

Measuring the Measuring Rod:

The Bible and Parabiblical Texts within the History of Medieval Literature*

Abstract

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In spite of the acknowledged crucial role it had in forming medieval written culture, the Bible and a wide-range of parabiblical texts still remain largely ignored by histories of medieval literatures. The reason for this striking omission of an important group of medieval texts from the ‘canonical’ narratives is, as I argue, the strong bias in favour of national, secular, fictional and original texts which shapes literary studies – an inheritance from the nineteenth-century nationalising approaches discussed in the first issue of the *Interfaces* journal. Of course, the discipline of literary studies and therefore selection, hierarchization, and interpretation are complex social, cultural and political processes where almost anything is possible. It is the environment, the interpretive community, in which the interpretation takes place that has a decisive role. And that, too, is constantly being transformed. Thus, there are no final categories and answers because as long as there are interpretive communities, meanings are generated and operate in new ways. That is why the present discussion does not aim to claim that many of the parabiblical texts are literature and should have been included in the canon of medieval literature. Rather, I examine what the nineteenth-century notion of canon did to these texts and how the current questioning and substantial reshaping of notions of canon can transform our understanding of parabiblical texts.

I. Bible and Parabiblical Texts outside of the Canon of Medieval Literature

Di heilige scrift an allen wanc / Ist gar swer und lanc.
 (“The Scriptures, to be sure, are pretty difficult and very long.”)

Prologue to *Historie der alden é*,
an anonymous retelling of the Old Testament in German¹

1. The text was written in the first half of the 14th c. and edited by Gerhard z.

It is no longer necessary to carefully justify taking the Bible away from the field of religion and analyzing it as literature in the way that

2. The move, was however, not an obvious one. For an argument against it, see, e.g., Søren Kierkegaard, *The Present Age*.

3. For further groundbreaking studies, see, e.g., Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality*; Alter; Alter and Kermode, eds. There are also some contemporary publications intended for wider readership, some of them rather suspicious (e.g. Ryken and Ryken eds.).

Northrop Frye was obliged to do in *The Great Code* (Frye). It is now common to speak not only of the Bible *and* literature but also of the Bible *as* literature.² There are many literary studies on biblical language, narrative, imagery, plot coherence, voice and the like.³ It is also recognized that the Bible inspired and shaped the majority of medieval textual types (e.g., exegesis, sermons, hymns, hagiography, liturgical drama, much of lyrical poetry such as *planctus* etc.), and it was much used or referred to in most other ones or in their framing (e.g. historiography or exempla) (see, e.g., Cremascoli and Leonardi). Beside the Bible itself, there were numerous types of parabiblical texts with varied relationship to and distance from the Bible. These include biblical poetry, prose paraphrases, commentaries, sermons, and many other texts. The omnipresence of the Bible in medieval written culture is a fact that does not need to be defended or exemplified.

Yet, in spite of the acknowledged crucial role it had in forming medieval written culture, the Bible and the variety of parabiblical texts still remain mostly out of the picture in histories of medieval literatures. The reason for this striking omission of an important group of medieval writing from the 'canonical' narratives is surely the predilection for national, secular, fictional and 'original' texts, our ambivalent inheritance of the nineteenth century nationalistic approaches discussed in the first issue of the *Interfaces* journal (cf. especially Borsa *et al.*). Of course, literary appreciation and therefore selection, hierarchization, and interpretation are complex social, cultural and political processes where a lot (if not everything) is possible. It is the environment, the interpretive community, in which the interpretation takes place that has a decisive role. And that, too, is constantly being transformed. Thus, there are no final categories and answers because as long as there are interpretive communities, meanings are generated and operate in new ways (Fish). That is why the present discussion does not aim at claiming that many of parabiblical texts *are* literature and *should have been* included in the canon of medieval literature. The Bible and parabiblical texts do not fulfill the listed criteria, in fact, these texts are exactly the opposite of what is searched for in the canon, and thus it is no wonder they were not selected. I would like to look at what the 19th century notion of canon, that is, 'the measuring rod', did to these texts, as well as how the current questioning and substantial reshaping of the notion transform that.

1. National vs. Universal

“But even when Latin was used for writing, it was always with patriotic aims, with enthusiasm and national consciousness. The spirit of this Latin writing always remained Czech national spirit ...”

4. The English translation is mine.

A Czech literature textbook from 1907 (Šlejhar 6)⁴

Stressing the national aspects in medieval writing means looking for difference: it is a search for features that can be considered distinctive and may be used to define a particular community, a nation. Thus, local specificities come to the fore, and so does the ‘pagan’ mythical past of individual nations. With this predilection, the Bible and parabiblical texts fell out completely since they did not separate but unite, they presented a universal history of the mankind, and operated within the medieval society across the nations. Approached as literature (its significant religious and social role aside), the universality and omnipresence of the Bible in medieval culture can be explained through its two features: it was believed to be authored by the greatest authority imaginable, God himself, who supposedly encoded the most important teachings about the world and its meaning in it. And, at the same time, it was recognized as a very obscure text. The combination of these two aspects created a notion of a challenge. Although it was impossible to solve the challenge in this life when things were perceived only *per speculum in aenigmate* (2 Cor 13:12), one was expected to keep trying, which was a praiseworthy act in itself. As a perpetual enigma of the highest authority possible, the Bible was actively and creatively received throughout the Middle Ages.

Perceiving the Middle Ages as a cradle of national identities, with national languages as one of the primary identification features of these identities results also in downplaying most of the Latin writing. In a much simplified way, Latin is seen as gradually conquered by the vernaculars which take over the discourse and the space on the manuscript page (see Stein). But sharing the textual knowledge in the Middle Ages was possible also thanks to sharing one language throughout medieval West: the Latin. The parallels sometimes made with English today are not too farfetched: Medieval Latin operated as a language of communication on a wide area, with many local specificities, and generally lower level of complexity than classical Latin but allowed for communication on a large scale. Latin was not no-

5. The reduction of its role within canonical histories of medieval literatures results in a much simplified picture of medieval literature. It is this aspect of canons of medieval literatures that has been most attacked and criticized in recent decades, see, among many others, Stella, “A ‘Postcolonial’ Approach.”

6. Tertullian, *De spectaculis*, 29, 5. The whole treatise aims at dissuading Christians from the public shows. The final section (chaps 29 and 30) describes the better shows awaiting Christians, such as watching the others burn in hell.

7. The rescript on Christian teachers is found in his letters, edited in *The Works of the Emperor Julian*, transl. Wright vol. 3, 117–23.

body’s language but rather everybody’s language.⁵ And it won its position even though it was not the original language of the Bible: it was a *translation* that became a universal textual commonplace.

2. Secular vs. Religious

Vis autem et sanguinis aliquid? Habes Christi.
 (“Would you have something of blood too?
 You have Christ’s.”)

Tertullian, *On the Public Shows*⁶

The notion of the secular is in fact closely linked to the notion of national: it is a post-reformation concept invented to prevent the idea of a ‘nation’ from falling apart. While in the medieval West, the society would consist of Christians and those who are ‘blind to the truth’ (primarily Jews and Muslims), in the modern period religious differences began to play an important role and caused inner division within several nations and states of Europe (especially France, Germany and states in Central Europe). It is only then that the idea of separating religion from the state which would have no sense during the Middle Ages appears. Secularism then worked as a sort of pseudo-religion trying to unite some national communities. This approach not only excludes the Bible and parabiblical texts, but it downplays most of medieval literature, as well as crucial aspects of the few selected texts (*Canterbury Tales* as describing a pilgrimage to the grave of Thomas Becket, Holy Grail stories as a quest for the blood of Christ, etc.).

The early modern fear of promoting religion within a literary canon is not new. It is in fact a sort of reverse situation to the one in the Late Antiquity, when the same considerations concerned the classical ancient writings: can they be used within Christian education without affecting the beliefs of the Christians? Will Christians be able to enjoy them and learn from them without being seduced by their contents? The answers to these questions are well known: Jerome, in his famous dream, promised to stop reading the classics whom he loved and enjoyed and stick forever solely to the Bible (Jerome, Epistle 22.30). Julian the Apostate disarmed Christian teachers efficiently when he prohibited them to use the classics in their education, which, as he argued, was a dishonest activity if they did not share their beliefs.⁷ Origen, and after him Augustine justified the usage through the comparison with the Egyptian theft (Ex 12.35–36): Christians are entitled to take from the pagans whatever the pagans

do not use properly but they themselves can employ well (Augustine, *De doctrina christiana* 2.40). It was this thesis that was accepted and using the classics in Christian education worked out fine for over 1000 years.

An example of the use of the ancient heritage in Christian context is ‘biblical epic,’ that is, retelling parts of the Bible in Virgil-style poetry. It is a problematic literary type – Curtius dismissed it as a *genre faux* (Curtius 462), and it had long been looked down upon as a result of mere school exercises in paraphrase – dressing Christian content with Ancient style (see e.g. Roberts; Springer; or Bažil). But is it possible to extract literary devices from the content and see literature as mere form unconnected to religion and politics? The separability of form and content, so well visible in ancient and medieval rhetoric,⁸ is not accepted today, the *what* is seen as ultimately intertwined with the *how*.⁹

3. Fiction vs ‘Truth’

“I’ve got a love story and a sex story, with the same woman no less, and both are great [...]”

King David in Joseph Heller, *God Knows* 18

The romantic concept of ‘literature’ included the idea of ‘fiction’ – a sort of artificial parallel imaginary universe, allowing a temporary escape from truth. In the Romantic and post-Romantic concept, literature is expected to create an autonomous world of its own with its own rules. The Bible and parabiblical texts stand at the other end with exactly the opposite ambition: they insist on offering the only and ultimate truth (*cf.* Auerbach). They usually address the readers and require changes in their lives. They relate to the experienced situation, attack it, and constantly try to alter it. These are texts wishing to have an actual impact. This sort of doctrine is in contrast with the romantic idea of literature pleasing and ennobling the spirit but not bringing about historical and social changes (even, as Oscar Wilde said, being utterly useless).¹⁰ The writings in the periods of conflicts and transitions (such as Late Antiquity or reformation period) were typically presented as times when literature (as opposed to writing) was in decline and was ‘abused’ for the purposes of propaganda.¹¹ Also didactic literature was always on the margin of literature, a sort of lower level type, exactly because it has a definite aim. The Bible, of course, contains a great number of stories. But they insist on being true and on trying to teach, too.¹²

8. Their starting point is always the idea that the author knows *what* he wants to say and the aim of the manual is to help him with the *how* of saying it: various ‘wrappings’ of the message are normally proposed and discussed.

9. Yet, in fact, a number of contemporary web sites devoted to the Bible as literature do insist on this division: e.g., *Bible as Literature* (accessed May 25, 2017). They usually argue for the separability of form and content, just like the ancient and medieval rhetorics.

10. “All art is quite useless.” Wilde.

11. See the very influential Gibbon. This has much changed already several decades ago when the periods of transition receive more attention, exactly because it is possible to detect specific transformation of value system through the texts. See Brown.

12. Curiously, it is included as a positive aspect in books and especially films today, that they are ‘based on a true story.’

Just as it is doubtful and much discussed whether pure history is possible, we could ask: is it possible to write pure fiction? Is it possible to create a completely autonomous imaginary world? Cognitive psychology shows that most things happen in our brain anyway: interpretation cannot be extrapolated from the experienced event. In this way it is impossible to write objective history. And, it is also impossible to write pure fiction. Stories we make up necessarily relate to our experience even if they are set in distant future or past. The romantic and post-romantic idea of literature includes the requirement that it should offer something more (or only something else?) than the world – it should offer a different perspective, new approach, new view or reflection. That it needs to step out from what is lived and experienced to do that. Medieval biblical texts do not create this distance. They do not form a controllable environment with clear borders which can be entered and exited. They attempt the opposite, to pull down the borders, invade their readers' minds and live and grow in them.

4. 'Original' vs Repetition

“I shall proceed to speak a little of the investigative journey I made to test the possibility and meaning of repetition. Without anyone knowing about it I went by steamship to Berlin.”

Soren Kierkegaard, *Repetition* 150

The notion of originality is somewhat losing its appeal lately, especially in connection to the romantic idea of a creative genius and unique unrepeatable creation. Questioning and scrutinizing the concept has, however, not lead to its complete abolishment. The requirement of novelty and surprise is persistent.

The Bible is, of course, an ancient, *not* a medieval creation. Placing into its centre such an 'old' text, stressing continuity and tradition, medieval written culture stands in contrast to the modern search for the new and unheard of. This results also in a different notion of authorship in the Middle Ages – one in which the authors tend to diminish their active and creative role in a text's origin.¹³

The notion of originality has been transformed also through Julia Kristeva's influential concept of intertextuality. Originality may not be searched for only in relationship between text and reality but also in relationships among different texts. And it is exactly this feature that makes medieval parabiblical texts original. The medieval in-

13. On the medieval notion of authorship, see, e.g., Minnis; Ranković *et al.*, eds; D'Angelo and Ziolkowski, eds.

tertextuality is a result of realizing communication possibilities within a society that can rely on generally shared textual knowledge. Such shared knowledge enables the authors to use various ways of intertextuality, and thus offers otherwise inaccessible toolkit of specific writing strategies.

II. The Bible and Parabiblical Texts in the Middle Ages

Biblical retellings were popular throughout the Middle Ages; some of them, like Peter Comestor's *Historia scholastica* (c. 1170) or the late medieval anonymous *Summarium biblie* (see Doležalová, *Obscurity and Memory*) even extremely popular. Some use extra-biblical sources, fill the gaps in the biblical narrative or harmonize places where there are more versions. Many of them actualize the stories. There are direct quotations from the Bible, both precise and approximate, as well as allusions, both close and distant. Sometime a single aspect is chosen and re-contextualized, e.g. a character, a setting, or part of a plot. There are numerous retellings, both in prose and in verse, some relying on images. Some of them are edited (e.g. Peter Riga, ed. Peter Beichner; Alexander of Ashby, ed. Dinkova-Bruun, and other works by this author; Daub), many more remain still only in manuscripts. What is clear is that dealing with the Bible was in general surprisingly free.¹⁴ What is also clear is that the field is vast and complex, and, exactly for this reason, remains rather unstudied (see, e.g. Stella, *La poesia carolingia latina*; Doležalová and Visi).

14. There is a nice image comparing the Bible to soft wax that holds any image imprinted on it, as well as that of an oak tree that is cut down and eleven different artisans each take the part that they find useful for their profession, both in the prologue to another popular retelling of the Bible, the *Speculum humanae salvationis* (ca. 1324). See Palmer.

1. Medieval Biblical Intertextualities

Medieval authors explored the possibilities of biblical intertextuality (although they certainly would not think of it in these terms), and turned out to be very inventive. The examples are numerous, even omnipresent. Here, I will only mention three examples. They can all still be characterized as parabiblical but they are on the margin of the type exactly due to their specific parodic transformation of the Bible. In focusing on the margins of the pool of medieval parabiblical literature, I attempt to show that this pool includes texts that might be shocking to readers today who still tend to associate medieval biblical and parabiblical literature with serious, universal, traditional,

and non-fictional. These texts do not only challenge but simply invalidate the simplistic categories discussed above.

First, the *Cena Cypriani* (Cyprian's feast), an obscure anonymous opuscle written probably in mid-fourth century perhaps in Gaul, describes a wedding feast organized by the king Joel:

Quidam rex nomine Iohel nuptias faciebat in regione orientis, in Chana Galileae. His nuptiis invitati sunt plures. Igitur qui temperius loti in Iordane adfuerunt in convivio. Tunc commundavit Naaman, aquam sparsit Amos, Iacobus et Andreas attulerunt faenum, Matheus et Petrus straverunt, mensam posuit Salomon. Atque omnes discubuerunt turbae. Sed cum iam locus discumbentium plenus esset, qui superveniebant, quisque ut poterat, locum sibi inveniebat. Primus atque omnium sedit Adam in medio, Eva super folia, Cain super aratrum, Abel super mulgarium, Noe super archam, Iaphet super lateres, Abraham sub arbore, Isaac super aram, Iacob super petram [...]

A certain king, Joel by name, organized a wedding in the eastern region, in Cana of Galilee. To this wedding, many were invited. Thus those, who had earlier bathed in the Jordan, came to the feast. At that time Naaman cleansed, Amos sprinkled water, James and Andrew brought hay. Matthew and Peter lay down, Solomon prepared the table, and the whole crowd reclined at various places. But when the place was already full of the reclining ones, those who arrived later, all, as they could, looked for a place for themselves. So Adam, the first of all, sat in the middle, Eve on leaves, Cain on top of a plough, Abel on a milk churn, Noah on an ark, Japheth on bricks, Abraham under a tree, Isaac on an altar, Jacob on a rock [...] (Modesto 14).¹⁵

15. The English translation is mine.

After the guests sit down, they cook for themselves, eat and get drunk and go home in a festive procession. The following day they return with gifts to the king, but as it turns out that something had been stolen the day before, they are investigated and punished, until the king decides that only one of them, Achan, should suffer. Then the guests kill him, bury him, and return to their homes (see Modesto; Casaretto). In the text, each of the activities is first briefly introduced, and then there follows a list ascribing the biblical characters (each time a different set of them) particular activities which are linked to their

activities in the Bible. In this way, the text approaches the Bible as a space in which the characters can meet. It takes over the names, it turns aspects of their stories into signs (which become little riddles for the reader), and weaves the whole into a new narrative of feast and violence, where finally one person dies for all the guilty ones. Yet this one is guilty here, too, and Jesus participates in killing him (he flagellates him). In this way, also the parallel with the Passion is shifted and twisted.

The text was very actively received during the Middle Ages: there are at least five different rewritings of it and one commentary from the twelfth century; Peter Abelard and Hugh of St. Victor mention it; altogether there are some 103 manuscripts of the text from the ninth to the fifteenth centuries.¹⁶ Towards the end of the Middle Ages it became more and more clearly organized and less amusing; it turned into a didactic tool, a biblical mnemonic aid (see Doležalová, “*Cena malectrati*”). While during the Middle Ages themselves, the reception of this text seems to have been unproblematic, later periods found it a bit too entertaining to be considered religious. During the Renaissance, scholars wondered how it could have ever been ascribed to St. Cyprian, and they printed it always with a caveat in the prologue. Umberto Eco, in his *The Name of the Rose*, presents an image of the text as very popular but transmitted among novices in secret, hidden under their pillows (Eco 468).

The second example, the *Sermo de Sancto Nemine* (Sermon on the Saint Nobody) is a late twelfth-century anonymous cento perhaps originating in France made out of the phrases with the word *nemo* (nobody) in the Bible. This Nobody is a very powerful man able to do what nobody can do. The text opens:

Vir erat in Oriente nomine Nemo, et erat vir ille ut alter Iob inter omnes orientales. Magnus namque erat sanctus iste Nemo in genere et prosapia, magnus in potentia, magnus in scientia, magnus in clementia et in compassione, magnus in honore et reverentia, et magnus in audacia. Et hec omnia per sacram scripturam comprobantur. Primo dico quod magnus fuit iste sanctus Nemo in genere et prosapia, similis Ade, qui nec creatus nec genitus sed formatus, secundum quod habetur per prophetam dicentem: *Dies formabuntur et Nemo in eis*. Fuit etiam de genere militari, secundum illud apostoli: *Nemo militans deo*. [...] Et fuit de genere non qualicumque, sed regali, Ecclesiastici quinto: *Nemo ex regibus sumpsit exordium* [...] Nec solum fuit de stirpe regia sed cum ipso deo

16. See Modesto, further studies of Casaretto (one on each of the rewritings), and Doležalová, “*Quoddam notabile vel ridiculum*.” The medieval commentary was written in an exegetical style by Herveus Burgidolensis (Hervé of Bourgdieu). It is edited and the rewritings are discussed in Doležalová, *Reception and Its Varieties*.

eternaliter legitur semper regnaturus, Ecclesiastes undecimo:
Nemo semper regnaturus.

There was a man in the East named Nobody, and that man was like another Job among all the people of the East. For this holy Nobody was great in race and lineage, great in power, great in knowledge, great in mercy and compassion, great in honor and reverence, and great in daring. And all of these things are confirmed in Holy Scripture. First, I say that this holy Nobody was great in race and lineage, like Adam, who was neither created nor begotten but formed, as it is said by the prophet: *The days will be formed and Nobody in them.* He was also of a military lineage, according to the saying of the apostle: *Nobody being a soldier to God.* [...] And he was of a race of no other kind than royal, Ecclesiasticus 5: *Nobody took his birth from kings* [...] it is read that he will reign eternally with God himself, Ecclesiastes 11: *Nobody will reign forever.*¹⁷

17. Bayless, ed., “The Short *Nemo*”. Bayless also edits two other recensions of the text.

This simple joke (of the type Ulysses played on *Kyklops*) goes on in this way, Nobody – hidden in the Bible itself – is the most powerful of all the saints. Again, this text was popular, transmitted in several different versions and its medieval reception seems to have been unproblematic. It was only in modern times that some scholars believed that the medieval author had thought he had indeed discovered an actual so far unnoticed person in the Bible and used this case as an example of medieval naivety (see Bayless, *Parody in the Middle Ages*; Doležalová, “The Absolute Alterity in Cult of Saints”).

Lastly, the *Passio Iudeorum Pragensium secundum Iesskonem, rusticum quadratum* (The Passion of the Jews of Prague according to Ješek, a square hick / a proper countryman)¹⁸ describes a pogrom on the Prague Jews during Easter 1389, an important historical event that is mentioned (although not precisely described) in a number of other sources in Latin, Czech, German, and Hebrew. To describe the event, the anonymous author used the structure of the Passion narrative as it appears in the Gospels: thus, the Christian persecutors of the Jews operate in the same ways and within the same framework as the Jewish persecutors of Christ in the Bible. For example, the deliberation among the Christians near the beginning of the text reads:

Tunc unus ex plebe cristianorum nomine Ieško quadratus,
cum esset quasi pontifex anni et temporis illius, prophetavit

18. For a discussion on how to translate *rusticus quadratus*, see Vidmanová.

dicens: “Expedit vobis, ut omnes pariter Iudei moriantur <pro> populo cristiano, ne tota gens pereat.” Ab illo ergo die et ab illa hora cogitaverunt interficere omnes Iudeos dicentes: “Ne forte veniat ulcio Dei super nos, tollamus bona eorum et gentem perfidam de terra vivencium disperdamus.”

Then a man from among the crowd of the Christians, called square / proper Ieško since he was a sort of leader for the year and of his time, prophecized, saying: “It is profitable for you that all the Jews alike should die for the Christian people, so that the whole race does not vanish.” Thus, from that day and from that hour they plotted to kill all the Jews, saying: “Let us take away their property and eliminate the treacherous race from the land of the living lest God’s vengeance fall upon us.” (Steinová, *Passio Iudeorum pragensium* 18–19)¹⁹

19. The English translation is mine.

20. The mss. are: Třeboň, Státní archiv, A 14, fols 68v–70v, Praha, Archiv Pražského hradu, Knihovna Metropolitní kapituly u sv. Víta v Praze, O 3, fols 167r–177r, and Praha, Národní knihovna, XI D 7, fols 130v–133r, ed. Tomek 11–13, reprinted in Lehmann 211–16. A new edition is currently being prepared by Evina Steinová. Cf. also her “Jews and Christ Interchanged.”

21. For a sort of overinterpretation, see Newman.

22. For a recent important contribution to the topic, see Bartuschat and de Hartmann, eds.

23. I developed this idea in Doležalová, “Passion and Passion.”

This particular version survives in three manuscripts but there are several other surviving variants of the text.²⁰ The reception, again, seems to have been unproblematic. Only recently there have been claims that the text is not simply anti-Semitic but includes a double inversion within a complex intertextual play.²¹

All the texts briefly presented here are anonymous. They all survive in several manuscripts from different places and periods thus indicating a wider transmission. Each of them seems to have been simply popular and not opposed by the Church. But exactly this fact appeared striking and unbelievable to post-medieval readers who first neglected these texts altogether as not meriting anyone’s attention, and then tended to interpret them as blasphemous, extremely naïve, or simply failed opuscula. True, none of these three texts employs special rhetoric colors and figures, they are written in a simple way. They seem to lack final polishing. They include incoherencies. But they are also funny.

Each of these cases is usually labeled ‘parody’, which is, however, not understood any more today as a strictly subversive genre.²² In fact, these texts can be used to show that the dividing line between the sacred and the profane was thin, and often not discernible on the textual level – an actual historical, political, social or cultural act is necessary to activate it.²³ These texts are primarily good examples of a functioning of a specific type of writing which, to a great degree, defined medieval written culture as opposed to both earlier and later times. Such medieval ‘free’ dealing with the Bible, which was tol-

24. There are biblical retellings then, too, and they are numerous indeed, but each is 'wrapped' through a prologue which controls its reception, the texts are not merely 'thrown' out there. They appear in a context in which the Bible has and keeps its unshakeable authority of a defined fixed text and the area of operation is well defined outside the Bible. Thus, it would not happen in the early modern period that someone would quote one of these retellings and refer to it as a Bible quotation as it does happen with Peter Comestor in the Middle Ages.

25. Many texts, for example, that ended up outside the canon (such as parts of the childhood Gospels or some of the apocryphal acts of the Apostles) continued to appear both in the visual arts and in writing. Jerome's prologues to the individual books were copied together with it and virtually formed part of the Bible. Also within the accepted canon of the Bible itself, the order of the books as well as their chapter numbering was not unified until the end of the twelfth century. See Poleg and Light, eds.

26. Cf. Morey. Morey argues along the same lines: "The Bible in the Middle Ages, much like the Bible today, consisted for the laity not of a set of texts within a canon but of those stories which, partly because of their liturgical significance and partly because of their picturesque and memorable qualities, formed a provisional 'Bible' in the popular imagination. Even relatively devout and educated moderns may be surprised by what is, and what is not, biblical" (p. 6).

27. A database of all medieval biblical quotations and references would show very clearly which biblical passages were omnipresent and which were in the background at which times and places during the Middle Ages. The 'canon' and 'archive' within the Bible clearly emerge from it.

erated and sometimes even welcomed by the Church, is unimaginable in the early modern period.²⁴

2. 'Canon' and 'Archive' within the Bible

Approaching the Bible as a single text, as it is sometimes taken for granted, is not obvious, though. Among others, Jacques Berlinerbau argues that Bible is not a "carefully redacted narrative unity", but a "multi-layered, multiple-authored anthology of ancient provenance", and thus the modern tools of literary analysis are not suitable to approach it. It is necessary to "develop theoretical and methodological implements that are properly calibrated to the study of collectively and trans-historically composed works of art" (Berlinerbau; cf. also van Liere).

The canonization of the Bible was a long and complex process. The canonical Bible, although copied and symbolically perceived as a clear separable unity throughout the Middle Ages, did not always operate as a unified text.²⁵ Aleida Assmann's concepts of canon and archive are useful in approaching the medieval Bible. It had been composed of parts that she would have classified as 'canon', as well as of parts she would have called 'archive' (Assmann): some of its parts were more alive than others, were told and retold, analyzed and used, others were only copied within the whole. The 'canonical' part of the Bible can be extracted from sermons, liturgy, exegesis, biblical retellings and other parabiblical texts. The medieval actively operating 'canon' of the Bible emerges from this parabiblical material as concentrating primarily on the narrative parts (*e.g.* Genesis, Gospels, or the Books of Kings), and parts crucial for Christian dogma (Gospels, Paul's Epistles, or parts of the Old Testament prefiguring the New Testament).²⁶ These 'canonical' parts informally formed a sort of 'popular Bible' (see Utley, "The Bible of the Folk") or unwritten parallel Bible, a virtual composition in the minds of the people. On the other hand, there are biblical books very rarely used, quoted, or commented on throughout the Middle Ages, for example the book of Leviticus with Jewish rules was irrelevant for the Christians unless interpreted in a metaphoric way. This 'archive' was still carried on, that is, copied together with the rest of the Bible in its proper place and available for being brought to light and included in the canon.²⁷

Thanks to the persistence in perceiving the Bible as a whole and copying it as such, the exact division between such a 'canon' and an

‘archive’ within the Bible was flexible: it was transformed throughout the periods of biblical reception and had a large impact on the religious, social, and cultural function of the text. Also, the perception of the authority of the text of the Bible secured its status – never replaced by any of the parabiblical texts, it remained in the background ready to be picked up and used when needed.

3. Medieval Biblical Intertextuality beyond Texts

The ‘canonical’ parts of the Bible, on the other hand, were constantly retold, adjusted, appropriated and transformed. As a result, it is frequently difficult to claim that it is the Bible itself that is an ultimate source of another text (see Meredith 61). Among the transformations, Petrus Comestor’s *Historia scholastica* was especially widespread and influential, and it is frequently identified as the actual model text even in cases when the authors explicitly claim to be quoting the Bible.

Our concept of intertextuality is (not surprisingly) very much *text*-based. Contemporary databases make it easy to detect textual correspondences; these, however, do not necessarily indicate actual influences. Medieval ‘intertextual’ texts frequently do not use *texts* but rather ideas created on the basis of texts but also of visual material and imagination. The omnipresent Bible is the prime example of this practice. Not only was it often quoted from memory, but it operated as this sort of a construct (with additions, omissions and other transformations) rather than merely as a text (see Murdoch, or Hamburger). Of course, the mental reflection was flexible and it is difficult (if possible at all) to reconstruct it. What is clear, though, is that narrative concerns played a substantial role in it (*e.g.* apocryphal material is naturally used whenever filling a gap within the plot, non-narrative parts are substantially reduced, unnamed characters like Noah’s wife get names, etc.) (see Utley, “One Hundred and Three Names of Noah’s Wife”), as did imagination and the practice of visualization (in this way, many particular details were added, for example the fruit of the forbidden tree became a lemon, fig, apple, or peach). Many of these aspects (especially adding concrete details and incorporating non-biblical information) can be found in the ‘mental image’ of the (‘popular’) Bible today. The main difference is that the medieval mental construct of the Bible was rooted very deeply and was very influential in producing and consuming further texts.

4. A case of appropriation: *The Versus maligni angeli*

The Bible as a mental construct was not only used in new textual creations but it was also a ready point of reference when reading and interpreting other texts. For example, there is a brief anonymous poem of uncertain meaning and origin, which was quite largely diffused during the twelfth–fifteenth centuries: there are 36 surviving manuscripts and four different commentaries to it.²⁸ The poem is usually transmitted without an author attribution and a title. The few titles that appear include *Versus maligni angeli* (Verses of a malign angel), *Versus daemonis* (Verses of a demon), *Versus extranei* (Verses from outside), and even *Tractatus de fluvio Oronte* (Treatise on the Orontes River). The hitherto oldest known manuscript is Bourges, Bibliothèque municipale 105 (95) written at the end of the eleventh century or the beginning of the twelfth century in Chezal-Benoît. It reads:

28. It was edited by Hilka. Hilka was not aware of many of the manuscripts. I discuss the poem, its manuscript transmission and its reception in my studies, Doležalová, “The Devil as a Christian Author?,” and “Manuscript Transmission”.

- 1 Oppositum montem conscendere cernis Orontem
Arma tua dextra capies et fer caput extra
hinc gladio multos umbris mactabis inultos
Sed prius hoc unus puerorum fert tibi munus
- 5 Lanx que cum carne dudum tibi servit agarne
Iam prolatura tibi constat munera plura
Hinc et gallina dat vocem pandite lina.
Panibus indutos piscesque videte minutos
Trax caput Orontis iacet hoc in corpore montis
- 10 Quem circumstabant acies et vociferabant
Amaratunta tili codoxia noxia nili
Pensa tibi dippus eris hoc in lumine lippus
Victus amore pio sic cantat maxima Clio.

The very approximate translation I propose is:

29. Or: “You see Orontes ascending against the mountain.”

Facing the mountain, you note Orontes ascending²⁹
You will seize your weapons with your right hand and take
the head out
Hence you will slaughter to the shadows many un-revenged
with [your] sword
But before [that] one of the boys brings you this gift
A plate with meat which he humbly³⁰ serves just now
Already about to bring forth to you many gifts
Hence the hen also gives the voice, spread out the ropes
Behold the diminished³¹ fishes clad in bread
Thracian head of Orontes, it lies in the body of the mountain
Around which the troops stood and exclaimed

30. Based on the medieval commentaries claiming that *agarne* is an adverb derived from *Agar*, *i.e.* Haggai, the servant of Sara (Genesis 16), meaning ‘in a servant-like manner.’

31. Probably “divided into small pieces.”

32. Based on the medieval explanations of the text the translation of this line would be: “In the second coming of the Lord the vain glory of the heretics will become to them the plague of the Red Sea.”

33. Clio or Kleio is the Muse of history.

*Amaratunta tili codoxia noxia nili*³²

Consider for yourself, you will be Oedipus blind in this light
Defeated by pious love, thus sings the greatest Clio.³³

The original source and purpose of the poem are far from clear. At first sight, this looks like nonsense. Something is occurring – perhaps a fight – but the situation is confusing. Two of the words, *amaratunta* and *codoxia*, are *hapax legomena* (cf. Du Cange 216). There are allusions to the Gospels (the miracle of the bread and the fish, and the simile of stretching the ropes, *i.e.*, the nets by the apostles), but also to classical culture (Oedipus and the Muse Clio). The use of the second person, which gives the poem a sense of appellation, is curious. The other manuscripts include a great number of variants many of which affect the meaning of the poem; yet, in each manuscript version the text remains obscure.

The most striking part of the poem is the totally incomprehensible line 11: *Amaratunta tili codoxia noxia nili*. Similar lines are found in many other manuscripts, most notably in *Carmina burana* 55 (*Amara tanta tyri pastos sycalos sycaliri*, ed. Hilka and Schumann 110). As Hilka notes, it might be connected to exorcism and reflect a much older formula. My conjecture is that our poem developed around an exorcist formula, and meaning was gradually added to it. This feature would thus be responsible for the poem’s title *Verses of a malign angel* or *Verses of a demon* – these verses would have been written to be used against a demon. Although this suggestion cannot be proven now, its implications are thought-provoking: if the original basis of our poem was exorcism, that is magic or an incantation, then it was *designed* as obscure and enigmatic and was not expected to be interpreted at all. Magical incantations are meant to sound unusual and have an aesthetic dimension (they contain alliterations, rhymes, etc.) but they may be indiscernible as far as their meaning is concerned. Of course, some of the words generally remind the listeners of God and demons, or of other familiar concepts, but in the context of exorcism one is not expected to analyze the meaning and author’s intentions.³⁴ It is not evident in what exact way the exorcist formula could have been transformed into a poem considered fit for being commented on independently by at least four twelfth-century exegetes. Yet, within the rich medieval tradition of encountering obscurity as a natural part of the created world, this particular obscurity of an ‘external’ origin (*i.e.* not created by a human but by a demon or a devil) might have been a natural challenge to the exegete and an obvious choice for elucidation.

34. Magic formulas in which every word is meaningful of course also exist. The relationship between the two modes (or styles?) has not been, to my knowledge, fully explored yet. In any case, ‘meaningless’ would not describe any of the formulae either: the words used always remind one of something, and there is a sense of grammar (often Latin grammar). For more on the language of exorcist and magic formulas and incantations, see Heim; or Maguire, ed. There is also a clear link to the *Ephesia grammata* (see the free access journal of the [same name](#)).

Each of the four commentaries explains the poem in a different way. Yet, each explanation corresponds with Christian beliefs and ethics, interpreting it either as a fight between Christ and devil, or as encouragement for preachers to fight against heretics, or an urge for Christians to avoid devil's tricks and sinning. Just like in biblical exegesis, the commentators frequently offer several possibilities without choosing between them. Each of them devotes special attention to the question of how it is possible that a devil or a demon authored verses that turn the audience to the good side, and each finds a different response. The commentaries are, on the one hand, similar in appropriating the verses to fit the 'mainstream' culture, while, on the other hand, they substantially differ in particularities where they reveal independent creative and associative treatments. Thus, for example, *Orons*, the Orontes river, is a cold river in Thracia and the place of the devil in the 'novelistic' and in the 'exegetical' commentary; in the 'apologetic' commentary it is a river in Babylon, the city of false and fallen heretics; in the 'moral' commentary it is the river of Egypt, which signifies this world full of inequality.

This example shows the power of the Christian / biblical paradigm: it was not only a source of inspiration but it operated as a key to understanding of the world around. The methods developed and tested in biblical exegesis were employed in interpreting other texts as well as in categorizing and dealing with actual experience. In this way, through invading the mind and the patterns of perception, medieval biblical and parabiblical literature blurred the lines between the world and literature for its readers.

III. The Bible and Parabiblical Texts within the 'Canon of Medieval Literature'?

"So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see,
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee."

William Shakespeare, *Sonnet 18*, lines 13–14

Today, while the aspects of the national, secular and fictional seem to have been only a specific historical phase in evaluation of literature, the criterium of originality, although recognized as a tricky concept and sometimes rephrased as a feeling of novelty, or an element of surprise, still holds. This 'originality' is now recognized also in selective repetition or adjusted reiteration – that is, a text can be considered original through its intertextuality.

The discussed nineteenth-century criteria for the canon were very efficient in their time because they quickly excluded the majority of the medieval written production and there was not a very big competition among the comparably few texts that were left. Canon, after all, is a list that claims some sort of authority, and as such it should not be too long (it would become unmanageable), and its items should not have too many competitors in order to succeed.

The canon Harold Bloom presented in his provocative *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* (Bloom, *The Western Canon*) contains books that “survived the fight” and got over “the anxiety of influence.”³⁵ Bloom did not include the Bible among the 26 works selected for his analysis, but he did insert it into his additional canonical list in the appendix and also mentioned it as the second book (after the collected works of Shakespeare) he would take to the deserted island. From the Middle Ages themselves there is only Chaucer and Dante on his list. No wonder that parabiblical texts discussed above are missing: in many ways, they are simply anticanonical: these texts never competed with ‘high literature,’ they did not suffer from the anxiety of influence but welcomed influence and searched for it.

Yet, paradoxically (and also only purely incidentally), today these texts fulfill one of Bloom’s primary criteria for canon inclusion: they provide ‘difficult pleasure.’³⁶ Since knowledge of the Bible is not widely shared any more, the high level of intertextuality of parabiblical texts startles the reader today. The need for explanation interrupts the flow of the reading and makes it difficult: these texts are not easy to enjoy as pure stories, they rather create a feeling of inferiority in readers not familiar with the text(s) alluded to. They become reading for the elites who spend time and energy on penetrating them.³⁷

The reason parabiblical texts are not seen as an integral part of the canon of medieval literature now is complex: they are numerous and not so easily distinguishable. It does not require special effort and active suppressing to exclude them, they are a clear candidate for the grey mass background against which the few original works of authorial geniuses could shine. But can a historian of medieval literature afford to disregard a great portion of the surviving texts? Harold Bloom would answer: of course, there is too little time and too many books, readers should carefully choose with which ones to spend their time. Today, more scholars would answer no. This type of writing is crucial for understanding medieval written culture. The

35. The book, framed by a bitterly resigned introduction and an epilogue criticizing the current anti-elitist politically correct trends that refuse the autonomy of aesthetics, is a somewhat sad read, documenting an end of an era when literature was a noble elite phenomenon, accessible to only a few. See also Mishra and Mendelsohn.

36. “...the strongest, most authentic motive for deep reading of the now much abused traditional canon is the search for difficult pleasure,” Bloom, *How to Read and Why* 28.

37. Of course, it can be stated about many medieval texts that the experience of today’s readers is far from the original experience of their medieval readers, but there are still differences in the readers’ distance from the text.

‘bulk’ is certainly no grey background but a structured field. To get to know the medieval mainstream is important in order to recognize the difference from it. These texts nevertheless do not raise too much interest today, are not much read, and are definitely no one’s choice of a piece of writing to take to the deserted island. Yet, this also means they (so far) succeeded in what they aimed at: interpreting, retelling, and handling the Bible in various ways without taking its authority from it.

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