Chapter 4

The Role of Imagination as the Soul Prepares for Contemplation

We often use such an imagination when we more diligently examine what the goods and the evils of the future life are. For no things here in this world are good only; no things here are evil only; good and evil are mixed together.1

4.1 Introduction to Benjamin Minor

In this chapter, I will concentrate on Richard of St. Victor’s ideas on imagination (imaginatio) in Benjamin Minor, in which he analyses the relation between imagination and reason, and points out at least three different forms of the activity of the imagination. In this connection, Richard considers the soul’s ability to imagine future events with the co-operation of imagination and reason. He also describes how the imagination can serve as a useful instrument for interpreting the Bible. At the end of the chapter, I will illustrate how Richard aims to adapt the co-operation between reason and imagination to the spiritual life.

I begin my study by exploring the themes of Benjamin Minor at a general level. Benjamin Minor consists of 87 chapters which deal with both spiritual and psychological issues. The basic objective is to produce an idea of the soul and its operation which would be as useful as possible for the contemplative life, guiding the students of St. Victor’s school in their spiritual exercise and self-reflection.2 In his spiritual psychology, Richard describes how the soul is on a journey from the material and visible world towards the invisible God and divine reality. This idea constitutes a particular scheme of discipline through which students may pass in pursuing contemplation. As Grover Zinn states, the works of Richard are thoroughly practical in their intent.3 Even though my study focuses on Richard’s use of concepts which derive from traditional theories of the soul, this practical dimension and close relationship to the

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2 BMIN I, p. 90–92; BMIN III, p. 94.21–22.

3 Zinn 1979, 7.
monastic life should not be forgotten. Although his text is not philosophical in character, the movements and emotions of the soul as well as its instruments and actions are analysed in detail. The vocabulary covers many concepts and ideas which are closely connected to the philosophical topics of the time.

Richard wrote *Benjamin Minor* for a particular audience, the members of the school and monastery of St. Victor. Thus *Benjamin Minor* had its own restricted communal purpose and communal life is evident in the text. According to Châtillon, a few passages in Richard’s production even echo his own ambition to guide his own community to a more balanced way of life. However, in general it is difficult to find any exact details about the life of St. Victor or its rule—the text is more like the universal analysis of an individual soul and its inner experiences.

In *Benjamin Minor*, Richard offers a tropological interpretation of the biblical history of Jacob and his family. According to the well-known narrative in Genesis, Jacob had two wives, the wonderful, young and tender Rachel, and the laborious Leah. Jacob’s falling in love with Rachel leads him to work for Rachel’s father, Laban, for seven years. After these years of labour, Jacob marries, but after the wedding unexpectedly realizes that he has been deceived and he has in fact been married to Rachel’s sister Leah. With the power of burning love, Jacob endures another seven years in the employment of Laban until he eventually makes Rachel his own. In addition to Rachel and Leah, Jacob also has two concubines, Rachel’s and Leah’s handmaids. Rachel chooses Bala to be her handmaid, while Leah prefers Zelpha. Jacob fathers twelve sons altogether by his two wives and their two handmaids. These twelve sons are the origin of Israel’s twelve tribes. Furthermore, Jacob begets one daughter, Dina, by Leah. Rachel suffers from infertility and only after a long time of waiting does she give birth to her own two children, Joseph and finally Benjamin, after whose birth Rachel dies.

Because the basic structure of *Benjamin Minor* is adopted from this legend of Jacob and his wives, it is essential to get a general overview of his analysis of the story in order to understand Richard’s concept of imagination (*imagination*). According to Richard, each member of Jacob’s family represents a particular affect or faculty of the soul, or even a combination of the soul’s faculties. As Richard follows the growth of the family and the fates of its members in

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4 *BMIN* XI, p. 210–211; *BMIN* XLVI, p. 224; *BMIN* LVII, p. 226–227; *BMAJ* II, p. 23–24; *BMAJ* II, XV, p. 37–38. See also *Mysticae adnotationes in Psalmos*, pl. 196, 354B. For the interpretations of these texts, see Châtillon 1988, 597.

5 Gen. 29–30. 34–35. 49. For the significant interpretative role of Psalms in Benjamin Minor, see Zinn 2010, 88–94.