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Thirteenth-Century Visionaries Engaging Scripture via the Liturgy: Mechthild of Hackeborn, Gertrude of Helfta, and Angela of Foligno

One Holy Saturday, most likely in the year 1294, Angela of Foligno (ca. 1248-1309), a member of the Franciscan Third Order, experienced a vision in which she found herself in the tomb of Christ. Her account of the event, dictated to her kinsman, a Franciscan priest known only by his first initial «A», describes a sort of holy necrophilia:

On Holy Saturday, after what was written above, Christ's faithful one told me about the wondrous joys that she had received from God. Among other things, she told me, brother scribe, that on that very day, while in ecstasy, she had been together with Christ in the tomb. She said that first she kissed Christ's breast and she saw him lying with eyes closed, as though he were dead. Then she kissed his mouth. She said that she smelled a wondrous and indescribable scent which exuded from his mouth – but this lasted only a little while. Then she said that she put her cheek on Christ's cheek, and Christ put his hand on her other cheek and pressed her to himself. Then Christ's faithful one heard these words spoken to her: «Before I was laid in the tomb, I held you this closely to me.» Although she understood that Christ had spoken these words to her, she nevertheless saw Christ lying with eyes closed, not moving his lips, just as when he lay dead in the tomb. And her joy was indescribable.¹

The imagery in this visionary account resonates with verses from the Song of Songs: «Let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth» (1:1); «His left hand is

1 Angela of Foligno: *Memoriale* 7.93-107, ed. E. Menestò, Spoleto 2013, 66: «On die sabbati sancti post supradicta, illa fidelis Christi retulit michi admirabiles letitias quas habuerat de Deo. Et inter alia retulit michi fratri scriptori quod ipso die ipsa Christi fidelis, facta in excess mentis, stetit in sepulcro simul cum Christo. Et dixit quod obsculata fuit primo pectus Christi, et videbat eum iacentem oculis clausis sicut iacuit mortuus, et postea obsculata est os eius; ex quo ore dicebat quod admirabilem et inenarrabiliter delectabilem odorem acceperat, qui respirabat ex eius ore; et hic dixit quod fuit parva mora. Et postea dixit quod posuit maxillam et strinxit eam ad se, et ista fidelis Christi audivit sibi dici ista verba: «Antequam iacerem in sepulcro tenui te ita astrictam». Et quamvis ipsa intelligeret quod Christus diceret predicta verba, tamen videbat Christum iacentem cum oculis clausis et non moventem labia, sicut quando iacuit mortuus in sepulcro. Et ipsa erat in letitia maxima inenarrabiliter.» Subsequent references to the *Memoriale* will employ chapter and line numbers from Menestò's critical edition.

under my head, and his right hand will embrace me» (2:6); and «His lips are like lilies distilling fine myrrh» (5:13).² The scene also appears to draw upon artistic images of the Virgin Mary embracing Christ as he was removed from the cross and placed in the tomb. In typical thirteenth-century Umbrian paintings of Christ's deposition into the tomb, Mary holds her dead son, placing her left cheek on his right cheek, embracing him with her right hand. In some paintings from this period, the Virgin Mary stretches her own torso across Christ's supine body, virtually crawling into the tomb with him as she offers her son a final embrace.³ Elements of the Holy Saturday liturgy encouraged the worshiper to reflect upon Christ's repose in the sepulcher.⁴ Angela takes it a step farther than this, imagining her very body spending Holy Saturday in the tomb together with Christ.

In a Saxon convent thirteen hundred kilometers to the north, also on a Holy Saturday in the 1290s, the Benedictine nun Mechthild of Hackeborn (1241-1298) likewise contemplated Christ's burial in the tomb. In the case of Mechthild, a highly educated cantor and liturgical director for her religious community, the Holy Saturday contemplation included a theological lesson about Christ's divine and human natures, as well as Trinitarian participation in the resurrection:

On the holy night of our Lord Jesus Christ's joyous resurrection, Christ's handmaid saw him, reposing in the tomb, as it were. Divinely illumined, she understood how God the Father gave all his divine power to Christ's humanity at his resurrection, just as the Son of God received all the glorification that he had been given by the Father from eternity; and the Holy Spirit poured all his own sweetness, goodness, and love into his glorified humanity.⁵

2 All scripture quotations are the author's translations from the Vulgate. Chapter and verse enumeration will follow the Vulgate numbering.

3 M.C. Nari: La contemplazione e le immagini: il ruolo dell'iconografia nel pensiero della beata Angela da Foligno, in: E. Menestò (ed.): *Angela da Foligno, terziaria francescana: Atti del Convegno storico nel VII centenario dell'ingresso della beata Angela da Foligno nell'Ordine Franciscano Secolare (1291-1991)*, Spoleto 1992, 247-248.

4 For instance, one of the antiphons sung at matins on Holy Saturday emphasized Christ's repose: «In peace, in that very peace, I will sleep, and I will rest» (Ps 4:9). See S.J.P. van Dijk and J. Hazelden Walker: *The Ordinal of the Papal Court from Innocent III to Boniface VIII and Related Documents (Spicilegium Friburgense 22)*, Fribourg 1975, 260.

5 Mechthild of Hackeborn: *Liber Specialis Gratiae* 1.19, in: L. Paquelin and the monks of Solesmes (eds.): *Revelationes Gertrudianae ac Mechthildianae*, vol. 2, Poitiers and Paris 1877, 60: «In sancta nocte laetabundae Resurrectionis Domini nostri Jesu Christi, haec ancilla Christi

Mechthild's Holy Saturday contemplation included a visit to the tomb to anoint Jesus with ointment, understood metaphorically in terms of devotional virtue that the nun should cultivate. Like Angela, Mechthild invoked language from the Song of Songs, described mystical fragrances, and imagined herself kissing Jesus while he was in the tomb; however, differing from the Franciscan tertiary, the nun had a stronger sense of the didactic and symbolic nature of her visualization. Her metaphorical visit to Christ's tomb also evoked the image of the women bringing spices to the tomb in order to anoint his body (Mark 16:1, Luke 24:1) or perhaps Joseph of Arimathea's lavish offering of fragrant ointment at Christ's burial (John 19:39-40).

Again, as she was visiting the tomb, this virgin dedicated to God said to the Lord with a burning heart: «Ah, my beloved, chosen out of thousands (Song 5:10), teach me what ointment I should use to anoint you, lover of my soul.» The Lord said to her: «Take this indescribable sweetness that has eternally flowed from my divine heart into the Father and the Holy Spirit. From this, ferment wine for yourself. Second, take this sweetness which made the virginal heart of my Mother sweeter than all other hearts. From this, make the sweetest honey for yourself. Third, take the devotion that caused me to have very fervent longing, devotion, and burning love before the passion. From this, prepare the finest balsam for yourself.» Suddenly she saw herself holding a pyx filled with ointment which gave off a wondrous fragrance. With this she anointed the Lord according to her heart's desire, and she kissed his rosy wounds, her soul's true medicine.⁶

vidit ipsum, quasi in sepulcro resideret, et agnovit divinitus illustrata, qualiter Deus Pater totam suam divinam potentiam humanitati Christi in eius resurrectione dedisset, Filiique Dei persona omnem suam clarificationem quam ab aeterno a Patre habuit, Spiritusque Sanctus omnem suam dulcedinem, bonitatem et amorem plene infudit eius glorificatae humanitate.» Subsequent citations to the *Liber Specialis Gratiae* will employ the book and chapter numbers from this edition.

- 6 Mechthild of Hackeborn: *Liber Specialis Gratiae* 1.19: «Item cum sepulcrum visitaretur haec Deo devota virgo ardenti corde dixit ad Dominum: «Eia, dilecte mi, ex millibus electe, doce me quo unguento te animae meae amatorem perungam.» Cui Dominus: «Accipe illam inenarrabilem suavitatem quae ab aeterno de meo divino profluxit Corde in Patrem et Spiritum Sanctum, de quo tibi conficias vinum. Secundo, illam dulcedinem a qua indulcoratum est prae omnibus cordibus cor Genitricis meae virgineum, de qua tibi facias mel dulcissimum. Tertio, devotionem qua ante passionem eram in ferventissimo desiderio et devotione ac amore ardentissimo, de qua tibi conficias balsamum peroptimum.» Continuo se vidit habere pixidem plenam unguento redolente odore mirifico, de quo secundum cordis sui desiderium perunxit Dominum, et vulnera eius rosea, animae vera medicamina, est osculata.»

These episodes from the writings of Angela and Mechthild illustrate the ways in which liturgical observance, especially the events commemorated in the Christian liturgical year, created opportunities for thirteenth-century visionary women to encounter scripture. Their imaginative presence in the biblical scenes, with visionary engagement with the biblical characters, was a form of biblical interpretation highly valued in medieval Christian culture. As we will see, Mechthild of Hackeborn frequently commented on the liturgical texts themselves. These texts included the appointed lessons, antiphons, responses, and prayers that were drawn from scripture or interpreted biblical events. Another woman from the same convent, Gertrude of Helfta (1256-1301/2), engaged in similar activity. As highly literate nuns serving in a convent renowned for its learning, Mechthild and Gertrude instructed women on the meaning of the Bible and the liturgy. Angela, too, was a teacher in her own community, with devotees that included Franciscan friars as well as male and female members of the Third Order. Angela, whose literacy was far more limited, seems to have learned biblical stories through art, preaching, verbal instruction from friars, and presence in church during the feasts and commemorations of the liturgical year. The examples of Mechthild, Gertrude, and Angela – two cloistered nuns and a non-cloistered widow – offer an excellent starting point for considering the liturgy as a locus for thirteenth-century visionary women to engage and interpret the biblical text.

Mechthild of Hackeborn, Gertrude the Great, and the Nuns of Helfta

In the late thirteenth century, the Benedictine convent of St. Mary at Helfta, northern Saxony, was home for three famous visionary women: Mechthild of Hackeborn, Gertrude «the Great» of Helfta, and Mechthild of Magdeburg (ca. 1207-1282), a beguine (non-cloistered religious woman) who resided at Helfta for the final twelve years of her life. Founded in 1229 by Elisabeth of Schwartzburg and her husband Burchard, count of Mansfield, the convent was renowned as «the crown of German cloisters», a place of women's prodigious learning, intellectual activity, and literary productivity.⁷ Officially Benedictine in affiliation, the convent adopted stricter Cistercian usages, such as Cistercian customs, dress, and liturgical practices. The nuns drew upon Dominican friars for sacramental care, such as celebrating mass and hearing confessions.

7 M.J. Finnegan: *The Women of Helfta: Scholars and Mystics*, Athens GA 1991, 1.

The documents produced by the nuns of Helfta make clear that most of the women's spiritual care and religious instruction was provided in-house, by female members of the community.⁸

Gertrude of Helfta, who must be distinguished from the convent's abbess Gertrude of Hackeborn (1223-1292) who was Mechthild of Hackeborn's older sister, is the subject of a jointly-produced Latin volume entitled the *Legatus* or «Herald». The *Legatus* is divided into five books. Gertrude authored only Book Two, while the rest of the *Legatus* was compiled by nuns of her community, recording their recollections of Gertrude's words, life, and teachings. Much of the *Legatus* consists of reflections on biblical and liturgical texts associated with the church year. Another work by Gertrude survives, namely the *Spiritual Exercises*, a set of seven meditations on liturgical rites.⁹ Historian and theologian Laura Grimes has studied the role of the female community in the production of the *Legatus*, affirming and praising the creative contributions of these sisters.¹⁰ For the purposes of this essay, even those sections of the *Legatus* not written or directly dictated by Gertrude herself are of considerable interest, for they reflect the intellectual activity of the anonymous females interpreting scripture.

The author of the prologue, a female devotee, praised Gertrude's study of the Bible. She had first «applied herself excessively to the study of the liberal arts» [*studiis liberalibus nimis inhaerendo*], but then, according to Gertrude's admirer, she realized that the study of scripture was a much higher calling.¹¹ At that point Gertrude turned her attention to the study of sacred writings:

Whence from a grammarian she was made a theologian, and she tirelessly ruminated on all the books of Holy Scripture that she could get her hands on or acquire. She continually filled the basket of her heart all the way to the brim with the more useful

8 R. Voaden: All Girls Together: Community, Gender and Vision at Helfta, in: D. Watt (ed.): *Medieval Women in their Communities*, Toronto 1997, 72-91.

9 Gertrude of Helfta: *Œuvres Spirituelles*, vol. 1: *Les Exercices*, ed. J. Hourlier and A. Schmitt, SC 127, Paris 1967.

10 L.M. Grimes: *Wisdom's Friends: Gertrud of Helfta's Conversational Theology*, Saarbrücken 2009, 23-43.

11 Gertrude of Helfta: *Ouvres Spirituelles*, vol. 2, *Le Héraut* 1.1.2, ed. P. Doyère, SC 139, Paris 1968, 120. This «conversion» from attention to the liberal arts to scripture echoes the conversion of Augustine of Hippo (354-430), one of several ways in which the *Legatus* intentionally echoes Augustine's *Confessiones* and treats Augustine as one of Gertrude's models. See Grimes: *Wisdom's Friends* (n. 10), 79-88.

and sweet quotations from Holy Scripture, so she always had at hand a holy and edifying instruction. As a result, she was always able to offer appropriate help to all those who came to her, and she could fend off any sort of error by using testimonies from Holy Scripture that were so apt that virtually no one could refute her.¹²

Gertrude went to great efforts to collect books and manuscripts for the convent, sometimes copying them herself. Apparently she also provided biblical texts to other communities whose libraries were incomplete.¹³ In order to help the less learned, Gertrude wrote scripture paraphrases, altering the Latin to make it simpler and summarizing lengthier portions. She also wrote commentaries on difficult passages: «When she found some useful passage in Holy Scripture that seemed too difficult for those who were less intelligent to understand, she would alter the Latin, rewriting it in a more straightforward style so it would be more useful to readers. And thus she spent her entire life, from dawn to sunset, sometimes abbreviating lengthy passages, other times commenting on difficult passages, in the desire for the glory of God and the salvation of her neighbors.»¹⁴ Unfortunately Gertrude's scripture paraphrases and commentaries have been lost, likely perishing during one of the two occasions (1342 and 1524) when the convent was destroyed or ransacked in political upheaval.¹⁵

12 Gertude of Helfta: *Le Héraut* 1.1.2, SC 139, 120-122. : «Unde ex hinc de grammatica facta theologia omnes libros divinae paginae quoscumque habere vel acquirere potuit infastidibiliter ruminans, cophinum cordis sui crebro utilioribus et mellitis Scripturae sacrae eloquiis impletis usque ad summum replebat, ita ut semper praesto sibi esset sermo divinus et aedificatorius; unde quoslibet ad se venientes posset satis convenienter expedire atque cuilibet errori tam congruis sacrae Scripturae testimoniis obviare, quod a nullo penitus posset confutari.»

13 Gertude of Helfta: *Le Héraut* 1.4.2., SC 139, 142-144:

14 Gertude of Helfta: *Le Héraut* 1.7.1., SC 139, 152-154: «Unde et quaecumque in Scripturis sanctis inveniebat utilia, si videbantur sensui minus intelligentium difficilia, latino mutato, stylo describebat planiori, quo legentibus fierent utiliora; et sic totam vitam suam a mane usque ad vesperum consumebat, nunc longa decurtando, nunc difficilia explanando, desiderabat laudem Dei et proximorum promovere salutem.»

15 Finnegan: *The Women of Helfta* (n. 7), 4-5. In 1342 Albert of Brunswick, enraged that Albert of Mansfeld (whose sister was Luitgard, abbess of Helfta) had been confirmed as bishop of Halberstadt instead of him, took revenge against the abbess's brother by setting fire to Helfta; his armed men vandalized books and liturgical items. In 1525, the convent sustained vandalism and mob violence during the Peasants War. The convent probably became a target of the peasants' wrath because of a hostile pamphlet published by Martin Luther (1483-1546) the previous year. The peasants tossed the nuns' manuscripts and books into beer vats.

What remains of Gertrude's own writings – Book Two of the *Legatus* and her book of spiritual exercises that meditate on various liturgical rites such as baptism and the divine office of daily prayer – reflects a sophisticated liturgical biblical literacy. Gertrude sometimes identified the liturgical date of her revelations by giving the introit (entrance psalm) for that Sunday. Her reflections often served as commentary on the liturgical texts. For instance, on Quinquagesima, the Sunday preceding Ash Wednesday, she referenced the introit «Be unto me a God, a protector» (Ps 30:3) and then offered comments on the responsory verses (chants following a lesson, which quoted or were adapted from scripture):

After this, on the Sunday of *Esto mihi*, during mass, you stirred up my mind and increased my longing for those nobler gifts that you intended to grant me, by two phrases in particular that had powerful impact on my soul: the verse of the first responsory, «Blessing, I will bless you, etc.» (Gen 12:1), and the verse of the ninth responsory, «I will give these lands to you and your seed, etc.» (Gen 26:3). At this time you touched your venerable hand to your most blessed breast and showed me what «lands» were promised by your boundless generosity.¹⁶

The responsory verses were adapted from God's promises to Abraham (Gen 12:1) and to Isaac (Gen 26:30). Gertrude went on to explain what «these lands» were, in a spiritual sense. She praised God's fields and «holy land» of blessing, with echoes from Exodus, offering a devotional application of the text: «O land that is blessed and confers blessings, overflowing with blessedness! O field of delights whose tiniest grain can fully satisfy the hunger of all the elect, with every sort of desirable, beloved, delightful, and pleasing thing the human heart could imagine!»¹⁷

A similar approach to biblical interpretation is found in Mechthild of Hackeborn's *Liber Specialis Gratiae* (*Book of Special Grace*). Anonymous nuns, at

16 Gertude of Helfta: Le Héraut 2.8.1, SC 139, 262: «Post haec in Dominica Esto mihi, inter Missam incitasti mentem meam et dilatasti desiderium meum ad ea nobiliora quae mihi collaturus eras dona, specialius per duo verba quorum efficaciorum in anima praesens effectum, scilicet in versu primi Responsorii: *Benedicens benedicam tibi*, et., et in versu noni Responsorii, scilicet: *Tibi enim et semini tuo dabo has regiones*, etc. Inter quae venerabili manu beatissimum pectus tuum tangens demonstrasti mihi quas regiones incontinentissima liberalitas tua polliceretur.»

17 Gertude of Helfta: Le Héraut 2.8.2, SC 139, 264: «O regio illa beata et beatificans, affluens beatitudinum, ager deliciarum cuius minutissimum granum sufficientissime satisfacere posset aviditati omnium electorum, in diversis quae humano cordi desiderabilia, amabilia, delectabilia, iucunda et suavia poterunt excogitari!»

first surreptitiously and then with Mechthild's approval, recorded and compiled their recollections of Mechthild's revelations, life, and teachings.¹⁸ Part One, by far the longest section of the seven-part *Liber Specialis Gratiae*, is devoted to comments on the liturgy, arranged according to the liturgical calendar.¹⁹ On the second Sunday of Advent, Mechthild (or the anonymous sister recording the text) offered a commentary on the introit for that Sunday, drawn from Isaiah 30:

On *Populus Sion* (People of Zion) Sunday, when «The Lord will make the glory of his voice be heard» (Isa 30:30) was being chanted, she wished to know what «the voice of the Lord's glory» is. The Lord said to her: «This is the voice of my glory, when a soul, repenting more from love than from fear, grieves over its sins and deserves to hear these words from me: «Your sins are forgiven you. Go in peace» (Luke 7:48, 50). For as soon as a person grieves over the sins that he or she committed and truly repents, I fully forgive all that individual's sins, raising that person up with my grace as if that individual had never sinned. Second, the voice of my glory is when a soul, united with me through intimate prayer and contemplation, hears me say: «Come, my beloved, show me your face» (Song 2:13, 14). The third is when a soul about to depart from its body is sweetly invited to rest, when I say: «Come my chosen one, and I will put my throne in you.»²⁰ Fourth, on the day of judgment, this will be the glory of my voice, when I will call together all who are chosen from eternity and gloriously called to the kingdom of beauty and glory, saying: «Come, blessed of my Father, possess the kingdom that is prepared for you from the beginning of the world» (Matt 25:34).²¹

- 18 Many scholars, including Barbara Newman, the author of the first modern English translation of Mechthild's works, believe that Gertrude of Helfta is the nun responsible for penning and compiling most of Mechthild's *Liber Specialis Gratiae*. See the introduction to Mechthild of Hackeborn: *The Book of Special Grace*, trans. B. Newman, New York 2017, 1. Others have contested the supposition of Gertrude's authorship. Grimes: *Wisdom's Friends* (n. 10), 8-9: «The vast majority of *Liber specialis gratiae* bears little linguistic or theological resemblance to the extant texts personally written by Gertrud: Book II of *Herald* and *Spiritual Exercises*. Instead, the *Liber* is virtually identical in style and theme to other sisters' compiled accounts of Gertrud's visions in Books III through V of *Herald*, which are more moralizing in content and written in simpler Latin.»
- 19 In *Revelationes Gertrudianae ac Mechthildianae*, the printed edition prepared by Louis Paquelin and the monks of Solesmes, Part One comprises 128 pages of the 421-page work.
- 20 This is from the antiphon for the Office of Virgins, commemorating unmarried female saints.
- 21 Mechthild of Hackeborn: *Liber Specialis Gratiae* 1.3: «Dominica *Populus Sion*, dum cantaretur *auditam faciet Dominus gloriam vocis suae*, desideravit scire quae esset vox gloriae Domini, et ait Dominus: «Haec est vox gloriae meae, cum anima ex amore magis quam timore poenitens dolet de peccatis suis, et a me audire meretur: *Remittuntur tibi peccata tua. Vade in pace* (Luc.

On another occasion, when Mechthild heard the Pentecost Sunday offertory *Tibi offerent reges munera* («Kings will offer you gifts», Ps 71:10), the chant prompted an extended reflection, enumerating five forms of self-offering.²²

Though some modern readers might be tempted to trivialize or dismiss this sort of interpretation as merely «devotional» rather than constituting serious biblical exegesis, we should note that what Gertrude and Mechthild (and their compilers) are doing is quite similar to the interpretive activity carried out at the same time by Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) and by the Dominicans at the University of Paris who compiled a massive Postill (commentary) on the entire Bible under the direction of Hugh of St. Cher (1200-1263).²³ In addition to comments designated as *ad litteram* («literal», «according to the letter») that explained historical and textual details considered foundational for understanding the biblical text, Thomas's and Hugh's commentaries provided preachers with «spiritual» or «mystical» interpretations, consisting of edifying material for instructing others. For instance, in his Jeremiah commentary, Thomas Aquinas's spiritual interpretation enumerated four reasons that readers could speak of a «throne of glory» (Jer 14:21). As in the quotation from Mechthild above, regarding «the voice of the Lord's glory», Thomas's explanations were supported by scriptural quotations. Thomas writes:

There is a «throne of glory», so-called for four reasons. Because of its lofty character. Isaiah 6:1-3: «Behold the Lord, seated on the throne high and lifted up, and the entire earth was full of his majesty.» Because of its peaceful tranquility. Jeremiah 3:17: «They will call Jerusalem «the throne of the Lord», and all nations will be gathered to it in Jerusalem in the name of the Lord, etc.» Because of the depth of its knowledge. Ezekiel 10:1: «And I looked, and, behold, in the firmament over the heads of the

VII. 48. 50). Statim enim ut homo de his quae perpetravit dolet et poenitet veraciter, omnia peccata sibi plene dimitto, et eum in gratiam meam, ac si nunquam peccaverit, suscipio. Secundo, vox gloriae meae est, cum anima per intimam orationem aut contemplationem mihi unita audit a me: *Veni, amica mea, ostendi mihi faciem tuam* (Cantic. II). Tertio, cum anima de corpore egressura a me dulciter ad requiem sic invitatur: *Veni, electa mea, et ponam in te thronum meum*. Quarto, in die iudicii haec gloria vocis meae erit, cum omnes ab aeterno electos et ad regnum decoris et gloriae vocatos gloriosissime convocabo dicens: *Venite, benedicti Patris mei, percipite regnum quod vobis paratum est ab origine mundi* (Matt. XXV. 34).»

22 Mechthild of Hackeborn: *Liber Specialis Gratiae* 1.23.

23 For a discussion of the biblical interpretation of Hugh of St. Cher and Thomas Aquinas, see J.A. Schroeder: *The Book of Jeremiah, The Bible in Medieval Tradition* 4, Grand Rapids 2017, 24-35; and I.C. Levy: *Introducing Medieval Biblical Interpretation: The Senses of Scripture in Premodern Exegesis*, Grand Rapids 2018, 204-213.

cherubim, there was something like a sapphire stone, and over them appeared something resembling a throne.» Because of its eternal duration, as in the final chapter of Lamentations (5:19): «But you, O Lord, will remain forever, and your throne from generation to generation.»²⁴

Gertrude and Mechthild's books contain «glosses» (explanatory comments) on scripture and liturgical texts that resemble glosses found in authoritative works by male medieval authors. For instance, as Anna Harrison notes, when Mechthild asked for greater understanding of a particular text, Christ readily answered her with a fulsome explanation, sometimes «pausing to tease out the meaning of each word and fashioning something like a gloss that might have been lifted from a written document or fitted into one.»²⁵ According to Harrison: «Liturgical observance offered individual nuns the opportunity for intellectual productivity, perhaps paralleling, supplementing, or fueling the work a contemporary monastic reader might associate with the scriptorium.»²⁶ Bruce Holsinger has observed that Mechthild's and Gertrude's glosses do not merely repeat «conventional glosses from authoritative texts», but are, in fact, original to the nuns.²⁷ Thus the literature arising from the Helfta nuns' liturgical engagement with scripture was a form of intellectual output and biblical interpretation.

In the medieval Christian tradition, male interpreters working in the monasteries, universities, and mendicant study houses frequently aspired to offer such spiritual interpretations of scripture which, they believed, represented a higher, deeper wisdom than the foundational literal interpretation. For exegetes like the Cistercian abbot Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153), as well as the Domini-

24 Thomas Aquinas: *In Jeremiam Prophetam Expositio*, in: *Opera Omnia*, vol. 14, Parma 1863, 614: «Quoddam est solium glorie; et hoc quadrupliciter, scilicet naturae sublimitate. Isa. 6: «Vide Dominum sedentem super solium excelsum et elevatum, et plena erat omnis terra maiestate eius.» Pacis tranquillitate. Supra 3: «Vocabunt Jerusalem solium Domini, et congregabuntur ad eam omnes gentes in nomine Domini in Jerusalem etc.» Scientiae profunditate. Ezech. 10: «Et vidi, et ecce in firmamento quod erat super caput Cherubin quasi lapis zaphirus, et quasi species similitudinis solii apparuit super eum.» Durationis aeternitate. Thren. Ult.: «Tu autem, Domine, in aeternum permanebis, solium tuum in generationem et generationem.»»

25 A. Harrison: «I Am Wholly Your Own»: Liturgy Piety and Community among the Nuns of Helfta, CH 78 (2009) 549-583 (562).

26 Harrison: «I Am Wholly Your Own» (n. 25), 562.

27 B.W. Holsinger: *Music, Body, and Desire in Medieval Culture: Hildegard of Bingen to Chaucer*, Stanford 2001, 243.

cans mentioned above, penetrating the depths of scripture – while assisted by divine grace – was a pathway to contemplation of the Trinity and union with Christ.²⁸ Gertrude, Mechthild, and the nuns responsible for compiling their books make clear that this is something that the Helfta nuns excelled at.

Angela of Foligno and Biblical Imagination

At the same time that the Helfta nuns were compiling Gertrude's *Legatus* and Mechthild's *Liber Specialis Gratiae*, a Franciscan friar known to us as «Brother A.» and «brother scribe» (*frater scriptor*) was recording the experiences of the visionary Angela. Residing in Foligno, eighteen kilometers southeast of Assisi, Angela was a semi-literate widow who had joined the Third Order of St. Francis, the Brothers and Sisters of Penance. Tertiaries belonging to mendicant third orders usually dwelt in their own homes, undertaking lives of piety and devotion, living according to a simplified rule. Following the death of her mother, husband, and sons, Angela divested herself of most of her property in order to embody the Franciscan ideal of poverty.

Given her general reliance on vernacular instruction and sermons, as well as her dictation of her book in Umbrian (though her words were immediately translated into Latin), Angela can be called a «vernacular theologian». Medievalists use the term «vernacular theology» to refer to a spiritual and intellectual phenomenon that Bernard McGinn characterizes as «a third dimension or tradition of theology», a tradition that arose in the thirteenth century and took its place alongside «two main [Latin] intellectual and sociological strands – the monastic and the scholastic.»²⁹ Named for «its primary distinguishing mark – linguistic expression in the medieval vernacular tongues», vernacular theology is a tradition in which, according to McGinn, «women, for the first time in Christian history took an important, perhaps even preponderant role.»³⁰

Speaking in Umbrian (an Italian dialect) to Brother A., who endeavored to capture the essence of his kinswoman's teachings in the Latin text he produced, Angela dictated extraordinary experiences such as visions, locutions

28 On Bernard of Clairvaux as exegete, see Levy: *Introducing Medieval Biblical Interpretation* (n. 23), 123-129.

29 B. McGinn: *Introduction: Meister Eckhart and the Beguines in the Context of Vernacular Theology*, in B. McGinn (ed.): *Meister Eckhart and the Beguine Mystics: Hadewijch of Brabant, Mechthild of Magdeburg, and Marguerite Porete*, New York 1994, 6.

30 McGinn: *Introduction: Meister Eckhart and the Beguines* (n. 29), 6.

(non-audible messages received interiorly), and other divine revelations.³¹ Most of the things Angela reported «seeing», however, were not corporeal visions seen with her bodily eyes. Rather, they were imaginative visualizations, something highly appreciated by spiritual directors who sought to cultivate devotional imagination in those they counseled. Indeed, McGinn has recommended using the term «visualization» rather than «vision» to describe much of the content of thirteenth-century visionary women's mysticism: «Given the biblical-liturgical character of most of their accounts, it might be better to speak of them as «visualizations» rather than visions, in order to stress the fact that they are imaginative creations «seen» by the mystic as she strives to appropriate the inner meaning of the action of the liturgy.»³²

Ever since the time of Augustine, Christian spiritual directors ranked the *visio imaginativa* (the imaginative or spiritual vision) higher than a corporeal vision (*visio corporealis*). In Augustine's schema, the imaginative vision is something not perceived by the physical eyes but interiorly by the mind's eye, and it includes things like dreaming.³³ In the case of Angela, the imaginative vision, or visualization, became a form of engaging New Testament events.

Angela frequently reflected on biblical stories as a result of her participation in the liturgical year, drawing from art and also adding details from her own imagination. For instance, she reported that during the procession liturgy of the Feast of the Purification (February 2), commemorating the Virgin Mary's purification in the temple and the dedication of the baby Jesus (Luke 2:22), Angela was divinely informed: «This is the hour in which the Lady went into the temple with her Son.»³⁴ Angela reported that she saw the Virgin Mary en-

31 For the challenges of discerning Angela's authentic «voice» and distinctive contributions to a text produced through literary collaboration between Angela and Brother A., see B. McGinn: *The Flowering of Mysticism: Men and Women in the New Mysticism – 1200-1350*, vol. 3 of *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism*, New York 1998, 142-143. For a discussion of the textual transmission of Angela's work, see D. Poirel: *Le Liber D'Angèle de Foligno: enquête sur un exemplar disparu*, *Revue d'Histoire des Textes* 32 (2002) 224-263.

32 McGinn: *The Flowering of Mysticism* (n. 31), 270. McGinn wrote this statement with regard to the Helfta mystics, but it applies just as well to Angela.

33 C. Erickson: *The Medieval Vision: Essays in History and Perception*, New York 1979, 37.

34 Angela of Foligno: *Instructio* 19.7-8, in L. Thier and A. Calufetti (eds.): *Il Libro della Beata Angela da Foligno: Edizione critica*, Grottaferrata 1985, 586. The first part of Angela's *Liber* was the *Memoriale*, penned by Brother A. The second portion, consisting of various «instructions», were recorded by Brother A. and other devotees of Angela. Citations from

ter, holding the Christ child. (It is not clear whether Mary and Jesus entered the Jerusalem temple or the Franciscan church in Foligno. It was probably the former, though the two sanctuaries may have been conflated in Angela's visualization.) Angela said that the Virgin Mother handed the child to her. Mary then sat down, worn out from carrying the baby, a sort of realistic and homey detail – an exhausted mother handing a child to another woman so that she could sit down and rest for a few minutes:

She handed her Son toward me and said: «Take him, lover of my Son.» When she said these words, she reached out her arms and placed her son into my arms. He seemed to have his eyes closed as though he were sleeping, and he was wrapped or swaddled with cloths. The Lady sat down, as though fatigued from the journey. Her manners were so beautiful and charming.³⁵

Franciscan spiritual directors encouraged those in their care to engage in this sort of visualization, interacting with and assisting the biblical characters. For instance, the *Meditationes vitae Christi*, written in the early fourteenth century for a Poor Clare (Franciscan) nun and which enjoyed wide circulation, urges the reader or listener to picture New Testament events in her mind's eye.³⁶ Meditating on the nativity, she should kiss the baby and ask the Virgin Mary to let her hold him. Holding the child Jesus in her arms, the devotee should, in her imagination, kiss the baby and gaze on his face. After handing the infant back,

Angela's *Instructiones* will be cited by the instruction number and line number in Thier and Calufetti's critical edition. The scribe for *Instructio* 19 was likely a Franciscan friar other than Brother A. See J.A. Schroeder: The Feast of the Purification in the Liturgical Mysticism of Angela of Foligno, *Mystics Quarterly* 32 (2006) 35-67 (46).

35 Angela of Foligno: *Instructio* 19.13-18: «Et extendit versus me Filium suum et dixit: Accipe, dilectrix Filii mei; et dicendo verba, extendit brachia et posuit in brachiis meis Filium suum, qui videbatur oculos habere clausos quasi dormiret et erat pannis involutus sive fasciatus. Et ipsa Domina, quasi ab itinere fatigata, sedit et faciebat tam pulchros et delectabilis gestus.»

36 In the past, the Latin *Meditationes Vitae Christi* was mistakenly attributed to the Franciscan theologian Bonaventure (1221-1274). More recently it has been credited to John de Caulibus («John of the cauliflowers») or to Jacopo of San Gimignano; both of them were Franciscan friars active in the early fourteenth century. Sarah McNamer has since argued that the Latin text is an expansion and redaction of an Italian work that she believes was authored by a Poor Clare nun. If this is the case, a woman was responsible for the urtext of one of the Middle Ages' most influential devotional works. See S. McNamer: *Meditations on the Life of Christ: The Short Italian Text*, Notre Dame IN 2017, xcv-cxix.

she should offer to assist the Holy Mother.³⁷

In her study of medieval meditation and imagination, Michelle Karnes has argued that theologians and spiritual directors understood this form of imaginative engagement with New Testament events to be a highly valued form of cognition, which needed to be cultivated with great effort and discipline.³⁸ The author of the *Meditationes vitae Christi* emphasized the complete focus required: «So if you desire to benefit from these [meditations], you should place yourself in the presence of what is recounted about the things the Lord Jesus said and did, as if you were hearing them with your own ears and seeing them with your own eyes, with a total mental response of care, delight, and sorrow, putting aside all other concerns and worries at the time.»³⁹ At a time when devotion to the crucified Christ was a central feature in western Christian piety, it is not surprising that Angela's own imaginative visualizations most frequently dealt with Christ's passion and the suffering of Christ's mother and St. John as they witnessed the crucifixion (John 19:25-27), a scene ubiquitous in Christian art.⁴⁰

Angela of Foligno's knowledge of scripture no doubt came from a variety of sources. According to the 1289 rule *Supra montem*, Franciscan tertiaries were expected to attend worship services regularly, as circumstances permitted. A monthly mass, with sermon instruction by the friars, was held specifically for tertiaries.⁴¹ On other various occasions, friars discussed biblical passages in private conversations with Angela.⁴² Furthermore, one intriguing passage in

37 Iohannes de Caulibus: *Meditaciones Vite Christi* 7.138-140, ed. M. Stallings-Taney, CCCM 153, Turnhout 1997, 35.

38 M. Karnes: *Imagination, Meditation, and Cognition in the Middle Ages*, Chicago 2011, 142.

39 Iohannes de Caulibus: *Meditaciones Vite Christi*, Prologus 103-107, CCCM 153, 10: «Tu autem si ex his fructum sumere cupis, ita presentem te exhibeas his que per Dominum Iesum dicta et facta narrantur ac si tuis auribus audires et oculis ea videres, toto mentis affectu diligenter, delictabiliter et morose, omnibus aliis curis et sollicitudinibus tunc omissis.»

40 See, for instance, Angela of Foligno: *Memoriale* 1.138-173. Angela frequently speaks of gazing at painted crucifixes and other art. She said that sometimes the act of viewing crucifixes caused her to faint and fall sick, so her companion tried to hide them from her view. *Memoriale* 1. 265-268.

41 *Supra montem* (*Regula et modus vivendi Fratrum et Sororum Ordinis de Penitentia*), in L. Temperini and F. Accrocca (eds.): *Testi e documenti sul Terzo ordine Francescano (sec. XIII-XV): Originale latino e versione italiana*, Rome 1991, 248-277.

42 For instance, Brother A. said that he told Angela the story of Moses striking the rock with his staff (Num 20:10-13), and she offered an interpretation that applied the lesson to people who, though spiritually advanced, overstep their bounds and displease God. Angela of Foligno: *Memoriale* 7.452-461.

the *Memoriale* suggests that she was able to read scripture, in Latin, for herself, and that she had access to the biblical text: «Once, when I was in the cell in which I had enclosed myself for the Great Lent, I was enjoying and meditating upon a passage of Gospel which was extremely important and quite delightful. At that time I had a book, a missal, nearby, and I thirsted to see this passage again in writing. I could barely contain myself and keep my hands from opening the aforementioned book.»⁴³ Angela went on to say that she fell asleep and God gave her the meaning of the passage in a dream. For our purposes, it is important to observe that she mentioned having access to a book of scripture, a liturgical book that the text calls a *missale*. This book, which she either owned or borrowed, was probably was one of the Bible-missals that began to circulate in Umbria in Franciscan circles at precisely this time. The Bible-missals were small portable Bibles (eighteen to thirty centimeters in height) that contained all of scripture, supplemented by liturgical material needed by a priest to perform private masses.⁴⁴ This episode, the only time Angela explicitly mentions reading the Bible for herself, suggests that she had access to scripture and possessed some measure of Latin literacy. Yet her chief form of engaging scripture seems to be through meditating on the New Testament events that were featured in art and highlighted during the liturgical year.

Angela not only imagined biblical scenes with her mind's eye; she also reenacted the story of the Last Supper and Jesus washing his disciples' feet when she visited a hospital on Maundy Thursday, feeding the patients from her resources, and washing the hands and feet of lepers. One of the ways that Christians learned about the foot washing (John 13:4-10) was by observing the Maundy Thursday service in which priest liturgically washes the feet of others. Angela entered into the story more fully through her own physical actions. Her explanation for this, words offered to her female companion who accompanied her, resonated with Matthew 25:40 («Whatever you did to the least of

43 Angela of Foligno: *Memoriale* 1.221-226: «Quadam vice dum eram in carcere, in quo reclusam me pro quadragesima maiori, et diligerem et meditarer in uno verbo Evangelii, quod verbum erat maxime dignationis et excessive dilectionis, dum ego eram iuxta unum librum, scilicet missale, et sitirem videre illud verbum saltem tantummodo scriptum.» Regarding Angela's literacy, Rosalind Brooke asserts, «Her ability to read is beyond doubt.» R. Brooke: *The Image of St Francis: Responses to Sainthood in the Thirteenth Century*, Cambridge 2006, 480.

44 A. Welch: *Liturgy, Books and Franciscan Identity in Medieval Umbria*, Boston 2015, 60-61.

these my brothers and sisters you did unto me»). Angela recounts: «On Holy Thursday I said to my companion that we should seek to find Christ. And I said: «Let us go to the hospital and perhaps we will find Christ there among the poor and the suffering and the afflicted.»⁴⁵ With words that echo the spirit of James 1:22 («Be doers of the word and not hearers only»), Angela later reported that God told her: «It is not the great commentators [*magni lectores*] on my scripture who are commended, but instead those who carry it out.»⁴⁶ In her Maundy Thursday action of feeding the poor and washing their feet, at a time aligned with the liturgical commemoration of Christ's own act of foot washing, Angela revealed herself as someone who interpreted the Bible through her imitation of Christ and her obedience to his command to love others and wash one another's feet (John 13:14-15, 34). Viewed within the tradition of vernacular theology, Angela's theological expression and biblical interpretation were creative, vivid, and profound.

Liturgical Literacy and a Medieval Women's Tradition of Biblical Interpretation

Whether one is speaking about non-cloistered women with varying degrees of literacy and who normally expressed their religious impulses in the vernacular, or about nuns whose Latin could range from a limited «liturgical literacy» (phonetic ability to decipher or memorize Latin text) to a sophisticated knowledge of scripture and worship texts, liturgical observance was the primary way that medieval Christian women could encounter scripture. Literate nuns with a high proficiency in Latin could understand and appreciate the lessons, psalms, and antiphons. In preparation for the daily office, they regularly practiced the antiphons and responses, perhaps memorizing them. The regular repetition of the psalms was certainly a vehicle for memorization.

Various thirteenth-century rules for nuns expressed the expectation that young novices entering religious orders to become nuns would be – or soon become – *litteratae* («literate» or «lettered») in Latin, able to read the psalter.⁴⁷

45 Angela of Foligno: *Memoriale* 5.116-120: «In die iouis sancti ego dixi socie mee quod inquireremus invenire Christum. Et dixi: «Eamus ad hospitale et forsan ibi inveniemus Christum inter illos paupers et penatos et afflictos.»»

46 Angela of Foligno: *Memoriale* 9.243-244: «Sed dicebat quod audivit quod commendabantur non magni lectores, sed adimpletores Scripture mee.»

47 The men who wrote the rules for nuns were less optimistic about the ability of older nuns – those over the age of twenty – to learn to read Latin or to succeed in much more than

However, as historian Claire Taylor Jones has observed, «literate» could mean anything from phonetic decoding to nuanced comprehension». ⁴⁸ In the late medieval *Schwesterbücher* («Sister-Books»), chronicles written by nuns about the exemplary women who lived in their convents, there are cases of nuns being praised for their diligent study of scripture in service to liturgical devotion. For instance, a certain Elsbetlein (14th c.) from a Dominican convent in Gotteszell, Bavaria, was commended for reading the feast-day texts ahead of time – scriptures, psalms, antiphons, and responsories – so that she could apply herself with greater devotion and have a richer liturgical spiritual experience. ⁴⁹

Visionary nuns like Gertrude and Mechthild, as well as their female admirers who compiled the *Legatus* and the *Liber Specialis Gratiae*, went well beyond devotional appreciation of scripture and liturgical texts, by authoring literature that interpreted the scriptural introits, readings, antiphons, and responsories. As monastic theologians and biblical interpreters living in a community that celebrated women's learning, Gertrude and Mechthild used their considerable intellectual gifts and creativity to instruct other nuns and to compose written works that have endured through the centuries.

Angela of Foligno, a vernacular theologian, liturgically encountered scripture not through the texts of Latin antiphons, introits, and responsories that permeated the Helfta nuns' thought-world, but through the art she viewed, the ritual actions she observed, and the vernacular instruction she received from others, including (but not limited to) the Franciscan friars who were spiritual directors for the tertiaries. Angela, too, left a text that interpreted scripture with great vividness.

This essay has explored various instances of women's liturgical encounter with scripture in the thirteenth century. We have seen that, though it is manifested in different ways according to the literacy, mode of life, and experiences of the women expositors, there is a robust tradition of medieval female interpreters of the Bible who used the liturgy – especially the words, images, and rituals associated with the liturgical year – as a means to encounter, reflect upon, and interpret the sacred text.

rote memorization of the psalter. See C.T. Jones: *Ruling the Spirit: Women, Liturgy, and Dominican Reform in Late Medieval Germany*, Philadelphia 2018, 24-25.

48 Jones: *Ruling the Spirit* (n. 47), 6.

49 Ibid., 74.

Abstract

Liturgical observance, especially observance of the events commemorated in the Christian liturgical year, provided opportunities for thirteenth-century visionary women to encounter scripture. Literate nuns studied and interpreted biblical readings, antiphons, and other liturgical texts. Women with lesser degrees of literacy could engage scripture through viewing artistic portrayals and listening to vernacular sermons about biblical events. These women's imaginative presence in the biblical scenes, with reports of visionary engagement with God and the biblical characters, was a form of biblical interpretation highly valued in medieval Christian culture. This essay explores episodes from the writings of Franciscan tertiary Angela of Foligno (ca. 1248-1309) and Benedictine nuns Mechthild of Hackeborn (1241-1298) and Gertrude of Helfta (1223-1292) to illustrate the ways in which liturgical observance created opportunities for thirteenth-century visionary women to engage with scripture and to author authoritative works that interpreted the biblical text for their audiences.

Die liturgische Betrachtung insbesondere der Ereignisse im christlichen Liturgiejahr, bot den visionären Frauen des dreizehnten Jahrhunderts die Möglichkeit, der Schrift zu begegnen. Literarisch begabte Nonnen studierten und interpretierten biblische Texte, Antiphonen und andere liturgische Texte. Dies ermöglichte Frauen mit geringerer Lesefähigkeit sich den Schriften über künstlerische Darstellungen und über volkstümliche Predigten zu biblischen Ereignissen anzunähern. Die phantasievolle Präsenz dieser Frauen in den biblischen Szenen, mit Berichten über die visionäre Auseinandersetzung mit Gott und den biblischen Charakteren, war eine Form der biblischen Interpretation, die in der mittelalterlichen christlichen Kultur sehr geschätzt wurde. Der vorliegende Essay untersucht Teile aus den Schriften der franziskanischen Tertiärin Angela von Foligno (ca. 1248-1309) sowie den Benediktinerinnen Mechthild von Hackeborn (1241-1298) und Gertrude von Helfta (1223-1292). Er will damit veranschaulichen, wie liturgische Betrachtungen für visionäre Frauen des 13. Jahrhunderts Möglichkeiten geschaffen haben, sich mit der Schrift auseinanderzusetzen und autoritäre Werke zu schaffen, die den biblischen Text für ihr Publikum interpretierten.

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