

Nowell, Irene, OSB. "Benedictine Interpreters of the Word of God."

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I am very grateful for this opportunity both to study Benedictine interpreters of the Word of God and to present some of my insights to you. I'm certainly glad we're still "exploring." I have often said to my students that I don't know anything that happened after 200 A.D., and in many ways that remains true! So please have patience with me as I launch into several centuries new to me.

I have found two basic principles that shape the Benedictine approach to Scripture throughout the centuries: (1) Benedictines always do biblical interpretation in a spirit of *lectio divina*; and (2) Benedictines always go home. Let me spin these out a little.

Benedictines always do biblical interpretation in a spirit of *lectio divina*. You can teach us other methods; you can even force us to use them. But left to our own devices, Benedictines will consistently revert to a *lectio* approach. I think this may be why Benedictines are often criticized from two directions because (a) their teaching is too spiritual and (b) their preaching is too academic! They are consistently blending the results of their study with the experience of their prayer. Benedictines do biblical interpretation in a spirit of *lectio divina*.

Benedictines always go home. That's what Joseph Fitzmyer said to me when I finished my studies at Catholic University: "The trouble with Benedictines is that they always go home!" I took that as a compliment although I don't think he meant it as one! Stability is real for Benedictines, and although you may find them somewhere else for a while, it is consistently true that they always go home. There are consequences of this. Most of the time you don't find Benedictines in the big universities -- or the big cities, for the most part. They may be there for a time, but they always go home. So they may not be as well known as those who stay long-term in large institutions.

Most of the interpreters that I found through the centuries were abbots (and one pope). They had better publicity! This may also be the reason we know less about women Benedictines in this field. Another consequence of finding Benedictines at home is that you have a pool of talented people who teach in their own schools for the long haul. Their real influence is often through their students! This, I think, is an important insight for the Association of Benedictine Colleges and Universities. Be grateful for the talented people you have year-in and year-out. Benedictines always go home.

Now for some core samples in this preliminary archaeological dig. I begin with Benedict and Gregory the Great. My second sample circles the turn of the first millennium to the second, and my third circles the turn of the second millennium to the third.

Benedict: The Premier Interpreter of Scripture

The premier Benedictine interpreter of Scripture is Benedict himself. Anyone who has read the Rule is aware that it is interwoven throughout with quotations and allusions from Scripture. A careful examination of what Benedict believed about Scripture and how he used it yields much richness.

Benedict begins by telling us that "the Scriptures rouse us when they say: "It is high time for us to arise from sleep (Rom 13:11)" (RB Prol. 8) and ends by exhorting us: "What page, what passage of the inspired books of the Old and New Testaments is not the truest of guides for human life?" (RB 73.3). **1** Benedict personifies Scripture itself and hears it speaking directly to us: Scripture rouses us. He tells us that God speaks to us now through these words: "the voice from heaven calls," "the Lord calls out," "God then directs these words to you" (RB Prol. 9, 14, 16). He values Scripture as "the truest of guides" (73.3), "medicine" (28.3), "a light that comes from God" (Prol. 9). **2** Scripture is central for Benedict and never divorced from the reality of the present.

Benedict's use of Scripture is certainly based on his *lectio divina*. He frustrates scholars who want to determine which translation he is using -- both the Old Latin and the Vulgate were available to him -- because he seems often to be quoting from memory. Sometimes it is difficult to determine whether he is quoting Scripture at all. The number of citations and allusions that have been found in the Rule differs widely! **3** But Benedict doesn't just pull a quotation out

of the air because a few words fit his point. In other words, he rarely proof-texts. He is a sober interpreter. A look at the context of the verses he cites can be very revealing.

For example, in the middle of RB 27 on "The Abbot's Concern for the Excommunicated," Benedict cites 2 Corinthians (2:7-8). The two verses seem tame enough: "Console [him] lest he be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow" and "let love for him be reaffirmed" (RB 27.3-4). An investigation of 2 Corinthians shows, however, that these aren't just nice thoughts. Paul is telling the Corinthians that he is not coming to visit them as he had planned. He had apparently been offended by someone in the community and had written a previous letter to them (now lost) that grieved them deeply. So Paul does not want to come to Corinth just yet. He is afraid that he is, in part, the cause of their grief and by coming will just add to it. Instead he has sent Titus to convey his message and bring him news of them.

In RB 27, right before the quotation of these two verses from 2 Corinthians, Benedict advises the abbot to "send in senpectae . . . to "support the wavering brother [and] urge him to be humble" (27.2-3). The abbot is not to go himself. Perhaps he is, in part, the cause of the grief! But he is to send wise brothers, just as Paul sends Titus. Did Benedict know the context of 2 Corinthians or is this just a lucky guess? There are enough other examples to suggest that he knew the context and assumed his readers would too. The two verses he cites are sufficient both to carry the message and suggest the context. **4**

Benedict's influence on the interpretation of Scripture comes not only through his own example in the Rule but also through his instructions to his followers. In the summer he calls for reading "from the fourth hour until the time of Sext" (48.4) with the possibility of reading instead of a siesta after the noon meal. In the winter "the brothers ought to devote themselves to reading until the end of the second hour" and again after their meal (48.10, 13). During Lent the time for reading is lengthened until the third hour (48:14). "On Sunday all are to be engaged in reading except those who have been assigned various duties" (48.22). Benedict is serious about our *lectio divina*: it is to be guarded and there are sanctions for neglecting it (48.17-21). It is no wonder that Benedictines revert to interpreting through the lens of *lectio* since it is a major part of our daily routine.

Gregory the Great

Our next stop has to be St. Gregory the Great, pope from 590-604. Not only is he our first interpreter of Benedict, he himself is an influential interpreter of Scripture. Robert McNally names him the "most prolific Bible commentator" of his time and says that his work "reflect[s] the spirit which will inspire the Bible exegesis for the next thousand years."**5** His major work is the *Magna moralia* in Job along with numerous homilies on the gospels and on Ezekiel. He too is working from a *lectio* method. Beryl Smalley, citing Guibert of Nogent, calls him "the master of 'spiritual' exegesis, in whose words 'the keys to this art may best be found.'"**6** He is interested in spiritual and allegorical interpretation, but he also has a respect for the literal sense.

Like Benedict, he too hears Scripture speaking directly to the reader in the present. In the Letter to Bishop Leander that opens the *Moralia* he claimed to be particularly suited to comment on Job because of his own infirmities: "I, a stricken one, should set forth Job stricken."**7** Without apology he relates the text to his own personal situation. Because he is a preacher and a teacher, Gregory's exegesis is shaped by the needs of his audience. The *Moralia* originated in daily conferences to the monks who had traveled with him to Constantinople. His work on the gospels and Ezekiel consists of homilies given while he was pope.**8**

Gregory interprets biblical passages by finding echoes in other biblical passages. In other words, he interprets Scripture by Scripture, linking passages that may have little to do with each other except shared vocabulary. Smalley points out that "[t]o us, this is a most annoying system,"**9** but, in fact, this practice is one that springs from *lectio*. Isn't it true that one passage will lead us to another and another? To be fair, neither Benedict nor Gregory invented this method. Augustine is a master of it! Gregory describes his procedure for interpretation with two images. In one of his homilies on chapter 1 of Ezekiel he says that *lectio divina* is like the wheels of the four living creatures in Ezekiel: it goes wherever we go, seeking what we need. **10** In his Letter to Leander he says that the exposition of Scripture "should follow the way of a river," watering the valleys on either side yet always returning to its bed. **11**

What about Gregory's influence? We find it both in his method and in his works. But Gregory is influential not only because of his own interpretation of Scripture but also through Augustine of Canterbury and his companions whom he sent to Britain. Mentoring is another significant way of impacting the future. Smalley concludes her description of Gregory: "Exegesis is teaching and preaching. Teaching and preaching is exegesis. This was the strongest impression left by St. Gregory on medieval Bible study."**12** It is, I propose, a description of Benedictine biblical interpretation to this day. We cannot separate our spirituality from our intellectual life.

Haimo of Auxerre

Now we move to the ninth century. Haimo of Auxerre is the gift of this study for me. I had never heard of him until I started to prepare this paper. Haimo is an example of what happens because Benedictines stay home. His influence extends to his student, Heiric, and from Heiric on to Remigius of Auxerre. He is another example of monastic mentoring. The situation at Auxerre reveals further consequence of staying home, another monastic reality.

Haimo's commentaries on Joel and Amos were published under the name of Remigius and other works of his under the name of Heiric. Worse yet, Haimo has also been confused with another Haimo who was bishop of Halberstadt. Not until 1907 was it demonstrated that the works attributed to Haimo of Halberstadt in the *Patrologia Latina* are really by Haimo of Auxerre. In a monastery it is inevitable that eventually one's work will be attributed to "a nun of Stanbrook" or "a monk of Auxerre."

So who is this Haimo of Auxerre? We know very little. He was born in the early ninth century, was a member of the abbey at Auxerre and a teacher in its school between A.D. 840-860. It is thought that he left there to become abbot of Sasceium (Cussy-les-Bois) around 865, and died around 875. **13**

Kevin Hughes says that "Haimo's scholarship is most distinctively his in its exegetical method."**14** He works through a text phrase by phrase, commenting as he goes. He is well-read and draws on a variety of sources from Jerome to Virgil.**15** He comments on the Vulgate and the Septuagint and knew at least some Hebrew. He gives a variety of interpretations without judging between them. He had good historical-critical instincts centuries ahead of his time. But he also belonged to his own time. He is a gatherer of everything he finds useful or interesting. He turns to allegory, to numerological analysis, to literal exposition, to moral commentary.

Everhart observes, concerning his commentary on Jonah: "one feels that the mysteries are never fully explained; nevertheless, one believes that the commentator has laid forth as much meaning as can possibly be conveyed in so few pages. In these pages, we can visualize a medieval mind working to interpret not only the biblical text, but also our infinitely complicated world, which may also be read as the Maker's Book."**16** Is this not a description of a lectio method? Haimo is a well-educated monk who blends knowledge and faith in the service of teaching and preaching. Exegesis is teaching and preaching. Teaching and preaching is exegesis.

A few examples may be enlightening:

And he went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tharsis (Jonah 1:3). Joppa is a port in Judea, to which Hiram, king of Tyre, transported wood from Lebanon on barges, and from there the wood was brought by land to Jerusalem. Jonah, therefore, coming from the mountainous country of Judea to the sea coast and the plains, is rightly said to have gone down. And he paid the fare to them, and went down into the ship, that he might go with them to Tharsis from the face of the Lord (Jonah 1:3), that is, he paid the fees of transport. Moreover, he is said to have gone down into the ship, as it appears, because like a fugitive, he passes into the interior of the ship looking for a hiding place.**17**

This much is clearly based on the literal meaning. He gives us also some information about the place, the geography, and a little connection to other events (Hiram of Tyre).

"Tharsis" means "contemplation of joy"; "Joppa" means "beautiful." Mystically: Jonah, that is, Christ, leaving the mountains, went down into Joppa, because when they pursued Him in Judea, as we read in the Gospel, He went across "into the districts of Tyre and Sidon" (Matthew 15:21), which are cities of the Gentiles. These cities are designated rightly by Joppa (that is, "the beautiful"), because they were set apart in the allotment of Israel. Therefore the Lord came to Tharsis, that is, the contemplation of joy, because He contemplated the salvation of the world, which was predestined before time.

Moreover, the salvation of the world is His joy. And He descended into Joppa because, when the Passion was upon Him, He accomplished the salvation of the beautiful Gentile nations. But because He came for the lost sheep of the house of Israel, He did not wish to give "the children's bread" to dogs (Matthew 15:26). Therefore He pays the fare, that is, the pledge of expected salvation, to the sailors, whom we believe signify the Gentiles, so that at this time He might first save the Jews for whom He had come and then save the Gentiles, as it were, the neighbors of the sea. **18**

There is no break between these two passages. Haimo moves with ease from the literal exposition to the etymology of words to a christological interpretation. Once he makes this last move, he begins to weave together allusions from the gospels. This same ease characterizes the whole commentary on Jonah.

Lest you think that Haimo is always easy to read, however, I have one more paragraph to share, and this one just for fun! Here is his commentary on the last verse of the book of Jonah:

Nor should it escape notice that more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons were said to have been in Nineveh, which number in itself contains a great mystery. For you reach a hundred and twenty if, beginning from one all the way to fifteen, you will always add the numbers following the natural order: for add one to two, you get three; add three, you get six; add four, you get ten. Let this be done all the way to fifteen, following the natural sequence of the numbers, and a hundred and twenty will be reached. The Holy Spirit came over this many believers on the day of Pentecost (Acts 1:15).**19**

Moreover, the number fifteen is composed of the number seven and the number eight. For seven and eight are fifteen; so many were the steps in the Temple of the Lord (Ezekiel 40:26-31), and just this many are the Psalms on which the title appears, "A gradual canticle" (Psalms 119-33). So many days Paul is read to have been with the Apostles and to have delivered the Gospel to them. Rightly, therefore, the multitude of the Church shines forth in such a number, in which the mysteries of the New and also of the Old Testaments, both the hundredfold squares and the cubits by the thousandfold, that is, a solid perfection, is proclaimed.

Concerning the "squares and the cubits," Everhart comments, "In these lines, Haimo introduces a numerological mystery that he does not explain. . . . Haimo closes his commentary with an emphasis on mystery, and the difficulty of this final point demonstrates for him as for us the complex implications of allegorical interpretation."**20** Amen!

Regarding Haimo's commentary on Second Thessalonians, Hughes calls it "a highpoint in the history of 2 Thessalonians exegesis."**21** Haimo combines the earlier traditions into a "moderate synthesis" and warns against panic concerning an imminent end, which may have been in the air at the approach of the year 1000.

Haimo's influence continued through his students. Deborah Everhart says of Haimo, Heiric, and Remigius of Auxerre: "All three of these monks contributed to the biblical commentary of the Carolingian Renaissance, and their influence carried over into the later Middle Ages."**22**

So where are we? Benedict's contribution is in the Rule; Gregory's influence is found primarily in his homilies. Haimo and his students write commentaries. But Smalley comments that after Remigius, who died around 908, there is a great gap. Commentaries disappear for more than a century. She observes that one cause of this is the Cluniac emphasis on liturgy. Since monks were spending much more time in choir, written works on the Bible declined. The commentary was replaced by the gloss.**23** Keep a pencil in your choir stall!

Another major contribution of Benedictines to biblical interpretation throughout this period is the copying and preservation of texts, both the Bible itself and various commentaries on it. This work was carried out by monks whose names will never be known to us, but where would we be without them?

Notes

1 The translation used throughout is that of RB 1980: *The Rule of St. Benedict in Latin and English with Notes* (ed. Timothy Fry, OSB, et al.; Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1981).

2 See Mary Forman, OSB, "Benedict's Use of Scripture in the Rule: Introductory Understandings," *American Benedictine Review* 52 (2001) 329-32; Demetrius Dumm, OSB, *Cherish Christ Above All: The Bible in the Rule of Benedict* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1996; reprinted St. Vincent's Archabbey) 13-15.

3 See Ansgar Kristensen, OSB, and Mark Sheridan, OSB, "The Role and Interpretation of Scripture in the Rule of Benedict," *RB* 1980, 468-71.

4 See Irene Nowell, OSB, "Benedict's Use of Scripture in RB 27: A Question of Context," *Benedictines* 57.1 (Spring-Summer, 2004) 6-16.

5 Robert E. McNally, SJ, *The Bible in the Early Middle Ages* (Woodstock Papers 4; Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1959) 15.

6 Beryl Smalley (citing Guibert of Nogent), *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1952) 32.

7 *Moralia*; Praef in Iob as cited by Smalley, p. 24.

8 Smalley, p. 32.

9 Smalley, p. 34.

10 Hom. In Ezech 1.7, par. 16 on Ezek 1:21, in S. Gregorii Magni, Homiliae in Hiezechihalem Prophetam (Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina; ed. Marcus Adriaen; Turnhout: Brepols, 1979) vol. 142, p. 93.

11 Epistola ad Leandrum, par. 2, in S. Gregorii Magni, Moralia in Iob. Libri I-X (Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina; ed. Marcus Adriaen; Turnhout: Brepols, 1979) vol. 143, pp. 3-4.

12 Smalley, p. 35.

13 See Kevin L. Hughes, "Haimo of Auxerre and the Fruition of Carolingian Hermeneutics" in *Second Thessalonians: Two Early Medieval Apocalyptic Commentaries: Haimo of Auxerre, Expositio in Epistolam II ad Thessalonicenses and Thietland of Einsiedeln*, In *Epistolam II ad Thessalonicenses* (trans. Steven R. Cartwright and Kevin L. Hughes; TEAMS Commentary Series; Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2001) 13-14, and Deborah Everhart, "Introduction" in *Commentary on the Book of Jonah: Haimo of Auxerre* (trans. Deborah Everhart; TEAMS Commentary Series; Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1993) 1-2.

14 Hughes, p. 15.

15 The commentary on Jonah is heavily dependent on Jerome. He cites Virgil in his commentary on 2 Thessalonians 1:9: "They, the reprobate, will give eternal punishment in death. They will give punishment to others, but they also will give it to and inflict it upon themselves: since they do evil things for which they receive in like measure. Also, 'to give' is in some cases substituted for 'to suffer or bear,' as in Virgil: 'And for blood-red locks, Scylla gives punishment,' that is, bears or suffers punishment" (Hughes, p. 23). The citation from Virgil is from *Georgics* 1.405.

16 Everhart, p. 5.

17 Everhart, pp. 9-10.

18 Everhart, p. 10.

19 Everhart, p. 39.

20 Everhart, n. 55, pp. 44-45

21 Hughes, p. 17.

22 Everhart, p. 2.

23 Smalley, pp. 44-45.