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978-0-521-81046-3 - Biblical Poetics Before Humanism and Reformation  
Christopher Ocker  
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## BIBLICAL POETICS BEFORE HUMANISM AND REFORMATION

*Biblical Poetics Before Humanism and Reformation* is a study of the interpretation of the Bible in the late Middle Ages. Scholastic theologians developed a distinct attitude toward textual meaning in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries which departed significantly from earlier trends. Their attitude tended to erode the distinction, emphasized by the scholars of St. Victor in the twelfth century, between literal and spiritual senses of scripture. Christopher Ocker argues that interpreters developed a biblical poetics very similar to that cultivated and promoted by Protestants in the sixteenth century, which was reinforced by the adaptation of humanist rhetoric to Bible reading after Lorenzo Valla. The book is a comparative study, drawing from a variety of unpublished commentaries as well as more familiar works by Nicholas of Lyra, John Wyclif, Jean Gerson, Denys the Carthusian, Wendelin Steinbach, Desiderius Erasmus, Philip Melancthon, and John Calvin.

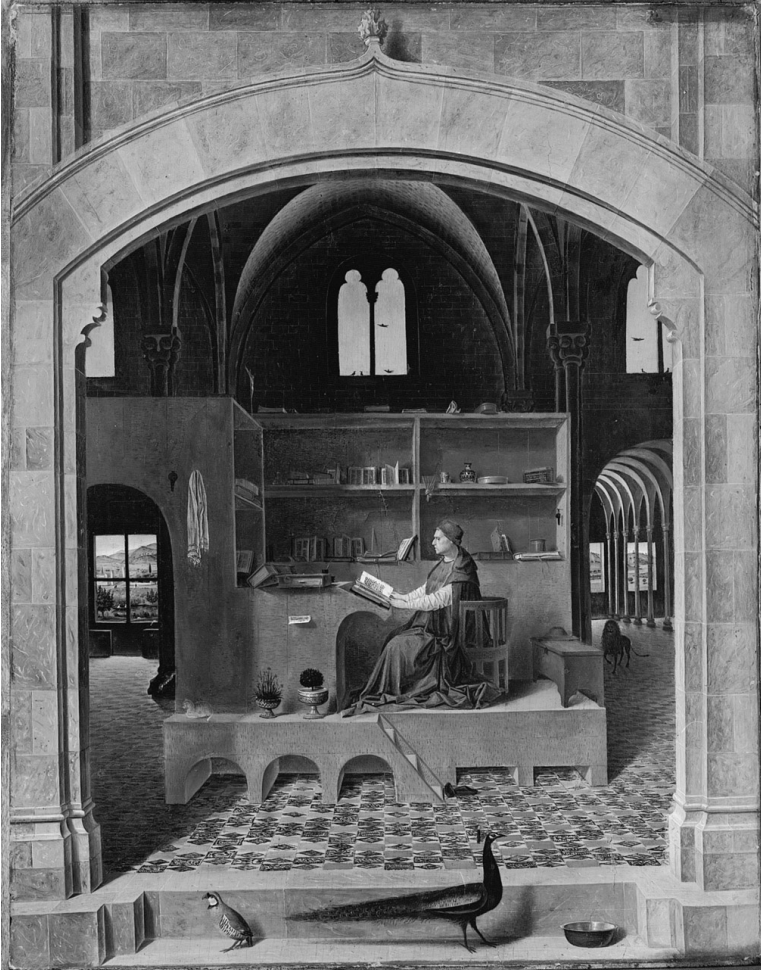
CHRISTOPHER OCKER is Associate Professor of History at the San Francisco Theological Seminary and the Graduate Theological Union at Berkeley. He is also Co-Director of the Center for the Study of Religion and Culture at Berkeley. He is the author of *Johannes Klenkok: A Friar's Life* (1993) and has published in a number of journals including the *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, the *Harvard Theological Review*, and the *Scottish Journal of Theology*.

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Frontispiece: Antonello da Messina, *Saint Jerome in His Study*. 46 × 36.5 cm. London, National Gallery, inv. 1418. Biblical translation and interpretation, according to medieval biographers, were Jerome's principal accomplishments as a monk at Bethlehem. Antonello portrays Jerome's study as an enclosure within a large room of his monastery, bathed in a heavenly light, with conspicuous references to paradise in the foreground (peacock, potted plant, and bowl of water). If this is a disguised portrait, as some believe, a living human being is inserted into the scene, with its allusions to Eden, the incarnation (pyxes on the shelves), the penitential life (the contrast of worldly play in the left background window and pure nature in the right window), and the flight of redeemed souls from the world to heaven (birds alighting the window, above). Jerome's studious self becomes emblematic of reading from the point of view of a divine light. Reading recovers paradise.

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... τὸ τῶν ποιητῶν μυθῶδες οὐκ ἀφιλόσοφον εἶναι. Hoc est,  
secretum uel fabulamentum Poetarum non est sine Philosophia.

Plutarch, *De audiendis poetarum*, according to Heinrich Bullinger's  
*Ratio studiorum* (Zürich, 1527)

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## *Preface*

This book began, as some books do, with a question. How is it that late medieval commentators had trouble maintaining the distinction between literal and spiritual meanings? I began to document the confusion of literal and spiritual, and then I sought the grounds for it in two areas of intellectual life: scholastic views of signification and religious notions of knowledge.

The method I pursue is comparative. The medieval development of commentary literature and of the sources and methods of exegesis, with the possible exception of Nicholas of Lyra's *Postilla*, was complete by the year 1300. It therefore seemed to me more useful to identify hermeneutical commonplaces, study them in a variety of commentaries, and look for shared convictions and attitudes about the text and the ways it conveys meaning. I examined a diverse sample and supplemented this with a detailed study of Johannes Klenkok's commentary on the Acts of the Apostles, a good text from the third quarter of the fourteenth century to which Beryl Smalley called attention. The commonplaces seemed to cluster around three main topics, although not without repetition: semantics, rhetoric, and theology. I then compared the treatment of these topics to interpretation in the Reformation, about which we have learned so much in recent years.

Only a small part of my research on Klenkok's commentary on Acts appears in this book. I intend to publish a detailed monograph on that commentary in the near future. While this book provides a broad, comparative look at late medieval interpretation, that monograph will provide an overview of a single commentary and a thorough examination of its sources and techniques, around the same main topics treated here – signification, rhetoric, and theology. This book does not pretend to provide a comprehensive introduction to any single commentator or to trace traditions of the interpretation of particular passages. It uses comparative evidence to determine general hermeneutical presuppositions and

the ideas that commonly expressed them. A chronologically systematic or even genetic method, tracing techniques, interpretations, and ideas from teacher to student, is impossible. Very few late medieval scholars commented on the entire Bible, nor did any significant number of them comment on one book of the Bible over against the others, which means that there is no constant biblical reference point that we can exploit. It would be extremely difficult to find commentaries on particular books of the Bible by scholars with some definite relationship to each other. Finally, very few late medieval scholars discussed biblical hermeneutics in an elaborate or self-conscious way, forcing us to rely on the rare treatise (two figure in my study: Hermann of Schildesche's handbook on the senses of the Bible and Heinrich of Langenstein's commentary on Jerome's prologue to the Bible) and to seek theory in the practice of interpretation. Either we study single commentators exhaustively, or we study a variety of commentaries by equally various authors comparatively. The latter is the approach of this book. Other books, I freely admit, do more than I have, and this work will at best supplement them, to what extent the reader will judge: Minnis and Scott's *Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism* exploits a fairly coherent body of prologue literature from the twelfth to the early fourteenth centuries, and G. R. Evans's *The Language and Logic of the Bible* examines the full breadth of ideas relevant to late medieval views of the Bible and its interpretation.

Because I relied heavily on unpublished texts, which is hardly avoidable in the study of late medieval exegesis, this book is part argument, part workshop. Especially in chapters 3 and 4, I take soundings from a variety of commentaries and also translate and expound long excerpts from a few texts that illustrate verbal techniques and key theological ideas. Again, I am not pretending to offer a history of the development of techniques or ideas. More than anything else, those chapters try to document broad hermeneutical trends in a variety of commentaries, and they contextualize interpretation within scholastic approaches to argument and problem solving. As the specialists know, late medieval intellectuals prided themselves on the originality of their views and arguments, but the Bible was a book that was supposed to transcend scholars' idiosyncracies. It provided a kind of universal "metanarrative," and that is what I am trying to reach through diverse evidence. This makes for a less conventional book, but perhaps a more useful one, in that it steers from diverse individuals toward the general and exposes the reader to more interpreters and, through liberal translations, to styles of presentation and manners of argument.

I have a chronological bias toward the fourteenth century. Scholasticism was an international culture, rendered so by the mobility of scholars, especially in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, and by the extensive system of schools outside universities in the mendicant orders. The movement of scholars decreased somewhat in the fifteenth century, with the proliferation of regional universities, as Paris itself became a regional school. By then the culture of late medieval exegesis was entrenched, as fifteenth-century sources suggest, awaiting the discovery of humanism by theologians. The fourteenth century is the period when that culture became entrenched.

I did not want to write a polemical book, although one could. My subject is what many scholars, at least since Wilhelm Dilthey's famous essay, published in 1900, "Die Entstehung der Hermeneutik," have ignored and still ignore as a regressive interlude between classical and Renaissance hermeneutics. Others see it as the ragged aftermath of the exegetical successes of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. It seems to me that these impressions arise from too narrow a focus on the methods of classical rhetoric, which are eclipsed by logic in the late Middle Ages, and too narrow consideration of twelfth-century theology, which was transformed by Aristotelian metaphysics in the early thirteenth century. If one focuses on the study of classical rhetoric and twelfth-century theology, late medieval scholasticism will look shabby. I hope to show that late medieval theologians took a distinct approach to the text of the Bible that, in its own way, led naturally to the adaptations of classical rhetoric to Bible study in the sixteenth century. There was no degenerate interlude, insofar as hermeneutics is concerned. I hope, too, that this study will expand the chronology so interestingly treated by Kathy Eden, Olivier Millet, and Peter Harrison (see their works in the bibliography).

Commentaries are layered texts, containing quotation of original sources – the passage commented upon as well as other sources – with explanations. In excerpts from commentaries, I have italicized words of the Bible passage being commented upon, but have put all other quotations in quotation marks, as in this excerpt from Nicholas Gorran's commentary on Exodus 3.2:

*And the Lord appeared to him in a flame*, which was done, as Andrew [of St. Victor] says, lest they make a statue of him. A *flame* is in constant motion, and thus one cannot make an image of it. Because God might be depicted in an image, God has to be under certain terms of *fire*, which was done on account of his greatest active power, so that thus he might show himself to be above the Egyptians,

just as fire is above all the elements. Deuteronomy 4 [verse 24], “Our God is a consuming fire.”

It will help the reader to have an English Bible at hand when reading the excerpts of commentaries in chapters 2, 3, and 4, but unless noted otherwise, I translate a commentator’s quotations of scripture rather than translating directly from the Vulgate or copying any modern Bible translation. The sigla used are noted along with the Abbreviations. In Latin quotations that appear in the footnotes, textual notes are placed in brackets immediately after the relevant word or phrase, except in some long quotations, where the notes are placed at the end of the passage following the usual conventions of textual editing. For additional comments on the Latin editing, see the beginning of the Appendix.

Since most texts used in this study originated as lectures in schools, their language is sometimes rough and inexact, and, had they been written as literature, they would deserve the humanistic reproach heaped upon scholastic commentaries since the days of Lorenzo Valla. I strove for clarity, but I also tried to preserve the oral, often erratic tone of commentary idiom.

I am grateful to the following libraries for allowing me to use their manuscript collections or providing microfilms and photocopies: Augustinus-Institut, Würzburg; Baden-Württembergische Landesbibliothek, Stuttgart; Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Eichstätt; Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Munich; Beinecke Library, Yale University; Biblioteca Nacional de Catalunya, Barcelona; Biblioteca de la Universitat de Barcelona; Bodleian Library, Oxford; Herzog-August Bibliothek, Wolfenbüttel; Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Vienna; Speer Library, Princeton Theological Seminary; Stadtsbibliothek, Mainz; Trinity College, Cambridge; Universitätsbibliothek, Basel; Universitätsbibliothek, Frankfurt am Main; Universitätsbibliothek, Würzburg; Wissenschaftliche Allgemeinbibliothek, Erfurt. An earlier version of chapter 1 appeared in the *Scottish Journal of Theology*. I’m grateful for permission to adopt it here.

Much of the research for this project was begun while I was a fellow of the Institut für Europäische Geschichte in Mainz some years ago. I owed the privilege to the late Peter Manns, who received me as a fellow, and I am grateful to Rolf Decot, Markus Wriedt, Rainer Vinke, and Gustav Benrath for their interest and advice, which by now they have forgotten, but I have not. I am grateful to the San Francisco Theological Seminary for its ongoing support. The library of the Graduate Theological

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Union at Berkeley, its director, Bonnie Hardwick, and its librarians in San Anselmo, Michael Peterson and Allan Schreiber, have hastened the completion of my work by stretching the limits of a sane lending policy.

Karlfried Froehlich introduced me to the study of late medieval exegesis, as the focal point of scholastic labor that it was, but also, more than I am able to demonstrate, as the locus of extremely diverse cultural transactions, where fundamental and broadly shared attitudes toward nature, history, life, and their representation are expressed. Whatever may be found good in this study is imperfect testimony to his enthusiasm for this subject and his teaching. I am also grateful to those others who have corrected me, especially Richard Muller, Don Compier, Herman Waetjen, Robert Coote, and three anonymous readers. They read the manuscript whole or in part and offered advice that was meticulous and entirely compelling. They will recognize how in many places their influence has been decisive. Among those to whom I owe a more general debt, I should mention Thomas A. Brady, William Bouwsma, Randolph Starn, Otto Gerhard Oexle, and Reindert Falkenburg. Philip Krey and Lesley Smith were kind enough to let me see a prepublication copy of their important collection of essays on Nicholas of Lyra. Lorna Shoemaker, Ph.D. candidate in history at the Graduate Theological Union, helped with the initial collation of Hermann of Schildesche's *Compend*. Chris Seeman, Ph.D. candidate in the Joint Degree Program in Near Eastern Religions of the Graduate Theological Union and the University of California, helped check the Latin transcriptions and translations. My special thanks to Dr Rosemary Williams at Cambridge University Press, who is more than a copy editor and has saved me very many embarrassments in both Latin and English. Michelle Walker helped assemble the bibliography. For every mistake that remains, I alone am responsible.

## *Abbreviations and sigla*

<i>add</i>	<i>addit / addunt</i>
<i>al man</i>	<i>alia manu</i>
<i>corr</i>	<i>corrigit / corrigunt</i>
<i>del</i>	<i>delet / delent</i>
<i>leg</i>	<i>lege</i>
<i>marg</i>	<i>marginalium</i>
<i>om</i>	<i>omittit / omittunt</i>
<i>rep</i>	<i>repetit / unt</i>
<i>supersc</i>	<i>superscripto / is</i>
<i>trans</i>	<i>transponit</i>
<i>CHLMP</i>	<i>The Cambridge History of Later Medieval Philosophy</i>
<i>CHRP</i>	<i>The Cambridge History of Renaissance Philosophy</i>
<i>CCI</i>	Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina
<i>CCM</i>	Corpus Christianorum, Continuatio Mediaevalis
<i>CICan</i>	Corpus Iuris Canonici
<i>CICiv</i>	Corpus Iuris Civilis
<i>CSEL</i>	Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum
<i>DThC</i>	<i>Dictionnaire de théologie catholique</i>
<i>Glossa cum Lyra</i>	<i>Biblia sacra cum glossis, interlineari et ordinaria, Nicolai Lyrani postilla et moralitatibus, Burgensis additionibus et Thoringi replicis (Lyon, 1545)</i>
<i>LthK</i>	<i>Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche</i>
<i>PG</i>	<i>Patrologia Graeca</i>
<i>PL</i>	<i>Patrologia Latina</i>
<i>RB</i>	Friedrich Stegmüller, <i>Repertorium Biblicum</i>
<i>RS</i>	Johannes Baptist Schneyer, <i>Repertorium der lateinischen Sermones des Mittelalters</i>
<i>ST</i>	Thomas Aquinas, <i>Summa Theologica</i>
<i>TRE</i>	<i>Theologische Realenzyklopädie</i>