

## LATE-MEDIEVAL SERMONS IN ENGLAND: AN ANALYSIS OF FOURTEENTH- AND FIFTEENTH- CENTURY PREACHING

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There can be no doubt as to the very extensive use of the Bible in the late Middle Ages. Beryl Smalley, in her standard work on the subject, speaks of the Bible as "the most studied book of the middle ages" and indicates that "Bible study represented the highest branch of learning."<sup>1</sup>

Exegesis as a separate subject emerged in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, with textual criticism and biblical languages employed as aids to study.<sup>2</sup> It would seem an open question, however, as to the extent to which textual criticism was more than a very rudimentary science in the Middle Ages, and also the extent to which knowledge of biblical languages influenced biblical exegesis and exposition. Nevertheless, Smalley has clearly established that Bible study as a basis for both academic procedures and popular preaching was very prevalent in the medieval period.

J. W. Blench recognizes considerable variation in the method of exegesis employed in late fifteenth-century sermons. Some sermons reveal no scriptural interpretation at all.<sup>3</sup> Others bear out William Tyndale's criticism of the "Old Learning," that the true meaning of Scripture was hidden beneath the allegorical, tropological, and anagogical meanings which preachers deduced from the text.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, Blench provides evidence for *De*

<sup>1</sup>Beryl Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1962), p. xi.

<sup>2</sup>See *ibid.*, p. xvi.

<sup>3</sup>J. W. Blench, *Preaching in England in the Late Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries* (New York, 1964), p. 3.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 1, 3. It should be pointed out that the allegorical, tropological, and anagogical meanings of a Bible passage each involved what today would be regarded as comprised in the term "allegory." All three were divergencies from the

*Tempore* sermons of the late fifteenth century which made considerable use of a simple, literal exposition of the biblical material, with "unforced moral applications of the Gospels of the Day."<sup>5</sup> The question would seem to be, which tendency was most characteristic of late-medieval sermons?

Toivo Harjunpaa refers to the *Liber festivalis*, or *The Festival*, written about 1420 by the Augustinian prior John Mirk (or Myrc), as representing the type of preaching which was especially popular with people and hierarchy in fifteenth-century England.<sup>6</sup> Harjunpaa maintains that the *Festival* reveals very little that can be regarded as serious interpretation of Scripture. Certainly there is some attempt to draw obvious moral lessons from the literal exposition of the text. But by far the greater tendency is to allegorize, edit, and embellish the text of Scripture with fabulous *exempla*. If Mirk's work is to be taken as especially characteristic of later medieval homiletical exegesis, the preachers of the period cannot be regarded as showing any great concern to hew very closely to the scriptural line. In other words, Harjunpaa's answer to the question posed above would be that the sermons of the later Middle Ages characteristically give considerable evidence of a rather cursory respect for the exact meaning of the biblical text. Allegory in its various forms becomes a convenient means of adjusting the message to the particular concerns of the preacher and the Church. Where Scripture fails to provide an adequate vehicle for the instruction, "long talis of fablis" constitute the greater part of the sermon.<sup>7</sup>

Harjunpaa explains that the quantity of Bible quotations "is not in itself a guarantee that the sermon is truly scriptural in spirit" and that it is "on this important point that criticism must

literal exposition of the text. By "literal" is not meant an over-literalization of the text by which figures of speech, parables, symbolic language, and allegory employed by the Bible writers are ignored; rather, the "literal" interpretation as it emerged in the Renaissance and the Reformation was an attempt to explicate the meaning of any Bible passage as intended by the author.

<sup>5</sup>Blench, p. 7.

<sup>6</sup>Toivo Harjunpaa, *Preaching in England During the Later Middle Ages* (Åbo, Finland, 1965), pp. 6, 7, 25.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 25.

be directed against many of Mirk's sermons." Nevertheless, there are "sermons in the *Festival* in which the central scriptural message is clearly present. There are always what one might call seeds of evangelical truths in these sermons, but they rarely develop into blossoms."<sup>8</sup>

My purpose in this article is to examine a number of individual sermons and collections of sermons from the late medieval period to determine whether Harjunpaa's above-mentioned evaluation is correct. The specific questions which I wish to direct to the sources are these: First, what is the prevailing method of exegesis in the sermons: allegory, typology, redaction, or literal exposition? Second, what part do legendary or fabulous *exempla* play? Third, to what extent is the scriptural interpretation drawn from the early Fathers and medieval Doctors of the Church and/or from philosophers? Fourth, how is the Bible used to establish the validity of a particular world view, involving preference for a distinctive societal structure, for a characteristic ethical outlook, and a specific set of doctrinal emphases?

### 1. *Allegory*

Wimbledon's famous Middle-English sermon, published by K. F. Sundén and believed by Sundén to have been written and preached in 1388, may serve as a good starting point for noticing the use of allegory in medieval preaching.<sup>9</sup> We know that this sermon became influential, because in the latter half of the sixteenth century and the first half of the seventeenth century it was printed in some fifteen editions. The British Museum contains the earliest printed edition, dated 1573, and the fifteenth edition, dated 1635; and the Bodleian Library contains an edition printed as late as 1731.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

<sup>9</sup>K. F. Sundén, ed., *A Famous Middle English Sermon (MS. Hatton, Bod. Lib.) Preached at St. Paul's Cross, London, on Quinquagesima Sunday, 1388*, Årsskrift 31 (Göteborg, Sweden, 1925). Sundén has edited MS Hatton 57 in *Bibliotheca Bodleiana*, Oxford. The Summary Catalogue of the Bodleian Library dates the manuscript about 1400.

<sup>10</sup>See *ibid.*, p. vii.

There are some fifty quotations from, or references to, Scripture in Wimbleton's sermon, and the sermon is based on the Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard, recorded in Matt 20:1-16.<sup>11</sup> There are no Marcan or Lucan parallels from which other emphases could be drawn.

Wimbleton first cites the parable. A householder employed workers in his vineyard at different hours of the day (1st, 3rd, 6th, 9th, 11th hours), but at the end of the day he paid them all a *denarius*. Wimbleton then proceeds to give us what he calls the "spirytual vndirstondyg." It is not difficult to see that "this householder is oure lord jesum crist, that is hede of the house holde of holy chyrche." Difficulty arises, however, as Wimbleton applies the hours of the day to "diuerse agys of the world." In the era of the law of "kynde" God called Abel, Enoch, Noah, and Abraham. In the time of the old law, Moses, David, Isaiah, and Jeremiah were called. In the time of grace, the apostles and martyrs were called.<sup>12</sup>

Obviously, from the outset Wimbleton has gone beyond the intention of the original parable. Of course, such a parable is itself an allegory, but an allegory subject to interpretations delimited by the nature of the original pericope and the scriptural application. There is nothing of different eras of world history referred to in the parable. On the basis of what criteria would Wimbleton put Abel and Abraham in the same era, or Moses and Jeremiah? What does Wimbleton's periodization of history have to do with the obvious message of the parable that Christ rewards the eleventh-hour servants equally with those who began at the first hour of the day? In Wimbleton's line-up of eras, Abel in the first era was murdered as a youth, while some of the apostles, in the third era, lived for many years. Evidently Wimbleton had no scriptural rationale for his allegorical application and no clear purpose in mind for making it.<sup>13</sup>

Richard Fitz-James was the author of *Sermo die lune in ebdomada Pasche*, printed about 1495, another sermon in which we

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., pp. xi-xii, 1.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 1.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., pp. 2-3.

see the medieval use of allegory illustrated.<sup>14</sup> According to Francis Jenkinson, Fitz-James was successively Bishop of Rochester, Chichester, and London, but when the sermon was printed, Fitz-James was still only "reverendus doctor."<sup>15</sup> The theme of the sermon is God's condescension in coming right to man at every stage of history but especially in the Person and work of Jesus Christ.

In allegorical terms, Fitz-James speaks of three men in the pre-Christian era named "Jesus," who typified the Messiah: Jesus (or Joshua) the son of Nun, who led Israel after Moses' death; Joshua the son of Josedech (or Jehozadak), the first high priest of Israel after the period of the captivity; and Joshua the son of Sirach, the author of the apocryphal *Book of Proverbs (Ecclesiasticus)*. Fitz-James uses these three personalities to represent three characteristics of Jesus Christ. "The fyrste saued the people by myght and power. The seconde by perfyte obedyence. The thyrde by his grete wysdom."<sup>16</sup> Hence Joshua the son of Nun symbolizes the power of Christ, Joshua the son of Josedech his perfect obedience, and Joshua the son of Sirach his great wisdom. The artificiality of the allegory is apparent, for presumably Joshua the son of Nun was not entirely devoid of obedience and wisdom, as the other two were by no means lacking in power of one form or another. However, with no scriptural support, Fitz-James presses his allegory to the limit by indicating that there was not one of these three "whyche had alle thyse vertues/neither any of theym plenaryly/ but by partycipacyon of oure Jhus Cryste. . . ."<sup>17</sup>

Fitz-James simply chose three characters whose name was Jesus, decided what he considered the salient characteristic of each, and then used the life and work of these three as allegories of the power, obedience, and wisdom of Jesus Christ. A similar use of allegorical exegesis is apparent in a sermon by the Boy Bishop who, sometime before 1496, preached at the Feast of the Holy

<sup>14</sup>Richard Fitz-James, *Sermo die lune in ebdomada Pasche. Printed at Westminster by Wynkyn de Worde about the year 1495*, ed. Francis Jenkinson (Cambridge, Eng., 1907).

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, p. i.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, sig. aii<sup>v</sup>.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, sig. bvi<sup>r</sup>; cf. sig. gv<sup>v</sup>.

Innocents (December 28). He combines a rather forced moral application of some well-known aspect of everyday life with an apparently natural allegorical application of some otherwise innocuous Bible passage.<sup>18</sup> The result is that the meaning of the scriptural passage is quite unrelated to its context. Irrespective of its strict linguistic and contextual force, the Bible text thus becomes a convenient tool for the molding of whatever moral motif may at the moment strike the fancy of the homiletician.

D. M. Grisdale, who has published three Middle-English sermons preached somewhere between 1389 and 1404, concurs that secular and biblical allegory were common in the sermons of the period. She speaks of "the narration and allegorical treatment of stories either from the Bible or from any other source known to the preacher" and indicates that this style of preaching, which was first introduced by the friars, was adopted almost universally throughout England.<sup>19</sup> The congregation, Grisdale thinks, comprised largely laity, country folk and tradespeople, but also some representatives of the upper classes, and a few secular or regular clergy.<sup>20</sup>

The first of the three sermons, entitled *In Passione Domini*, was preached by one Hugonis Legat. He says that Abraham, who was called to go into a far country, represents Jesus Christ who was called by the Father to come to this alien earth to die for man, but strangely, the land of Canaan also represents heaven.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, Ishmael, Abraham's son by Hagar, symbolizes man's soul which was delivered by Christ "out of the bondage & te thraldom of the deuel"<sup>22</sup>—a rather inept parallel when it is realized that Ishmael, in the company of his mother, was obliged to leave his

<sup>18</sup>See *Two Sermons Preached by the Boy Bishop at St. Paul's. Temp. Henry VIII, and at Gloucester, Temp. Mary*, ed. John Gough Nichols, with an introduction by Edward F. Rimbault, Camden Society, new series, no. 14 (Westminster, 1875), pp. 1-13.

<sup>19</sup>D. M. Grisdale, ed., *Three Middle English Sermons from the Worcester Chapter Manuscript F. 10*, Leeds School of English Language Texts and Monographs, no. 5 (Leeds, Eng., 1939). See pp. xi, xxiii.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p. xxv.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., pp. 2-3.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., p. 3.

father's household. Further examples of allegory are plentiful in the sermons edited by Grisdale.<sup>23</sup>

We turn now to some of the homilies of John Mirk, whose sermons, according to Harjunpaa, are "without doubt by far the best known sermons in the vernacular."<sup>24</sup> Mirk's *Festival* can be viewed as one of the means employed in the early fifteenth century to counteract the influence of Wyclif's teachings and the preaching of the Lollards. These sermons appeared at the time when Archbishop Arundel's measures were in force and when the official Church was confronted by the need for a satisfactory homiletical apologetic.<sup>25</sup> Hence we can assume that the use of the Bible in Mirk's homilies is thoroughly representative of that kind of exegesis which the official church thought proper to present to the laity in the fifteenth century.

In his homily *De Circumcisione Domini Nostri, Ihesu Cristi*, Mirk explains why Jesus was circumcised on the eighth day. It was so that each Christian servant might use seven days to think on his depraved beginnings and present unsatisfactory spiritual condition, and remedy all this on the eighth day by cutting "away from hyn the lust of his flesche and worlde's lykyng."<sup>26</sup> Many similar examples of allegorical interpretation may be taken from Mirk's homilies—so much so that it does not seem an exaggeration to say that one of Mirk's characteristic ways of interpreting the Bible was to allegorize the text so as to render it more relevant to his own religious and social environment than the original context would

<sup>23</sup>See *ibid.*, pp. 23, 25-27, 54, 65.

<sup>24</sup>Harjunpaa, p. 7.

<sup>25</sup>To combat Lollardy, Arundel in 1407 drew up thirteen constitutions which were presented first to a provincial synod at Oxford in November 1407 and later, in January 1408, to the convocation at St. Paul's. The first three of Arundel's constitutions were designed to control unlicensed preaching. The fourth and fifth dealt with false teachings concerning the sacraments. The sixth banned the reading and teaching of all Wyclif's works unless they had been approved. The seventh constitution prohibited unauthorized translations of the Bible into English. The eleventh provided for a monthly enquiry of the state of opinion at Oxford. See Gordon Leff, *Heresy in the Later Middle Ages* (New York, 1967), 2:570-571.

<sup>26</sup>John Mirk, *Mirk's Festival: A Collection of Homilies*, ed. Theodor Erbe (London, 1905), pp. 46-47.

allow.<sup>27</sup> Bible characters and their experiences are used in his sermons quite indiscriminately as examples of the spiritual, religious, ethical, and social problems of fifteenth-century man, and if the application required a distortion of the original story, this was a matter of unconcern to Mirk. Allegory rendered possible for him a plausible apology for the accepted theology of the Church, for the standard religious customs required of the laity, and for the ethical norms considered appropriate to govern the life of the average Christian. What more effective means could be found to combat the machinations of the heresiarchs?

Allegorical interpretation of Scripture is well represented also in six groups of sermons edited by Woodburn O. Ross, most of which sermons are to be dated in the late fourteenth to early fifteenth century.<sup>28</sup> In sermon 12, for example, the Syro-Phoenician woman who begged Christ to heal her demented daughter is used as a symbol of every sinful human being who pleads with God to heal his soul. The daughter is a symbol of the despoiled human soul.<sup>29</sup> The same story is used in sermon 28. This time the woman represents the Church. The daughter is man's soul, and the demon possessing her is Satan. Just as the Canaanite woman prayed for her daughter, so the Church prays for the sinful soul.<sup>30</sup> Ross's collection of sermons is a fruitful source of such examples.<sup>31</sup>

The evidence from the sample sermons and collections of sermons I have examined would suggest that the allegorical method was the most characteristic use of Scripture in late medieval preaching. It will become evident from our continued discussion

<sup>27</sup>For further examples of allegorization, see *ibid.*, pp. 49-50, 52, 60, 71, 94, 103, 119, 129, 152, 162, 261, 263.

<sup>28</sup>Woodburn O. Ross, ed., *Middle English Sermons: Edited from British Museum MS. Royal 18 B. xxiii*, Early English Text Society, Original Series, no. 209 (London, 1940). These sermons, which lack external evidence for authorship, are in *Brit. Mus. Royal 18 B. xxiii*. Ross is doubtful that all the sermons were actually delivered as they were written down, but is inclined rather to the view that most of them were originally written as models. It is possible, he also thinks, that the sermons were subject to scribal additions. See p. xix.

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 66.

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 143.

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 76-82, 92, 104-105, 126-128, 135-136, 172, 214-216, 231, 243, 248, 263, 265, 290.



that other approaches to the biblical text were not entirely lacking. For instance, typology, as distinct from allegory, was used occasionally; and literal interpretation was not completely ignored. But by far the most impressive and prevalent element in the vernacular sermons of the late Middle Ages was allegory, whether based on scriptural sources or on extra-biblical legends and fables. My findings in this respect are in agreement with the consensus of historians of biblical interpretation.

Robert M. Grant, for example, states that the "most important and characteristic method of biblical interpretation" in the Middle Ages was allegory.<sup>32</sup> He explains the medieval emphasis on the four meanings of Scripture which, as late as the sixteenth century, were illustrated by means of a little verse:

Littera gesta docet, quid credas  
allegoria, moralis quid agas,  
quo gendas anagogia.

(The letter shows what God and our Fathers did;  
The allegory shows us where our faith is hid;  
The moral meaning gives us rules of daily life;  
The anagogy shows us where we end our strife.)<sup>33</sup>

In practice, Grant explains, many exegetes deduced only two senses with scriptural passages. Others found three. Sometimes there were as many as seven. In the ninth century, Rabanus Maurus presented a theory which stressed the importance of the number four.<sup>34</sup> Later, Franciscan number-mysticism contributed to the acceptance of the fourfold interpretation.

Likewise, Harry Caplan refers to the fourfold sense of Scripture interpretation—(1) the *sensus historicus* or *literalis* which involved simple explanation of the words; (2) the *sensus tropologicus*, aimed at moral instruction; (3) the *sensus allegoricus* which sought exposition by a "sense other than the literal"; and (4) the *sensus anagogicus* by which the minds of the listeners were opened to consider a heavenly application—and recognizes this

<sup>32</sup>Robert M. Grant, *The Bible in the Church: A Short History of Interpretation* (New York, 1948), p. 101.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., pp. 101-102.

method of hermeneutics as very common in the exegetical theory of the Middle Ages. He "expects thus to find its role in the theory of preaching equally important." Certainly in the schools, Caplan argues, the multiple senses of Scripture were the bases of separate artistic disciplines.<sup>35</sup>

Perhaps of most striking interest as an indication of the prevalence of the method is the fact that it could be held forth as an evidence of the validity of traditional preaching against the teaching of the Lollards. G. R. Owst refers to Master Rypon of Durham, a Benedictine monk and an important preacher about the year 1400, who traced the errors of both Lollards and Mendicants to their concern for the literal sense of Scripture.<sup>36</sup> Owst remarks:

Historic controversies of this kind do not concern us at the moment. But the significance of Master Rypon's argument lies in its triumphant reassertion of the superiority and safety of the allegoric method. Little wonder that the orthodox preachers of his day, sharing this view, maintained a very riot of imagery in their expositions. "Glosyng" of this kind became "a ful glorious thing," as Chaucer's Sompnour observed, and a literalist like Wycliffe might thunder his complaints in vain upon unwilling ears.<sup>37</sup>

## 2. *Typology*

J. N. D. Kelly defines for us what is understood by typological exegesis as it developed in early church history.<sup>38</sup> It was a method of clarifying the relationship between the OT and NT revelations. The presupposition of the typologist is that the Bible depicts the progressive unfolding of the history of salvation. Unlike allegory, typology takes history seriously. The events and personages of the OT are studied in their historical context, but are seen as shadows or types of the events and persons in the Gospel age.

<sup>35</sup>Harry Caplan, "The Four Senses of Scriptural Interpretation and the Medieval Theory of Preaching," *Speculum: A Journal of Medieval Studies* 4 (1929): 283-284.

<sup>36</sup>G. R. Owst, *Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England* (Cambridge, Eng., 1933), pp. 57-61.

<sup>37</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 61-62.

<sup>38</sup>J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (New York, 1960), p. 71.

Many examples of typological exegesis could be given from the Bible and the writings of the early Church Fathers. One of the classic examples is Paul's reference to the two sons of Abraham, Ishmael and Isaac, as representing the Old and New Covenants (Gal 4:22-31; ἄτινά ἐστιν ἀλληγορούμενα). Another example is the use in the book of Hebrews of the OT priesthood and mediatorial ministry in the heavenly sanctuary (chaps. 7-10). Some of the early Church Fathers and also later commentators and preachers were quick to draw a parallel between the OT priesthood and the Christian priesthood. Such a parallel was used as a justification for the sacerdotal and sacramental emphases of the medieval Church.<sup>39</sup>

When there ceases to be a dynamic relationship between the OT symbol and the NT application, typology merges into allegory. This happens when the interpreter fails to identify the biblical evidence for his application and relies upon an imaginary relationship between the so-called type and the Gospel fulfillment. Kelly points out that most of the Fathers made this easy transition from typology to allegorism.<sup>40</sup> Origen and Augustine are typical examples.<sup>41</sup>

With such a background of patristic respect for typological exegesis, it is not surprising to find the preachers of the late Middle Ages employing it in their sermons. Nor is it unusual to find their types merging into allegories which occupy by far the more prominent place. Although typology is not especially prevalent in the medieval sermons I have scrutinized, there are a few interesting examples. The third Middle-English sermon edited by Grisdale likens the cereal offerings of flour, oil, and frankincense, mentioned in Lev 2, to the prayers of sincere Christians, which are contrasted with the unacceptable prayers of the hypocrites and Lollards.<sup>42</sup> Mirk regards King Saul, who pursued David, as a type

<sup>39</sup>ODCC, 1957 ed., s.v. "Priest"; *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, 1950 ed., s.v. "Priest," by A. C. A. Hall; Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1907), 5: 720; Marshall W. Baldwin, *The Mediaeval Church* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1953), p. 10.

<sup>40</sup>Kelly, p. 72.

<sup>41</sup>Smalley, p. 6; Yngve Brilioth, *A Brief History of Preaching* (Philadelphia, 1945), pp. 56-57.

<sup>42</sup>Grisdale, p. 51.

of the NT Saul (or Paul), who pursued Christ and the disciples.<sup>43</sup> Isaac, the son of Abraham's old age, is a type of Jesus Christ who was born miraculously of the Virgin Mary.<sup>44</sup> Moses is also presented by Mirk as a type of Christ: Just as Moses gave the law, so Christ gave grace, mercy, and truth; and as Moses led the people out of Egypt through the Red Sea to Sinai, so Christ, by preaching and miracles, led the people out of the darkness of sin to the hill of virtue.<sup>45</sup>

A fine example of the intermingling of typology and allegory is provided by sermon 38 of the Middle-English sermons edited by Ross: By the children of Israel in the wilderness, the preacher understood "all Cristen men that are now dwellynge in this werld, the wiche nedis, as the children of Israel dud, watur for to live by. Likwise we nede and thurste aftur the watur of grace, that cometh from oure Lorde Crist Ihesus." By Moses and Aaron he understood "prechours and techours of Goddes worde, the wiche preyeth and beseketh for the synnefull man for the watere of grace. . . ." By the rod ("zerde") with which Moses should strike the rock was meant the "good preyours of hem that be well shrywyn and sorefull for here synnes," and the stone itself the preacher understood as representing Christ. "And ryght as Moyses held the one ende of the zerde in ys honde and with the othur ende smote vppon the stone, ryght so shall thou, synnefull man, prey to God for mercy and grace, the wiche is full and nedefull to the, the wiche preyours shall be shewid be-forne Criste in the blesse of heven iff thou be in clene liff, and els not."<sup>46</sup>

The Pauline application of the OT story is clear (in fact, reference is made in the context to 1 Cor 10), but the preacher could not resist the urge to apply insignificant details to the practical religious life of his congregation. In this manner, allegory emanated from an overworking of the OT types.

<sup>43</sup>Mirk, p. 53.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., p. 77.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid., p. 103.

<sup>46</sup>Ross, pp. 215-216.

### 3. *Other Aspects of Late-Medieval Homiletical Exegesis*

Scattered throughout late-medieval sermons are many instances of the literal use of the Bible. Quite often a Bible story is told substantially as it appears in the text, and rather obvious moral lessons are drawn from it. Many times, however, the story is followed by a legendary miracle-story which has no real relationship to the original biblical account. Undoubtedly, the discriminating listener *could* have learned the teaching of the Bible if he had some knowledge of Scripture. Otherwise, it would have been difficult for him to distinguish between the biblical and the legendary or allegorical applications. Blench sees it as characteristic of sermons delivered in England during the period 1450-1547 that they based the spiritual sense on the literal verbal expression.<sup>47</sup> Even so, he comments:

However, it may be seen that the interpretation given in popular *De Tempore* sermons was not always predominantly allegorical for in a late fifteenth-century collection preserved in Lincoln Cathedral Library (MSS. Linc. Cath. Libr. 50 & 51) simple literal expositions and unforced moral applications of the Gospels of the Day considerably outnumber far-fetched spiritual interpretations.<sup>48</sup>

Mirk's sermons and those edited by Ross give numerous examples of literal exposition which often, but not always, merges into the fabulous and the allegorical.<sup>49</sup> Redactional elements were quite often introduced by Mirk into a Bible story.<sup>50</sup> His narration of the nativity scene is a case in point:<sup>51</sup> Joseph deposited Mary in a cave for domestic animals between two houses. Then shortly before midnight Mary sent Joseph to procure the services of two midwives. While he was gone into the town, Mary was delivered of the

<sup>47</sup>Blench, p. 2.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>49</sup>Mirk, pp. 18, 21, 27-28, 32, 35-36, 48, 66, 70-72, 80, 83, 93-95, 97-98, 100, 102, 114, 116-118, 121-122, 152, 156, 160-161, 167, 176, 184, 188, 203-204, 254; Ross, pp. 1, 5, 9-12, 17-18, 26-28, 36-37, 97-98, 115-116, 143, 150-151, 155, 164, 168-169.

<sup>50</sup>Mirk, pp. 22-24, 27-28, 31, 53, 106-107, 136-137, 152, 175-176, 185-189, 204.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid., pp. 22-23.

child and "layde hym yn the cracche befor the ox and the asse." The animals recognized their Lord and fell down on their knees and worshiped him, and ate no more hay. When the midwives Gebel and Salome arrived with Joseph, Gebel "fonde well that our lady was clene mayden, scho cryed anon and sayde: 'A mayden hath borne a chyldel!'" But Salome would not believe it. When she roughly handled Mary, "her hondes dryden vp." Then an angel came and told her to touch the child. This she did and was healed. Similarly, Mirk introduces redactional elements into the stories of Stephen, John, Paul, and Mark,<sup>52</sup> into the account of the ascension of Christ,<sup>53</sup> and into other Bible accounts.

Late-medieval preachers demonstrated an incredible predilection for the legendary and the fabulous. As we have seen, sometimes the legends had a tenuous relationship with Scripture, but quite often they were totally unrelated. The obvious purpose was to reinforce the validity of the ethical and doctrinal precepts of the Church.<sup>54</sup> The doctrines of the immortality of the soul, eternal hell-fire, original sin, transubstantiation, the sacrament of penance, the divine powers of the Virgin Mary, the efficacy of celibacy and virginity, the powers of clergy and popes—all these and more were illustrated with intensely lurid and frightening miracle-stories. It is not an exaggeration to say that use of such stories is a characteristic of late-medieval sermons, ranking in terms of frequency with the use of allegory.<sup>55</sup>

The particular biblical interpretation employed by late medieval preachers was often borrowed from an early-Church Father or medieval-Church Doctor.<sup>56</sup> Patristic explanations of Bible events

<sup>52</sup>Ibid., pp. 27-28, 31, 53, 136.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid., p. 152.

<sup>54</sup>Owst, *Literature and Pulpit*, p. 87; idem, *Preaching in Medieval England: An Introduction to Sermon Manuscripts of the Period c. 1350-1450* (Cambridge, Eng., 1926), pp. 245, 313.

<sup>55</sup>For examples of such, see Grisdale, pp. 19-20, 34, 39; Mirk, pp. 5-20, 26, 29, 31-34, 43, 49-50, 67, 75, 79-81, 95, 111, 119-121, 138, 141, 143, 147, 162, 173-174, 186-187, 190-192, 196, 203-208, 214, 221, 227, 245, 246, 255, 256, 262; Ross, pp. 5-7, 62-63, 65, 78, 120-130, 144, 148, 156-167, 206, 216-217.

<sup>56</sup>E.g., see Fitz-James, sigs. aiii<sup>v</sup>, civ<sup>r</sup>, eiii<sup>v</sup>, fii<sup>v</sup>, gi<sup>r</sup>-gi<sup>v</sup>, giv<sup>r</sup>; Mirk, p. 46; Ross, pp. 163, 165.

and themes must have been very impressive to fifteenth-century congregations. Not only did they perpetuate the widely accepted authority of the Fathers, but they increased the image of the preacher in terms of scholarship and piety. The word of a Father in support of a scriptural interpretation or ethical teaching was obviously regarded as sufficient to establish its validity. Without actually saying it, these late-medieval preachers revealed their view that patristic concepts were as authoritative for them as the words of the Bible. Fitz-James accepted the testimony of Augustine and Jerome in regard to the wisdom of the philosophers.<sup>57</sup> Such great thinkers as Plato and Aristotle, he said, may not have understood the ultimate end of man's existence, but nevertheless they sought and found a genuine approximation to true spiritual wisdom. The source of ultimate spiritual and religious authority to Fitz-James was, clearly, Scripture as interpreted by the Fathers of the Church. The philosophers, who were influential with the Fathers, were the source of a secondary, preparatory mode of wisdom.

#### *4. The Relationship between the Homileticians' World View and Their Exegesis*

There is no doubt that the method of biblical exegesis employed by late-medieval English preachers was especially well-adapted to the detection in Scripture of concepts regarding Church, society, ethics, and doctrine which were most highly valued by the established Church. Allegory, typology, redaction, legend, and fable were ideally suited to the process of confirming the world view of the medieval Church in the minds of the laity. Where it was not in conflict with accepted religious, ethical, and theological understandings, the literal exposition of the Bible found acceptance. Fathers and philosophers were used as corroborative evidence for the particular interpretation which emerged: Fathers as authorities, and philosophers as a secondary source of wisdom.

#### *The Church*

Scriptural exposition was a means of reinforcing a sacerdotal, hierarchical Church in opposition to any who, like Wyclif and the

<sup>57</sup>Fitz-James, sigs. bii<sup>v</sup>-bv<sup>v</sup>.

Lollards, presumed to question its authority. Since the Church was regarded as the ultimately credible interpreter of Scripture, any who rejected the Church's interpretation was considered out of accord with the ultimate authority of Scripture. This point is made quite unequivocally in the first of the three sermons edited by Grisdale, wherein it is stated that pride and obstinacy makes "mani man falle in-to heresie," leading to perversion of the text of Holy Writ; moreover, "thei wilnot resseyue the teching of holichirch, but despise the lawis of oure Lord God, & Christes correctyuns set at rith nawth."<sup>58</sup>

Grisdale's second preacher uses Paul's call to prayer in 2 Thess 3:1-2 as the basis for his injunction that the people should pray for the unity and tranquility "of al holichirche, vr holy vader the Pope, Bonif, te 9, al his cardinals & al other statis & degres vrom the heyest to the lowest, that be grownded & apreuyd e the rithful lawes of holy chirche. . . ."<sup>59</sup> He likens false doctrine to the leprosy which Christ healed, and credits the Lollards with being afflicted by it.<sup>60</sup>

In his sermon *De Nativitate Domini Nostri Ihesu Cristi*, Mirk refers to the Roman Emperor enquiring of a Sibyl whether there would be any greater than he born in the future. The Sibyl looked at the sun and saw a circle of gold about it. In the middle of the circle was a very fair maiden with a child in her arms. The Sibyl showed the emperor the vision and commanded him to worship the child. The emperor obeyed and commanded all men likewise to do sacrifice to the Christchild.<sup>61</sup> Given Mirk's frame of reference, and that of his listeners, it is not difficult to detect here a recognition of the subservience of the State to the Church.

To bolster the validity of mendicant preaching, Mirk had recourse to a legend concerning St. Dominic. One night Dominic was engaged in his devotions and saw the Lord Jesus holding three spears in his hand ready to throw them into the earth in vengeance upon the proud, covetous, and lecherous. Mary intervened and

<sup>58</sup>Grisdale, p. 8.

<sup>59</sup>Ibid., pp. 24-25.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid., p. 40.

<sup>61</sup>Mirk, p. 25.



persuaded him to wait a while, for she had a true servant in Dominic, who would preach God's word and turn the people.<sup>62</sup>

In a similar vein, Mirk told of a bishop of Lincoln who on his deathbed was tormented by numerous fiends. They tried to destroy his faith. Then Mary, coming to the rescue, asked the bishop to say that he believed "as holy chyrch dothe." He said that he did so believe, and the fiends were obliged to leave him.<sup>63</sup>

In the accepted tradition of the late Middle Ages, the Boy Bishop extolled the virtues of the ecclesiastical hierarchy and urged prayer on behalf of the prelates, from the pope down.<sup>64</sup> Grisdale's third preacher uses the epistle to the Hebrews, chap. 5, as evidence for his concept of the priesthood, wherein the Christian priest is seen as the successor of the Israelite priest before the Cross.<sup>65</sup> In place of the animal sacrifices offered by the Jewish priest, the Christian priest offers the sacrifice of the body of Christ in the Mass. Contrary to the overall teaching of his source, which speaks of *one* sacrifice of Christ in contrast to multiple sacrifices of the Old Covenant, the medieval preacher has expounded upon a mediatorial earthly priesthood which is involved in offering repeatedly a sacrifice on earth. If the preacher had paid greater attention to the contrast between Aaronic and Christian priesthood discussed in Hebrews, chaps. 7-10, he may have been constrained to modify his exegesis of Heb 5.

Ecclesiastical hierarchy and sacerdotalism were accepted without question in late-medieval sermons. The teachings generally held by the Church were the ones looked for in the Bible and preached. The two attitudes—veneration of the hierarchy and priesthood, and acceptance of their teachings—were natural corollaries of the doctrine of apostolic succession. Bishops in a direct line of descent from the apostles were looked upon as bound to be of divine appointment and their scriptural interpretations were certain to be apostolic. The idea of Church authority in matters of

<sup>62</sup>Ibid., p. 73.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid., p. 78.

<sup>64</sup>*Sermons by Boy Bishop*, p. 3.

<sup>65</sup>Grisdale, p. 71; cf. Ross, p. 119-120, 158.

faith stems from Irenaeus and his successors.<sup>66</sup> "Papal authority in matters of interpretation was first clearly set forth by Alain de Lille (c. 1128-1203) in the late middle ages."<sup>67</sup> The late-medieval preachers adhered to a concept of the Church and its authority as an interpreter of Scripture, and a concept of a mediatorial earthly priesthood, which had been dignified by centuries of acceptance and application.

### *The Structure of Society*

As we have seen, Wimbledon's famous Middle-English sermon is based on the parable of the laborers in the vineyard (Matt. 20:1-16). In its original setting, the parable is designed to teach that salvation is available irrespective of the length of time spent in service. The eleventh-hour laborers are rewarded equally with those who have borne the heat and burden of the day. In the hands of Wimbledon, the parable is made to teach a three-structured society (priests, knights, or rulers, and laborers) with an essential division of labor in the third class.<sup>68</sup> Wimbledon is at great pains to extol the virtues of the medieval class structure and to furnish scriptural backing for it.

Fitz-James in his *Sermo die lune in ebdomada Pasche* manifests similar respect for the political and societal status quo. He quotes 1 Pet 2:13, 14, 18, Scripture verses which enjoin obedience to secular law, to king, and to governors. Not only are good rulers to be obeyed, but also the "wylde and lewde of theyr disposycyon."<sup>69</sup> Fitz-James also cites Augustine, who maintained on the basis of Christ's teaching that just as children are to obey their parents, so subjects are to obey "theyr hedes and prelates."<sup>70</sup>

The Boy Bishop invited prayer for the rulers of all lands, and especially for those of England. The king, queen, and members of

<sup>66</sup>Kelly, pp. 37-39, 40, 50; James D. Wood, *The Interpretation of the Bible: A Historical Introduction* (London, 1958), pp. 45-47; J. K. C. von Hofman, *Interpreting the Bible* (Minneapolis, 1959), pp. 7-8; *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, 1950 ed., s.v. "Exegesis or Hermeneutics," by Henry S. Nash.

<sup>67</sup>Grant, p. 96.

<sup>68</sup>Sundén, pp. 2-13.

<sup>69</sup>Fitz-James, sigs. gi<sup>v</sup>-gii<sup>r</sup>.

<sup>70</sup>Ibid.

the royal family, along with the lords of the realm and mayor, aldermen and sheriffs of London are, he said, to be respected and prayed for.<sup>71</sup> Similarly, Grisdale's third preacher is concerned for the "pes & tranquilite of this rem . . .," and kings, lords, and local authorities are to be the subject of the prayers of the laity.<sup>72</sup>

Mirk takes the position that it is the special grace of God that makes some men rich and some poor.<sup>73</sup> The rich man has the responsibility to "socour the pore yn hor nede and soo wyth hor good by hom Heven . . ."; the poverty of others is their salvation, "for God knowethe wele, yf thay wern rych, thay wold, forgefe hor God, and soo spyll homselfe."<sup>74</sup> So the rich should not be enamored of their riches, but should credit their good fortune to God. And the poor man was not to be envious of the rich, but was to "take his povertie in pacyence and thonke God of hys grace: for, at the last, he schall have that for the best."<sup>75</sup>

There is no indication in these late-medieval sermons of any political or social unrest. The hierarchical structure of society is accepted and exonerated without question. Monarchy and aristocracy are treated as facts of life which are thoroughly in accord with the spirit of the Gospel. To late-medieval preachers, the ultimate concern was salvation, and if poverty contributed to a man's chances of such, it was a very salutary thing.

### *Ethical Emphases*

Christian ethics as understood by late-medieval preachers formed a major part of their sermons. For example, Wimbeldon uses an allegorical interpretation of a vision from the book of Zechariah to illustrate the evil of covetousness. He reminds his listeners of Balaam whose salient characteristic was covetousness, and of Achan, Judas, and Ahab, who were destroyed by the same problem.<sup>76</sup> Wimbeldon also inveighs against dishonesty, cursing,

<sup>71</sup>*Sermons by Boy Bishop*, p. 4.

<sup>72</sup>Grisdale, p. 53.

<sup>73</sup>Mirk, p. 86.

<sup>74</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 86-87.

<sup>75</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 87.

<sup>76</sup>Sundén, pp. 14-15.

fraud, harsh criticism ("scornynge, and bacbytyne"), pride, lechery, and gluttony.<sup>77</sup>

Ross's collection of Middle-English sermons contains much that is designed to engender in the listener a healthy respect for moral law and a genuine fear of divergence from it. Sermon 12, for instance, lists the seven deadly sins—pride, lechery, covetousness, wrath, envy, sloth, and gluttony—and indicates that these are the sins which destroy a man and bring upon him divine wrath. In fact, the root of all ethical and moral problems, according to this preacher, is pride.<sup>78</sup>

Often in these sermons edited by Ross, the sinner is rather bitterly condemned. The preacher of sermon 18 quotes Paul's epistle to the Philippians in his attack on the lecherous and gluttonous, "of whom the ende is death," etc. (Phil 3:19). He condemns commandment breakers and urges penance as the solution.<sup>79</sup> He fails, however, to emulate Paul in giving corresponding space and time to the solution of spiritual and ethical problems. This sort of procedure is characteristic of the late-medieval sermons examined by the present writer. The emphasis on ethical and spiritual failure and its concomitant punishment is quite out of proportion with any attempt to suggest a solution. In other words, the sermons are long on diagnosis and short on prescription. The evident concern is to engender conformity of the laity rather than to rehabilitate the degenerate.

### *Doctrinal Emphases*

As would be expected, the specific doctrines which constantly reappear in late-medieval sermons are those which are usually associated with the teachings of the established Church. Eschatology is featured relatively prominently. The soul of man is considered immortal.<sup>80</sup> Hence, every human being can look forward to an eternity in either heaven or hell. The latter, along with purgatory,

<sup>77</sup>Ibid., p. 34.

<sup>78</sup>Ross, pp. 67-68.

<sup>79</sup>Ibid., pp. 107-108.

<sup>80</sup>See, e.g., Mirk, p. 69; Ross, p. 6.

is depicted in the most lurid colors.<sup>81</sup> The doctrine of the Trinity as traditionally understood since the Council of Nicea (A.D. 325) is quite in evidence.<sup>82</sup> The incarnation of Christ is likewise depicted in terms which are quite traditional to Christian theology.<sup>83</sup>

On the question of original sin, the teaching of the sermons is substantially identical with the Augustinian doctrine that inherited guilt is removed by infant baptism since the Cross, just as it was, in a typical and provisional sense, by circumcision before the Cross. Fitz-James explains that circumcision was replaced by baptism, stating that circumcision as given to Abraham did "not open the gates of heven" since at that time "the pryce was not payed of our Sauioir Crist Jhus moost precyous blood and dethe. . . ."<sup>84</sup>

Late-medieval sermons presented the laity with a highly sacramental mode of religious belief and practice. Sermon 6 of Ross's collection, for example, lists the seven sacraments (baptism, confirmation, penance, transubstantiation or the Mass, orders, matrimony, extreme unction) and briefly discusses each.<sup>85</sup> A motif which emerges often in these sermons is the doctrine of sacramental grace. Christ will save us if we do penance and partake of his actual body and blood. There are extreme penalties for not entering into the performance of the sacramental rites. These penalties are illustrated vividly by use of miracle-stories and legends which are obviously designed to consume the listeners with fear of nonconformity.<sup>86</sup>

In the sermons, the sacrament of penance is closely related to the divine powers of the priesthood, Christ having given the priests the power to forgive sins.<sup>87</sup> Likewise, Christ not only gave his own

<sup>81</sup>See, e.g., Grisdale, p. 14; cf. Ross, pp. 15, 18, 171, 174, 240.

<sup>82</sup>See, e.g., Mirk, pp. 51, 76, 166; Fitz-James, sigs. cii<sup>r</sup>-ciii<sup>r</sup>.

<sup>83</sup>See, e.g., Fitz-James, sigs. cii<sup>v</sup>, dii<sup>r</sup>, div<sup>r</sup>-div<sup>v</sup>, dv<sup>v</sup>, gi<sup>r</sup>.

<sup>84</sup>Ibid., sig. civ<sup>v</sup>; cf. *Sermons by Boy Bishop*, pp. 2, 5; Grisdale, pp. 56-57.

<sup>85</sup>Ross, p. 30.

<sup>86</sup>On the question of the sacraments and their importance, see Fitz-James, sigs. di<sup>v</sup>-dii<sup>r</sup>, evi<sup>r</sup>-fiii<sup>r</sup>; Mirk, p. 51; Ross, pp. 30, 126, 132.

<sup>87</sup>Fitz-James, sigs. fi<sup>v</sup>-fiii<sup>r</sup>. On the overall teaching of the sermons concerning the sacrament of penance, see Fitz-James, eiv<sup>v</sup>, evi<sup>v</sup>; *Sermons by Boy Bishop*, p. 9; Grisdale, pp. 19, 29, 45, 60; Mirk, pp. 2, 67-68, 89-90, 95, 203-204, 262; Ross, pp. 30, 104, 106, 108, 112, 116, 132, 141, 147, 158, 206, 274, 278-279, 283, 287, 311.

flesh and blood to the apostles, but conferred upon Christian priests the power of transubstantiation. In the words of Mirk, Christ gave to his disciples and “to al othyr prestes, zee and to al othyr prestes, power and dignite forto make his body of bred and wyne yn the auter. . . .”<sup>88</sup> Precisely this question of transubstantiation was to become the subject of much eloquent and polemical preaching in sixteenth-century England, as Anglicans and Puritans challenged the Catholic teaching. Inasmuch as each side sought biblical support for its position, the differences in exegetical method and presuppositions in regard to doctrinal authority are especially apparent in sermons dealing with this issue.

Despite the great stress on sacramental grace and forgiveness in late-medieval sermons, occasionally a preacher would suggest that God is well able to forgive sins directly.<sup>89</sup> This is a relatively minor motif, however, and its appearance was obviously not designed to detract in any way from the orthodox doctrine of penance. Justification, involving the gift of divine grace, is associated by Mirk with performance of the sacramental rites of the Church; and although the preachers of Ross’s collection of sermons occasionally speak of God’s free gift of grace in a manner similar to that employed by the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformers, there is no attempt to contradict the sacramental emphasis elsewhere apparent in the same sermons.<sup>90</sup> Good works are performed by virtue of the gift of God’s righteousness, according to the preacher of sermon 15; but one’s good deeds are the means by which heaven is won, according to sermon 51.<sup>91</sup> The point seems to be that there is a cooperation between the believer and God. Human works do count for something in respect to justification, even though works without the gift of grace are of no value.<sup>92</sup>

It is not uncommon for late-medieval preachers to contrast the OT era unfavorably with the NT era. In fact, the impression is given that the period prior to Christ was characterized by an

<sup>88</sup>Mirk, pp. 168-169; cf. pp. 64, 125-126, 168, 170, 173; Fitz-James, sigs. fi<sup>v</sup>, fiii<sup>v</sup>; Grisdale, pp. 71-72; Ross, pp. 30-31, 52, 65, 97, 127, 129-131, 159.

<sup>89</sup>Mirk, pp. 76, 92; Ross, pp. 28, 115, 160, 178.

<sup>90</sup>Mirk, p. 91 (cf. p. 86), and Ross, pp. 117, 163, 200, 207, 243, 247, 250, 270.

<sup>91</sup>Ibid., pp. 84-85, 334.

<sup>92</sup>Ibid., pp. 12, 21, 59, 152; Mirk, p. 168.

unsatisfactory application of the law of Moses, while the Christian era is an age of God's mercy, with greater availability of forgiveness and grace.<sup>93</sup> The law of Moses was the law of vengeance which failed to save man's soul, "than com Crist, and with is precieuse blode he made man hole."<sup>94</sup> The period before Christ was the age of the "olde law,"<sup>95</sup> by contrast with the age of the new law since the Cross.<sup>96</sup>

The denigration of the OT era is despite the analogy drawn between Christian and Aaronic sacerdotalism and sacramentalism, and despite the emphasis upon the soteriological significance of good works and commandment-keeping. The inconsistency is interesting. Perhaps the NT rejection of the "Old Covenant" and anti-Semitism of the post-apostolic Church were responsible for rejection of much of the "old law," while the obvious analogy between the medieval concept of the Church and the structure of the Israelitic religious system invited an appeal to the OT for justification of the medieval priesthood and ritualism.

### *Summary and Conclusion*

In terms of exegetical method, the salient characteristic of the late-medieval sermons was allegory. Confronted by the need to justify from the Bible the current religious, social, and political system, preachers employed allegorical interpretation as a method of determining so-called deeper spiritual meanings of the Scriptures. Interpretation of the Bible was, therefore, highly subjective. What the preacher was looking for was what he found, irrespective of actual meanings which could have been determined by context, language, and comparison with related biblical material. Preachers of the late Middle Ages were thus perpetuating an exegetical method which was employed in antiquity by interpreters of Homer, and which was introduced into the Christian Church via the late second- and early third-century Alexandrian theologians, who accepted and applied the Philonic method. Augustine and Gregory

<sup>93</sup>Grisdale, p. 15.

<sup>94</sup>Ross, p. 126.

<sup>95</sup>Ibid., p. 214.

<sup>96</sup>Fitz-James, sigs. di<sup>v</sup>-dii<sup>r</sup>; *Sermons by Boy Bishop*, pp. 7-9.

the Great handed the Alexandrian method on to the Middle Ages, and the late-medieval English preachers used it extensively.

To a lesser extent, the sermons of the late Middle Ages also give evidence of typology. This involved a recognition of the NT fulfillments and applications of so-called OT types. The preacher's interpretations were governed by applications made by later Bible writers. There was an attempt to find deeper meanings only in those materials which were seen to be predictive of later Christian motifs. To some extent typology was used by Origen, Augustine, and other Fathers of the early Christian Church, and to some extent it is to be detected in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century sermons. But for both the early Fathers and the medieval preachers, typology tended to merge into allegorization. Christian symbolism was often seen in OT pericopes which had no typological or predictive elements.

Although the preachers of the late Middle Ages often presented biblical material in a substantially literal manner, they usually embellished their literal expositions with redactional, legendary, and fabulous elements which, in many cases, were clearly designed to justify or exonerate the ecclesiastical, doctrinal, ethical, and political status quo. If an extra-biblical miracle-story could substantiate in the minds of the laity the pangs of hell-fire or the validity of transubstantiation, it was used and, judging by the eloquence of the rhetoric and lurid nature of the stories, with considerable homiletic success. Often preachers had recourse to the writings of the early Church Fathers and medieval Doctors as authoritative interpreters of Scripture. Pagan philosophers used by the earlier Christian writers were occasionally cited by the late-medieval preachers as sources of secondary corroborative evidence.

The world view which emerged from the Scriptures by the application of these exegetical techniques was that which has come to be regarded as typically medieval. The Church, which was sometimes spoken of as superior to the State, was depicted as justifiably papal, hierarchical, and sacerdotal. Secular government was viewed as quite legitimately monarchical and aristocratic. The ethics of the Church were those which the preachers found in the Bible, conformity to which was essential to salvation, and rejection of which would result in ecclesiastically imposed penalties with the



very real possibility of the temporary pains of purgatory, or ultimate eternal suffering in hell.

The doctrines which the preachers employed the Scriptures to substantiate were those of the established Church, such as immortality of the soul, eternal salvation for the saved and damnation for the lost, the Trinity, the virgin birth of Christ, Augustinian original sin, sacramental grace, faith-plus-works as the means of justification, and a sort of dispensationalism which denigrated the Mosaic system in contrast to the Christian. The techniques of biblical interpretation employed and the message which emerged were such as to confirm the laity in their acceptance of the dogmas and practices of the Church.

A major reason suggested here for the rejection by later English preachers of the medieval exegetical method was their acceptance of the new philological approach of Renaissance humanists. This fact can be well demonstrated from the sermons of humanist-inclined Anglicans. It is somewhat more difficult to show a direct causal relationship between the new philosophical world view of humanists and that of the Anglicans. Certainly, there were definite similarities in tendency between humanist attitudes to the Church, society, ethics, and doctrine, and those which were manifested by sixteenth-century Anglican preachers. This similar tendency was not unlike that which resulted in a measure of sympathy and rapport between Erasmus and Luther.