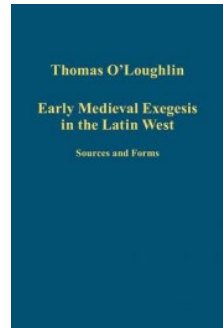


*Early Medieval Exegesis in the Latin West: Sources and Forms*, by Thomas O'Loughlin

Variorum Collected Studies Series | Farnham and Vermont: Ashgate Publishing, 2013 | xvi + 346 pages | ISBN: 978-1-40946-818-9 (hardback) \$165.00



Thomas O'Loughlin is a master of teasing out large narratives from small details. His broad and deep knowledge of the Latin tradition of biblical exegesis allows him to move across centuries, regions, and diverse types of evidence with ease and creativity. He presents a vision of a tradition of exegetical practices in its variety and of the complex relations among its participants. His expertise in the Latin West begins in the early Christian centuries, finds its center in the early medieval period, and extends to later medieval and early modern authors. This volume treats readers to a collection of articles and book chapters from O'Loughlin's career that investigate exegetical communities and explore the notion of participating in an exegetical tradition.

All of the works in this volume have appeared in journals or edited volumes in the past. But several factors form a rationale for republishing these works as a single collection. First, most of the fifteen selections originally appeared in journals or volumes with limited circulation. Many of the selections come from three journals which are not widely available and do not appear in any online databases: *Milltown Studies*, *Proceedings of the Irish Biblical Association*, and *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies*. All but one of the re-

maining selections can be found in edited collections held only by the largest research libraries.

Second, the volume includes two indices. The first is a general index that indicates the names of the interpreters that O'Loughlin discusses. This facilitates cross references to major figures who appear repeatedly in the selections (Adomnán, Ambrose, Augustine, Eucherius of Lyons, Isidore of Seville, Jerome, Julian of Toledo). The second index notes all of the biblical passages that O'Loughlin discusses. Here his focus on select passages becomes evident (Genesis 1–2; John 5). These indices will make this book serviceable to those who wish to see if an author, topic, or passage receives attention in this diverse set of articles and chapters.

Finally, the volume groups the selections into three categories: part 1: Processing the Patristic Inheritance; part 2: Developing New Exegetical Strategies; and part 3: Exegesis as a Practice. The coherence of these groupings gives the volume its own character as a set of reflections on related themes. The final selection—the only one in a widely accessible journal—contains the greatest theoretical and methodological reflection in the volume, providing a sense of completion to the reader who reads this volume from back to front.

The first part—on the patristic inheritance—traces the interpretation of minute details in the biblical text to reveal broad trends in the history of interpretation. The firmament above (Gen 1:6–7), the age and death of Methuselah (Gen 5:21–27), the location of Adam's grave (cf. Gen 23:16–17), and the pericope of the woman taken in adultery (John 7:53–8:11), serve as focal points. O'Loughlin helps us understand how these passages intersected the debate between faith and science, occasioned claims about the inerrancy of the biblical text, served as sources for different understandings of Christology and soteriology, and challenged major interpreters to treat passages which called into question their ethical norms. He concentrates on Latin authors from the fourth through sixth centuries here. But he gestures towards the reception of these figures in the Middle Ages. His ability to make sense of their logic allows for clear connections to modern issues of interpretation.

The second part turns to the early Middle Ages and examines different methods of communicating exegetical strategies. The first four articles focus on the handbooks or guides produced by individual writers from this time: Julian of Toledo's *Antikeimenon*, Adomnán's *De locis sanctis*, Eucherius of Lyons's *Formulae spiritalis intelligentiae*, and Eriugena's *Periphyseon*. The fifth and final selection investigates an illustration in the Book of Armagh

as an example of complex exegesis. These articles form an impression of the types of intellectual activity occurring during the early Middle Ages. Although O'Loughlin distinguishes figures such as Augustine or Ambrose from the authors examined in this section, he demonstrates the error of simplistic interpretations of this period as a time of intellectual decline. These authors represent the riches of cultural history that are yet to be discovered and properly incorporated into historical narratives. This part probes deeper in one regard than the last. Only the works of some of these authors had enduring legacies, even if they had importance in their own time. O'Loughlin challenges us to see how patterns of exegesis became part of enduring traditions while others did not.

The final part of the book discusses the practices and tradition of exegesis in the Middle Ages. Here micro-studies of details in the biblical narrative open perspectives on the tradition. The rib of Adam (Gen 2:21–22) demonstrates how Aquinas worked within a tradition of exegesis dominated by the views of Augustine. The firmament above again serves as a focal point and allows for an examination of how Isidore of Seville drew on the intellectual heritage of late antiquity in writing his *De natura rerum*. Another selection investigates the general view of the Song of Songs as a source of theological reflection in the early Middle Ages before the distinctively Cistercian interpretation of this book. Two other selections expose early medieval interpretations of the gates of Hell and of numbers as sources of theological imagination to be appreciated for their creativity rather than judged on the basis of later interpretive approaches. The two previous parts exhibited the connection of biblical exegesis to the larger questions faced by ancient and medieval interpreters and to the means they used to communicate their interpretations. But this part provides the greatest sense of the development of an exegetical tradition with honored authorities, developed methodologies, and shared commitments.

The final selection in the volume is the most exploratory and conclusive for understanding the distinctive nature of early medieval exegesis. Here, O'Loughlin highlights early medieval exegetes' efforts to work within a tradition, exegetical authorities, social realities, commitment to meeting the needs of the church, self-understanding as intellectuals within the church, emphasis on collective excellence, and willingness to be anonymous in their activities. Some of his concluding words to this selection serve as a fitting summary of the volume as a whole:

So we have a group who did not see themselves as individuals, but parts of a greater whole, and charged with two, seemingly enormous tasks. First, to take on board everything that came to them from the past as good listening disciples should; and second, to transmit it in the way that the pious teacher should. In the whole endeavor they saw Christ, in him they existed both as humans and scholars, from him they learned as disciples and like him they had to be teachers and in this he was both a model and warning. (313)

This article and the volume as a whole demonstrate well O’Loughlin’s assertion that these anonymous authors from a maligned period of history developed foundational approaches to the biblical text and the world that would dominate until the early modern period.

In a preface to the volume, O’Loughlin writes that he still affirms the positions he held in these articles despite the passage of time. Yet he is careful to note that he would not “restate some the opinions now in the same terms” (ix). The selections in the collection date from 1992 to 2000. Although they have stood the test of time, they do not engage with methodological reflection on reception studies that has been characteristic of scholarship and led to the founding of this journal. Here one will find very little regarding methodological approaches. These would have amplified O’Loughlin’s work and made comparisons with other traditions easier. His study of these works is foundational and a sure introduction to the biblical exegesis in this time period. Yet one wishes that more attention were granted to the theoretical frameworks that remain relevant for this topic.

This is an important collection of essays that will appeal to and serve the interests of various people. Researchers focused on modern reception studies will find the discussion of a concrete tradition illuminating for their work today. While O’Loughlin explores the notion of participating in a tradition from a particular vantage point, his approaches and findings bear implications for other settings. Scholars interested in the history of interpretation more broadly will also gain much from this volume. O’Loughlin not only investigates the tradition and its development, but he also shows how one can discover a tradition amidst the wide range of information that remains unpublished. Finally, he demonstrates how minute details can become significant for unlocking the secrets of communities of exegesis. This provides an excellent model for how one can do so with limited information from

the past. We will do well to consider how his approach may shed light on communal practices of exegesis in other times.

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