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978-0-521-86578-4 - An Introduction to the Medieval Bible

Frans Van Liere

Excerpt

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

For a long time, even in the scholarly world, the history of the Bible in the Middle Ages was thought to be a field that held little interest except for a small group of specialists. This began to change shortly after World War II, with three important, almost simultaneous publications: in 1946, Ceslas Spicq published his *Esquisse d'une histoire de l'exégèse latine au Moyen Âge* (*Sketch of a History of Latin Exegesis in the Middle Ages*), a concise survey of medieval biblical exegesis. Spicq's *Esquisse* was almost exclusively based on a survey of the texts he found in Jean-Paul Migne's *Patrologia Latina*, a comprehensive printed edition of Latin patristic and medieval church writers from Tertullian (second century C.E.) to Innocent III (1215). For the period after the latter, Spicq limited himself to the few authors whose work was edited, while providing a handlist of authors whose work was available in manuscript only. In 1952, Beryl Smalley published her *Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages*, an epoch-making work, which showed that serious textual biblical studies began not with the Enlightenment but much earlier, in the Carolingian period, and reached an intellectual peak in the twelfth century. In contrast to Spicq, Smalley's work ventured into the vast array of unprinted texts in medieval collections, uncovering sometimes surprising aspects of medieval biblical scholarship and putting half-forgotten authors, such as Andrew of Saint Victor, back into the limelight. Like Spicq, however, Smalley left the work of the fourteenth- and fifteenth-century exegetes largely unexplored. Between 1959 and 1964, Henri de Lubac published his magisterial four-volume *Exégèse médiévale. Les quatre sens de l'écriture* (*Medieval Exegesis. The Four Senses of Scripture*), in which he demonstrated that the rich spiritual tradition of medieval exegesis had relevance for twentieth-century theology. In fact, Lubac argued, modern theology might have omitted an essential Christian element by discarding the patristic and medieval traditions of interpretation and one-sidedly embracing the Enlightenment historical-critical method. Since then, medieval exegesis

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has been a subject of serious scholarly attention and reappraisal. This reappraisal resulted in the publication of scholarly compendia: the second volume of the *Cambridge History of the Bible* (1969), the fourth volume of the French series *Bible de tous les temps* (*Bible of all Times*, 1984), the Italian *La Bibbia nel Medioevo* (*The Bible in the Middle Ages*, 1996), the massive multiauthor handbook *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament* (1996), and, most recently, the second volume of the *New Cambridge History of the Bible* (2011), which incorporated much of the scholarly progress made since the publication of the first Cambridge History.

SOME MISCONCEPTIONS

Much of this scholarship has not been readily available for undergraduate coursework, however. Partly, this may be due to departmental divisions: Bible and religion departments often pay little attention to the reception of the Bible whereas courses in history departments are wont to overlook the Bible as a subject for historical research. Interested students seeking to educate themselves via the Web often find themselves surrounded by religiously motivated misinformation. The topic of the medieval vernacular Bible is especially prone to anti-Catholic sentiment. Statements such as the following are still common in popular literature and on Web sites:

The Roman Catholic Church dominated religious life in Western Europe during the bulk of the medieval period, and it tightly controlled the availability of the Holy Bible. . . . The Papacy was officially opposed to the production and the translation of the Holy Bible in the vernacular languages, especially in the latter part of the medieval period.¹

Access to the Bible was restricted to clerics, it is assumed here, because they were the only ones who could read Latin, or who could read at all. The laity was ignorant of the contents of the Bible and had to satisfy itself with the legends and stories told by the clergy until Luther first translated the Bible into the language of the people. Alongside the myth that the clergy monopolized the Bible, it is also still often taught that medieval exegesis contributed little to the serious study of scripture. Sixteenth-century reformers rejected the tradition of medieval exegesis and biblical scholarship, maintaining that its spiritual or allegorical interpretation helped

¹ Barry Val, "The Bible in the Middle Ages," online at suite101.com/article/the-bible-in-the-middle-ages-a112611.

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to obscure the “true” meaning of the original text. In the words of John Selden, medieval biblical commentaries were “excellent instruments for the advancement of ignorance and laziness.”² In this view, the “real” history of the Bible was that of the Greek and Hebrew text of that Bible and of its recovery in the Renaissance. Thus, the long millennium from circa 400 A.D., when the scriptures were translated into an imperfect Latin derivative of the “original” text, to circa 1500, when the first vernacular translations directly from the Greek and Hebrew began to appear, was not deemed worthy of serious investigation.

This book aims to offer a more positive assessment of biblical studies in the medieval period. It concentrates on four main areas: first, the history of the Bible as a material object – whether a scroll, a codex, or a collection of such objects. The Middle Ages constituted an important period in the formation of the Bible as a book in a physical sense. The modern conception of the Bible, as a single volume of portable size containing all of the Old and New Testaments, is essentially a medieval invention. We will see that this changing physical shape of the Bible deeply influenced medieval notions about the biblical canon and scriptural authority. The second area is the history of the Bible as a written text, and its transmission by repeated copying, and the efforts medieval scholars made to establish a “correct” Latin Bible text to counteract the textual corruption that had resulted from this transmission. The third area is the history of the interpretation of this text, which often has been dismissed as derivative and irrelevant to modern theology. That it was neither will become clear in this volume. The final area discussed in this book is the diffusion of the biblical text and its influence on broader culture. Contrary to the popular myth, ordinary Christians did have access to the contents of the Bible, through numerous channels. Vernacular translations of the Bible did exist in the Middle Ages. However, reading Scripture in one’s own language was far from the only way that medieval people came into contact with the contents of the Bible, for the medieval world was much more visual and oral in character than our own. Thus, the biblical dimensions of liturgy, sermons, literature, and visual art are also considered. Before beginning to examine each of these four areas, however, it will be helpful to define the term *Middle Ages* more precisely and to consider what makes this millennium-long period a distinctive one in the cultural history of Christian learning.

² Selden, *The Historie of Tithes*, ii. Selden was referring to medieval biblical commentaries known as Postills, which are discussed in Chapter 6.

THE MIDDLE AGES: SOME LANDMARKS

The Middle Ages are customarily understood to mean the millennium between the collapse of the Roman Empire (a gradual process which took place mainly over the course of the fifth century), and the fifteenth century, in which the intellectual movement of the Renaissance and profound demographic changes connected to the expansion of Europe combined to usher in the early modern age. In the history of the Bible, this period corresponds quite conveniently (and coincidentally) with two significant events: Jerome's completion of his final Latin translation of the Bible circa 405, and Gutenberg's production of the first printed bible in 1455. Both of these events were watersheds in the history of the biblical text, because for most of the interval between them, Jerome's Latin version of the Bible, which became known as the *Vulgata* or Vulgate, was the dominant biblical text. Although it existed for several centuries alongside other, older, translations, for most of the medieval millennium Jerome's Vulgate was, in a way, *the* medieval Bible, as the name "Vulgate" (meaning "the common one") suggests. Modern observers generally consider Gutenberg's achievement to have marked the beginning of a new era, but in the history of biblical scholarship, it makes more sense to see him as bringing the medieval period to its fruition; in making Jerome's Latin Bible available in large quantities, he accomplished what medieval scribes had been aiming to do for at least 150 years. This also had unforeseen consequences, however, that would usher in radical changes in the way scholars approached the Bible: by making the text of Jerome's Bible more widely available than ever before, printing spurred biblical scholarship on to a new level. Within a century of its publication, Gutenberg's printed version would come under criticism for its many faulty readings, which the unprecedented quantities of identical texts made more visible than they had been in the era of manuscripts. The first official critical revision of the Vulgate text was printed in 1590. At the same time, Renaissance and Reformation scholarship was putting increasing emphasis on the study of the Hebrew and Greek originals on which the Latin Bible was based. Vernacular translations of the Hebrew and Greek text began to appear, claiming equal authority with the Latin text, and eventually greater authority, since they were based on the supposed "original text," that is, the Hebrew and Greek, rather than the Latin Bible. Barely a century after Gutenberg's invention, the millennium-long dominance of the Latin Bible had come to an end.

The dominance of the Vulgate does not mean that the Middle Ages was a uniform period or that all medieval bibles were identical, however.

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There was immense diversity in the physical appearance and contents of medieval bibles, and in the identity and aims of the people who produced, read, and interpreted them. As an introduction to this diversity, and to some of the historical developments that account for it, let us consider here two different bibles that represent two very different historical moments between Jerome and Gutenberg. This also allows us to consider some of the important roles that bibles played in medieval culture, as bridges between different parts of Christendom, as markers of identity, as gifts, and as expressions of orthodoxy. And it will help us understand some of the changes that occurred in these respects, across the centuries that compose the medieval era.

The first example, the so-called Codex Amiatinus, represents the oldest surviving complete Latin Bible.³ Complete bibles in one volume were a rarity in the Early Middle Ages. For example, most of the (often beautifully illuminated) “bibles” we so admire from this period, such as the Book of Kells, the Book of Durrow, or the Lindisfarne Gospels, are Gospel books, not complete bibles.⁴ The Codex Amiatinus was produced in England around 700 c.e., at Wearmouth-Jarrow, a joint monastery that was one of the principal centers of learning in northern Europe. It was created as a means to confirm the links between the young English church and the church of Rome. Christianity had first been introduced into the British Isles in the fourth century, when the region was still under Roman rule, but successive waves of evangelization produced conflicting Christian traditions in England. From the fifth century on, England was ruled by Anglo-Saxon chieftains, who were pagans, but remnants of the Christian Church survived, especially among the British. In 596, Pope Gregory the Great (Gregory I) sent the monk Augustine to preach to the Anglo-Saxons and revitalize Christianity in England. Augustine and his monks were at first so daunted by the prospect of preaching the Gospel to a faraway people, whose tongue they did not even understand, that they grew discouraged before completing the journey and tried to return to Rome. But Gregory sent them on their way again, and they eventually established a mission in Kent, in the south of England, and the monk Augustine became the first archbishop of Canterbury. The Amiatinus was an important testimony to the special ties that the English church felt with its mother church in Rome.

³ See Photos 1 and 2.

⁴ The Lindisfarne Gospels can be viewed online at <http://www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/sacredtexts/ttpbooks.html> and the Book of Kells at <http://digitalcollections.tcd.ie/home/index.php>.

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Photo 1. Portrait of Ezra, seated in front of a classical *armarium* (book case), holding a Bible in nine volumes. The inscription reads “After the sacred books were burned in the hostile carnage, Ezra restored the work out of zeal for God.” Codex Amiatinus 1, fol. 4r/5r. Photo (c) Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Florence. By permission of the Ministero per i Beni e le Attività Culturali. Further reproduction by any means is prohibited.

An important watershed for the Roman missions in England was the conversion of Edwin, the Anglo-Saxon king of Northumbria, in 627. Under his successors, several monasteries with ties to Augustine's Canterbury, alongside monasteries founded out of Iona, in Scotland, were established in the north of England. Wearmouth was one of these. Its first abbot was Benedict Biscop (d. 690), a Northumbrian nobleman who, after his conversion, maintained close ties to Rome. In the course of his life, he visited Rome at least five times, each time bringing back with him stacks of books "on all subjects of divine learning," sacred images, and relics to supply the still young English church with needed spiritual treasures. On returning from his third journey to Rome, in 682, Abbot Benedict visited the court of King Egfrid, one of Edwin's successors, and showed him the bibles and relics he had brought with him from Rome. Egfrid, himself a recent convert, was well disposed toward the young church in his kingdom and granted Benedict permission to build a new monastery at Jarrow, close to Wearmouth. Benedict's companion on one of his earlier Rome journeys, Ceolfrid, became its first abbot, and after the death of Benedict, he became abbot of both monasteries. The two monasteries continued to cooperate closely. The scholar the Venerable Bede (ca. 673–735), Jarrow's most famous resident, who later recorded the lives of Benedict and Ceolfrid, described them as "a single monastery of the blessed apostles Peter and Paul, situated in two different places."⁵

Ceolfrid, no less eager than Benedict to promote learning at Jarrow and Wearmouth, doubled the size of the library of both monasteries. The double monastery housed not only a library but also a scriptorium, where monks labored in copying bibles. Ceolfrid had brought back a large one-volume copy of the Bible from his Roman journey. Under his direction, they copied three new bibles, modeled after this bible, which may have been among the first in the England to contain the complete "new translation" made by Jerome (ca. 341–420).⁶ We do not quite know why Ceolfrid preferred the new translation. Was it more "Roman," or did he consider the text to be more reliable, or more readable? Or was Jerome's new translation already so widely used by the early eighth century that the decision to use it was not particularly innovative? Because of lack of evidence, answers to these questions are hard to come by. In any case, Ceolfrid's decision was one step in making Jerome's translation the dominant Bible text in western Europe.

⁵ Bede, *Historia Abbatum*, 2: 15, ed. Plummer, 379.

⁶ See also chapter 2, note 11.

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The new bibles did not look at all like any of the books commonly produced in England at the time. Their script and layout closely followed its sixth-century Italian late classical model to the extent that, until the nineteenth century, scholars mistook the Amiatinus for a bible of Italian provenance. Only fragments remain of the other bibles,⁷ and the Codex Amiatinus today is the oldest extant complete copy of Jerome's Vulgate translation.

Ceolfrid must have been proud of his achievement. Two of the copies were for the use of the two monasteries, but the third he carried with him as a gift to Pope Gregory II, when toward the end of his life he set out to revisit the holy city. It was a precious gift; an estimated 500 animals were needed to produce parchment for the Codex Amiatinus alone. This present to the pope was meant as a vivid proof of the energy of the young English church. By sending back to Rome a complete copy of the Bible, beautifully illuminated, and written in the best tradition of late antique paleography, the monks at Wearmouth-Jarrow were showing the pope the vitality of the recent mission and acknowledging the great debt that the English Church owed to the initiative of the bishops of Rome, the successors of the apostles Peter and Paul, the same to whom the monasteries of Wearmouth and Jarrow were dedicated.

Ceolfrid never made it all the way to Rome; he died on the way in Langres in France, "among people who did not speak his tongue."⁸ The bible he carried with him was brought to Rome, however, and remained there until some time in the eighth century, when it became a gift again. The name of the original giver, "Ceolfrid abbot of the Angles," on the first folio was erased and replaced by "Peter, bishop of the Lombards," and the book was presented to the newly founded abbey of San Salvatore on Monte Amiata in Tuscany, where it stayed until the eighteenth century. It was brought to Rome briefly in 1587, when it was used as a reference text for a newly authorized Latin Bible edition, the Sixto-Clementine edition of the Vulgate. In the eighteenth century, it was brought to the Biblioteca Laurenziana in Florence, where it remains today.

The second bible is a far less unique specimen than the Amiatinus. It is a northern French bible from the thirteenth century, probably produced in

⁷ Today in the British Library, MS Add. 45,025 and MS Add. 37,777. It is very likely that both fragments are from the same codex (dubbed the "Ceolfrid Bible") whereas nothing remains of the third.

⁸ Bede, *Historia Abbatum*, 2: 21, ed. Plummer, 386.

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Paris around 1240 or 1250.⁹ This bible is much smaller than the Amiatinus (142 × 94 mm against the Amiatinus's 505 × 340 mm), and the pages are made of extremely thin and fine vellum, with the text written in a minute hand. Like the Codex Amiatinus, it contains the entire text of the Bible in one volume, a phenomenon that, by the thirteenth century, had become much more common. Although the contents differed somewhat from that of the Amiatinus, it too contained the Vulgate translation of Jerome. By the time this bible was written, literacy and book possession had become much more common, and bibles were starting to be copied in great numbers. They were written by professional scribes and sold by lay booksellers. Because Paris was the most active center of production for these mass-market bibles, they are often called "Paris bibles." In modern European libraries, hundreds of similar bibles can be found. This bible was most likely never used by a monastic community, but was probably the individual possession of a university master, possibly a Franciscan or Dominican friar. Although we do not know who initially owned it, we know something about its later history, thanks to an inscription on its flyleaf, which reveals that in 1563, the Dominican Giovanni of Marssano gave it as a present to the bishop of Tortosa, Martín de Córdoba y Mendoza. The occasion for the gift was the closing of the Council of Trent, the lengthy council in which the sixteenth-century Catholic Church discussed its response to the Protestant Reformation.

It was fitting that a thirteenth-century copy of the Vulgate Bible should serve as a gift from one delegate to another at Trent, where the question of biblical authority and the status of the Vulgate Bible were debated extensively. In 1545, a generation after Martin Luther's attack on the Catholic Church ushered in one of the most severe crises in the history of the western church, cardinals from all over Europe convened in a general council in the northern Italian city of Trent, to discuss the reforms necessary to see the Church through the crisis Luther had caused. The Bible was at the heart of the Reformation conflict. Luther had translated the Bible from the Hebrew and Greek into German and had declared that Church tradition and hierarchy should no longer be recognized as a source of authority in the Christian Church, but only Scripture (*sola scriptura*). By translating it into German, Luther had implicitly declared that its interpretation

⁹ Until recently, this bible was in the private collections of Arthur Haddaway in Texas and the Boahlen Collection in Berne. See University of Texas, *Gothic and Renaissance Illuminated Manuscripts*, 14. It was offered for sale by the gallery Les Enluminures, Paris and Chicago, <http://www.lesenluminures.com/>, in 2007 and is currently in a private collection. All information presented here, including the ownership inscription, is derived from the Web site of Les Enluminures. See Photos 3 and 4.