Living in the Penultimate Age: Apocalyptic Thought in James of Vitry’s ad status Sermons

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James of Vitry – the Paris-trained preacher, bishop of Acre, and participant in the Fifth Crusade – interpreted his age as edging ever closer to the final one. James authored numerous works, including two histories, a large collection of sermons, letters and a vita of Mary of Oignies. Through these works, especially his histories and sermons, James sought to explain how certain prophecies had been fulfilled by past successes and failures, giving credence to future plans, and encouraging present action. One of his sermon collections – which is organized according to the sermons’ intended audience, such as widows, lepers, clerics and crusaders (entitled Sermones vulgares or ad status sermons), offers different eschatological messages to each audience.1 This investigation examines James’s application of apocalyptic imagery to these diverse social groups, each of which he envisioned as having a particular role to play in an end-times narrative. It surveys four of James’s works – the Historia Occidentalis, the Historia Orientales, his letter collection, and selections of the ad status sermons – to examine his use of passages from Daniel 7–12, Matthew 24 and Revelation.2 Each of these selections includes apocalyptic visions marked by persecution of the faithful and characterized by the central role of the Temple. For example, Matthew 24:15 predicts the destruction of the Temple, citing Daniel’s prophecy (9:27) of the appearance of the abomination of desolation. In Revelation, John’s visions take place in the heavenly Temple, presenting a different vantage point of the end times. Taken together, these passages serve to validate Old Testament prophecies, thereby also bolstering the visions yet to come.

1 Jean Longère, Oeuvres Oratoires de Maîtres Parisiens au XIIe Siècle: étude historique et doctrinale (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1975), 31–33.
James applied these biblical passages in different ways when addressing different audiences, thus offering an avenue to compare how apocalyptic passages specifically pertained to a range of social groups, including crusaders. As will be shown, James's commitment to eschatology and prophecy enabled him simultaneously to condemn those whose moral failures made them agents of the Antichrist and to affirm that all people – including women – did in fact have important parts to play in God's wider plan. He emphasized the influence that all people had on the movements most crucial for defining spiritual life in the thirteenth century, namely reform and crusade. James supported pious laywomen while serving as a prior in the Diocese of Liège (1210). He preached against the Albigensians in France (1211–13), and participated at the siege of Damietta (1218–20). James's own experiences offered a unique vantage point of these movements, and consequently his sermons reflect a vision in which reform and crusade are woven together in the tapestry of eschatological time.3

After resigning his see at Acre, James began composing a large collection of model sermons. During this time, he was working for the bishop of Liège, Hugh of Pierrepont (1226–29) and serving as the cardinal bishop of Tusculum (1229–40).4 These sermons largely combine eschatology with soteriology in order to incite his audience to action.5 The directives of the Fourth Lateran Council had promoted evangelization of the laity to combat heresy, emphasizing the importance of preaching to a wider range of audiences. Eschatological preaching, therefore, became more important as preachers sought to communicate to all types of men “the religious message contained in Revelation”.6 In alignment with these trends, James crafted a new method of exhortation. This is evidenced by his greater use of exempla, his crafting of sermons targeted at

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3 Jessalyn Bird’s insightful article in this volume examines the influence of biblical exegesis on preachers and participants of the Fifth Crusade, and Jan Vandebruijne’s contribution discusses at length the eschatological context of James of Vitry’s Historia Orientalis. Taken together, the rising eschatological urgency seen in the promotion and accounts of the Fifth Crusade is underscored.

4 Longère, Sermones Vulgares, xxiv; Hinnebusch, Historia Occidentalis, 7.

5 Mark A. Zier, “Sermons of the Twelfth Century Schoolmasters and Canons”, in The Sermon, ed. Beverly Mayne Kienzle (Turnhout: Brepols, 2000), 325–51. The medieval sermon serves as “religious discourse, it has moral purpose, often seeking to rebuke, or to move to repentance, penance, or reform. Ultimately its purpose is eschatological and soteriological, for it is concerned with the end of time and the listeners’ salvation”, Beverly Mayne Kienzle, “Introduction”, in Sermon, 155.