Medieval Christian Interpretation of the Book of Jeremiah

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As medieval Christian commentators on the book of Jeremiah examined the scriptural text, looking for lessons to apply to their own context, they discovered messages of judgment against sin, and words of encouragement and hope in the midst of suffering. Cognizant that the book of Jeremiah was written to the Judean people facing the destruction of Jerusalem and eventual exile, they also believed that the book contained messages directed specifically to the Christian church and its adherents.

Christian worship gatherings regularly included readings from the book of Jeremiah. In sixth- and seventh-century Rome, the *Ordines Romani* (*Roman Liturgical Instructions*) directed worship leaders to have readings from Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Daniel read from the weeks before Christmas (December 25) through Epiphany (January 6). It is not clear whether the instructions refer to reading the entirety of the books or simply selections from each. By the twelfth century, the selections were shortened.1 Vernacular homilies on Jeremiah shared stories of the life of the prophet with worshippers unable to access or understand the Latin text. For instance, a late-twelfth-century Old English sermon told listeners the story of Jeremiah lowered into the cistern, buried in mire up to his mouth (Jer 38:6–13), comparing the pit to the depth of sin, filled with the mire of “adultery and gluttony, and perjury and pride, and other foul sins.”2 The cloths sent from the king’s house to cushion Jeremiah’s armpits (while the harsh ropes tied around him raised the prophet from the pit) represented the prayers of the church buffering the harshness of confession and penance (represented by the ropes).3 Indeed, as this essay will show, the

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3 *Hic dicendum est de propheta*, 46.
medieval Christian interpretive tradition drew a wide variety of lessons from the book of Jeremiah – many of which could never have been imagined by the sixth century BCE prophet.

1 The Book of Jeremiah and the Medieval Commentary Tradition

Relatively few medieval Christian authors composed commentaries on the book of Jeremiah, especially when compared to more widely read books such as Genesis, the New Testament gospels, and the letters of Paul, or brief books such as Lamentations. The reason for the paucity of Jeremiah commentaries may have been the difficulty of the subject matter, the scarcity of patristic source material on Jeremiah for the medieval authors to draw upon, and the length of the book itself. Writing in the early 400s, the scholarly monk Jerome (ca. 345–420) exclaimed in his Commentary on Jeremiah: “The immense length of the book itself can deter readers. How much more if we discuss the book too extensively.”

Only nine medieval Christian commentaries on Jeremiah, which will be discussed below, can be found in printed editions; however, as is the case with medieval commentaries on other biblical books, more commentaries on Jeremiah doubtless “sit in libraries and archives, and still await their first edition.” Medieval commentaries on Jeremiah have their origins in three settings: the monastery, the university, and the study houses of the mendicant orders, particularly the Order of Preachers (Dominicans). A number of the commentaries in circulation were originally lectures given in university classrooms and mendicant houses of study.

It was customary for medieval interpreters to draw upon sources from the early church. Extant interpretive Christian writings from late antiquity include fragments from works by Cyril of Alexandria (d. 444) and Ephrem the Syrian (ca. 306–373), or Pseudo-Ephrem; thirty-four sermons by Origen of Alexandria.

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6 Van Liere, Introduction to the Medieval Bible, 173. For instance, the Jeremiah commentary of William of Luxi, a thirteenth-century Dominican commentator also known as William of Alton, is found in several manuscripts and is not yet in a printed or critical edition, though there is a critical edition of the prologue in William of Luxi, Opera, ed. Andrew T. Sulavik, CCCM 219 (Turnhout: Brepolis, 2005), 131–32.