

THE HIGH MIDDLE AGES

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An Encyclopaedia of Exegesis and Cultural History

Edited by Christiana de Groot, Irmtraud Fischer,
Mercedes Navarro Puerto, and Adriana Valerio

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Volume 6.2: The High Middle Ages

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Edited by

Kari Elisabeth Børresen and Adriana Valerio

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ABBREVIATIONS

PRIMARY TEXTS

<i>BHG</i>	<i>Bibliotheca Hagiographica Graeca</i>
<i>Comm. Soph.</i>	Jerome, <i>Commentariorum in Sophoniam</i>
<i>Extr.</i>	Birgitta of Sweden, <i>Reuelaciones extrauagantes</i>
<i>FLG</i>	Mechthild of Magdeburg, <i>Das fließende Licht der Gottheit</i>
<i>Glossa</i>	<i>Glossa ordinaria</i>
<i>LXX</i>	Septuagint
<i>Prot. Jas.</i>	Protoevangelium of James
<i>Ps.-Matt.</i>	Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew
<i>Quaest. ev.</i>	Augustine, <i>Quaestionum evangelicarum</i>
<i>Reg.</i>	Birgitta of Sweden, <i>Regula Saluatoris</i>
<i>Rev.</i>	Birgitta of Sweden, <i>Reuelaciones</i>
<i>Sermo</i>	Birgitta of Sweden, <i>Sermo Angelicus</i>

SECONDARY RESOURCES

<i>ADTB</i>	Altdeutsche Textbibliothek
<i>Aev</i>	<i>Aevum: Rassegna de scienze, storiche, linguistiche, e filologiche</i>
<i>AFH</i>	<i>Archivum Franciscanum Historicum</i>
<i>AISP</i>	<i>Archivio italiano per la storia della pieta</i>
<i>ANL</i>	Annua Nuntia Lovaniensa
<i>Aug</i>	<i>Augustinianum</i>
<i>BAKG</i>	Beihefte zum Archiv für Kulturgeschichte
<i>ByzF</i>	<i>Byzantinische Forschungen</i>
<i>ByzZ</i>	<i>Byzantinische Zeitschrift</i>
<i>CBST</i>	Collana La Bibbia nella storia
<i>CCCM</i>	Corpus Christianorum, Continuatio Mediaevalis
<i>CCSL</i>	Corpus Christianorum: Series Latina
<i>CH</i>	<i>Church History</i>

CSEL	Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum
CSSV	Collana della Società di studi valdesi
CWS	Classics of Western Spirituality
DLAS	Deutsche Literatur von den Anfängen bis 1700
DTMA	Deutsche Texte des Mittelalters
FCNTECW	Feminist Companion to the New Testament and Early Christian Writings
FrFor	Franziskanische Forschungen
FThSt	Freiburger theologische Studien
GBLS	Greifswalder Beiträge zur Literatur und Stilforschung
HKAW	Handbuch des klassischen Altertumswissenschaft in systematischer Darstellung
<i>JEH</i>	<i>Journal of Ecclesiastical History</i>
<i>ME</i>	<i>Medieval Encounters: Jewish, Christian and Muslim Culture in Confluence and Dialogue</i>
MGG	Mystik in Geschichte und Gegenwart
<i>MGG</i>	<i>Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart</i> . Edited by Friedrich Blume. Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1979.
MThSt	Marburger theologische Studien
PBF	Publicazioni della Biblioteca Franciscana Chiesa nuova
PG	Patrologia Graeca. Edited by J.-P. Migne. 162 vols. Paris: Migne, 1857–1886.
PL	Patrologia Latina. Edited by J.-P. Migne. 217 vols. Paris: Migne, 1844–1864.
<i>RCT</i>	<i>Revista Catalana de Teologia</i>
<i>RHE</i>	<i>Revue d'histoire ecclésiastique</i>
<i>RET</i>	<i>Revista Española de Teología</i>
<i>RTL</i>	<i>Revue théologique de Louvain</i>
<i>Sef</i>	<i>Sefarad</i>
SC	Sources Chrétiennes
SHG	Subsidia Hagiographica
SSFS	Samlingar utgivna av Svenska Fornskriftsällskapet
TTB	Topos-Taschenbücher
TThSt	Trierer theologische Studien
TU	Texte und Untersuchungen
<i>ZfdA</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum und deutsche Literatur</i>

PREFACE TO THE ENGLISH EDITION

This ambitious volume is a labor of love to which many have contributed. The co-editors, Kari Elisabeth Børresen and Adriana Valerio, have compiled a collection of essays that analyzes women's reception of the Bible in the High Middle Ages. The international scope of the entire project, *The Bible and Women*, is remarkable, and this volume (6.2) is an example of the breadth of the encyclopedia. The contributors come from Europe and United States and study exegetical sermons, artwork, transcripts of heresy trials, handbooks for recognizing witches, vision reports, liturgies and vernacular editions of the Bible. This reception history engages 'texts' from across medieval Europe. The authors employ many different methods and hold various hermeneutical assumptions, and the end result is a multi-faceted mosaic. It traces the emergence of what will become Western Christianity, a faith in which gender is a key component, and yet has been under-studied. This volume is a much-needed corrective to the forgotten history of women's reception of the Bible, as it was conducted through a variety of mediums.

The editors of volume 6.2 deserve high praise for hosting the symposium that began this volume and then compiling, arranging and editing the contributions. I also add my gratitude for their continued involvement in seeing the English version of this volume, already available in Italian, Spanish, and German, through to its publication. Kari Elisabeth Børresen, aided by her research assistant Kari Horn, took on the monumental task of ensuring that the English editions of primary and secondary sources were cited where available. This is painstaking and exacting work and the volume has benefited from her diligence.

The English version would not have been possible without the efforts of gifted translators. I would like to thank Molly Rogers for her translations from Italian to English, Dennis Slabaugh and Daunia Pavone for translating articles from German to English, and Anna Deckert and Victoria Howell for translating from Spanish to English. A final note of gratitude goes to Barbara Carvill, who helped with translating last-minute finishing touches. In addition, I would like to acknowledge the generosity of the Calvin

Center for Christian Scholarship and the Calvin Alumni Association, which awarded grants to support the work of student assistants Evan Elliot and Kellan Day to help with editing and formatting. Their work was stellar and much appreciated.

All of us trust that the reader will be instructed, enlightened and delighted by engaging these fascinating essays.

Christiana de Groot
Grand Rapids, December 2014

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FOREWORD

The present volume develops the historical dimension of our international project Bible and Women. This dimension is both important and difficult since it offers fascinating and little known and partly unpublished materials dealing with biblical exegesis and the history of gender. The Bible shaped Western culture. Biblical interpretation and reception supported by philosophical and theological treatises shaped the understanding of women and men's nature. Gender roles were defined in sermons, codes of law, in literature and the arts.

The medieval age, especially the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, represents a fundamental turning point not only for the construction of gender identity, but especially for the powerful and significant writings by women who were forming new communities and exegeting the Bible.

The present volume came about through the cooperation of scholars, both women and men, from many corners of the world. Their research and analysis of biblical reception are presented in this volume. The novelty of our research consists in the attempt to bring together conventional, tradition-bound ways of interpretation with newly emerging insights and questions posed by women.

All of medieval Europe provides the venue for such research: from Byzantine Orient to Spain, from the Netherlands to Italy, from Sweden to the Germanic regions. All of these sites participate in creating the conditions for the formation of the "Christian West" as it began embarking on the difficult path to individualization and to finding its unique character and identity.

Our gratitude for supporting the research colloquium held December 4–6, 2009, in Naples, goes to the Federico II University in Naples, the University of Graz, and the Naples Fondazione Valerio per la Storia delle Donne (The Valerio Foundation for the History of Women).

Kari Elisabeth Børresen and Adriana Valerio
Oslo/Naples, September 2011

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INTRODUCTION—THE BIBLE IN THE CENTER:
THE *RENOVATIO ECCLESIAE* AND THE EMERGENCE OF
FEMALE AUTONOMY (TWELFTH–FIFTEENTH CENTURIES)

Adriana Valerio

“Once God has spoken; twice have I heard this” (Ps 62:11 NRSV).

1. THE BIBLE AND WOMEN IN THE CULTURE OF MEDIEVAL CLERICS

1.1. THE BOOK PAR EXCELLENCE

The Bible, in medieval culture and mentality, was the book present in all aspects of social and spiritual life. The many vehicles through which the sacred Scripture was expressed included the liturgy, preaching, exercises of piety, pastoral counseling, devotional readings, holy representations, sculptures, paintings, miniatures, and music. Because the Bible was woven into the fabric of life, every Christian, whether man or woman, erudite or uneducated, priest, member of a religious order, or layperson, was a participant in this immense common heritage.

In the depths of the soul of every believer, therefore, the Scripture resounded: memories, assonances, metaphors, themes, figures, and events constituted the framework of thought, imagination, and language. The Bible was also the space within which each person could find the meaning of his or her being in the world. Because of the use of the allegorical method, it was possible to create an interpretation that could be applied both to the spiritual dimension and to the concrete nature of everyday life.

It is therefore challenging to identify specific angles of perspective in a culture so permeated by the sacred Scripture. We need to take into account the fact that not all the books it contains were circulated, studied, and known in the same way or had the same value in the lives of believers. In fact, only some passages, quotations, episodes, or characters stirred the minds and souls of people. They in turn understood those biblical references through the

filter of the theological interpretation that had been sedimented in the previous centuries, and whose authority had been approved by the fathers of the church. But it is even more complex to find an interpretative key that allows us to better understand the relationship between biblical texts and female believers and the influence that these texts exerted on the construction of sexual identity and on the definition of male and female gender roles, both in society and in the ecclesiastical community.

On the other hand, the period from the twelfth to the fifteenth century, the period under consideration, is full of cultural ferment and innovations that stimulated the formulation of new questions about God, the world, and human beings. Surprisingly, these are above all the centuries which saw the emergence of writing by women who through their writings expressed their desire to seek truth, and through listening to or reading from the Bible found new ways to understand themselves, to interpret events that occurred in their lives, and to describe their experiences of the transcendent.¹

In order to deal with such a cluster of issues, we need to identify time frames and propose periodizations that will allow us to grasp continuity and novelty in a better way. This demarcation will help us, on the one hand, understand the dynamics put into action by the religious institutions and, on the other hand, account for the changes that occurred as a result of the participation by women.

1.2. PERIODIZATIONS

For these centuries it is appropriate to delineate two epochs that mark the history of women with regard to the impact of the Bible in defining of their roles. The first epoch begins with the Gregorian Reform (1046–1122) and continues to the publication of the manual for inquisitors, the *Malleus maleficarum* (1486). This period is characterized by male thought and illustrates how the use of the Scripture legitimized the subordination of women and their exclu-

1. On the origin of women's writing, see Peter Dronke, *Women Writers of the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984). On the presence of strong personalities of women in the Middle Ages, see Kari Elisabeth Børresen, section "Matristics," in Børresen, *From PatrISTICS to Matristics: Selected Articles on Christian Gender Models*, ed. Øyvind Norderval and Katrine Lund Ore (Rome: Herder, 2002), 143–272; Børresen, "Matristics," in *Encyclopedia of Ancient Christianity*, ed. Angelo di Bernardino (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 2:730–35. Børresen coined the expression "mothers of the church" to indicate the authority of women's thought. It was precisely in the Middle Ages that women's presence found its specific manifestation. This is an important part of the Christian tradition, like the one expressed by the fathers of the church.

sion from spheres of power. It climaxed in the persecution of female witches, who, “like all women are *by nature* inclined to evil,” according to the commonplace sentiment of the culture of the time.

The second epoch starts from the Abbess Heloise (d. 1164) and continues to the writer Christine de Pizan (d. 1430). This period marks, by contrast, the birth and the increased importance of women’s writing and is characterized by a growing awareness of women’s identity and dignity, which found its nourishment and foundation in the sacred Scripture.

This periodization, like any schematization, simplifies and tends to define rigidly, often with forced contrasts, historical phases that are much more nuanced and contradictory. Not always, in fact, have the men of the church conveyed negative images of female humanity. On the contrary, precisely on the basis of biblical texts, they have often articulated the reasons for an inclusive human dignity. Some theologians, such as Abelard (d. 1142) and Girolamo Savonarola (d. 1498), paid attention to women and considered them to be mature believers both in their knowledge of the Scripture and their commitment to broad religious reform. Nevertheless, not only innovative women are to be found in this second medieval epoch, where the female majority demonstrates passive acceptance of the dominant androcentric culture.

Finally, we cannot overlook the fact that in the late Middle Ages dark visions of life were found alongside hymns of joy. Dogmatic and intolerant positions were interwoven with an eagerness to seek answers and openness to dialogue. The aversion to sex did not overshadow the celebration of female beauty. Spiritual love existed alongside the pleasure of carnal love. Submission to authority did not eliminate dissent. Faithfulness to tradition did not take away the ability to innovate. The list of paradoxes could continue.²

With this differentiated periodization, it is essential to include the category of sociocultural gender. Therefore, it is necessary to compare, with the greatest possible reciprocity, both male and female religious experience, in order to highlight the multiple interactions of women and men on all levels of social, cultural, and political life.

Theoretical representations, such as anthropological vision, symbolic imagination, and gender models, do not always coincide with the practical experience of women, and the condition of real women, throughout the Middle Ages, varied according to their subculture, social class, urban or rural context, and the specific historical situation. How much the anthropological pre-comprehension, which was markedly dualistic and asymmetrical, or the

2. Umberto Eco, “Introduzione al Medioevo,” in *Il Medioevo: Barbari Cristiani Musulmani*, ed. Umberto Eco (Milan: EncycloMedia, 2010), 11–35.

judicial and ecclesiastical legal system were influenced by specific interpretations of sacred Scripture will become clear as a result of the research we pursue.

1.3. FROM THE GREGORIAN REFORM TO THE CRISIS OF THE WESTERN CHURCH

The first periodization must consider the reform that takes its name from the pontificate of Gregory VII (1073–1085). This was a turning point in the history of Christianity. The political and theological operation that was initiated with the goal of strengthening the clergy led concomitantly to a reduction of the influence of laypeople and a marginalization of women in the ecclesiastical community. In particular, the rigid conceptions of reformed monasticism, oriented to impose the absolute purity of religious ministers, and the tightening of laws against corrupt and concubinary clergy delineated, in an increasingly precise manner, a theology of the sacrament of Holy Orders. As a result of the reform, priesthood was considered to be by divine right and therefore experienced as a power reserved exclusively to human males. The defence of purity and obligatory celibacy for the clergy, which was established by the Council of Pisa in 1135, inevitably promoted a negative conception of women and sexuality. They were considered unclean and regarded as incompatible with the sacred.³ Divine service required a body-temple that was not profaned, and the offer of a pure and immaculate sacrifice required a distancing from the female sex. Monastic rhetoric about the ritual impurity of women, which referred to the prescriptions of Leviticus (Lev 15:19–30) mediated by patristic theology, sounded bitter tones of misogyny. These views were publicized in pamphlets, treatises, and sermons that denigrated sexual and matrimonial life. The arguments used to encourage and justify ecclesiastical celibacy were supported by passages from the Bible and from pagan and Christian literature. These views became the backdrop of an androcentric and misogynous culture, which influenced Western thought for centuries. Woman was presented as the daughter of Eve, the temptress, responsible for the fall (Gen 3), impure par excellence (Lev 15), and, for this reason, as Peter Damian said, *materia peccandi, occasio pereundi*.⁴

3. Gary Macy, *The Hidden History of Women's Ordination: Female Clergy in the Medieval West* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); Anne Barstow, *Married Priests and the Reforming Papacy: The Eleventh-Century Debates* (New York: Mellen, 1982); André Vauchez, "Clerical Celibacy and the Laity," in *Medieval Christianity*, vol. 4 of *A People's History of Christianity*, ed. Daniel Ethan Bornstein (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), 179–203.

4. *Contra intemperantes clericos*, ch. 7 (PL 145:410A–B). Regarding Peter Damian's opinion of women, see Dyan Elliott, "The Priest's Wife: Female Erasure and the Grego-

In spite of this, it was precisely beginning with the twelfth century that women, together with the laity, made their entry as protagonists onto the political and religious scene. They worked to realize their aspirations in response to changing economic and social conditions. The birth of a monetary economy, increase of the urban population, emergence of the bourgeoisie in commercial activities, and growing affluence caused significant social changes and profound questions regarding the compatibility of the growing economic and political power in the church with the gospel message calling for poverty and sharing.

Already in 1935 the historian Herbert Grundmann demonstrated an intrinsic connection between this religious movement and the socioeconomic developments of the twelfth century, and the resistance to the corruption among the clergy and laity. This prompted a search for alternative ways of living in accordance with the dictates of the gospel.⁵ Within the great reform movement of the church, which began in the monastic-clerical community and was vigorously supported among the laity, emerged an ideal model of the apostolic life and the need to live simply by imitating the first Christians. The Gospels and the writings of the apostles became the norm, exhorting each Christian to follow the path indicated by Christ.

Women also responded in large numbers to calls for radical forms of Christian life that implied poverty, chastity, charity, and apostolate. In this context, the fundamental importance of the Beguine movement, which developed in Belgium beginning in 1170, should be noted. *Jacques de Vitry* (d. 1240)

rian Reform,” in *Medieval Religion: New Approaches*, ed. Constance Berman (New York: Routledge, 2005), 136–45. It should be recalled that in the course of the eleventh century a literary genre concentrating on the ascetic theme of contempt for the world (*contemptus mundi*) grew in importance. Lotario di Segni, the future Pope Innocent III, wrote in 1190 a particularly popular work titled *De miseria humanae conditionis* (PL 217:701–46); see the edition by Robert E. Lewis, ed. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1978), with a list of 672 manuscripts. Referring to sapiential literature (Psalms, Job, Proverbs, Wisdom, Sirach), Lotario describes with dark pessimism the misery of the human condition, beginning from conception, when the foetus is nourished in the womb with the blood that is “totally abominable and unclean;” upon contact with it “crops will no longer sprout, shrubs will wither, grasses die, trees lose their fruit and dogs, if they eat it, will become ferocious with rabies” (ex eius contactu fruges non germinent, arescant arbusta, moriantur herbe, amittant arbores fetus, et si canes inde comederint in rabiem efferantur): Lotario di Segni, *Il disprezzo del mondo* (Torino: Luni, 1994), 38–39.

5. Herbert Grundmann, *Religiöse Bewegungen im Mittelalter: Untersuchungen über die geschichtlichen Zusammenhänge zwischen der Ketzerei, den Bettelorden und den religiösen Frauenbewegung im 12. und 13. Jahrhundert und über die geschichtlichen Grundlagen der deutschen Mystik*, Historische Studien 267 (Berlin: Ebering, 1935).

was the first to recognize the extension and complexity of the movement.⁶ The phenomenon of women who did not adhere to an existing Order or adopt a monastic rule that had already been approved has been widely studied. They supported themselves, for the most part, with their labor and were united by prayer, charitable works, and reading the Bible. As Gilbert de Tournai (d. 1284) emphasized with annoyance, the *subtilitates et novitates* of theological questions attracted them.

The questions that they asked with distressing frequency concerned the right way to understand and live out the Christian faith. This challenge created great tension between the church and some movements that later formed communities judged heretical, such as the Waldensians, Cathars, Free Spirit, and Guglielmites.⁷ According to the conscience of many people, ecclesiastical practice was irreconcilable with the gospel. A recurrent question was whether imitation of the apostolic life, connected to the myth of origins (Acts 4:32–37), was not more important than the obedience owed to the minister. The laity asked whether poverty should not be essential for the identity of the disciple and of the church (Mark 10:17–22) and whether one should overcome the distinction between precept and advice in order to affirm that the calling to perfection found in Matt 19:21 was valid for all, both clergy and laity.

The response of the mendicant orders, which were founded in the thirteenth century in order to steer the threatening ferment of renewal into the confines of orthodoxy, has been thoroughly investigated.⁸ In order to succeed in repressing dissent and propaganda and in order to get closer to the people, the activities of teaching, preaching, and spiritual guidance were crucial. This meant inventing modes of communication that would make the Bible more understandable and attractive to the sensibilities of believers. At the same time, it involved using the sacred Scripture to guide the behaviour of the faithful, women in particular, towards activities that were consistent with and functional within a hierarchical and patriarchal society.

Because women were directed towards becoming nuns, in 1298 Bonifatius VIII required them to be cloistered, with the decree *Periculoso et detestabili*, or to become tertiaries. Women, in search of new vital spaces, developed a mystical and visionary dimension that helped them assert spiritual freedom and individual autonomy. This aroused a reaction from the clerics that was quite

6. Romana Guarnieri, *Donne e Chiesa tra Mistica e Istituzioni (secoli XIII–XV)* (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2004).

7. See the essay by Marina Benedetti in this volume.

8. Giulia Barone, “Gli ordini mendicanti,” in *L'antichità e il medioevo*, vol. 1 of *Storia dell'Italia religiosa*, ed. Gabriele De Rosa, Tullio Gregory, and André Vauchez (Rome: Laterza, 1993), 347–73.

diffident, because they had difficulty discerning the difference between sainthood and simulation or between correct religious experience and heretical drift. The appeal to the Bible constituted a litmus test in the dialogue between the female mystics and the spiritual directors responsible for their guidance. Needless to say, this dialogue was not always successful.

The years of the “Avignon captivity” (1309–1377) and the Great Western Schism (1378–1417) were years of political and cultural disruption and recurring wars, famines, and plagues. In such a threatening climate, prophetic experiences and apocalyptic visions flourished. In the prophetic awakening of the fifteenth century, monastic and laypeople, both men and women, participated. The appeal to eschatology connected to the thought of Joachim of Fiore (d. 1202), together with the utopian dreams of an age of radical regeneration, the announcement of a humble “Angelic Pope” who would initiate reform in the church, and the unification of all peoples through the conversion of Muslims and Jews contributed to a strong prophetic movement that involved some women as remarkable protagonists.⁹

Supporters of women’s prophetic vocation argued that since it is a grace given freely by God (*gratia gratis data*) for the good of the entire community, useful to the political society, and indispensable to the church, women can also receive it. As Girolamo Savonarola stated in a sermon in 1496, “Prophecy is not given to the sex, but to the purity of heart.”¹⁰ He was speaking about Deborah and about how the people of God were under the “judgment of a woman” and how Baruch did not complain about obeying a woman “but believed and went on simply,” because “God gives prophecy to whomever He wants, to men and women, and to high-born and low born.” He made the point that women, precisely because of their weakness, are chosen by God to humble the mighty (1 Cor 1:27).

The consolidation of a female prophetic role, however, was accompanied by a parallel strengthening of the misogynist elements of a theology obsessed with the Devil. As a result, the persecution of women considered witches

9. The thought of Joachim of Fiore, introducing the age of the Holy Spirit, had lengthened the time of salvation, opening it to a period of liberty and grace. Among the publications on Joachim, see Marjorie Reeves and Warwick Gould, *Joachim of Fiore and the Myth of the Eternal Evangel in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (London: Clarendon, 1997); Roberto Rusconi, ed., *Gioacchino da Fiore tra Bernardo di Clairvaux e Innocenzo III* (Rome: Viella, 2001); and Gian Luca Potestà, *Il Tempo dell'apocalisse: Vita di Gioacchino da Fiore* (Rome: Laterza, 2004).

10. Girolamo Savonarola, *Prediche sopra Ruth e Michea*, ed. Vincenzo Romano; 2 vols. (Rome: Belardetti, 1962), 1:240 (sermon 8 on 8 September 1496). See Girolamo Savonarola, *Fede e speranza di un profeta*, trans. Adriana Valerio (Milan: San Paolo, 1998).

gained more and more ground. A preview of misogynist motifs occurs in the work of the Franciscan Alvarus Pelagius (d. 1350), Grand Penitentiary at the court in Avignon. He was the author of *De statu et planctu ecclesiae*, written between 1330 and 1332, but only printed in Ulm in 1474. It contains a significant amount of information about the church and society of the fourteenth century, including abuses and reforms. For example, chapter 45 deals with “The conditions and the vices of women. Whether women can occupy public office” (*De conditionibus et vitiis mulierum. An possint mulieres habere officia publica*). There are 102 reasons put forward to demonstrate not only the inferiority, but also the dangerous nature of human females, “origin of sin, weapon of the devil, expulsion from paradise, mother of error, corruption of the ancient law” (*caput peccati, arma diaboli, expulsio paradisi, delicti mater, corruptio legis antiquae*). Women, therefore, had to be controlled and excluded from all public offices. The 102 theses are supported by numerous biblical quotations that come mostly from the Old Testament and mainly from Deuteronomy (13:32, 34), Numbers (25), Proverbs (2, 6, 7, 9, 11, 22) Sirach (7, 9, 19, 23, 25, 26, 33, 42, 47), and Hosea (5).

Demonological literature also made extensive use of misogynist passages taken from these texts in order to justify a struggle against witchcraft. It had previously been considered a superstition, but at the end of the fifteenth century acquired the characteristics of heresy. For instance, the *Malleus maleficarum* is an exemplary compendium of this use of biblical sources (including Sir 25:3; Eccl 7:26; Prov 9:13; 25:24). The Bible was exploited in order to blame women, who were considered the object of particular attention by the devil, for all the anguish of a troubled era.¹¹ Paradoxically, the “dark” Middle Ages ended and the modern era, the era of witch hunts, began.

1.4. WHICH BIBLE?

In the Middle Ages the entire culture was at the service of the Bible, the study of which was considered the most elevated form of Christian knowledge. It was considered the directly inspired word of God and therefore the book of life and salvation, the key to understanding all of reality, the inexhaustible thematic repertoire of symbols, the object of textual and philological investigations, and an inexhaustible source for interpretations.¹²

11. See the essay by Dinora Corsi in this volume.

12. Pier Cesare Bori, *L'interpretazione infinita: Lermeneutica cristiana antica e le sue trasformazioni* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1987).

Monastic theology, in particular, was nourished by the sacred Scripture through the discipline of reading (*lectio*), reflection (*meditatio*), and prayer (*oratio*) in order to reach its mystical understanding (*contemplatio*). In addition, it probed the biblical texts in order to grasp their multiple meanings, literal, moral, and spiritual, which could best guide the life of faith. This continuous nourishment from the sacred Scripture (*ruminatio*) entailed its memorization, with the result that it shaped the structure of people's thinking and the language they used in everyday life. Monastics, whether male or female, read and listened to Scripture in the liturgy, choir, refectory, and study, and it came to mind during the many moments of prayer and meditation.¹³

The complex and delicate work of exegesis, which runs through medieval monasticism, was applied not to a single corpus, to a canon that was well defined. Rather, it was applied to hand-written texts, the translations of which were not always certain and reliable, given the multiplicity of codices, translations, and summaries that were circulating. The Song of Songs, for example, was usually included with other Wisdom books under the title "Book of Solomon." The Apocalypse was reproduced separately or combined with the Song of Songs,¹⁴ and the Gospels were treated as a single group of texts and not individually. The Pentateuch (the five books attributed to Moses) and the Hexateuch (the first five books and the book of Joshua) were often reproduced together. The Psalms were usually presented as a single book (the Psalter), since they had to perform a liturgical function.

When we speak of the Bible, we must take all of this into account and ask ourselves not only about the circulation of texts, but also about the selection that was made in the Middle Ages and about what led to the preference for one book of the Bible over another. In general, the attention given to the letters of Paul remained high. The book of Revelation received the most comment. The Psalms and the Song of Songs were the most widely read and beloved books. The Psalms were the basic and essential material of prayer life in Christianity. The Song of Songs was present both in mystical literature and in the female monastic orders because it lent itself magnificently both to expressing the love relationship between God (the bridegroom who calls the beloved by

13. Among the many studies of the Bible in the Middle Ages, see Henri de Lubac, *Exégèse médiévale: les quatre sens de l'Écriture*, 4 vols. (Paris: Aubier Montaigne, 1959–1964); Pierre Riché and Guy Lobrichon, eds., *Le Moyen Âge et la Bible*, vol. 4 of *Bible de tous les temps* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1984); Giuseppe Cremascoli and Claudio Leonardi, eds., *La Bibbia nel Medioevo* (Bologna: Dehoniane, 1996); Beryl Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983).

14. See Rossana E. Guglielmetti, ed., *L'Apocalisse nel Medioevo* (Florence: Sismel-Edizioni del Galluzzo, 2010).

her name) and the Soul of the believer (the beloved) and to representing the Virgin consecrated as the bride of Christ.¹⁵ We should take into consideration, moreover, the fact that the Apocrypha of the Old Testament and the New Testament circulated with the same authority as the canonical books. They were used both in preaching and in iconography because of their wealth of detail, a feature which nurtured the devotion and the imagination of the faithful.

The biblical texts were reproduced with *glosses*, notes in the margins written alongside the entire text. These comments, taken from the writings of the church fathers and used as a guide to reading, indicate that patristic theology was the interpretative filter of biblical exegesis. This had no small impact on the view of women in the Middle Ages. The understanding of the texts was influenced by the cultural biases of the interpreters, who found in the Scripture what people believed or observed in their cultural context. In this case, their bias included the social subordination of women.

Between the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, schools and universities appeared alongside the monasteries, and here new public intellectual figures emerged with renewed research perspectives. The questions (*quaestiones*) that arose out of the biblical text were to be resolved through rational inquiry and the use of dialectics. To facilitate its study, the text was subdivided into chapters and verses, and in order to make it easier to understand the text and to study it in depth, concordances and lexicons were prepared. One cannot help noting the different intent in how the biblical text was approached, whether as a book of meditation, or as a source of knowledge and study. The different approaches created tensions that played out in conflicts between the cloister and the school, between *lectio* and *disputatio*. This was a conflict in which women would not always be ill prepared because, though far from centers of research, they were not far from the debates that were widespread in the life of church. It is significant that Abelard recommended to Heloise and her fellow sisters that they should learn Hebrew and Greek in order to understand the Scripture. But it is far more significant that Heloise posed exegetical questions to Abelard for a more correct understanding of the biblical text and, consequently, for its different application in the ethical choices entailed by daily life.¹⁶

The Bible, studied fundamentally in Latin, made its first appearances in the vernacular with the pauperistic and spiritual movements. For example, the Waldensians, who contributed to the translation and distribution of bibli-

15. Rossana E. Guglielmetti, ed., *Il Cantico dei Cantici nel Medioevo* (Florence: Sismel-Edizioni del Galluzzo, 2008).

16. See the essay by Constant J. Mews and Carmel Posa in this volume.

cal texts for the purpose of preaching, used the Gospels, the Letters of Paul and the Psalter in their meetings. These new translations worried the ecclesiastical hierarchies, which were not very inclined to give the laity a direct approach to Scripture.

In addition, between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries the Bible experienced considerable changes as a physical object. Alongside the voluminous books intended for reading from the pulpit, manageable copies were prepared in a single volume in a small format, intended for personal reading. In the university environment during the first half of the thirteenth century, beginning in France and England, and some years later in Italy, “portable” Bibles were produced. This was a personal book, published in a small format, decorated, suitable for everyday reading, and intended for elite laypeople desirous of having a more immediate relationship with the sacred Scripture.

Manuscripts called “Bibles moralisées,” which could be considered objects of luxury for the aristocratic classes, were produced. These finely crafted volumes contained biblical verses accompanied by a brief commentary and images to better illustrate the story.

The so-called *Biblia pauperum* was another type of codex made up of prints that combined verbal text and image. Its selected extracts were set in allegorical sequences with references to the Old Testament (on the right and on the left) and references to the New Testament (set in the center). It was not intended for the poor but rather was a text addressed to an audience of laypeople with the purpose of representing biblical stories in an accessible form.¹⁷

The revolutionary invention of printing with movable type focused on the Bible as its preferred text. The 1471 Venetian edition of a Bible in the vernacular, curated by the Camaldolese monk Nicolò Malerbi, which was based on a translation of the Latin Vulgate, marked a surprising change from the tradition of manuscripts. Vernacularization, in particular, was a new approach to the Scripture, intended above all for the laity. Malerbi himself supported the need to make the Bible accessible to everyone, without “any difference between male and female or because of age.”¹⁸

In Basel in 1491, Froben printed a pocket-sized Bible employing the octavo format and introduced it into a broader market, addressed not only to scholars and preachers but also to laymen and women. This was now the high period of humanism.

17. See the essay of Leticia Sánchez Hernández in this volume.

18. *Epistola a Laurentio* (1478), cited in Edoardo Barbieri, *Le Bibbie italiane del Quattrocento e del Cinquecento: Storia e bibliografia ragionata delle edizioni in lingua italiana dal 1471 al 1600* (Milan: Bibliografica, 1992), 1:43.

1.5. WOMEN AND THE BIBLE IN THEOLOGICAL THOUGHT

What image of women did monks have? How did they interpret the sacred text regarding the mystery of human life and the female role in the plan of salvation? Further, did instructors in schools and universities deviate from the monastic culture in their consideration of women?¹⁹

Medieval authors, as already indicated, drew on the Scripture through the interpretation made by the fathers of the church, and they considered the natural weakness of women as a certain and undeniable reality. Didactic and moral literature largely reflects the cultural prejudices of the time.²⁰ Genesis 1–3 was the primary authoritative source for the definition of sexual identity and gender roles. The creation of Eve (born from the rib of Adam to be his helper), her primary role in sin (she induces Adam to transgress) and the consequent punishment (“he shall rule over you”) were understood as a paradigm of the actual subordination of women. The exegesis carried out by medieval theologians thus legitimized the physical inferiority of woman because she was born from man and in his service, her moral inferiority because she was unable to make ethical choices, and her juridical inferiority because she was under the legal guardianship of man (father, husband, spiritual guide).

This androcentric preconception, which mirrored the structure of society according to patriarchal and hierarchical models, was reinforced in medieval thinkers. They were influenced both by the growing importance of the Gregorian reform and by the weight acquired by Greek philosophy, which considered the male as the norm of the human. In particular, the Aristotelian androcentric model, which considered woman as an undeveloped male (*mas occasionatus*), was accepted and integrated into Scholasticism and, specifically, into the thought of Thomas Aquinas (*Summa theologiae* 1.92.1). For centuries this assumption constituted the foundation for the inadequacy of the female sex to carry out all the tasks performed by men and to represent the image of God.²¹

19. Marie-Therese d’Alverny, “Comment les théologiens et les philosophes voient la femme,” *Cahiers de civilisation médiévale* 20 (1977): 105–28.

20. See María Isabel Toro Pascua’s essay in this volume.

21. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1.93.4 ad 1: Sed quantum ad aliquid secundario imago Dei invenitur in viro, secundum quod non invenitur in muliere: nam vir est principium mulieris et finis, sicut Deus est principium et finis totius creaturae. See Kari Elisabeth Børresen, *Subordination and Equivalence: The Nature and Role of Woman in Augustine and Thomas Aquinas* (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1995); Børresen, “God’s Image, Man’s Image? Patristic Interpretation of Gen1:27 and 1 Cor 11:7,” in *The Image of God: Gender Models in Judaeo-Christian Tradition*, ed. Kari E. Børresen (Minneapolis: Fortress,

The comparison, in fact, between Gen 1:27 (“So God created the human being in his image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them”) and 1 Cor 11:7 (“For a man ... is the image and reflection of God; but woman is the reflection of man”) initiated a discussion among medieval theologians (Bruno the Carthusian, the school of Laon, Peter Lombard, the Dominican School) concerning the concept of *imago Dei* and its applicability to the two sexes.²² Spiritual sexless equality, which was well established in the Augustinian tradition, did not eliminate the gender-specific asymmetry between men and women. For example, the words present in the Pauline epistles, in 1 Cor 14:34 (“Women should be silent in the churches”) and 1 Tim 2:12 (“I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man”) were interpreted by patristic and medieval tradition as clear instructions to exclude women from public and teaching roles.²³ This theology, which we might label “exclusionary,” was also translated into legal terms. For example, it occurs in the *Decretum Gratiani*, with well-known repercussions in western society.²⁴

In medieval culture, the creation and the fall were considered historical events. Moreover, apocryphal and legendary motifs that emphasized the drama of sin were added to the biblical narrative. The reelaboration of the Jewish apocryphal work *Vita Adae et Evae* by the thirteenth-century poet Lutwin offered evocative illustrations regarding the weakness of Adam and the inconstancy of Eve. These attributes became very popular and strengthened the stereotypes of the two characters. Additionally, the story lent itself to

1995), 187–209; Børresen, “God’s Image, Is Woman Excluded? Medieval Interpretations of Gen 1:27 and 1 Cor 11:7,” in Børresen, *The Image of God*, 210–35.

22. See Gary Macy’s essay in this volume.

23. Ratio autem naturalis huic dicto consonat, quam Apostolus innuit 1. ad Corinth. 14[34]. Nam natura non permittit mulierem, saltem post lapsum, tenere gradum eminentem in specie humana, siquidem est dictum sibi in poenam peccati sui Genes. 3. ‘Sub viri potestate eris.’ *Bk. 4, distinctio 25, questio 2, Questiones in librum quartum sententiarum (Opus Oxoniensis)* in Joannis Duns Scoti, *Opera Omnia* (Paris: Vivès, 1894), 19:140.

24. Haec imago Dei est in homine, ut unus factus sit ex quo ceteri oriuntur, habens imperium Dei, quasi vicarius eius, quia unius Dei habet imaginem, ideo quae mulier non est facta ad Dei imaginem. Sic etenim dicit: ‘Et fecit Deus hominem; ad imaginem Dei fecit illum.’ Hinc etiam Apostolus: ‘Vir quidem,’ ait, ‘non debet velare caput, quia imago et gloria Dei est; mulier ideo velat, quia non est gloria aut imago Dei.’ *Decretum Gratiani, Causa 33, quaestio 5, c. 13*, in Emil Friedberg, ed., *Corpus iuris canonici*, 2 vols. (Graz: Akademische Druck und Verlagsanstalt, 1959), 1:1254. See Adriana Valerio, “Donna,” in *Dizionario Enciclopedico del Medioevo*, ed. André Vauchez and Claudio Leonardi (Rome: Città Nuova, 1998), 1:593–95; Valerio, “Il potere delle donne,” in *Il Medioevo: Castelli, Mercanti, Poeti*, ed. Umberto Eco (Milan: Encyclomedia, 2011), 228–31.

innumerable representations because it was a response to the great theological questions that ran through Christianity. It engaged issues relating to sin and redemption, as well as the role that men and women had played in this unfolding of the destiny of humanity and the entire cosmos. For this reason we find Gen 1–3 amply represented throughout the Middle Ages. It occurs in relief sculptures over portals, cycles of mosaics, the stained glass windows of great cathedrals, sculptures in monasteries, altarpieces of high altars, and the holy play cycles performed at Christmas and at Easter (*Passionsspiel*), where it is portrayed as a precondition to the coming of Christ.

Some passages of the Pauline letters also lent themselves to practical interpretations that we find in medieval culture. The interpretation of 1 Tim 2:11–14 (“Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor”) had supported a justification of the subordination of women since they are more prone to deception. This in turn influenced literature and art. However, alongside a nearly unanimous representation of Eve’s responsibility in first picking the fruit and offering it to Adam, we can point out a significant variation. It occurs in the mosaics in the Palatine Chapel in Palermo from the twelfth century, and therefore in a Byzantine environment. Here, in a miniature by the Neapolitan Cristoforo Orimina (d. 1365), both progenitors are pictured collecting the fruit.²⁵ The theme of shared responsibility was to be taken up again by Michelangelo in the Sistine Chapel, within his personal “humanistic” reading of the Holy Scripture.

The sin of Eve, moreover, lent itself to a typological reading by portraying Eve in relation to Mary. In this way, sin was contrasted with redemption, and the serpent, often portrayed with a woman’s face, was placed, in contrast, under the foot of Mary, the new Eve and instrument of salvation.

Although Mary merits a separate discussion, we can only mention her briefly here. The spreading of the cult in response to the Cluniac reform in the eleventh century, laid the groundwork for the flourishing of Marian lyrics in the vernacular. Marian cycles and Lives and Legends drew largely on the apocryphal tradition, since the gospel texts provide little information. The importance of the figure of Mary expanded when it was interpreted typologically. She became both the fulfillment of the old covenant, which the women of the Old Testament (Abigail, Bathsheba, Judith, Esther) foreshadowed, and a representation of the church and humanity. This expansion fueled a widespread diffusion of the figure of Mary in medieval culture, offering an image

25. I thank Paola Vitolo and Alessandra Perriccioli Saggese for this information.

of a high, if not unreachable, ideal of the feminine. It is important to emphasize that this is a model that is also dominant in the male monastic culture, in which the Mother of God was both a source of spirituality and an ideal of the sublimated woman. The presence of Mary under the cross, which we find in literary laments, in the holy representations, and in the Marian lyrics, for example, *De planctu beatae Mariae*, attributed to Bernard of Clairvaux, and the *Stabat Mater*, attributed to Jacopone da Todi. Both favoured a sorrowful devotion that exalted the role of the loving and compassionate mother. This exaltation strengthened the positive consideration of women, to the extent that they could reflect that model.

We must also consider the role that Mary played in the spirituality of the Beguines. They identified with Mary, taking her place in the function as mother: joyfully tender with the child and painfully grief-stricken in the passion. A mysticism of the nativity and of the passion characterized these experiences. The joy and the pain of motherhood, clearly under-appreciated by the men of the church, thus became the dominant features of this female spirituality. The relationship with Mary developed from a filial attitude to a spiritual communion that led to complicity, if not identification. These women relived the moments of Christ's birth, taking part in an event of salvation characterized by joy and tenderness, by participating through actions and identification.²⁶

1.6. RITES OF ORDINATION

A special exception to the stereotypical image of women can be found in the symbols used in the rites of ordination. Other media also allowed familiarity with the biblical texts. First and foremost was the liturgy, through which the laity listened to a certain, although limited and restricted, number of passages from the Old and New Testaments read and interpreted. Their choice and distribution corresponded to a theology and an interpretation of the sacred text which directed the believer towards adherence to the revealed truth. The Liturgy of the Eucharist, the Liturgy of the Hours (Breviary), and the liturgies of the other sacraments and the sacramentals included references to biblical texts and themes. Among these, we must emphasize the blessings of abbesses by the bishop.

26. Adriana Valerio, "Maria nell'esperienza mistica della laicità femminile dal XIII al XV secolo," in *Storia della Mariologia 1: Dal modello biblico al modello letterario*, ed. Enrico dal Covolo and Aristide Serra (Roma: Città Nuova, 2009), 900–21.

The ordination rites highlight the high symbolic and political value of the prayers of consecration. These prayers involved assigning the abbesses pastoral and legal powers, through the entrusting of the crosier and the book of the Rule of the Order. The structure of the rite and the language used in some medieval rites reveal a close similarity between the ordination of the abbot and that of the abbess, varying only in the references to biblical models.²⁷ The *exempla* of Miriam, Deborah, Judith, and Esther supported a strong symbolic appeal for the connection that was established between the leadership functions and responsibilities exercised by the biblical heroines and those entrusted to abbesses. For example, in the rite used by the Mozarabic Church, the bishop, after having bestowed a mitre and pallium on the abbess, clearly proclaimed that for God there is no sexual discrimination (*non est discretio sexuum nec ulla sanctorum disparilitas animarum*) and asked God to grant the abbess strength to use in spiritual combat, as he had accorded it to Deborah, judge and prophetess against Sisera.²⁸ The bishop asked God also to assist her in danger, as he had with Judith and to help the abbess defeat Satan in every place, just as Esther had eliminated Haman.²⁹ Reference to the sister of Moses appeared in the Roman rite at the time of the final prayer preceding the consecration which conferred powers of jurisdiction and spiritual guidance on the abbess.

This use of biblical models, which should be studied further by examining a broader group of examples, shows how these figures have played a role that is central in conferring authority and identity. The Old Testament models in this case are examples of strength and vigor for women who had to assume positions of power. Such appeals were also found in the ordination rites of the Frankish queens. Here, in addition to the usual figures of Esther and Judith, Sarah, Rebekah, Leah, and Rachel appeared as “*beatae reverendissimae feminae*.”³⁰

27. Adriana Valerio, *La questione femminile nei secoli X-XII* (Naples: D'Auria, 1983), 31–33, 78–85.

28. Da ei, Domine, fortitudinem (ad) spiritualia bella gerenda, ut quondam Debbore bellatrici procintum certaminis contra Sisare ostile cuneum tribuisti (Marius Ferotin, *Le 'Liber Ordinum' en usage dans l'Eglise wisigothique et mozarabe d'Espagne du cinquième au onzième siècle* [Paris 1904], 67, cited in Valerio, *La questione*, 84).

29. Adsit ei tua dextera consolatrix, que Iudit vidue in perniciem non defuit Olofernis. Ita, Domine, sermonibus piis et tui adiutorio nominis, exterminet usquequaque Satan, ut Ester humilis infestum tuis plebibus exterminavit Aman (Valerio, *La questione*, 84; Valerio, “Il potere delle donne,” 204–7).

30. *Ad benedicendum regem francorum*, in Edmond Marten, *De antiquis ecclesiae ritibus*, III (Venice: Battista Novelli, 1763), 207ff.

1.7. PREACHING

Preaching played a fundamental role in the knowledge of Scripture both inside the monasteries, through an exegesis that conformed for the most part to the thought of the church fathers, as well as in the squares, with the birth of the mendicant orders in the thirteenth century and the techniques of the *sermo modernus*.³¹

The sermons of Abelard for the nuns of the Paraclete constitute a rare and valuable source as a collection of sermons addressed to a female religious community.³² In them the high regard that Master Abelard had for women and their role in the plan of salvation is emphasized. In *Sermo* 1, in his desire to exalt the dignity of women, he indicates the equal responsibility of Adam and Eve in the fall and their perfect equality in terms of grace (ut in utroque sexu consisteret gratia, sicut in utroque praecesserat culpa). In addition, for him the women who followed Jesus were the origin of the female diaconate, which was fulfilled in female religious life (*Sermo* 31). This clear example shows how the nuns received, in internal preaching, a positive and effective resource for meditation and reflection on the sacred texts, which were an essential source for the construction of religious identity.

The sermons addressed to the Beguines of Paris in 1264 by the Dominicans Godefroy de Beaulieu and Pierre de Verdun responded to the changed conditions in which these women worked outside of the cloisters.³³ They carried out roles of assistance in an urban context, into which they were perfectly integrated, and gathered around a *Magistra* (also called “Martha”) who guided them. The Dominicans presented them with biblical heroines as models opposed to sinners, in order to direct them towards correct behavior, through control of the tongue, practice of prayer, commitment to bringing peace, and industriousness. In this context the role of Martha was given new

31. The “modern” sermon became widespread in the thirteenth century, when the narrative presentation of an entire page of Scripture was replaced by a discussion based on one biblical verse, which was the so-called “theme,” and which was then extended into a series of divisions and subdivisions, shedding light on the inexhaustible interpretative work. Among the many studies, see the overall picture given by Jean Longère, *La prédication médiévale* (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1983).

32. Paola de Santis, *I Sermoni di Abelardo per le monache del Paraclete* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2002).

33. The two Dominicans preached vernacular sermons to the Beguines in 1272–1273 (MS Lat. 16481 of the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris), which were put together by the Canon of Evreux Pierre de Limoges (d. 1306), who transcribed them into a simplified Latin. See Laura Restelli, “Donne religiose nella Parigi del XIII secolo: Studio su quattro sermoni inediti,” PhD diss., Libera Università Maria SS. Assunta, Rome, 1992.

importance: work was regarded as positive, as a *servitium* to be experienced as a new spiritual discipline. For example, the famous sermon by Meister Eckhart (d. 1328), entitled *Intravit Iesus in quoddam castellum*, comments on the episode of Martha and Mary (Luke 10:38–42). Contradicting the usual tradition, the German mystic gave the active Martha a more prominent place than her sister Mary, who sat at the feet of Jesus listening to his words.

The demanding commitment of the female laity was to be the fertile ground for the development of a body of religious literature in the vernacular. This included translations of the Bible that would be more and more in demand in order to better ground life choices in their faith and find forms of expression in one's own native language. It would be worthwhile to carry out a separate reflection on the German mysticism born out of the encounter between the preaching in the vernacular of the Dominicans and female devotion. The rootedness in the Bible of Meister Eckhart and of Tauler (d. 1361),³⁴ for example, influenced the experience of the women under their guidance, which in turn affected significant aspects of a systematic elaboration of mystical experience.

The concerns raised by both Domingo de Guzmán (d. 1221) and Francis of Assisi (d. 1226) about the dangers of the presence of women for the purity of the friars did not exempt the friars from having contact with the women, in order to teach them and guide them.

The revolution of Francis consisted of wanting to understand the Bible in its strictly literal meaning, understood as the presence of God to be made real in life. His interpretative scheme was thus not patristic or theological mediation, but above all focused on the imitation of Christ through poverty and itinerant proclamation: becoming *alter Christus*. The Book is not the Bible, but the crucifix. We will find this same approach expressed in female mysticism. Here we find the legacy of Francis more clearly expressed than in the Franciscan preachers that came after him, since they departed from his spirit of innovation.

It was precisely the awareness of the importance of preaching in shaping the lives of Christians that induced the mendicant orders to seek new strategies in content and communication, which were suited to each particular category (*sermones ad status*). Dominicans and Franciscans addressed the different female believers through *exempla* drawn from the sacred text

34. Paul Michel, "Beatae vitae dulcedinem lectio inquirat': Exegese des Bibeltextes als Basis mystischer Rede, am Beispiel des Hohenliedes," in *Deutsche Mystik im abendländischen Zusammenhang*, ed. Walter Haug and Wolfram Schneider-Lastin (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 2000), 61–92; Kurt Ruh, *Frauenmystik und Franziskanische Mystik der Frühzeit*, vol. 2 of *Geschichte der abendländischen Mystik* (Munich: Beck, 1993).

to educate obedient virgins, chaste widows, or hard-working mothers by presenting them with roles and tasks in keeping with the ideals of Christian society. The preachers emphasized, on the one hand, the dignity of women, focusing on the Virgin Mary, in whom God became incarnate, and they illuminated, on the other hand, feminine virtues to be approved or vices to be condemned, through models taken from sacred Scripture. Eve, the symbol of temptation, was opposed to the holiness of Mary or the redeemed humanity of Mary Magdalene; Esther, the prototype of the church, was set in contrast to the ambiguous figure of Herodias.³⁵ Female restlessness was to be controlled, their feelings ordered, and their behavior disciplined. It was still the case, however, that the center of Christian education for the Dominicans remained the sacred Scripture. It was the spiritual nourishment from which women drew. Scripture encouraged laywomen to adapt their lives to evangelical models and play an educational role within the family and nuns to become teachers and mothers of spiritual life. This promoted a familiarity with Scripture that would also later occur in the women connected to the Dominicans.

The reciprocal relationship between the Bible and preaching was articulated in a different way. The mendicant orders revolutionized the means of communication, occasionally preferring appropriate gestures to support the message, like in primitive Franciscanism. As Roger Bacon (d. 1294) argued, the preacher had to be concerned with transmitting biblical content in language capable of arousing emotions and moving the will towards conversion. In this perspective, the Bible was narrative material. It was treated freely and mixed with anecdotes taken from classical antiquity, with episodes drawn from apocryphal literature, hagiographical legends, and stories drawn from daily events, employing a hybrid language that mixed the vernacular with Latin (*mescidanza*). What remained of the sacred text in the end is difficult to say.

For example, the “Sermons on the Passion,” were presented in the squares to incite the faithful to conversion. In them, the cruel elements of the passion, derived from the apocryphal gospels or widely popular texts such as the *Meditationes vitae Christi* by the Pseudo-Bonaventura, attracted, through their emotional impact, the attention of an audience that participated dramatically in the events of Christ’s death. By dramatizing the episodes of the gospel, they attempted to lead the faithful into the scene, arouse compassion in them and urge them towards identification (Phil 2:5). In these holy representations, the

35. See Umberto di Romans and his sermons *ad status: Predicandum est mulieribus*, in *Prediche alle donne del secolo XIII*, ed. Carla Casagrande (Milan: Bompiani, 1978); Carlo Delcorno, *Quasi quidam cantus: Studi sulla predicazione medievale* (Florence: Olschki, 2009).

female figures stood out as positive role models. They illustrated shared pain (Veronica), fidelity (the pious women), love that does not abandon (Mary Magdalene), and motherhood remaining strong in pain (Mary). These are women who, like the Virgin Mary, represent all of suffering humanity, or, like Mary Magdalene, show the capacity of love to redeem.³⁶

The pedagogic function pushed the preachers to interpret the texts to meet ethical and social needs. This is what the Dominican Giovanni Dominici (d. 1419) did in reinforcing the hardworking but subordinate role of women in the family,³⁷ as did the Franciscan Bernardino da Siena (d. 1444), who adapted Scripture to fight sodomy. For example, in his sermon on September 3, 1427, Bernardino took inspiration from Luke 10:27 to encourage man and woman to love each other, and he used the stories of creation to exalt marriage and the importance of woman in the life of man. The preacher from Siena interpreted the passages relating to eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven (Matt 19:12) and the fruit by which believers can be recognized (Matt 7:15–20) to assert the goodness of marriage against sodomy.³⁸ This is the context in which the emphasis Bernardino placed on the educating function of women should be highlighted. He exhorted them to carry out their roles as mothers and wives carefully and attentively, with the result that many women flocked to his sermons because they felt empowered by a new area of responsibility.

The Augustinians also used primarily the typological-allegorical method to address a lay audience which was often poorly educated but attentive. They were careful of the moral implications presented in their preaching. In the

36. See Andrea Taschl-Erber's essay in this volume.

37. His pedagogical concern resulted in pastoral intransigence and doctrinal harshness. This is apparent both in the treatises addressed to Bartolomea degli Obizzi and in his text *Lucula noctis*, a summation of a long and entrenched negative view of the female. The ancient practice of spiritual direction was articulated in the Middle Ages into different practices for men and women. The spreading of mystical phenomena and the growth of the belief in witchcraft induced the mendicant orders to tie the *cura delle anime* (care of souls) to their pastoral practice which was oriented toward the formation of the true faith of the believer and of his proper behavior (the "good life"). For women this entailed entering into the everyday life of domestic commitments and for men, commitments of work. See Sofia Boesch Gajano, ed., *Letà medievale*, vol. 2 of *Storia della direzione spirituale* (Brescia: Morcelliana, 2008).

38. Roberto Rusconi, "S. Bernardino da Siena, la donna e la 'roba,'" in *Mistiche e devote nell'Italia tardo medievale*, ed. Daniel Bornstein and Roberto Rusconi (Naples: Liguori, 1992), 171–86. We can consider how Bernardino railed against haughty and lustful women who leaned toward the magic arts and the seduction of the devil. For these women he asked for "extermination."

sermons given in Florence in 1427, Gregorio d'Alessandria made reference to several female figures in the Bible in order to point out models of behavior. In this sense, the widows of Sarepta and of Naim offer useful opportunities to exalt widowhood. However, Naomi was presented in her affliction as a type of Mary of sorrow.³⁹

The concern to educate the conscience induced the Dominican Antonino Pierozzi, archbishop of Florence (d. 1459), for example, to apply the many pedagogical implications addressed especially to women, to a wide variety of cases.⁴⁰ In this work Scripture played an important role as a source of moral theology. The Psalms, Canticles, the letters of Paul, and some gospel passages were among the most frequently used scriptural texts, but Old Testament models were not lacking. They, too, were adapted to pedagogical needs, such as presenting Judith as a model of widowhood and seclusion.⁴¹

Girolamo Savonarola must be included among the great preachers. He made the convent of San Marco in Florence into an active center for biblical studies and modeled his preaching on Scripture, departing from the structure of the medieval *sermo*. The study of Scripture for him was fundamental for the renewal of Christianity and was essential in the life of every Christian because it was the primary source of spiritual nourishment. Biblical knowledge would enable an authentic religious experience and thus it had to be easy to understand, mediated by a language that was simple and not rhetorically ornate. This Dominican friar committed himself to making the Bible accessible to all believers, and he himself boasted that the women at his sermons understood it spontaneously:

39. Oriana Visani and Maria Grazia Bistoni, "La Bibbia nella predicazione degli agostiniani," in *Sotto il cielo delle Scritture: Bibbia, retorica e letteratura religiosa (secc. XIII–XVI)*, ed. Carlo Delcorno and Giovanni Baffetti (Florence: Olschki, 2009), 115–37.

40. Alongside the works of spiritual edification addressed to women (*Regola di vita cristiana* in 1440, *Opera del ben vivere* in 1450), within a pastoral concern with the purpose of improving habits and faith, Antonino Pierozzi completed in 1454 his *Summa theologiae Moralis*, in which he often dealt with the female world. In part 3, regarding marriage, he presents an acrostic taken from Dominici of biblical inspiration (Sir 9:1–9) within a misogynist culture: Est enim mulier: avidum animal, bestiale baratrum, concupiscentia carnis, aestuans carnis, dolorosum duellum, aestuans aestus, falsa fides, garrulum guttur, herignis armata, invidiosus ignis, kalumniarum chaos, lepida lues, monstruosum mendacium, naufragii nutrix, opifex odii, prima peccatrix, quietis quassatio, ruina regnorum, silva superbiae, truculenta tyrannis, vanitas vanitatum, xantia xersis, ymago idolorum, zelus zelotypus (Antonino Pierozzi, *Sancti Antonini Summa theologiae*, 4 vols. [1440–1459] (Verona, 1740; repr., Graz: Akademische, 1959), part. 3, ch. 25, col. 117.1.

41. Antonino Pierozzi, *Regola di vita cristiana* [1440] (Florence: Tip. Fiorentina, 1866), 7ff.

Even the women, as soon as we enunciate the gospel texts, or other canonical books, before we give an explanation of them, at once and on their own, have a premonition of what our explanation will be, or already know how to adapt and relate the ancient teachings of Scripture to our times.⁴²

The Scripture, therefore, was not to be analyzed with the subtleties of philosophical reason but meditated upon with the heart, contemplated in prayer, listened to in its deep meaning, and experienced in the conduct of the “good life.” And of women, as is evident from the letter sent to the Sisters of Annalena, who were particularly dear to him, the monk asked that the sacred Scripture be the “mirror” of their consciences, a fundamental element of a renewal of the heart, which is necessary for the implementation of reform.

In the five sermons commenting on the book of Ruth that Girolamo Savonarola preached May 18–25, 1496, he retraced the simple faith of the Moabite girl and her love for her mother-in-law, Naomi. He proceeded from the literal meaning of the text to clarify the typological meanings, almost in concentric steps. This, in turn, enabled him to open the Old Testament book to the great events of history that were contemporary to him. Savonarola upheld and elaborated the dominant exegetical tradition, which saw Ruth as the symbol of the “church of the gentiles” (Origen), giving it a meaning within his ecclesiastic and political vision.⁴³ The Moabite became a model of “simplicity” for women and for all believers, who in Scripture grasped the reasons which anchored their lives of faith. From Ruth, the foreigner, symbol of “simple” faith, would be born the renewed church.⁴⁴

2. WOMEN WHO WERE ASSIMILATORS AND INTERPRETERS OF THE SACRED SCRIPTURE

2.1. WOMEN AND THE BIBLE

Among us are women called Beguines, some of whom make themselves known for their acuteness and openness to novelties. They possess the mysteries of the Scriptures in the common Gallic language, mysteries which are

42. Girolamo Savonarola, *Verità della profezia-De veritate prophetica dyalogus*, ed. Claudio Leonardi (Florence: Sismel-Edizioni del Galluzzo, 1997), 112.

43. Regarding the exegetical tradition about Ruth, see Elena Giannarelli, “I Padri della Chiesa e Ruth. Il libro, il personaggio e la sua storia,” *Ricerche Teologiche* 2 (1991): 181–206.

44. Adriana Valerio, “La predica sopra Ruth, la donna, la riforma dei semplici,” in *Una città e il suo profeta: Firenze di fronte a Savonarola*, ed. Gian Carlo Garfagnini (Florence: Sismel-Edizioni del Galluzzo, 2001), 249–61.

barely accessible to specialists of Scripture. They read them in public, without respect, in conventicles, in squares.⁴⁵

Thus the Franciscan Gilbert de Tournai (d. 1284) described to the bishops, who gathered at the Council of Lyons in 1274, the subversive phenomenon of *mulierculae* who in northern France and Belgium dared to read and comment on the Bible in the vernacular in public squares.

Beguinism, as we saw earlier, appeared in the Low Countries (Brabant) at the end of the twelfth century and spread rapidly in the Rhineland, Provence, and Umbria. Despite the cultural and geographical diversity, beguinism was able to bring out women with strong personalities who were also highly cultured. They wrote about their experiences and reflections, giving a literary form to their longing to love God and become “one spirit” (1 Cor 6:17) in the total fusion of wills.

Hadewijch of Antwerp (d. ca. 1250), Ida of Gorsleew (d. 1262), Beatrijs of Nazareth (d. 1268), and Mechthild of Magdeburg (d. 1282/1294) are some of the names of these *magistrae* who dedicated themselves to work, charity, and the study of the Scripture, demonstrating that they had knowledge and competence.⁴⁶ The women felt they were an active part of the society in transformation, and their writing, expressed in a variety of genres, sheds light on their spiritual and interpretive presence in the tradition. They expounded the biblical texts using the vernacular, thus revolutionizing the traditional way of speaking about God in a way freed from the walls of the convents and the academies.⁴⁷

Hadewijch’s forty-five love songs, for example, offer a new way to speak of God as “Lady Love” (*Frau Minne*, where *Minne* is in the female gender). The names of this personified love recall images of biblical derivation (bond, light, coal, fire, dew, living source), but in poetry the language changed its genre from comment on the sacred Scripture to mystical theology.⁴⁸

45. Sunt apud nos mulieres, quae Beghinae vocantur, et quaedam earum subtilitatibus vigente et novitatibus gaudent. Habent interpretata scripturarum mysteria et in communi idiomate gallicata, quae tamen in sacra scriptura exercitatis vix sunt pervia. Legunt ea communiter, irreverenter, audacter, in conventiculis, in ergastulis, in plateis (*Collectio de scandalis Ecclesiae*, cited in Grundmann, *Religiöse Bewegungen*, 338).

46. Peter Dinzelbacher and Dieter R. Bauer, eds., *Religiöse Frauenbewegung und mystische Frömmigkeit im Mittelalter* (Cologne: Böhlau, 1988); Walter Simmons, *Cities of Ladies: Beguine Communities in the Medieval Low Countries (1200–1565)* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001).

47. See Hildegund Keul’s essay in this volume.

48. Hadewijch, *Poesie, visioni, lettere*, ed. Romana Guarneri (Genoa: Marietti, 2000).

In this genre of poetic creativity, the writing of Julian of Norwich (d. after 1416) can also be included. This English mystic, meditating on the meaning of Christ's motherhood, transferred female metaphors to the divine level of the Trinity. She wrote that Jesus Christ is our mother: "Our Savior is our true Mother in whom we are endlessly born and from whom we will never come out" (*Showings*, long version 57). For Julian, God's fatherhood and motherhood are invoked to connote the fullness of divine action.⁴⁹

For these women, therefore, the Bible was not a text to study, but rather living words that questioned the present and responded to its challenges. The desire to experience the love of God in person through the imitation of the Son, poor and suffering, was translated into a fervent spiritual renewal. This ferment was not like scholastic disputes, but rather was motivated by the assimilation of the gospel message in its most essential form. There is substantial evidence that some women had a renewed relationship with the sacred text.

At the end of the thirteenth century, the Franciscan Salimbene de Adam da Parma (d. 1288) in the *Cronica*, dedicated his writing to his niece Agnese. She was a Clarissan nun at Parma who was very skilled in the interpretation of the Scripture. This dedication attests to the fact that some women in the Franciscan monasteries were able to comment on the Bible.⁵⁰ It was precisely within Franciscan female monasticism that the Observance movement had favored the production and the circulation of extensive devotional literature in the vernacular. For example, Cecilia Coppoli (d. 1500) commented on the sacred Scripture with great authority, drawing on her knowledge of Greek and Latin. She had been preceded by the Franciscan abbess Caterina Vigri (d. 1463), who claimed that it is necessary to be anchored to the Scripture, which is nourishment for every Christian. Her work, *Le sette armi spirituali*, is imbued with the Bible quoted, recalled or echoed.⁵¹ In particular, Caterina cited the Psalms, in line with liturgical practice, the Gospels, and especially Paul, for whom she felt a particular affinity. Among the spiritual weapons that the believer must acquire, the Seventh Weapon for her was: "The memory of the holy Scripture, which we must carry in our hearts and from it, as if from a very faithful mother, take advice in everything that we have to do" (VII, 2).⁵²

49. See Kari Elisabeth Børresen's essay on Julian of Norwich in this volume.

50. Salimbene de Adam da Parma, *Cronica*, ed. Giuseppe Scalia; 2 vols. (Parma: Monte Università Parma, 2007).

51. Caterina Vigri, *Le sette armi spirituali*, ed. Antonella Degl'Innocenti (Florence: Sismel-Edizioni del Galluzzo, 2000).

52. *Ibid.*, 14.

Camilla Battista da Varano (d. 1524) also belonged to the order of the Poor Clares. Introduced by birth into the humanistic and Renaissance atmosphere of the court of the Varano family, she practiced music and acquired a broad literary culture that included knowledge of Latin. But it was the Bible that guided her thought and governed her spirit. Each stage of the spiritual path proposed to Camilla was given a biblical foundation of its own: Exodus, for example, was the “big event” that was the basis of her vocation and thus of her spirituality. It stands out in relief in the first part of her *Autobiography*. She was strongly influenced by Paul and John, who through the themes of the passion and of the wisdom of the cross formed the framework within which she developed her life of faith.⁵³

Women were also the privileged beneficiaries of the Dominican Observance movement. The order, reformed at the urging of Catherine of Siena (d. 1380), proposed a return to full compliance with the ancient rules: rigorous poverty, assiduous prayer, and scrupulous study for preaching. The need for internal discipline was strong, but so was the willingness to resolve the crisis of Christianity of the late fourteenth century by recovering ancient austerity and listening to the Holy Scripture, adapted to meet pastoral needs. Women would later turn to Catherine, especially in the modern age, as a model of prophetic commitment, which found its strength in the centrality of the word.⁵⁴

Beyond situating these women in the spiritual current of thought (Augustinian, Benedictine, Franciscan, Dominican, Carmelite, etc.) in order to better understand their different ways of approaching the Bible, I believe it useful to propose, schematically, some modes of interpretation that medieval women used and that we study in this volume.

2.2. READING AND STUDY

In the Middle Ages the percentage of women who could read was very low. Education, where available, was aimed at the knowledge of rudiments of a life of devout faith. For both Christian and Jewish women, learning to write was limited, since it was common to read aloud and learn Psalms or prayers by heart.⁵⁵ Nevertheless, from the twelfth to the fifteenth century, because of their culture and preparation and starting precisely from the sacred Scripture, women contributed to the literary culture as scholars, copyists, and exe-

53. Pietro Luzi, *Camilla Battista da Varano* (Turin: Gribaudi, 1989), 315ff.; Camilla Battista da Varano, *Autobiografia e le opere complete*, ed. Silvano Bracci (Vicenza: Hamsa, 2009).

54. See Rita Librandi's essay in this volume.

55. See Gemma Avenzoa's essay in this volume.

getes in the East and as theologians and writers in the West.⁵⁶ For example, Heloise questioned Abelard on issues raised during her study of the Bible. The model of Marcella, Jerome's intelligent student and careful interpreter of the Scripture, played an important role of stimulating Heloise and providing identification in order to approach the biblical texts with a critical spirit, with *ratio* and *discretio*. The collection, known as *Problemata Heloissae*, consists of forty-two theological questions that show Heloise to be a mature and scrupulous scholar.⁵⁷

It is also important to emphasize the study of the Bible as it was applied to music. In addition to Hildegard of Bingen (d. 1179), a refined composer, the important role that music played in the monastic life of women emerges more clearly from the research in this volume.⁵⁸ Studying also led to the proposal of new theological hypotheses. Marguerite Porete, the educated Beguine from Valenciennes, translated the Bible into the vernacular and certainly her study and meditation led her to elaborate the theory of the Free Spirit. She claimed a Holy Church the Great (*Sainte Eglise la Grant*) in which simple souls worship God in spirit and in truth (John 4:21) and dwell in the desire for love, liberated from the mediation of priests, sacraments, or virtuous merits, which is necessary in the Little Church (*Eglise la Petite*). In this mystical experience of union with God, Marguerite went beyond Scripture, although it inspired her thought and she often referred to texts by John and Paul. Condemned as a heretic, Marguerite and her works were burned at the stake in Paris in 1310.

The case of the writer Isotta Nogarola (d. 1466) deserves a separate discussion. Together with her sister Ginevra, Isotta was famous for her culture and refused marriage to devote herself to studying. Starting from a reflection on the limited status of women, Nogarola questioned the responsibility of Adam and Eve in the fall of humankind (*De pari aut impari Evae atque Adae peccato*, 1451). This dialogue recalled, on the one hand, the thesis of their equal guilt, but, on the other, tended to attribute to Eve, whom she described as the weaker of the two, less responsibility, claiming that the prohibition was directed only to Adam. However, woman was not the cause of sin, her punishment was certainly more serious and, in some way, her guilt remained unforgiven.⁵⁹ Isotta Nogarola marks, in some way, the passage from the Middle Ages to modern times. Her work is set within a genre that is defined as *querelle*

56. See Rosa Maria Parrinello's essay in this volume.

57. Maria Cipollone, "In margine ai *Problemata Heloissae*," *Aev* 2 (1990): 659–68.

58. See Linda Maria Koldau's essay in this volume.

59. *Isottae Nogarolae Veronensis opera*, ed. Eugenius Abel, 2 vols. (Vienna: Gerold et socios, 1886); Margaret L. King, "Isotta Nogarola, umanista e devota (1418-1466)," in *Rinascimento al femminile*, ed. Ottavia Piccoli (Rome: Laterza, 1991), 3–33.

des femmes, which began at the end of the 1400s, was made up of treatises that discussed equality, disparity, or difference between the sexes, and drew on sacred Scripture to legitimize first one thesis, then another.

2.3. THE BIBLE AS THE PEDAGOGY OF LIFE

Normally the approach to the biblical text practiced by women was not, however, the study of the Bible in itself but rather its pedagogical adaptation. The intent was to make it alive in order to educate and edify. Even the aristocratic Dhuoda (d. ca. 843) elaborated personal ethics derived from the Bible, a *Liber manualis*, and dedicated it to her faraway son William as a practical guide to help him live at court in the light of Christian values.⁶⁰

The poetess Ava of Melk (d. 1127) also dealt freely with biblical episodes as narrative material in her poems, with a clear edifying intent.⁶¹ We find this pedagogical attitude in the comments that abbesses, such as Hildegard of Bingen and Herrad of Hohenburg (d. 1196), founders, and spiritual mothers, such as Clare of Assisi (d. 1253) and Camilla Battista da Varano, addressed to nuns of their orders or to their spiritual daughters. In order to make it possible for them to draw lifeblood from biblical episodes, they chose them for their exemplary nature, with applications in teaching and learning. In Scripture, they sought the *rectissima norma vitae humanae*. In this sense, these women were able to reconcile theology and spirituality, a combination that started an irreversible break with the male thought expressed by Scholastic philosophy, which nevertheless persisted throughout the modern and contemporary eras.

For example, we find no such separation in the abbess Heloise, who was concerned about the human implications connected to a correct interpretation of Scripture. Her ethics of responsibility was elaborated based on her engagement with her teacher/lover Abelard and from having shared with him the “principle of intentionality,” and also from a personal elaboration of the gospel message. The unity of the Christian vocation, the matrimonial experience, the intentionality resulting from a personal ethical conscience, which is the foundation of every action, and attention to the individuality of the human person—all these were matured in Heloise through her meditation on the Bible, which she knew well and interpreted critically.⁶²

60. Franca Ela Consolino, “Dhuoda, la Bibbia e l’educazione,” in *La Bibbia nell’interpretazione delle donne*, ed. Claudio Leonardi and Adriana Valerio (Florence: Sismel-Edizioni del Galluzzo, 2002), 49–76.

61. See Magda Motté’s essay in this volume.

62. *Problemata Eloissae*, PL 178:677–730. See Adriana Valerio, “Il dramma della coscienza: Eloisa,” in *Cristianesimo al femminile* (Naples: D’Auria, 1990), 77–94.

Herrad of Landsberg, in another context, elaborated in her *Hortus Deliciarum* over 1,100 passages taken from the Scripture, tracing the history of the world and humanity, of sin and redemption up to the judgment, in order to educate and spiritually uplift the nuns of her monastery in Alsace.⁶³

The *Sermons* of Umiltà of Faenza (d. 1310) also carried out this pedagogical role to exhort the nuns to prayer and to meditation. Although this abbess made extensive use of scriptural quotations, she adapted them to her didactic intent in order to exhort the sisters to virtue.⁶⁴

The Bible was used, finally, by Christine de Pizan as the framework for the moral and allegorical construction of *Le livre de la cité des dames*, fortified by the merits of the women of the past. In that city, the excellence or inferiority of women are not measured according to an arbitrary conception of nature, but rather according to the exercise of virtue, the models for which can be found in pagan and Christian sources. This lay writer, who ideally represents the end of the Middle Ages and the beginning of humanism, is extensively discussed in the volume dedicated to the *querelle des femmes*.

2.4. BIBLE, LIFE, AND HAGIOGRAPHY

The stories of some women, as we know them from hagiographical texts, function as personal hermeneutics and practical exegesis of the Bible. We can verify this by demonstrating that the will of the saint corresponds as much as possible, even in everyday actions, to figures present in the sacred texts and, above all, to Christ, the unique *exemplum* for every Christian. But we find it also in the concern of the hagiographers to shape that concrete life around themes inspired by Scripture to the point of identification between women and Christ. This method provided models that indicated the ways to make the Bible come true in the circumstances of life.⁶⁵ An episode, a verse of the Scripture, or an expression of the gospel could become themes that inspired a life. They interpreted the meaning of a person's existence.

The medieval saints participated in the events of the birth of Christ and relived in their flesh the agony of the cross. Their lives, in this assimilative path, became the corporal manifestation of a biblical inspiration: the word

63. See the essays by Paola Vitolo, Claudia Poggi, and Marina Santini in this volume.

64. Adele Simonetti, *I Sermoni di Umiltà da Faenza* (Spoleto: Centro Italiano di Studi sull'Alto Medioevo, 1995). This Vallombrosan abbess showed a preference for John the Evangelist and knowledge of the Apocalypse, which she cited abundantly.

65. André Vauchez, *Les laïcs au Moyen Age: Pratiques et expériences religieuses* (Paris: Cerf, 1989); André Vauchez, *Saints, prophètes et visionnaires: Le pouvoir surnaturel au Moyen Age* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1999).

heard or read became flesh in everyday life. The Beguines, for example, lived in relation to Jesus, whom they loved at the two extreme moments of his life: his birth and his death. This allowed them to express a maternal affectivity which we cannot find with the same intensity in any male experience of the time. These women identified with the Virgin. To Mary of Oignies (d. 1231) and for Ida of Gorsleeuw, for example, this meant receiving the honor of caring for baby Jesus: holding him to their breasts, kissing him, and swaddling him. The imitation of Mary (through reliving her pregnancy and nursing) became for some mystics the corresponding female version of the imitation of Christ.

Angela of Foligno (d. 1309) was seen by her followers as the “strong woman” of Proverbs 31:10–31. Her disciples applied 1 Cor 1:27–29 to her, paraphrasing it: her humility was contrasted with the foolishness of worldly wisdom, her “ignorance” with the learned scholars. Angela was compared to the prophetess Huldah (2 Kgs 22:8–20), and she herself was considered a prophetess of the longed-for third age of the world. This was in line with the eschatological movement of the Spirituals, which were strongly influenced by the teachings of Joachim of Fiore.⁶⁶

We can recall, finally, Catherine of Siena, the first woman to receive the stigmata, the sign of conformity to Christ and of the annulment in Christ of the differences between the sexes.

2.5. THE MYSTICAL PATH

For medieval women the understanding of faith, nourished by listening to the Bible, was thus not based on knowledge or theoretical speculations but rather matured in the encounter of love that was aroused by listening. The mystical experience became an interpretative key that gave life to the written word through the soul enlightened by God, according to the expression of Paul, “Littera occidit, spiritus autem vivificat” (2 Cor 3:6). It was taken up by the fathers of the church to support the importance of allegorical or spiritual interpretation.

This deep assimilation of the Scripture that we find in the female writings also includes an awareness that it is an inexhaustible source, full of ideas and open to multiple interpretations that go “beyond” the narrow formulation of the literal text. We find, for this reason, an internal tension between

66. Enrico Menestò, ed., *Angela da Foligno terziaria francescana* (Spoleto: Centro Italiano di Studi sull'Alto Medioevo, 1992); Giuseppe Betori, “La Scrittura nell’esperienza spirituale di Angela,” in *Vita e spiritualità della beata Angela da Foligno*, ed. Clement Schmitt (Perugia: Messaggero, 1987), 171–98; Rossana Vanelli Coralli, “Il superamento della Sacra Scrittura nel Liber di Angela da Foligno (†1309),” in Delcorno and Baffetti, *Sotto il cielo delle Scritture*, 79–99.

the knowledge of the Bible and the experience of God. This often resulted in becoming critical towards theologians who were unable to discern the true message of the Scripture, because they were immobilized by a reading strategy flawed by a closed hermeneutic horizon.

These female mystics were attentive to the sacred Scripture, but were also aware of the necessity to go beyond the text.⁶⁷ The truth is above the book, which, in the light of the mystical experience, turns out to be a poor instrument. In *Le miroir des simples âmes* Marguerite Porete, for example, shows great familiarity with the biblical texts, which are cited, assimilated, and reexamined. For her the Scripture was a mediation in the order of “Reason,” in which the institutional church was founded, and not a mediation in the order of “Love” that belonged to the “simple souls.” In this order the soul, in the mystical encounter of love and in the total emptying of the self, reaches freedom and understanding and going “beyond” the biblical text. While the Scripture is an instrument, the mystical union reaches God, who is the source of the Scripture.⁶⁸

For Angela of Foligno the union of love with the transcendent led into the heart of the Trinitarian mystery and went beyond every biblical commentary. The sacred Scripture, for her as for all of the Franciscan tradition, was to be incarnated in life. Before understanding what the passion was, one had to relive it in one’s own person in order to participate in the divine reality.

From this point of view, the *imitatio Christi* was experienced by women as a way of experiencing in their own flesh what the Gospels say about the life of Jesus. For Clare of Assisi life had to be in full observance of the gospel (*vivere secundum perfectionem sancti evangelii*) in order to be as much like Christ as possible.⁶⁹ Her own ambition to follow Francis as an itinerant missionary, although it was thwarted because deemed inappropriate for a woman, was born out of the evangelical longing to be a disciple and apostle of the master Jesus of Nazareth.⁷⁰

67. Peter Dinzelbacher, *Mittelalterliche Frauenmystik* (Munich: Paderborn, 1993); Peter Dinzelbacher and Dauer R. Bauer, eds., *Frauenmystik im Mittelalter* (Stuttgart: Schwabenverlag, 1985).

68. Margherita Porete, *Speculum simplicium animarum: Le miroir des simples âmes*, ed. Paul Verdeyen and Romana Guarnieri, CCCM 69 (Turnholt: Brepols, 1986); Blanca Gari, “Filosofia en vulgar y mistagogía en el ‘Miroir’ de Margarita Porete,” in *Filosofia in volgare nel Medioevo*, ed. Nadia Bray and Luis Sturlese (Louvain-la-Neuve: Fédération Internationale des Instituts d’Études Médiévales, 2003), 133–53.

69. See the essay of Martina Kreidler-Kos in this volume.

70. Chiara Frugoni, *Una solitudine abitata: Chiara d’Assisi* (Rome: Laterza, 2006), 28ff.; Maria Pia Alberzoni, *Chiara e il papato* (Milan: Biblioteca Francescana, 1995); André Vauchez, *François d’Assise: Entre histoire et mémoire* (Paris: Fayard, 2009).

Teresa de Cartagena (d. 1478), through an ongoing comparison between the biblical texts and her own experience, updated a rereading of the Bible in the light of the dream of a universal Christian unity which was never achieved.⁷¹ In the Middle Ages, it is obvious that women's actual experience of God, rather than knowledge through the study of Scripture was the interpretative key for understanding the Bible. They did not seek intellectual insight but comprehension of the message of salvation as incarnated in physical and everyday life. This means that women listened to, read, meditated upon, and, above all, assimilated the gospel in an encounter of love. It was the *experientia Crucis*, as Francis of Assisi had experienced it, that gave the key of interpretation of the sacred Scripture, rather than the meticulous *postillatio* of the texts practiced by the exegetes. Only the mystic understands the Bible because he or she takes it to completion.

The mystical experience also meant to complement, through visions, what the Bible did not say. The Augustinian Veronica da Binasco (d. 1497) did not know how to read but showed an extensive knowledge of the Gospels, reexamined by Veronica herself. Her visions followed the liturgical feast days and led her inside the gospel narrative, expanding the content of the text. In this way a sort of holy representation or "mystic theater" was created.⁷² It is above all the scene of the passion that was enriched with elements that do not occur in the canonical texts: dialogues between Christ and the Virgin, before the passion, the blessing of the mother, her tears, Mary sending Mary Magdalene to stop him, and the revelation to her of the resurrection.

This particular experience of God, on the one hand, allowed a lively and heart-felt participation in the life of Christ, and, on the other hand, offered women a charismatic legitimation that gave strength to their words and were capable of revealing the divine plans hidden in the sacred page.

71. See Maria Laura Giordano's essay in this volume.

72. Isidoro de Isolani, *Vita della beata Veronica da Binasco* [1517], ed. Giacomo Ravizza (Pavia: Seminario Vescovile, 2006). In a vision, Veronica da Binasco was present at the meal of Jesus at the house of Mary and Martha, in which the Master announced his death on the cross: "The Angel of the Lord led her mind into the house of Martha, situated on a rock, where she saw the Savior with his disciples, blessing the meal. Indeed, while the Savior was sitting at the table, his mother also came to the table in the presence of the crowd of the disciples. Mary of James and Salome and other women in proper order followed the Mother to the right hand of Christ; on the left hand sat John, and the Magdalene was sitting at the feet of Jesus.... When at the end they got up from the table, Veronica saw Christ kneeling in front of the Mother and asking for her maternal blessing, and in the same way the humble mother on her knees prayed to her Son God to give her the gift of the same thing" (*ibid.*, 129, 131).

2.6. THE PROPHETICAL PATH

Prophecy is not a sacrament but a gift of God ... in matters pertaining to the soul woman does not differ from man as to the thing, for sometimes a woman is found to be better than many men as regards the soul. (Thomas Aquinas, *Suppl.* 39.1, ad 1)

Prophetic inspiration was considered a privileged way of understanding the Scripture, since it took place through the free intervention of the Spirit. Hildegard of Bingen inaugurated the prophetic path, followed by other female figures engaged in interpreting and repositing the word of God to a church and society in need of conversion and renewal.

For Hildegard, prophecy unveils the *mysterium* hidden under the literal text of Holy Scripture and communicates to other believers a deep inner understanding of the revealed texts, not lacking in a feminine originality of analysis.⁷³

To Birgitta of Sweden (d. 1373), the Bible offered symbols and metaphors that allowed her, through her visions, to establish a connection with the destinies of humankind. The Scripture was the canvas on which to embroider the intervention of God in the world, but also the story to expand upon in order to rewrite the scenes that are not present in the biblical texts. Her visionary experience, in fact, allowed her to see things and to witness episodes that were not made explicit in the Scripture. It is surprising that she affirmed to be a revelatory channel, called by God in the same way as the prophets, evangelists, and apostles. This means that she attributed scriptural authority to her *Reuelaciones*. In fact, the vision of Mary and Joseph, kneeling on either side of the child, was to influence the iconography of the Nativity as evidence of the mutual exchange between visionary experience and the world of images.⁷⁴

For Catherine of Siena, her prophetic mandate expressed the intimate connection between experience of the transcendent and pastoral concern for the reform of the church. Biblical quotations, references, and metaphors were adapted to the message she had to communicate and were intermingled with the prophetic word that was nourished by that word. An inner urgency drove Francesca Romana (d. 1384) to enter into the dynamics of the political and religious life of her time, judging the results in light of the word.⁷⁵

73. See the essay by Valeria Ferrari Schieffer and Elisabeth Gössmann in this volume.

74. See Kari Elisabeth Børresen's essay on Birgitta of Sweden in this volume.

75. Alessandra Bartolomei Romagnoli, ed., *Francesca Romana: La santa, il monastero e la città alla fine del Medioevo* (Florence: Sismel-Edizioni del Galluzzo, 2009), with an extensive bibliography.

The communities that were considered heretical can also be included in the prophetic path: the followers of Peter Waldo of Lyon (d. ca. 1206), with their radical adhesion to the gospel and active participation in apostolic itinerancy and preaching, were critical of the church hierarchy and their privileges. Another movement, which dated back to Guglielma of Milan (d. 1282), interpreted the gospel by applying it to a woman as incarnation of the Holy Spirit and announced the advent of a new church with female direction. This revolutionary vision highlights the necessity felt by some women in the Middle Ages to reinterpret and to rewrite the biblical texts. It allowed a different image of God, described with female metaphors, and consequently, a greater appreciation of women in the church and in Christian society.

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