

NICOLAUS DE LYRA, *Postilla litteralis in vetus testamentum, pars* [Commentary on Joshua, Judges, Ruth, Kings and Chronicles]
In Latin, decorated manuscript on paper
Germany (Bavaria?), c. 1450-1475

252 folios (ff. 1 and 252 now serving as pastedowns) on paper, watermark, tower with merlons without a window, similar to Piccard Online 100480, Wending, 1455, 100500, no place, 1459, 100531, Kaisheim, 1464, modern foliation in pencil top outer corner recto, original foliation in Arabic numerals in ink middle lower margin, 14-264, beginning on f. 2 (f. 1 recto now pasted to the front board), lacking one quire of twelve leaves at the beginning, and probably one at the end (collation i-xxi²), horizontal catchwords very bottom inner margins, often partially trimmed, no signatures (justification 230-225 x 148 mm.), frame ruled in ink with all rules full across, prickings remain lower margin and occasionally in the upper, written in a good cursive gothic bookhand in two columns of 46-42 lines, notes for the rubricator very bottom margin, guide letters alongside many initials, majuscules touched with red, lemmata underlined in red, red rubrics, two- to three-line red initials, a few corners torn with very minor damage, slightly soiled at the beginning and the end, otherwise in very good condition. EARLY CHAINED BINDING (contemporary(?) or slightly later) of brown leather over wooden boards, beveled and cut almost flush with the book block, sewn on double bands that enter the boards at the edge and are fastened on the inside, head and tail bands also fasten into the boards, spine with four raised bands with the remains of a tab at the top, simply tooled in blind with an outer frame and two single fillets crossing on the diagonal, five brass bosses upper and lower boards, once fastened back to front: stubs of two straps, lower board and holes from two pins center upper board, intact metal hasp and chain ending in a ring middle top edge lower board, remains of parchment label upper board (certainly for a title, but with the script now indiscernible), strips of parchment from earlier manuscripts used to line the spine visible at the beginning and end, title copied in a cursive script on bottom fore edge: "Isti(?) sunt liber hystoriales scilicet iosue iudic[um] Ruth paralipomenon Regum," something else written on the top fore edge (illegible), front cover detached, leather degraded and crackling, wear at the top and bottom of the spine, the binding has been tampered with and the first and last leaves now are pasted down at the front and back, perhaps when the opening and closing quires were removed, modern fitted book box. Dimensions 308 x 210 mm.

This is a rare opportunity to acquire an important text and a classic example of a fifteenth-century manuscript made for institutional use. This substantial volume includes Nicholas of Lyra's commentaries on nine Old Testament books. An innovative commentary, it stressed the importance of the literal sense of the text and drew on the work of Jewish scholars; it was one of the most popular of all medieval commentaries, with influence on thinkers in the Reformation and beyond. This volume was once chained in a library, ensuring that it remained in place as a reference work for a community. Surviving medieval bindings with intact chains are extremely rare.

PROVENANCE

1. Written in Southern Germany in Bavaria c. 1450-1475 as indicated by the evidence of the watermark and script; the chained binding tells us it was in an institutional collection.
2. Private North American collection.

TEXT

[Commentary on Joshua; f. 1 has been pasted down to the front board so the recto is not accessible], ff. 1v-16v, incipit, "//afflictionem iniustam gabanitarum [sic] facta per saul ... et non

est in hebreo nec in libris correctis," *Explicit lyra super Josue*; [ends mid column a; remainder blank];

Now beginning imperfectly in the commentary on Joshua chapter 9.

ff. 17-48, [Commentary on Judges], *Lyra super librum Iudicum capitulum primum*, incipit, "Suscitavit <deus: expunged> dominus iudices ut libarent ... non receperunt eas de voluntate vestra, etc.," *Explicit liber Iudicum*; [ends mid col. b; remainder blank];

ff. 48v-53v, [Commentary on Ruth], *Lyra super librum Ruth*, incipit, "In diebus unius ... Hic consequenter ... est supra secundo capitulo," *Explicit lyra super Ruth*; [ends mid column a; remainder blank];

ff. 54-86, [Commentary on Chronicles 1], *Lyra super paralippomenon primum*, incipit, "Colligite fragmenta ne pereant ... ut habetur supra 18 19 et vicesimo capitulis," *Explicit lyra super paralippomenon primum, etc.*; [Ends column a; remainder blank];

ff. 86v-112, [Commentary on Chronicles 2], *Lyra super paralippomenon secundum*, incipit, "Confortatus est ergo, salomon. Postquam in primo libro ... ut plenius habetur Esdre primo," *Explicit lyra super libros paralippomenon*;

f. 112, [Commentary on the Prayer of Manasses], *Oracio regis manasse*, incipit, "Domine deus. Ista oracio regis manasse non est in hebreo ... In secula seculorum, Amen";

ff. 112v-159v, [Commentary of 1 Kings], *Primus liber regum*, incipit, "Per me reges regnant ... pro morte saul et filiorum eius etc.," *Et sic est finis primi libri Regum. Sequitur liber secundus*; [ends top column a; remainder blank];

ff. 160-194, [Commentary on 2 Kings], *Secundus liber Regum*, incipit, "Factum est autem. Postquam in primo libro ... et 2 paralippomenon 3 capitulo," *Sequitur Tertius liber Regum*;

ff. 194v-231v, [Commentary on 3 Kings], *Tertius liber Regum*, incipit, "Et rex dauid senuerat ... per regulas superius dictas," *Explicit explanacio lyre In librum Regum 3. Sequitur quartus*;

ff. 232-252, [Commentary on 4 Kings], [P]revaricatus est. Postquam actum est ... feceruntque verba pessima et facta siue opera//'' [f. 252v, is no longer visible, since the leaf has been glued down as a pastedown].

Ending imperfectly in the commentary on 4 Kings chapter 17; f. 237rv, the scribe copied three lines but his ink was running and they are blurred, presumably because the leaf was improperly prepared, and he therefore left it blank, and began again on f. 238 with proper results this time.

Nicolaus de Lyra, *Postilla litteralis in vetus testamentum, pars* (Literal commentary on the Old Testament): Joshua (beginning imperfectly), Judges, Ruth, 1-2 Chronicles, the Prayer of Manasses, and 1-4 Kings (with 4 Kings ending imperfectly); Stegmüller, 1950-1980, no. 5834-5836, 5841-5843, 5837-5840. The odd order, with Chronicles preceding rather than following 1-4 Kings, is likely just an error – there are no annotations in the manuscript commenting on the

fact, but it is clearly original. The *Postillae* were very popular, and survive in at least 800 manuscripts, and likely more (Stegmüller, 1950-1980, nos. 5829-5923, with a partial list of c. 200 manuscripts; Gosselin, 1970; Krey and Smith, 2000, p. 8); some copies include the commentaries on the entire Bible, others include commentaries on just one or a small group of biblical books. Our example could have been part of a larger set, but it is equally possible that it was not.

There is no complete modern edition of these commentaries. Nicholas's commentary encompassed the entire Bible; only the Song of Songs has been edited by a modern scholar (Kiecker, 1998); his Apocalypse commentary has been translated into English (Krey, 1997). The Strasbourg 1492 edition of the *Postillae* on the entire Bible is available in a reprinted edition, and online (Frankfurt am Main, 1970; Online Resources). Nicholas composed the work c. 1322-1331, drawing no doubt on his earlier the lectures on the Bible that he prepared for his students in Paris. It was the first biblical commentary to appear in print (Rome, 1471), and then in more than one hundred editions until 1600, including editions in Basel, Douai, Cologne, Lyons, Nuremberg, Paris, Venice and Strasbourg; Anton Koberger in Nuremberg, printed this work seven times from 1479-97 (Gosselin, 1970).

BINDING

Librarians have always faced the problem of allowing access to their collections, while at the same time trying to make sure that their books are not stolen. The medieval solution was to attach books to something immovable by means of chains. Readers could move the volume down to a desk, but no further. The chaining of books served as an effective security system in European libraries from the Middle Ages to the eighteenth century. Famous examples that can still be seen today are at Hereford Cathedral and Zutphen (Online Resources).

This binding has the hasp and chain attached at the top of its back cover; its title is written on the bottom fore edge in a fifteenth-century script (something is also written on the upper fore edge, but it is now indecipherable). It must have been chained and stored vertically, showing the title on the bottom fore edge (with the spine facing up). Bosses on both covers would have served to protect it from neighboring volumes. The hasp and the chain both look old; the chain is rather short. The library at Zutphen (Online resources) chained their books on reading desks with short chains; a different type of chained library can be seen in the seventeenth-century book chest at Gorton Chapel (Kwakkel, Online resources).

Examples of fifteenth-century German chained bindings on the market in recent years include a Peter Lombard of 1491, sold at Christie's, New York, 22 October 1987, lot 53 (\$110,000), a manuscript of Aquinas sold at Sotheby's, 1 December 1998, lot 85 (£58,000), and Nicolaus de Lyra's *Postillae super Prophetas* sold in London, Sotheby's, 6 December 2001, lot 58.

Nicholas of Lyra, O.F.M., (c. 1270-1349) was the greatest biblical scholars of the fourteenth century; indeed, many consider him one of the greatest biblical scholars of the Middle Ages. He was born in Lyre, near Évreux in Normandy. At the age of thirty, around 1300, he entered the Franciscan Convent at Verneuil, and was soon sent to the Franciscan House in Paris to study at the University; the remainder of his life was spent in Paris. He became a regent master in theology in 1308/09, and later the Franciscan provincial minister for the Province of Paris from 1319-1324, and the provincial minister for Burgundy from 1324-1330.

His greatest work was a running commentary on the whole Bible, the *Postilla litteralis in vetus et novum testamentum* (Literal Commentary on the Old and New Testament). He stresses the importance of the literal sense of the scriptures, which he argues was often neglected by other commentators, discussing grammar, philology, and the historical context of the text. "Postilla," a term which may derive from "post illa verba" (after that word), refers to a commentary written out as a continuous gloss, interspersed with scriptural *lemmata*. Throughout, he exhibits a thorough grounding in Jewish commentaries on the Bible, including the Talmud, the Midrash, and the works of Rashi, Rabbi Solomon ben Isaac (1045-1105), and a knowledge of Hebrew (Klepper in Krey and Smith, eds., 2000, pp. 289-312; Geiger in Dahan, ed., 2011, 167-203).

Nicholas of Lyra's commentary Bible is arguably the most influential biblical commentary from the Middle Ages, and one that was studied by students of the Bible for centuries afterwards. The often-cited little couplet, attributed to Julius von Pflug (1499-1564), "Si Lyra non lyrasset/ Lutherus non saltasset" (If Lyra had not played, Luther could not have danced), aptly summarizes the importance of Nicholas of Lyra's thought to Martin Luther, who praised Lyra for his knowledge of Hebrew, and considered him "A fine soul: a good Hebraist and a true Christian" (quoted in Wood, 1958, p. 83; see Noblesse-Rocher in Dahan, 2011, 335-357).

LITERATURE

Dahan, Gilbert, ed. *Nicolas de Lyre franciscain du XIVe siècle exégète et théologien*, Collection des Études Augustiniennes. Série Moyen Âge et Temps Modernes 48, Paris, 2011.

Gosselin, E. A. "A Listing of the Printed Editions of Nicolaus de Lyra," *Traditio* 26 (1970), pp. 399-426.

Halperin, Herman. *Rashi and the Christian Scholars*, Pittsburg, 1963.

Kiecker, James George, ed. and trans. Nicholas of Lyra. *The Postilla of Nicholas of Lyra on the Song of Songs*, Milwaukee, 1998.

Klepper, Deeana Copeland. *The Insight of Unbelievers; Nicholas of Lyra and Christian Reading of Jewish Text in the later Middle Ages*, Philadelphia, 2007.

Klepper, Deeana Copeland. "Nicholas of Lyra and Franciscan Interest in Hebrew Scholarship," in Krey and Smith, eds., 2000, pp. 289-312.

Krey, Philip D. W., transl. Nicholas of Lyra. *Nicholas of Lyra's Apocalypse Commentary*, Kalamazoo, Michigan, 1997.

Krey, Philip D. W. and Lesley Smith, eds. *Nicholas of Lyra: The Senses of Scripture*, Leiden and Boston, 2000.

Nicholas of Lyra. *Postilla super totam Bibliam*, Frankfurt am Main, 1971 (reprint of the Strasbourg 1492 edition).

Stegmüller, Fridericus. *Repertorium biblicum medii aevi*, Madrid, 1950-1961, and Supplement, with the assistance of N. Reinhardt, Madrid, 1976-1980.

Wood, James D. *The Interpretation of the Bible: A Historical Introduction*, London, 1958.

ONLINE RESOURCES

Piccard Watermarks Online

<https://www.piccard-online.de/einfueh.php?sprache=en>

Hereford Cathedral Chained Library

<https://www.herefordcathedral.org/chained-library>

Chained manuscript, Houghton Library, Harvard University

<http://houghtonlib.tumblr.com/post/77728654529/its-our-500th-post-and-we-wanted-to-bring-you>

Eric Kwakkel, "Chain, Chest, Curse: Combating Book Theft in Medieval Times"

<https://medievalbooks.nl/2015/07/10/chain-chest-curse-combating-book-theft-in-medieval-times/>

Chained library at Zutphen

<http://erikkwakkel.tumblr.com/post/49509415868/the-chained-library-of-zutphen-i-took-these>

Glossae.net: link to edition of the Gloss with Nicholas's Postills

<http://www.glossae.net>

Johannes Froben and Johannes Petri, ed., Basel, 1498

http://www.e-rara.ch/bau_1/content/titleinfo/5083763

Plassmann, Thomas. "Nicholas of Lyra," *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 11, New York, 1911

<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/11063a.htm>

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