CHAPTER 4

Mendicant School Exegesis

Introduction

The two largest mendicant orders – the Friars Preachers (Dominicans) and the Friars Minor (Franciscans) – had very different beginnings. The Dominicans started out as a taskforce of well-trained preachers and priests eager to counter the influence of dualist heresies in Southern France and Spain. They adopted a life of austerity modeled on the biblical message in order to be successful in their struggle against ascetic Cathar spokesmen. Solid biblical learning was a cornerstone of the Dominican identity from the outset.1

The Franciscans, on the other hand, began as a body of lay people identifying with the message of the poor and suffering Christ presented in the Gospel. Their initial submersion in the biblical message on the one hand had a socially activist character, and on the other hand took over strong meditative elements from earlier eremitical communities. Counter to the Dominicans, who adopted the rule of Augustine (which gave them the flexibility to be teachers, students and itinerant preachers), the Franciscans wove their early rule to a great extent from biblical citations, thus emulating the Gospel message in their regulations.2

Despite these differences, the Dominicans and the Franciscans soon became papally approved international orders of preachers, confessors, missionaries and inquisitors. They adopted both a framework of communal religious life

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1 This is a an updated version of an article that appeared with the same title in The Practice of the Bible in the Middle Ages: Production, Reception, and Performance in Western Christianity, ed. Susan Boynton & Diane J. Reilly (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 179–204. Copyright © 2011 Columbia University Press. Reprinted with revisions with permission of the publisher. I would like to express my gratitude to dr Frans A. van Liere and dr Susan Boynton for their insightful comments and editorial remarks on earlier drafts of this chapter.

modeled on older monastic and canonical models and a regulated system of theological education that led to the creation of a hierarchical school network with local, custodial, provincial and general studia. The mendicants' educational system also brought the friars to the principal centers of theological learning, namely the theology faculties of the universities of Paris, Oxford, Cambridge and elsewhere.3

As novices, professed friars and priests, Dominicans and Franciscans encountered the biblical text every day in the liturgy and in their obligatory moments of private meditation. The conflict between the ambulant life of many friars and their liturgical and meditative obligations gave rise to the production in large numbers of concise 'pocket' bibles and breviaries, ideally one for each clerical friar in the order, leading to yet another change in the format of the biblical text. Beyond these liturgical and meditative settings, the Bible was central to the friars' preaching effort as well as to their confrontations with heretics and 'infidels' (in Muslim territory). Many surviving mendicant sermon collections therefore have strong exegetical and catechetical characteristics, a phenomenon that presupposed a thorough emphasis on biblical study in the mendicant schools from the outset.4 No wonder that the mendicants adopted and perfected in their schools the programs of biblical teachings developed by the twelfth- and early thirteenth-century theology masters of the University of Paris.5

After the departure of the theology master Stephen Langton, who in 1206 became Archbishop of Canterbury, academic exegesis at Paris lost some of its earlier drive. Thanks to the labors of the Victorines, Peter the Chanter, Peter Comestor, Stephen Langton and others, early thirteenth-century secular masters had access to a decent number of recent biblical commentaries, on top of the Glossa Ordinaria and additional instruments to facilitate academic biblical teaching (basic cursory lectures provided by the baccalaureus biblicus – in fact an adult ‘teaching assistant’ of the ruling master – and in-depth biblical lectures by the master himself). It was tempting to divert scholarly attention to discussions fueled by the influx of new philosophical ideas, following the

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3 See M. Michèle Mulchahey. ‘First the Bow is Bent in Study…’: Dominican Education before 1350 (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1998); Bert Roest, A History of Franciscan Education (c. 1210–1517) (Leiden: Brill, 2000).