

Lecture Thirteen

Interpretation in Medieval Christianity

Scope: Christian biblical interpretation in the medieval period was carried out through commentaries but also through a variety of liturgical expressions, as well as homilies and theological writings. This lecture sketches some of those ritual and literary forms and identifies some of the overarching premises governing biblical interpretation that had developed since the birth of Christianity. Of special interest is the conviction that the Bible bears meaning, not simply as a literal witness of the past, but as a voice that speaks to the present through a variety of “spiritual” senses.

Outline

- I. More than at any time before or after, Christianity was biblically shaped during the medieval period.
 - A. The Bible was critical in the patristic period (3rd–6th centuries), but interpretation was carried out in lively exchange with Greco-Roman culture and Judaism.
 - B. From the Reformation to the modern period, the Bible has been important, but its place has been controversial.
 - C. In the Middle Ages, Christians lived in a world that was shaped most powerfully by Scripture.
 1. Christians in Europe were isolated from competing great cultures of the world.
 2. Islam was regarded as a threat from without, whose intellectual challenge only slowly became clear.
 3. Judaism was considered to be a “biblical people” whose failure to recognize Jesus as Messiah removed them from a central place in the biblical story.
- II. Before the invention of printing, the experience of the Bible story was less individual and direct than it was communal and indirect.
 - A. In the liturgy, Scripture was primarily an oral/aural experience of the gathered community.

1. The monks frequently memorized the Psalter even though they had the texts before them in the stalls; other readings (at Matins) were heard rather than seen.
 2. At Mass, the words of prayer and Scripture were heard as read from a lectionary, and then elaborated through a homily.
- B.** The symbols of Scripture organized the time and space of monks and laypeople in complex ways.
1. The stages of life were marked by the sacraments, and the stages of a single year were marked by liturgical seasons: The temporal cycle followed the biblical story, and the sanctoral cycle, the feasts of saints; the times of day were marked by the hours of prayer.
 2. Places were sacred because of their association with a holy person or event: Pilgrimages, crusades, and the use of relics all testify to the connection between place and power.
 3. The great medieval cathedrals gave expression to the biblical stories through the ornamentation of the choir, statuary, and above all, the stained-glass windows.
 4. Before the development of science, technology, and critical history, it was possible to “imagine the biblical world” in the context of the actual empirical world of everyday life.
- C.** The more direct and individual experience of “reading the Bible” was available to those who were literate and whose work required them to engage the biblical text (almost exclusively the Latin of the Vulgate).
1. In monasteries, those choir monks who worked in the scriptorium or who served as abbots, priors, or novice masters needed to interpret Scripture in order to teach or preach.
 2. Similarly, great cathedrals had *chapters* (organizations) that met for instruction and gave instruction through attached schools.
 3. In such contexts were composed and copied the medieval scriptural commentaries, homilies, and spiritual writings.
 4. The Abbey of Saint Victor in Paris (1113) was a center for mystics and scholars, including Hugh (d. c. 1142) and Richard (d. 1173).
- D.** The medieval universities (Bologna, Paris, Oxford) that arose in the 12th and 13th centuries represented a more professional and “scientific” study of Scripture.

1. The Bible was the chief source book for the “science” of theology, which was, in turn, the “queen of the sciences.”
2. The shift from the monastic *sacra pagina* to Scholasticism involved both social setting and approach to the text (e.g., Thomas Aquinas).

III. Although the Bible was interpreted through multiple media in the medieval period, there was also an enormous body of literature devoted explicitly to interpretation.

- A.** The governing premise of all interpretation was that Scripture revealed God’s Word to humans.
1. The conviction that all of Scripture was divinely inspired meant that God was regarded as the ultimate author, even though human authorship was acknowledged.
 2. Connected to inspiration was the sense of the Bible’s authority: The task of human reason was to discover what God said (however cryptically), rather than to challenge what the text said.
- B.** Given that God was the author of all of Scripture, then the Bible must speak in a unified and harmonious fashion.
1. The Old Testament and New Testament told a single story, which was also the story of the Bible’s readers.
 2. The Old Testament found its meaning through the “fulfillment of prophecy” in the story of Jesus and the Church.
 3. The “moral laws” of the Old Testament were maintained in the New, whereas the “ritual laws”—like the events of the past—found continuing meaning as “types” of Christian sacraments and life.
 4. The Bible spoke harmoniously within itself and was also harmonious with the Church’s tradition; thus, interpretation must seek the deeper harmonies beneath the apparent discrepancies and disagreements on the surface of the text.
- C.** Because God was the author of Scripture, every text of the Bible could yield meaning at one of several levels.
1. The literal or historical meaning gave the basic story, and for Christians, unlike Jews, this sense was the least interesting, especially in the case of the Old Testament.
 2. The allegorical sense enabled Scripture (even in the Old Testament) to speak about Christ and the Church.

3. The tropological sense enabled the Bible to speak to the moral life and to the soul's progress toward God.
 4. The anagogical sense applied the Scripture to heavenly realities.
- D. Because Christian identity in this period was so grounded in shared practices and social structures, biblical interpretation—especially in monasteries and chapters—tended to be linked to wisdom and spirituality. In the universities, by contrast, Scripture became a tool for controversy, against both Jews and Muslims.

Essential Reading:

F. M. Young, *Biblical Exegesis and the Transformation of Christian Culture*.

Supplementary Reading:

H. de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis: The Four Senses of Scripture*.

Questions to Consider:

1. Compare and contrast the fourfold levels of meaning that Christians found in the Bible to the perspectives of medieval Jews.
2. How did the way of life in monasteries and cathedral chapters affect the manner in which the Bible was read?