

Reading the Bible in the Middle Ages. Edited by Jinty Nelson and Damien Kempf. Studies in Early Medieval History 6. London: Bloomsbury, 2015. Pp. 284. ISBN: 9781474245722.

This interesting and varied collection takes as its central focus the concept of the Bible as understood by different audiences, both secular and clerical, primarily during the eleventh and twelfth centuries in Northern Europe, conjoined with theoretical and pragmatic approaches to reading. The sixth published volume in Bloomsbury Academic's Studies in Early Medieval History series, the present volume has its origins in a day-long conference at the University of Liverpool in 2011, "Bibles: Reading Scriptures from Medieval to Early Modern," which focused on Bible reading and hearing in particular locations and contexts. The editors acknowledge that the "patchiness" of the volume's contents are shaped by the conference program's favoring broader implications for religious practice rather than comprehensiveness of coverage as well as by the availability of contributors. Typical of thematic collections, the individual contributions here are loosely connected by way of the governing topic and provide self-contained analysis and insight rather than seeking a sequential or unified whole. Eight essays, by historians affiliated with the Universities of Cambridge, Utrecht, Liverpool, and elsewhere, cover a range of topics engaging with the availability, dissemination, reception, interpretation, and controversies surrounding the uses of Scripture.

A brief Introduction by volume editors Jinty Nelson (Kings College London) and Damien Kempf (University of Liverpool) provides an overview of the topical threads and identifies the individual contributions in relation to the framing subjects, noting that the volume retains a broad spatial coverage (Post-Roman Latin Christendom, Italy, and the Carolingian world of France and Germany, plus the Anglo-Norman realm as well as the broader European culture of various schools), and that its contributors draw on expertise in various disciplines, in service to the overarching theme of Bible readings, hearings, understandings, and interpretations in religious, social, and political practice. The general goal of the contributions is to investigate "who exactly medieval readers were, and how they read," with findings that are, as the editors note, "predictably diverse" (2), though all offer examples of readings and readers of biblical texts drawing on Gregory's *Moralia in Job* and Bede's citations and commentaries. Owing to the Bible's elastic confines and fragmented availability, most readers and auditors of biblical texts, the editors remind us, were reading and listening to selections, excerpts chosen to fulfill a particular ideological, theological, or didactic purpose.

The first contribution, Cornelia Linde's "Twelfth-Century Notions of the Canon of the Bible," provides a useful contextual grounding for the volume as a whole, tracing the controversies surrounding the concept of "canon" and the problematics of inclusion and exclusion of biblical books fueled by ideology, theology, and other motives of those attempting to solidify the Bible's contents and structure. Noting that the fixed canon of the Latin Bible wasn't established until a decree at the Council of Florence in 1442 determined a binding table of contents, for the first time, for the whole of Catholic Christendom, Linde remarks that despite what was, in many respects, a stable, recognized canon of contents, theologians considered matters of inclusion, as well as the ordering of contents, subject to discussion and debate. Contextualizing attitudes towards canonical elasticity on the part of the Church Fathers and other early authorities, Jerome's and Augustine's views in particular, Linde traces the contrasting approaches and methodologies of Hugh of St. Victor and Robert of Melun, two prominent twelfth-century scholars—the former indebted to Jerome's structuring and inclusion of deuterocanonical material, and the latter attempting to integrate Jerome's and Augustine's views of the biblical canon—providing documentary evidence of ongoing issues regarding authenticity and structure and ensuring that the Bible's specific contents be subjected to subsequent ongoing discussion.

Several contributions stand out for their insightful analyses and potential relevance for feminist medievalists: Jinty Nelson's "Lay Readers of the Bible in the Carolingian Ninth Century" considers, among others, the laywoman Dhuoda (late ninth century), author of the *Handbook*, a moral guidebook written for her son citing numerous biblical texts, which, Nelson notes, includes over two hundred references to the Psalms as well as quotes from all books with the exception of a few, mostly minor, prophets, in the commonly recognized Vulgate Bible. Building upon the work of Rosamond McKitterick, Nelson characterizes laypersons as both readers and writers having their own integrity and purpose in the messages they hoped to project. Florian Hartmann's "*Quid nobis cum allegoria?* The Literal Reading of the Bible in the era of the Investiture Conflict" considers how the late eleventh-century controversy between the popes and the German king affected the Empire and how selective biblical citation and interpretation could be used to propagandistic, even violent, ends. Violence in relation to the reception and interpretation of biblical texts, and its relevance to the construction of political power, is likewise taken up in the volume's closing essay, Claire Weeda's "Violence, Control, Prophecy and Power in Twelfth-Century France and Germany."

In a recent review essay, “Feminism and Medieval Studies: Moving Forward,” published in *Exemplaria* 26 (2014), E. Jane Burns assesses the status of feminism as critical practice in relation to medieval studies. Noting that, as Monique Wittig observed in the 1970s, the goal of feminism was in effect to make itself obsolete, Burns observes that, for many academics, feminism’s goals were ostensibly reached and its centrality rendered obsolete due to its success in the 1980s and 1990s. Disagreeing with the assumption that feminism’s highly visible role in knowledge production during the ‘80s and ‘90s peak has rendered it obsolete, Burns aptly argues that feminism’s place in medieval studies has shifted and that it has moved outward “from the central locus it once occupied to inhabit a broader band of diverse sites that it has penetrated more deeply” (291). Certainly, the present volume cannot be reasonably characterized as feminist scholarship, nor as having overtly feminist contributions or aims. But it purposefully raises more questions than it seeks to answer, and, as a launching point for further consideration and development of feminist approaches to medieval scholarship related to religion and textuality in particular, the present volume is illustrative of such “diverse sites,” receptive to such approaches, and demonstrative of their potentialities. The present volume offers much to engage readers with interests in medieval history, religious studies, and textual dissemination and reception, which, while not overtly feminist in approach, constitutes insightful material of potential utility to feminist scholars in these fields.

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