

THE LITERAL SENSE OF SCRIPTURE AND THE SEARCH FOR TRUTH IN THE LATE MIDDLE AGES

Scholars of the Middle Ages have demonstrated an increasing awareness of the profound importance of biblical exegesis in the formation of medieval theology, and indeed of medieval society as a whole. Recent monographs, articles, and essay collections attest to this fact.¹ This article will examine one specific aspect of medieval biblical exegesis, namely the role of the literal sense in the determination of orthodoxy in the Late Middle Ages. It has been well established that the literal sense was given greater emphasis already in the 12th century with the rise of the Victorine school, and that this attention to the literal sense continued to grow among the theologians of the mendicant orders in the 13th century.² It is also true, however, that the concept of the literal sense was expanding in its range and complexity. The late medieval theologians still accepted the traditional four senses of Scripture: literal, allegorical, tropological, and anagogical. Indeed, they could all recount the old rhyme: *Littera gesta docet; quid credas allegoria; moralis quid agas; quo tendas anagogia*. Yet their expanded view of the literal sense permitted them — as we shall see — to accommodate the mystical senses within the orbit of the literal sense precisely because the theologians had developed theories of authorship which could equate the literal sense of the text with the intended meaning of the author. In the case of Holy Scripture, therefore,

¹ The list is long, but some substantial essay collections include: Pierre RICHÉ and Guy LOBRICHON (ed.), *Le Moyen Age et la Bible*, Paris, 1984; Irena BACKUS (ed.), *The Reception of the Church Fathers in the West: From the Carolingians to the Maurists*, Leiden, 1997; Celia CHAZELLE and Burton VAN NAME EDWARDS (ed.), *The Study of the Bible in the Carolingian Era*, Turnhout, 2003; Ineke VAN'T SPIJKER (ed.), *The Multiple Meaning of Scripture: The Role of Exegesis in Early-Christian and Medieval Culture*, Leiden, 2009. Other studies will appear in the notes below.

² See the classic work of Beryl SMALLEY, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages*, 3rd rev. ed, Oxford, 1983; and the magisterial essay by Karlfried FROELICH, *Christian Interpretation of the Old Testament in the High Middle Ages*, in: Magne SÆBØ (ed.) *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament: The History of its Interpretation*, vol. 1/2, Göttingen, 2000, p. 496-558.