

GARDNER-WEBB UNIVERSITY

MEDIEVAL METHODS OF INTERPRETATION 800-1300

A TERM PAPER SUBMITTED TO

DR. LORIN CRANFORD

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS OF

NEW TESTAMENT SEMINAR

BY

CALEB WYATT

BOILING SPRINGS, NORTH CAROLINA

FEBRUARY 26, 2004

## INTRODUCTION

The medieval period presents a challenge when analyzing the methods of biblical interpretation. Many scholars and theologians have quickly dismissed the Middle Ages as a time period of ignorance and digression. The “Dark Ages” as this time period is often called, actually sparked the development of some of the exegetical methods commonly practiced today. Life during this period was centered on the Bible, and in fact, most people had no knowledge of any other books besides the Bible.<sup>1</sup> The Christian culture created during the Middle Ages allowed the Bible to penetrate every aspect of life. For this reason, most authors wrote solely about the Bible. This time period was also characterized by a shifting in the way people viewed the scriptures, especially in the High Middle Ages. Ironically, the strict interpretation challenged people to revolutionize the ways they handled the scriptures. The traditional biblical interpretations came under examination as a slow-paced change began to take place throughout Western Europe.

---

<sup>1</sup> Gerald Bray, *Biblical Interpretation: Past and Present* (Downer’s Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 130.

## MEDIEVAL METHODS OF INTERPRETATION

To properly understand the development of interpretation during the Middle Ages, we will begin with the traditional patterns of understanding scripture. The exegetical methods of the medieval period followed the patristic tradition, “whose principal task was to transmit and explain the Bible.”<sup>2</sup> Scriptures were viewed as divine revelation, and literally the inspired “word of God,” in the strictest meanings of these terms.<sup>3</sup> Careful attention was therefore directed toward the literal meaning of the texts, especially in the Antiochene school. However, allegorical interpretations had also entered biblical understanding with the Alexandrian school of thought. The struggle to determine whether the text could or should be read literally or figuratively led Origen to develop the three senses of Scripture, the Literal, Moral, and Spiritual.<sup>4</sup>

The tension between the two schools intensified during the medieval period for many reasons, one of which is language.

Beginning in the ninth century, the “three languages heresy” developed, which stated that God could only be worshipped in Latin, Greek, or Hebrew.<sup>5</sup> To most people, these languages were foreign, which limited biblical interpretation to those who had knowledge of one of these languages. As in the patristic period, the main groups who could read any of the “orthodox” lan-

---

<sup>2</sup> Jean Leclercq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God, A Study of Monastic Culture* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1982), 71.

<sup>3</sup>Bray, 145.

<sup>4</sup> Bray, 147. John Cassian later added the fourth sense, the ‘mystagogical’ or mystical sense.

<sup>5</sup> Bray, 130.

guages were either clergy or scholars. Further, the Christian culture limited the “spiritual” understanding of scriptures to the clergy. This of course excluded the laity in medieval society. Bray says, “The written text conceals a spiritual teaching which only the enlightened can grasp. To the medieval mind, spiritual enlightenment belonged not to scholars but to monks. Scholarship served only the outward form of the text...”<sup>6</sup> So as we can see, the division continued to grow over the argument of how scripture was to be read, on the surface or allegorically (spiritually).

The view of the Old and New Testaments in the Middle Ages came directly from the patristic period. The divisions of the bible were viewed not as books, but “as two periods, two ‘times’ which echo each other...the time of the law (*tempus legis*) and the time of grace (*tempus gratiae*).”<sup>7</sup> The two periods of time were considered to complete each other. The Old Testament led to the New Testament, yet the New Testament finished the story that began in the Old Testament. People in the Middle Ages did not view the Old Testament as a historical document of the Hebrew people, but according to Leclercq the widespread understanding was that the Old Testament was figurative in meaning.

The groundwork to any study of scriptures during the Middle Ages was based upon a study of grammar. Leclercq says, “Since Scripture is a book, one must know how to read it, and learn how to read it just as one learns how to read any other book.”<sup>8</sup> Because the languages (Latin, Greek, and Hebrew) were foreign to many scholars and theologians, they were forced to pay careful attention to the words of the texts. This careful, grammatical analysis took place

---

<sup>6</sup> Bray, 145.

<sup>7</sup> Leclercq, 80.

<sup>8</sup> Leclercq, 72.

whether or not a person took the words to the deeper, allegorical meaning. Because the medieval culture used the Bible as their guidebook, careful supervision of biblical interpretation was needed, “if society was to hold together...”<sup>9</sup>

The *lectio divina* is our first actual method of interpretation, which literally means, “spiritual reading,” or “holy reading.” This reading of the scriptures is dominant throughout the Middle Ages despite some variations toward the Late Middle Ages. Although this term can be used to describe both scholarly and monastic methods, it varies with each group. The monastic tradition, established by St. Jerome and St. Benedict made use of *lectio divina* as a means to read the scripture to receive a lesson.<sup>10</sup> The way that *lectio divina* differs from the scholarly realm, involves the aim and conclusion of the reading of scriptures. Scholars read the scriptures to understand what they are saying and then to appreciate them, while the ultimate goal in monastic culture was compunction, the desire to be with God. Scholars read to understand the form objectively, while monks read for spiritual enlightenment. What was contained on the *sacra pagina*, or “sacred page” had the capacity to reveal truth from God. The concept of *sacra pagina* involved “interpreting the sacred page through understanding, appropriating, and proclaiming Scripture.”<sup>11</sup> To better understand the role of *lectio divina*, Kevin W. Irwin says,

*Lectio* aims to draw out the spiritual meaning of the Scriptures in order for the monk to grow in God’s wisdom revealed through the Word. Thus, the kind of scriptural interpretation on which *lectio* is based is neither scientific nor historical-critical, nor is its reflection on the Word aimed at theological insight (in the modern sense of academic theology). Rather, it aims at disclosing the God who speaks through the Word and at shaping an appropriate response in thought, prayer, and the conduct of one’s life...The monk does not engage in *lectio divina*

---

<sup>9</sup> Bray, 131.

<sup>10</sup> Leclercq, 72.

<sup>11</sup> William T. Flynn, *Medieval Music as Medieval Exegesis* (Lanham, Maryland: The Scarecrow Press, 1999), 6.

for the sake of being intellectually informed or enlightened; rather, he or she engages in *lectio* truly to “listen” and respond to God’s invitation to lead a fuller and richer life illumined by God’s revealed Word and through God’s gracious invitation and action.<sup>12</sup>

Bray gives an explanation of what *lectio divina* entails:

1. It involved spiritual preparation before reading the text. The Bible could be properly read only in an attitude of prayer.
2. It demanded of the reader a quiet receptiveness to the voice of the Holy Spirit, speaking in and through the text. Spiritually minded readers did not question what they read; they listened and obeyed.
3. It demanded a close attention to every detail of the text. Everything in the Bible was put there for our edification, and so failure to listen to it carefully might result in losing some spiritual benefit.
4. It called for a deep appreciation of biblical imagery. *Lectio divina* stretched the imagination to the highest contemplation of God...<sup>13</sup>

In the monastic world, *lectio divina* involved more than just reading the scriptures, as we might understand. The monastic life was a life of contemplation and prayer. The monastic concept of worshipping God involved reading, prayer, and *meditatio* (meditation), and is termed as “meditative prayer” by Leclercq.<sup>14</sup> *Lectio divina* was used on a very broad scale throughout medieval society, yet by the new millennium, other forms of study arose.

The ninth and tenth centuries in Europe provided little development in biblical interpretation. By the year 1000, theologians began the most significant contribution to biblical scholarship of this period, the gloss (*glossa* or *glosa*).<sup>15</sup> Glosses were basically notes that scholars began to write alongside the scriptures to provide some explanation of complex topics. The gloss would compare to the modern day study bibles. Notes began to be written in the margins of the

---

<sup>12</sup> Kevin W. Irwin, “Lectio Divina,” *Encyclopedia of Monasticism*, Volume I, (Chicago and London: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 2000), 751.

<sup>13</sup> Bray, 146-147.

<sup>14</sup> Leclercq, 73.

<sup>15</sup> Bray, 148.

texts, then were written parallel to the scriptures in separate columns. Eventually, glosses were created in separate manuscripts, and their use became more common as parallel sources for biblical interpretation.<sup>16</sup> It was helpful for bible scholars to see the notes of others. Glosses initially held the purpose of explaining the meaning of the texts, but eventually they posed theological questions, (*quaestiones*).<sup>17</sup> The exegetical methods began to transform into innovative ways of exploring the text more freely.

By the thirteenth century, there began to be some reaction to the more liberal interpretations of many medieval Christians. Some demanded that true interpretation still lay in the literal sense of the scriptures, and this is when we see the postill (*postilla*). The postill was similar to the gloss in form, but held a much stricter interpretation of the scriptures. Those who considered glosses to be false accepted the postill, such as Francis of Assisi.<sup>18</sup>

The medieval period of 1000-1300 gave birth to a new way of approaching the scriptures. Corruption within the Roman Catholic Church urged theologians to debate matters of faith and they began to place more emphasis on the literal interpretation of scriptures. Scholars began to combine their Christian faith with reason, creating what is known today as scholasticism. *Lectio divina* was taking on a more practical approach, as the literal sense of scriptures became the basis for solutions to the corruption of the church. Allegorical readings of the scriptures resided only in the monastic communities, and even in the cloister, the imitation of Christ became much more literal than ever before.<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup> Bray, 148.

<sup>17</sup> Bray, 148.

<sup>18</sup> Bray, 152.

<sup>19</sup> Bray, 151-152.

From this point in the medieval society, methods of interpretation began to branch out in different directions. So from here we will take a look at the particular scholars who contributed to a variety of views of interpretation. It is important throughout this study to remember that the newer forms of interpretation all came from the traditional exegetical methods, and had their roots in *lectio divina*.

The most popular monastic figure to this day is Bernard of Clairvaux, who is considered by Jean Leclercq to be the Last of the Fathers. During the 12<sup>th</sup> century, Bernard preferred the allegorical approach to scriptures, and compunction was his ultimate goal. Influenced greatly by the lives of St. Gregory and St. Augustine, St. Bernard fell in love with the Song of Songs, which became the source for most of his writings. St. Bernard, during the twelfth century, “in eighty-six sermons composed over a period of eighteen years, had reached only the beginning of the third chapter.”<sup>20</sup> The images that St. Bernard uses to describe the love of God are derived from the Song of Songs, such as 2:14, “O my dove in the clefts of the rock...Let me see your countenance.”<sup>21</sup> St. Bernard represents better than any medieval personality the desire to find rest in God’s presence, in the cleft of the Rock.<sup>22</sup> The impact of Bernard’s approach to the scriptures stretches throughout the generations to come.

Hugh of St. Victor played a major role in the development of interpretation. “He expanded the *lectio divina* to include a preparatory course of instruction, which was designed to give monks and nuns some background to biblical studies which they could then apply to their

---

<sup>20</sup> Leclercq, 85.

<sup>21</sup> “Song of Solomon” *New King James Version* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1984), 584.

<sup>22</sup> Caleb Wyatt, “Song of Songs,” Research Paper presented to Dr. Donna Ellington in Religion 493 at Gardner-Webb University on November 26, 2003.



spiritual reading.”<sup>23</sup> Hugh attempted to uncover the writings of Jewish interpreters, and his followers, the Victorines did so as well. Hugh represents the transition from faith to reason very well because he allowed for both literal and allegorical approaches to scripture. Later, a Victorine named Peter the Chanter also contributed to interpretation by providing a manual for preaching. Chanter divided the literal sense of the text into three parts: *lectio* (reading), *disputatio* (discussion), and *praedicatio* (preaching).<sup>24</sup> A student of Chanter, Thomas of Chobham further developed the three parts, and he considered preaching to be the highest form of exegesis.<sup>25</sup>

During the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, there arose a movement that was radically new. The Mendicants, as they were called, introduced an entirely new way of following Christ. The word “mendicant” is derived from *mendicus*, which literally means “beggar.” The two main groups of Mendicants, the Dominicans and the Franciscans, became naked to follow the naked Christ, as St. Jerome had stated centuries earlier. Based on the words of St. Jerome in a letter to Rusticus, the Mendicants rejected all of their property and traveled from city to city, preaching the gospel, “to be useful to souls of our neighbors.”<sup>26</sup> The Mendicants lived in poverty as devotion to God, taking literally the biblical instructions of Jesus. The Mendicants rejected even a place to rest their heads to express their longing to grow closer to Christ, and to preach to the people.<sup>27</sup>

---

<sup>23</sup> Bray, 149.

<sup>24</sup> Bray, 150.

<sup>25</sup> Bray, 150.

<sup>26</sup> Simon Tugwell, “The Spirituality of the Dominicans.” *Christian Spirituality: High Middle Ages and Reformation* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1988), 15.

<sup>27</sup> Caleb Wyatt, “Song of Songs.”

One of the most well known members of the Order of Preachers (Dominicans) is Meister Eckhart. In the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries, Eckhart began preaching from the convictions of his mystical devotion. Eckhart believed that any lifestyle was conducive to worshipping God, and he spoke of the union between God and the human soul. The way that Eckhart describes one's relationship with God is that a union blends one's own identity with the Spirit of God. As a mendicant, Eckhart believed that a relationship with God would dissolve one's personal will. Through absolute poverty, a Christian is capable of losing oneself and uniting with God the Father. In "Another Sermon on the Eternal Birth," Eckhart describes God's love as a fisherman's hook. He says, "Without the hook he could never catch a fish, but once the hook is taken the fisherman is sure of the fish."<sup>28</sup> Even though the hook is painful at times, God's love is worth the suffering. Further, Eckhart says, "To hang on this hook is to be so [completely] captured that feet and hands, and mouth and eyes, the heart, and all a man is and has, become God's own."<sup>29</sup> This perfectly describes the compunction of Meister Eckhart; his desire to let go of the world and embrace God.<sup>30</sup>

Around the 12<sup>th</sup> century, another interpretation of a love relationship with God appeared in Christian literature, the theme of Jesus as Mother. Maternal imagery in literature exists in Scripture passages and had been used by Christians for centuries. The early church Fathers, St. Ambrose and St. Augustine had used maternal imagery for God in their works, so it was natural for Christians such as St. Bernard and St. Anselm to use the same language. The reasoning be-

---

<sup>28</sup> Ray C. Petry, Ed. "Another Sermon on the Eternal Birth" *Late Medieval Mysticism*, (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 1957), 191.

<sup>29</sup> Petry, 191.

<sup>30</sup> Caleb Wyatt, "Song of Songs."

hind the use of Jesus or God as a motherly figure, branches from the needs within the Christian community. A mother is one who nurtures, cares, is life giving, and is compassionate. According to Aristotle, who was widely read, children are formed from the mother's blood, and her blood becomes milk for nourishment. The connection then came with the blood of Christ and how it flowed from the cross when He died for Christians. This is the life giving blood. During this time, Christians sought a godly figure that displayed tender affection toward the follower. Further, the theme of Jesus as Mother arose due to the need for monks to establish a union with Jesus Christ. The human form of Christ was obviously male. In order to develop a union with Christ, and especially in their writings, it was more comfortable for the monks to speak of Jesus in a feminine manner. This allowed for an appropriate spiritual marriage between man and Christ.

While the monks made efforts to keep the traditions of the church fathers, others practiced scholasticism. In the 11<sup>th</sup> century, St. Anselm (the Father of Scholasticism) became well known for his meditations and prayers. The ways that St. Anselm approached the study of Scriptures and the existence of God became slightly different than what had been practiced, due to the recovery of Aristotle's work. Anselm is one of the first stepping-stones in a path toward a more logical approach to theology. "Faith seeking understanding," and "I believe in order to understand," became his mottos and he sought to prove theological points by reasoning. This aspect of Anselm was different from his monastic fathers, and St. Anselm proposed "an ontological proof for the existence of God."<sup>31</sup> However, Anselm's devotion displayed the same characteristics of his predecessors. In his work, *Meditation on Human Redemption*, Anselm discusses logically the

---

<sup>31</sup> James E. Reed and Ronnie Prevost, *A History of Christian Education*, (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1993), 130.

original sin and the redemptive processes of Jesus.<sup>32</sup> Even though the faith versus reason debate appeared in the Christian world, Anselm serves as an example that compunction still filled the hearts of Christians.

Peter Abelard also bridged the gap between his faith and reason. Abelard “developed a distinction between the subject-matter (*materia*) of a text and its intention (*sensus*), which enabled him to look for a figurative sense within the literal sense of Scripture.”<sup>33</sup> Many scholars began to believe that the “real” things were the ideas behind the matter. Essentially, if an idea exists, there must be an object. This of course all came to the surface due to the recovery of Aristotle’s works and the study of Plato. A student of Abelard, Peter Lombard, also contributed to the faith versus reason debate. Lombard addressed issues such as the adoption of Christ, and claimed that a person could know God by faith, reason, and God’s works.<sup>34</sup>

In the 13<sup>th</sup> century, Thomas Aquinas, a Dominican, impacted Christianity with his theology. Aquinas was also influenced greatly by the works of Aristotle and Plato. Aquinas view scriptures in a way much different than the monastic fathers, yet did not deny that faith played some role in biblical interpretation. Thomas Aquinas viewed the world as a giant jigsaw puzzle, acknowledging that each piece could only be understood when viewed as a whole.<sup>35</sup> Belief in God is the ultimate aim of all earthly matter, and our model for being placed together as the

---

<sup>32</sup> St. Anselm, *The Prayers and Meditations of St. Anselm*, Sister Benedicta Ward, Translator (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1973), 237.

<sup>33</sup> Bray, 138.

<sup>34</sup> Ralph Keen, *The Christian Tradition* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2004), 146.

<sup>35</sup> Keen, 150.

church is Christ our Lord.<sup>36</sup> So as we can see, biblical interpretation began to blossom into countless possibilities.

One branch of prophetic interpretation that deserves some attention is the work of Joachim of Fiore. In the 13<sup>th</sup> century, Joachim led a movement that prophesied about the second coming of Christ. “Joachim tied political allegory to a universal scheme of redemptive history--the three ages of salvation,” according to Bray.<sup>37</sup> The work of Joachim attempted to link world events to the prophecy of the Bible, linking the Antichrist with Emperor Frederick II.<sup>38</sup> Soon people began to believe that his prophecies were being fulfilled, but this was not a widespread movement. However, there are still traces of this way of interpreting books of the bible with apocalyptic themes, such as Revelation.

The most widely read book during the Middle Ages was the Song of Songs, and we will apply the medieval methods of interpretation to this book. First, we will look at the monastic approach to the Song of Songs. The marriage imagery from the Song of Songs is central to the Christian’s understanding of a relationship with God during the Middle Ages. Song of Songs 2:10 says, “My beloved spoke, and said to me, ‘Rise up my love, my fair one, And come away’” and verse 14, “O my dove in the clefts of the rock...Let me see your countenance.”<sup>39</sup> The words of King Solomon show an intimate love relationship between the bride and bridegroom. It is a love song in which the lover and the beloved search for one another with increasing desire. God calls to his beloved to come and unite with Him in His presence as the Rock. Some medieval Christians desired to answer God’s call into an intimate, marriage relationship by pushing away

---

<sup>36</sup> Keen, 150.

<sup>37</sup> Bray, 152.

<sup>38</sup> Bray, 152.

<sup>39</sup> “Song of Solomon,” 584.

the world while striving toward a perfect marriage with God in heaven.<sup>40</sup> When monks applied *lectio divina* to the Song of Songs, it produced a holy desire to be with God. This was the most common interpretation for this book in the Middle Ages, and many monks devoted their entire life to the interpretation and application of this book to their lives, such as Bernard of Clairvaux.

There were, however, different interpretations of the Song of Songs by those who held a more scholastic approach to scriptures. Medieval scholars viewed the Song of Songs more collectively, as in the relationship of God with the entire Church.<sup>41</sup> Scholars viewed the book as the way that God reveals himself to the Church, and a way that God is present in the world through the Incarnation of Christ.<sup>42</sup> Today, people argue over the meaning of this text with less intensity, but some look at the figurative meaning while others consider this a literal sexual rendezvous and the juiciest part of the Bible! Interestingly, the allegorical approach is still the most commonly understood meaning of this text. So then, this poses the question, should some texts be taken literally and others allegorically?

Some scholars consider the sexual language as the reason for allegorical interpretation. Monasticism created a tension between the celibate monks and the sexually explicit nature of the text. It was quite uncomfortable for a monk to exegete a passage of scripture about the sexual union of a couple. Therefore, it must be referring to the future marriage relationship with God in heaven. Others suggest that this book is written in a way that invites the allegorical interpretation.

---

<sup>40</sup> Caleb Wyatt, "Song of Songs."

<sup>41</sup> Leclercq, 84.

<sup>42</sup> Leclercq, 84.

## CONCLUSION

The Middle Ages represent a time of growth in the understanding of biblical interpretation. Despite arguments, medieval culture did in fact contribute positively to the way we view the bible today. Perhaps no other time period was more engulfed in efforts to understand the bible. Beginning with the *lectio divina* of the *sacra pagina*, monks and scholars began to branch out in exploration of new methods of interpretation. Others chose to follow the tradition methods passed on from the patristic period. Glosses appeared as a way to explain complex passages of scriptures, followed by the postill, a direct reaction to the glosses. By the year 1300, scholasticism had taken root, and it affected the way that Christians worldwide viewed the scriptures. The Song of Songs serves as a great example however, that both literal and spiritual understandings of scriptures will always be present in Christianity.

## WORKS CITED

- Bray, Gerald. *Biblical Interpretation Past & Present*. Downer's Grove, Illinois: Inter-Varsity Press, 1996.
- Flynn, William T. *Medieval Music as Medieval Exegesis*. Lanham, Maryland: The Scarecrow Press, 1999.
- Irwin, Kevin W. "Lectio Divina," *Encyclopedia of Monasticism*, Volume I. Chicago and London: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 2000.
- Keen, Ralph. *The Christian Tradition*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2004.
- Leclercq, Jean. *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God, A Study of Monastic Culture*. New York: Fordham University Press, 1982.
- Petry, Ray C., Ed. "Another Sermon on the Eternal Birth" *Late Medieval Mysticism*, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 1957.
- Reed, James E. and Ronnie Prevost. *A History of Christian Education*. Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1993.
- "Song of Solomon." *New King James Version*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1984.
- Tugwell, Simon. "The Spirituality of the Dominicans." *Christian Spirituality: High Middle Ages and Reformation*. New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1988.
- Ward, Sister Benedicta, Translator. "St. Anselm." *The Prayers and Meditations of St. Anselm*, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1973.
- Wyatt, Caleb. "Song of Songs." Research Paper presented to Dr. Donna Ellington in Religion 493 at Gardner-Webb University on November 26, 2003.