

## The Bible in the Early Irish Church

# Commentaria

SACRED TEXTS AND THEIR COMMENTARIES:  
JEWISH, CHRISTIAN AND ISLAMIC

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# The Bible in the Early Irish Church

*A.D. 550 to 850*

*By*

Martin McNamara

*With assistance from*

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## Preface

Early medieval Ireland was traditionally referred to as “The Island of Saints and Scholars”, and renowned for its biblical learning. It was natural that in due time extant evidence would be sought for the texts used in the monastic schools and texts of a biblical nature produced by early Irish scholars. An early review of the evidence was made in 1922 by Montague Rhodes James, 1862–1936, the eminent medievalist with an incomparable knowledge of Latin manuscripts and apocryphal literature particularly of Britain and Ireland. He was forced to admit that the evidence at our disposal for any biblical writings by Irish writers was meagre. He remarked that “[t]he scanty list of their [the Irish] Latin writers between the end of the sixth and the beginning of the eighth—between Columba (d. 597) and Adomnán (d. 704)—includes besides penitentials, lives of saints, and hymns of no very marked excellence, several writings which are without rival for their time”.<sup>1</sup> Yet with regard to works relating to the Bible he listed only three: *De mirabilibus sacrae scripturae* (of the Irish Pseudo-Augustine, ca. 655); the “Interpretation of the Names of Christ’s Ancestors” of Aileran the Wise (seventh century); and, *De locis sanctis* of Adomnán (624–704), who presented a copy of this work to Aldfrith, King of Northumbria in 685.

In 1929 in his classic work on the sources for the early ecclesiastical history of Ireland, James Kenney summed up the evidence then available on the Bible in the early Irish monastic system as follows:

The chief subject of study in the monastic schools of early Christian Ireland was the Bible. With the exception of such instruction as was of practical necessity for carrying on the services of the Church, all other studies, including that of the Fathers of the Church, were ancillary to the reading, comprehension, and exposition of the Scriptures. The predominance thereof is witnessed to by the whole literary remains of the early Irish Church. The monastic traditions as set down by a later age in almost innumerable Lives of Saints tell the same story: the important element in an ecclesiastic’s education was the reading of the Scriptures, and—it may be remarked—in especial the reading of the Psalms. Nor, even if other evidence were lacking, could it be said that these represented the ideas of

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<sup>1</sup> Montague Rhodes James, “Learning and literature till the death of Bede,” *The Cambridge Medieval History*, Vol. 3, ed. Henry Melville Gwatkin (Cambridge, Eng., 1922), p. 506.

the twelfth century reflected onto the seventh: the seventh-century texts offer identical testimony.<sup>2</sup>

In the *scriptorium* as well as in the master's cell the Bible was pre-eminent. Copies of the Gospels, of the Psalms, and of the other books of Holy Writ were the most numerous products of scribal activity. On them were lavished the treasures of the illuminator's art. Of the output during four centuries of some hundreds of monastic *scriptoria* only a scanty remnant of codices and fragments of codices survive today, and of these the majority are scriptural texts. This result has been due in part to the reverence in which these texts were held, giving them a better chance of preservation, but there can be little doubt that it also represents real preponderance in numbers in the original production.<sup>3</sup> Kenney was able to add a few more Irish works, from the seventh century, to those of James' list: the *Kanon Evangeliorum* of Aileran, Laidcend's abbreviation of the commentary of Gregory on Job, a commentary on the Catholic Epistles, and a Turin fragment of a commentary on Mark's Gospel.<sup>4</sup>

A few years on Professor Bernhard Bischoff's known interest in Latin manuscripts had him cooperate from 1933 onwards with E.A. Lowe on the project *Codices Latini Antiquiores: A Paleographical Guide to Latin Manuscripts Prior to the Ninth Century* (CLA). With various supplements, the CLA comprise 18,884 codices or scrolls, and more than 2,000 works, including a great number of fragments. Bischoff was responsible for many of the descriptions. Several of the manuscripts would be of well-known compositions, with multiple copies. However, Bischoff noted that one small group of manuscripts stood apart from the great mass. He noticed that several from that small group, while for the greater part extant in only a single copy, were united with one another in good part by certain features. He would present what he believed was a far richer corpus of biblical works for the period 650–800, thirty-nine in total of Irish origin or Irish-affiliated, in a seminal essay in 1954 titled "Wendepunkte in der Geschichte der lateinischen Exegese im Frühmittelalter",<sup>5</sup> and in revised form in his collected

2 James F. Kenney, *The Sources for the Early History of Ireland: Ecclesiastical* (1929; reprint, New York, 1969), p. 624.

3 Kenney, *Sources*, p. 624; cf. also Louis Gougaud, *Christianity in Celtic Lands. A History of the Churches of the Celts, their origin, their development and mutual relations*, trans. Maud Joynt (1932; reprint, Dublin, 1992), pp. 256–257; John Ryan, *Irish Monasticism. Origins and Early Developments* (Dublin, 1931), pp. 379–380.

4 Kenney, *Sources*.

5 Bernhard Bischoff, "Turning-Points in the History of Latin Exegesis in the Early Middle Ages," in *Biblical Studies: The Medieval Irish Contribution*, ed. Martin McNamara, Proceedings of the Irish Biblical Association 1, trans. Fr. Colm O'Grady (Dublin, 1976), pp. 74–160. Original



essays in 1966. He traced the history of Irish biblical interpretation from the seventh-century glosses on the Latin New Testament Codex *Usserianus Primus* (Trinity College Dublin 55) onwards. In his introduction to these he treated of Irish exegetical methods as well as common characteristics among them, which he designated as “irische Symptome” (‘Irish symptoms’).<sup>6</sup>

Bischoff’s new essay influenced writers such as his student Robert E. McNally,<sup>7</sup> Joseph Kelly<sup>8</sup> (a student of McNally) and others. It was systematically challenged in 1967 in a lengthy article by Edmondo Coccia,<sup>9</sup> by Clare Stancliffe in 1975,<sup>10</sup> but especially in two influential essays by Michael Gorman in 1997 and 2000.<sup>11</sup> It was more recently challenged (2016) by Mark Stansbury in a section of his chapter “Irish Biblical Exegesis” in the volume *The Irish in Early Medieval Europe: Identity, Culture and Religion*.<sup>12</sup> There also have been defenses of Bischoff’s position, mainly against Gorman’s critique;<sup>13</sup> for instance, Gabriel

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German: “Wendepunkte in der Geschichte der lateinischen Exegese im Frühmittelalter,” *Sacris Erudiri* 6 (1954), 190–281. All citations to Bischoff’s seminal work will be to the English translation by O’Grady, “Turning-Points”. Scholars often still refer to it as simply “Wendepunkte”, and when necessary, it will be abbreviated as WP in this work.

- 6 See the “Introduction” for more detailed discussion of Bischoff’s argument, as well as those who have argued against him.
- 7 For example see: Robert E. McNally, *The Bible in the Early Middle Ages* (Westminster, MD, 1959); *Scriptores Hiberniae Minores Pars 1*, ed. Robert E. McNally, CCL 108 B (Turnhout: Brepols, 1973): “Commentarius in Epistolas Catholicas Scotti Anonymi”, 1–50; “Tractatus Hilarii in Septem Epistolas Canonicas”, 51–124.
- 8 For example see: Joseph F. Kelly, “The Originality of Josephus Scottus’ Commentary on Isaiah”, *Manuscripta* 24 (1980), 176–180; and, “A Catalogue of Early Medieval Hiberno-Latin Biblical Commentaries (1)”, *Traditio* 44 (1988), 537–571; “(11)”, *Traditio*, 45 (1989), 393–434.
- 9 Edmondo Coccia, “La cultura irlandese precarolingia: miracolo o mito?” *Studi Medievali*, 3rd series, 8 (1967), 257–420.
- 10 Clare Stancliffe, “Early Irish biblical exegesis”, in *Studia Patristica xii. Papers presented to the Sixth International Conference on Patristic Studies held in Oxford, 1971. Part 1: Inaugural lecture, editiones, critica, biblica, historica, theologica, philosophica, liturgica*, ed. Elizabeth A. Livingstone, *Texte und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der altchristlichen Literatur* 115 (Berlin, 1975), 361–370.
- 11 Michael Gorman, “A Critique of Bischoff’s Theory of Irish Exegesis: The Commentary on Genesis in Munich Clm 6302 (Wendepunkte 2)”, *The Journal of Medieval Latin*, 7 (1996), 178–233; and, “The Myth of Hiberno-Latin Exegesis,” *Revue Bénédictine*, 110 (2000), 42–85.
- 12 Mark Stansbury, “Irish Biblical Exegesis,” in *The Irish in Early Medieval Europe: Identity, Culture and Religion*, eds. Roy Flechner and Sven Meeder (Palgrave, 2016), 116–130.
- 13 Roger Gryson notes Gorman’s position, but without desiring to enter into the debate favours Bischoff’s view of Irish origin or relations of the commentary *Commentarius* (*Commemoratorium*) on the Apocalypse (“Turning-Points”, p. 143, WP 37), related to the Cambridge commentary (Cambridge University Dd. X. 16). In fact, he takes all three commentaries on the Apocalypse (*De enigmatibus*, Cambridge text, and one by Theodulf of Orleans) as based on one composed in Ireland in the early eighth century. See Gryson’s

Silagi in 1998,<sup>14</sup> followed by others including Dáibhí Ó Cróinín<sup>15</sup> and Charles D. Wright<sup>16</sup> both in 2000.<sup>17</sup>

I believe that in the critique of Bischoff's essay, too much attention has been devoted to externals such as some of his criteria ('Irish symptoms', etc.) and not sufficient attention to a fuller study of the texts themselves. Thus this work focuses on examining those texts, the extant biblical and exegetical manuscripts (complete and fragmentary) that are accepted by scholars, to a greater extent, as Irish or Irish-affiliated. We examine some of the work already done but moreso concentrates on matters and texts yet to be studied in greater detail, not only for this period but even beginning a century earlier than Bischoff at 550 A.D. This is important work in an effort to ascertain as much information as possible on the activity regarding biblical scholarship during the period, on the writings available to early medieval Irish scholars and *peregrini*, and on their pursuits on textual and exegetical activity and such like. As part of this approach this study will present each text utilizing not only the defenders but also the challengers of Bischoff's work to assist future work, to show a path toward expanding our understanding of the History of the Bible in Ireland from 550–850 A.D., and in expanding the corpus of Irish origin or Irish-affiliated works.

In the course of these chapters I remark that a particular work is Irish or Irish-affiliated. What I mean by 'Irish' is a known Irish author or from Irish tradition, whether in Latin or the vernacular, such as Aileran the Wise or the Poems written by Blathmac. By 'Irish-affiliated' I mean texts that cannot clearly be shown to be of Irish origin but strongly have certain features found in Irish-origin texts, and potentially by authors not Irish but obviously Irish-trained. A good example of this is the relationship of Northumbria and Ireland in this earlier period. Christianity was taken from the Irish community of Iona, Scotland, to Northumbria by Aidan in 635. Colman, the Irish monk, and a number of Anglo-Saxon monks retired to Iona and in 668 to the island of Inisboffin off the Co. Mayo coast (west coast of Ireland). The Anglo-Saxon monks later withdrew

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*Variorum auctorum commentaria minora in Apocalypsin Johannis*, CCL 107 (Turnhout, 2003), pp. 181–182; see also Chapter Twelve of this work.

14 Gabriel Silagi, "Notwendige Bermerkungen zu Gormans 'Critique of Bischoff's theory of Irish exegesis,'" *Peritia*, 12 (1998), 87–94.

15 Dáibhí Ó Cróinín, "Bischoff's 'Wendepunkte' Fifty Years On," *Revue Bénédictine* 110 (2000), 204–237.

16 Charles D. Wright, "Bischoff's Theory of Irish Exegesis and the Genesis Commentary in Munich clm 6302: A Critique of a Critique," *The Journal of Medieval Latin* 10 (2000), 115–175.

17 For more on this discussion, see the Introduction.

to the mainland and made a foundation known as Muigheo na Sacsan, Mayo of the Saxons, which maintained contact with Lindisfarne/Northumbria and York until the ninth century and later. Contact between Ireland and Northumbria was so great during this period that, as we shall see below, some biblical texts and glosses, although written in Northumbria, are regarded as Irish-affiliated and thus belonging to the Irish tradition.

At what point then is a text no longer considered even Irish-affiliated? A good example of this is the *Italian Homiliary*.<sup>18</sup> This is a collection of sermons composed probably in southern France ca. 798–820<sup>19</sup> (thus near this book's chronological endpoint of 850). It contains Hiberno-Latin influences in that it uses some Irish and Irish-affiliated sources,<sup>20</sup> and it demonstrates some of Bischoff's Irish criteria and symptoms (see Introduction for more on those) with great regularity. However, the collection is a Carolingian product that uses the new Carolingian reform measures and models for sermon production developing at the time.<sup>21</sup> And as Bischoff argued early in "Wendepunkte" the Carolingian period is the start of a new (as it were) 'turning' point different from the Irish one of the previous 150 years.<sup>22</sup>

Both of these terms 'Irish' and 'Irish-affiliated' are inclusive of the idea of the 'Irish tradition'. In these chapters the phrase 'Irish tradition' appears a number of times. By this I mean views and explanations found specifically in Irish Latin prose and verse texts, in Irish Latin biblical texts and Irish vernacular texts. Since this is an all-encompassing term, specific examples will be demonstrated and explained throughout the chapters.<sup>23</sup>

18 See Michael T. Martin, "The Italian Homiliary: Text and Contexts" (Ph.D. diss., Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo, MI, 2005); and, "The Italian Homiliary: An example *pro omnibus bonis operibus* produced according to the 'new' Carolingian homiletic genre and reform measures," *Sacris Erudiri* 49 (2010), 261–338.

19 Martin, *Italian Homiliary: Text and Contexts*, pp. 531–535; "The Italian Homiliary: An example", p. 284.

20 For example: (pseudo-)Jerome, "Expositio Quatuor Evangeliorum," in *S. Eusebii Hieronymi Opera Omnia*, Vol. 11, PL 30 (Paris, 1846), cols. 531–590 [WP 11A]; and, the Hiberno-Latin *Commentarium in Lucam*, see Joseph F. Kelly, "Commentarius in Lucam Scotti Anonymi: A Critical Edition and Analysis of Cod. Vind. Lat. 997, fols 1r–66v (saec. VIII–IX)" (Ph.D. diss., Fordham University, 1973). <https://research.library.fordham.edu/dissertations/AA17316021> Last accessed November 20, 2021 [WP 30].

21 Martin, *The Italian Homiliary: Text and Contexts*, pp. 60–74. See also Thomas L. Amos, *The Form and Nature of the Carolingian Sermon* (Ph.D. diss. Michigan State University, 1983); Henri Barré, *Les Homéliaires carolingiens de l'École d'Auxerre. Authenticité, inventaire tableaux comparatifs, initia*, Studi e testi 225 (Città del Vaticano, 1962).

22 Bischoff, "Turning-Points," p. 74.

23 A good example of what I mean by Irish tradition would be an example that Wright gives:

In recent studies I have examined various aspects of the Bible and the Apocrypha in the early Irish Church,<sup>24</sup> and the Bible mainly in relation to the period covered by the works believed by Bischoff to have been composed by Irish scholars or out of an Irish-affiliated tradition, that is 650–800 A.D.<sup>25</sup> My studies, as those of others, led me to the conviction of the validity of Bischoff's conclusions. With this current study, by continuing to build on Bischoff's and others' work on these Irish texts (and new ones encountered since then), we hope to help guide future scholars and their work in this important field.

Thus this work does present some of the work already done but more so concentrates on matters yet to be studied in greater detail, not only for this period but even beginning a century earlier than Bischoff at 550 A.D., in an effort to ascertain as much information as possible on the activity regarding biblical scholarship during the period, on the writings available to scholars, on their pursuits on textual and exegetical activity and such like. As part of this approach this study will present each text utilizing not only the defenders but also the challengers of Bischoff's work to assist future work, to show them a path toward expanding our understanding of the History of the Bible in Ireland from 550–850 A.D., and in expanding the corpus of Irish origin or Irish-affiliated works.

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"That *actualis*—*theorica* rather than *actiua*—*contemplatiua* was the standard Irish formulation is confirmed by the Irish loanwords *achtàil* and *tèoir*, which appear antithetically in a number of vernacular texts ... The opposition *actualis*—*theorica*, while ultimately patristic in origin, is used with distinctive frequency in "Wendepunkte" commentaries, while the vernacular evidence ... demonstrates that this was indeed the formulation preferred by Irish scholars." Wright, "Bischoff's Theory of Irish Exegesis," p. 165.

24 Martin McNamara, ed., *The Bible and the Apocrypha in the Early Irish Church (A.D. 600–1200)*. *Collected Essays*, Instrumenta patristica et mediaevalia 66 (Turnhout, 2015).

25 The term 'Hiberno-Latin' is also often used by Bischoff throughout his essay. As Wright remarks: "In many cases Bischoff did not attempt to distinguish sharply between 'Hiberno-Latin' and 'Irish-influenced'; furthermore, the term 'Hiberno-Latin' does not necessarily mean that a work was composed in Ireland. Indeed, Bischoff believed that certain of these commentaries were likely compiled on the Continent, whether by Irish *peregrini* or under Irish influence." Wright, "Bischoff's Theory of Irish Exegesis," p. 117. As Joseph Kelly has suggested, "As the name suggests, it deals with the exegesis of the Bible by Irishmen writing in Latin." In Kelly, "Catalogue (1)," p. 537.

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# Abbreviations

CCCM	Corpus Christianorum Continuatio Mediaevalis
CCSA	Corpus Christianorum Series Apocryphorum
CCSL	Corpus Christianorum Series Latina
CLA	Codices Latini Antiquiores
CLH	Clavis Litterarum Hibernensium
CLM	Codices latini monacenses
CPL	Clavis Patrum Latinorum
CSEL	Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum
eDIL	Electronic Dictionary of the Irish Language (Old Irish)
JSOT	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament
MGH	Monumenta Germaniae Historica
MGH SRG	Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Scriptores rerum Germanicarum
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version (Bible)
PL	Patrologia Latina
PLS	Patrologia Latina Supplementum
RSV	Revised Standard Version (Bible)
SC	Sources Chrétiennes
TCD	Trinity College Dublin
TEAMS	Teaching Association for Medieval Studies
WP	“Wendepunkte”