

## Lecture Eleven

### Monasteries and Manuscripts

**Scope:** Throughout the Middle Ages, both in the East and West, Bibles were produced by means of scribal copying in monasteries. This lecture discusses the social settings and practices that provided a context for such scribal activities and the ways in which the copying of manuscripts expressed both religious and artistic impulses. The paradox of the medieval monastery is that the intense and technical work of the scriptorium was not where the Bible was actually experienced most vividly: Monks lived within a Scripture-shaped world of liturgical prayer, poetry, and song, and it was in such oral-aural expressions of the Bible that medieval Christian piety was most powerfully displayed.

### Outline

- I. A key role in the history of Christianity and in the story of the Bible was played by monasteries.
  - A. Monasteries are intentional religious communities organized around worship and work and dedicated to a life of full discipleship.
    1. Earliest monasticism in the East (Syria and Egypt) was intensely ascetical and took an eremitic or semi-eremitic form. The focus tended to be on the extraordinary ascetic.
    2. In the West, following the lead of John Cassian and, especially, Benedict of Nursia, monasticism was coenobitic. The emphasis was on the common life more than on the individual.
    3. From the 5<sup>th</sup> to the 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, monasteries were the most vibrant centers of Christian life both in the East and West.
  - B. Because of their attention to “prayer and work” (*Ora et Labora*, *Rule of Saint Benedict*), monasteries in the West played a number of critical social roles in addition to the strictly religious.
    1. Monastic schools enabled the teaching of grammar and rhetoric, as well as the higher arts.
    2. Monasteries preserved and extended the crafts of agriculture, both within and outside the cloister.

3. Monasteries were islands of relative literacy and of strict order in a world where illiteracy reigned and civilization was fragile.
- C. As monasteries grew in size and prosperity (as their industry and reception of benefits enabled them to grow), they became virtual cities and centers for the production and preservation of biblical manuscripts.
1. In the East, such sites as Mt. Athos (with its 20 monasteries dating to the 10<sup>th</sup> century) and the monastery of Saint Catherine on Mt. Sinai (6<sup>th</sup> century) were capable of copying and storing manuscripts.
  2. In the West, Cluny (10<sup>th</sup> century) eventually stood at the head of more than 1,000 other monasteries, and Monte Cassino (founded by Benedict, c. 529) was famous for its size and its scriptorium.
- II. Benedictine monks sought to live in imitation of biblical saints and spent much of their lives immersed in the Bible.
- A. The basic structure of the monastic life imitated the apostolic church described in Acts 2 and 4.
1. Obedience to the *Rule* and the abbot, the sharing of possessions, and devotion to the life of prayer were all ways of radical discipleship.
  2. Virtually every aspect of the monastic day (silence, work, meals, times of prayer, the vows) was supported by reference to Scripture.
- B. The meaning of “work and prayer” was distinct for *choir monks* and *lay brothers*.
1. Choir monks spent more than four hours a day performing the *Opus Dei*, made solemn vows, were ordained as priests, and received an appropriate education. Their “work” was correspondingly more intellectual in character.
  2. Lay brothers made simple vows, had a less arduous form of prayer, and spent longer hours in manual labor to sustain the community’s economic life.
- C. The recitation (singing) of the *Opus Dei* in Latin organized the life of the choir monk.
1. The day was divided into eight “hours” of prayer in common: Matins, Lauds, Prime, Terce, Sext, None, Vespers, Compline.

2. During these hours, the central prayers were the Psalms; the entire Psalter was recited each week, with some psalms repeated many times. New Testament canticles formed part of Lauds, Vespers, and Compline.
3. During the longest session (Matins), monks also listened to sermons and treatises concerning the Bible drawn from “the fathers” (Basil, Augustine, Ambrose, Gregory the Great).
4. Daily celebration of the Eucharist (the Mass) was also part of the choir monk’s day—usually in private at a side altar—and engaged Scripture in still another format.

D. *Lectio Divina* (“Holy Reading”) either of Scripture or of patristic literature was the basis for monastic contemplation and prayer.

III. The “love of learning and the desire for God” (Jean LeClercq) came together in the work of the monastic scriptorium: Everything was done by hand!

- A. The life of choir monks demanded the production of a considerable number of distinct books (in large communities, in large numbers) simply to carry out “the work of God.”
  1. Psalters were required for the recitation of the Psalms, at least one for every three monks and needing replacement frequently because of use.
  2. Lectionaries (organized according to the liturgical year) were used for the public reading of Scripture in the divine office and at Mass.
  3. Graduals and antiphonals guided the singing of responses and versicles during the office and at Mass.
- B. In addition to all these manuscripts for the continuing prayer life of the community, trained scribes gave their talents to the copying of biblical manuscripts.
  1. Such copying was a combination of intellectual and manual labor, carried out with devotion in less than comfortable circumstances.
  2. Throughout the medieval period, monks copied both Greek and Latin manuscripts of the Bible, continuing the practice even after the invention of printing (some biblical manuscripts date from the 17<sup>th</sup> century).

3. At the same time, monks made copies of other literature, both sacred and profane, including such compilations of commentaries as the *glossa ordinaria* (mid-12<sup>th</sup> century).
- C. Monasteries were natural repositories for manuscripts and developed extensive manuscript libraries that were available for looting with the dissolution of many monasteries during the Reformation.

IV. The monastic scriptorium also provided the setting for two expressions of art centered on the Bible.

- A. Ingenious and often profound interpretations of biblical texts were developed literarily in the composition of antiphons and responses, and these were, in turn, deepened through musical expression in Gregorian chant.
- B. Scribes developed the art of biblical illumination, using the copying of manuscripts as a medium for sometimes astonishing expressions of beauty (as in the Book of Kells).

### **Essential Reading:**

J. LeClercq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God: A Study of Monastic Culture*, translated by C. Misrahi.

### **Supplementary Reading:**

B. Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages*.

### **Questions to Consider:**

1. How do medieval monasteries illustrate the symbiotic features of “oral/scribal” culture?
2. Discuss the ways in which monastic “work and prayer”—especially for choir monks—created a life centered in the Bible.