

Perturbations of the Soul:  
Alexander of Ashby and Aegidius of Paris  
on Understanding Biblical *Obscuritas*

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The mystery of the Bible and the significance of its deeply encoded messages have shaped Christian discourse from the earliest days of its existence. The brightest patristic, Carolingian, pre-scholastic and scholastic minds strove tirelessly to understand the meaning of God's creation and the place of humanity in it. They were guided in this endeavor by Holy Scripture, which however often challenged them with perplexing, contradictory and obscure testimonies. From the time of Augustine throughout the entire Middle Ages the inherent obscurity of the divine word was considered an integral part of God's message. It was universally believed that the true meaning of Scripture was concealed from the reader in order to encourage a multiplicity of interpretations that could only enrich and strengthen the faith of the believer.<sup>1</sup> Because of the great intellectual effort expended in this search for understanding, the truth uncovered at the end would be even more highly valued, while pride would be subdued by toil and the intellect freed from disdain towards what has been discovered without difficulty.<sup>2</sup> By devising this learning strategy God proves to be like the best of teachers who never give their students easy answers and whose lessons are intricate but memorable.

While this brief description of the inherent nature of biblical *obscuritas* may be fairly well known, I will show in the following pages how these thoughts are exemplified in the writings of two thirteenth-century authors, whose works have not been examined from this perspective.

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<sup>1</sup> See Augustine, *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, In *Psalmum* 126, 11, ed. D. E. Dekkers and I. Fraipont, *Corpus Christianorum Series Latina* 40 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1965), 1865. See also Jan Ziolkowski, "Theories of Obscurity in the Latin Tradition," *Mediaevalia* 19 (1996): 101–67, esp. 146–47.

<sup>2</sup> "ad edomandam labore superbiam et intellectum a fastidio reuocandum" (Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana libri IV* 2.6, ed. Joseph Martin, *Corpus Christianorum Series Latina* 32 [Turnhout: Brepols, 1965], 35).

The authors in question are the Augustinian prior Alexander of Ashby in England (d. August 6, 1208 or 1214)<sup>3</sup> and the Parisian master and poet Aegidius (fl. 1200),<sup>4</sup> who take two different but complementary approaches in explaining the perplexing nature of the biblical narrative. Alexander and Aegidius are examined together in this study because they both treat the topic of biblical *obscuritas* in the context of biblical versification, thus adding a new pedagogical dimension to the theological significance of the question.

In the prose prologue to his poem, the *Breuisssima comprehensio historiarum*,<sup>5</sup> a text addressed to one of his younger followers, Alexander of Ashby outlines three principal *turbationes* that confuse the carnal soul in its early attempts to understand the meaning of sacred scripture. They are *obscuritas significationis*, *uarietas expositionis*, and *mutatio personarum*.<sup>6</sup> Let us examine more closely what Alexander means by these *turbationes* and what solutions he proposes for dealing with the cognitive difficulties created by them.

<sup>3</sup> Alexander was the second prior of the small Augustinian house of Canons Ashby in Northamptonshire. For details on his life, an edition of his epitaph, and the date of his death, see Greti Dinkova-Bruun, "Alexander of Ashby: New Biographical Evidence," *Mediaeval Studies* 63 (2001): 305–22. According to his epitaph, Alexander died at the age of sixty, which means that he was born in 1148 or 1154.

<sup>4</sup> Little is known about Aegidius of Paris, except for what he tells us himself. He is known mostly for revising Peter Riga's poem the *Aurora*, but he also wrote a versified life of Charlemagne entitled the *Karolinus*, which he presented as a gift to the future King Louis VIII, on 3 September, 1200. For some recent studies on Aegidius, see Greti Dinkova-Bruun, "Aegidius of Paris and the Seven Seals: A Prose Prologue to the Gospels in Peter Riga's *Aurora*," *Mediaeval Studies* 73 (2011): 119–45; Greti Dinkova-Bruun, "Corrector Ultimus: Aegidius of Paris and Peter Riga's *Aurora*," in *Modes of Authorship in the Middle Ages*, ed. Slavica Rancović (Toronto: PIMS, 2012), 172–89; and Greti Dinkova-Bruun, "Charlemagne as a Model Ruler in the Poem *Karolinus* by Aegidius of Paris (ca. 1200)" (forthcoming). For further information on Aegidius's life and literary activity, see Paul Beichner, *Aurora Petri Rigae Versificata*, 2 vols. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1965), 1, xx–xxvi, and *Histoire littéraire de la France* (Paris: Imprimerie nationale 1832), 17: 36–69.

<sup>5</sup> For the critical edition of this prologue, see *Alexandri Essebiensis Opera Poetica*, ed. Greti Dinkova-Bruun, *Corpus Christianorum Continuatio Mediaevalis* 188A (Turnhout: Brepols, 2004), 5–13.

<sup>6</sup> "Carnalis autem animus in inicio sacre erudicionis tripliciter turbari solet. Prima turbacio est de obscuritate significationis, secunda de uarietate expositionis, tertia de mutacione personarum" (Alexander of Ashby, *Breuisssima comprehensio, Prologus*, 7.52–54). See also Ziolkowski, "Theories of Obscurity," 150–51.

According to Alexander, *obscuritas significationis* or obscurity of meaning causes consternation and bewilderment among the inexperienced readers of the Bible because they fail to grasp why God expresses himself *allegorice et obscure*, as though wishing to hide from them the path to salvation.<sup>7</sup> Would God not want the flock of the faithful to acquire true understanding of his message? If so, why does he obscure and hide it in difficult and perplexing *figurae* and allegories? In order to dispel this confusion Alexander uses three quotations from Augustine's *Enarrationes in Psalmos*: one from the exposition on Psalm 140, and two more from the expositions on Psalms 146 and 147.<sup>8</sup> These quotations may have been borrowed directly from Augustine but it is also possible that Alexander took them from Peter Lombard's treatise on the Psalms, which contains the same passages from Augustine and which by Alexander's time had become the commentary of choice in scholastic circles.

In either case, according to Augustine (and Lombard), the profound mysteries of scripture are veiled for three reasons: first, in order to retain their value (*ne uilescant*); second, in order to exercise the mind (*ut exerceant*); and third, in order to provide spiritual nourishment for the reader once their hidden meaning is uncovered (*ut pascant*).<sup>9</sup> In this difficult journey of understanding, one should not be arrogant and accuse God of expressing himself badly. After all, the patient does not object to the medications prescribed to him by his doctor; in fact, he accepts them without complaining. Love of God, faith in his good intentions and humility will lead to sublime peace of mind, *pax summa*, as Alexander calls it. If one respects the divine law, one should honor it, even if one does not comprehend everything in it. If something that is written in the Bible seems absurd, one should consider it too elevated for one's imperfect human intellect and thus embrace it in faith.<sup>10</sup> In this way, the anxi-

<sup>7</sup> *Breuissima comprehensio, Prologus, 7–8.55–79.*

<sup>8</sup> *Breuissima comprehensio, Prologus, 7–8.59–75.* See Augustinus, *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, *In Psalmum 140*, 1–2; *In Psalmum 146*, 12; *In Psalmum 147*, 2, 2026, 2131, 2147.

<sup>9</sup> "Sunt in scripturis sanctis quedam profunda misteria que ad hoc absconduntur ne uilescant, ad hoc queruntur ut exerceant, ad hoc aperiuntur ut pascant. Scriptura enim sacra, si nusquam esset aperta, non te pasceret, si nusquam occulta, non te exerceat" (*Breuissima comprehensio, Prologus, 7–8.59–61*; quotation from Augustine, *In Psalmum 140.1–2*).

<sup>10</sup> "Qui enim legem diligit, si quid in ea non intelligit, honorat; quod absurde sonare uidetur, iudicat esse magnum et se nescire" (*Breuissima comprehensio, Prologus, 8.77–79*).

ety created by the first *turbatio* will be chased away.

The second difficulty stems from the so-called *varietas expositionis* or variety of exposition.<sup>11</sup> What Alexander means by "variety of exposition" is actually the multiplicity of explanations proposed by the various catholic interpreters and theologians in their scholarly treatises on the Bible. Is it really possible, some people ask, that the Holy Spirit truly intends for the same words of scripture to contain a multitude of different meanings? Alexander's answer to this question is "yes," each statement in the Bible is divinely preconditioned to signify many different things and the task of the reader is to find these hidden layers of signification. This intellectual pursuit is meant to enrich the word of God and to provide worthy occupation for all men who have dedicated their lives to the service of the Lord. All the meanings (*omnes sensus*) that are found in the Bible by the Christian exegetes are supposed to be uncovered.<sup>12</sup> The process, however, is gradual and complex, resulting in a multitude of diverse opinions. This process is captured in the prophetic words of Daniel 12:4, which Alexander did not quote, but which seem to exemplify perfectly the tenor of his second *turbatio*: "Many shall pass through and knowledge shall be manifold."<sup>13</sup>

The final difficulty that confuses the carnal soul when it attempts to understand the meaning of the Bible is what Alexander calls *mutatio personarum* or the change of speaker.<sup>14</sup> This problem seems to be encountered most often in the Psalter, where the speaker is sometimes Christ himself, sometimes various parts of his body, and sometimes the reader. Alexander insists that it is easy to explain this apparent confusion of expression as long as one remembers that it is always Christ who speaks, despite what appears at first glance. Christ is the head (*caput*), and the head always speaks for the other parts of the body, the *membra*, be they physical limbs or the members of the Church. Thus there is no *mutatio personarum* really; the speaker is always only one. This understanding of

<sup>11</sup> *Breissima comprehensio, Prologus, 9.80–94.*

<sup>12</sup> "Omnes autem sensus, quos catholici expositores in scripturas sacras apposuerunt, spiritus sanctus, quo ipse scripture sacre sunt, apponi et intelligi uoluit et adhuc plures, qui a te uel a quolibet alio catholice dici possunt" (*Breissima comprehensio, Prologus, 9.90–94*).

<sup>13</sup> "Pertransibunt plurimi et multiplex erit scientia." On the meaning of Daniel 12:4, see Jefferey R. Webb, "Knowledge will be manifold: Daniel 12:4 and the Idea of Intellectual Progress in the Middle Ages" (unpublished LMS paper, PIMS 2012; deposited in the PIMS Library).

<sup>14</sup> *Breissima comprehensio, Prologus, 9–10.95–110.*

the head-body union as representing the relationship between *Christus* and *Ecclesia* is a very old exegetical principle advanced as early as the fourth century by the North African Donatist theologian Tyconius. Indeed, Tyconius's first rule in his textbook on biblical interpretation called the *Liber Regularum* ("The Book of Rules") deals precisely with the issue of the unity between Christ and his body the Church.<sup>15</sup> These ideas were widely disseminated in the Latin West through their inclusion in Augustine's *De doctrina Christiana* and Isidore's *Sentences*.<sup>16</sup>

The *mutatio personarum* concludes the section of Alexander's prologue that outlines the three *turbationes* faced by the carnal soul when it first tries to decipher the messages of the Bible. Being a preacher and a teacher, Alexander proceeds to give practical advice to his reader on how the afore mentioned difficulties can be overcome. The answer is simple: serious dedication to learning. In fact, Alexander proposes a program of study saying that in order to understand the four senses of scripture one must begin by mastering the historical or literal level. For this purpose it is best to start with Hugh of Saint Victor's *Didascalicon*, which Alexander calls *Isagogas magistri Hugonis theologi*, or with some other short introductory texts.<sup>17</sup> Second, after identifying the right books, one needs to find the right teachers. They can be located in the peace and silence of the cloister where the student will encounter

many masters, extremely skilled in both divine and secular knowledge, who can expound the theological arguments better than anybody else, because they know them not only through reasoning, but also through experience.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>15</sup> See *The Book of Rules of Tyconius. Newly Edited from the MSS with an Introduction and an Examination into the Text of the Biblical Quotations*, ed. F. Crawford Burkitt (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1894), 1–8. Burkitt's Latin text was reprinted and translated in *Tyconius: The Book of Rules*, trans. William S. Babcock (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989).

<sup>16</sup> See Pamela Bright, *The Book of Rules of Tyconius: Its Purpose and Inner Logic* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), and Pierre Cazier, "Le Livre des règles de Tyconius. Sa transmission du *De doctrina christiana* aux *Sentences* d'Isidore de Séville," *Revue des études augustiniennes* 19 (1973): 241–61, esp. 245. For Augustine's text, see his *De doctrina christiana* 3.30–37, *CCSL* 32, 102–06. Rule 1 is discussed in chapter 31, p. 104. Augustine deals with the same issue in *Enarrationes in Psalmos, In Psalmum* 140, 3, *CCSL* 40, 2027–2028.29–30 ("Si ergo ille caput, nos corpus, unus homo loquitur; siue caput loquatur, siue membra, unus Christus loquitur.")

<sup>17</sup> *Breuisima comprehensio, Prologus*, 9–10.95–110, 10. 115–16.

<sup>18</sup> "Habet tecum magistros plures, tam in diuinis, quam in secularibus literis peritissimos, qui theologicas rationes eo melius poterunt exponere, quo eas uerius nouerunt non solum per scientiam, sed etiam per experientiam" (*Breuis-*

And finally, one has to develop good learning habits. Here Alexander quotes from the *Epistola ad fratres de Monte Dei* attributed in the Middle Ages to Bernard of Clairvaux, but now known to be the work of William of St. Thierry.<sup>19</sup> The point made herein is that the student has to make a clear distinction between reading (*lectio*) and study (*studium*). The two are definitely not the same; indeed, they are as different as friendship is different from hospitality and amiable affection from casual greeting.<sup>20</sup> Study needs to be closely connected, first, to understanding what one is reading; second, to memorizing what one has read; and third, to meditating upon the true significance of the memorized material. The ultimate purpose of the study of Scripture is to discover the glory of the abundant goodness of God which is laid up for those who fear him.<sup>21</sup> This aim will make the effort (*labor*) of the student a delightful (*delectabilis*) process rather than a difficult one or, as Alexander puts it himself at the beginning of his prologue: "The consideration of the benefits of this study turns toil into play."<sup>22</sup>

The somewhat pragmatic and completely demystifying way in which Alexander presents and solves the problems of biblical *obscuritas* may seem somewhat unexpected at first. However, his prologue is representative of the changed environment of scholastic study at the beginning of the thirteenth century, an environment in which conscious attempts are made to render the study of scripture and theology a rational and manageable academic process.<sup>23</sup> Alexander's own versification of the Bible, which was preceded by the prologue discussed here, is an excellent example of this new approach to contemporary pedagogical concerns and methods. As a result, the *Brevissima comprehensio historiarum* is a verse digest of the historical books of the Bible that is meant to serve as a

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*sima comprehensio, Prologus*, 11.134–37).

<sup>19</sup> See *Guillaume de Saint-Thierry. Lettre aux frères du Mont-Dieu (Lettre d'or)*, ed. and French trans. Jean Déchanet, 2 ed., Sources chrétiennes 223 (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1985); English translation in *The Golden Epistle: A Letter to the Brethren at Mont Dieu*, trans. Theodore Berkeley, 2 ed. (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1980).

<sup>20</sup> "Et in omni scriptura, tantum distat studium a lectione quantum amicitia ab hospicio, socialis affectio a fortuita salutacione" (*Brevissima comprehensio, Prologus*, 12.152–54).

<sup>21</sup> *Brevissima comprehensio, Prologus*, 13.174–75, which is a quotation of Ps. 30:20.

<sup>22</sup> "Laborem in ludum vertit fructus consideratio" (*Brevissima comprehensio, Prologus*, 5.1).

<sup>23</sup> Gillian R. Evans, *Old Arts and New Theology: The Beginning of Theology as an Academic Discipline* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), 27–37.

mnemonic aid to the student who is striving to master the literal level of biblical study. The linguistic and theological obscurity of scripture is temporarily put aside by Alexander, not because the poet denies its existence but because he considers the clarification of the hidden meaning of the sacred page to be the next step in the program of study his reader is advised to follow.

Aegidius of Paris, the second author under discussion, represents this next level. In his prose prologue to Peter Riga's *Evangelium*, Aegidius links the obscurity of the Bible to the Book of Revelation and the seven seals mentioned in it. Scripture is sealed by God with *signacula* and can be unlocked (*soluenda*) only by those who know how to uncover the secrets of its symbolic language.

Aegidius of Paris and Alexander of Ashby were near contemporaries but their approaches are somewhat different, even though both wrote prose introductions to verse renditions of the Bible. If Alexander's text, as we already saw, was mainly concerned with the literal sense of the biblical narrative, Aegidius's preface is deeply embedded in a long tradition of prefigurative exegesis which is concerned primarily with the allegorical level of understanding or, as he calls it himself, the *altior intelligentia*<sup>24</sup>

In the opening paragraph of his preface Aegidius compares himself to John the Evangelist who cries bitterly in Revelation 5 because there is nobody worthy to open the book sealed with the seven seals. He continues to say that the sealed book is, of course, the Bible, which could not truly be called sacred or holy, if it talked simply about the mundane deeds of men and contained no divine mysteries. It is shameful and absurd, insists Aegidius, to believe the foolishness of the Jews who hold the view that the authority and power of scripture are based on some insignificant historical tales (*historicas narratiunculas*) that are to be understood literally. Something more sublime has to be hidden and searched for in the letter.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, Jesus himself says as much in the Gospel of

<sup>24</sup> Ed. Dinkova-Bruun, in "Aegidius of Paris and the Seven Seals," 137.18.

<sup>25</sup> "Liber iste est sacra scriptura continens diuinam preordinationem et eiusdem promissionem antiquis patribus factam de filio Dei mittendo in carnem ad consummandum nostre redemptionis misterium per ipsius passionem et mortem. Neque enim uere sacra aut diuina scriptura dici posset uel deberet, si tantum de hominibus ita quod de puris eorum gestis ageret et nulla diuina misteria contineret. Turpe satis est fatuis ludeis et absurdum credere quod propter quasdam quantum ad litteram hystoricas narratiunculas tanta auctoritate scriptura ista polleret, nisi in ipso corpore littere aliquid querendum sublimius latitaret" (in

John, chapter 16, verses 12–13:

I have many more things to say to you but you cannot bear them now. But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth.<sup>26</sup>

Until that moment the mysteries of the Bible will remain "not fully expressed but veiled and obfuscated by figurative imagery and enigmatic testimonies."<sup>27</sup> The Jew cannot read the Book because it is sealed (*signatus*), and the pagan philosopher is unable to understand it because in Jerome's view he is ignorant of its sacred letters,<sup>28</sup> but even the Christian cannot have a clear and perfect knowledge of its secrets before they are revealed to him by Christ, "the lion from the tribe of Judah, who is our teacher in humility and the harbinger of our salvation."<sup>29</sup>

Aegidius dedicates the rest of the prologue to showing his reader how the secrets of the Bible can be understood. His exegetical method is traditional, meaning that each enigma fulfilled in the New Testament is exemplified and corroborated by a passage or passages from the Old Testament, all quoted in rapid succession and without lengthy explanations. Aegidius thus proposes the following clusters of solutions of the biblical mysteries: first, each of the seven seals of Revelation represents one sacramental *mysterium* related to Christ, that is, his incarnation, nativity, passion, resurrection, ascension, the sending of the holy spirit, and the last judgment;<sup>30</sup> second, the seven seals can be interpreted as symbols of the seven ecclesiastical sacraments, that is, *baptismus, eucharistia, confirmatio, ordo, coniugium, penitentia* and *extrema inunctio*. Again, scriptural testimonies from the Old Testament are presented as illustrations of these solemn religious occasions; and finally, scriptural examples are presented as statements anticipating the Christian beliefs in the general resurrection and the last judgment at which the righteous will be

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"Aegidius of Paris and the Seven Seals," 137.21–29)

<sup>26</sup> "Adhuc multa habeo vobis dicere sed non potestis portare modo. Cum autem venerit ille Spiritus veritatis docebit vos in omnem veritatem"

<sup>27</sup> "non ad plenum expressa sunt sed figuris et enigmatibus adumbrata" (in "Aegidius of Paris and the Seven Seals," 137.32).

<sup>28</sup> See Hieronymus, *Commentariorum in Esaiam libri I–IX, Prologus*, ed. M. Adriaen, CCSL 77 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1963), 2.34–40.

<sup>29</sup> "Libro ergo sic remanente clauso et nemine aperiente eum nec solvente signacula eius, uenit tandem 'leo de tribu iuda' (Apoc. 5:5) Christus, scilicet David secundum carnem filius, qui uenit nobis magister esse humilitatis et auctor nostre salutis" (in "Aegidius of Paris and the Seven Seals," 138.50–53).

<sup>30</sup> For a similar way of interpreting the seals, see E. Ann Matter, "The pseudo-Alcuinian *De septem sigillis*: an early Latin apocalypse exegesis," *Traditio* 36 (1980): 111–37.

rewarded and the wicked punished.

None of this is new or original as such. Christian exegetes had been making these connections for centuries. What is unusual is the context in which these ideas are placed. While Aegidius's allegorical approach to understanding the Bible differs from Alexander of Ashby's, it exemplifies a similar desire to organize, clarify and versify the available interpretative knowledge for didactic purposes. If Alexander's teaching method was to eliminate scriptural obscurity, Aegidius's approach was to propose a way of unlocking its meaning. In this he follows the example of Peter Riga, whose poem he is revising and expanding and to which he also adds the prologue under discussion here. Aegidius's interest in the allegorical meaning of the sacred page is exemplified by such accretions to the *Aurora* as the *Misterium de Tobia a correctore appositum*, the *Allegoria de libro Iudith*, and the *Allegoria de libro Hester*.<sup>31</sup> In his own words, Aegidius seeks to uncover the hidden flavor of the biblical text by cracking open the bone of the letter and tasting the sweet marrow inside. The scent of typology, continues Aegidius, adds taste to the letter of the text, and the figure in the words delights like the aroma in the herbs:

I proceed by appending a short addition to the Book of Tobit about the flavor which words possess through their figurative meaning; for the letter of the text, though bony on the outside, preserves this flavor inside, so if one sucks on it (i.e. the letter), its marrow will taste sweet to him. The plain narration of events is dry as bone on the outside, but the figurative scent, being stronger, flavors the words.<sup>32</sup>

This vivid sensory imagery of pleasant aroma and sweet taste hidden inside the letter captures perfectly Aegidius's exegetical approach which is exemplified also in his prologue to Peter Riga's *Euangelium*. In addition, the way in which the text of the prologue is constructed reveals another level of signification that is not immediately apparent. The seven seals of scripture represent first the mysteries of Christ's incarnation, or in other words, the past; then they are linked to the ecclesiastical sacraments, thus encompassing the present; and finally, the beliefs in the second coming of Christ and the last judgment invoke the prophecies about the future. In this way, without saying so explicitly, Aegidius reinforces the

<sup>31</sup> See Beichner, *Aurora*, 1:334–38, 383, and 396–98, respectively.

<sup>32</sup> "Tobie libro breuiter subscribere pergo, / Quid typico sensu uerba saporis habent; / Intus enim retinet foris ossea littera textus / Quam qui suggit ei dulce medulla sapit. / Aret ut os extra rerum narratio pura, / Ac typicus potior uerba saporat odor" (Beichner, *Aurora*, vol. 1:334, *Misterium de Tobia a correctore appositum*, vv. 1–6).

idea that the Bible contains the entire span of human history as predetermined by God's master plan. Hence the meaning of history is of paramount importance for both Alexander and Aegidius, even though they approach the concept differently.

Like Alexander, Aegidius is also concerned with memory, which is closely connected to the idea of historical process. Thus towards the end of his prologue Aegidius says that "it is easy to find in scripture the mysteries locked within it and the sacraments hidden inside, but it is not easy to remember all of them."<sup>33</sup> Unlike Alexander, however, who gives detailed practical advice about how the student should train his memory and who produces a verse compendium to help him do so, Aegidius relies fully on Christ. "Christ, who is our Lord and master," says Aegidius, will reveal the secrets and will grant us understanding in everything we need to know in order to be saved. Then, once we have been instructed, he will redeem us; once we have been redeemed, he will keep us in his faith, and finally he will save and bless us.<sup>34</sup>

Through his incarnation and ministry, death and resurrection, Christ has made humanity part of his heavenly kingdom and the task of every Christian is to learn about all the major events in his life, which are narrated in the Gospels. Poetic works like the *Aurora* prove to be very useful for this purpose because they offer memorable digests of an enormous quantity of medieval exegetical scholarship on the Bible. As a result, even though only Christ can grant true knowledge, the believer is encouraged to learn the basics himself in order to be prepared for the revelations which will eventually be granted to him. Again, although his starting point was different from that of Alexander, Aegidius arrived at the same conclusion: learning to the best of one's limited human abilities is an important step towards dispelling scriptural obscurity and unveiling the meaning of the sacred page.

From an exegetical point of view, the two authors discussed in this article represent the two major approaches to biblical interpretation: the

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<sup>33</sup> "Hec sunt que recipit fides catholica, quorum sunt in scripturis signata misteria et abscondita sacramenta, que facile est in scripturis reperire, sed non facile est omnia ad memoriam reuocare" (in "Aegidius of Paris and the Seven Seals," 143.194–96).

<sup>34</sup> "Ad hec et alia in hunc modum uenit Christus Dominus et magister noster, ut ea nobis reuelaret et in his nobis intelligentiam aperiret, quatinus de his tanquam de necessariis ad salutem instructos nos redderet, instructos redimeret, redemptos in sua fide conseruaret, postea saluaret et beatificaret" (in "Aegidius of Paris and the Seven Seals," 143.196–200).

literal (linguistic and immediate) and the allegorical (symbolic and delayed), even though, as was shown above, Aegidius does not lack historical sensibilities. In fact, the two approaches are complementary and represent the overarching belief clearly held in the Middle Ages that scriptural knowledge and divine truth will be revealed gradually and in various ways to the one who is searching for them. Mysteries are not explained easily; in fact, they are revealed only to the initiated who in this case are the Christian believers.<sup>35</sup> However, diligent study and mental discipline are required as well, if one hopes to reach spiritual enlightenment. In this difficult process, the faithful need to progress from literal to allegorical understanding using all the tools available to them: books and teachers, memory and meditation, faith and patience. Despite their differences, both Alexander and Aegidius are early-thirteenth-century teachers who exemplify the scholastic methods of study and who strive to bring order and clarity to the vast field of theological thought inherited from previous centuries in order to make it useful in the classroom.

This common purpose, as well as the concern with memorability expressed by both authors, can be readily explained by the fact that their prologues, as already mentioned, were written to accompany verse Bibles. After all, the main reasons for versifying the biblical narrative in the later Middle Ages were first didactic and second mnemonic.<sup>36</sup> In order for these aims to be achieved successfully, biblical *obscuritas* had to be dealt with in one way or another. Thus, Alexander of Ashby removes obscure and confusing passages from his poem, postponing their elucidation to the moment when the basics have been learned, memorized and internalized. Peter Riga and his reviser Aegidius of Paris, in contrast, take the student to the next level, where obscurity and symbolic language are confronted and clarified to the best ability of the poet. The student,

<sup>35</sup> Ziolkowski, "Theories of Obscurity," 141–43.

<sup>36</sup> See, for example, Greti Dinkova-Bruun, "Biblical Versification and Memory in the Later Middle Ages," in *Culture of Memory in East Central Europe in the Late Middle Ages and the Early Modern Period*, ed. Rafal Wójcik, Prace Biblioteki Uniwersyteckiej 30 (Poznań: Biblioteka Uniwersytecka, 2008), 53–64; Greti Dinkova-Bruun, "Why Versify the Bible in the Later Middle Ages and for Whom?: The Story of Creation in Verse," in *Dichten als Stoff-/Vermittlung: Formen, Ziele, Wirkungen. Beiträge zur Praxis der Versifikation lateinischer Texte im Mittelalter*, ed. Peter Stötz, Medienwandel – Medienwechsel – Medienwissen, Band 5 (Zürich: Chronos Verlag, 2008), 41–55; and Greti Dinkova-Bruun, "The Verse Bible as Aide-mémoire," in *The Making of Memory in the Middle Ages*, ed. Lucie Doležalová (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 115–31.

meanwhile, is expected to exercise diligence and persistence because the hidden truth of Scripture is so multifaceted and the paths to uncovering it so manifold that, with God's help, every Christian is bound to find the understanding that will enrich his faith and make him worthier of grace and salvation.



## Obscurity in Medieval Texts

# MEDIUM AEVUM QUOTIDIANUM

SONDERBAND XXX

# Obscurity in Medieval Texts

edited by  
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and Alessandro Zironi

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