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Frans van Liere, *An Introduction to the Medieval Bible*

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Errata

I noted a few mechanical errors in passing, which I give here in case some of them might be remedied in future printings of this significant and valuable work. The levels of the headings in chapter 3, “The Earliest Translations of the Bible into Arabic,” have a few problems: The second subheading on p. 106 (“Reports on Bible Translations”) should probably be styled one level lower, like that on p. 108, while the subheading on p. 122 (“Earliest Jewish Translations of the Bible into Arabic”) should be styled one level higher (also like that on p. 108).

I also noted a few typographical errors, though I make no claim to being thorough in this regard:

p. 43, l. 14: The “in fact” here is redundant.

p. 44, l. 14: “in an early Islamic texts” should read “in early Islamic texts.”

p. 102, l. 16: “these development” should be “these developments.”

p. 147, n. 72: “Aziz Z. Atiya” should be “Aziz S. Atiya.”

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Frans van Liere. *An Introduction to the Medieval Bible*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014.

Reviewed by Carl Griffin

SOME NEW BOOKS FILL SUCH a clear need that it is a wonder they were not written sooner. This is one of them: Frans van Liere’s *An Introduction to the Medieval Bible*. The Bible in the Middle Ages is a subject of intense study in a number of different fields, including history, literature, and religion. This is no obscure topic. But while this book has clear antecedents, there is no other today quite like it. It is concise but

comprehensive, thick with detail but always readable. It is a perfect first book on the Christian Bible in the West from late antiquity to the Protestant Reformation.

Like many good subject introductions, this one was born from want of an adequate textbook. Van Liere teaches classes on the medieval Bible at Calvin College (Grand Rapids, Michigan) and has regretted the lack of a suitable introduction. He remedies that with his own book and also addresses some vexing popular misconceptions. He notes that, like many biblical scholars, his Protestant students often struggle to see any value in premodern readings of the Bible. This is often based in a lack of hermeneutical awareness (the Bible means “just what it says”) and in an “unfortunate banalization of the Protestant notion of the ‘sufficiency of scripture’” (p. xii). They too often accept the common viewpoint that “the ‘real’ history of the Bible was that of the Greek and Hebrew text of the Bible and of its recovery in the Renaissance” (p. 3). Most introductions to the Bible, if they treat earlier reception at all, begin with the Renaissance and Reformation. A consistent exception (he grumbles) is that modern scholars avail themselves of “the rich body of medieval biblical illustrations [that] is often freely exploited for its aesthetic value” (p. xi).

Van Liere sets out to correct this deficit with a discussion of four subjects:

1. “The history of the Bible as a material object.” This includes discussion of the medieval Bible’s forms and formats, media of transmission, its contents, the history and methods of its production, and the cultural significance of bibles themselves. This cultural reception is illustrated in the book’s introduction with a tale of two manuscripts, the famous Codex Amiatinus (seventh century) and a common thirteenth-century Paris bible with an uncommon story. This engaging bit of anecdotal history both makes the author’s point and draws readers effectively in.
2. “The history of the Bible as a written text.” This includes the history of the Latin Bible’s translation and the practice

of textual criticism, meaning “the efforts medieval scholars made to establish a ‘correct’ Latin Bible text” (p. 3).

3. “The history of the interpretation of this text.” Van Liere discusses both medieval hermeneutics generally and the specific forms and traditions of medieval biblical commentary.
4. “The diffusion of the biblical text and its influence on broader culture.” This last subject is dauntingly broad. Perhaps it can only be evoked through a wide selection of representative examples.¹ But Van Liere has a more specific pedagogical goal. He focuses on the “popular myth” that “common” Christians in the Middle Ages did not have access to the Bible. To that end he discusses translations into vernacular languages, the Bible in preaching and worship, and artistic and dramatic reception of the Bible.

The Bible as a book

The author first discusses the use by Christians of the codex, or book format, rather than the scroll for their sacred texts. This is a well-known fact. Less commonly known is that all-in-one bibles like our modern bibles were uncommon until the thirteenth century. Cassiodorus (d. ca. 585) “commonly referred to his Bible as a ‘sacra bibliotheca’ (holy library), suggesting that he saw it as a collection of writings rather than one book” (p. 26). Much more common were multivolume bibles or, for liturgical use, partial bibles and related liturgical books (lectionaries). Over time bible books were increasingly glossed with brief, adjacent commentary to facilitate study, or decorated with lavish illustration either for display or devotion. Van Liere illustrates a number of ways in which evolving reader needs and changing demand drove innovation in bible layout and production. In fact, the medieval bible in its various forms was mostly the product of consumer demand and not, as might be supposed, church authority.

1. See Michael Lieb et al., eds., *The Oxford Handbook of the Reception History of the Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), esp. 1–8.

Similar variety may be found in modern bibles, though “a modern reader who opens a printed bible has a good idea of what to expect.” The modest formal differences between our bibles today “pale in comparison to the bewilderment that can confront a modern student who opens a medieval bible” (p. 53). Vital differences include books appearing out of order, like the book of Acts following the Epistle of Jude; books varying in name and numbering; regular inclusion of the Old Testament Apocrypha, which most bibles now lack; the inclusion of books like 3 Corinthians that are completely unfamiliar; books, chapters, or verses that are missing because of alternate versification or combination (for example, Lamentations was part of Jeremiah); and finally, a large variety of paratext such as prefaces, commentaries, and headings.

Van Liere provides a very thorough survey of these and other aspects of the medieval Bible, including its canonical history and authority. Mormon scholars have sometimes found theological value in the fact that “the biblical canon was not completely ‘closed’ in the Middle Ages” (p. 78).² On the other hand, the canon might better be described as modestly variable rather than open, at least in the strong Mormon sense. “There was a broad consensus, but an absence of definite rules. In the Middle Ages, when every copy of a book was unique, it was next to impossible to regulate the exact contents of every copy of the Bible. This changed with the advent of printing. It is therefore no coincidence that the canon of Scripture became permanently fixed by an ecclesiastical decision only after the Middle Ages ended” (p. 79).

2. See Stephen E. Robinson, *Are Mormons Christians?* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1991), 51–55; and David L. Paulsen, “Are Christians Mormon? Reassessing Joseph Smith’s Theology in His Bicentennial,” *BYU Studies* 45/1 (2006): 45–50. Lee Martin McDonald, an evangelical historian of canon whom Paulsen cites favorably, responds, “It is not clear to me that the Mormons’ claims for these additional books would survive the ancient test of orthodoxy,” but “it is nonetheless difficult to argue biblically or theologically for a closed collection of Scriptures.” Lee Martin McDonald, *The Origin of the Bible: A Guide for the Perplexed* (New York: Clark, 2011), 7–8; see also McDonald, *Forgotten Scriptures: The Selection and Rejection of Early Religious Writings* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 62.

The biblical text

Van Liere devotes one chapter to “the important junctures in the history of the [Latin] Vulgate, its creation and background, the reason for [its] contamination and corruption, and different recensions” (p. 81). His treatment could easily be nerdish. This is a technical topic. More usefully, instead of a text-critical primer, the author creates an engaging narrative around his contention that medieval scholars “helped to establish the beginnings of scholarly textual criticism, which was one of the great accomplishments of the medieval study of the Bible” (p. 81).

There is a great story here, and van Liere tells it well. Medieval scholars gave high effort to establishing a reliable text of the Bible and laid the groundwork for the enduring achievements of Renaissance textual scholarship. The story ends in anticlimax, though. They failed completely in their object. Paradoxically, says the author,

the effect of all this medieval textual criticism on the quality of the bibles that were circulating was limited. Medieval critics did not have the means to ascertain with any certainty which readings were true and which were false. Thus, most medieval textual critics were content to show the diversity of the textual tradition rather than deciding on one reading. . . . Medieval textual criticism remained largely a learned debate, without much direct implication for most of the actual texts produced. (p. 102)

Renaissance humanists better succeeded where medieval scholars failed, in large part though more effective study of the original Greek and Hebrew texts. This led them to reject the Vulgate. This is yet another paradox since they were, after all, following in the footsteps of its very translator, St. Jerome. Jerome always insisted on the priority of the original texts, even daring to tell his Christian readers, “Whenever I seem to you to err in my translation, ask the Hebrews” (p. 100).³

3. Jerome’s full, striking statement is: “Whenever I seem to you to err in my translation, ask the Hebrews, consult the teachers of diverse cities; what they (i.e., the Hebrew books) contain concerning Christ, your books do not contain.” *Incipit prologus Sancti*

Medieval interpretation

Readers benefit from the fact that van Liere is a specialist in medieval hermeneutics, the “art of finding meaning in a text” (p. 110). This is a challenging subject, but he starts with the basics. Medieval readers believed “the Bible was not just a story about God, but a story by God” (p. 111). God was the Bible’s author in the strictest sense, and therefore, unlike any other book, every word in it was truth. “If the Bible were a book unlike any other, it also needed to be interpreted in a unique way,” to be read as “one extended metaphor, a Great Code” (p. 112). While believing the Bible could be read conventionally (*ad litteram*, “literally”), medieval readers employed special interpretive techniques to reveal the Bible’s “spiritual” meaning, which was seen as its primary meaning. Van Liere explains the nature and evolution of this special hermeneutic in necessary detail. Detail is necessary for even modest understanding, because these ways of reading the Bible are now so alien to us (which is one reason they should interest us).⁴ Post-Enlightenment Christians came to have a very different view of biblical authority and inspiration, and thus of biblical hermeneutics. The Bible’s spiritual meaning became personal; only its literal and moral meaning was universal. Rather than radical divine self-disclosure—God made Word—the Bible became writings by human authors who were inspired, more or less. We live in a different world interpretively.

Van Liere does full justice to the sophistication of medieval biblical hermeneutics, but without overwhelming the reader. He shows that “allegorizations are not without their own logic” (p. 115). He explains clearly how in medieval hermeneutics, “whereas words are signs for things, things can also be signs for things” (p. 120), a fundament of medieval theology that was also presupposed in spiritual exegesis. It is true that in

Hieronymi presbyteri in Pentateucho, in *Biblia Sacra Vulgata* (ed. Weber-Gryson), 4, translation mine.

4. In some cases, “it is the ‘otherness’ of medieval practice that draws our attention and invites reflection. . . . The exploration of a tradition so wholly alien to one’s own may sometimes lead to a renewed perception and a critical examination of one’s own criteria of interpretation” (p. 262).

On Christian Teaching “Augustine warns his reader that some passages in Scripture clearly only have spiritual meaning; in fact, many things taken in their literal sense alone may seem strange, absurd, or even offensive” (p. 124). But close literal reading always remained necessary for spiritual exegesis, in theory if not fact, since “the words [of the Bible] themselves did not lead directly to spiritual truth, but the objects or events that those words referred to” (p. 126). That is, scripture records creation and history, but it is creation and history themselves that point us to God, the author of both Word and Nature. Van Liere explains well, too, how Jewish interpretation paralleled and shaped Christian interpretation. As is well known, this was the case in the early Christian era when, for example, the allegorical method of Philo was a decisive influence on Alexandrian theologians. The author shows how later Jewish *derash* and *peshat* likewise influenced Christian interpreters.

Medieval reading, preaching, and teaching of the Bible were more strictly guided by interpretive precedents than they would be following the Protestant Reformation. For most of the Middle Ages, the principal scriptural authorities were the church fathers. Commentaries written by patristic authors or based on their works became necessary complements to Bible reading. Van Liere surveys both the history of medieval commentary and the various, sometimes surprising, forms it would take.

The first medieval project was to make the fathers “readily accessible” (p. 144). This might be through simple selection and abridgment into digests (*florilegia*, “garlands”) or by commentaries based on the patristic legacy. Commentaries took many shapes. They could be short notes (glosses) added directly to a Bible text or long, mystical meditations. From the twelfth century onward they increasingly reflected university curriculum and scholastic method. The Bible was the basis of education. As higher education expanded, so too did the production of commentary, very dramatically. “More sermons and commentaries were written in the period from 1400 to 1500 than ever before,” and most of them “sit in libraries and archives, and still await their first editions” (p. 173). Commentary production has only increased over time, arguably out of all proportion to changes in need or fashion, constantly

directing attention away from preceding works. “Today, the medieval Christian commentary tradition seems not so much scorned as simply forgotten” (p. 174).

The influence of the Bible

The concluding chapters on the influence of the Bible take aim at the “popular myth” that in the Middle Ages ordinary Christians did not have access to the Bible. The author goes after this pointedly in a chapter on the vernacular Bible, or medieval translations into the languages of common speech. It is a common Protestant (and Mormon) misperception that “common” people did not read the Bible in the Middle Ages or even that biblical literacy was restricted by the church. Catholic scholars have long argued the opposite, and they are correct. “Biblical literacy was not only widespread among the laity in the later Middle Ages,⁵ but it was even actively encouraged by the Church. Most scholars today, Catholic and non-Catholic alike, agree with [this] point of view” (p. 178). One component of lay literacy was vernacular translation. Van Liere surveys a selection of these translations and paraphrases, highlighting two issues with respect to them that certainly were debated: “whether biblical translations in the vernacular were legitimate and, if they were, what authority these translations held” (p. 178).

However, the private study of bibles, Latin or vernacular, was not the primary source of general biblical literacy. “Most medieval Christians came to know the Bible not by reading, but by hearing it” (p. 208), particularly in worship and preaching. The author surveys its use in the liturgy of the Mass and the divine office, in private and collective prayers, and later in private devotional practices for which lush Books of Hours would be produced. His treatment of “The Bible Preached” is

5. Van Liere is careful to clarify that there were great differences in lay literacy between the early and late Middle Ages and that medieval literacy is altogether a complex issue. “Recent research has added many shades of gray to a black-and-white image. There was both more illiteracy among the clergy, and more literacy among the laity, than is often supposed” (p. 179).

even more comprehensive, with a history of the medieval sermon that is a strong, independent primer (pp. 214–34). The volume of surviving sermons from the high Middle Ages is staggering, witnessing to the epic scale of preaching.⁶ The Bible was of course ever present in sermons. The prominence and clarity of its exegesis, however, was far from assured since “the medieval sermon was a florid discourse, rich in images, illustrations, symbols, and stories. It was sometimes hard to see the forest for the trees” (p. 234).

A final chapter on the Bible in medieval art and drama is titled as a question: “The Bible of the Poor?” In surveying the subject, van Liere also interrogates the popular century-old thesis of Emile Mâle that biblical art was intended to teach the Bible to those who could not read and write. Some early churchmen also made statements to this effect in defending the use of images in the church since their use reliably provoked periodic debate or even violence. Biblical art often served an explicit exegetical function that required “an intricate process of visual interpretation,” which presupposed the biblical if not exegetical literacy of its viewers (p. 245). Van Liere’s examples illustrate this clearly. The general evidence suggests that “art in the Middle Ages was rarely used intentionally as a didactic tool” or “bible of the poor,” though “it did help believers to visualize biblical content, and enrich their imagination” (p. 257).

For me van Liere’s book brought to mind some of the popular books on “how we got the Bible” that especially flourished in the postwar era.⁷

6. “In his repertory of medieval sermons, Jean Baptiste Schneyer enumerates some 140,000 sermons alone for the period he covers, 1150 to 1350. This does not even include sermons written in languages other than Latin or the much larger number of sermons written in the later Middle Ages” (p. 214).

7. See the preface in H. G. G. Herklots, *How Our Bible Came to Us: Its Texts and Versions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1954), 5. The prototype for Herklots and others was certainly Frederic G. Kenyon, *Our Bible and the Ancient Manuscripts* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1895), which was printed for more than sixty years in four editions. These and similar books became the inspiration and basis for the later Mormon title by Lenet Hadley Read, *How We Got the Bible* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985), which can be commended at least for its readability.

But his *Introduction to the Medieval Bible* is fully up-to-date, more serious in intent, and much more comprehensive for its subject. It is still written for general readers, certainly, and never leaves its readership behind. Specialists may wish their own interests received more coverage. In that vein, I wished in a few places that the early Middle Ages had received a little more discussion. For example, the author defends Carolingian commentary, heavily dependent on the fathers, against charges of being merely derivative, saying suggestively that “selection bears the signature of the commentator” (p. 148). This recognizes that such works are subtly inventive, “exegesis of the exegesis” (Silvia Cantelli), and this point may merit more discussion. However, introduction requires compromise and longer is not necessarily better. This will rightly be the standard introduction and textbook for many years to come. It is also van Lier’s argument that the medieval Bible may be of interest to modern biblical scholars for more than pretty cover art. And it succeeds well in that argument, too.

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