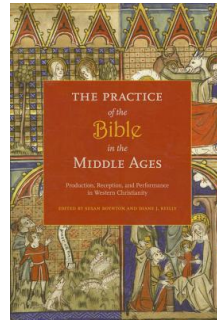


***The Practice of the Bible in the Middle Ages: Production, Reception and Performance in Western Christianity*, edited by Susan Boynton and Diane J. Reilly**

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This collection of articles provides an overview of the reception, transformations, and uses of biblical texts in the Christian Middle Ages, focusing on its manuscript tradition. The volume consists of fourteen chapters and an introduction (“Orientation for the Reader”). The chapters are organised by chronology and theme. The first chapters (2–4) deal with the Bible in a monastic context, especially that of the Early Middle Ages. The next four chapters (5–8) focus on transformations in the reception of the Bible through the eleventh and twelfth centuries. The second half of the book (chapters 9–15) focuses on the thirteenth century, while also considering the period up to the end of the Middle Ages. Two of the chapters (9–10) in this section are dedicated to the Mendicant Orders, two to a specific example of biblical codex (eleven to the *Paris Bible* and twelve to the *Illustrated Psalter*) and the final three (13–15) to translations of the Bible into English, French and Castilian respectively. The methods and expertise of scholars from a wide range of disciplines (theology, musicology, history, codicology, or literature) provide an interesting variety of perspectives. The editors have been able to compile a set of articles that conveys a sense of completeness and that addresses the most relevant aspects of the chosen subject. Each chapter can be read autonomously, but they frequently refer to one another and are well-organised in the volume.

The book is a valuable introduction for people who are not specialists in the area but who have a basic knowledge of biblical studies or medieval culture. The “Orientation for the Reader” and the glossary easily allow the amateur to become acquainted with some fundamental aspects of the subject. Both might seem rather elementary to many, but they guarantee that the reader is able to find most of the necessary background information on the book itself. The “Orientation” also contains some useful final paragraphs reviewing relevant literature on the subject of the volume. The language of most of the articles is also easily readable. The goal stated in the acknowledgements of being “understandable to the broadest possible audience” (vii) is widely met.

The title of the volume subdivides the “Practice” of the Bible in the Middle Ages into three distinct activities, namely “production, reception and performance.” These are, however, not represented equally in the volume. Production and reception stand out, while performance is seldom chosen as a subject. Nine of the fourteen chapters focus on biblical manuscripts and the way their material traits reveal the interpretation and use of a text. The articles show distinctly and with relevant examples how multiform biblical texts and codices in the Middle Ages were and how the modern Bible is the result of a process that lasted many centuries. Other means of dealing with the reception and uses of the Bible include the analysis of its translations and illuminations, as well as its influence on medieval conceptions of history and theology. The chapters dealing with the historical, theological or philosophical reception and uses of the Bible (2, 4, 5, 8, and 9) are very general, perhaps due to limited space, but they all cope with the problem of explaining difficult issues in a few words. In spite of the merits of the volume, a more detailed treatment of “performance” is widely missed. Only two chapters (6 and 10) address the problem directly, while another few do it marginally (for example, chapter 12). It is certainly one of the most difficult and uncertain aspects to analyse, but remains a subject which deserves more attention after being traditionally left out of scholarly investigation.

I would now like to make a brief commentary on each of the articles. Susan Boynton, co-editor of the volume, writes on “The Bible and the Liturgy.” The focus lies, as expected, on the Psalms, the most important of the biblical books used in the liturgy. The author states that “the selection and combination of biblical texts in the chants and readings of the liturgy constitute a system of interpretation” (10). The thesis is argued with convincing examples. However, this reader would have liked to find a more developed

reflection on the performance of the Bible in liturgical contexts. Only in the final part of the chapter, when dealing with dramatic representations of biblical subjects, does performance receive more detailed attention.

Chapter 3, “Early Medieval Bibles, Biblical Books, and the Monastic Liturgy in the Beneventan Region,” by Richard Gyug, continues dealing with the relationship between the liturgy and the Bible, but limits its corpus to the biblical codices produced in the Beneventan script. The purpose of the article is to show the importance of liturgy for the organisation of many biblical manuscripts. Biblical codices depended strongly on their liturgical use and were adapted extensively to it. The article is a great example of exhaustive textual criticism applying statistical methods to a relatively large number of textual accounts.

Chapter 4, “When Monks Were the Book: The Bible and Monasticism (6th–11th Centuries),” by Isabelle Cochelin, is an interesting account of the role played by the Bible in the life of monks up to the eleventh century. The Bible was taken as a model for the foundation of a community, for the yearly calendar and for daily activities. The article shows that the Bible was present in almost every aspect of monastic life, organising it and giving it meaning.

Chapter 5, “The Bible and the Meaning of History in the Middle Ages,” by Jennifer A. Harris, is an account of Christian historiography up to the twelfth century. In very few pages Harris summarises with great clarity the main issues addressed by Christian historiographers and highlights the role of the biblical narrative in this. The author states that the salvation story in the Bible was used as the model for all historical writing and could be adapted in various ways to solve the main problem of medieval historiography: the explanation of historical change.

Chapter 6, “Lectern Bibles and Liturgical Reform in the Central Middle Ages,” by Diane J. Reilly, co-editor of the volume, is a good example of how codicology can be a powerful tool for understanding the uses, functions and interpretations of biblical texts. She analyses large lectern Bibles from the eighth up to the twelfth centuries and explains how form, script, and especially size indicate the function of a biblical manuscript. Reilly argues that lectern Bibles did not perform a purely symbolic function as luxury articles, but were also used to support the renewed liturgical life in the monasteries. The thesis is very convincingly argued. The second part of the article focuses on the functions of the decoration of these manuscripts in the context of the liturgy, as an aid to memorization and as an interpretation of the biblical text.

Chapter 7, “The Italian Giant Bibles,” by Lila Yawn, deals with a particular type of biblical codex, the *Bibbia Atlanticae*, giant and luxurious Bibles composed in the twelfth century. The expensive and difficult production of the codices and the people involved in it (patrons and scribes) are extensively analysed. The author takes a stance in the scholarly discussion about the origin of the *Bibbia Atlanticae*. She argues that they were not originally produced in Rome, but to the north, in the region of Tuscany and Umbria, and that they were manufactured by professional artisans hired for that purpose. The final part of the article focuses on the illustrations, especially on how they render the purposes of the patron.

Chapter 8, “Biblical Exegesis Through the Twelfth Century,” by Frans van Liere, summarises the Christian theories of interpretation from the Early Middle Ages through to the twelfth century. It manages to explain such a complex subject in very few pages. Sometimes the article does name too many theologians without being able to expand on their contributions to the history of exegesis, but it is an accomplished introduction to the subject.

Chapter 9, “Mendicant School Exegesis,” by Bert Roest, summarises the works of the most notable theologians of the thirteenth century who were also members of mendicant orders. Thomas Aquinas and Bonaventura receive detailed attention. The author also analyses attempts at textual criticism in several medieval theologians, Joachimism, and the Commentaries of Nicholas of Lyra. The last part of the article focuses on the decline of mendicant exegesis in the universities, as the study of biblical texts was being replaced by other textbooks and speculative theology. However, the author argues that the practice of mendicant exegesis continued living in preaching and in some marginal centres of learning, a topic which should receive greater scholarly attention in the future.

Chapter 10, “‘A Ladder Set Up on Earth’: The Bible in Medieval Sermons” by Eyal Poleg, deals with the role of the Bible in medieval sermons and the historical changes in this practice. The author explains the formal traits and historical transformations of medieval sermons and explores the preacher’s awareness of the audience, the gap between extant sources and medieval reality, and the ways in which preachers expanded and interpreted the biblical text in order to fulfil various aims, such as moral injunction and commentary on the liturgy. Of all the articles in the book, this is the one which pays closest attention to how the biblical text was part of a performative act. The thesis that sermons pre-dated humanists and reformers in celebrating contradictory biblical readings and bringing increased attention

to the Semitic roots of the Vulgate seems arguable. However, this chapter stands out in the context of the volume for focusing on the performative aspect of the biblical text.

Chapter 11, “The Bible and the Individual: The Thirteenth-Century *Paris Bible*,” by Laura Light, has a quite misleading title, as the problem of individuality is not addressed at all. It is a very clear and didactic chapter on one of the most historically important types of biblical manuscript, the so called *Paris Bible* of the thirteenth century. The chapter deals with the importance of the market and the University in establishing and configuring the text. The uses, formats, and transformations of the *Paris Bible* as well as some fundamental methods of biblical textual criticism are explained very clearly.

Chapter 12, “The Illustrated Psalter: Luxury and Practical Use,” by Stella Panayotova, explores the continuous presence and profound influence of the Psalms in the life of men and women in the Middle Ages. It is probably the only chapter in the volume to analyse all the practices listed in the title: “production, reception and performance.” It is a very complete account of how psalters were shaped by the people producing, reading, and using them in a great variety of ways (from a political and ideological tool to a magical instrument) as well as how their texts helped medieval people in shaping and understanding life. In my opinion, it is one of the most interesting and accomplished chapters in the volume.

Chapter 13, “The Bible in English in the Middle Ages,” by Richard Masden, analyses various translations of biblical texts into the English language, from the early Anglo-Saxon glosses on the Latin text to the complete translations of the early Reformation. Many kinds of text are considered: vernacular texts on biblical subjects, translations of specific passages in the context of a vernacular text, translations of some biblical books, and translations of the entire Bible (especially that by Wycliffe). The most important issues addressed are the method of translation (word by word or adapting the text to reproduce the meaning) and the political significance of each translation.

Unlike the other two chapters on vernacular Bibles, chapter 14, “The *Old French Bible*: The First Complete Vernacular Bible in Western Europe,” by Clive R. Sneddon, has a confusing structure which sometimes makes it difficult to follow. This is perhaps due to the author’s decision to reconstruct the history of scholarly criticism on the *Old French Bible*. On the positive side, this structure shows the problems that scholars encounter when investigating these codices. One merit of the chapter is that it provides personal theses

about the context of the production and use of the *Old French Bible*. The author claims that it is a product of the period 1220–1260, probably made in Paris, for the edification and devotional use of wealthy lay-people.

Chapter 15, “Castilian Vernacular Bibles in Iberia, c. 1250–1500,” by Emily C. Francomano, is a very detailed article which explains the role of Castilian translations of biblical texts in the context of the written and intellectual tradition of the Iberian Peninsula. It is the article which pays the closest attention to the links between Christian, Jewish, and, in minor detail, Arab exegetical traditions. The author tries to determine the intended audiences and readerships of these Castilian Bibles through a careful and convincing analysis of the remaining traces of the translation process.

The volume as a whole deals with all the main issues in the reception history of the Bible in medieval Christian Western Europe. It is no groundbreaking book, nor does it intend to be one. It is however a very clear and enjoyable introduction to the transformations and uses of the Bible throughout the Middle Ages. The volume reminds us that the Bible was not a unified book, that its use was multi-faceted, and that it helped to shape the thinking and ways of life of men and women in Western Europe throughout many centuries.

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