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

Frans Van Liere

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AN INTRODUCTION TO THE MEDIEVAL BIBLE

The Middle Ages spanned the period between two watersheds in the history of the biblical text: Jerome's Latin translation circa 405 and Gutenberg's first printed version in 1455. The Bible was arguably the most influential book during this time, affecting spiritual and intellectual life, popular devotion, theology, political structures, art, and architecture. In an account that is sensitive to the religiously diverse world of the Middle Ages, Frans van Liere offers here an accessible introduction to the study of the Bible in this period. Discussion of the material evidence – the Bible as a book – complements an in-depth examination of concepts such as lay literacy and book culture. This introduction to the medieval Bible includes a thorough treatment of the principles of medieval hermeneutics, and a discussion of the formation of the Latin Bible text and its canon. It will be a useful starting point for all those engaged in medieval and biblical studies.

Frans van Liere studied theology and medieval studies at the University of Groningen, the Netherlands, and is Professor of History at Calvin College. His most recent publications include *Andrew of Saint Victor, Commentary on Samuel and Kings* (2009), and *Interpretation of Scripture: Theory* (Victorine Texts in Translation), vol. 3 (coedited with Franklin Harkins, 2012).

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To the memory of my parents

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Preface

The influence of the Bible in the Middle Ages was enormous. Whether read in private devotions, prayed in communal liturgy, commented on in classroom lectures, expounded on in sermons, painted on church walls, or sculpted in cathedral portals, its influence shaped not only moral and spiritual life but also intellectual, aesthetic, and social life. One cannot understand the medieval world without appreciating the scope of medieval people's engagement with biblical stories, characters, and images. Students of medieval history and religion are the primary intended audience for this book. It aims to provide them with a basic understanding of the medieval Bible, the formation and transmission of its text, and its traditions of interpretation. Although there are many introductions and handbooks to the Bible, most of these follow the historico-critical method, a tradition of biblical interpretation that has its origin in the Enlightenment. This method builds on the assumption that in order to retrieve the meaning of a text, we need first to establish its "original" form, study this within its historical context, and analyze what the author tried to convey to his intended audience. Thus, textbook introductions to the Bible tend to pay ample attention to biblical archaeology and to the historical context of the authors, editors, and redactors of the Hebrew and Greek texts. They typically offer linguistic analysis of the text and perhaps an historical survey of its transmission, including the formation of the canon. But they usually stop there. If they do include a history of biblical scholarship and interpretation, this usually starts with the Renaissance and Reformation. The Middle Ages are thus obscured from view, although the rich body of medieval biblical illustrations is often freely exploited for its aesthetic value.

How deeply ingrained this tradition is in today's thinking was made clear to me by a student who once confessed, "I am not all that interested in how medieval people understood the Bible. What matters more to me is how God wants it to be understood." The tacit assumption was,

of course, that medieval authors have nothing valuable to say about the latter. The idea that it is possible to read the Bible “just what it says,”¹ not influenced by any interpretive tradition, seems a fallacy, to say nothing of the equation of that interpretation with God’s intended meaning. It is unfortunate banalization of the Protestant notion of the “sufficiency of Scripture,” which holds that “whatsoever man ought to believe unto salvation is sufficiently taught” in Scripture.² In the sixteenth century, reformers such as Martin Luther challenged the authority of the Church to interpret the Bible, and claimed that it spoke to the believer without an intermediate authoritative tradition of interpretation. The Calvinist *Belgic Confession* likewise warns not to “consider custom, or the great multitude, or antiquity, or succession of times and persons, or councils, decrees and statutes, as of equal value with the truth of God.”³ Despite their huge debt to the achievement of medieval biblical scholarship, the Reformers regarded the contribution of these historical interpreters as irrelevant at best, and often pernicious. However, while affirming the Reformers’ notion of the primacy of Scripture, one may still acknowledge that every historical period has its own traditions of interpretation that can offer some valuable insights into the deeper meanings of an ancient religious text. Luther himself tacitly acknowledged this when he made ample use of the works of the fourteenth-century Franciscan Nicholas of Lyra in his translation of the Bible into German.

Considering the neglect that medieval exegetes often suffered, especially within the Protestant tradition, I came to envision an additional audience for this book: biblical scholars and students who want to rediscover the rich tradition of medieval biblical interpretation as something still relevant to our understanding of the Bible today. This book was thus written from the conviction that the Bible is not just a historical text dating from before the first century C.E. but a dynamic tradition that gained its meaning within the life of Church and Synagogue over a period of several millennia.

This book started as an undergraduate course, taught at Calvin College, on the topic of “The Bible in the Middle Ages.” The inspiration for this course came from one I had taken many years before, with my teacher and mentor, Prof. Dr. L. J. Engels, which came to shape my scholarly career. When I prepared to teach this course, however, I found that it was almost impossible to find a suitable textbook. The work that had most

¹ Kugel, *Traditions of the Bible*, xviii.

² *The Belgic Confession*, art. 7. In *Historical Creeds and Confessions*, 75.

³ *Ibid.*

influenced my own study of this subject, Beryl Smalley's *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages*, was not only more than half a century old, but it was also written for an academic audience and thus not very accessible to undergraduates. Kate Brett, then managing editor of the religion division of Cambridge University Press, persuaded me to write such an introduction myself. More than seven years later, this suggestion has come to fruition.

The title of the book perhaps promises more than is offered here. This book mainly concentrates on the Latin Bible in the west during the Middle Ages. One chapter discusses bibles in the vernacular. In western Europe prior to the sixteenth century, these were most often translated directly from the Latin. It was regrettable but necessary to exclude the medieval Greek and Hebrew traditions. Jewish exegetical traditions are discussed here chiefly in relation to their influence on Christian traditions. Excellent introductions to the Hebrew Bible and Jewish exegetical traditions can be found in the essays by Barry Walfish and Jordan Penkover, in the *Jewish Study Bible*. Because this book was written for a general audience, I have limited footnotes to direct citations only. At the end of each chapter, a short list of chiefly English-language works aims to provide orientation for research in each particular field. The bibliography at the end of the book not only provides the full titles of all works cited in the footnotes but also acknowledges some of the scholarly works that were used but not cited.

The citations from non-English sources are generally my own translation, unless otherwise noted. Even where I have followed existing translations, however, I have sometimes taken the liberty of adapting them by comparing them to the original. Biblical quotations are generally taken from the New Revised Standard Version, or, where a closer proximity to the Latin version was required, the Douay-Rheims version. Throughout the book, I generally use the modern English names of biblical books (thus Chronicles instead of Paralipomenon, Samuel and Kings rather than Regum, and Revelation rather than Apocalypse), but Appendix B provides a concordance of variant names for Bible books. Most titles of Latin works are given in English, providing a first-time translation in parentheses or in the footnote. For works that are best known by their Latin names (such as the *Summa theologica* or the *Historia scholastica*), the Latin has been retained although an English translation is given. Medieval authors are referred to by their English names; thus, "Jerome" is used rather than "Hieronymus" and "Jacob of Varazze" rather than "Jacobus de Voragine" or "Jacopo da Varazze." In the bibliography and index, authors living before 1500 are generally listed by their first names rather than their nicknames, toponyms,

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or patronyms. If an exception is made, cross-references are provided. Bible verses, and especially Psalms, are cited according to their modern chapter and verse; where necessary, the Vulgate numbering is indicated with “Vulg.” Appendix B provides a brief comparison between modern and Vulgate Psalm numbers.

I wish to thank the staff of the various libraries whose collections I was permitted to visit and use: Corpus Christi and Trinity College in Cambridge; Cambridge University Library; the Newberry Library in Chicago; the Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana and Biblioteca Nazionale in Florence; the British Library in London; the Bodleian Library in Oxford; Salamanca University Library; the Vatican Library; the Waldo Library of Western Michigan University in Kalamazoo; and York Minster Library. For permission to use images from their collections, I wish to thank the staff of the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York, the Scheide Library in Princeton, Trinity College Library in Cambridge, the Bibliotheca Laurenziana, the British Library, the Metropolitan Museum in New York, and Hekman Library of Calvin College.

Special gratitude is due to those who read chapters and parts of this book, offered valuable feedback, and saved me from making embarrassing mistakes, especially Bert Roest, Laura Light, Celia Chazelle, Suzan Folkerts, Margriet Hoogvliet, Derek Krueger, Ittai Weinryb, Mayke de Jong, T. Michael Law, Yitzhak Hen, and the anonymous reviewer for Cambridge University Press. I especially wish to thank Ann Matter for her continuous support and encouragement of this project. The inspiration for many of the topics covered in this book came from the sessions of the Society for the Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages, in Kalamazoo and Leeds, and I wish to thank my colleagues for all that I learned at these sessions. My debt to them goes beyond footnotes. Colleagues in the History Department at Calvin College and the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton provided a stimulating and supportive environment that allowed me to write this book. I am grateful to the students at Calvin College who have taken this course with me and who helped shape the contents of this book, and to Kate Brett and Anna Lowe, my editors at Cambridge University Press, for their patience and encouragement. The index was compiled by Lisa Eary, with help from Jenna Hunt. Further, I wish to thank the Board of Trustees of Calvin College, for granting a research fellowship and a sabbatical that allowed me to complete this work; the Calvin Center for Christian Scholarship for funding bibliographical research; and the Institute for Advanced Study, especially Dan Shapiro and Agnes Guld, for funding the research

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time there that made it possible to finish this book. My greatest debt is to my wife, Kate Elliot van Liere, who not only supported me morally and intellectually throughout the writing of this book but was also my most critical reader and the best editor for whom anyone could wish.

Princeton, Easter 2013
Frans van Liere