

BOOK REVIEW

BIBLE TRANSLATIONS AND COMMENTARIES IN THE ENGLISH MIDDLE AGES: DIVERSITY OF EXEGESIS

Casandra Artacho Rodríguez*

Universidade do Porto

Biblical Commentary and Translation in Later Medieval England: Experiments in Interpretation, Andrew Kraebel. Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020, 326 pages, €26,83 ISBN: 978-1-108-48664-4

The fascinating diversity and profound complexity of biblical interpretation in medieval England is comprehensively explored in Andrew Kraebel's work *Biblical Commentary and Translation in Later Medieval England - Experiments in Interpretation*. The book focuses on significant aspects of exegesis and sheds light in particular on Richard Rolle, an outstanding representative of the 14th century, who "turns commentary into a form of writing that is at one scholastic and devotional" (2020, p. 3). Kraebel's analysis shows how Rolle skilfully fused traditional explanations with a personally pious approach, expanding the scholastic framework. This work sheds light on the highly creative and experimental nature of 14th-century scholastic exegetes, who viewed biblical commentary as a tool of authority and skilfully juggled between different interpretations to appeal to readers from different social and spiritual backgrounds (ibid.).

By analysing a variety of texts, Kraebel emphasises the complexity of exegesis and stresses the need for a more comprehensive view of medieval biblical interpretation to avoid misunderstandings, or "falling into easy binarisms, of intellectual and affective, Latin and vernacular, elite and demotic" (2020, p. 4). This work provides a deep insight into the evolution of exegesis from medieval to early Reformation thought, refuting simplistic historical categorisations. It shows how the scholastic exegetes not only interpreted Scripture but also developed new ways of reading and interpreting it, which illustrates their innovative power and love of experimentation.

Andrew Kraebel's *Biblical Commentary and Translation in Later Medieval England – Experiments in Interpretation* expands our understanding of the multi-layered nature of biblical commentary and emphasises the depth of interpretation that emerged during this period, offering a detailed and varied consideration of different perspectives on the interpretation of biblical texts, ranging from individual interpretation to broader social and spiritual contexts. Nevertheless, Kraebel also wants to stress "works that include translations of individual biblical books *and* extensive interpretive prose, glosses compiled from Latin sources or devised by the English exegete himself" (2020, p. 7). This gives him the impetus to

* casandraartacho@web.de

call them “commentary-translation” (ibid.) so as not to diminish their equal weight [he also coins the expression “hermeneutic eclecticism” for “commentaries that include an unpredictable variety of interpretive approaches to a single biblical text” (2020, p. 89)].

The book is structured in several chapters that deal with various facets of medieval biblical interpretation in England in the 14th century. The first chapter of the work focuses on the interpretative theories and traditions that flourished in medieval England, emphasising the variety of biblical commentaries available and the tendency of medieval commentators to favour alternative interpretations and to appreciate the complexity of the text. In particular, it stresses the multifaceted nature of biblical interpretation and hermeneutical diversity created by the scholastic exegetes of the 13th and 14th centuries. Readers are encouraged to explore the wide range of interpretations and to appreciate the significance of this diversity.

Different hermeneutical approaches to biblical interpretation are presented in the second chapter of the work, with particular attention given to the commentaries of John Wyclif, who was the first commentator known to have adopted an indexing system in his work (2020, p. 62). Wyclif attempted to go beyond (super)traditional approaches to interpretation, which he saw as literal and conventional, which in turn raises the question of not only what counts as “ordinary interpretation”, but also how he understood the literal meaning of the Gospels (2020, p. 67). An in-depth analysis of these approaches offers potential readers the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of the diversity of medieval exegesis.

At the centre of the third chapter is Richard Rolle and his integration of personal mystical experiences into biblical commentaries, which had a significant impact on the development of exegesis in the 14th century and greatly influenced the understanding of religious progress and spiritual experience in this period (2020, p. 94). Rolle is portrayed as a prominent mystic and authority of medieval England (2020, p. 91). His unique approach to biblical interpretation, which included an emphasis on personal mystical experiences and the integration of scholastic resources (ibid.), significantly shaped the contemporary understanding of biblical texts.

Dedicated to various texts and commentaries exploring diverse hermeneutical approaches to biblical interpretation, the fourth section, entitled “Moral Experiments: Middle English Matthew Commentaries,” illustrates the ongoing dynamics and intricate nature of biblical interpretation across the Middle Ages. The commentators of this period endeavoured to make the biblical text accessible to a wider audience (2020, p. 135), offering various interpretations and superimposing moral meanings onto the literal meaning of the Scriptures.

Finally, the epilogue examines the views of John Bale and William Tyndale on the interpretation of Scripture and illustrates the challenges faced by the reformists of the 16th century. In particular, it deals with the difficulties that arose when trying to separate the work of biblical translation from that of commentary. This section also outlines the development of exegesis up to the Reformation period and emphasises the remarkable diversity and experimentation in biblical interpretation. Kraebel’s work emphasises the efforts of these exegetes not only to preserve traditional explanations, but also to develop new interpretations in order to make the biblical text accessible to different audiences. The consideration of different groups of readers – from religious women to monastic lay brothers – emphasises the

transition from Latin to Middle English commentaries and their importance for the dissemination of biblical texts in the vernacular.

The hermeneutical variety that juggled literal meaning, allegorical interpretation and other hermeneutical approaches are addressed in the book. It also emphasises the integration of personal experiences and mystical interpretations that scholars such as Richard Rolle incorporated into their exegesis.

This work is recommended for all those who wish to gain a deeper understanding of the complex approaches to interpretation and the development of biblical exegesis in medieval England, as it provides a solid basis for exploring the diversity of hermeneutical traditions. However, the reader must either know the Bible very well in order to recognise all the passages cited or must have one at hand to refer to. However, Kraebel translates the Latin quotations into English, thus helping those who do not read that language to understand the text. As for the Middle English quotations, these are discussed in sufficient detail to render them accessible to the non-specialist reader.

Overall, this study offers valuable insights into the transmission and interpretation of biblical texts in different languages and contexts, which is of particular interest to translation studies. I would have liked to have had a little more about translation theory, but I understand that the book is more a work of biblical studies than of translation studies. Kraebel manages to present critical viewpoints from the field of “commentary-translations” while taking a broader look at various scholars so that the reader can contextualise everything he explains.

About the author: Casandra Artacho Rodríguez completed her Bachelor's degree in German Studies at the University of Santiago de Compostela in 2023. She is now studying the Master's degree: "Erasmus Mundus: Transnational German Studies". Her field of research is the (German-language) literature of the Middle Ages, especially *Minnesang* and heroic epic poetry.