Approaching the Bible in Medieval England

Many books on topics related to the medieval Bible have appeared in recent years, usually collections of essays by different authors, and a lot of them have been disappointing in their lack of overall focus and variable scholarly quality. The volume under review in the Manchester Medieval Studies series is a single-author work with a clear aim, and is rigorously scholarly throughout. Its title is ambiguous. Is it an account of how people in medieval England approached the Bible, or is it a guide to how we might today approach the topic of the Bible in medieval England? It turns out to be predominantly the former, but at the same time it promotes a challenging methodology which will interest all who work in this very broad and dauntingly complex field. At first glance, the four long chapters cover widely differing topics: the Bible and liturgy, the Bible as talisman, biblical ‘paratext’, and the preaching of the Bible. In fact, it is the ‘multimedia’ approach that is the point of the book, as Poleg explains in his introduction. His theme is ‘mediation’, how the Bible (the Latin Vulgate) was mediated to its audiences in a variety of different but closely interrelated ways – oral, performative and material. The point is that the complexity of the Bible itself is paralleled by the complexity of its transmission and reception.

The first chapter (‘The Bible and liturgy’) explores the process by which the biblical narratives are recreated in the liturgy by means of elaborations, additions and interpretations, which thereby shape the medieval audience’s knowledge of biblical events. Poleg concentrates on the rituals of Easter and shows how liturgical re-enactment’s are grounded in the local landscape. The ‘locating’ of the Palm Sunday presentation of Christ’s entry into Jerusalem, for instance, involves clergy and congregation processing through the city gates or around the outside of the church. Among the paraphernalia of the ritual are the all-important ‘palms’ which are to be carried by the people. If you were high enough in the various social or clerical hierarchies, you got a genuine imported palm; if not, you made do with other foliage, such as yew or willow. (The present writer vividly remembers as a small schoolboy processing in and around the school building waving branches of ‘pussy’ willow). A particularly interesting section of this chapter deals with a manuscript fragment relating to the staging of the events of the third station of the cross during the Easter processions. Among various Latin texts in the manuscript is a speech in Middle English verse, ostensibly from the mouth of Caiaphas the high priest, who figures in the Gospel of John prophesying about Christ. (The form of the high-priest’s name used by Poleg – perhaps also in the manuscript? – is consistently Caiphas.) The speech, heavily influenced, as Poleg shows, by the commentary of William Durand, and given a light-hearted and
even comical tone, is an allegorical exposition that links the liturgical paraphernalia of Palm Sunday with the personal devotion of the audience. Poleg surmises that this vernacular intervention survives from a wider but now almost invisible tradition. I am sure he is right and would love to know more about the circumstances of both composition and use. Poleg’s statement that the format allows ‘biblical allusion alongside comic performance’ (p. 41) seems to me to raise more questions than it answers. How are we to envisage such a performance, and where? And is there any connection between this text and the mystery plays, which it resembles in its popular tone? As I recall, several of the play-cycles include episodes featuring Caiaphas (presented, however, as an unpleasant persecutor, not a prophet).

Chapter two (‘The Bible as talisman’) is about the symbolic value of Bibles as sacred objects. The term most often used in the records to describe the biblical book as icon is textus, which would conventionally be a copy of the Gospels. Although clearly the talismanic power of a book derives originally from the power of the text within it, ultimately the material object itself is venerated. This process had both secular and religious dimensions, which Poleg describes as a ‘single story’, in the sense that the sacred books lent ‘an aura of sacrality’ to both civil and religious spectacles (p. 91), and he notes a close affinity between oath-taking ritual and the ritual of the liturgy. In the performance of the Mass, the ceremonial carrying in of the Gospels, followed by the laying on the altar and the blessing (still everyday rituals, of course, in Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox worship), reflected their core place in Christian doctrine. The kissing of the book at the end of the reading by the deacon had a special symbolism and delineated a boundary between clergy and laity. Poleg digs out much intriguing information about the iconography of textus and their association with relics, ranging across the records of Glastonbury, Canterbury and Salisbury, among others. The evidence for the textus in oath-taking is to be found primarily in legal documents but also in literary sources, such as Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales. Elaborate procedures for oath-taking in courts of law by Jews were set out, too, in which they would use their own iconic artefacts, usually scrolls. To what extent oath-rituals using scared books would (or do) actually ‘instil fear in the hearts of potential perjurers’, as Poleg puts it (p. 93), is an interesting question. At what point does that potential fear itself become a merely symbolic emotion, just as the sacred artefact itself becomes divorced from the truth of the text within it?

The third chapter (‘Paratext and meaning’) discusses the ways in which book-sequence and the choice of prologues and glosses, as well as the work of scribes, rubricators and illuminators (all of which items Poleg includes in the term ‘paratext’) themselves constitute a form of mediation of the Bible. Crucial here is the increasing production, from the start of the 13th century, of single-volume Bibles in a manageable size – ‘the first mass-produced pandect’ (p. 140). The origin of these was Paris, where developments in exegesis influenced also their contents, including the sequence of books (the historical order of the Septuagint was preferred) and the use of chapter-division to facilitate study. The spread of these ‘new’ practical and utilitarian bibles, whose basic features survive in our Bibles to this day, was rapid, helped by itinerant preaching friars. Poleg here invokes the title ‘The Latin Medieval Bible’ to label the bulk of the biblical manuscripts copied between 1230 and 1450. He justifies such an inclusive and ostensibly reductive term by pointing to what he calls ‘the staggering paratextual uniformity in script and addenda, mise-en-page and textual division’ shown by these Bibles (p. 111), such that it is hard sometimes to tell one from another. His comparative research is therefore based on 56 Bibles of the several hundred available (still a huge number), chosen, we are told, ‘at random’ – though the range of date, origin and provenance shown in the list of them suggests to me that some selection criteria must have been in play. Almost in passing, Poleg states that the uniformity of these volumes includes ‘text’, as well as paratext, an idea which I found challenging (as an historian of the text of the Latin Bible, albeit mostly at an earlier period). It would be interesting to know by what sort of sampling method this textual uniformity has been ascertained, given the general instability of the Vulgate text in the centuries before Trent, and the fact that the Bibles under investigation derive from a period of 200 years of copying and re-copying.

Poleg’s main argument is that the variety of tools offered by them made these Bibles self-sufficient for study and preaching: glossaries, tables, diagrams, and calendars (crucial of course for the liturgy). It is clear that their uniformity was in fact relative, residing primarily in layout rather than in the chosen addenda, which were ‘varied and versatile’ and could accommodate Bibles to ‘personal taste’ and make them appropriate for
‘classroom, pulpit or lectern’ (p. 112). It would be interesting to know what were the logistics and mechanics of ordering and acquiring what one might call a ‘bespoke’ volume. Poleg reveals much of great interest in relation to layout: how non-canonical books received a different treatment from canonical books, for instance. Psalms were a special case, always in a way a ‘foreign element’ in the biblical corpus (p. 131), and were given more of a liturgical treatment in their presentation; the origin of the superscriptions provided for them, which attracted exegesis in their own right, is something of a mystery. One of the most popular addenda, found in two thirds of Poleg’s sampled manuscripts, is the Interpretations of Hebrew Names, a work originating with Jerome’s Liber interpretationis but much enlarged and containing in its longest version more than 5000 names of Hebrew, Aramaic or Greek origin, arranged (in the most developed versions) alphabetically. It was treated as a sort of key for deciphering the mysteries of the biblical text and did much to facilitate the trend towards asserting the primacy of text which characterised later medieval exegesis. Little work on the Interpretations has been done to date, but Poleg has found that as many as a fifth of the words in the longest versions do not in fact occur in the Vulgate text.

In his fourth and final chapter (‘Preaching and the Bible’), Poleg explores ‘the interplay between authority and contextualisation, between Bible, audience, and preacher’ (p. 153). In the later medieval period, the regular homiletic sermon – built round a pericope which was read in full and then expounded in detail – gave way to a more intricate and elaborate sermon based usually on only a snippet of text, the thema, which might be a phrase or even a single word. This change must be viewed in parallel with changes in the form of the Late Medieval Bible, including the use of chapter divisions and the appending of the above-mentioned Interpretations of Hebrew Names, which offered inexhaustible material for the preacher. To illustrate his theme, Poleg analyses three sermons written for Advent Sunday between the early 13th and later 14th centuries, using them to show the astonishing ingenuity of the preachers. For them, the Bible was a means to an end, that of imparting doctrine and moral truth, and their work illustrates the decisive shift away from the biblical narratives themselves to the minutiae of text. Rather than treat contradictions in the gospel narratives as problems to solve, as textual scholars do – how many animals did the disciples fetch for Christ’s entry into Jerusalem, an ass and a colt (Matthew) or just an ass (the other gospels)? – they formulated wonderfully creative solutions involving alternative mystical or allegorical interpretations. Poleg gives a real sense of the performative qualities of the sermons and I found his account of them hugely entertaining. The preachers were a self-promoting and self-justifying bunch, by all accounts, presenting the act of preaching as following in the footsteps of Christ and his apostles. The vainglory of preachers would be one of the targets of the Wycliffites, though Poleg argues that in fact Wyclif himself used the same sermon form as those he criticised.

This volume is liberally supplied with ancillary material of various kinds, including a section of seven excellently reproduced colour plates (though I wish that some indication of scale had been given for each plate). A chart of the contents of the 56 Bibles analysed by Poleg is of great value also, given that so little systematic information about these volumes is available, but it is rather hard to use, as the column headings are given only on the first page and it is hard to remember, as we turn subsequent pages, what they are. The bibliography is full and up-to-date, and there is an index of the manuscripts discussed in the book. As for the general index, I do wish the publishers had been more generous with space; four pages are simply not enough for a book of such density of material. On general presentation, some more thorough copyediting, especially in chapter three, would have been useful, to iron out various stylistic problems. Although this is another matter out of the control of the author, I do find end-of-chapter notes tiresome in a scholarly volume in which the notes are such an integral part of the whole endeavour; the foot of the page is the place for them, in my view, however long they are. Whatever the position of the notes, the translations of the very many Latin citations in this work should surely have been put on the page, immediately after the original texts. Only a tiny number of today’s readers will be able to cope with Latin and they will be forced to turn repeatedly to the end of the chapter, sometimes several times in the course of reading a single page. Once located, the translations will be found to be generally clear, though I disagreed with the details of some of them. For instance, although I am not familiar with the Latin usage of later medieval England, I would assume that de cetero, used in a 14th-century court submission cited on p. 77, and translated ‘of the others’,
is in fact an adverbial phrase. My guess is that it is used as it is in the Vulgate New Testament epistles, where it translates Greek ??? ?????? and may be rendered in English as ‘for the rest’, ‘besides’ or ‘finally’.

A virtue of this volume is that it provokes a torrent of questions in the reader, some of which I have iterated above. Another that I was left with concerns an aspect of the ‘medieval Bible’ in England which was not within Poleg’s remit, though it is in a sense adumbrated in his analysis of the ‘Caiaphas’ passage noted above. In the introductory chapter (p. 6), he notes the rarity of vernacular scripture and comments that this ‘language gap’ increased ‘the laity’s reliance on visual, performative, and oral media’ – that is, the sort of approaches that are the subject of this book. He states, however, that ‘[b]y the end of the fourteenth century English was beginning to occupy a prominent place in culture and society’, and affirms (as he does again in the concluding chapter) the role of the Wycliffite (or Lollard) Bible in this. There are two points I would make in response to this. First, English as a literary medium was in fact both prominent and pre-eminent long before the end of the 14th century; there is an ample and multi-faceted literature to prove it. Second, although it is true that there was almost no direct translation of the Bible into the vernacular before the Wycliffites, we simply cannot ignore the astonishingly large and varied corpus of Bible-based vernacular works which had begun to appear from the very early years of the 13th century onwards, under ecclesiastical influence (largely in response to the demands of the Lateran Council of 1215 for a more proactive approach to educating the laity in spiritual discipline). They included universal Bible histories (Poleg mentions one of these, the Cursor mundi), metrical paraphrases of Old Testament biblical books, devotional texts, versions of the Psalms, Gospel narratives (canonical and apocryphal), and so on. James Morey’s description of all these as cumulatively constituting a ‘Middle English Bible’ (1) is in my view justified. Many were based on, or at least inspired by, Comestor’s Historia scholastica. This is not to question the fundamental importance to both laity and clergy of the Bible mediations that Poleg analyses but to wonder whether the ‘Middle English Bible’ should not be seen as a parallel process of mediation, or perhaps as some sort of substitute. Were the audiences different? Some of the texts to which I allude were for private meditation but most were certainly composed for public (oral) performance, yet we know little about where and when, and the authors, who certainly had a thorough knowledge of the Latin Bible, are invisible. To my mind, then, this ‘Middle English Bible’ needs to be incorporated in, or at least squared with, Poleg’s multimedia structure of biblical mediation.

The ambition of this book is something that struck me only in retrospect: it tackles, with great assurance, a massive range of material, and the ample and often absorbing notes testify to the depth of its author’s scholarship. Particularly illuminating are the regular passages in which general observations are anchored to specific historical events or personalities. The volume makes an important contribution to our understanding of the use of the Bible in medieval England and its most lasting effect, as I have indicated, is to provoke questions and prompt a host of ideas for further research.

Notes


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