

NICHOLAS OF LYRA, *Postilla litteralis super epistolam ad hebraeos* (Literal Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews)

In Latin, manuscript on parchment

Northern France (Paris?) or England (?), c. 1340-1375

i (paper) + 30 + *i* (paper), modern foliation in pencil top outer corner recto, complete, (collation *i-ii*¹² *iii*¹²[-7 through 12, cancelled blanks]), trace of horizontal catchword remains f. 12v, ruled in lead with the top and bottom horizontal rules full across, single full-length vertical bounding lines, prickings in three outer margins (justification 207-20 x 140-137 mm.), written in a quick gothic bookhand (*textualis currens*) in two columns of forty-nine lines, majuscules in text stroked with red, biblical lemmata underlined in red, no rubrics apart from explicit, blank spaces for initials (six- to two-line), with guide letters visible, in very good condition apart from minor cockling and a few worm holes. Bound in modern red leather in 1988 by Donald Taylor of Toronto, title on spine, "Nicholas/ Lyra/ Super/ Hebreos," excellent condition. Dimensions 248 x 183 mm.

Nicholas of Lyra's literal commentary on the Bible is arguably the most influential biblical commentary from the Middle Ages – one that was studied by students of the Bible for centuries afterwards. This is an early copy of his unedited *Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, almost certainly made in university circles in France or England. The textual and historical implications of the transmission of the text in manuscripts such as this one that include commentaries on single books of the Bible, or small groups of books, have been neglected in the scholarly literature, and deserve careful study.

PROVENANCE

1. Written in Northern France, likely in Paris, or in England, perhaps at Oxford, in the middle of the fourteenth century, based on the evidence of the script. The script is a good example of the type some scholars have called *littera parisiensis* describing the clear, but quickly written gothic bookhand found in so many university texts copied in Paris in the thirteenth and fourteenth century centuries. The name is, however, somewhat misleading, for similar scripts were used at the English universities (and also in non-university contexts) (discussion and bibliography, Derolez, 2003, p. 100). This could have been copied in Paris, Oxford, or Cambridge. Evidence that might hint at an English origin includes the frequent use pendular abbreviations that are attached to the letter and curl around above line, the forked ascenders, and the occasional "forked" (but here short) 'r'. Citations within the text use Arabic numerals, again perhaps tilting the balance very slightly towards England. (Yale University, Beinecke Library, MS 22 is a fragment of Nicholas of Lyre's Postill on the Psalter from the mid-fourteenth century, securely localizable in England based on the style of the penwork initials. Its script is more formal than the script in our manuscript, but the similar use of pendular abbreviations is noteworthy).

The first folio is darkened, suggesting it has stood at the beginning for a long time, and this is a complete copy of the Postill on Hebrews. It is possible this was once part of a longer manuscript, possibly a Nicholas's commentary on all the Pauline Epistles, of which Hebrews is the last. The verso of the last folio is unruled and quite clean, but it

was once followed by six blank leaves (removed when owned by Joseph Pope, see below).

Extensive contemporary corrections, particularly in the first half of the manuscript, chapter numbers added in margin. A few later notes show use: f. 12v, "Experimentalis"; f. 20v, "Questio."

2. Top margin, f. 1, a bold "82" in ink; inside lower margin, ff. 29, 30, "6," also in ink; price code (?), in pencil, back pastedown, top corner, "63XSL."
3. Belonged to Ruth J. Dean (1902-2003), the author of *Anglo-Norman Literature: A Guide to Texts and Manuscripts* (1999), and a graduate of Wellesley College (1922,) and Oxford University. Dean taught at Mount Holyoke, and at the University of Pennsylvania, and served as president of the Medieval Academy of America in 1973 (Chance, 2005).
4. Collection of Joseph Pope (1921-2010) of Toronto, investment banker and prominent collector of medieval manuscripts, who acquired it in March, 1984 from Deane. Bergendal MS 72 (described in Pope, 1999; brief description in Stoneman, p. 194; an overview of the collection is given in Pope, 1997). The Bergendal catalogue states that this was bound in a seventeenth-century binding when it was acquired, which was in poor condition. When the manuscript was rebound the last six folios of third quire, originally blank, were removed.
5. Bergendal Sale, London, Sotheby's, *Western Manuscripts and Miniatures*, July 5, 2011, lot 80.

TEXT

ff. 1-30 [contemporary heading, added in the upper margin, *Postilla magistri nicholay de lira super epistola ad hebreos*], incipit, "[C]um uenerit quod perfectum est euacuabitur quod ex parte est, prima ad cor. 13 [1 Corinthians 13:10]. In primatiua ecclesia illi qui de iudaismo conuertebantur ad fidem christi ...; f. 4, incipit, *In primis dicendum est etc.*, Epistole ad hebreos. Iste prologus communiter preponitur ...; f. 4v, *Multifarie multisque modis, etc.* [Hebrews 1:1], Sicut predictum est. Apostolus Paulus hanc [ap: expunged] epistolam scripsit aliquibus conuersis ad fidem christi ...; f. 6v, incipit, *Propterea habundantius* [Hebrews 2:1], Posquam apostolus in capitulo ...; f. 20v, incipit, *Vnquam enim habens etc.* [Hebrews 10:1], In capitulo precedenti probauit ...; f. 29, incipit, *Caritas fraternitatis* [Hebrews 13:1], Superius apostolus ... uobis. Amen. Id est confirmetur in presenti et in futuro per gloriam consummere. Prestante domino nostro ihesu christo cui honor et gloria in secula seculorum, amen. *Explicit postilla super epistolam ad hebreos eddita a magistro Nicholao de Lyra de ordine fratrum minorum* [Ends mid col. b, f. 30, remainder and f. 30v, blank].

Nicolaus de Lyra, *Postilla litteralis super epistolam ad hebreos*; Stegmüller, no. 5915; there is no modern edition of Nicholas's Postill on the Epistle to Hebrews. Indeed, of Nicholas's most important achievement, a running commentary on the entire Bible that was focused on the literal sense of the text, 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. This

commentary, like his commentary on the Apocalypse and Romans, dates from 1329, but was probably based on lectures very early in his career, c. 1301-03 (Klepper in Krey and Smith, eds., 2000, p. 309; Krey in Dahan, ed., 2011, p. 155). The *Postillae* were enormously popular, and survive in at least 800 manuscripts, and likely more (Stegmüller, 1950-61, 1976-80, 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. It was the first biblical commentary to appear in print; first printed in Rome in 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).

Nicolaus de 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.

Nicholas's greatest work was his running commentary on the whole Bible, the *Postilla litteralis in vetus et novum testamentum* (The Literal Postil on the Whole Bible). He stresses the importance of the literal sense of the scriptures, which he argues was often neglected by other commentators, and discusses the grammar, philology, and 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 this commentary, 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. Scholars have suggested that he studied with Jewish scholars in Évreux, which was an important center of Jewish learning in the late thirteenth century, although more recently it has been suggested that he studied Hebrew in Paris (Klepper in Krey and Smith, eds., 2000, pp. 289-312; Geiger in Dahan, ed., 2011, 167-203).

In this commentary, Nicholas presents the main theme of the Epistle to the Hebrews as the superiority of the New Testament over the Old, comparing the old covenant with the perfection of evangelical law established by Christ. There is no modern critical edition, nor has there been a census of the surviving manuscripts of this commentary. The Postils survive both in impressive multi-volume manuscripts that include the commentaries on the entire Bible (many of these expensive, illuminated copies), and in manuscripts that include the commentary on a single book of the Bible, or a group of books, such as this one; this latter type of manuscript has been comparatively neglected by modern scholars. Future studies of the textual tradition will need to analyze both types of manuscripts. Our modern perception of Nicholas's commentaries, and their text, has been based on the one hand on evidence of the expensive copies of the complete commentaries (studied often for the diagrams and illustrations more than for their text), and on the other, on the widely available fifteenth-century printed editions, many of which present the text of the commentaries together with the Ordinary Gloss and the complete biblical text. The layout of this practical, working copy of the Postil on Hebrews, could not be more different. Most university students of theology, and even masters, in the

fourteenth and into the fifteenth century would have known Nicholas's commentaries in manuscripts such as this one.

The influence of the *Postilla* extended far beyond the Middle Ages, and they were valued by Martin Luther and others. 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.

Chance, Jane, ed. *Women Medievalists and the Academy*, Madison, Wisconsin, 2005, pp. 565-574.

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

Halperin, Herman. *Rasbi 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, Deena Copeland. "The Dating of Nicholas of Lyra's *Quaestio de adventu Christi*," *Archivum Franciscanum Historicum* 86 (1993), pp. 297-312.

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

Klepper, Deena Copeland. "Nicholas of Lyra and Franciscan Interest in Hebrew Scholarship," 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.

Krey, Philip D. W. "The Eschatology of Nicholas of Lyra in the Apocalypse Commentary of 1329," in Dahan, ed., 2011, pp. 153-165.

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

Pope, Joseph. *One Hundred and Twenty-Five Manuscripts. Bergendal Collection Catalogue*, Toronto, 1999.

Pope, Joseph. "The Library That Father Boyle Built," *A Distinct Voice: Medieval Studies in Honor of Leonard E. Boyle, O.P.*, ed. Jacqueline Brown and William P. Stoneman, Notre Dame, 1997, pp. 157-162.

Shailor, Barbara. "A New Manuscript of Nicolaus de Lyra," *Yale University Library Gazette*, vol. 58 (October 1983), pp. 9-16.

Stegmüller, Fridericus. *Repertorium biblicum medii aevi*, Madrid, 1950-1961, and *Supplement*, with the assistance of N. Reinhardt, Madrid, 1976-80.

Stoneman, William P. "A Summary Guide to the Medieval and Later Manuscripts in the Bergendal Collection, Toronto," *A Distinct Voice: Medieval Studies in Honor of Leonard E. Boyle, O.P.*, ed. Jacqueline Brown and William P. Stoneman, Notre Dame, 1997, pp. 163-206.

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

ONLINE RESOURCES

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

PDF of fifteenth-century editions of the *Postillae* (Julian of Norwich website)

<http://www.umilta.net/nicholalyra.html>

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

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

Yale University, Beinecke Library, MS 22

<http://brbl-dl.library.yale.edu/vufind/Record/3591013>

TM 887