

Bibles: Reading Scripture from Medieval to Early Modern

Alex Reynolds and Jennifer Bartlett, The University of York

With its rich backdrop of eighteenth-century architecture and its impressive dockland structures, Liverpool is not a city that immediately associates itself with medieval history. Nevertheless, for their third one-day conference, *Bibles: Reading Scripture from Medieval to Early Modern*, the Society for the Study of Medieval Languages and Literature headed to the University of Liverpool's Centre for Medieval and Renaissance Studies. Although the King James Bible has been the version hitting the headlines this year, the conference offered new ways of exploring the preceding Biblical tradition. The differing approaches to this theme ranged from discussions of exegetical and political contexts, to reading strategies and instructional practices; from examining textual devices to uncovering translation problems of multilingual Biblical rhetoric.

Dr Damien Kempf (University of Liverpool) got the ball rolling with his opening reflections on "Canon, Meaning and Authority", questioning the concept of textual fixity, the very notion of "the" Bible, and consequently hermeneutical openness in scriptural exegesis. These issues were further probed by Dr Gerda Heydemann (Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, Vienna) in her paper "*In uberis autem serendis mira potentia: Cassiodorus' rhetorical exegesis and the context(s) of the Expositio Psalmorum.*" Dr Heydemann argued for the simultaneous yet separate existence of "Cassiodorus the exegete" and "Cassiodorus the politician" in his Psalter commentaries. Heydemann's paper investigated this bifold character in relation to the duality of Cassiodorus' classical rhetoric, a duality which she concluded was exposed and sustained by the author's exegetical techniques.

The (to us) surprisingly free and playful adaptation of scripture proved to be a common theme as, after a brief coffee break, we headed into Professor Mayke de Jong's investigation of "Political Polemics and the Biblical Past in the Carolingian World." Opening with the historical context of Book II of the *Epitaphum Arsenii*, Professor de Jong (Universiteit Utrecht) continued by revealing the intriguing uses to which Radbertus has put the Book of Job, subtly sprinkling references throughout his "tell-all" biography, editing and moulding the verses to both confer authority and inspire a more intimate, personal response.

Such compelling suggestions were continued in the paper "Lay Readers of the Bible in the Ninth Century" by Professor Jinty Nelson (King's College, London). Professor Nelson's discussion was threefold, beginning with an investigation of the scriptural texts as "mirrors for princes", then investigating the exegetical participation of the female lay reader, before finally presenting the problems of vernacular translation. Her paper integrated these topics into a broader discussion of the complex spectrum of reading ability in the laity, and the ways in which different literary cultures are combined in exegesis to achieve indoctrination of Biblical material through a universal language.

Removing all possibility of sinking into that fatal post-lunch torpor were Dr Cornelia Linde (University College, London) and Dr Eva de Visscher (Oriental College, Oxford), who plunged us straight into the knotty problems faced by medieval Hebraic exegeses. Dr Linde's paper, "A Twelfth-Century Primer on Reading the Bible: Nicolaus Maniacutia's *Suffraganeus bibliotece*" approached Maniacutia's primer as a "beginner's guide" to the Old Testament and the Hebrew Bible. She revealed Maniacutia's pursuit of the most authoritative version of the Bible as one which is frustrated by manuscript errors – errors which Maniacutia himself identified as a direct result of the various processes of transcription, translation and transmission. Linde argued that Maniacutia's text was created for a readership still struggling with Latin and with little knowledge of Hebrew, but her paper also highlighted the ways in which Maniacutia's work is limited for all his introductory claims of accessibility. Maniacutia's exegetical processes erase alternative scriptural readings and origins; despite his apparent adoption of an active role in the instruction of his readers, his ad verbatim exegesis of Hebraic material in *Suffraganeus* transforms his authorial position into a passive station, recreating him as a mere consumer of sources written by other scholars.

Dr Eva de Visscher's paper also approached the question of directed reading and interpretive control in relation to the exegesis of Hebraic scripture. "The Problem with Knowing Hebrew: Christian Hebraists and biblical translation in High Medieval England" examined Herbert of Bosham's works as examples of Christian attempts to interpret Jewish material. Dr de Visscher compared two manuscripts, noting especially the relocation of Hebraic cross-references from margins of the first text into the main paragraphs of the second document. De Visscher thus highlighted the transformation of Hebraic material from the typographically and ideologically marginal in earlier documents into the central feature of later exegeses. This specific comparison was interrogated by de Visscher's discussion of the incorporation of Hebrew into the universal curriculum; a process which she argued generates a series of questions surrounding methods of Christian learning, the dangers of mistranslation, and issues of "correctness" in the interpretation of lexical meaning.

Dr Eyal Poleg (University of Edinburgh) then led us from the late Medieval and into the Early Modern for the final session with his provocatively titled "Wycliffite Bibles as Orthodoxy." Dr Poleg began with an identification of the disjunction between the Lollard negation of oath and the Wycliffite Bibles' textual apparatus (which is, unlike Continental vernacular versions, almost identical to that of an orthodox Latin Bible). With this in mind, Poleg suggested that Wycliffite Bibles featured heavily in the sixteenth-century attempt to incorporate new exegetical techniques into the Latin tradition. However, his paper also described the divergences between the different corpora; the traditional Latin glossary of Hebrew names for example, present in sixty per cent of Latin Bibles, does not feature in Wycliffite versions. Similarly, while the more orthodox Psalters do not use chapter numbers, Wycliffite manuscripts include numbered headings alongside each psalm's original Latin

incipit. Dr Poleg argued that these respective similarities and divergences within Wycliffite scripture are positioned within the response of orthodox clerics and families to fiscal limitations. He proposed that – in later years – concern for the bottom line, as well as for the edification of the laity, generated the increased circulation of these manuscripts.

“English Catholics, the Reformation and the Bible” by Dr Lucy Wooding (King’s College, London) concluded this series of diverse and challenging papers. Dr Wooding discussed the Biblical Revival in the Tudor environment in connection with medieval exegeses’ performative nature, imagery replication and notions of “correct” rhetoric.

Dr Wooding explored Henry VIII’s rhetorical attempts to reinforce his self-identification as a humanist. As such, she described Henrician exegesis as a process which encouraged Bible reading, in order not only to generate spiritual revelation but also as part of a reinforcement of social order. Dr Wooding illustrated this argument with specific examples of Tudor manuscripts, focussing on Henry’s self-endorsement. In one Biblical frontispiece, for example, Henry's image replaces the figure of Christ, displaying an interconnection of the ideas of divine majesty and human government. Wooding evaluated such images in relation to Tudor Catholics' openness to printing and imagery replication, as opposed to Tudor Protestant neglect of such details. These ideas were also discussed in their correlation with contemporary instructional methods; Dr Wooding argued that those who wished to survive as members of Tudor society swallowed and regurgitated “correct” rhetoric, but did not necessarily engage with its rhetorical lessons.

The conference’s closing Roundtable discussion, chaired by Dr Harold Braun (University of Liverpool), gave speakers and audience members alike a moment of retrospection, in order to identify the various strands that unite these contextually diverse papers. The nature of spiritual authority and its translation into textual authority was clearly a recurrent theme, but issues of reader naivety or ignorance, the parallels between the teacher/devotee and the parent/child relationship, and the typographical placement of words as mnemonic cues were also consistently resonant. Perhaps the most compelling aspect of the day’s proceedings involved the opportunity to engage with various Biblical texts as metamorphic resources. Unfortunately for Nicolaus Maniacutia, the SSMLL's "Bibles" conference was unable to identify a single authoritative scriptural version – but that this dilemma *is* unresolvable is surely what makes such discussion truly intriguing. The opportunity this experience provided, then, to investigate this unresolvable exegetical diversity in a lively and inquisitive space, created a very memorable and undeniably inspiring event.