

Introduction

Dominus habitans in me est *illuminatio mea* contra tenebras ignorancie, vt iam discernam inter bonum et malum, *et salus mea* contra infirmitatem spiritualem, vt iam firmus resistam peccato. *Quem t[er]rebo?* Preter ipsum nullum. Vtique *Dominus protector vite mee*, id est defensor a malis contra impetus et insidias. *A quo trepidabo*, positus in prouectu virtutum? Audiant hos versus qui solitarios esse non audent, cum iste qui habet Deum illuminatorem et protectorem a nullo trepidat. Non enim timidi sunt homines nisi propter vite reprehensibilis conscienciam. Sciatis ergo vos timidi quod a societate multorum potestis propter peccata vestra a demonibus rapi ad infernum, et in solitudine Deo protegente securi eritis. Deponite itaque malam vitam vestram que in nullo loco effugiet manum Dei vtricem.¹

The Lord dwelling within me is *my light* against the shadows of ignorance, allowing me to distinguish between the good and the wicked, *and my health* against spiritual illness, allowing me firmly to withstand sin. *Whom shall I fear?* None but him. *The Lord is the protector of my life*, i.e., my defender against the assaults and snares of the wicked. *Of whom shall I, set in the progression of virtues, be afraid?* Let those who do not dare to be solitaires hear these verses, for such a one who has God as his light and protector is afraid of no one. For men are only fearful from a sense of guilt for their reprehensible life. Know then, ye fearful, that from the fellowship of many people demons can snatch you to hell because of your sins, while in solitude, with God as your protector, you will be secure. Lay aside, then, your wicked life, which will not offer any refuge from the vengeful hand of God.

This forceful, perhaps overbearing call to flee from the world occurs in a commentary on the Psalms by the Yorkshire hermit Richard Rolle (d. 1349), one of the most influential religious writers of later medieval England. Though elsewhere in this work, out of a concern that he might “appear to exalt [his] own state,” Rolle says he will avoid glossing a

particular verse as having to do with religious solitaries, he does not hesitate to present himself *qua* hermit as the ideal speaker of Ps. 26.1.² With the Lord as his light and his spiritual health (or salvation), the solitary is confident of his fate at the end of time, while those still living “in the fellowship of many people,” apparently both secular and religious, may be snatched to hell at any moment. Though coming at the end of his reading of this verse, this identification makes Rolle’s initial string of glosses seem, in retrospect, to be not general statements of spiritual self-assurance so much as specific claims about the exegete’s authority, and, taken this way, they do indeed reflect views found elsewhere in his writings.³ The notion of God as a light “dwelling within” him, for example, seems to echo claims of divine inspiration for his exegesis, while his ability to distinguish between the good and the wicked may reflect his belief that he will be among the elect who assist in judging souls, and his need for protection against “assaults and snares” recalls his repeated attacks on those who question his solitary lifestyle and, especially, the frequent relocation of his hermitage.⁴ Here, then, Rolle draws on the Psalmist’s text (*hos versus*) to articulate a bold account of the authority of both his vocation and his writing.

While his warning to those too afraid to be solitaries is his own contribution to the interpretation of this verse, however, the hermit has adapted the opening series of glosses from his major source, the mid-twelfth-century *Magna glosatura* of Peter Lombard (d. 1160), a basic reference work of scholastic Psalter exegesis.⁵ Throughout his commentary, Rolle draws on the Lombard’s interpretive offerings, sometimes supplementing them with new glosses of his own and sometimes, as here, presenting them in ways that alter his source’s meaning. (In the *Glosatura*, this psalm is interpreted in the voice of any faithful Christian, who can draw confidence from his or her participation in the Church’s sacraments.)⁶ In one sense, Rolle’s approach is typical of scholastic commentators, who regularly engage with a range of sources, sometimes affirming long-standing interpretations, sometimes arguing over whether a gloss presents the literal or spiritual meaning of a verse, and sometimes drawing on newly available material or the insights of new interpretive theories to devise original readings of the biblical text. Yet Rolle also departs from these norms in subtle but significant ways, especially insofar as his disagreements with the Lombard are based not on his engagement with new scholastic theories or newly available sources – which, considering his short career as a student at Oxford, were probably unknown to him – but rather on his ecstatic experiences, especially his distinctive accounts of physical heat and heavenly song, and the authority he derived from them.⁷ Rolle’s exegesis, in other words, brings together standard glosses

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that would form the basis of almost any scholastic Psalter commentary with more idiosyncratic ones focused on his distinctive devotional program. Yet it is not simply the case that Rolle uses commentary to authorize his way of life. Though this kind of enhanced authority may be an effect of his exegetical writing and may occasionally – as in Ps. 26.1 – be the focus of his glosses, it would be more accurate to say that, in this work as a whole, he has attempted to contribute to the longer tradition of biblical commentary by bringing his spiritual insights to bear on the interpretation of Scripture, and he thereby expands the scope of scholastic commentary to include more overtly mystical materials. Rolle turns commentary into a form of writing that is at once scholastic and devotional.⁸

This book charts the complex and dynamic field of scholastic biblical commentary in fourteenth-century England, arguing that this form of writing attracted exegetes – authors of commentaries – because of its potential to serve as a site of intellectual and interpretive creativity and experimentation. Biblical commentary afforded writers an opportunity to try out new ways of reading, to explore the implications of new interpretive theories or the relevance of newly discovered sources, to think in different languages, and to develop ideas about a seemingly endless range of issues, reflecting the broad heterogeneity of the biblical text. Almost inevitably, commentators were attracted to this form as an oblique way of accruing authority to their writing, with their original material presented as the meaning of the supremely authoritative text of Holy Writ. Yet their glosses are often tentative, put forward as one or more of many different ways of interpreting an inexhaustibly rich source, and this pragmatic provisionality was reinforced by the attitude with which exegetes by and large approached earlier efforts at interpretation.⁹ That is, at the same time as they turned to commentary as a vehicle for exploring new ideas, scholastic exegetes persistently engaged with a vast inherited tradition of interpretation, complexly contradictory patristic and earlier medieval glosses, through which they sifted, sometimes seeking to reconcile conflicting authorities, and in relation to which they positioned their own contributions. Indeed, discerning the intellectual contours of this received body of glosses was itself a significant undertaking, prompting a wide range of creative solutions, new scholarly tools, and different forms of scholastic writing.¹⁰ In sum, then, the commentators whose work forms the core of this book were thoughtfully poised between the new and the old, at once committed to the authoritative traditions of reading gathered in sources like the *Magna glosatura* and eager to find ways to make their own distinctive contributions to the ongoing project of biblical interpretation.

Within this larger field of scholastic commentary, the work of exegetes in England in the fourteenth century is at once more specific and distinctive. At the same time as it saw the production of new commentaries aimed at readers within the universities, English exegesis across the fourteenth century is characterized by an increasing interest in commentary's potential as a demotic literary form, an expansion of the work of scholastic exegesis that is captured perfectly (and influentially) in Rolle's glosses. To put it another way, beginning in the 1310s and 1320s, more and more writers sought to adapt the conventional sources and interpretive strategies of scholastic commentary to meet the needs of readers with at most a limited university education.¹¹ Initially, this work was done in the same language as most scholastic exegesis, Latin, but especially in the second half of the century, commentators began to turn to Middle English to supply sometimes startlingly complex interpretive material for a wide range of non-specialist readers, including vowed religious women, monastic lay brothers, and a laity with increasingly ambitious devotional aspirations. As so many attempts to define and extend the possibilities of biblical commentary as a literary form with a potentially broad appeal, these efforts at vernacular exegesis represent some of the most significant and consequential experiments in scholastic interpretation in fourteenth-century England, and they provide a crucial context for the creation of the Wycliffite Bible versions, the first complete translations of Scripture into English, which need to be understood not just in relation to scholastic commentary, but as expressions of its development into the vernacular.

At least in part, then, this study seeks to develop the narrative of late medieval university exegesis begun in the scholarship of Beryl Smalley, whose treatment of the fourteenth century was more narrowly focused than her work on earlier scholasticism.¹² But it argues that a fuller account of scriptural commentary in this period must look beyond the universities and include a range of texts that have not typically been addressed in studies like Smalley's, works – like Rolle's – composed for a broader audience and informed by priorities that are now less commonly associated with scholastic exegesis. To overlook these texts, or to treat them as somehow less than deserving of the title of scholastic commentary, almost inevitably results in an impoverished view of English (including Anglo-Latin) exegesis in this period, and it risks falling into easy binarisms, of intellectual and affective, Latin and vernacular, elite and demotic. As we will see, commentary was capacious enough to cut across – without necessarily collapsing – all of these distinctions.

Beyond opening new texts to critical inquiry, then, this understanding of its capaciousness and creativity challenges assumptions about scholastic

commentary that have been too common in recent literary and historical scholarship. Indeed, commentary has been seen as a tool wielded by the Latin-educated clergy in an attempt to limit allowable understandings of Scripture, and commentaries are thus often taken as more likely to constrain interpretive inquiry than to encourage it. According to this view, “glossing is a gesture of appropriation,” one which “undertakes to speak the text, to assert authority over it, . . . to limit or close it to the possibility of heterodox or unlimited significance. . . . Glossing seeks to find one answer, impose one interpretation on the meaning” of the biblical text.¹³ Likewise, the later medieval Bible has been described as “protected by its Latin glosses” and thereby “meshed in an intertextuality” that guarded against the possibility of dissenting interpretations.¹⁴ Yet, though some examples could surely be found to support them, these caricaturing views are unfortunately misleading with regard to the larger phenomenon of medieval biblical commentary. To be sure, exegetes do often express an anxiety that Holy Writ could be misinterpreted, leading to theological error or heresy – though it is frequently the exegete himself (including Rolle in his work on the Psalms) who fears that *he* will misinterpret Scripture in a way that leads to further confusion and fosters misunderstanding.¹⁵ At the same time as commentators sought to avoid what they considered misreadings, however, their notion of proper interpretation rarely limited the biblical text to a single meaning. Indeed, “it is typical of the commentator to see the text as a ‘rich’ entity, a practically inexhaustible store of meanings.”¹⁶ An exegete “does not close down the meaning of a text but opens it up to further examination,” and “the task of commentary is to multiply problems, not to solve them.”¹⁷ This interpretive richness is often paired with a complex play of different voices. More than just seeking “to speak the text,” the commentator can move from quoting his author to ventriloquizing him with a paraphrasal gloss, and he may then go on to offer further glosses in his own critical voice, as we have seen Rolle doing in his treatment of Ps. 26. The issue of voicing becomes all the more complex with the introduction of interpretations drawn from earlier authorities – “the ghosts that float through the [commentary’s] pages” – such that the text becomes something of an echo chamber, with “many different voices offer[ing] a polyphony of interpretations.”¹⁸

Admittedly, these positive valuations have all been taken from discussions of the tradition of commentary on classical Greek and Latin poetry, in some cases describing commentary as it is ideally carried out by classicists today. But the following chapters argue for the perhaps startling degree to which these descriptions can also account for medieval exegesis of

biblical literature.¹⁹ Scholastic exegetes worked with a more or less established body of authoritative sources, which could not simply be jettisoned but rather demanded their critical engagement almost as much as the biblical text itself. As we will see, at least one commentator was willing to reclassify all earlier commentaries on a specific biblical book as spiritual, identifying his gloss as the book's first literal treatment – but this is an extreme case, and most exegetes sought to position themselves as extending earlier exegetical undertakings, opening the biblical text to new interpretive possibilities without foreclosing others.²⁰ Commentary thus presents a very specific instance of what Patricia Clare Ingham has recently described more generally as “the ambivalent status of newness” in the later Middle Ages, with writers “not regularly cast[ing] innovation as utterly distinct from the old.”²¹ And the same basic interpretive moves that scholastic exegetes found in their authoritative sources – the careful consideration of how to break the text into lemmata, for example, and paraphrasal glosses introduced with the phrase *quasi diceret* or *ac si dicat* (as though he said) – allowed them to explore afresh the many different things a single text could be made to say.²²

Of course, it is one thing to recover an understanding of commentary as a robust and experimental kind of literature, and quite another to see Middle English biblical translations as part of that larger field of scholastic exegesis. The translations produced in the second half of the fourteenth century, and especially the Wycliffite versions, have typically been thought to reject scholastic interpretive priorities. In contrast to earlier English translations, which were “hedged about with interpretive commentary,” we are told that the translators responsible for the Wycliffite versions “wanted [Scripture’s] meaning to radiate forth in as unimpeded a way as possible,” and they consequently “hated . . . interpretive glossing.”²³ The notion of “a Bible liberated from a corrupt academia and its associated intellectual practices” has been identified as “central to the thought of Wyclif and his later followers,” who instead favored “the notion of an unglossed, indeed *deglossed* biblical text.”²⁴ Again, these translations supposedly gave “English readers naked Scripture, not only independent of its Latin source . . . but freed from the influence of the schools.”²⁵ As we will see below, this perceived division between scholastic exegesis and Wycliffite biblicism is at best misleading, and it potentially obscures the important ways in which Wycliffite translation was itself a scholastic project. To be sure, there is some basis in Wycliffite writings for the idea that inspired readers can, in theory, interpret Scripture without the aid of glosses, but it hardly follows that Wyclif and his disciples were doggedly hostile to

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scholastic exegesis in a way that sets them apart from their contemporaries. For one thing, Wyclif was himself the author of an extensive series of scholastic commentaries on the entirety of Scripture, writings which, as we will see, he continued to revise throughout his career. Moreover, many manuscripts of the translations produced by his followers include marginal glosses drawing on some of the same sources as his commentaries, and the vernacular Wycliffite commentary known as the *Glossed Gospels* is one of the major monuments of Middle English scholasticism.²⁶ Just as importantly, the Wycliffite translations can themselves be considered a kind of commentary, a series of attempts to interpret the meaning of the Vulgate by rendering its text in a new language, sometimes reflecting the insights on offer in standard scholastic (Latin) glosses.²⁷ Certainly, not all later readers would have recognized these translations as originating from a tradition of scholastic commentary, and copies lacking marginal glosses could have been especially prone to novel interpretive approaches and sensibilities – but the monolingual presentation of these manuscripts may now just as easily obscure their continuing contribution to the enterprise of scholastic interpretation.²⁸

The implications of understanding translation as a mode of commentary will be explored at length in the following chapters. But rather than taking up this issue as it relates to the different versions of the Wycliffite Bible, which have received considerable attention in recent scholarship,²⁹ the argument of this book will focus instead on English works that include translations of individual biblical books *and* extensive interpretive prose, glosses compiled from Latin sources or devised by the English exegete himself. These works, in other words, are substantial biblical commentaries written in English. Further, most of the vernacular examples discussed below adhere to a common form, with a short quotation of the Latin text (typically a single verse) followed by a close translation and a more or less extensive selection of commentary, these different registers typically being distinguished with some combination of underlining, the use of rubrication or paraph marks, or a hierarchy of scripts (more on this below). To give equal weight to their two vernacular elements, namely, the English renderings of biblical material and the English glosses that follow, I propose to refer to these texts as “commentary-translations.”³⁰ Though cumbersome, this description is useful for insisting that these works participate in a larger project of scholastic exegesis, while also emphasizing that, by translating Scripture into a new language, they develop that tradition in novel ways – ones which initially would have been unfamiliar even to their authors, however well versed they may have been in traditions

of Latin exegesis. These writings represent, as we will see, a sustained experiment in English prose, and if, as David Lawton has said, the “intellectual tradition” of modern literary criticism “stemmed above all from biblical commentary,” then these commentary-translations could be considered the beginning of that tradition in English.³¹

Though they represent the expansion of scholastic interpretive discourses into a new language, however, it would be wrong to see these commentary-translations simply as an instance of academic work diffusing outward from the university to reach a broader or more demotic audience. This is not a straightforward case of “the business of Latin hermeneutics being continued in the vernacular.”³² In this regard, the more capacious and expansive notion of scholastic commentary advocated here is especially important, since one of the earliest (and certainly the most influential) English commentary-translations of biblical literature was *not* written by a master active in Oxford or Cambridge, but rather by Rolle, the Hermit of Hampole, who we have already seen was seeking to put scholastic commentary to differing devotional uses in Latin as well. In his second commentary on the Psalms – written in the vernacular and now called the *English Psalter* – and in early works written in imitation of it, biblical commentary-translation was crafted outside the universities as a means of providing some of the interpretive tools of scholastic commentary to enrich, specifically, *devotional* reading in the vernacular. In the second half of the century, the work of producing new commentary-translations would be taken up by Oxford theologians with considerably more training (and considerably more extensive resources on which to draw), but the texts made by these writers still reflected the devotional priorities established in earlier works, with the example of the *English Psalter* continuing to exercise considerable influence. And, as we will see, early in the fifteenth century, Rolle’s vernacular text was even regarded as an authoritative source of scholastic interpretation by an Oxford master writing a commentary in Latin.³³ By treating these texts as important models of vernacular scholasticism, later academic writers seem to have acknowledged that the task of expanding commentary into the vernacular, of experimenting with the kind of work commentaries could do, had already been undertaken by writers outside the schools.

The appeal of these commentary-translations is similarly far from straightforward.³⁴ To be sure, much of the impetus must have come from the commentators’ sense of pastoral obligation, an impulse to provide suitable writings that would benefit vowed female religious and poorly educated members of the clergy, as well as more ambitious laywomen and

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men.³⁵ Just as importantly, the production of these texts seems likely to have met a demand from their would-be readers – but, again, the importance of Rolle’s *English Psalter* as an early example of this kind of literature means that this demand was more complex than might otherwise be expected. On the one hand, as Claire Waters has argued, already in the thirteenth century vernacular religious texts were “focused on the disciplining of the laity, in the sense of making them *discipuli*,” students who “engaged cooperatively in the project of their own education,” and it could be the case that English learners, already imagining themselves as gaining some mediated access to the scholastic classroom, wanted their study to include the interpretation of Holy Writ as well.³⁶ In this regard, commentary seems to have functioned as a kind of “prestige discourse” to which readers sought access, a desirability which challenges the recent claim that the growth of vernacular religious literature was concomitant with a loss of status of “the ways of knowing fostered by the university.”³⁷ On the other hand, the early association of vernacular exegesis with Rolle’s authoritative and charismatic *persona* may itself have contributed to the appeal of this kind of writing. At least some readers may have sought out commentary-translations because they were the sort of thing that Rolle wrote, suggested by the misattribution to the hermit of the *Pety Job* (a poeticization of the commentary-translation form focused on selections from Job) or Richard Maidstone’s *Penitential Psalms* (another poeticization of the form, discussed in Chapter 3).³⁸ Lacking in all of these explanations, however, is a sense of the contestative relationship between Latin and the vernacular that has often characterized discussions of translation and late medieval English literature, the notion that “the new hermeneutical performance” of these vernacular glosses displaces “antecedent commentaries” and has, more profoundly, the potential to “displace Latin as the linguistic system within which exegesis is practiced.”³⁹ Certainly, intellectual resources being limited, the expansion of commentary into a new language means that some writers who would otherwise have glossed Scripture in Latin produced English texts instead, but the composition of these vernacular commentaries was carried out alongside the continuing (and more copious) production of new Latin glosses. This is not to say, then, that English biblical exegesis operated in some kind of humble fealty to the master discourse of Latin, but rather that vernacular commentators persistently position their writings as part of a larger biblical-interpretive field, one which was at once multilingual and predominantly Latin.⁴⁰

As the foregoing discussion should suggest, the university remained critical for the development of biblical exegesis, even when its faculty

was responding to trends originating outside its walls. More specifically, the chapters that follow reveal Oxford to have been a significant center of exegetical activity across the fourteenth century, though more intensely in some periods than others. This is not to dispute the claim, initially made by Smalley and supported by William Courtenay, that fourteenth-century Oxford saw the production of fewer biblical commentaries than had been the case in earlier centuries (and especially in comparison to Paris).⁴¹ Almost all of the commentaries discussed here were known to Smalley and Courtenay, and even when we extend our view to include scholastic exegesis composed outside the university, in English and in Latin, the numbers will still come in below those of the two previous centuries. By considering the interpretive experiments on offer in these commentaries, then, this book does not seek to argue that exegesis was any more ubiquitous or popular a form of writing in fourteenth-century Oxford than these earlier studies would suggest. However, at the same time as Courtenay sees schoolmen turning increasingly to the possibilities for professional advancement on offer in the study of canon law, and at the same time as Kantik Ghosh sees theologians turning increasingly to the intellectual tools of speculative philosophy to adjudicate questions of hermeneutics and interpretive authority, it remains the case that some particularly influential writers favored biblical commentary as a mode in which to explore and experiment with their ideas.⁴² Such exegetes built on a substantial body of work, and their efforts, though fewer than in past decades, nevertheless represent a major category of scholastic literature, one with an ever larger appeal for readers beyond the university. The purpose of this book, then, is to recover the intellectual contours and complicated interpretive commitments of these unstudied texts, and thereby to gain a fuller sense of why commentary continued to attract writers and readers even in the face of such professional and institutional change.

By advocating for a more capacious view of scholastic exegesis in fourteenth-century England, one that includes texts in Latin and English, this book has implications beyond an understanding of the commentaries that are its focus. Put simply, it indicates the broader relevance of biblical exegesis for medieval vernacular culture, especially – though by no means limited to – vernacular religious culture. Of course, tracing all of these implications lies beyond the scope of this study, but before presenting a more detailed outline of my argument, it will nevertheless be useful to consider some examples illustrating the sort of implications I have in mind, and, relatedly, to address one further methodological issue.

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