughout the Middle Ages and put topics arising from the study of the Bible into order in a course of systematic theology, with the aid of extracts from the Fathers.

RABANUS MAURUS (d. 836), a pupil of Alcuin, produced an enormous corpus of exegesis and an encyclopaedia, bringing together the critical work of the Fathers.

RICHARD OF ST VICTOR (d. 1173), pupil of Hugh of St Victor, a scholar and a mystic, author of exegetical works, notably of a literal reconstruction of the Temple in Ezekiel's vision.

ROBERT OF MELUN (d. 1167), succeeded Peter Abelard as Master of Theology in Paris.

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- RUPERT OF DEUTZ (1070 – c. 1129 or later), abbot of Deutz near Cologne, and author of a large corpus of exegetical writings, especially the comprehensive *De Trinitate et Operibus Eius*.
- THIERRY OF CHARTRES, taught at Chartres in the 1120s, where he commented on Boethius' theological tractates.
- THOMAS OF CHOBHAM (fl. late twelfth and early thirteenth century), sub-dean of Salisbury, was author of a manual for preachers.
- WALTER OF ST VICTOR (mid-twelfth century) wrote a diatribe attacking the theological errors of four scholars of his day, whom he felt to have departed from the methods developed by the Fathers.
- WILLIAM OF CHAMPEAUX (c. 1070–1121), master of Hugh of St Victor and Peter Abelard.
- WILLIAM OF CONCHES (c. 1080 – c. 1145), grammarian and Platonist.
- WILLIAM OF ST THIERRY (c. 1085–1148), Benedictine abbot, later Cistercian monk at Signy; friend of Bernard of Clairvaux and accuser of Peter Abelard.