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## Nicholas of Lyra's Literal and Moral Postillae on the Book of Esther

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## **Acknowledgements**

Many thanks to my many friends in Oxford, who made times of leisure happier and times of work lighter.

Special thanks to my siblings and siblings-in-law: Carolyn, Devon, Jack, Mary, Kenneth, Thomas, Gabriella, Mark, Michael, Aurora, and Timothy. I love you all very much.

Sincere thanks to my supervisors, Professor Anna Sapir Abulafia and Professor Lesley Smith, for unceasing help and encouragement. Anything of merit in this thesis is due to their insight and instruction; anything not of merit is in spite of frequent, friendly exhortation to greater care and precision.

Finally, my deepest love and gratitude to my parents, Mark and Mary Crabtree, who have never failed in their love and support, and to whom I can only ever aspire to be sufficiently grateful.

### Short Abstract

Nicholas of Lyra (c. 1270-1349) wrote two commentaries on the entire Bible: one according to the literal, the other according to the spiritual (what he called the 'moral') sense of scripture. In keeping with tradition, the Franciscan declares that the literal sense is the foundation for any other sense; what he meant by literal and moral senses and what relationship exists between them are questions which have no clear answer. Nicholas's exegesis is also remarkable for an unprecedented use of Jewish sources in his literal commentary. Most of the scholarly engagement with Nicholas's work centres around this first commentary, and explores Nicholas's attitude toward his Jewish sources. I am interested in understanding the relationship between the two commentaries. Did Nicholas's unprecedented use of Jewish sources in his literal commentary lead to any serious innovations in his spiritual commentary? In what sense is the literal a 'foundation' for the moral?

These are questions not yet addressed by scholars of his work, but answers to these questions would provide insights into the development of the senses of scripture, and a more complete picture of Nicholas himself as a Franciscan exegete. I am using Nicholas's literal and moral commentaries on the book of Esther to explore the relationship between the two commentaries. Esther is an interesting context in which to explore these questions because Nicholas was the first Christian exegete to write a literal commentary on this book, which had traditionally been allegorised to contrast Jews and Christians.

I will argue that the content and methods of Jewish sources are used by Nicholas in his innovative literal commentary as part of an effort to provide the literal sense of Esther with a religious and spiritual value in its own right, a value rooted in the perceived historical truth of the events. This theological attitude toward history increased the importance of the literal/historical sense of Esther, which no longer needed to be allegorised to have significance for Christians. This same theological and historiographical interest shapes Nicholas's moral commentary also. He does provide an allegory for the book of Esther, but his allegory has its value in being historical, rather

than doctrinal. Ultimately, I believe Nicholas is best understood as a Church historian, with a deeply theological understanding of history. My study contributes to our understanding of later medieval Christian Hebraism, Franciscan historiography, and changing perceptions of the four-fold senses method.

## Long Abstract

My thesis explores the exegesis of the Franciscan Nicholas of Lyra (c. 1270-1349), who has long been thought remarkable for his extensive use of Jewish exegesis in a time of general hostility toward Jews in France, his home. Nicholas wrote his *Postilla super totam bibliam* according to the literal sense of scripture between 1322/3 and 1331. Two interconnected questions surround much current scholarship on this commentary: what was his understanding of the literal sense of scripture; and what was his attitude toward the Jewish sources which played an essential role in his exposition of it?

What has so far been neglected by scholars of Nicholas's work is his second commentary on the entire Bible, his *Postilla Moralis*, or 'moral commentary', written between 1333 and 1339. This provides a spiritual interpretation of scripture. Building on studies of Nicholas's literal commentary, this thesis explores the relationship between Nicholas's literal and spiritual exegesis. The Franciscan declares (in keeping with tradition) that the literal sense is the foundation for any other sense, but what this meant in practice is unclear, and it is especially unclear if his extensive use of Jewish sources in the literal commentary shaped his spiritual commentary in any significant way.

I will use Nicholas's literal and moral postillae on the book of Esther to interrogate the relationship between the two commentaries. Esther is a particularly interesting context for exploring these questions, because the very few Christian commentaries that were written on Esther were allegorical and distinctly polemical, contrasting Jews and Christians. Nicholas is the first scholar to attempt a literal interpretation of Esther, and his spiritual interpretation departs in significant ways from the usual Christian allegory.

The thesis is divided into four chapters. The first chapter begins with an introduction to Nicholas, which includes a discussion of Christian perception of Jews in general and Jewish-Christian relations in France specifically. The primary purpose of the first chapter is to explore the interpretive principle that developed among medieval Christians, who expounded the Bible

according to (generally) four senses— literal, allegorical, moral, and anagogical. None of these was strictly defined. What was understood to be a literal reading changed throughout the medieval period. What medieval expositors understood by these ‘senses of scripture’, and what was the purpose(s) of their use, are not yet fully answered questions of some interest.

I will situate Nicholas's work within this tradition, asking how appropriately the term "Christian Hebraism" has been applied to him. A substantial portion of this first chapter is therefore given to understanding the history of Christian use of Jewish sources. This will involve exploring the development of peshat exegesis amongst twelfth-century Jewish scholars like Rabbi Solomon ben Issac (Rashi), a development which coincided with new interest in the literal sense, especially at the school of St. Victor.

The reasons medieval Christians turned to Jewish exegesis and the Hebrew language were complex and multifaceted. A desire to correct the biblical text, an interest in disputations with contemporary Jews, and an emphasis on the literal sense were all reasons for Christians to consult Jewish texts and attempt some study of Hebrew. This last was due to a perception of Jews as "stuck" in a literal interpretation of scripture, denying the spiritual interpretation which from a Christian perception revealed Christ. Current scholarship has explored how Christian recourse to Jewish sources was a natural result of the Christian belief that a more perfect understanding of the Old Testament could only mean a more perfect understanding of the New. In the final analysis, Jewish scholarship might be deemed admirable, insightful, and useful by Christian Hebraists, but only in so far as it served the Christian belief that Christ is the ultimate revelation of both Testaments.

That Jewish insight was deemed useful in arriving at a more perfect understanding of both Testaments is an explanation for Christian interest in Jewish texts, but the impact the inclusion of Jewish scholarship had on the content of Christian exegesis requires closer examination. This is one question I will keep in mind as I explore Nicholas's two commentaries on Esther: did his use of Jewish sources shape his exegesis as a whole, or did his Jewish sources

appropriately belong only to a literal exposition, given the belief that the Jews deny a spiritual sense?

After providing a synopsis of the story of Esther, the second chapter explores the main features of medieval Jewish and Christian interpretations of this book before Nicholas. As Rashi is Nicholas's most preferred Jewish source, my overview of the much more extensive body of medieval Jewish exegesis will be guided by showing how Rashi fits into this tradition. This will involve a summary of rabbinic midrash on Esther, much of which Rashi included in his commentary.

There are far fewer Christian interpretations of Esther and the most important is certainly that by the Carolingian Rabanus Maurus. Rabanus wrote the first Christian commentary on Esther, which became the source text for the *Glossa Ordinaria*, and was therefore widely disseminated through that medium. Rabanus's interpretation is allegorical. It aimed to teach Christians that the Church had replaced the Jews as God's chosen people. The Gloss repeats the main features of Rabanus's interpretation, but with subtle changes of emphasis. Hugh of St. Cher's *postillae* on the book do not depart from Rabanus's interpretation in many significant ways, but his does indicate for the first time an interest in historical questions.

These historical questions are a major concern of Nicholas's literal sense of Esther, which is the focus of chapter three. In this chapter, I analyse Nicholas's literal interpretation with special attention to how Jewish sources function in this context. Using an interpretive principle of Nicholas's exegesis (the *divisio textus* or *forma tractatus*) as guide, I will demonstrate that both the content and methods of Jewish exegesis are used by Nicholas to present the literal meaning of Esther as possessing religious and spiritual value in its own right. It is a story of God's providential action in history. The result is a greatly elevated literal sense of Esther.

In the final chapter, I examine Nicholas's *Postilla Moralis* which clearly demonstrates that the organising principle of Nicholas's exegesis as a whole is a deep and theologically inflected interest in history. While elements of Rabanus's allegory remain, they are presented not as the

essential spiritual meaning but as a small facet of a much larger story of the history of the Church. Nicholas allegorises the story of Esther to tell a story of Church history from antiquity to within a few hundred years of his own time. His interest here is essentially the same as that of the literal. He wants to show that all of history is the unfolding of God's providential plan.

Ultimately, my thesis demonstrates that Nicholas's spiritual sense is just as historically orientated as his literal, and his idea of history is deeply theological. This situates Nicholas in a specifically Franciscan tradition of biblical exegesis and interest in historiography. Examining both Nicholas's literal and spiritual commentaries and the relationship between them, my study allows for a re-evaluation of Nicholas's exegetical programme as a whole. His literal sense is a specifically historical literal sense, and his moral sense is also historical. In light of this research, Nicholas is best understood as a Church historian, with a deeply theological and sacramental idea of history.

## Introduction

The ways medieval Franciscans read and interpreted the Bible is the foundational interest of this thesis, which explores the exegesis of one such Franciscan. Nicholas of Lyra (c. 1270-1349) wrote his *Postilla super totam bibliam* according to the literal sense of scripture between 1322/3 and 1331. In this *postilla litteralis*, he utilizes Jewish sources to an unprecedented extent, and two interconnected questions surround much current scholarship on this commentary: what was his understanding of the literal sense of scripture; what was his attitude toward the Jewish sources which play so essential a role in his exposition of it?

Herman Hailperin was the first to explore the extent to which Nicholas used Jewish exegesis, especially that of Rabbi Solomon ben Isaac (known as Rashi). Hailperin sees Nicholas as the culmination of a tradition of Christians using Jewish exegesis for scholarly rather than polemical purposes.<sup>1</sup> It was an interest in the literal sense, especially the historical aspects of the literal sense, that sent dedicated Christian scholars to engage with the richness of Jewish exegesis on what they called the Old Testament. In her exploration of developments in the literal sense of scripture, Beryl Smalley also notes Nicholas's extensive and appreciative use of Jewish sources for this purpose.<sup>2</sup> This use of Jewish sources by Christians, sometime described as "Christian Hebraism", is explored further by Deanna Copeland Klepper in connection to the literal sense.<sup>3</sup> Jeremy Cohen departs from this positive assessment of Nicholas, describing the Franciscan as a key figure of an anti-Jewish Mendicant movement which departed from an Augustinian defence

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<sup>1</sup> Herman Hailperin, *Rashi and the Christian Scholars* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1963), especially pages 250-251.

<sup>2</sup> Beryl Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages* 3rd ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1978), 344.

<sup>3</sup> Deanna Copeland Klepper, "Franciscan Interest in Hebrew Scholarship", in *Nicholas of Lyra: the Senses of Scripture*, edited by Philip D.W. Krey and Lesley Smith (Boston: Brill, 2000); idem., *The Insight of Unbelievers: Nicholas of Lyra and Christian Reading of Jewish Text in the Later Middle Ages*. 1st ed. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010).

of Jews based on their ignorance of Jesus's Messiahship. This group presented post-biblical Jewish material as irrational and absurd.<sup>4</sup>

The question at issue is how to reconcile an extensive and appreciative use of Jewish sources with a clearly Christocentric understanding of scripture. The collection of papers edited by Philip Krey and Lesley Smith highlights this ambiguity, while in many instances also demonstrating that Nicholas's Jewish sources are supposedly included to assist a literal/historical interpretation of scripture, even while the parameters of what Nicholas considered 'literal' were significantly broader than those of his predecessors.<sup>5</sup>

All these useful studies will be engaged with throughout this thesis. What has so far been largely neglected by scholars of Nicholas's work is his second commentary on the entire Bible, his *postilla moralis*, or 'commentary according to the moral sense of scripture', written between 1333 and 1339. Building on previous studies of Nicholas's literal commentary, this thesis explores the relationship between the two commentaries and the overall principles which guide Nicholas's hermeneutic – that is, his method of interpretation and his understanding of the senses of scripture. If Nicholas's understanding of what pertained to a literal interpretation was especially broad, in a way that was particular to him, did that affect how he understood the spiritual interpretation? Does the influence of Jewish sources end with the literal? The Franciscan declares (in keeping with tradition) that the literal sense is the foundation for any other interpretation, but what this meant in practice is unclear, and it is especially unclear if his extensive use of Jewish sources in the literal commentary shaped his spiritual commentary in any significant way.

I will use Nicholas's two commentaries on the book of Esther to explore the relationship between the Franciscan's literal and moral senses. Esther is a useful context to begin answering

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<sup>4</sup> Jeremy Cohen, *The Friars and the Jews: the Evolution of Medieval Anti-Judaism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), 170; idem., "The Jews as the Killers of Christ in the Latin Tradition, from Augustine to the Friars", *Traditio* 39 (1983): 1–27.

<sup>5</sup> *Nicholas of Lyra: The Senses of Scripture*, ed. Philip D. W. Krey and Lesley Smith (Boston: Brill, 2000).

questions about Nicholas's hermeneutic as a whole, because while there is an abundance of Jewish exegesis on the book of Esther, there is relatively little Christian exegesis, and none at all on the literal sense until Nicholas.

The thesis is divided into four chapters. The first chapter is an introduction to Nicholas and an exploration of the interpretive principle that developed among medieval Christians, the four 'senses of scripture'. Conventionally, these were seen as the literal, allegorical, moral, and anagogical, although none of them was strictly defined. What was understood to be a literal reading changed throughout the medieval period. What medieval expositors understood by these 'senses of scripture', and what was the purpose(s) of their use, are questions of some interest which have not yet been fully answered. I will situate Nicholas's work within this tradition. I will also ask how appropriately the term "Christian Hebraism" has been applied to him.

Chapter two examines the tradition of interpretation of Esther by both Jews and Christians. The chapter is organised around the question: how did Jewish and Christian exegetes discover a sacred meaning for Esther? From here, I explore what Nicholas does with the literal sense, the subject of chapter three, and then, in chapter four, how his spiritual interpretation relates both to his first commentary and to the standard Christian allegory found, for example, in the *Glossa Ordinaria*.

As noted by many scholars of Christian Hebraism, Jewish scholarship might be deemed admirable, insightful, and useful by Christian exegetes, but only in so far as it served the Christian belief that Christ is the ultimate revelation of both Testaments. That Jewish insight was deemed useful in arriving at a more perfect understanding of both Testaments is an explanation *for* Christian interest in Jewish texts, but the impact the inclusion of Jewish scholarship had *on* the content and method of Christian exegesis requires closer examination. By exploring both Nicholas's literal and spiritual exegesis on the book of Esther and the relationship between them, my study will offer a new evaluation of Nicholas's exegesis, and contribute to our understanding of later medieval Franciscan exegesis, especially how recourse to Jewish texts fits within a

changing perception of the four-fold sense of scripture, and how these changes might have affected the use of Jewish texts.

## **Chapter One: Nicholas of Lyra and Christian Hebraism**

The aim of this chapter is to introduce Nicholas as a medieval Franciscan biblical scholar, and to summarise the current scholarly consensus on his exegesis. Unusually, his exegesis is characterised by a sustained, appreciative, occasionally preferential but at all times judicious use of Jewish sources in an exposition of a 'literal' interpretation of scripture. This both situates him in a tradition of Christian interest in the Hebrew language and Rabbinic scholarship, and indicates that he departs from this tradition in significant ways. Before considering Nicholas's exegesis of the book of Esther therefore, I will outline the details and context of his life. Without this background, the radical nature of his utilisation of Jewish texts cannot be understood.

This chapter, then, will proceed as follows: 1) an introduction to Nicholas's life, with an emphasis on his time in the Franciscan order; 2) a brief overview of the state of Jewish-Christian relations in thirteenth-century France; 3) the methods adopted by medieval Christians in interpreting the Bible; 4) the development of Christian interest in the literal sense of scripture, and concomitant with this, the development of Christian Hebraism, that is, how, why, and when medieval scholars incorporated Jewish material into their work; and 5) the question of Nicholas's place in this tradition.

The last point provides the organising principle of this chapter. Understanding what is meant by "Christian Hebraism", and asking how appropriately this term has been applied to Nicholas, will provide a framework which allows the questions I am bringing to his exegesis on Esther to inform a broader understanding of Nicholas himself, and later medieval Jewish-Christian intellectual relations more generally.

## 1.1: Introduction to Nicholas

Nicholas was born in Lyra, a small village in Normandy, in the diocese of Évreux sometime around 1270.<sup>1</sup> The details of his early life are obscure, which is typical even of influential figures from this period. It seems likely that his earliest education was close to home, perhaps in the Cathedral school in the Évreux diocese.<sup>2</sup>

Wherever it took place, the speed with which Nicholas advanced in the Franciscan order indicates that his education before joining must have been particularly good. When Nicholas entered the order at Verneuil, sometime around 1300 or 1301, he was sent almost immediately to Paris, the European centre for biblical studies, to the Franciscan house, *Les Cordeliers* (which was

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<sup>1</sup> The exact date is unknown, but is generally given as around 1270. The sources of primary importance in providing a chronology of Nicholas's life and works are: Jules Viard, "La date de la mort de Nicholas de Lyre," *Bibliothèque de l'École des Chartes* 56 (1895): 141ff; Henri Labrousse, "Sources de la biographie de Nicolas de Lyre," *Études Franciscaines* (EF) 16 (1906): 383-404; idem., "Biographie de Nicolas de Lyre," EF 17 (1908): 41-53, 153-176, 368-380, 593-fin; EF 35 (1923): 171-187, 400-432; Charles Langlois, "Nicholas de Lyre, Frère Mineur," *Histoires Littéraires de la France* 36 (1927): 356-357; Heinrich Rütthing, "Kritische Bemerkungen zu einer mittelalterlichen Biographie des Nikolaus von Lyra," *Archivum Franciscanum Historicum* 60 (1967): 42-54. See also Pierre Feret, *La Faculté de théologie de Paris de Moyen Âge*, vol. 3 (Paris: A. Picard, 1896), 331.

Also important are three recent theses on Nicholas: J. Kiecker, 'The Hermeneutical Principles and Exegetical Methods of Nicholas of Lyra, O.F.M.' unpubl. PhD thesis, Marquette University (Milwaukee: 1978); P.D.W. Krey, 'Nicholas of Lyra: Apocalypse Commentary as Historiography', unpubl. PhD thesis, Univ. of Chicago (Chicago: 1990); D.C. Klepper, 'Nicholas of Lyra's *Quaestio de adventu Christi* and the Franciscan Encounter with Jewish Tradition in the Late Middle Ages', unpubl. PhD thesis, Northwestern University (Chicago: 1995). See also *Nicholas of Lyra: The Senses of Scripture*, edited Philip D. W. Krey and Lesley Smith (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 1-12. Henceforth Krey and Smith.

Note that 'Lyre' is spelled variously when referring both to the village and to Nicholas himself. When referring to Nicholas, I am using the spelling from the *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* which designates him Nicholas of Lyra. This is also the spelling typically used in the latest studies on Nicholas, for instance in Krey and Smith.

<sup>2</sup> Elementary and grammar education usually took place at home, at the home of a teacher, or at a religious institution. See Sarah Lynch, *Elementary and Grammar Education in Late Medieval France: Lyon, 1285-1530* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017), 119. Frequent references in Nicholas's work to the language and customs of Normandy makes it likely that his earliest education was there. See Langlois, "Nicholas", 356-357. Herman Hailperin also points out that in his later scholarly work, Nicholas translates Latin into words in a Norman dialect. See Herman Hailperin, *Rashi and the Christian Scholars* (Pittsburgh: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1963), 137, 282. Henceforth Hailperin.

I found that in his literal commentary on Esther, for example, Nicholas mentions the drinking habits of Normandy. When describing Ahasuerus's feast and the drinking that took place there, Nicholas says "[Ahasurus] would not allow anyone in his hall to use the disorderly and irrational manner of some barbarians, who induce other men to drink with excessive rudeness. Such a habit came into Normandy, which is part of Gaul, from the barbarous people living near the arctic pole, who took that land and plundered it." This is in the Literal Postilla on Esther 1.8 at the verse which begins: "*Nec erant qui nolentes cogeret ad bibendum*". Full citations of the Literal Postilla will be provided in Chapter Three.

For information on a medieval child's primary education, see Annemarieke Willemsen, *Back to the Schoolyard: The Daily Practice of Medieval and Renaissance Education* (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2008), ch. 2. For a good discussion of preparatory teaching in the medieval Parisian schools, see Astrik L. Gabriel, "Preparatory Teaching in the Parisian Colleges during the Fourteenth Century" in *Garlandia: Studies in the History of the Mediaeval University* (Frankfurt Am Main: Knecht, 1969); James Bowen, *A History of Western Education*, vol. 2 (London: Methuen, 1972), 14, 19.

named for the knots in the girdles of the Franciscan habits).<sup>3</sup> Nicholas began his theological studies immediately, and we know he completed them by 1308 because he was made regent master in that year. Only those who had completed the theology programme at the University of Paris were eligible to become regent master.<sup>4</sup> Nicholas must have completed his theological studies in seven or eight years. This indicates that *before* he arrived in Paris, he had already attained the equivalent of a "masters" training in the arts, and probably had some theological training as well.<sup>5</sup>

According to John Marenbon's description of thirteenth-century university education (which typically began for the student at about fourteen or fifteen years of age) a masters degree in the arts would have meant training in grammar (Latin literature and the structure of language), rhetoric, logic, some Aristotle, and participation in "disputations", that is, addressing questions arising from set texts.<sup>6</sup> This training was a necessary precursor to any theological study. The theology programme generally lasted nine to ten years. For the first six or seven years, students attended lectures in which the Bible and Peter Lombard's *Sentences* were "read" (that is, explained or expounded), in addition to disputations. In the final four years, students were required to expound the Bible and the *Sentences* themselves.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> It is now generally believed that Nicholas joined the Franciscans in 1300/1301. This is based on a record of the epitaph on his tomb at *Les Cordeliers* and the established date of his death. See Labrosse, "Sources", 396-397. The record of this epitaph (the actual tomb was damaged in 1580 by a fire that destroyed the convent) states that Nicholas died in 1340 and was a Franciscan for 48 years. It is now generally accepted that the copy of the epitaph has a scribal error, and that Nicholas died in 1349. This would date his entry to the order in 1300 or 1301, rather than in 1291 or 1292. Cf. Hailperin, 137; Langlois, "Nicholas", 356; Feret, *La Faculte*, vol. 3, 331.

<sup>4</sup> P. Glorieux, *Répertoire Des Maîtres En Théologie De Paris Au XIIIe Siècle*, Études De Philosophie Médiévale; 17-18, (Paris: J. Vrin, 1933), vol. 2, 215; Labrosse, "Biographie" (1908), 593-595.

John Marenbon describes the programme of study which had to be completed before becoming a regent master. See John Marenbon, *Later Medieval Philosophy (1150-1350): An Introduction* (London: Taylor and Francis Group, 1987), 20-24.

<sup>5</sup> Marenbon, *Later Medieval Philosophy*, 33. Marenbon says that "before he could enter the faculty of theology, a student had to be a master of arts or to have received an equally thorough training in a mendicant *studium*."

<sup>6</sup> Marenbon, *Later Medieval Philosophy*, 31-33. For a general overview on education in the medieval universities see Bowen, *A History*, ch. 4.

<sup>7</sup> Marenbon, *Later Medieval Philosophy*, 33-34. Peter Lombard (c. 1100-1160) wrote his *Libri Quattuor Sententiarum*, his "Four Books of Sentences" between 1150 and 1159. It was a systematic treatment of theology which became a set text for university students in the 13th century. I will discuss the importance of the *Sentences* in more detail below.

It was only after completing this entire programme of study in the arts and theology that a student could become a regent master.<sup>8</sup> As regent, Nicholas would have expounded the Bible and the *Sentences* for the *cursi biblici* (students beginning the programme of theological study, who were obliged to give cursory expositions of the Bible) and for the *baccalauri sententiarum* (students who had advanced to expounding the *Sentences*), and he would have presided over the disputations.<sup>9</sup>

We know, too, that Nicholas had already begun his study of Hebrew and Rabbinic sources before arriving in Paris, as his earliest exegetical works, written between 1301 and 1303, already show this influence.<sup>10</sup> Hebrew was not a regular part of the university curriculum, although some scholars (especially mendicants) were interested in Hebrew.<sup>11</sup> Nicholas's interest in the language seems to be linked with his interest in the literal sense of scripture, which I will discuss in more detail below.

There is rather more documentary evidence for Nicholas's life after he joined the mendicants, and we are on more stable ground when exploring his career after he completed his studies in 1308. What emerges from these sources is the sketch of the life of an able administrator, diplomatically involved in the theological concerns and controversies of his order specifically and the Church in general, and engaged with the interests of the Capetian royal family. In addition to teaching at the university (and even before he completed his own studies) he was involved in ecclesiastic concerns, and specifically inquisitorial trials.

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<sup>8</sup> Marenbon, *Later Medieval Philosophy*, 31-33.

<sup>9</sup> Marenbon, *Later Medieval Philosophy*, 32-35.

<sup>10</sup> Klepper, 'Nicholas of Lyra's *Quaestio*', 32, 55-58.

<sup>11</sup> Hebrew was not part of the set university curriculum, but the Council of Vienna (1312) did encourage Christian scholars to study it. See Langlois, "Nicholas", 366. Pope John XXII also appointed the first teacher of Hebrew at Paris in 1319, and it is very likely that when Nicholas arrived in Paris he would have had the help of Jewish converts and other scholars of Hebrew in continuing his study of the language. See Rüthing, "Kritische Bemerkungen", 51; Langlois, "Nicholas", 363, 366; Hailperin, 134. I will discuss this and address the question of how Nicholas might have learned Hebrew in more detail below.

Nicholas participated in the trial of the Templars in 1307, and the trial and subsequent condemnation of Marguerite Porete for heresy in 1310.<sup>12</sup> This illustrates an important point about the religious order Nicholas had elected to join: by this time, Franciscans occupied positions of power and authority, as university professors, inquisitors, bishops, and cardinals. The first Franciscan Pope, Nicholas IV, was elected in 1288. This worldly success was a departure from Francis of Assisi's original intention, and it introduced an ongoing crisis of self-definition unresolved in Nicholas's lifetime. The lynchpin of the debate was the Franciscan definition of poverty.

Franciscans understood their vow of poverty as meaning that they owned nothing individually, but rather received everything from the communities in which they lived or, in such case as living quarters, from the Pope, to whom they were obedient. This might be a fairly straightforward arrangement if the order consists of only a few men, as it did when Francis originally conceived it; but after his death in 1226, Francis's order expanded rapidly. This growth, coupled with the itinerate nature of mendicant life, and a new emphasis on formal study (which Francis himself would certainly not have approved), inevitably transformed the order. Franciscans increasingly began to fill positions of authority, and were made agents of the Pope, (for instance, as inquisitors).<sup>13</sup> Franciscans found themselves entrenched in the world Francis had founded the order to escape.

In the later thirteenth century, the order was re-negotiating what their vows of poverty and obedience meant. The pomp and ceremony of a medieval episcopate, or the renown and prestige of a faculty chair, to give two examples, were not obviously consistent with a life of poverty, and both involve *giving* orders, rather than obeying them. But the debate was more academic than this, originating in a specific understanding of the Franciscan vow of poverty.

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<sup>12</sup> Glorieux, *Répertoire*, 215; Labrosse, "Biographie" (1908), 595; idem., "Sources", 388. For more information on Marguerite, see the introduction in *Marguerite Porete: The Mirror of Simple Souls*, tr. E. Babinsky (New York: Paulist Press, 1993), 13-26.

<sup>13</sup> David Burr, *The Spiritual Franciscans: From Protest to Persecution in the Century After Saint Francis* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001), 1-9.

Everyone agreed that the vow of poverty meant a lack of ownership. Ownership is straightforward: you either own something, or you do not. But there were those within the order who wanted to restrict not just ownership but *use* of goods. They wanted the *usus pauper*, the restricted use of goods, to be part of the vow. Restricting one's use of received goods involves an attitude toward life, rather than a prescriptive way of understanding your relationship to the goods you use but do not possess. The extent to which one restricts one's use of goods in accordance with a vow is not straightforward at all, and if falling short of what was appropriate involved a mortal sin, it was perceived as spiritually very dangerous.<sup>14</sup> In other words, the 'restriction of goods', because it is not strictly definable, was, in the view of some Franciscans, much too loose a definition of the vow.

This was an aspect of a larger debate between Franciscans and Dominicans. The Franciscan vows involved promising to observe everything in the Gospel (lack of ownership being an aspect of this). Since observing everything in the Gospel is not possible, the Dominicans charged that the Franciscan rule was dangerous, in that it made the friars' vows an impossibility, thus making mortal sin inevitable. Pope Nicholas III's (r. 1277-1280) papal bull *Exiit qui seminat* (1279) settled this issue on the Franciscan side, declaring that the vow to observe everything in the Gospel is not taken absolutely, but according to Francis's intention. Some aspects of the rule are precepts (binding rules) but some are counsels (advice). Christ had no possessions, and this was an aspect of the perfect Christian life, but in recognition of and mercy toward the weakness of human persons, Christ allowed his disciples the shared use of goods (or a shared 'purse'). Nicholas III put a ban on any further discussion of Franciscan poverty, intending his bull to be a final solution to the problem.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Burr, *The Spiritual Franciscans*, 51-53. For a more detailed treatment of the *Usus Pauper* controversy, see David Burr, *Olivi and Franciscan Poverty: The Origins of the Usus Pauper Controversy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017).

<sup>15</sup> Burr, *The Spiritual Franciscans*, 51-56. Nicholas III's position was largely based on that of Bonaventure. For the text of *Exiit qui seminat*, see *Corpus Juris Canonici*, ed. Emil Friedberg and Aemilius Ludwig Richter (Leipzig: 1881): vol. 2, *Liber Sextus Decretalium Bon.* VIII, lib. 5, tit. 12 (*De verborum significatione*), c. 3 (*Exiit qui seminat*), cols 1109-1121.

Unfortunately for the more rigorous members of the order, Nicholas III, mostly concerned with defending the Franciscan vow against assertions that it was spiritually dangerous, did not address whether restricted use was part of the vow of poverty, simply asserting that owning nothing did not restrict the use of anything.<sup>16</sup> The rigorists, or 'spirituals' as they were called, continued to agitate within the order for some time, and were occasionally executed as heretics for their pains. By the time Nicholas joined, the standard position was that the vow entailed a lack of ownership but not restricted use.<sup>17</sup> However, as David Burr notes, the powerful positions occupied by many Franciscans gave the vow of poverty quite a hollow sound: it seemed ridiculous for a wealthy and powerful Franciscan bishop to declare to his friends that he was in fact very poor, because he only *used* his wealth and did not *own* it.<sup>18</sup>

This was a difficult position to be in, especially for those Franciscans who were sincere in their attempts to observe the principle behind the definition of the vow. This long debate culminated in a direct attack on traditional Franciscan self-definition: Pope John XXII (r. 1316-1334) argued that 'use' entailed or included ownership, and that Christ and the Apostles did have rights of property, assertions that upset the Franciscan definition of poverty which *Exiit qui seminat* had been issued to protect.<sup>19</sup> In his bull *Quia nonnunquam* (1322) John declared he could lift the ban on discussion put in place by Nicholas III and revisit the Franciscan definition of poverty.<sup>20</sup>

In the midst of this controversy, in 1319, Nicholas was appointed Provincial Minister of France. In this capacity he attended the general chapter of the Franciscans in Perugia (1322),

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<sup>16</sup> Burr, *The Spiritual Franciscans*, 57-58.

<sup>17</sup> Burr, *The Spiritual Franciscans*, ch. 8 and 9. My summary is a simplification of a complicated process, and debates about poverty were ongoing in the order.

<sup>18</sup> Burr, *The Spiritual Franciscans*, 265.

<sup>19</sup> *Ad Conditurum* (1322) retracted the practice, established by Nicholas III, that the Pope owned the goods Franciscans merely used. *Cum inter nonnullos* (1323) stated that it was heresy to claim that Christ and his apostles had no right of possession.

<sup>20</sup> Burr, *The Spiritual Franciscans*, 275. See also J. H. Moorman, *A History of the Franciscan Order from its Origins to the Year 1517* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), 315-317. Nicholas's own attitude toward the question of Franciscan poverty was a moderate but traditional one: that Franciscans should use goods in common while not owning them outright. For further discussion, see Kevin Madigan, "Lyra on the Gospel of Matthew" and Lesley Smith, "The Gospel Truth: Nicholas of Lyra on John", in Krey and Smith.

where the question of poverty and recent papal attacks on Franciscan self-definition were discussed.<sup>21</sup> At this chapter meeting, Nicholas was one of those who signed a document challenging the Pope's authority to change the decrees of his predecessors. This was a question of vital importance in the order, part of an effort to finalize a debate that had seen Franciscan brothers denouncing and burning each other as heretics.

Sometime around 1333 saw Nicholas involved in yet another challenge to John XXII, when he took part in a debate, sponsored by the Capetian king, on the Pope's position regarding the Beatific Vision. John XXII claimed that the faithful who died did not immediately see God or the Beatific Vision. His contention was that no one beheld the Beatific Vision until the final judgement. The position was roundly condemned by the faculty at the University of Paris, and Nicholas wrote a treatise called *De visione divine essentie* in line with the University's position.<sup>22</sup>

In addition to his business with the politics of the Franciscan order, and Catholic theology in general, Nicholas maintained a positive relationship with the French royal court.<sup>23</sup> He participated in the inquisitorial processes already mentioned, and he was made an executor of the will of Jeanne of Burgundy (d. 1330), the wife of King Philip V (r. 1316-1322). He was also present when Blanche, the daughter of Philip VI, became a nun.<sup>24</sup>

After this very active life, Nicholas died in 1349 and was buried at *Les Cordeliers*.<sup>25</sup> He was involved in the administration and politics of the Franciscan order and the Capetian royal family, and managed to steer a tactful course through the controversies of his day. In the midst of his

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<sup>21</sup> Labrosse, "Biographie" (1908) 596-597, 600-601. He was also named Provincial Minister of Burgundy in 1324. As Minister he would have been responsible for the chapters of Paris, Champagne, Artois, Vermandois, Lorraine, Flanders, Normandy, Liège, and Rheims. See Krey and Smith, 3; Labrosse, "Biographie" (1908), 596; and Philippe Buc, "The Book of Kings: Nicholas of Lyra's Mirror of Princes" in Krey and Smith, 83-110.

<sup>22</sup> Klepper, "Nicholas of Lyra's *Quaestio*", 31. For more information on Nicholas's involvement, see Heinrich Denifle and E. Chatelaine, eds., *Chartularium Universitatis Parisiensis*, vol. 2 (Paris, 1891), 429-432; Langlois, "Nicholas", 357-358.

<sup>23</sup> Philippe Buc, "Pouvoir royal et commentaires de la Bible," *Annales: Economies, sociétés, civilisations* 44 (May-June 1989): 691-709; idem., "The Book of Kings", in Krey and Smith, 83-110.

<sup>24</sup> Langlois, "Nicholas", 355-400; Labrosse, "Sources", 392. Buc has discussed how important Capetian politics were in shaping some aspects of Nicholas's exegesis on the Book of Kings. Buc, "The Book of Kings", in Krey and Smith.

<sup>25</sup> Viard, "La Date de la mort", 141-143.

numerous duties he wrote two immense commentaries on the entire Bible. The predominance of Jewish sources in his exegesis is astonishing, considering that it coincided with a high point in Capetian hostility toward the Jews which culminated, just a few years after Nicholas arrived in Paris, with an expulsion of the Jews of unprecedented consequence. Having sketched out the chronology of Nicholas's life I will turn now to look in more detail at medieval Jewish-Christian relations, a necessary precursor for anyone interested in exploring Nicholas's exegesis.

## **1.2: Jewish-Christian Relations in fourteenth-century France**

Any attempt to make sense of the complexities of Christian-Jewish relations in France during Nicholas's lifetime requires an explanation of: 1) the formal ecclesial position regarding the place of Jews in Christian society; and 2) the policies the Capetian kings adopted toward the Jewish communities in their realm. The former created a framework which the Capetians adapted to their circumstances and agendas. The purpose of tracing this history will be to examine 3) Nicholas's own attitude toward Jews and Jewish "unbelief".

### **1.2.a: The Ecclesial Policy toward the Jews**

The official policy of the medieval papacy was that Judaism was a lawful religion, and that Jews had a protected status in Christian society. This protection was premised on the idea that Jews occupied a subservient role and that their activities, ultimately, benefited Christians.<sup>26</sup> The medieval papacy therefore attempted to balance protection with restriction of Jews, consistently defending their right to practise their religion without interference, while also trying to ensure that no balance of power could ever shift in their favour. The papal policy of protected

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<sup>26</sup> For a survey of the development of Christian attitudes toward the Jews see Kenneth Stow, "The Church and the Jews: St. Paul to Pius IX" in *Popes, Church, and Jews in the Middle Ages: Confrontation and Response* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 1.

restriction was sometimes influenced by and sometimes a challenge to a persistent anxiety among churchman and laity that Jews would pollute Christian society.

Augustine of Hippo (c. 354-430) and Pope Gregory I (r. 590-604) were especially influential in developing the theological and legal principles behind a Christian conception of Jews in general. Augustine's contribution arose from a perceived essential connection between the Hebrew Bible (or Old Testament) and the New Testament, a connection which made negotiating the place of Jews and Judaism *vis-à-vis* Christians a conceptually and practically difficult one for late antique Christians and the early Fathers of the Church. I will return to a Christian perception of the relationship between the Hebrew Bible and New Testament later in this chapter, when I look at the medieval method of expounding scripture; here I will discuss it only as it pertains to ecclesial attitudes towards Jews.

Put simply, the Christian belief that the promises, sacrifices, and prophecies in the Old Testament refer to Christ posed a series of interrelated problems for Christians in terms of continued Jewish "unbelief": if the Jews were God's "original" chosen people, why did some Jews not accept that Jesus Christ was the messiah long promised to them? What relationship existed between these original chosen people and the Church of Christ? To what extent was Jesus's Jewishness important for the Christian? Augustine developed a theological answer to this question of Jewish-Christian relations which provided Jews with a protected status by characterising their relationship to Christianity in terms of witness.

The salient features of Augustine's position are these: in the working out of God's providential plan for the salvation of humankind, the Jews, his chosen people, had a special role. God made a covenant with them which was characterised on one hand by promises and prophecies, and on the other by observance of the law. These promises, laws, and sacrifices, all recorded in Hebrew scripture, were prophecies and symbols for Christ, who, when he came, fulfilled the prophecies and subsumed the old law of carnal (or literal) observance under a new, spiritual law of grace. This new law of grace is a new covenant, open to all people, and recorded

in the Gospels. Those who live under it, that is, Christians, have replaced the nation of Israel as God's people.<sup>27</sup> The Jews who do not accept or recognise this are bound, in Augustine's perspective, to the sterile observance of a law which has been surpassed by a new law of grace. The old law is only relevant for salvation in its prophetic and typological role, that is, because it mysteriously points toward and is contained in the new law of Christ.

For Augustine, the Jews were right to follow the old law before the time of Christ; their perceived error is ignorance and blindness, a failure to recognise that Christ is the messiah who was prophesied.<sup>28</sup> Even in this, however, they contribute to the working out of God's plan. They are witnesses, Augustine says, to the truth of Christianity by preserving, in their scriptures, the

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<sup>27</sup> Augustine's position on the relationship between the Old Testament and New Testament is the position of the early Church, but his work was especially influential in articulating it. This is a brief and necessarily simplistic synthesis of Augustine's thought as it was developed in different contexts and in response to a variety of theological concerns. Aspects of Augustine's position will be returned to and discussed more fully throughout this study. Especially important are the *Contra Faustum* 12:2-12:3 and 12:7, where Augustine states that all the prophecies of the Hebrew Bible foretell Christ and that the sacrifices of the old law are in reference to him; or *Contra Faustum* 6:5 where he argues that the sacrifices of the old covenant are symbols for the one sacrifice of Christ and as such should be embraced as foreshadowing images, a point he makes again in his *Tractatus adversus Iudaeos* 2:3. Here he defends Christian interest in the Hebrew Bible, stating that Christ fulfilled the law and the prophecies contained in these scriptures. See also *Contra Faustum* 12:3, where Augustine argues that the Israelites observance of the old law was to their merit, but that the new law under Christ is one of grace. Additionally, in *De Civitate Dei*, Augustine presents a complicated allegory of Sarah and Hagar as representing the relationship between old and new covenants: Hagar (old Jerusalem/Israel) is put aside for Sarah (New Jerusalem/the Church). The allegory is based on Galatians 4:21-31.

See Augustine, *Answer to Faustus, a Manichee*, translation and notes by Roland Teske, S.J., edited by Boniface Ramsey, (New York: New City, 2007). All summaries and quotations are from this edition. For the Latin text see Augustine, *Contra Faustum*, ed. J. Zycha, in *Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum* (henceforth CSEL) 25 (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 1891).

For the *Tractatus adversus Iudaeos* see Marie Liguori's English translation in Augustine, *Treatise on Marriage and Other Subjects*, edited by Roy J. Deferrari and Charles T. Wilcox, Fathers of the Church; v. 27 (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1999) 387-414. For the Latin text see *Anonymi Contra Iudaeos: ("Excerpta ex libris beati Augustini infidelitati Iudaeorum obuiantia" vel potius "Liber altercationum contra Iudaeos")* ed. D. Aschoff, in *Corpus Christianorum Series Latina* (henceforth CCL) 58B (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2009).

For the allegory of Sarah and Hagar in *De Civitate Dei*, see Augustine, *The City of God against the Pagans*, ed. R. W. Dyson, Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 1998), 636-667. All future summaries and quotations from *The City of God* will be indicated by book, chapter number, and page number from this English edition.

For the Latin text see Augustine, *De Civitate Dei*, ed. B. Dombart and A. Kalb, CCL 47-48 (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 1955).

For a more thorough treatment Augustine's position on the Jews, see Anna Sapir Abulafia, *Christian-Jewish Relations, 1000-1300: Jews in the Service of Medieval Christendom*, first edition (London: Routledge, 2011), ch. 1. A second edition was published summer 2024, but I was not able to get a copy in time to update my references.

<sup>28</sup> One context in which Augustine describes the Jews as ignorant that Jesus was the Messiah is his commentary on the Gospel of John. Augustine argues that John demonstrates that the Jews recognised that Jesus was *claiming* to be the son of God and equal to the Father, but they did not believe this was true. The Jews, says Augustine, are blind or ignorant to the truth of Christ's messiahship. See Augustine, *In Iohannis Evangelium Tractatus CXXIV*, ed. R. Willems. CCL 36 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1954), 17:16. For English translation see Augustine, *Tractates on the Gospel of John, 11-27*, trans. and ed. John W Rettig (Washington, D.C: Catholic University of America Press, 2003) 122-123.

prophecies which speak of Christ, and by observing the old law which foreshadowed him.<sup>29</sup> He describes the Jews as being in a state of *Testimonium Veritatis*: they are those bearing witness to the truth. "Truth" for Augustine meant Christianity.<sup>30</sup>

This Jewish witness was bound up in two important and interrelated features. The first is the antiquity of their books, which, in a culture that valued ancient authority above all else, validated the new Christian religion by providing it with a past. In his commentary on Psalm 58/59 for instance, Augustine speaks of Christians as an olive branch grafted onto an old tree, echoing Paul's language from Romans 11. Those authoritative books speak of Jesus, and the Jews, by their continued observance of the old law (circumcision, the Sabbath, Passover, unleavened bread, etc.) witness to a religious past of which Christians are the true heirs. The Jews witness to "our truth", Augustine says. Therefore, they are not to be slain.<sup>31</sup>

The second feature of Augustine's witness doctrine is the misconception of Jews as an unchanging monument to the Old Testament past.<sup>32</sup> As frequently noted, the Jews in Augustine's

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<sup>29</sup> This is especially apparent in Augustine's commentaries on Psalm 40 and 58/59. Augustine, *Expositions of the psalms, 33-50*, vol. III/16-17. Translation and notes by Maria Boulding, edited by John E. Rotelle (New York: New City Press, 2000-2001). All citations of Augustine on the psalms will be taken from this edition and indicated by Psalm number and verse. For the Latin text of Psalms 40 and 58/59, see Augustine, *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, ed. E. Dekkers and I. Fraipont, CCSL 38-40 (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 1956), 429, 729-745.

Augustine also discusses this idea of Jewish witness at various points in *The City of God*. See especially *The City of God* book XVIII, 46, p. 892, and 47, p.891-892.

<sup>30</sup> As in the commentary on Psalm 58, verse 12: "The Jews have been scattered among all nations, *witnesses* to their own iniquity and [to] *our truth*" (emphasis added).

<sup>31</sup> For example, Augustine interprets Psalm 40, which speaks of God's delivering the blessed man from his enemies, with reference to Christ and the Jews. The Psalm ends with an exclamation of praise to the God of Israel, and Augustine warns that this should not be read with reference to the Jews, but to the new Israel, to Christianity. He describes the Jews as slaves, carrying books for "the students", i.e. Christian disciples. They carry the books which have laws and prophecies which speak of Christ.

Augustine also interprets Psalm 58/59 as speaking of the Jews. This Psalm describes the righteous man triumphing over his enemies. An exhortation not to slay those enemies but to scatter them, Augustine says should be understood in connection to the Jews, who are not to be slain because they provide an unfailing witness to Christ to all the nations among whom they have been spread through the diaspora.

See the first commentary on Psalm 58, verse 12.

<sup>32</sup> For example, in his Sermon on Epiphany (Sermon 199) Augustine talks about the Jews being 'milestones' for the Magi, pointing the way to truth while they remained in the past: "Now, however, having pointed out to others the fountain of life, they themselves died of thirst. They became for the Magi just so many milestones; they pointed the way to travellers walking along the road, but themselves remained inert and unmoving." Augustine, *Sermons on the Liturgical Seasons*, ed. Mary Sarah Muldowney (Washington, D.C: Catholic University of America Press, 1984), 59-63.

thought were not living Jews, but a conceptual category which served the needs of his theology.<sup>33</sup> The idea that the Jews were static memorials to a biblical past did not correspond to the reality of Judaism in this period, which was developing alongside Christianity (more on this below). Incorrect as it was, the idea that contemporary Judaism was essentially identical to the religion described in the Hebrew Bible was an important feature of Augustine's witness doctrine (and, indeed, of a medieval Christian curiosity about Jewish exegesis, as will be seen in due course).

Augustine's doctrine of Jewish witness, based on the dual affirmation of the antiquity of their books and the changelessness of their religious observance, influenced Christian exegesis of the literal sense, as we will see later in this chapter. The important point here is that it had socio-political ramifications also. It allowed Augustine to make theological sense of the Jews' continued existence after Christ's coming in such a way that it also advocated the protection of Jews.<sup>34</sup>

Adopted at a practical level by the medieval Church, Augustine's ideas provided the Jews with a protected status while also characterising their relationship to Christians in terms of service.<sup>35</sup> Anna Sapir Abulafia demonstrates that the protected status Jews had in medieval Christian society was based on the idea that the Jews served Christians in a variety of theological roles: by being static witnesses to biblical Judaism, by being a warning to Christians by their dispersion following their rejection of Christ, and by being a sign of eschatological hope, as their ultimate conversion signified the end of the world.<sup>36</sup> So long as Jews were believed to serve

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<sup>33</sup> See especially Abulafia, *Christian-Jewish Relations*, 7; Cohen also examines the construction of what he calls the "hermeneutical Jew", a medieval Christian idea of Jews and Judaism as a unchanging biblical witness to the truth of Christianity. This idea arose from a theological background of which Augustine is the key figure. Jeremy Cohen, *Living Letters of the Law: Ideas of the Jew in Medieval Christianity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), ch. 1.

<sup>34</sup> Augustine was, of course, also influenced by the Roman context in which his thought developed. Judaism was a lawful religion although the Roman authorities refused to allow them to re-build the temple. The details of Roman law regarding the Jews is outside the parameters of this study. For a detailed discussion, see Martin Goodman, *Rome and Jerusalem. The Clash of Ancient Civilizations* (London: Penguin, 2008), 383–422; see also Marcel Simon, *Verus Israel. A Study of the Relations between Christians and Jews in the Roman Empire (AD 135–425)*, trans. H. McKeating [first published in French, 1948] (Oxford: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1986).

<sup>35</sup> Abulafia, *Christian-Jewish Relations*. Abulafia's robust analysis demonstrates how the ambiguities of Christian attitudes towards Jews in the Middle Ages can most helpfully be understood in terms of Jewish service, positively and negatively construed.

<sup>36</sup> Abulafia, *Christian-Jewish Relations*, chs. 1-2, et passim.

Christians by being witnesses to an Old Testament past which was the precursor to Christian truth, they had, at least officially, a protected status within Christendom.

What Jewish service meant in concrete, practical terms was made much clearer during the papacy of Gregory I (r. 590-604).<sup>37</sup> His attitude toward Jews and Judaism is one aspect of his attempts to realise an ideal Christian society, and his adherence to the Roman legal system.<sup>38</sup> Unlike Augustine, whose *De Civitate Dei* was written in the aftermath of the sack of Rome and was to some extent a response to it, Gregory was working within a weakening Christian Roman empire in which the majority of power had shifted frustratingly to the East. Gregory tried to balance his preference for imperial tradition with the practical pressures exerted by the burgeoning national monarchies in the West. Judaism had been a legal religion under Roman law, and it continued to be so under the Christian emperors; Gregory consistently defended the rights of Jews under the law.<sup>39</sup> However, he also sternly prohibited what he saw as any situation which might corrupt or jeopardize the Christian faith. He was especially concerned about Jews owning Christian slaves.<sup>40</sup> He was eager for Jews to become Christian, but strictly forbade forced baptism.<sup>41</sup>

Gregory espoused, in essence, a policy of conditional toleration of the Jews: so long as Jewish observance in no way infringed on Christian law or jeopardized Christian observances, they should be protected in the practice of their religion.<sup>42</sup> Gregory's attitude is summed up in a letter to Victor, bishop of Palermo, in response to complaints Jews had made that they were

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<sup>37</sup> For the historical background and sources of Pope Gregory I see: Robert A. Markus, *Gregory the Great and His World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Jeffery Richards, *Consul of God: The Life and Times of Gregory the Great* (London: Routledge, 1980).

<sup>38</sup> Solomon Katz especially noted the importance of the Roman legal system in shaping Gregory's policy. See: Solomon Katz, "Pope Gregory the Great and the Jews" *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 24, no. 2 (1933): 113-136.

<sup>39</sup> See for example Gregory's letter to Fantinus of Palermo, ordering him to release Notamnus the Jew from a bond, or his letter to Peter, a sub-deacon of Sicily, desiring him to pay a debt owed to a Jew. See Gregory I, *The Letters of Gregory the Great*, ed. John R. C. Martyn (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2004) 9.40 and 1.42. All citations of Gregory's letters will be taken from these translations and indicated by book and letter number. For the Latin, see Gregorius Magnus, *Registrum Epistularum*, ed. D. Norberg, CCSL 140-140A (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 1982).

<sup>40</sup> See letters 3.37, 4.9, 21, 29, 9.214, and 13.1.

<sup>41</sup> See letters 1.34, 2.6, 8.25, 9.38, and 13.13. Gregory states Jews should be converted through "gentle persuasion".

<sup>42</sup> Gregory's policy was based on Roman law but also influenced by Augustine's policy of toleration, as demonstrated by Abulafia: Abulafia, *Christian-Jewish Relations*, 21.

being unfairly treated. This letter, titled *Sicut Iudaeis* from its opening lines, begins: "Just as there should not be a freedom for Jews to presume anything in their synagogues, beyond what has been permitted by law, even so, in what has been allowed to them, they should not sustain any prejudice."<sup>43</sup> Gregory would not countenance any 'presumption' among the Jews, but he did assert their right to practise their religion.

Gregory's attitude of conditional toleration, seen in his letters, made its way into the legal policy of the Church through his *decretals* (legal rulings) which were eventually incorporated into canon law.<sup>44</sup> These rulings attempt to articulate what the right relationship between Christians and Jews should be. As Abulafia demonstrates, while the Jews had a place in Christian society it was meant to be a subservient one.<sup>45</sup> Restrictions at their worst arose from an anxiety that Jews would corrupt Christian society. Like the policy of protection, this anxiety would continue to shape the Church's attitude toward the Jews throughout the Middle Ages.

Another way to understand the paradox of the papal policy toward the Jews is to think of it as medieval reception of Paul's teaching in Romans chapters 9-11 (which advocates the protection of Jews, because they will all come to believe in Christ at the end of the world) and Galatians chapters 4-5 and 1 Corinthians chapter 10, which both warn followers of Jesus who were Gentile rather than Jewish against "corrupting" themselves by taking part in Jewish acts (while a follower of the Law himself, Paul did not believe these observances were necessary for Gentile follower of Jesus).<sup>46</sup> This is how Kenneth Stow makes sense of the papal policy, arguing that while the balance of protection and anxiety was never resolved, before the sixteenth century

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<sup>43</sup> Letter 8.25.

<sup>44</sup> Abulafia, *Jewish-Christian Relations*, 20-25. Abulafia also notes the importance of these sources: John Gilchrist, "The Canonistic Treatment of Jews in the Latin West in the Eleventh and Early Twelfth Centuries", *Zeitschrift der Savigny-Stiftung für Rechtsgeschichte Kanonistische Abteilung* 106 (1989), 74–75; idem, "The Perception of Jews in the Canon Law in the Period of the First Two Crusades", *Jewish History* 3 (1988), 12–13.

<sup>45</sup> Abulafia, *Jewish-Christian Relations*, ch. 2.

<sup>46</sup> Stow, "The Church and the Jews", 4-5.

it was generally decided in favour of the soteriological vision in Romans, which guaranteed the protection of the Jews.<sup>47</sup>

Augustine's idea of Jewish witness and Gregory's legal rulings provided the foundation for the medieval papal policy which tried to balance protection of the Jews on the one hand with their restriction on the other.<sup>48</sup> This balance was never fully realized. Because they witnessed to the truth of Christianity, Jews were to be protected; but their role was understood as a subservient one. Churchmen were always negotiating what this meant in practical terms.

A relevant example for this study is papal attitudes toward Jewish money lending. This was an occupation Jews, especially in northern France, became increasingly involved in throughout the twelfth century.<sup>49</sup> Throughout that same century, theologians at the University of Paris developed more and more rigorous arguments against usury, asserting that it not only corrupted the soul of the usurer himself, but constituted a spiritual and economic corruption to society in general.<sup>50</sup>

Previous to this, papal and ecclesiastic censure was overwhelmingly directed toward Christian usury, as an immoral activity affecting the soul of the sinner alone.<sup>51</sup> The unique status Jews held in Christian society, as detailed above, meant Jews' commercial activities were outside

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<sup>47</sup> Stow, "The Church and the Jews", passim.

<sup>48</sup> Within this basic framework of protection and restriction, the attitudes and policies of individual Popes naturally varied according to the circumstances of their papacy. For a more nuanced study of papal attitudes toward the Jews in the High Middle Ages, see Rebecca Rist, *Popes and Jews, 1095-1291* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016). Generally speaking, the Papal Bull "Constitutio pro Judeis" of Innocent III (r.1198-1216) expresses the Church's traditional attitude: "Although the Jewish perfidy is in every way worthy of condemnation, nevertheless, because through them the truth of our own faith is proved, they are not to be severely oppressed by the faithful." Quoted in Solomon Grayzel, *The Church and the Jews in the XIII Century* (New York: JTSP, 1966), 92-93.

Another instance of the consistency of the papal policy can be seen in the re-promulgation of a bull titled *Sicut Iudaeis* (in reference to Gregory's letter). It was first promulgated by Pope Calixtus II (c. 1120), and served essentially as a charter of papal protection for Jews. It was re-promulgated and re-affirmed by Popes from the tenth to the fifteenth centuries. See Shlomo Simonsohn, *The Apostolic See and the Jews* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1988). An English translation of a version of the bull from Pope Innocent III (d. 1216) is included as an appendix in Edward A. Synan, *The Popes and the Jews in the Middle Ages* (New York: Macmillan, 1965), 229-232.

<sup>49</sup> I will discuss this in more on this below. For now, see William Chester Jordan, *The French Monarchy and the Jews* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989, reprinted 2016), 26-28.

<sup>50</sup> Peter the Chanter (d. 1197) was an especially influential theologian who argued that usury was morally infectious. His students Fulk of Neuilly (d. 1201) and Stephen Langton (d. 1228) also preached frequently against usury. Rowan Dorin, *No Return: Jews, Christian Usurers, and the Spread of Mass Expulsion in Medieval Europe* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2023), 35-42.

<sup>51</sup> Dorin, *No Return*, 38-39. In fact, the penalties for usury, as detailed in canon law, would not have affected the Jews. These were: denial of communion, an injunction against giving alms, and denial of Christian burial.

the remit of ecclesiastic censure; however, while Jews were to be tolerated in Christian society, this forbearance was not meant to extend to anything that was considered a spiritual threat to Christians. If usury by its very nature corrupted the community and not simply the usurer himself, as was increasingly asserted, then any usurious activity was subject to the condemnation of the Church.

The papal response illustrates the balance of protection and restriction the Church tried to maintain: it consistently allowed Jewish lending within certain limits. While censure of Jewish usury, not just Christian usury, did proliferate in the early thirteenth century, in general the popes left room for Jewish money lending, and often adopted a less harsh attitude than many of the popular Parisian preachers and the temporal rulers who listened to them.<sup>52</sup>

The conciliar decree *Quanto Amplius*, for example, which was promulgated at the Fourth Lateran Council (1215), exhorted Christian rulers to crack down on Jewish usury which was "heavy" (*gravis*) or "immoderate" (*immoderatus*). What constituted heavy and immoderate usury was very much open to interpretation. Officially, the hierarchy of the Church continued to allow Jewish lending (within unspecified limits) while influential theologians frequently voiced harsher positions which often amounted to a complete exclusion of interest.<sup>53</sup> As Rowan Dorin notes, the ambiguous language of *Quanto Amplius* might well have been intentional, a means of placating the feelings of these more rigorous theologians while accommodating the impracticality of a total ban on Jewish money lending.<sup>54</sup>

The consequences of the papal or ecclesiastical policy of protection and restriction on a practical and concrete level was determined by the power of any individual church official and the authority he was able to exercise over temporal rulers. The *actual* protection, restriction, exploitation or persecution of Jews was determined by the attitude of these rulers. We are now

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<sup>52</sup> Kenneth Stow, "Papal and Royal Attitudes toward Jewish Lending in the Thirteenth Century", *AJS review* 6 (1981): passim.

<sup>53</sup> Dorin, *No Return*, 41-44.

<sup>54</sup> Dorin, *No Return*, 43.

well placed to examine what this attitude was in the Frankish kingdom in the centuries leading up to the 1306 expulsion of the Jews from France, witnessed by Nicholas.

### **1.2.b: The Capetian Policy**

The Capetian kings Philip II (Philip Augustus, r. 1180-1223) and Philip IV (Philip the Fair, r. 1285-1314) are useful termini for exploring the features of Jewish-Christian relations of particular relevance to Nicholas and his exegesis. The former set a precedent for assertions of regnal paramountcy which were made in a particularly radical way by the latter; in the intervening century, the fate of Jewish communities in France was increasingly determined by the efforts of the Capetians to expand their remit. Following a period of relative stability and flourishing for Jewish communities in the early twelfth century, the Capetian policy toward the Jews was increasingly restrictive and hostile from the 1180s.

This general context will highlight how fraught and complex Jewish-Christian relations were in this period, making Nicholas's appreciative use of Jewish sources all the more remarkable. One moment in this history is of particular relevance for situating the Franciscan in a tradition of Christian recourse to Jewish texts. This is the so-called Trial of the Talmud which took place in 1240. Conducted under the patronage of King Louis IX (r. 1226-1270), this event captures the initial Christian reaction to the discovery that Jews in medieval Christian society were not the unchanging monuments to a biblical past which Augustine had imagined. This event brought about a split in how and why Christians used Jewish sources, a question of special relevance to Nicholas. After briefly summarizing the Jews' situation in medieval France and the underlying considerations which determined the Capetian policy toward them, I will comment on the Talmud and its consequences.

As mentioned above, Jews in *Zarfat* (the medieval Hebrew word for northern France) became increasingly involved in money-lending throughout the eleventh century, due especially

to their exclusion from other forms of commercial activity.<sup>55</sup> This created an ambiguous situation for them. It was in the economic interest of temporal rulers to protect the Jewish communities in their realms because Jews were seen as their special possession, whose loans they sanctioned and taxed. On the other hand, temporal rulers were not always deaf to the urgent voices of their churchmen, who, as we saw, became increasingly condemnatory of the corrupting influence of both Christian and Jewish usury in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The stereotype of the Jewish 'usurer' significantly augmented a negative perception of Jews in Christian society, and expulsions of Jews in France was often linked to a rhetoric against usury and its corrupting influence.<sup>56</sup> Nor did temporal rulers sacrifice all practical interests when they chose to pursue ostensibly pious ones. Ordering a *captio* (a seizure of Jewish goods and property for ransom) was a source of quick cash, and expelling the Jews from their realm was a way of acquiring Jewish property for themselves.<sup>57</sup>

When Philip II became king in 1180 this was an undesirable but not impossible situation for the Jews because no single temporal ruler in France had a monopoly of control over them. After Carolingian hegemony crumbled toward the end of the ninth century, northern France had become a patchwork of smaller domains controlled by powerful counts and barons. The Capetian king claimed suzerainty over these magnates, who in reality maintained considerable

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<sup>55</sup> See Jordan for an extensive treatment of the reasons Jews became involved in money lending: Jordan, *The French Monarchy*, 26-28. For an overview of Jews in Northern France, see Abulafia, *Jewish-Christian Relations*, ch. 4. See also: Gavin Langmuir, "'Judei nostri' and Capetian Legislation," *Traditio*, 6 (1960), 207; Robert Chazan, *Medieval Jewry in Northern France: A Political and Social History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), 15-17, 33; Rist, *Popes and Jews*, ch. 4.

<sup>56</sup> Jordan, *The French Monarchy*, 28. The negative stereotype of the Jewish usurer was one factor in the hostility shown toward these communities, but there were others. Ritual murder accusations was also increasingly common in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Jews were repeatedly accused of murdering Christian children in a way that mocked the passion of Christ. While it is outside the parameters of this study to do more than note these accusations, I include them here because they are a further indication of the fear Christians had of Jewish malevolence. For a complete discussion and recent historiography, see: Hannah Johnson, *Blood Libel* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012); Israel Jacob Yuval, *Two Nations in Your Womb: Perceptions of Jews and Christians in the Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); Gavin Langmuir, *Toward a Definition of Antisemitism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996). Dorin's recent study of the topic, which examines the expulsion of Jews alongside the expulsion of other 'outsider' groups, establishes that there was a rhetorical link between 'usury' and expulsion, such that it became increasingly common to justify expulsion of outsider groups—including the Jews—by denouncing their supposedly illicit commercial activities. 'Usury' was a term used to denigrate any economic activity not sanctioned by the Church, and might mean any number of commercial practices. Dorin, *No Return*, ch. 1.

<sup>57</sup> Jordan, *The French Monarchy*, 28-30.

independence. It was officially acknowledged that power over Jews was a regalian right, bestowed by the king on his vassals (an attitude inherited from Imperial Rome and asserted by the Carolingians); in reality, over fifty lords had control (*dominium*) of the Jews in their realms.<sup>58</sup>

So long as the regalian rights of the Capetians remained ephemeral, Jews persecuted in one fiefdom did not have far to go to find a community that could succour them (and a temporal ruler happy to profit from their presence). A lord intending to tax or expel 'his' Jews might try to negotiate agreements with neighbouring lords not to receive them, but the cost involved and the temporary nature of these agreements did not always make them practical or effective.<sup>59</sup>

When Philip II expelled the Jews in 1182, for example, his action affected a relatively small number of Jews. The royal domain at the time of Philip II's ascension to the throne was not much bigger than the Ile de France, and the Capetian monarch was not nearly as powerful a ruler (in terms of wealth and territorial control) as some of his vassals, such as the Count of Champagne.<sup>60</sup> The expulsion provided Philip with an immediate and much needed fortune, but only served, in the long run, to enrich the count into whose domains the Jews fled. The two men appreciated this fact: when he recalled the Jews in 1189, Philip was obliged to negotiate with Count Theobald to determine which Jews living where were the property of whom, the count or the king respectively.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Jordan, *The French Monarchy*, 33-37; idem., "Jews, Regalian Rights, and the Constitution in Medieval France", *AJS review* 23.1 (1998), 2.

<sup>59</sup> Jordan, "Jews, Regalian Rights", 5-6.

<sup>60</sup> Philip claimed he was expelling the Jews for their usurious practices, and his biographer Rigord (c. 1150-1209), who lauded the expulsion as the act of a good king stamping out corruption, was correspondingly appalled when the Jews were readmitted to the royal domains in 1198. Dorin, *No Return*, 83-85.

<sup>61</sup> Jordan, *The French Monarchy*, 38-39. On the readmittance of the Jews, see Jordan, *The French Monarchy*, 31-31. See also Chazan, *Medieval Jewry*, 67-68, 75; idem. *The Jews of Medieval Western Christendom, 1000-1500* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 141-144; John Baldwin, *The Government of Philip Augustus: Foundations of French Royal Power in the Middle Ages* (Berkeley; University of California Press, 1986), 160. Chazan and Baldwin describe Philip's actions in both expelling and re-admitting the Jews as financially motivated. Jordan, however, while not denying the financial benefit accrued by these actions, gives more weight to possible fanatical religious feeling in the expulsion, in keeping with subsequent participation in the crusades. Philip did also put restrictions on Jewish money lending when he readmitted them.

Ironically, Fulk of Neuilly's preaching around that time galvanized many barons in northern France to expel *their* Jews, some of whom probably fled to the recently re-opened royal domains. Dorin, *No Return*, 36.

The lack of power which made such undignified haggling necessary was significantly mitigated in the following century. It was a prerogative of Philip Augustus and his successors to actualize their claim to paramountcy over the other temporal rulers in their realm. These efforts were assisted by territorial acquisition. Victories over John I of England in 1214 brought Normandy under Capetian control, and the Albigensian Crusade, which ended in 1229, did the same for Languedoc (much of what is now southern France).<sup>62</sup> The well-established Jewish communities in these areas became subject to Capetian policies, which, especially for Jews of Languedoc, were much harsher than those they had previously enjoyed under rulers such as the counts of Toulouse.<sup>63</sup>

The Capetians adopted ever stricter measures against Jewish usury and attempted to put Jews more firmly under their exclusive control.<sup>64</sup> A decisive moment was Louis IX's Ordinance of Melun (1230). As William Chester Jordan notes, the Ordinance, while it does not differ much from the statutes (*stabilimentum*) of Louis's predecessor in its restrictions, does assert more strongly the regalian rights of the Capetians, evoking the old Carolingian principle that the monarch alone had punitive power over Jews.<sup>65</sup> The Ordinance insisted that Jews were not allowed to move into another fiefdom.

In 1235 new ordinances insisted that Jews must live on their own labour and that Christians were not to pay interest on loans to Jews, and in 1254 those who continued to practice usury were told to leave the kingdom.<sup>66</sup> This meant, in essence, crushing poverty for the Jews, who in addition to heavy taxation and exclusion from Christian commercial endeavours were no

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<sup>62</sup> Jordan, *The French Monarchy*, 52-53, 61-69, 105-127; Baldwin, *The Government*, 230-231.

On the Albigensian crusade, see: Jonathan Sumption, *The Albigensian Crusade* (London: Faber, 1999).

<sup>63</sup> Jordan, *The French Monarchy*, 105-127.

<sup>64</sup> For a full discussion, see Jordan, *The French Monarchy*, 65, 83, 82-104; idem., "Princely Identity and Jews in Medieval France" in *From Witness to Witchcraft: Jews and Judaism in Medieval Christian Thought*, ed. Jeremy Cohen (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1996) 265-268. See also: Abulafia, *Jewish-Christian Relations*, 63-69; Chazan, *Medieval Jewry*, 67-68; idem., *The Jews in Medieval Western Christendom*, 141-142.

<sup>65</sup> Jordan, *The French Monarchy*, 93-104, 131-134; idem., "Jews, Regalian Rights, 6-7.

<sup>66</sup> Jordan, *The French Monarchy*, 93-99, 144-150.

longer allowed to be involved in their customary economic activities.<sup>67</sup> These Ordinances effectively put an end to that feature of the situation which in 1180 had made the Jews' position manageable. They could no longer escape exploitative practices by moving into another fiefdom.

This is the background for the much further reaching consequences of the 1306 expulsion, which effectively ended Jewish presence in France.<sup>68</sup> Jordan argues that Philip the Fair's expulsion of the Jews, not only from the royal domain but also from the territories of his barons, was a radical assertion of paramountcy, an attempt to re-assert an ideology of kingship.<sup>69</sup> It is revealing too that Philip called himself "the most Christian king" for these actions, and Joseph Strayer has discussed how ideas of sacral kingship influenced efforts at state-building.<sup>70</sup> While the Capetians' policy toward the Jews can be understood as part of their efforts to consolidate their power, and often seemed calculated to provide new revenue streams, a crucial element in the creation of their ideology was describing their actions as those of pious rulers trying to purify Christian society.

Aggressive action toward the Jews for their usurious practices, for their supposed corruption of society, became a powerful means of self-fashioning as a pious ruler. Louis IX, called the Pious, seemed especially concerned to stamp out all corruption in his realm and to create a perfect Christian society. This meant a heightened hostility toward the Jews in his realm, of which the Ordinance of Melun is only one facet. He spared no effort to convert the Jews, and it was during his reign and under his authority that the Trial of the Talmud took place.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Jordan, *The French Monarchy*, 148-150, 128-176; Chazan, *Medieval Jewry*, 102-104. The signatures of many barons and counts affixed to these ordinances demonstrates how Capetian power has grown since the reign of Philip Augustus.

<sup>68</sup> For a full discussion of the event and what motivated Philip IV's decision, see Jordan, *The French Monarchy*, ch. 13. Although a small group of Jews were allowed to return in 1315, it was only under strict regulations of their activities and dress. 1306 effectively marks the end of a vibrant Jewish presence in France.

<sup>69</sup> Jordan, "Jews, Regalian Rights", 12-13.

<sup>70</sup> Joseph Strayer, "France: The Holy Land, the Chosen People, and the Most Christian King," in *Medieval Statecraft and the Perspectives of History: Essays by Joseph R. Strayer* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), 300-314.

<sup>71</sup> It is outside the parameters of this study to give a full description of the Talmud Trial. For detailed accounts and the current scholarly debate see: Judah M. Rosenthal, "The Talmud on Trial: The Disputation at Paris in the Year 1240" *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 47 (1956-1957): 58-76, 145-169; Judah Galinsky, "The Different Hebrew Versions of the 'Talmud Trial' in 1240 in Paris", in *New Perspectives on Jewish-Christian Relations*, ed. Elisheva Carlebach and Jacob J. Schacter (Leiden: Brill, 2012); Hyam Maccoby, ed. and trans. *Judaism on Trial: Jewish-Christian Disputations in*

The Talmud is an essential text in Rabbinic Judaism, and I will discuss it in greater detail below. The point here is that the Talmud is post-biblical, a textual record of centuries of Jewish conversations about biblical exegesis and the law. There are two versions, the Babylonian Talmud and the Jerusalem Talmud which were compiled and written between the fifth and eighth centuries. It was not much known (or was at least poorly understood and ignored) by Christians until 1238, when Nicholas Donin, a Jewish convert to Christianity, went to Pope Gregory IX (r. 1227-1241) to submit thirty-five accusations against the Talmud to the papal court. These accusations included, among other things, the assertion that the Jews favour the Talmud over the 'real' law given to Moses; that the Talmud teaches or condones anti-Christian behaviour; and that it blasphemes God, Jesus, and the Virgin Mary.<sup>72</sup>

Donin's accusations raised the question whether the use of the Talmud accorded with Augustine's formative idea of Jews as static witnesses to the Old Testament past. Gregory IX, who had always been fully in line with the official ecclesiastic policy of conditional toleration, sent out a series of letters to the Bishop of Paris, the mendicants of France, and (through the Bishop of Paris) letters to other temporal and ecclesiastical lords, ordering them to seize Jewish books, including the Talmud, and have them examined. In doing so, Gregory IX was not departing from the traditional ecclesial policy of conditional toleration: Jews were to be protected, so long as they did not disparage or threaten Christianity.<sup>73</sup> The accusations brought against the Talmud seemed to indicate that the Talmud itself was a threat to Christian society.

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*the Middle Ages*, (London: Associated University Presses, 1982); Joel Rembaum, "The Talmud and the Popes: Reflections on the Talmud Trials of the 1240s," *Viator* 13 (1982): 203-223; See also Harvey Hames, "Reconstructing Thirteenth-century Jewish-Christian Polemic. From Paris 1240 to Barcelona 1263 and Back Again", ed. Ryan Szpiech, *Medieval Exegesis and Religious Difference. Commentary, Conflict, and Community in the Premodern Mediterranean* (New York: New York, 2015), 115-117; Yossef Schwartz, "Authority, Control, and Conflict in Thirteenth-century Paris: Contextualizing the Talmud Trial", in *Jews and Christians in Thirteenth-century France*, ed. Elisheva Baumgarten and Judah D. Galinsky (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 93-110; Piero Capelli, "Nicolas Donin, the Talmud Trial of 1240, and the Struggles between Church and State in Medieval Europe", in *Entangled Histories. Knowledge, Authority, and Jewish Culture in the Thirteenth Century*, ed. Elisheva Baumgarten, Ruth Mazo Karras and Katelyn Mesler (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), 159-178. For translations and discussion of all the primary materials, see: John Friedman, Jean Connell Hoff, and Robert Chazan, eds. *The Trial of the Talmud: Paris, 1240* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2012).

<sup>72</sup> See Chazan's introductory essay in Friedman, et al, *The Trial*, 75.

<sup>73</sup> See Chazan's introductory essay in Friedman, et al, *The Trial*, 33-34.

Louis IX of France was the only Christian king to respond obediently to Gregory's letter.<sup>74</sup> In 1240, in Paris, the Talmud was put on 'trial'. This was probably some sort of inquisitorial process with a few Jewish rabbis called up for the defence. However valiant the rabbis' efforts, the process, chaired by Louis's mother Blanche of Castille, resulted in the condemnation of the Talmud. Hundreds of manuscripts of the Talmud and other Jewish books were burned in 1242 in Paris. This event, devastating for Jews in Paris, filled other Jewish communities with anxiety for the safety of their sacred texts and way of life. A Jewish commission went to Pope Innocent IV (r. 1243-1254), arguing that it was against the traditional policy of the Church to rob Jews of the Talmud, without which their way of life was impossible. Pope Nicholas IV (r.1288-1292) ultimately reconsidered, and ordered that the Talmud be censored for offensive material but then returned to the Jews. Louis IX and ecclesial authorities in Paris, however, continued to practise harsher measures, banning the Talmud from the royal domains.

Jeremy Cohen argues that events subsequent to the Trial of the Talmud indicate that thirteenth and fourteenth-century mendicants viewed the Talmud and the Jews who used it as a heresy within Judaism itself, and began to see the Jews as simply another instance of a religious "other", like Muslims or heretics. Jewish "carnality" was linked with charges of "irrationality". These charges were exacerbated, according to Cohen, by the breakdown of Augustine's claim that Jews were ignorant of Christ's messiahship, a claim replaced by the supposition that Jews intentionally refused to acknowledge that their texts demonstrate the truth of Christianity and the Messiahship of Jesus. According to Cohen, these new ideas meant that Jews no longer

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<sup>74</sup> As Lesley Smith notes, some scholars have seen this as an indication of the relative weakness of the papacy, whose orders were supposedly ignored by other temporal rulers, and of the special bigotry of Louis IX, who was only too happy to comply with an order that aligned with his personal hostility toward the Jews. Smith, however, explores an alternative explanation. Gregory IX wrote up a collection of letters which were delivered to William of Auvergne, the bishop of Paris, who was meant to forward them to Christian kings and rulers. Smith argues convincingly that William simply never sent the letters, because he was not interested in having the Jews' books burned. Smith suggests Gregory IX's odd decision to make William a middleman might be an indication that he was also not particularly invested in the issue. The trial of the Talmud went ahead in Paris because Donin and Louis IX were determined that it should. See Lesley Smith, "William of Auvergne and the Jews", *Studies in Church History* 29 (1992): 107–117.

merited the protection granted by Augustine's idea of witness.<sup>75</sup> Robert Chazan, on the other hand, argues that awareness of Jewish material did not upset the old idea of protected Jewish witness, but it did usher in a new intensity in mendicant efforts to convert Jews, efforts in which Jewish post-biblical material was used to argue the truth of Christianity. From a fear that the Talmud blasphemed Jesus, Christians who engaged with the book began to argue that it proved Jesus was the Messiah.<sup>76</sup>

How does Nicholas fit into these descriptions of the mendicants' attitude toward post-biblical Jewish material? Nicholas's use of his Jewish sources, and the extent to which this is appreciative, has been at the core of much scholarly analysis of his work. Herman Hailperin was the first to discuss how extensive Nicholas's use of Jewish sources was. He argues that Nicholas used Jewish sources positively, because they accorded with his understanding of the literal sense.<sup>77</sup> Cohen, on the other hand, describes Nicholas's exegesis as much more hostile to Jews, and polemically motivated.<sup>78</sup> Many other scholars have noted his deep commitment to both a Christocentric approach to scripture and a belief in the usefulness of Jewish insight as a means of establishing the literal/historical sense of the Old Testament.<sup>79</sup> Before moving on to an

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<sup>75</sup> Jeremy Cohen, *The Friars and the Jews: The Evolution of Medieval Anti-Judaism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984); idem., *Living Letters of the Law: Idea of the Jew in Medieval Christianity* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999). The latter slightly modifies the contention of the former, saying that the attitude that Rabbinic Judaism was a Jewish heresy coexisted with the traditional attitude. See also: Jeremy Cohen, "Scholarship and Intolerance in the Medieval Academy," *American Historical Review* 91 (1986): 592-613; idem., "The Jews as the Killers of Christ in the Latin Tradition, from Augustine to the Friars", *Traditio* 39 (1983): 1-27.

<sup>76</sup> Robert Chazan, *Daggers of Faith: Thirteenth-Century Christian Missionizing and Jewish Response* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989). See also Amos Funkenstein "Reflections on Medieval Anti-Judaism: 3 Basic Types of Christian Anti-Jewish Polemics in the Later Middle Ages", *Viator* 2 (1972): 373-382.

<sup>77</sup> Hailperin, *passim*, esp. 144-145.

<sup>78</sup> Cohen, *The Friars and the Jews*, 177-179. Cf. Klepper, who situates Nicholas in an English Franciscan tradition of scholarship which emphasised the study of the Bible over the *Sentences*, and the use of Hebrew grammars and Jewish scripture to clarify the meaning of the Old Testament, and post-biblical Jewish texts in explaining the literal sense. According to Klepper, Nicholas's ambiguous attitude toward Jews is the result of a dual inheritance of appreciation for Jewish insight with an awareness of the need to defend this use in an atmosphere of anti-Jewish polemics. Klepper, "Nicholas of Lyra and Franciscan Interest in Hebrew Scholarship" in Krey and Smith, 291-292, 303-311; Klepper, *The Insight of Unbelievers*, ch. 1. See also the collection in Krey and Smith. Signer and van Liere discuss the anti-Jewish aspects of Nicholas's exegesis, while Gross-Diaz and Smith analyse Nicholas's preference for Jewish interpretation over Christian interpretation.

<sup>79</sup> To list a few examples: Patton discusses the Nicholas's Christocentric exegesis on Genesis; Smith explores how Nicholas combines an interest in history with a Christological perception of the Bible in his commentary on the book of Ruth; Zier examines Nicholas's use of the double-literal sense to infuse Christological meaning into the book of Daniel. In all of these contexts, Jewish exegesis is used extensively. See Corrin Patton, "Creation, Fall and

examination of Nicholas's place in the history of medieval exegesis in general, it will be useful to see how this immediate context of Jewish-Christian relations in late thirteenth-century France manifests in Nicholas's thought. What was *his* perception of the Jews? How did he understand and defend his use of Jewish sources, including post-biblical sources?

### 1.2.c: Nicholas of Lyra's attitude toward Jewish exegesis

Given the state of Jewish-Christian relations just described, the prominence of Jewish sources in Nicholas's work raises some interesting questions. Ancillary to the question of why this particular mendicant used Jewish sources in so appreciative a way (and how he defended this) are the questions how he learned Hebrew and why.

The first question is not one that can be answered in any satisfactory way from the sources available. It was so unusual that it was once assumed that Nicholas must have been Jewish by birth.<sup>80</sup> Apart from his knowledge of Hebrew there is no evidence for this view. He never gives any hint of a Jewish background, and he acknowledges the gaps in his knowledge of the Hebrew language which someone raised in a Jewish household probably would not have had. It is now generally accepted that Nicholas must have been raised a Christian.<sup>81</sup>

The diocese of Évreux did have a large Jewish community, and centres of Jewish learning which grew in importance during the thirteenth century.<sup>82</sup> Samuel ben Shneur, a thirteenth-

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Salvation: Lyra's Commentary on Genesis 1-3"; Lesley Smith, "The Rewards of Faith: Nicholas of Lyra on Ruth"; Mark Zier, "Nicholas of Lyra on the Book of Daniel", in Krey and Smith.

<sup>80</sup> Feret for instance says: "Le sang juif coula dans les veines de Nicolas, et les lettres hébraïques ornèrent son esprit, en attendant que les lettres chrétiennes, par suite d'une sincère conversion, formassent de lui un docteur remarqué et un professeur remarquable." Feret, *La Faculte*, 331. The theory that Nicholas was Jewish began in 1450 with an assertion by Hayyim ibn Mousa, a Jew from Salamanca. It was repeated by various others until the end of the nineteenth century. However, there are also attestations throughout this period that Nicholas was not Jewish but Christian by birth. See Kiecker, 'The Hermeneutical Principles', 3-5 for a detailed discussion.

<sup>81</sup> Kiecker, 'The Hermeneutical Principles', 3-5. Although we cannot be certain how Nicholas learned Hebrew, ignorance on such a point is not unusual; there are other Christian exegetes who were influenced by Hebrew, and there is no exact information on how they acquired their knowledge of the language either.

<sup>82</sup> Norman Golb, *The Jews in Medieval Normandy: A Social and Intellectual History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 525-529.

century Tosafist (a commentator on the Talmud), lived there, as did Nathan ben Jacob, another biblical scholar.<sup>83</sup> It is very possible Nicholas learned Hebrew from Jews in or near his city.<sup>84</sup>

Another question impossible to answer conclusively, but nevertheless worth considering, is why Nicholas *wanted* to learn Hebrew. He had already acquired most of his knowledge of the language before he joined the Franciscan order. Jewish sources feature in even his earliest exegetical works, but his understanding of both testaments is unfailingly Christocentric. Why did Nicholas think Jewish insight could be so good and so useful if the Jews miss what the supposed essential point of the Old Testament, that all the prophesies and sacrifices are ultimately about Christ? In 1309 Nicholas addresses the question directly in a quodlibet determined in Paris titled *Quaestio de Adventu Christi*.<sup>85</sup>

The quodlibet which Nicholas determined on the Advent of Christ addressed two questions related to the Jews: whether the Jews knew Jesus was the promised messiah, and whether from Jewish scripture it is possible to prove that the saviour was both God and man. Deanna Copeland Klepper asserts that the appreciate use of Jewish texts was already an established practice for Nicholas, a vital aspect of his exegesis. She notes that, especially given the state of Jewish-Christian relations at the time (as outlined above), the Franciscan had a particularly difficult task in answering these questions. He needed to explain the persistent "unbelief" of Jews while at the same time preserving the validity and usefulness of their insight into scripture. In his response to these questions, Nicholas used the Hebrew Bible and post-biblical texts to an unprecedented extent, and while he did argue that Christ's advent and nature

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<sup>83</sup> Nathan ben Jacob is known for copying the Targum (Aramaic translations of the Hebrew Bible) with the Megillot. The Megillot are the scrolls of the Hebrew Bible/Tanakh: the Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, and Esther. See Ernest Renan and Adolf Neubauer, *Les Rabbins Français Du Commencement Du Quatorzième Siècle*, (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1877), 438-441; Henri Gross and Simon Schwarzfuchs, *Gallia Judaica : Dictionnaire Géographique De La France D'après Les Sources Rabbiniques*. Collection De La Revue Des études Juives; 49 (Leuven: Peeters, 2010), 39-43; 258.

<sup>84</sup> Rütting, "Kritische", 50-51; Langlois, "Nicholas", 365. These sources note that it was even sometimes the case that Christian Children went to Jewish schools, but there is nothing to indicate that this was the case for Nicholas. It is most likely that he had a Christian education, and learned Hebrew somehow on the side, probably from Jews in his city. It is of course also possible that one of his Christian teachers knew Hebrew.

<sup>85</sup> This was a common question disputed at the university of Paris. Versions of the quodlibet are extant in hundreds of manuscripts. Klepper, *The Insight of Unbelievers*, 1-2, 82-84.

could be understood from Jewish scripture, and that many Jewish interpretations supported this, he also offered rational explanations for the "unbelief" of Jews at the time of Christ and for the continued "unbelief" of contemporary Jews.<sup>86</sup>

Klepper demonstrates that Nicholas adopts the epistemological theories from Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* to explain Jewish "unbelief". Nicholas distinguished between habitual knowledge of a thing and actual knowledge, arguing that the majority of Jews during Christ's lifetime would not have had actual knowledge that Christ was the messiah, because their knowledge of the prophets was limited. Those who were educated in the prophecies would have had an habitual understanding that Jesus was the messiah, and that the messiah was divine; but his preaching against them aroused the passions so that their *actual* cognition or recognition of him was disrupted. Furthermore, because prophecies are ambiguous, they could only have reached a probable understanding that Jesus was the fulfilment of the prophecies, not certain understanding.

Klepper describes Nicholas's explanation as "redefining ignorance in Aristotelian terms," thus preserving an Augustinian defence of the Jews based on their ignorance.<sup>87</sup> According to Klepper, Nicholas's concern here is to explain how Jesus and St. Paul could describe the Jews as being ignorant, while also insisting that Christ's messiahship and divinity were clearly foretold in Jewish scripture and accomplished in Christ's Advent.

Nicholas also argues that Christ's dual nature can be proven from Jewish scripture, and in addressing this question he makes frequent recourse to Jewish sources, including post-biblical material. He is interested, Klepper asserts, in answering the question with materials the Jews themselves would have considered authoritative. As with the previous question, Nicholas ultimately argues that both Christ's humanity and divinity as messiah could have been recognized at his advent from Jewish scripture.

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<sup>86</sup> For the following discussion, see Klepper *The Insight*, ch. 4.

<sup>87</sup> Klepper, *The Insight*, 88. This is contrary to Cohen's assertion that the Mendicants rejected Augustine's idea that the Jews were ignorant of Christ's divinity. See Cohen, "Jews as Killers of Christ," 17-21.

He is left, as Klepper notes, with a facet of the original problem: if Christ is so clearly revealed in Jewish scripture and supported by post-biblical literature, why do *contemporary* Jews persist in "unbelief"? Why didn't *all* the Jews recognize him at his coming? This perennial question, when addressed by Augustine, resulted in the witness doctrine and the (theoretical) protected status of Jews. When answered by Nicholas, so many centuries later and with a much better understanding of the reality of Rabbinic Judaism, it amounts to a rational defence of Jewish "unbelief".

Nicholas offers three reasons for Jewish "unbelief" which Klepper argues reflect his specifically fourteenth-century Franciscan context: the Jews are afraid of poverty (we have seen how poverty was on Nicholas's mind); they are raised in an environment of hatred for Christians (this was one of the accusations brought up in the Talmud Trial, that the Talmud encouraged a hatred of Christians and members of other faiths) and, as Aristotle says in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, childhood habits become part of nature; finally, Christian theology of the Trinity, the dual nature of Christ, and his presence in the Eucharist, all of which were perceived by Jews as idolatry, must have constituted almost insurmountable intellectual and devotional barriers.<sup>88</sup>

Klepper demonstrates that Nicholas offered rational explanations of Jewish "unbelief", while also using their texts to prove Christian truth. He is able in this way to defend the usefulness and insightfulness of the Jewish sources so essential to his exegesis, while at the same time explaining Jewish "unbelief" and avoiding charges of Judaizing in an environment of particular hostility to the Jews.

According to Klepper, Nicholas reframes Jewish ignorance in the epistemological terms in vogue at the University of Paris at this time. He did this because he was already thoroughly committed to the usefulness of Jewish exegesis in understanding the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible, and he needed simultaneously to: 1) defend the belief that the Old Testament prophecies

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<sup>88</sup> Klepper, *The Insight*, 105-107.

were clearly about Christ; 2) explain particular instances of Jewish ignorance regarding the messiahship of Christ predicted in the Old Testament; while at the same time 3) preserving the general usefulness of Jewish exegesis in understanding scripture.<sup>89</sup> His 'defence' of Jewish ignorance was not positive; however, "by providing a rational explanation for Jewish failure to grasp the truths of Christianity," Klepper asserts, "[Nicholas] could separate those failings from what he saw as an invaluable ability to discern the meaning of scripture."<sup>90</sup>

In his work which most directly addresses the question of Jewish scripture and exegesis, Nicholas gives a limited defence of their "unbelief" and an argument for the usefulness of their texts. While he does use Jewish sources to argue the truth of Christianity, this does not become, as it did for other mendicants, a charge of irrationality directed toward the Jews, nor is the disputation directed toward Jews themselves. Nicholas does not fit neatly into Chazan's description of later medieval mendicant polemic, nor is he anti-Jewish in the way Cohen has imagined.

Nicholas is better understood as part of a small but significant tradition of Christian interest in Hebrew texts and Jewish exegesis which is especially concerned with understanding the literal sense of the Bible. Having detailed Nicholas's life and filled in the broader context of thirteenth- and early fourteenth-century Jewish-Christian relations, I will now explore the intellectual milieu in which Nicholas's thought developed. This will essentially mean investigating the hermeneutic principle at the root of the study of the Bible in the medieval period. This principle, which posited multiple 'senses' of scripture, had a precedent in patristic thought, and is intimately connected to a late antique Christian perception of the relationship between the New Testament and Hebrew Bible already touched upon briefly.

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<sup>89</sup> Klepper, *The Insight*, 88.

<sup>90</sup> Klepper, *The Insight*, 88.

### 1.3: Medieval Christian and Jewish Theories of Biblical Interpretation

The work of Henri de Lubac and Beryl Smalley on medieval exegesis established the centrality of a theory of multiple senses of scripture to a medieval Christian conception of the Bible.<sup>91</sup>

Understanding how the idea of these senses of scripture developed is crucial background to understanding the work of any medieval biblical exegete.

One of these senses was the literal sense. Throughout the Middle Ages, exposition of the literal sense was increasingly linked to an interest in the original language of scripture, the Hebrew Bible, and exegesis by contemporary rabbis.<sup>92</sup> For anyone interested in Christian exegesis of the literal sense therefore, the development of Rabbinic Judaism and Rabbinic exegesis is equally crucial. The prominence of Jewish sources in Nicholas's work, his declared interest in expounding the literal sense, and his understanding of post-biblical Jewish sources makes a brief explanation of the development of Rabbinic exegesis necessary to an analysis of his work. A summary of medieval Christian and Jewish hermeneutics (that is, their methods of exegesis) will provide a helpful background for exploring developments in the literal sense specifically.

#### 1.3.a: Late-antique Precedent, Medieval Scheme: the Senses of Scripture

The medieval idea of the senses of scripture was firmly rooted in the precedent left by the Patristic period, and is closely related to the Christian perception of the relationship between the Hebrew Bible and New Testament. This perception in turn arose from Christianity's origins as a sect within Judaism, which requires a brief summary.

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<sup>91</sup> Henri de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis: The Four Senses of Scripture*, trans. Mark Sebanc (Grand Rapids, Mich: W.B. Eerdmans, 1998); Beryl Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages* 3rd ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1978).

<sup>92</sup> Smalley, *The Study*, passim. see esp. 44-80, 88-97, 149-156. See also William McKane, *Selected Christian Hebraists* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

In the first century CE, Jesus, a Jewish man, lived and died, and the second Jewish temple was destroyed by the Romans. These two events brought about a decisive change in the Jewish community.<sup>93</sup> As Martin Goodman demonstrates, Judaism by the first century was diverse.<sup>94</sup> Groups within Second Temple Judaism – Sadducees, Pharisees, etc. – had very different religious practices and beliefs, but for most groups their lives revolved around the Temple, and this was an important commonality.<sup>95</sup> The Temple's destruction forced Jews to grapple with the question of how best to preserve their religious identity without the Temple cult, and their answers to these questions brought about a greater unification of religious practice under the rabbis, who laid the foundation for the development of Rabbinic Judaism.<sup>96</sup> Concomitant with this, a small group of Jews, followers of Jesus, claimed he was the messiah long promised to them in Hebrew scripture. They also claimed his message of salvation was not only for Jews but for the 'nations'; all non-Jewish, gentile people. This nascent Christianity, while it began as a Jewish sect, was unaffected by the destruction of the Temple.

Both religious groups claimed to be the inheritors of the religious past described in the Hebrew Bible, however, and both had other sacred texts they saw as continuous with it. For

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<sup>93</sup> For a summary of the debate about the split between Judaism and Christianity, see P.S. Alexander, "'The Parting of the Ways' from the Perspective of Rabbinic Judaism", in *Jews and Christians: The Parting of the Ways, A.D. 70 to 135* ed. James D. G. Dunn, and Joseph Barber Lightfoot (Tübingen: Mohr, 1992), 1-25; Lindeskog and Horbury argue it was High Christology (the assertion that Jesus was the messiah) that caused the separation: Gösta Lindeskog, *Das Jüdisch-Christliche Problem: Randglossen Zu Einer Forschungsperiode*, (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1986), 122-123, 136; William Horbury, *Jews and Christians in Contact and Controversy* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1998), 13. Schiffman and Casey describe the separation as a result of Christian attitudes to the Torah and gentile tendencies: Lawrence Schiffman, *Who Was a Jew?: Rabbinic and Halakic Perspectives on the Jewish Christian Schism* (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav Pub. House, 1985), 6-7; Maurice Casey, *From Jewish Prophet to Gentile God: The Origins and Development of New Testament Christology* (Cambridge: Clarke, 1991), 31-32. This split should be understood as a complicated process, however, not an event. Goodman makes the point that groups within Judaism (including, initially, nascent Christianity) might have identified themselves and others according to principles not as clear to us as they would have been then. See Martin Goodman, "Modelling the 'Parting of Ways'" in *Judaism in the Roman World: Collected Essays* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 175-185.

<sup>94</sup> Martin Goodman, "Josephus and Variety in First CE Judaism" in *Judaism in the Roman World: Collected Essays* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 45-46.

<sup>95</sup> The Second Temple period is dated from 516 BCE, when Cyrus of Persia allowed the Jews to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem, until the temple was destroyed again in 70 CE.

<sup>96</sup> For a detailed overview of the development of Rabbinic Judaism from second temple Judaism, and especially the greater religious unity of Rabbinic Judaism and its causes, see: Martin Goodman, *A History of Judaism: from its Origins to the Present* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), chs. 10 and 11; Shayne Cohen, *From the Maccabees to the Mishnah* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1987), ch. 7; Jacob Neusner, *In the Aftermath of Catastrophe: Founding Judaism 70-640* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2009); Jacob Neusner, *The Four Stages of Rabbinic Judaism* (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 1999). Aspects of this development will be treated in more detail below.

Christians, this was a collection of writings that came to be known as the New Testament. For Rabbinic Judaism, this was the oral law, which was written down over the first few centuries of the common era.

This split between Jews and Christians obliged Christians to explain what relationship the Hebrew Bible had to the New Testament, to clarify (potential) contradictions between them, and to describe in what relation Christians now stood to the Jews, God's original 'chosen people'. The position the early Church adopted was based primarily on the Pauline Epistles and some Gospel passages. Theologians asserted that the Old Testament (Hebrew Bible) prefigures or foreshadows the New, and is ultimately fulfilled in, but surpassed by, the New. The Hebrew Bible is understood to speak in 'figures' of Christ, while the Gospels speak of him clearly; the Gospel is present in the Old Testament in 'shadows'. See for example 1 Corinthians 10:1-11, which speaks of events in the Hebrew Bible happening as a 'figure' for Christians; or Hebrews 10:1, which describes the old law of the Hebrew Bible as a 'shadow' of Christ's sacrifice; or 1 Peter 3:21, which likens the floods of Noah to the waters of baptism. For Christians, Christ is the only true revelation of both testaments: he is present in the Old in a hidden way, and in the New in a fully revealed way.

This was the earliest teaching of the Church, adopted by her earliest theologians (by Augustine of Hippo, for instance, as we have already seen). But if you are not St. Paul, how do you (dare) find the hidden meaning in the apparent meaning? An answer, and an approach, was provided by the intellectual proclivities of late antique Alexandria, a centre of culture and education. It was accepted as a matter of faith that the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament contained signs or figures that were both historic, in that they had actually happened, and mystic, in that they pointed to a future historic reality: Christ incarnate. An allegorical approach to

scripture provided the early Church Fathers with a way of explicating what was hidden in the apparent.<sup>97</sup>

Apparent and hidden were conceived of as a literal sense and a spiritual sense, the latter usually allegorical. As Smalley points out, it was an allegorical (or typological) reading of the Hebrew Bible that allowed early theologians (like Clement and Origen) to see in it prophecies about Christ, the Church and sacraments, the end of the world and the coming of heaven, and God's relationship with the human soul.<sup>98</sup> What was hidden behind the literal meaning or sense was the spiritual meaning or sense. For early Christians, then, their method of expounding the Bible arose from the perceived essential connection and harmony between Old and New Testaments, a connection mirroring the connection between literal and spiritual sense. The laws, prophecies, and covenants described in the Old Testament have a literal validity, but they are also speaking of Christ *spiritually*, and this spiritual meaning is more important for the Christian.

For example, in *De Doctrina Christiana*, Augustine's programme for the study of Christian teaching, the bishop of Hippo spelled out a programme for the study of the Bible with the senses of scripture at its heart. For Augustine, the relationship between letter and spirit is based on that between sign and thing signified; sacred scripture is a series of word-signs communicating the will of God.<sup>99</sup> God teaches us sometimes plainly, but sometimes through images, which is more delightful.<sup>100</sup> Signs (*signa*, that is, words) have either a 'pure' literal (*propria*, 'close') or a metaphorical literal (*translata*, transferred) meaning:

...they are called literal when used to signify the things for which they were invented: so, for example when we say *bovem*, meaning the animal which we and

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<sup>97</sup> This had a precedent in the work of Philo of Alexandria (d. 50) who read the Hebrew Bible allegorically in an attempt to fuse together Judaism and Platonic philosophy. Smalley, *The Study*, 2-6.

<sup>98</sup> Smalley, *The Study*, 6-7.

<sup>99</sup> Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, ed. and trans. R. P. H. Green (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), II: 1-9. All summarise and quotations of the *De Doctrina* will indicated by book and paragraph number, and will be taken from this edition. For the Latin text see Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*. ed. J. Martin, CCSL 32 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1962). As noted by Smalley, Augustine would not have distinguished between the study of the Bible and the study of Catholic theology. They were one and the same, and included Catholic tradition and philosophy. It was not until the eleventh and early twelfth centuries, with the incipient rise of scholasticism, that the study of theology and exegesis began to be seen as two separate pursuits. Smalley, *The Study*, 27, 76-77.

<sup>100</sup> *De Doctrina*, II: 10. Augustine allegorises a passage from the *Song of Songs* as an example of how the images in this book teaches a truth of the faith in a manner more pleasing than plain speech could do. *De Doctrina*, II: 11-13

all speakers of Latin call by that name. They are metaphorical when the actual things which we signify by the particular words are used to signify something else: when, for example, we say *bovem* and not only interpret these two syllables to mean the animals normally referred to by that name but also understand, by that animal, 'worker in the Gospel', which is what scripture, as interpreted by the apostle Paul, means when it says, 'You shall not muzzle the ox that treads out the grain'.<sup>101</sup>

Here we have Augustine's explanation of the literal sense. The literal meaning is the immediate thing signified by the words, or, if that thing is used figuratively, the literal meaning is what is spoken about figuratively, as in the example above, the ox is a worker in the Gospel. The spiritual meaning, according to Augustine, is when a *thing* refers to another thing. All the sacrifices which took place under the old covenant refer literally to those historical sacrifices in the literal sense, but spiritually they refer to Christ's sacrifice. Augustine does think that because the old law is fulfilled in the new, "so all, or nearly all, of the deeds contained in the books of the Old Testament are to be interpreted not only literally, but also figuratively" (i.e. spiritually).<sup>102</sup>

From the perspective of the early Church Fathers, as de Lubac says, "Jesus Christ brings about the unity of scripture, because he is the endpoint and fullness of scripture. Everything in it is related to him."<sup>103</sup> This conception brought about the idea of scripture having multiple senses. The usual –but not universal– scheme was of a fourfold sense. The literal, and then three types of spiritual interpretation: allegorical, moral (tropological), and anagogical (eschatological).

The literal was usually conceived of as linguistic and historical, it teaches what happened. The allegorical is the spiritual sense hidden by the words or events. It shows the Christian what must be believed. The tropological taught one what to do, and the anagogical was concerned with the final things, with prophecies of eschatology. There is a medieval poem which encapsulates the scheme: "Littera gesta docet; Quod credas allegoria; Moralia quid agas;

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<sup>101</sup> *De Doctrina*, II: 32-33. Augustine is quoting 1 Timothy 5:18. Here, St. Paul says priests who labour in 'word and doctrine' should be considered worthy of double honour, "For the scripture saith: Thou shalt not muzzle the ox that treadeth out the corn: and, The labourer is worthy of his reward." St. Paul is quoting Deuteronomy 25:4, and clearly speaking of the Ox as a figure or metaphor for a priest. Because the metaphor is the primary meaning, it is the literal sense.

<sup>102</sup> *De Doctrina*, III: 73.

<sup>103</sup> De Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis*, vol. I, 237.

Quo tendas anagogia."<sup>104</sup> Cassian gave an example which became standard in the Middle Ages: Jerusalem is the city of the Jews in the *literal* sense. In the *allegorical* sense, it is the Church of Christ. Jerusalem is the soul of man, which is threatened or praised according to its merit, in keeping with the *moral* sense. In the *anagogic* sense, it is the heavenly city.<sup>105</sup>

In many cases, a further proliferation of senses was due to a problem in methodology which problematised this system from the very beginning. Any 'sense' of scripture could refer both to the manner of expounding it and to the content. Smalley writes: "'Allegory' includes both teaching expressed by the sacred writer in figurative language and the commentator's allegorical explanation of an historical event or institution."<sup>106</sup> This conflation of content and method would perpetuate confusion about the senses of scripture throughout the Middle Ages. While the fourfold hermeneutic was described by medieval scholars as a definite scheme, inconsistencies abounded in its practical application. What pertained to which sense – and especially what pertained to the literal sense – varied from exegete to exegete.

The habit of expounding the sacred text according to multiple 'senses' also conceived of these senses in a hierarchy: the 'lowly' letter, the 'lofty' spirit. The spiritual or allegorical sense was prioritized amongst the Latin Fathers of the Church. It was through an allegorical reading of scripture that the Bible was shown to accord with Christian teaching even as this teaching was being fully articulated by early theologians in opposition to other beliefs and creeds – including Judaism.<sup>107</sup> This emphasis on Christological spiritual interpretation effectively distanced Christianity from Judaism and from the Jews, who were described as 'enslaved' to a purely literal reading of scripture which denied Christ.

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<sup>104</sup> "The Letter teaches what happened;  
What you must believe, Allegory;  
The Moral what you must do;  
What you reach out for, Anagogy."

See the introduction in Krey and Smith, 17.

The poem is attributed to Augustine of Denmark, d. 1282.

<sup>105</sup> From the *Conlationes*, as discussed by Smalley, *The Study*, 28.

<sup>106</sup> Smalley, *The Study*, 9. See also p. 41-42, 88, 169, et alia for further discussion of this problem.

<sup>107</sup> Smalley, *The Study*, 19-24.

Because Jews did not accept that Christ was the true, if hidden, communication of the Old Testament, early Christians asserted the Jews rejected *any* spiritual meaning of scripture and only read the Bible 'literally'. This attachment (often described as stubborn attachment) to the letter was seen as concomitant with a purely 'carnal' or 'fleshly' observance of the Law, contrasted with the Christians' spiritual observance by grace.<sup>108</sup> This idea included the perception of the Jews as static monuments to the Old Testament past which played so decisive a role in Augustine's witness doctrine. The literal sense was seen as less important, and its elucidation less sophisticated, than the spiritual sense. Jews were characterised as 'stuck in the past', more 'crude' in their interpretations. How and why did (some) Christians, like Nicholas, begin to perceive something valuable in the literal sense, and why did they use Jewish exegesis in expounding it? To answer this question, we must first explore the development of Rabbinic Judaism and Jewish exegesis.

### **1.3.b: Development of Rabbinic Judaism and Jewish Exegesis**

The idea that Jews were static monuments to a biblical past did not correspond to the reality of Second Temple or Rabbinic Judaism. It was in fact the Jews of the Second Temple who began the process of canonising Tanakh, which comprises the Torah (the five books of Moses), the Neviim (the prophets), and the Ketuvim (the Writings), most of the books included in the Christian Old Testament. This process was still ongoing in the first few centuries of the common era.<sup>109</sup> Furthermore, far from preferring a literal interpretation of scripture, rabbis had long

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<sup>108</sup> This characterisation of the Jews and what exactly it meant is a thesis in itself. Paul's letter to the Romans was a formative text in this regard. Writing of the law and what it means to live under the law, Paul says that one can be a true Jew inwardly and be circumcised not in the 'flesh' or the 'letter' but inwardly in the 'spirit'. This is from Romans 2:26-29, part of a much longer section of the epistle which addresses whether Gentile Christians need to observe the laws of the old covenant, such as circumcision and food prohibitions. In Romans 8:1-3 Paul contrasts living according to the law of the flesh and the law of spirit.

<sup>109</sup> The Torah was more or less finalised and considered canonical by the second century BCE. The Neviim (not accepted by all sects within Second Temple Judaism) was established amongst the majority of Jews between the second and first century BCE. The canonisation of the Ketuvim is the least straightforward. No texts were included in the Ketuvim after the first century CE., but rabbis were still debating the authority of some texts (the canonicity

understood sacred texts to have multiple meanings, and allegory was a fundamental part of their method of exegesis.<sup>110</sup>

Then, when the destruction of the Temple made it an urgent matter to find a way of preserving a distinctly Jewish form of religious observance, rabbis in the first and second centuries CE began a process of creating, from an oral tradition, new written works which would become authoritative. Following precedents set by various religious sects in the Second Temple period, Jews began writing down the oral law.

The oral law, called Mishnah, was considered just as important and authoritative as the written law (Torah). Jews believed both laws, written and oral, were given to Moses on Mt. Sinai, but while the former had been written down, the latter had been handed down by the tanna'im (sages) through the ages. After the Temple was destroyed, as part of an effort to stabilise Jewish religious practices (and, in the process, standardise those practices) the Mishnah was written down.<sup>111</sup>

After the Mishnah was written down, an authoritative body of interpretations of the Mishnah began to be attached to it by rabbis in Babylonia and Jerusalem. This body of authoritative interpretations is called the Gemara. The Mishnah and Gemara together are the

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of the Esther scroll was especially contested) until the middle of the second century CE. Some Jews (for instance, the Jews of Qumran) preferred not to have a canon at all. Not only was the Jewish canon not finalized until the end of the Second Temple period, in many respects the biblical texts themselves were still in a state of fluidity and change during this period, as inner-biblical interpretation influenced their content. See Cohen, *From the Maccabees*, 182-187; George Nickelsburg, *Jewish Literature Between the Bible and the Mishnah* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981); Günter Stemberger, "From Inner-Biblical Interpretation to Rabbinic Exegesis" in *The New Cambridge History of the Bible* vol. 1, edited by James Carleton Paget and Joachim Schaper, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 190-195; Roger Beckwith, *The Old Testament Canon of the New Testament Church* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1983).

<sup>110</sup> For a summary of allegory in the Jewish tradition see A. Altmann's article "Bible" in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, second edition, vol. 2, ed. Fred Skolnik, Michael Berenbaum, Shlomo S. (Yosh) Gafni, and Rachel Gilon (Farmington Hills, MI: Keter Publishing House Ltd., 2007), 895-899. For example, the *Song of Songs* was read from the late antique period in different ways: according to some, it had a 'plain' meaning, and was a story of erotic love. Others rabbis read it as an allegory of God's love for Israel. See Michael A. Fishbane, *Song of Songs/ Shir Ha-Shiri : The Traditional Hebrew Text with the new JPS Translation*, (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2015) xxi-xxiv.

<sup>111</sup> Cohen, *From the Maccabees to the Mishnah*, ch. 7; Goodman. *A History of Judaism*, especially Part III on the formation of Rabbinic Judaism.

Talmud, a fundamental component of Rabbinic Judaism as we have seen, and one that has been commented upon throughout the centuries.<sup>112</sup>

The late antique Christian perception of a neat and tidy Old Testament inherited from the Jews was in fact more complicated than they realised. Furthermore, Rabbinic biblical exegesis was much more multifaceted than their idea of the carnal or literal-minded Jew allowed. Rabbinic exegesis was often decontextualised and associative. This method of interpreting the Bible was called *derash* (derived from the Hebrew word for seeking).<sup>113</sup> The product of this method, Jewish exegesis itself, is called *midrash*, and it took two forms: *aggadah* and *halakha*. *Aggadah* is narrative, non-legal interpretation of the Tanakh, often mystical, homiletic, or parabolic. *Halakha* refers to interpretations regarding the law. The Talmud includes a great deal of both *halakha* and *aggadah*.<sup>114</sup> *Midrash* is frequently characterised by a hyper-parallelism of biblical references, expansions, paraphrases, or allegories, and the overlapping of many rabbinic voices or opinions.<sup>115</sup> I will examine a few examples of *midrash* on Esther in the next chapter.

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<sup>112</sup> Cohen, *From the Maccabees*, ch. 7. Two authoritative texts of the Talmud emerged in the 4th and 5th centuries, the Babylonian Talmud and the Jerusalem Talmud. The transition from Second Temple to Rabbinic Judaism also ensured a greater degree of standardisation in religious practices among Jews: when the temple cult was the watermark of Jewish religious life, there was room for diversity in other areas. With the Temple destroyed, the rabbis who recorded and commented upon the oral law assumed greater authority in defining Jewish beliefs and religious practices.

<sup>113</sup> This will be discussed in greater detail below. For an overview of *derash*, see David Halivni, *Peshat and Derash: Plain and Applied Meaning in Rabbinic Exegesis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 3-7, 23-28. Halivni describes how over the course of the medieval period, Rabbis moved from the decontextualised, associative *derash* method of biblical interpretation to the more contextual and linguistic *peshat* method, the generally accepted position of scholars of Jewish exegesis.

<sup>114</sup> For more information on the development, character, and purpose of *midrash*, see: Gary G. Porton, "Defining *Midrash*" in *The Study of Ancient Judaism*, ed. Jacob Neusner (New York: KTAV, 1981); Neusner, *The Four Stages*, ch. 3 and 4; Paul Mandel, *The Origins of Midrash: From Teaching to Text* (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 9-17; Gary G. Porton, "Rabbinic *Midrash*" in *Judaism in Late Antiquity*, ed. Jacob Neusner and Alan J. Avery-Peck (Leiden: Brill, 1995); Jacob Neusner, *Questions and Answers: Intellectual Foundations of Judaism* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2005). Note that *midrash* can designate the practice of exegesis, the content of the exegesis itself, or collections of exegesis, in which case the term is usually capitalised.

<sup>115</sup> Michael Fishbane describes how the attitude implicit in *midrashic* interpretation (especially after the scriptural canon was finalised in the first few centuries CE) is that everything in Tanakh is interrelated (put differently, that Tanakh is one comprehensive communication of many expressions or words). *Midrash*, from a rabbinic perspective, so far from adding or departing from God's sacred speech, reveals that coherence by showing how a word or phrase of Tanakh is related to or communicates the same thing as words or phrases found elsewhere. Michael Fishbane, *The Exegetical Imagination: On Jewish Thought and Theology* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1998), 11-13. For more on the nature and characteristics of *midrash* see Jacob Neusner, *What is Midrash?* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987); Gary G. Porton, *Understanding Rabbinic Midrash: Texts and Commentary* (Hoboken: Ktav, 1985).

That Judaism should be a developing religion with a complex scriptural exegesis did not accord with the Christian perception that Jews read their scripture literally, ignoring or denying any more important spiritual meaning. Paradoxically, it was this false perception of Jews that carved out a unique – and at times uniquely appreciative – place for them among some Christian exegetes, even while providing the ingredients for a negative characterisation of them among others. As Smalley points out, this erroneous perception of Jews gave Christians the feeling that talking to a rabbi or reading his exegesis was like making a "telephone call" directly to the Old Testament.<sup>116</sup> Before events in the thirteenth century, Jews were perceived to have a special insight into the literal (often understood as historical) sense of the Old Testament *because* they were seen as unchanging witnesses to it.

But what impulse would interest Christian scholars in the literal sense? If it was the spiritual sense that taught the Christian what to believe, and if the literal sense was simply a precursor to it, what reasons might there be for Christians to interest themselves unduly in the 'lowly' letter? To understand Nicholas, we need to understand the development of Christian interest in the literal sense; and we need to understand what it was about this interest that led Christian scholars to consult Jewish texts.

#### 1.4: The Literal Sense

To understand a scholar like Nicholas, a fourteenth-century mendicant who, in a time of general anti-Jewish feeling, utilised Jewish sources to an unprecedented extent, and had a conception of the literal sense which seems broader than any previous ideas of it, we need to understand how Christian interest in the literal sense developed. After briefly summarising early medieval literal exegesis, I will discuss in more detail a few scholars from the twelfth century for whom recourse

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<sup>116</sup> Beryl Smalley, "Hebrew Scholarship among the Christians in XIIIth Century England: As Illustrated by Some Hebrew-Latin Psalters", *Lectiones in Vetere testamento Et in Rebus Judaicis*; No. 6. London: Shapiro, Vallentine (1939), 1. Cf. Smalley, *The Study*, 362.

to Jewish exegesis began to shape not only what pertained to the literal sense, but also their method of expounding it. Rabbi Solomon ben Isaac (known as Rashi, d. 1105) was a hugely influential figure for these twelfth-century scholars and eventually for Nicholas too, so I will include a summary of Rashi and his exegesis. Finally, I will look at how thirteenth-century interest in Aristotelian theories of causality brought about significant changes in the definition of the literal sense by linking it with the idea of authorial intention.

#### 1.4.a: Early Medieval ideas of the Literal Sense

If Christian students in the medieval west learned to prioritise the spiritual over the literal sense, they nevertheless learned not to neglect the letter entirely. They would have inherited a belief in its importance, even if they also had an idea of it as something mundane or preliminary.

Augustine gives a robust defence of the literal as an historical reality, foundational to any spiritual meaning.<sup>117</sup> That the sacrifices of the Old Testament happened *in fact* was essential to their having any relevance as precursors to Christ's sacrifice, which also happened in fact and is in some mysterious way the summit and end of all history.

Another influence in favour of the literal sense linked that sense much more obviously with Hebrew learning. Jerome (d. 420) insisted on a reverence for the original language of the text and on the role of the human scribe. He thought about the words of scripture as being analogous to the body of Jesus, which contained his soul (the spiritual sense). Although rather an extreme case, Jerome equates the words of sacred scripture with the body of Christ:

Happy the man who perceives the richness of this grain [Cf. Psalm 147:14 'with the best of wheat he fills you']. We have read the Sacred scripture. I think the

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<sup>117</sup> This is apparent in many contexts, but especially in Augustine's tractate against the Manicheans, who denied the historic validity of the Old Testament, and saw the New as having a purely allegorical meaning. Augustine, *Answer to Faustus, a Manichean*, vol. 1, 20.

For more information see Paula Fredriksen, *Augustine and the Jews: A Christian Defence of Jews and Judaism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), esp. ch. 4, and pp. 383-384; idem., "Excaucati Occulta Justitia Dei: Augustine on Jews and Judaism", *Journal of early Christian studies* 3.3 (1995), 316-317; idem., "Secundum Carnem: History and Israel in the Theology of Augustine" in *The Limits of Ancient Christianity: Essays on Late Antique Thought and Culture in Honour of R. A. Markus* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 26-41; For more general information about the Manichees, see the collection in Iain Gardner, and Samuel N. C. Lieu, *Manichaean Texts from the Roman Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

Gospel is the body of Christ; Holy Writ, His teaching. When He says: 'He who does not eat my flesh and drink my blood,' although the words may be understood in their mystical sense, nevertheless, I say the word of scripture is truly the body of Christ and His blood; it is divine doctrine. If at any time we approach the Sacrament –the faithful understand what I mean –and a tiny crumb should fall, we are appalled. Even so, if at any time we hear the words of God, through which the body and blood of Christ is being poured into our ears, and we yield carelessly to distraction, how responsible are we not for our failing?<sup>118</sup>

Given this attitude, it is unsurprising that language was an essential component of right understanding of scripture for Jerome. He referred to the Hebrew text as *Hebraica Veritas*, the *Hebrew Truth*, and it was on this 'truth' that he based his Latin translation.<sup>119</sup>

This is in contrast to Augustine. The possibility that signs (words) can be ambiguous (both in literal and spiritual interpretation), ensured that Augustine recognised the importance of knowing the original languages of scripture, including Hebrew, as the first step in dealing with any uncertainty. However, since it is the *thing the word points to*, either literally or spiritually, that is the object of understanding, Augustine does not display a disinterested enthusiasm for language learning. If the translation is good, it will direct the reader to a true understanding, since the words point past themselves to their spiritual meaning, which transcends language. The literal sense, then, is not necessarily linked to the study of the Hebrew language or Jewish scholarship in Augustine's thought. Language is important, but there is nothing essential about studying in the original, if a good translation has been made.<sup>120</sup>

Another point of comparison between the two is that Jerome had a more robust appreciation of the role the human scribe played in scriptures' composition. He reacted against a propensity to see the Bible as essentially dictated by God, the human authors having no more to

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<sup>118</sup> Jerome, *The Homilies of Saint Jerome*, trans. Marie Liguori Ewald (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1964), 410. Cf. John 6:54. For the Latin text, see: Hieronymi Presbyteri, *Opera Homiletica*, ed. E. Dekkers, CCSL 78 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1958).

<sup>119</sup> Smalley, *The Study*, 21-22.

<sup>120</sup> Augustine, *De Doctrina*, Book II, 53-55. For instance, Augustine unhesitatingly accepts the Septuagint, which legend ascribed to the 70 wise Babylonians from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE, who were all put into different rooms and translated the Hebrew Bible into Greek. According to tradition, they all produced the exact same translation, a clear indication of Divine Providence, and therefore just as acceptable a text for a scholar as the Hebrew original.

do with it than a pencil. When the psalmist declares "*My tongue* is the pen of a ready writer", Jerome would have been interested in the context, character, and language of that tongue.<sup>121</sup>

According to Sarah Kamin, Jerome's emphasis on the human author's role in writing scripture made relevant for him the difference between prophet and translator. He recognised the inescapable element of interpretation in translation, just as he recognized it in prophecy. It was therefore more than philological interests that spurred his determination to make a new translation of the Bible. Because the Septuagint was translated before the coming of Christ, it could not be as accurate as a Christian translation *after* the coming of Christ, when, from a Christian perspective, the true meaning of the Old Testament had been made clear. Jerome wanted to bring his Christian perspective to his new translation of the text.<sup>122</sup>

Jerome's emphasis on language and the human scribe would shape medieval exegesis of the literal sense. This did not immediately develop into a tradition of studying Hebrew however. There were many resources, some of them ascribed to Jerome, which meant an interest in the language of scripture need not entail the study of Jewish texts or the Hebrew language itself. In the early Middle Ages, Christian scholars interested in what the original words of the Bible meant, sometimes to inform their understanding of the historical elements of the Old Testament but also to build mystical allegories on the meaning of Hebrew names, typically consulted Jerome's *De Nominibus Hebraicis* and *De Formis Hebraicarum Litterarum*; Isidore of Seville's *Etymologiae*; and extracts of their work compiled by the Carolingians.<sup>123</sup> The *De Questionibus Hebraicis in Libris Regum et Paralipomenon*, attributed to Jerome but more probably the work of a converted Jew, was also consulted, especially by Rabanus Maurus and other Carolingian

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<sup>121</sup> Smalley, *The Study*, 21-22. Cf. Psalm 45:1.

<sup>122</sup> Sarah Kamin, "The Theological Significance of the *Hebraica Veritas* in Jerome's Thought", in "*Sha'arei Talmon*": *Studies in the Bible, Qumran, and the Ancient Near East Presented to Shemaryahu Talmon*, ed. Michael Fishbane, Emanuel Tov, Weston W Fields, and Shemaryahu Talmon (Winona Lake, Ind: Eisenbrauns, 1992), 247-250.

<sup>123</sup> Raphael Loewe, "The Mediaeval Christian Hebraists of England: Herbert of Bosham and Earlier Scholars." *Transactions (Jewish Historical Society of England)* 17 (1951): 226-227. Henceforth "Herbert of Bosham". Loewe, "Herbert of Bosham", 226-227.

scholars.<sup>124</sup> Knowledge of Hebrew and of Jewish exegesis in this early period was at second or even third hand, not at all precise, and described by Raphael Loewe as a 'swamp'.<sup>125</sup>

Perhaps these earlier scholars would have agreed with Augustine, that the original language was less important than a good translation. But concern over scribal corruptions to the biblical text inspired some twelfth-century scholars with Jerome's reverence for the *Hebraica Veritas*, and these began studying Hebrew.<sup>126</sup> Although their aim was the correction of Latin translations of the biblical text, a related concern, a result of the greater prominence of dialectic in medieval education, was the seemingly limitless sophistry an allegorical interpretation to scripture might entail. Some scholars desired to clarify what pertained to the senses of scripture and to root the spiritual sense more securely in the literal.<sup>127</sup> This is especially apparent in the twelfth-century school of St. Victor in Paris.

#### **1.4.b: The school of St. Victor and related scholars: new interest in Jewish exegesis**

The Abbey of St. Victor was founded c. 1110 by William of Champeaux, a pupil of Anselm of Laon (d. 1117).<sup>128</sup> Its tremendous early success owed much to the reputation of its free school, under the direction of Hugh of St. Victor (d. 1141). An enormously influential scholar, he emphasised repeatedly that all spiritual exegesis must be securely rooted in an understanding of the literal sense.

This is especially apparent in Hugh's *Didascalicon*, a comprehensive pedagogical programme based on Augustine's *De Doctrina Christiana*, and in his *De Scripturis et Scriptoribus Sacris*, a treatise on the study of the Bible. The literal sense, Hugh says, pertains to history, and he tells the student "you will not be able to become perfectly sensitive to allegory unless you have

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<sup>124</sup> Loewe, "Herbert of Bosham", 228.

<sup>125</sup> Loewe, "Herbert of Bosham", 228-229.

<sup>126</sup> Loewe, "Herbert of Bosham", 230-233.

<sup>127</sup> Frans van Liere, *An Introduction to the Medieval Bible* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014) 125-126.

<sup>128</sup> For full details see Smalley, *The Study*, chapters 3-4.

first been grounded in history".<sup>129</sup> Furthermore: "the mystical understanding cannot be gleaned except from those things that the letter of the text proposes in the first place".<sup>130</sup> The importance of the literal sense is repeatedly emphasized.<sup>131</sup> It is historical, foundational, and the first signification of the text.<sup>132</sup> This last point Hugh adopted from Augustine. It was helpful in clarifying some of the confusion that had attached itself to the literal sense. It is a 'grammatical' sense. If scripture speaks figuratively, the figure itself is the literal sense, not a type of allegory. Smalley notes that although he did not articulate it as Thomas Aquinas later would, Hugh seemed to think that the literal is what the author of the text intended. The literal sense, Hugh says, is the sacred text's primary communication.<sup>133</sup>

Hugh conceived of this primary communication in historical terms, a fact which cannot be overstated as he is an important figure in the development of medieval historiography. His literal sense was about the *res gestae*, historical events or deeds, and his understanding of these deeds was essentially sacramental: the spiritual is anchored in the material, the eternal in the temporal.<sup>134</sup> The events recorded in scripture are visible signs of God's invisible work of the restoration of mankind and creation, unfolding through time (or rather a series of historical ages); studying histories was important in establishing the who, where, and when of biblical events (the foundation and only secure starting point of more allegorical interpretation of scripture), but more than this, understanding the *res gestae* was a means of perceiving God's

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<sup>129</sup> See *The Didascalicon of Hugh of St. Victor*, trans. Jerome Taylor (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961), 136. Henceforth cited as *Did.*, with page number. Jerome Taylor's introduction cited as Taylor, *Didascalicon*, with page number.

<sup>130</sup> Hugh of Saint Victor, "On Sacred Scripture 5", in *Interpretation of Scripture: Theory: A Selection of Works of Hugh, Andrew, Godfrey and Richard of St Victor, and Robert of Melun* ed. and trans. Franklin T. Harkins, and Frans van Liere, Victorine Texts in Translation 3 (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2012), 216. Translations will be cited by author, work, and page number; the introduction by Harkins and van Liere will be cited *Theory* and page number.

<sup>131</sup> Smalley, *The Study*, 89.

<sup>132</sup> Hugh of St. Victor, *On Sacred Scripture*, 216.

<sup>133</sup> Smalley, *The Study*, 93-94. Cf. Augustine, *De Doctrina*, II: 32-33.

<sup>134</sup> Smalley, *The Study*, 89-91; See also the introduction to Victorine exegesis by Frans van Liere and Franklin T. Harkins: "Littera and Historia: Four Texts on the Intersection Between History and Exegesis", in *Interpretation of Scripture: Practice: A Selection of Works of Hugh, Andrew, Richard, and Leonius of St Victor, and of Robert of Melun, Peter Comestor and Maurice of Sully*, Victorine Texts in Translation; 6 (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2015), 121. Translations will be cited by author, work, translator, and page number; the introduction by Zier and van Liere will be cited *Practice* and page number. See also Loewe, "Herbert of Bosham", 236.

guiding hand and perhaps even to perceive where that hand was leading.<sup>135</sup> Thus, as Grover Zinn points out, for Hugh all wisdom is founded on an understanding of history.<sup>136</sup> In his treatise *On the Three Most Important Circumstances of Deeds*, a tract on the role of memory (and how to sharpen it) in learning the literal sense, Hugh presents his scheme of the senses, asserting once again that the literal is the foundation for the spiritual, and that the literal is historical:

All interpretation of Divine scripture is carried out according to a threefold sense: history, allegory, and tropology, that is, morality. History is the narration of deeds as expressed by the first meaning of the letter. Allegory is when through an action in history that is found in the literal sense another action—whether in past, present, or future time—is signified. Tropology is when we learn what we ought to do in what we hear has been done...

But now we have history at hand: the foundation, as it were, of all learning; a foundation that should be arranged in order (*collocandum*) in memory at the beginning [of learning].<sup>137</sup>

Hugh considered the spiritual sense(s) as something fundamentally more enriching than the literal; but the importance of history in the working out of God's plan, and the value of the literal as setting parameters in which the spiritual senses had to operate led to an unprecedented elevation of the letter of scripture in his thought.

Hugh's understanding of the literal as something essentially historical interested him in the original language of scripture, as it had Jerome. He spoke to Jewish rabbis about their exegesis and learned a little Hebrew on his own account.<sup>138</sup> In the *Circumstances of Deeds*, Hugh ends with an appeal to the chronology of the Old Testament according to the "Hebrew Truth".<sup>139</sup> These trends in Hugh's thought, and especially his use of Hebrew learning in expounding the historical sense, were adopted and amplified by his pupils, especially Andrew of

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<sup>135</sup> Richard Southern, "Aspects of the European Tradition of Historical Writing 2: Hugh of St. Victor and the Idea of Historical Development" in *History and Historians: Selected Papers of R.W. Southern*, ed. Robert Bartlett (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing, 2004) 35-41.

<sup>136</sup> Grover A. Zinn, "Historia fundamentum est: the role of history in the contemplative life according to Hugh of St. Victor," in *Contemporary Reflections on the Medieval Christian Tradition. Essays in Honor of Ray C. Petry*, ed. G. H. Shriver (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1974), 135-158.

<sup>137</sup> Hugh of St. Victor, *On the three most important circumstances of deeds*, in *Practice*, trans. Grover A. Zinn, 141. See also the *Didascalicon*, where Hugh says "Nor do I think you will be able to become perfectly sensitive to allegory unless you have first been grounded in history." Hugh of St. Victor, *Did.*, 136.

<sup>138</sup> Smalley, *The Study*, 102-103.

<sup>139</sup> Hugh of St. Victor, *On the three most important circumstances of deeds*, in *Practice*, trans. Grover A. Zinn, 143.

St. Victor (d. 1175). It was Andrew who strengthened the link between the study of the literal sense and recourse to Jewish exegesis.

Andrew was interested in expounding the historical sense of scripture to the almost complete neglect of the spiritual. He followed Jerome in being interested in the original language and the contexts and characters of the human authors of scripture. If Hugh's interest in the literal is a circumscribing foundation for the spiritual senses, Andrew's interest is in strengthening the foundation. His exegesis is characterised by a determination to show that the chronology of scripture and the historical events recorded there make coherent sense.<sup>140</sup> Often his commentary addresses historiographical problems by posing questions arising from the text. For example in his commentary on the book of Daniel:

How can it be true that Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, came and besieged Jerusalem in the third year of Jehoiakim, son of Josiah, king of Judah, when the prophet Jeremiah says that the fourth year of the reign of Jehoiakim was the first year of the reign of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon?<sup>141</sup>

He proceeds to marshal an abundance of sources, including Jewish sources, to answer this question.

As Van Liere points out, for Andrew, the Bible must be true in its literal sense; it is the work of the exegete to show how apparent contradictions or problems in the primary meaning of the text can be resolved.<sup>142</sup> Andrew's literal sense is grammatical, literary, and historical, and to a much greater extent than Hugh, Andrew turns to Jewish sources in elucidating the literal sense of scripture. In addition to Jewish exegesis mediated by Jerome or Pseudo-Jerome, Andrew consulted contemporary rabbis in northern France.<sup>143</sup>

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<sup>140</sup> Smalley called this Andrew's 'naturalism', or his 'common sense' approach. Smalley, *The Study*, 145. Frans van Liere and Mark Zier, in their introduction to Andrew's commentary on Daniel, restate this, saying that Andrew's "interest in history and chronology was driven by his desire to demonstrate the essential coherence and veracity of the biblical narrative. His goal was to give as smooth an account as possible of the biblical story, both with respect to chronology and narrative". Van Liere and Zier, *Practice*, 127.

<sup>141</sup> Andrew of St. Victor, *Commentary on Daniel Selection*, trans. Mark Zier in *Practice*, 171.

<sup>142</sup> Van Liere, "Introduction", 18-20.

<sup>143</sup> Smalley, *The Study*, 169-171; See also Frans van Liere's introduction to his translation of Andrew on Samuel and Kings: Frans van Liere, "Introduction" in *Commentary on Samuel and Kings* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2009), 9-10, 13-14. Van Liere's introduction will be referenced as "Introduction"; Andrew's commentary as *Commentary*. The rabbis

Andrew found what he was looking for in the rabbis he consulted because his interest in the straightforward literal sense was paralleled by a new method of exegesis amongst the rabbis themselves. A new interest in contextual or 'plain' reading, pioneered by Rashi and developed by his school, was transforming Jewish exegetical methods even while a renewed interest in the literal sense was shaping Christian exegesis at the school of St. Victor.

#### **1.4.c: Rabbi Solomon ben Isaac and his influence on Christian exegesis**

Rashi lived and taught in Northern France, primarily in Troyes, during a period of economic stability and intellectual flourishing in the early twelfth century, under the authority of the counts of Champagne.<sup>144</sup> He was a significant influence on Andrew of St. Victor and other twelfth-century scholars, and is also Nicholas's most cited and preferred Jewish source. Rashi's innovative exegetical method will be discussed here, an essential background to evaluating Nicholas's use of him.

Rashi pioneered a method of exegesis which combined traditional *derash* (spiritual interpretation) with *peshat*, an interpretation based on the 'plain' meaning of the text. *Derash* often proceeded via allegorises, applying a new interpretive context, or by displacing the surface meaning of the text (a process David Halivni calls "reading in", and which he distinguishes from allegory strictly speaking).<sup>145</sup> The *peshat* method is contextual, linguistic, and 'natural'; it was a more restrained method of exegesis than *derash*. It avoided the imposition of external

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Andrew consulted included Rashi (d. 1105), Joseph Kara (d. 1135), and two immediate contemporaries Joseph Bekhor Shor and Eliezar of Beaugency. Note also the significance of Andrew's extensive use of Jerome, who was considered an expert on the literal sense. Smalley, *The Study*, 127.

<sup>144</sup> For a general introduction, see Avraham Grossman, *Rashi*, trans. Joel A. Linsider. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

<sup>145</sup> David Halivni, *Peshat and Derash: Plain and Applied Meaning in Rabbinic Exegesis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 5-6.

frameworks or references.<sup>146</sup> Rashi combined these two approaches, incorporating both traditional midrashic interpretations with a sensitive attention to the language of scripture.<sup>147</sup>

The close, contextual focus of peshat (followed in an even more dedicated way by Rashi's followers) often gave the exegesis a grammatical and historic flavour which coincided with the interests of the school of St. Victor.<sup>148</sup> It provided Andrew, for one, with exactly the type of insight he was looking for. His methods, as Van Liere has demonstrated, overlap remarkably with the peshat methods of Rashi and his school. Andrew demonstrates the same interest in context, syntax, biblical idiom, and the simplest meaning.<sup>149</sup>

Rashi's combination of derash with a 'plain' method of exposition, and the integration of the two, contributed to something of a transformation of the literal sense in Christian exegesis. Andrew's literal sense, like Hugh's, was historically oriented and grammatically determined. Believing that all Jewish exegesis was essentially literal and historical, Andrew did not distinguish between derash and peshat in Rashi's exegesis; when he found an interpretation that seemed to support a historical or grammatical interpretation, he adopted it with enthusiasm. Andrew's strict identification of Jewish exegesis with the literal sense sometimes meant he adopted a midrashic (spiritual, folkloric, or traditional) reading as the literal sense.<sup>150</sup> But if Rashi gave an interpretation which seemed to Andrew absurd or inconsistent with the literal meaning he had dismissed it as clearly not the real meaning, not recognising that it was not intended as a 'plain' or 'literal' interpretation.

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<sup>146</sup> Halivni, *Peshat and Derash*, 54; See also Raphael Loewe, "The 'Plain' Meaning of Scripture in Early Jewish Exegesis" in *Papers of the Institute of Jewish Studies London*, vol. 1, ed. George Joseph Weiss (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964).

<sup>147</sup> Rashi's exegesis was enormously popular and authoritative amongst his contemporaries and to the present day. For overviews of Rashi's exegesis and his combination of *derash* and *peshat*, see: Benjamin Gelles, *Peshat and Derash in the Exegesis of Rashi* (Leiden: Brill, 1981). For the effective partnership of peshat and derash, see especially pages 34-35.

<sup>148</sup> Van Liere, "Introduction", 16-17; Smalley, *The Study*, 152-163.

<sup>149</sup> Van Liere, "Introduction", 17-18.

<sup>150</sup> Van Liere gives an example from his interpretation of Andrew's commentary on Samuel and Kings in which Andrew adopts Rashi's midrash that Jews killed the Amalekite's cattle lest their enemies turn themselves into cattle by sorcery, in which they were apparently well versed. Discussed in van Liere, *Introduction*, 125.

Rashi's combination of *derash* and *peshat* influenced another twelfth-century scholar, Herbert of Bosham (c. 1120-1194), in quite a different way. Herbert, inheriting in many ways the principles of the school of St. Victor, uses Rashi extensively in his commentary on Jerome's *Hebraicum* translation of the psalms (the translation from the Hebrew). Herbert's literal commentary on the Hebrew psalms represents a more dynamic exchange with the Jewish tradition than Andrew's, and his exegesis demonstrates an idea of the literal broader than the Victorine's, much more like Rashi's combination of *peshat* and *derash*.

Herbert's commentary, according to Eva de Visscher, "has Hebrew scholarship and the integration of Jewish exegesis into the Christian tradition at its heart".<sup>151</sup> De Visscher demonstrates that Herbert, responding to Rashi's combination of *peshat* and *derash*, infused his literal sense with spiritual implications. Providing the historical context and clarifying the language and customs described in the psalms is part of his literal sense, and Jewish sources, especially Rashi, are valuable here; but ultimately the literal must be that sense which is in harmony with Christological interpretations. She describes Herbert's understanding of the literal sense as one which must be 'fertile', meaning that, as a foundation for other senses, it promotes an understanding of the spiritual sense. An interpretation that does not lead anywhere is 'carnal' and incorrect. Herbert draws an important distinction then between 'carnal' and literal.<sup>152</sup>

Herbert uses or rejects his Jewish sources to the extent that they offer a literal sense which serves as a foundation to a spiritual (Christian) interpretation.<sup>153</sup> Herbert is determined to

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<sup>151</sup> Eva de Visscher, *Reading the Rabbis: Christian Hebraism in the Works of Herbert of Bosham* (Boston: Brill, 2013), 3. De Visscher gives a thorough analysis of Herbert's Hebrew learning and the inclusion of Jewish exegesis in his commentary on the psalms. See chapters two and three for a discussion of the Rabbinic sources Herbert used, and to what extent he was in conversation with his Jewish neighbours. It should be noted how different this is to Andrew of St. Victor: the extent of Andrew's knowledge of Hebrew is debated, but it is likely that most of his knowledge was from personal conversations with Jews rather than a reading knowledge of Hebrew.

<sup>152</sup> De Visscher, *Reading the Rabbis*, 191. See also Loewe, "Herbert of Bosham", 242-243.

<sup>153</sup> De Visscher, *Reading*, ch. 5, especially pp. 166-171; 189-191. See also Deborah Goodwin's discussion of Herbert's exegesis of the literal sense. Goodwin argues that Herbert's reliance on and incorporation of Rashi gives his literal "extra-historical import", in that the literal is inextricably connected to the spiritual. Deborah Goodwin, *"Take Hold of the Robe of a Jew": Herbert of Bosham's Christian Hebraism* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), Chs. 6 and 7, especially p 208.

show that the literal and spiritual are coterminous, and that this is clear from Jewish sources too.

In his commentary on Psalm 71/72, for example, as translated by De Visscher:

The ecclesiastical tradition has explained this psalm accurately enough as about our king the messiah, and the older, greater and more learned of the Jews have offered a similar interpretation. The modern *litteratores* on the other hand have tried to explain it (and most of the aforementioned psalms to which we have drawn attention before) as about Solomon son of David and Bathsheba in order to obstruct the ecclesiastical sense and remove our messiah from scripture. But since the ecclesiastical interpretation of this psalm is clear to us, let us follow the error of the *litteratores* if only to add a few things which according to the literal sense do not at all stand in the ecclesiastical sense's way but rather help it along.<sup>154</sup>

Unlike Andrew, Herbert distinguishes between older Jewish midrash and the newer peshat. The older sources, he declares, are messianic; but the newer methods also provide insights which bolster rather than detract from the messianic meaning.

Herbert sometimes incorporates midrash from Rashi's commentary, not as something strictly in accord with the literal sense, but as something consonant with it, what De Visscher calls "littera-by-extension".<sup>155</sup> De Visscher argues that Herbert's interest in harmonising Rashi's holistic and multi-faceted exegesis with the Christian tradition is rooted in a different conception of the literal than the strictly historical-literal sense of the school of St. Victor: like Hugh, Herbert sees the literal as foundational, and like Rashi, he wants to show that the plain/literal meaning of the text can be perfectly integrated with the applied/spiritual meaning of the text.<sup>156</sup>

The robust analysis of Andrew and Herbert by van Liere and Zier, and De Visscher respectively highlight the ambiguity attached to the literal sense –and the term 'Christian Hebraism'. Recourse to Jewish insight and understanding of the Jewish hermeneutic differed widely between these two scholars. Andrew's understanding of the literal sense was strict and

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<sup>154</sup> De Visscher, *Reading*, 164.

<sup>155</sup> De Visscher, *Reading*, 186.

<sup>156</sup> De Visscher, *Reading*, 191. In De Visscher's words: "although Herbert clearly identifies literal exegesis on the basis of the *Hebraica Veritas* as an overlooked aspect of biblical exegesis, it is his intention not to downplay the importance of the allegorical senses but to demonstrate that the correct *littera* leads to the orthodox *spiritus*. His contribution to psalm exegesis lies in the creation of a method of Christian literal exegesis equivalent to Rashi's *peshat*..."

'natural'; he used Jewish sources when they served his interests, and was influenced by their methods. Herbert's literal sense was broader and more elastic. He understood better than Andrew the difference between midrash and peshat in Rashi's exegesis, and he was inspired by their integration. He wanted the literal sense to be that sense which led to the spiritual meaning. If Andrew adopted Hugh's conception of the literal as historical, Herbert emphasised the literal as foundational, and in doing so invested it with spiritual qualities.

It is important to keep in mind that in the twelfth century these scholars were outliers. The exegetical priorities and practices of the school of St. Victor and the psalms commentary of Herbert do not represent a significant reprioritising of the literal over the spiritual sense in the Christian community in general. Furthermore, by the thirteenth-century, with the new awareness of Jewish post-biblical material which the Trial of the Talmud facilitated, anti-Jewish polemic had become both more prevalent and much sharper, and the edge here was also supplied, in many instances, by a better understanding of Jewish exegesis and its use to prove Christian truth, as already discussed.<sup>157</sup> We see in effect two types of recourse to Jewish texts throughout the twelfth and thirteenth centuries: a small group of scholars using Hebrew and Jewish exegesis to inform their understanding of the Bible and the literal sense of scripture, and others using Jewish sources to write polemical tracts against the Jews. Two very different types of recourse to Jewish text, two different types of Christian Hebraism.<sup>158</sup>

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<sup>157</sup> Abulafia describes how during the twelfth century and afterwards polemics against the Jews sometimes used the Talmud and other Jewish texts to argue that their religious beliefs were irrational, a particularly dangerous attitude in a society which defined being human as being endowed with reason. Anna Sapir Abulafia, *Christians and Jews in the Twelfth-Century Renaissance*, 1st ed, (London: Routledge, 1995), 91-117. Before the confrontation with the Talmud outlined above, Christian tracts "against Jews" had been more an apologetic than a polemic, a way of demonstrating for Christians the official policy of Jewish-Christian relations articulated by Augustine and codified by Gregory. Jews were not the intended audience of this *contra Iudaeos* tradition; these texts, stereotyping Jews as 'blind' and 'stubborn' because they did not understand that Christ was the meaning of the scripture and read merely the letter, or as 'slaves' to the old law rather than free men under the new law – these texts were written by Christians for Christians. This changed after the Trial, when Christians became more interested in converting Jews using Jews' own texts to argue for Christian truth. Funkenstein, for example, describes the four types of anti-Jewish polemic that became common after the twelfth-century, noting especially polemics that either argued post-biblical Jewish religious literature was a heresy within Judaism itself, or that it could be used to prove Christian truth. Funkenstein "Reflections on Medieval Anti-Judaism", 373-382.

<sup>158</sup> Loewe, tracing the history of Christian Hebraism in England, identifies the school of St. Victor as the first well enough attested example of Christian interest in Hebrew and Rabbinic study for the purpose of serious biblical study. Loewe, "Herbert of Bosham", 235-237.

Another significant change in a Christian understanding of the literal sense was produced by the slow transformation of scholarly priorities which took place between the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. These trends invested the literal sense with greater importance in its own right rather than simply as a foundation, and described it as that sense intended by the author (i.e., the Holy Spirit). This is the final point of context which will conclude my discussion of developments in the literal sense, and will facilitate a return to the primary question of this chapter, that is, in what way is it appropriate to describe Nicholas as a Christian Hebraist.

#### **1.4.d: Thirteenth-century Developments in the Literal Sense**

Pope Gregory I had identified reading and contemplating the Bible (exegesis) with theology. In the early Middle Ages, when most learning and biblical study took place in the cloister, theology and exegesis, or the study of the Bible, were seen as synonymous endeavours, and were in fact simply the material for and fruit of contemplation, which was pursued for love of God and not necessarily to be productive of some insight or scholarly project. Consequently, in the early medieval cloister, there was no theology which was not anchored in contemplative practice.<sup>159</sup> This helps explain the emphasis on the spiritual senses, which expounded Christian doctrine as something 'hidden' behind the literal meaning of scripture.

As cathedral schools (the precursors to the Universities) began to develop, they moved away from this monastic model. The initial reception of Aristotle raised pressing theological and philosophical problems, while the adoption of a Liberal Arts curriculum provided scholars with the tools to address them in the form of grammar, rhetoric, and dialectic.<sup>160</sup> What started as a series of theological questions arising from the biblical text and appended to exegesis evolved into theological works separated from their original biblical context, and an effort to systematize theology.

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<sup>159</sup> Smalley, *The Study*, 35, 76.

<sup>160</sup> Smalley, *The Study*, 77.

Anselm of Laon (c. 1050-1117) and his school represent the first serious attempt in this direction, but they did it in the realm of exegesis. The *Glossa Ordinaria* (henceforth the Gloss), a compilation of interlinear and marginal glosses on the Bible, taken mostly from patristic sources, was begun by Anselm.<sup>161</sup> The full import of the Gloss will be discussed in chapter two. Here, suffice it to say that it was the result of an impulse toward the creation of a standard biblical text book. Concomitant with this, as Cedric Giraud has shown, Anselm also compiled *sententiae*, conclusions or summing up of disputations on diverse matters. These often included many extracts from the fathers on theological issues.<sup>162</sup> These *sententiae* were the fruit of efforts to answer a *quaestio*, a theological or moral question arising from the biblical text, or efforts to harmonise seemingly contradictory passages.<sup>163</sup>

Traditional exposition of the Bible was slowly supplanted by this new method of collecting *sententiae*: Peter Lombard (c. 1100-1160) took a series of theological questions from earlier exegetical works and addressed them separately in his four books of *Sentences*, effectively sundering the theological questions from their original exegetical context. The *Sentences* became a standard theological textbook in the universities, where students were now specialising in different disciplines, pursuing different professions.

These trends culminate in the *Summas* of thirteenth-century theologians such as Alexander of Hales, O.F.M (c. 1185-1245) and Thomas Aquinas, O. P. (c. 1225-1274). These massive works of scholarship systematised theology, aiming to demonstrate the perfect coherence and rationality of a religious system. They contain significant extracts from scripture, and are influenced in myriad ways by the logic of Aristotle.

Extended exposure to other aspects of Aristotelian philosophy changed conceptions of the senses of scripture, too. There was a growing sense among Christian exegetes that the literal

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<sup>161</sup> For the most thorough treatment of the *Glossa Ordinaria*, see Lesley Smith, *The Glossa Ordinaria: The Making of a Medieval Bible Commentary* (Leiden: Brill, 2009).

<sup>162</sup> Cédric Giraud, *Per verba magistri: Anselme de Laon et son école au XIIe siècle* (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2010).

<sup>163</sup> Smalley, *The Study*, 66-75;

sense was the 'rational' sense, the one which, when demonstrated effectively, must be accepted even by non-believers.<sup>164</sup> The wax nose of allegory need not be feared.<sup>165</sup> Aquinas would say that there was nothing hidden in the spiritual senses which was not expressed plainly by the letter.<sup>166</sup> He broadened the parameters of the literal sense by identifying it with that sense intended by the author, who is primarily God and secondarily the human scribe.<sup>167</sup> This could mean that the literal sense itself might be parabolic or figurative.<sup>168</sup> This was a significant departure from Augustine's and Hugh's idea of the literal, because in Aquinas's scheme if an allegorical interpretation was *intended* by the Holy Spirit, this was the literal not the allegorical sense.

Aquinas effectively gave the literal sense greater priority than the spiritual sense. Alastair Minnis asserts that Aquinas's idea makes the allegorical interpretation redundant and unnecessary, if still potentially pleasing and persuasive.<sup>169</sup> Perhaps more importantly, as Van Liere notes, Aquinas also expanded the meaning of the literal sense to include what, a few centuries earlier, would have been thought of as allegory. His re-definition of the literal sense effectively re-brands traditionally spiritual interpretation as the literal meaning, by asserting that the Holy Spirit himself chose to speak, through his Old Testament scribes, about Christ, the point of the New Testament.<sup>170</sup> It is also important to note, especially in the context of this thesis, that this

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<sup>164</sup> Van Liere, *An Introduction to the Medieval Bible*, 134-136.

<sup>165</sup> First found in Alan of Lille's *De Fide Catholica*, a common complaint about the spiritual senses had at its root a fear of sophistry, expressed by characterising allegory as a 'wax nose' which could be moulded into whatever shape the exegete liked. See PL 210: 333.

<sup>166</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae: Latin Text and English Translation, Introductions, Notes, Appendices, and Glossaries*, ed. and trans. Thomas Gilby (London: Blackfriars in conjunction with Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1964), Prima Pars, q. I, art. 10 ra I. All summaries and translations will be taken from this edition and indicated by part, question, article, and either objection or reason.

<sup>167</sup> Aquinas *Summa theologiae*, Prima pars, q.I, a.10; See discussion in C. Spicq, *Esquisse d'une histoire de l'exegese latine au moyen age* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1944), 273-288.

<sup>168</sup> Aquinas *Summa theologiae*, Prima Pars, q.I, a. 10. See discussion by Minnis and Scott in their introduction to "Scriptural Science and Signification: From Alexander's Sum of Theology to Nicholas of Lyre", in *Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism c.1100-c.1375: The Commentary Tradition* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1988), 204-206, 232-233, 242. Minnis makes the point that by this period, medieval scholars had determined that even if the human scribe was of questionable moral character, if the spirit was speaking through him this did not effect the inherent value of the literal sense.

<sup>169</sup> Minnis and Scott, "Scriptural Science and Signification", 204.

<sup>170</sup> Van Liere, *An Introduction to the Medieval Bible*, 135-136.

new approach to the literal sense did not necessary connect it to Jewish exegesis or the Hebrew language. In many instances, it connected it to Christian spiritual interpretations which had become the traditional way of understanding certain passages.

Scholars who did carry on in the tradition of using Jewish texts for biblical scholarship were primarily interested in correcting the Latin text by comparison with the Hebrew. Some of these scholars, primarily Englishmen like Robert Grosseteste (d. 1253), Adam Marsh (d. 1257), and Roger Bacon (d. 1292) disapproved of much of the intellectual trends of scholasticism. They combined an anti-Aristotelianism with a strong belief that the Bible should remain the central text of theological study, rather than Lombard's *Sentences*.<sup>171</sup> Some Paris Dominicans, while not anti-Aristotelian, also redressed the imbalance between the study of the Bible and the *Sentences*, and worked on producing concordances and *correctoria* (lists of different reading of the Bible).<sup>172</sup> These scholars emphasised the role Hebrew language played in explicating the literal sense and in correcting the Bible.

Nicholas is an inheritor of this complicated history. He claims to be using Jewish sources in his exposition of the literal sense, and yet this sense is, for him, often Christological. He was influenced by the re-definition of the literal sense as that meaning intended by the author (we saw too how Francis's authorial intention was taken into consideration when determining the meaning of the Franciscan's vows). Nevertheless, Nicholas was clearly also influenced by the older tradition of interest in the language of scripture. He presents the four-sense hermeneutic as a definite scheme just as Cassian had done, and yet, what pertained to each sense had changed significantly throughout the medieval period. How did Nicholas understand the relationship between the senses? How did he understand the role of Jewish exegesis?

### **Nicholas of Lyra: A Christian Hebraist?**

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<sup>171</sup> Klepper, "Nicholas of Lyra and Franciscan Interest" in Krey and Smith, 291-299.

<sup>172</sup> Smalley, *The Study*, 270-275.

I will conclude this chapter by returning to my initial question, not with any definite answers, but as a way of framing this thesis. We have seen that across the twelfth and thirteenth centuries it is possible to trace two distinct approaches to Jewish texts: that which used Jewish texts to polemicise against the Jews and to argue the truth of Christianity with Jewish sources, and that which used Jewish texts for the purposes of a serious scholarly evaluation of the literal sense. Even within these two approaches, use of Jewish sources and knowledge of Hebrew and Jewish exegesis varied significantly. Both have been called a type of Christian Hebraism, and Nicholas has been described as belonging to both types. How helpful is this?

The scholarship which has so far been done on Nicholas indicates that he does not fit neatly into either of these categories. Nicholas is noted for his innovative use of the double literal sense: the idea that a word can signify an event or person in the Old Testament *and* an event or person in the New. The literal can mean two things simultaneously, in a lesser way in relation to the Old Testament and in a more important way in relation to the New. Closely connected to Aquinas's idea of the literal, and based, as was his, on the idea that the literal is that sense intended by the author (or authors, human and divine), Nicholas manages to preserve an older understanding of the literal as the primary signification of historical value, and it is often this primary signification that his Jewish sources serve. This is important, because Aquinas's definition of the literal might have severed it completely from Jewish sources.

Nicholas's broad understanding of the literal sense often does mean that his literal sense is Christological, and he does frequently use Jewish sources to support his Christological reading. More work can be done however to understand how his Jewish sources function in this context, and what this means about the other senses. If Nicholas can use Jewish sources to argue that the literal sense is Christological, how does this affect his understanding of the spiritual interpretation? Does he conceive of his Jewish sources as contributing to both a literal and spiritual interpretation? Nicholas wrote his massive work of exegesis, the *Postilla litteralis super totam bibliam* (literal postilla on the entire Bible) between 1322/3 and 1331, and his companion

(and much smaller) *Postilla moralis* (moral postilla) between 1333 and 1339.<sup>173</sup> What was the relationship between these two commentaries? How did the relationship between literal and spiritual manifest in his work, and what role does Jewish exegesis play?

These are the primary questions of this thesis. These are the questions I will bring to my analysis of his literal and spiritual commentaries on the book of Esther. Before looking at these two commentaries however, a summary and analysis of medieval Christian and Jewish interpretations of Esther previous to Nicholas is a final point of necessary context. This is the subject of the next chapter.

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<sup>173</sup> The term *postilla* probably comes from the phrase *post illa verba* ("after these words") which basically describes the method of interpretation. Quoting a word or a few words from the biblical text, Nicholas would follow with his interpretation or comments. The effect was a running commentary on the Bible, or a word by word interpretation. The term was first used in describing the commentaries of Hugh of St. Cher (ca. 1200-1263). Smalley, *The Study*, p. 270-271.

## Chapter Two: Esther in Jewish and Christian Scripture

Esther is unusual as a sacred text. The Hebrew version used in Rabbinic Judaism not only does not mention the name of God, it includes no reference to Moses, Mosaic Law, Jerusalem, or the Jewish Temple. It is a violent story with a vengeful ending. A Jewish woman is the hero, but her heroism is only made possible by association with a gentile male, a fact many medieval Jewish exegetes found exceedingly troubling.<sup>1</sup>

The primary focus of this chapter will be an investigation of medieval Christian exegesis on this book up to the fourteenth century before concluding with a brief overview of some of the more relevant aspects of Jewish exegesis on Esther. This background is necessary to an informed analysis of Nicholas's *postillae*. I will begin however with a brief synopsis of the Esther text, a summary of its history, and the process of its canonicity. This last point is especially important for understanding the development of Jewish and Christian exegesis on this text, because the most elemental question both Jews and Christians brought to Esther is how to discern something sacred in a story which on the face of it was purely secular.

### 2.1: General Introduction to the Book of Esther

The story of Esther begins with King Ahasuerus in Shushan, the capitol of his Kingdom, preparing to hold a great feast: "In the days of Ahasuerus, who reigned from India to Ethiopia over a hundred and twenty-seven provinces: When he sat on the throne of his kingdom, the city Shushan was the capital of his kingdom. Now in the third year of his reign he made a great feast for all the princes, and for his servants..."<sup>2</sup> Over the course of the Esther story, there are 7 (or 8)

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<sup>1</sup> Barry Dov Walfish, *Esther in Medieval Garb: Jewish Interpretation of the Book of Esther in the Middle Ages* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993) 122-126.

<sup>2</sup> Esther 1:1-3. All biblical quotes and paraphrases will be taken from the Douay Rheims Bible (DRB) unless otherwise stated. Personal and place names will be given in modern spelling.

banquets or feasts (*convivium*, or מִשְׁתֵּה) and much of the action takes place in the opulent setting of the Persian court. The first critical point in the narrative is at the initial feast, when the king commands his queen, Vashti, to come before him, to show off her beauty to all the people. She refuses to come.

The feast Ahasuerus holds in the third year of his reign is for all the princes and nobles in his kingdom, to show them his wealth and power for one hundred and eighty days; when these days have finished, the king commands a feast to be held for seven days in his court and garden, for everyone in Shushan, "from the greatest to the least". The luxuriousness of the setting, decorations, and food are all described. Then, on the seven day of the feast, the king commands Vashti to come to him, to show her off to all his people. He is very merry and "well-warmed with wine" at the time. Vashti is holding her own feast for herself and her women, and when she refuses to come, Ahasuerus become furious.

He asks his wise men, who are always on hand for such occasions, what he ought to do. One of them, Mamuchan, answers that Vashti has not only injured the king but all the princes of his kingdom, because "all the wives of the princes of the Persians and the Medes will slight the commandments of their husbands," wherefore, Mamuchan says, perhaps thinking of his own domestic situation, "the king's indignation is just." He advises Ahasuerus to command that Vashti should be summarily dismissed, and that news of her dismissal should be published throughout the kingdom, as a warning to the wives of other princes. Ahasuerus agrees, and Vashti's dismissal is published throughout this kingdom.

Ahasuerus eventually "remembers" Vashti and what she has suffered. Why he does not recall Vashti is not stated, but instead his ministers order that all the most beautiful virgins in the kingdom are to be brought to the palace so that Ahasuerus can choose a new queen from among them. Esther, the niece of Mordechai the Jew, is among the women taken to the palace. Mordechai is of the race of Jemini (he was Benjaminite), and he had been taken from Jerusalem during the reign of Nabuchodonosor, who also carried away Jechonias king of Juda.

According to Mordechai's instruction, Esther tells no one who her people are. The reason for this secrecy is unclear, but Esther nevertheless finds favour with the Egeus, the eunuch is in charge of the women. Being charged with the women's adornment and cosmetic preparations, Egeus advises Esther what do to. Each woman goes before the king, but when it is time for Esther to go she pleases him above the rest, for her great beauty, and he chooses her to be his queen. He holds a great feast to celebrate their marriage.

Meanwhile, Mordechai, who was concerned for Esther and wanted to know what happened to her, was frequently outside the palace gate. Virgins are sought a second time for the king (it is unclear why) and around this time Mordechai overhears a plot by two of the king's men, Bagathan and Thares, to kill the king. Why they were angry with Ahasuerus the text does not say, but Mordechai tells Esther of it, who tells the king in Mordechai's name, and when the thing is inquired into and discovered to be true, the traitors are hanged. A record of these events is put into the history of the kingdom.

After this, Ahasuerus appoints a man named Haman to be second in the kingdom. Everyone kneels and bows to Haman when he walks past. Everyone, that is, except Mordechai, who is questioned by others about his non conformity. Receiving no satisfactory answer from Mordechai, they tell Haman about it, and also that Mordechai is a Jew, wondering what the arrogant prince will do. Haman is furious, and he determines to destroy not Mordechai only but the entire race of the Jews.

In the month of Nisan (the first month of the year) in the twelfth year of Ahasuerus's reign, Haman casts lots into an urn to determine the day and month on which the Jews are to be killed. A 'lot' is called 'phur', and the lot cast by (or for) Haman determined that the time for the Jews' destruction would be the month of Adar (the twelfth month). Haman goes to King Ahasuerus, and says:

There is a people scattered through all the provinces of thy kingdom, and separated one from another, that use new laws and ceremonies, and moreover despise the king's ordinances: and thou knowest very well that it is not expedient

for thy kingdom that they should grow insolent by impunity. If it please thee, decree that they may be destroyed, and I will pay ten thousand talents to thy treasurers.

The king gives his ring with his seal to Haman and tells him to keep the money for himself and to do as he wishes. Haman affixes the king's seal to letters which are promulgated throughout the kingdom, letters which declare that the Jews are to be destroyed on the thirteenth day of Adar and all their goods seized. "The edict was hung up in Shushan, the king and Haman feasting together, and all the Jews that were in the city weeping."

The Jews throughout the kingdom go into mourning, putting on sackcloth and ashes, including Mordechai, who goes in lamentations to the gates of the palace, but not beyond (for no one in sackcloth can enter the king's court). Esther hears of Mordechai's condition from her maids and in a state of distress sends him a garment so that he might come in; but he will not accept it. Esther then sends Athach her eunuch to ask Mordechai what it is all about. Mordechai tells him, and also gives him a copy of Haman's edict, asking Athach to implore Esther to go to King Ahasuerus and beg for the lives of her people. Esther is greatly distressed, but tells Athach to say to her uncle that no one can go to the king unless she is summoned. Anyone who enters without being summoned is summarily executed, unless the king hold out his golden sceptre to them. She has not been called to the king for thirty days and it might cost her life to go now.

Mordechai receives the message from Athach, and sends this reply:

Think not that thou mayst save thy life only, because thou art in the king's house, more than all the Jews: For if thou wilt now hold thy peace, the Jews shall be delivered by some other occasion: and thou, and thy father's house shall perish. And who knoweth whether thou art not therefore come to the kingdom, that thou mightest be ready in such a time as this?

Esther sends a further reply by Athach, requesting that Mordechai gather all the Jewish people to pray and fast for her for three days, for she will risk her own life by going before the king.

On the third day Esther goes into the king, who sees her and is greatly pleased. He holds out his sceptre, which she kisses, and then asks her what she requests, declaring that even half his kingdom will be given to her if she asks it of him. Esther asks that he and Haman come to a

banquet she has prepared for them. The king has Haman summoned and they go together.

Toward the end of the feast the king again asks Esther what she might request of him, declaring that he would not withhold even half his kingdom. She asks that he and Haman come on the next day to another banquet, and then she will tell the king her request.

Haman leaves rejoicing, but his joy turns to anger when he sees Mordechai before the king's gate and the Jew not only does not bow to him he does not even rise to his feet. Haman calls his wife Zares and his friends and says that he has such wealth and power and glory, and even the queen has asked only he and the king to dine with her, but it all means nothing so long as Mordechai is sitting in front of the gate. His wife advises him to have a gallows prepared and to ask permission from the king on the following morning to hang Mordechai. Haman is pleased with this council, and has the gallows prepared.

For unstated reasons, the king cannot sleep on the following night, so he asks that the history of his reign be read out to him. His servants come to the place which records how Mordechai uncovered the treachery of Bagathan and Thares. Ahasuerus asks what reward was given to Mordechai for his actions. When his servants tell him Mordechai received no reward at all, the king asks who is in the court; hearing that Haman is there, for Haman had come early to request the death of Mordechai, he tells Haman to come in. Ahasuerus asks Haman what should be done to the man the king desires to honour. Haman, thinking the king is preparing to honour him, replies that the king should dress such a man in his own robe, put him on his own horse, with the king's own crown on his head and have the first of all the king's men lead the lucky one through the streets proclaiming that this is how the king treats the man whom he desires to honour. Greatly to Haman's chagrin, Ahasuerus tells him to go and do everything he has said (excepting only the king's crown) to Mordechai.

This distasteful command duly performed, Haman goes home in mourning while Mordechai returns to the king's gate. Haman tells his wife and certain 'wise men' among his friends what has happened and they tell him cryptically that if he has begun to fall before

Mordechai who is a Jew there is nothing he can do about it. One of the king's servants comes in at the moment to summon Haman to Esther's second banquet.

This begins much as the first, and after the king has become merry with wine he asks Esther again what her request is, saying he will grant it even to half of his kingdom. This time, Esther petitions the king for her life, saying a plot has been made to destroy her people. This, she says, or even becoming slaves she could bear, except that their adversary's malice rebounds even on the king himself. Ahasuerus demands to know who it could be that would dare such a plot; "and Esther said: It is this Haman that is our adversary and most wicked enemy" thus confounding Haman and infuriating the king, who leaves the banquet for the garden.

Haman also jumps up to entreat Esther, knowing that evil is now coming for him, but when the king comes back from the garden and sees Haman on the couch where Esther is lying he thinks Haman wishes to "force her" (*vult opprimere*) at which an unspecified "they" immediately cover Haman's face. Harbona, one of the king's eunuchs, tells the king about the gibbet that Haman had prepared for Mordechai and the king orders that Haman himself be hung upon it.

Esther has at last revealed her Jewish identity, and when she tells Ahasuerus that Mordechai is her uncle he is summoned before the king and given the ring initially given to Haman. Haman's house he gives to Esther, who sets Mordechai in authority over it. Not content with this, Esther falls at Ahasuerus's feet and begs that the letters Haman sent out to destroy the Jews should have no effect. Ahasuerus tells her that she and Mordechai can do as they wish.

Summoning scribes, Mordechai writes new letters and seals them with the king's ring, to the effect that the Jews should all arm themselves and destroy their enemies and despoil them of their goods. These are sent out and promulgated in all the provinces in all the languages and characters of the provinces and in Shushan also. Mordechai rides out from the king's palace in splendour, such that:

to the Jews a new light seemed to rise, joy, honour, and dancing. And in all peoples, cities, and provinces, whithersoever the king's commandments came, there was wonderful rejoicing, feasts and banquets, and keeping holy day:

insomuch that many of other nations and religion, joined themselves to their worship and ceremonies. For a great dread of the name of the Jews had fallen upon all.

One day of revenge is appointed throughout the kingdom, that is the thirteenth day of the month of Adar. On this day the Jews slaughter their enemies, which in Shushan includes the ten sons of Haman who are all listed. But they do not touch their enemies' possessions. When Ahasuerus hears how many had been killed, he asks Esther if she desires anything more. Esther asks that the Jews in the city of Shushan should be allowed to do the next day as they have done that day, and that the ten sons of Haman be hung on gibbets. The king grants her request, so on the fourteenth day of the month of Adar the Jews in Shushan attack their enemies again, but do not despoil them. So in the provinces the Jews rest from the slaughter on the fourteenth day, but the Jews in Shushan on the fifteenth day, which is a declared a day of rest and festival.

Mordechai makes a record of this entire story and declares that the fourteenth and fifteenth days of Adar should be kept and celebrated as a solemnity, because on those days the evil Haman had intended for the Jews fell upon Haman himself and the Jews were delivered. The festival the Jews must observe is called Purim, which means "of lots" because Haman had cast lots into an urn to determine when to destroy the Jews, but in the end he had been destroyed by them.

The text of Esther concludes with the assertion that this festival shall never be forgotten, for "all provinces in the whole world shall celebrate [it] throughout all generations: neither is there any city wherein the days of Purim, that is, of lots, must not be observed by the Jews, and by their posterity, which is bound to these ceremonies." Purim is still celebrated on the fourteenth and/or fifteenth day of Adar (corresponding to late February or early March, or late March in leap years, when Adar two is added into the calendar. In leap years, Purim is celebrated in Adar two. Most Jewish communities celebrate it on the fourteenth day of Adar, but in Jerusalem and other walled cities it is celebrated on the fifteenth day, because Shushan was a walled city). The festival is the liturgical occasion for reading of the Esther scroll, and a time to

commemorate the deliverance of the Jews from Haman's wicked plot with carnival-like games and parties.<sup>3</sup>

The synopsis above is based on Jerome's Vulgate translation of a Hebrew text. The author of Esther is unknown, although medieval Jewish and Christian tradition ascribed the text to Mordechai or Ezra respectively. This meant the date of its composition and the action it describes must be determined by the identity of Ahasuerus.<sup>4</sup> Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century biblical scholars generally believed the Esther scroll dated from the Hellenistic period (324-31 BCE), but the current scholarly consensus posits that the earliest version was written between 400-350 BCE (the final few years of the Persian period) and then redacted and given a new conclusion in the Hellenistic period.<sup>5</sup> The redacted version has a new conclusion which begins

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<sup>3</sup> For more information on the celebration of Purim, see: N. S. Doniach, *Purim, Or, The Feast of Esther: An Historical Study* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1933); Israel Abrahams, *Jewish Life In The Middle Ages* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2013, first published 2005 by Keagan Paul).

<sup>4</sup> Augustine thought that Ezra wrote the book, which Hugh of St. Victor repeats. Although most Jews thought Mordechai wrote it, in the Talmud it is ascribed to the men of the Great Synagogue. See Lewis Bayles Patton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Esther* (T&T Clark, 1908, reprinted 1964), 60-61.

<sup>5</sup> The Hellenistic period is typically dated from 324 BCE when Alexander the Great died, to 31 BCE when decisive Roman victories led to the emergence of the Roman Empire. The Maccabean revolt took place 167-160 BCE, a sub-period within the Hellenistic period. The once common view that Esther dates from the Maccabean period is represented in Patton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary*, v, 54, 60-63. Patton begins his introduction: "The Book of Esther presents no complicated problems of documentary analysis...it also presents no difficult problems of dating, such as are found in the prophetic books. There is general agreement that it belongs to the Greek period, and probably to the latter part of that period."

In 1953, Peter Ackroyd questioned the criteria generally used in dating biblical material to the Maccabean period, leading scholars to revisit the question of dating for numerous biblical books, and the Persian period (550-331 BCE) is increasingly recognised as an important and formative one in the composition of Jewish scripture –including the book of Esther. See Peter Runham Ackroyd, "Criteria for the Maccabean Dating of Old Testament Literature" *Vetus Testamentum* 3, no. 2 (1953): 113-132.

The Persian period is typically dated from 550-331 BCE, from Cyrus's defeat of the Medes to Alexander the Great's conquest of Persia. It is now argued that a large number of texts of the Tanakh originate in or were substantially redacted (and therefore reached their final form in) the Persian period. See especially: Erhard S. Gerstenberger, *Israel in the Persian Period: The Fifth and Fourth Centuries B.C.E.*, trans. Siegfried S. Schatzmann (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011, first published 2005), ch. 3; Jason M. Silverman, *Persepolis and Jerusalem: Iranian Influence on the Apocalyptic Hermeneutic* (New York: T&T Clark, 2012); idem, *Persian Royal-Judean Elite Engagements in the Early Teispid and Achaemenid Empire: The King's Acolytes* (New York: T&T Clark, 2019).

Jill Middlemas, "Dating Esther: Historicity and Provenance of Masoretic Esther", in *On Dating Biblical Texts to the Persian Period: discerning criteria and establishing epochs*, ed. R. J. Bautch and M. Lackowski (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019), 149-168; Lloyd Llewlyn-Jones, *Ancient Persia and the Book of Esther: Achaemenid Court Culture in the Hebrew Bible* (London: Bloomsbury, 2023), 3-4, 9-10; Arndt Meinhold, "Die Gattung Der Josephsgeschichte Und Des Estherbuches: Diasporanovelle II" *Zeitschrift Für Die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 88, no. 1 (1976), 72-93; Joyce G. Baldwin, *Esther: an Introduction and Commentary* (Leicester: Intervarsity Press, 1984), 48-49; Timothy K. Beal, *The Book of Hiding: Gender, Ethnicity, Annihilation, and Esther* (London: Routledge, 1997), 112; Jon D. Levenson, *Esther: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1997), 26. The two most recent studies, those by Jill Middlemas and Lloyd Llewlyn-Jones, provides helpful summaries of scholarship on the dating of Esther, and analyses the evidence for an initial Persian period composition and Hellenistic redaction. Middlemas basis her

with the establishment of the festival of Purim as described in the summary above. The redaction in general seems to reflect an interest in providing a biblical foundation for this festival.<sup>6</sup> Earlier Hebrew versions of the story (called the pre- and proto-Masoretic texts) probably did not include the Purim motif. There were Greek translations (or more correctly, interpretations) of the Hebrew version composed in the Hellenistic period. One of these was the Septuagint, which formed the basis for early Latin translations.<sup>7</sup>

The existence of different versions of the Esther text is primarily important (in the context of this thesis) for two reasons: first, because it influenced Jerome in composing his

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argument primarily on historical, linguistic, and intra-biblical aspects of the text which reflect a Persian provenance. Llewellyn-Jones discusses how the author of the earliest version of Esther was clearly very conversant in the Persian nobility and the customs of the royal court at Shushan, and how he provides a Jewish lens through which to view that world. The original story was not one of history but of historic fiction: playful, clever, alluding to but not overtly referencing other biblical texts. Llewellyn-Jones describes it as an "historical novella". He illustrates how the Esther story fits into an aspect of the literary culture of the late Achaemenid period, the "Court Tale". See p. 4-5. Further sources include: L. M. Willis, *The Jew in the Court of the Foreign King* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990); idem., *The Jewish Novel in the Ancient World* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995); M. Chyutin, *Tendentious Hagiographies: Jewish Propagandist Fiction BCE* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011).

<sup>6</sup> Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones, *Ancient Persia*, 10; David J. A. Clines, *The Esther Scroll: The Story of the Story* (Sheffield: University of Sheffield Press, 1984), 26-30, ch. 3, 158-168; Middlemas, "Dating Esther", 162-168. Questions of genre play an especially important role in Middlemas's analysis. She discerns two distinct purposes in the Esther scroll: chapters 1:1-9:19 function as a story of the diaspora, bolstering the confidence of Jews living abroad, while 9:20-9:32 function as the foundation story for the festival of Purim. The earliest version of Persian provenance, according to Middlemas, was a type of "diaspora Jewish fiction"; the later version was a biblical authorisation for the festival. Clines argues along similar lines that the first part of the (Masoretic) narrative (roughly ch. 1-8) are a stand alone narrative, while the last two chapters introduce a new theme, i.e., the festival of Purim. He contends that the earliest versions of the story were not about providing a biblical foundation to Purim, but that this was the interest of later editors. It is also worth noting that the first independent mention of Purim is in the book of Maccabees, composed around the time the Hellenistic redaction might have taken place. The reference is in 2 Maccabees 15:36-38. Judah the Maccabee has been unexpectedly victorious over his enemies, specifically Nicanor, who has been beheaded. The text concludes: "and they all ordained by a common decree, by no means to let this day pass without solemnity: But to celebrate the thirteenth day of the month of Adar, called, in the Syrian language, the day before Mardochia's day. So these things being done with relation to Nicanor and from that time the city being possessed by the Hebrews, I also will here make an end of my narration." The thirteenth day is the day before the 14th, 'Mordechai's day', ostensibly Purim.

The book of Esther is the only canonical book which is not in the Dead Sea Scrolls, suggesting that the Essenes did not accept its canonicity (possibly because of the absence of the name of God). Llewellyn-Jones, *Ancient Persia and the Book of Esther*, 2.

<sup>7</sup> Clines has provided the most detailed historical-critical analysis of the book of Esther based on the Masoretic text and two extant Greek versions. The two Greek versions Clines calls the A-text, which is the earlier version, and the Septuagint. Clines posits five stages for the Esther story: initial (separate) stories of Esther and Mordechai which were (hypothetical) sources for a pre-Masoretic text which combined the two. The pre-Masoretic text was the basis for the earlier Greek translation, the A-text. The Pre-Masoretic text was expanded into the proto-Masoretic text with various appendices, but still without the Purim motif; the proto-Masoretic text was essentially chapters 1-8 of the Masoretic text. The Masoretic text is a redaction of the proto-Masoretic text, with the new Purim-focused ending represented in chapters 9-10. The Masoretic text, translated and with several Semitic and Greek additions, was the source for the Septuagint, but the Septuagint differs significantly from the Masoretic text, as will be discussed below. See Clines, *Esther Scroll*, 26, 50-63, ch. 8, ch. 10. Clines provides a very helpful table detailing the version of Esther, their sequence, and influence on each other on page 140.

Vulgate version.<sup>8</sup> This is the closest text to the one Nicholas would have used. It is similar, but not identical, to the Hebrew text medieval Jews would have read. This is the Masoretic text, the authoritative version of the Hebrew Bible in Rabbinic Judaism.<sup>9</sup> It includes the Purim motif as described above, but it does not include the overtly religious themes which existed, for example, in the Septuagint (which I will summarise in a moment). This is related to the second point, which is that the redaction of Esther in favour of the Purim motif was a crucial factor in getting the Megillat Esther (the Esther scroll) included in the Jewish canon. Because these two points influence how Jewish and Christian exegesis on Esther developed, I will explore them both briefly.

When Jerome undertook to translate a Hebrew version of Esther into Latin (sometime between 390 and 406) several versions of the story were still circulating in Jewish and Christian communities as follows: proto-Masoretic versions (with the Purim motif), used by Jerome in writing the Vulgate and by Jews in writing the Masoretic text; possibly various Greek versions now lost; the Septuagint, and Old Latin (*Vetus Latina*) translations based on the Septuagint. There was not one single Hebrew version, and Lewis Bayles Patton provides a list of variant

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<sup>8</sup> I use the term 'Vulgate' here because this is how Jerome's Latin version is generally referred to today. Jerome's translation was only first called the Vulgate (*Biblia Sacra Vulgatae Editionis*) at the Council of Trent (1545-1563), when it was made the official text for the Roman Church (although this was not meant to disregard the original texts or other ancient Latin versions. It was primarily to favour Latin over vernacular translations). Before this, the term 'vulgate' referred to the older 'common' Latin editions. Before 1563, Jerome's translation was called *nostra translatio*, *nostra usitata editio*, or *ea translatio qua nostrae ecclesiae passim utuntur*. See Arthur Allgeier, "Haec Vetus et Vulgata Editio", *Biblica* 29, no. 4 (1948): 353-390; Edmund F. Sutcliff, "The Name *Vulgata*", *Biblica* 29, no. 4 (1948), 345-352; idem., "The Council of Trent and the *Authentica* of the Vulgate", *Journal of Theological Studies* 49, no. 193/194 (1948): 35-42. There is no critical edition of Jerome's Vulgate, for reasons which will be made clear in this chapter. A reasonably good edition was made in 1873 by Tischendorf and Heyse. See: *Biblia Sacra Latina Veteris Testamenti: Hieronymo Interprete*, edited Constantin Von Tischendorf, Theodor Heyse, and Christian Karl Josias Bunsen (F.A. Brockhaus, 1873). English quotations are taken from the Douay Rheims Bible (DRB), an English translation published between 1582 and 1610, and based on the Vulgate.

<sup>9</sup> The Masoretic text of the Hebrew Bible was edited and disseminated by a group of rabbis called the Masoretes between the seventh and tenth centuries CE. It became the standard text of Tanakh in Rabbinic Judaism. For the Masoretic text, I am using the *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (BHS), edited by Karl Elliger and Wilhelm Rudolph. Published in 1977, this edition is based on the Leningrad Codex, the oldest extant copy of the Masoretic text, dating from the 11th century. All citations of the Hebrew Bible will be taken from this version.

readings between Jerome's Vulgate and Masoretic text which demonstrates that Jerome was using manuscripts different but similar to those used by the Masoretes.<sup>10</sup>

Jerome himself was not aware of the existence of different versions in the Hebrew: he was primarily aware of the variation between the Hebrew version he consulted, the Greek versions like the Septuagint, and the Latin versions based on them. In Jerome's mind, these differences meant that somewhere the 'true' or 'original' text had been corrupted. In his prologue to the book of Esther Jerome states that he has translated "word for word" from the Hebrew original.<sup>11</sup> Unaware of the different Hebrew versions in circulation, Jerome turned to the 'Hebrew Truth' in his efforts to make a definitive translation into Latin, believing that here he had found the most authentic text. In the Hebrew version he used, as in that used by the Masoretes, there are no overtly religious themes, which did exist in other versions of the story, such as the Septuagint.

The Septuagint was almost certainly based on a pre- or proto-Masoretic text, but it is something of a literary paraphrase rather than a translation. There are numerous small differences between the Greek and the Hebrew versions, and, more significantly, six passages in the Greek which are not included in the Masoretic. The contents of the additions correspond to the current chapters 11:2-16:24 in the DRB. Chapter 11 details a dream of Mordechai's in which he sees tribulation coming for the Jewish people, but also their deliverance. Chapter 12 gives more information about Mordechai discovering the plot of the Eunuchs, and Haman's hatred of Mordechai. Chapter 13 is a copy of Haman's letter, and a prayer by Mordechai for his people. A long prayer by Esther follows in chapter 14. In chapter 15, Esther goes before the king to petition him on behalf of her people. She asks God for strength and help, and God inclines the king's heart toward her. Chapter 16 is a copy of the king's letter on behalf of the Jews. Jerome

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<sup>10</sup> Patton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary*, 24-28. Most of these differences are slight, but Patton discusses how Jerome's Vulgate is now an important source for a Hebrew version of Esther now lost.

<sup>11</sup> See Jerome's prologue to the book of Esther in *Biblia Sacra Latina*, ed. Tischendorf et. al., 56, where he says: "verbum e verbo pressius transtuli".

took these additions out of their natural place in the Greek narrative and appended them to his translation, as they are appended now to the DRB. He did not consider them 'authentic' because they were not in the Hebrew version he was consulting.<sup>12</sup>

The most striking thing about these additions is the religious content. Mordechai knows his dream is prophetic, and he is waiting to see what God will do; both he and Esther make long prayers to God, and see Him as the cause of their salvation. Even the king's letter describes the Jews as "the children of the highest and the greatest, and the ever living God, by whose benefit the kingdom was given both to our Fathers and to us, and is kept unto this day".<sup>13</sup> The additional content from the Septuagint significantly changes the overall tone of the text, providing it with overtly religious themes absent from the Hebrew versions. The Old Latin versions of Esther were based on the Septuagint, and probably also included these elements.<sup>14</sup> Jerome chose to follow the Hebrew version, excising these passages.

Jerome's decision was partly due to a perceived uniformity (and consequent 'purity') in the Hebrew text not found in the Latin or Greek texts. The Church Fathers often complained about the *Vetus Latina* because of variant readings, which were thought of as "corruptions" or scribal "insertions"; in reality, the *Vetus Latina* was the result of a long and complicated process which involved copying various local Latin translations based on Greek or even Hebrew versions of the Bible now lost. When Jerome looked at the Hebrew version he thought he had found a consistency lacking in the various Christian translations. His decision to translate the *Hebraica Veritas* emanated from his belief that the Hebrew was closer to the actual word of God, that it had been transmitted uncorrupted and unchanged, and that a new 'pure' Latin translation from such a source was needed.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Clines, *The Esther Scroll*, 69-70.

<sup>13</sup> Esther 16:16.

<sup>14</sup> Patton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary*, 40; Van Liere, *An Introduction*, 80-81;

<sup>15</sup> Jerome's decision to translate the 'Hebrew Truth' was inspired by what he saw as the extraordinary uniformity of the Hebrew version of the Old Testament books, but this uniformity was not, as Jerome thought, because the Hebrew text had been transmitted without change through the ages. In reality, the need felt by Rabbinic authorities

This question of religious features (or lack thereof) in the book of Esther did generate doubts as to whether it was indeed a sacred text, and shaped the debate regarding its canonicity. This is better documented in the Jewish than in the Christian context. Megillat Esther, one of five megilloth ('scrolls') in the Ketuvim, was not yet included in Tanakh when the Second Temple was destroyed, but only sometime after 200 CE.<sup>16</sup> This is comparatively late, as most of the books in the Ketuvim were canonised c. 65 CE.

Solomon Zeitlin argues that the delay was due to the efforts of rabbis who were opposed to the inclusion of Esther because of its overtly secular character.<sup>17</sup> The festival of Purim, however, had occupied an important liturgical place since before the time of the Maccabees. Purim was widely observed by Jews, so widely in fact that the scroll was likely included in the canon out of public pressure.<sup>18</sup> How exactly Purim came to be so widely celebrated in Rabbinic Judaism is unclear, and it is outside the parameters of this study to more than note the obscurity of Purim's origins.<sup>19</sup> The crucial point is that Purim's liturgical significance brought about the scrolls inclusion in the Jewish canon. For this reason, the Tractate Megillah in Seder Moed ("the Order of Festivals") in the Babylonian Talmud is primarily composed of halakah, legal rulings on how the Esther scroll should be read, addressing such questions as what to do if the festival falls on the Sabbath. Once included in Tanakh however, Esther generated more exegesis than almost any other book in Ketuvim.

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to standardise their text after the destruction of the Temple meant the suppression of various Hebrew versions in the first century. If Jerome was unaware of the variety of Hebrew texts when he began his task of translating, it was because a Judaism in crisis had made a strong and successful effort to standardise their biblical text. The final result of this process would be the Masoretic text. Jerome thought the Greek versions and the *Vetus Latina* were replete with error because they differed from the Hebrew text he consulted, but they were probably translated from variant Hebrew versions now lost. McKane, *Selected Christian Hebraists*, 39.

<sup>16</sup> This is based on evidence from the Talmud (Megillah 7a) and especially from the *Megilat Taanit*. The *Megilat Taanit* was written in the Tannaic period (c. 10-220), the period of the rabbinic sages whose interpretations of the Talmud are recorded in the Mishnah. It records semi-festivals, among them Purim; Purim would not have been included here if the book of Esther had been included in the canon, demonstrating that while Purim was widely practised, the book of Esther had not yet acquired canonical status. See Solomon Zeitlin, "An Historical Study of the canonization of the Hebrew Scriptures" *Proceedings - American Academy for Jewish Research* 3 (1931): 131-134.

<sup>17</sup> Zeitlin, "An Historical Study", 131-134.

<sup>18</sup> Zeitlin, "An Historical Study", 131-134, 154.

<sup>19</sup> Arguments are made in favour of a Hebrew, Greek, Persian, or Babylonian origin for the feast of Purim. Patton gives an overview of the four arguments, see Patton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary*, 77-94.

Sources for the canonical status of Esther in the earliest periods of Christianity are comparatively sparse.<sup>20</sup> The first definitive statement about the Catholic canon was made at the council of Trent (1546) and Esther is included here; that it was considered scriptural for many centuries before this is evidenced by its inclusion in biblical codices throughout the medieval period. How it attained canonical status is an interesting question, considering that many early scholars of the Church took exception to the lack of religion in the book. There is no festival corresponding to Purim in the Christian tradition that would explain the books' inclusion, and the book had only a very limited role in the Christian liturgy. The books of Solomon, the "women" (that is, Judith and Esther), Maccabees and Tobit were assigned to be read at vigil offices between mid October and advent.<sup>21</sup> There is also evidence that Esther was read on the second Wednesday of Lent, but the sections for this reading are taken from Mordechai's prayer (13:8-11, 15-17) which is part of the appended sections from the Septuagint, not the text based on the Hebrew and not considered canonical by Jerome.<sup>22</sup> It is a prayer for Mercy, with a distinctly Lenten feel.

This lack of liturgical context makes Esther's inclusion in the canon something of a mystery. It follows Ezra and Nehemiah, which suggests that it was thought of as an historical text of the diaspora, set squarely in the midst of the post-exilic Persian period. This is interesting too, considering that no Christian scholar attempted a literal or historical exposition of Esther before Nicholas in the fourteenth century.

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<sup>20</sup> In fact, earliest lists of canonical literature do not mention Esther. In his *History of the Church*, Eusebius (d. 339) records Melito's canon of the Old Testament which excludes Esther. Eusebius, *Church History; Life of Constantine the Great; and Oration in Praise of Constantine*, trans. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Grand Rapids, Michigan: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1982, first printed 1890), 206. Melito's letter to Onesimus is recorded, in which Melito says that he has gone east to enquire about the number and order of the books of the Old Testament "where these things were preached and done". He provides the current Old Testament canon, excepting Lamentations (which was probably at that time appended to Jeremiah) and Esther.

<sup>21</sup> Joseph Dyer, "The Bible in the Medieval Liturgy, c. 600–1300" in *The New Cambridge Companion to the Bible*, vol. II, edited Ann Matter and Richard Marsden (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 664; Andrew Hughes, *Medieval Manuscripts for Mass and Office: A Guide to Their Organization and Terminology* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982), 189.

<sup>22</sup> Joseph Dyer, "Sources of Romano-Frankish Liturgy and Music" in *The Cambridge History of Medieval Music*, edited Thomas Forrest Kelly and Mark Everist (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 103.

The question of the canonical status of Esther is primarily significant in that it highlights a problem Christian and Jewish exegetes faced when expounding this book: in what way was the story a 'sacred' one? What was God trying to communicate in this seemingly worldly story of feasts and treachery in the Persian court? In preparation for exploring how Nicholas navigates these questions, I will summarise medieval Christian and Jewish exegesis on Esther.

## 2.2: Christian Exegesis of Esther

The lack of any significant liturgical context and the overtly secular nature of the story are presumably explanation enough for the dearth of medieval exegesis on this book. There are very few Christian commentaries on the book from the Middle Ages, and none on the literal sense until Nicholas.<sup>23</sup> I will look at the three interpretive contexts which do exist, and which best illustrate the history of Christian exegesis on the book of Esther up to the fourteenth century. These are: 1) Rabanus Maurus (c. 780-856), who wrote the first commentary on Esther and whose interpretive framework was not departed from in any significant way until Nicholas. His exegesis forms the basis for 2) the *Glossa Ordinaria*, an influential and widely disseminated twelfth century compilation of patristic and Carolingian exegesis, which was updated by 3) Hugh of St. Cher O.P. (d. 1264), whose *postillae* were also widely disseminated in the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries.

The full relevance of these commentaries will be made clear in chapter four, when I compare Nicholas's moral or spiritual commentary to the standard interpretation these three contexts represent. For now, keeping in mind the central question of this chapter, we might ask how Christians initially discerned a sacred meaning in the book of Esther. Given the medieval exegetical methods discussed in chapter one, it is unsurprising that for Rabanus it is primarily found in the spiritual sense.

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<sup>23</sup> In the commentaries that did exist, a few historical questions were sometimes addressed and answered, but not in a robust way, as will be seen.

### 2.2.a: Rabanus Maurus

Rabanus was born in Mainz c. 780, and entered the abbey at Fulda at a young age. He studied under Alcuin at Tours (d. 804), but later returned to Fulda where he became abbot, and the head of a school which admitted lay persons. As a teacher, he wrote on grammar, logic, and rhetoric. He is especially remembered for his mystical poetry and hymns (notably the *Veni Creator Spiritus*). He was probably the most important (certainly the most prolific) biblical exegete of the Carolingian period.

Rabanus's activities, especially in the realm of exegesis, reflect the programme of reform instituted by Charlemagne (r. 768-814) and his successors in this period. Charlemagne promoted learning and literacy especially among the clergy, and desired to standardise Christian worship throughout his realm. The latter objective was hampered by the diversity of the biblical translations inherited by the Church (a minute facet of which we saw in relation to the Esther text). It was in this period, as part of Charlemagne's efforts to have one standard text of the Bible, that Jerome's Vulgate became the most common version of the Bible used in the Church.<sup>24</sup> Carolingian scholars were tasked with accurately copying and correcting it.<sup>25</sup> Exegesis took place alongside this process of copying and correcting the biblical text and the commentaries of the Fathers, and had a distinctly pedagogical element: the aim, as John Contreni points out, was primarily to teach. The result was innovative traditionalism: by synthesising and harmonising the

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<sup>24</sup> While "Jerome's" Vulgate (a combination of Jerome's translations, lightly edited old Latin versions, and scribal edits) became the most commonly used Latin version, theologians continued using and correcting the *Vetus Latina* until the thirteenth century. The process which made Jerome's version the most commonly used translation during the Carolingian period and afterwards is usefully discussed by Pierre-Maurice Bogaert. See Pierre-Maurice Bogaert, "The Latin Bible, c. 600 to c. 900" in *The New Cambridge History of the Bible*, ed. R. Marsden and E. Matter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 69-92. See also: Van Liere, *An Introduction*, 82-95.

<sup>25</sup> For a useful overview of Charlemagne's programme, see: Van Liere, *An Introduction*, 91-95. David Ganz describes the process by which the Bible was standardised in this period, including standardisation of prefatory material (usually Jerome's prologues) and chapter division. He also discussed the greater recurrence of single volume Bibles. David Ganz, "Carolingian Bibles" in *The New Cambridge History of the Bible*, vol. II, ed. Richard Marsden and E. Ann Matter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 325-337. Pierre-Maurice Bogaert describes the process by which Jerome's version predominated (although local versions continued to exist and be transmitted). See Bogaert, "The Latin Bible," 69-92.

Fathers, scholars often said something new, although the reverence for authority led most to protest vehemently that they were only 'repeating' what they 'gleaned' from the Fathers.<sup>26</sup>

Very much a man of Charlemagne's project, Rabanus makes it clear that he is commenting on Jerome's version of Esther. In the letter addressed to the Empress Judith of Bavaria (d. 841), for whom the commentary was written, Rabanus locates the value of this version in its being based on the Hebrew. Rabanus notes that Jerome appended sections from the Septuagint, but declares he will not comment on these, contenting himself with explaining "in an allegorical fashion" what has been drawn from the "Hebrew Truth":

The translator of this sacred history asserts that he has copied this book from the archives of the Hebrews, and he has translated it straightforwardly, word for word. He did not omit entirely what he found in the vulgate edition [i.e., the Old Latin, based on the Septuagint] but after translating with complete fidelity the Hebrew Truth, he added this material as an appendix to the end of the book with the other passages [not in the Hebrew original]. We have explained in an allegorical fashion the material drawn from the Hebrew source.<sup>27</sup>

As discussed above, the additional material from the Septuagint reframes Esther's story as one of divine providence. The Septuagint additions inject an otherwise romantic tale of palace intrigue and serendipitous reversals of fortune with a tropological reflection on God and His saving action. Rabanus is following Jerome's example in focusing on the Hebrew version, and, because this is seemingly devoid of religious significance, it is all the more important that Rabanus show how the book is a perfectly sacred one. He does this by an appeal to the spiritual sense.

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<sup>26</sup> John Contreni "Carolingian Biblical Studies" in *Carolingian Essays: Andrew W. Mellon Essays in Early Christian Studies*, ed. Uta-Renate Blumenthal (Washington D. C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1983), 79-86. Carolingian scholars have often been characterised as purely encyclopaedic and non-dialectical, amassing and copying classical and patristic works and treating these works as authoritative, rather than engaging with them in innovative ways. Recently there has been a re-evaluation of this perspective, one which views Carolingian scholars as engaging dynamically with the tradition they were collecting and organising. See for example the collection of essays in *Carolingian Culture: emulation and innovation*, edited Rosamond McKitterick (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994, reprinted 1997).

<sup>27</sup> "Hunc quidem librum asserit sacrae historiae interpres de archivis Hebraeorum relevatum verbum a verbo expressius se transtulisse. Attamen ea quae in editione vulgata reperit non penitus praetermisit, sed Hebraica veritate plena fide expressa, caetera quae extrinsecus invenit juxta finem libri addendo subjunxit. Nos autem ea quae ex Hebraeorum fonte prolata sunt, allegorico sensu exposuimus." PL 109: 0635c-0635d. All summaries and quotations will be taken from the *Patrologia Latina*. All translations are my own.

Indeed, Rabanus's almost exclusive preference for the spiritual exposition in his commentary on Esther is evident from the first few lines: "the book of Esther, which the Hebrews count among the hagiographies, contains in a mysterious way many sacraments (*sacramenta*) of Christ and the Church."<sup>28</sup> Rabanus is not denying that Esther, Ahasuerus, and Mordechai were real, historical persons; their previous existence in fact is essential to their typological significance, but it is this typological significance which is of primary importance, and which gives the story theological value. The term 'sacrament' is especially vital here.

By 'sacrament' Rabanus means a hidden truth of the faith. An essential aspect of the senses method, it is closely related to 'mystery'. 'Sacrament' and 'mystery' are dual aspects of one sacred communication from God. The former refers especially to the people and events in the Old Testament; a sacrament is an outer aspect which hides but is ultimately meant to reveal the 'mystery': the person (Christ) and events in the New Testament. Rabanus's attitude, in de Lubac's words, was essentially that "the entire New Testament is a great mystery hidden within this sacrament, or signified by means of this sacrament, which is the Old Testament."<sup>29</sup> Rabanus's perspective is that Esther was once a real woman living in Shushan, and that her story was dictated by God to a scribe in order that she might also have a secret or sacramental identity.<sup>30</sup> She is a 'type', 'symbol', or 'sacrament' for a New Testament reality too.

It is Rabanus's role as an exegete to reveal this hidden meaning, while in no way denying the apparent or literal meaning. If your exegesis proceeds in an allegorical fashion, the seeming worldliness of the text, the seeming absence of God, need not (necessarily) trouble you. In commenting on Ahasuerus's feast at the beginning of the story, Rabanus says:

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<sup>28</sup> "Liber Esther, quem Hebraei inter hagiographa annumerant, multipliciter Christi et Ecclesiae sacramenta in mysterio continet. PL 109: 0635c.

De Lubac notes that Rabanus in general favoured the spiritual sense, as did most Carolingians. De Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis*, 106-108.

<sup>29</sup> De Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis*, 22. The seven sacraments of the Church (baptism, confirmation, penance, Eucharist, matrimony, holy orders, and extreme unction) were not finalised until the Lateran Council in 1213. The sacramental theology behind these sacraments is related to but distinct from the use of the term 'sacrament' in the medieval hermeneutic.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Alcuin of York (d. 804), who wrote about the Bible as containing "the precepts of salvation which the saints wrote at God's dictation". Translated in Ganz, "Carolingian Bibles", 325.

Although these preparations for a most opulent banquet might seem to demonstrate in an historical way the parade of wealth and the sumptuous luxuries of a powerful king, nevertheless, in a more sacred and mysterious way, they signify the magnitude of spiritual gifts and the excellence of bodily necessities [given by] our most powerful king, namely the Lord Christ, which gifts he, according to the manner of his dispensation, dispenses liberally to each one of his faithful.<sup>31</sup>

Although the literal or 'historical' meaning describes the earthly glory of an earthly king, Rabanus asserts that Ahasuerus is more importantly a symbol or sacrament for Christ the true king, while the opulence of Ahasuerus's feast is an allegory for the spiritual riches provided by Christ.

According to the spiritual sense then, the various elements of Ahasuerus's banquet described in the text refer to some aspect of the spiritual life of the Church. This seems to happen on something of an inferred basis. Fruit-bearing trees in the king's garden are good men famous for their righteous deeds. The idea, I suppose, is that good trees bear good fruit, as good men perform good deeds. Sky-coloured tents are spiritual study supported by celestial wisdom, while the flax which stretches under their weight is the mortification of the flesh; we still might say that something 'stretched' us, mentally or emotionally. The purple linen is the blood of the martyrs, ivory the chastity of the body. Those who drink from golden vessels are those who draw wisdom from the Gospels, etc.<sup>32</sup>

Rabanus is careful to assert the priority of the spiritual meaning of the text, and he frequently does this with language that suggests necessity or definiteness. He introduces key elements of his allegory with the phrase *Quid per [haec]...nisi designatur/significatur/exprimitur*, that is "what can this signify except..." or "this must designate...". He says for example: "What could Vashti point out except the Jewish people?"; and "now, what can Esther (whose name means hidden, and who was also called Hadassah, that is, Mercy) designate except the Church?"; or "Mordechai must be a symbol of the teachers of the nations, and especially the blessed Apostle

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<sup>31</sup> "Haec praeparatio opulentissimi convivii, licet historialiter divitiarum pompam et deliciarum luxus regis potentis demonstrare videatur, tamen sacratiore mysterio potentissimi regis nostril, videlicet Domini Christi, divitiarum spiritualium magnitudinem ac vitalium opum excellentiam, quas ille secundum modum dispensationis suae unicuique fidelium suorum largiter distribuit, significat." PL 109: 0637c.

<sup>32</sup> See PL 109: 0639c-0642a.

Paul"; and even "that Esther is considered a type of the Church no one should doubt, nor can she properly be said to be anything other than the bride of Christ."<sup>33</sup>

The last assertion is made as an introduction to a small scale defence Rabanus sets up for his method. Ahasuerus is weak, changeable, opulent, and sometimes very foolish. How can such a man be an allegory for Christ? Rabanus's response is worth including in full, as his own words best illustrate his perception of the senses of scripture:

That Esther is considered a type of the Church, no one should doubt, nor can she properly be said to be anyone other than the bride of Christ. That is why no one should flee from this interpretation merely because the historical king was faithless, as though on account of this he could never be a type for a just king; for we do not say that anyone, Christian or even non-Christian (*fidelis et perfidi*), is a symbol [for Christ] in their faithlessness or sins...rather, [we say that] anyone's good deed and righteous judgements refer to no one more properly than to him from whom comes every good...What reason could there be to say that Moses's doubts at the waters of dissention, Aaron's deception about making the calf, Solomon's lust, Ezekiel's arrogance, Peter's denial, and Saul's blasphemy are fitting prefigurations of our Redeemer? And yet, no one can deny that the good deeds and correct teaching of these many men have given evidence [of Christ]. Wherefore no one should reproach us for comparing, in a similar way, the pious deeds and righteous judgements of a great king with the king and judge of all ages; for whatever is good belongs to him, and all iniquity flees from him.<sup>34</sup>

The lives of the imperfect men written of in the Bible can still be sacraments or signs for the perfect man, in so far as they are good. As a final emphatic defence, Rabanus gives what is essentially a recapitulation of the senses method, saying:

After all, the power of the sacred speech (as some say) is that it tells what has happened in order to express what is going to happen; it approves of the actor so that it may reprove him in mystery; it condemns what has happened to persuade

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<sup>33</sup> "Quid per Vasthi reginam nisi plebs Judaica exprimitur." PL 109: 0642b; "Quid per Esther, quae interpretatur *absconsa*, et altero nomine vocabatur Edissa, hoc est *miseriordia*, nisi gentium Ecclesia designatur... Et quid per Mardochoeum, nisi doctores gentium significantur." PL 109: 0646b; "Quod autem Esther typum Ecclesiae teneat, nulli dubium est; nec ipsa alicujus sponsa quam Christi ullo modo dicenda est." PL 109: 0637d. For similar examples of strong assertions of the priority and definiteness of the spiritual sense, see: PL 109: 0649d, 0650d-0651a, 0650d, 0652b, 0655c, 0657c, 0661a, 0662b, 0663c, 0666b, 0667c, 0670b. There are many other examples.

<sup>34</sup> "Quod autem Esther typum Ecclesiae teneat, nulli dubium est; nec ipsa alicujus sponsa quam Christi ullo modo dicenda est. Unde refugere quilibet hanc interpretationem non debet, pro eo quod ille rex historicus perfidus erat, quasi propter hoc regis justus typum tenere nullo modo possit: non enim dicimus quod perfidia seu peccata alicujus, sive fidelis, sive etiam perfidi, istius actus expriment... Sed bona facta ac justa judicia cujusquam ad nullum melius referuntur, quam ad illum de quo est omne bonum... Quid causae est ut aliquis dicat Moysis dubitationem ad aquam contradictionis, Aaronis fictionem in factura vituli, Salomonis libidinem, Ezechiae arrogantiam, Petri abnegationem ac Saulis blasphemiam Redemptori nostro figuraliter convenire? Attamen rite nullus denegare potest eorum bona facta ac rectam doctrinam plurimum illi testimonium praebuisse. Unde nemo nos reprehendere debet quod regis magni pia opera ac justa judicia regi et judici omnium saeculorum quodam modo similando comparemus, quia suum est quidquid bonum est, et ab eo refugit omnis iniquitas." PL 109: 0637d-0638b.

us mystically of what ought to be done.<sup>35</sup>

The sacred text, as far as Rabanus is concerned, has a quality such that Christ is always the 'real' point, either clearly (as in the Gospels) or obscurely (in the Old Testament); if the latter, he is revealed via allegory.

Furthermore, Rabanus points out that Christ himself often allegorised a feast or a banquet as the eternal feast of heaven.<sup>36</sup> In a similar way, the Carolingian explains that Ahasuerus is an allegory for Christ because Ahasuerus's kingly office reflects Christ's kingship: Ahasuerus represents Christ because he is a king (while Christ is king of kings). Additionally, the meaning of Ahasuerus's name references that aspect of Christ's mission which harmonises most fittingly with the allegorical meaning of the feast: 'Ahasuerus', means "door" or "my entryway", and Christ "opened wide to the human race the sacrament of his incarnation; and he opened up for us the entryway to life."<sup>37</sup> Christ the king is the door through which Christian people can enter into the eternal feast of heaven, represented by Ahasuerus's feast.

Having established that Ahasuerus is a type or sacrament for Christ, Rabanus interprets *the third year of his rule*, when he chooses to hold the banquet, as the third age of the world.<sup>38</sup> This

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<sup>35</sup> "Virtus namque sacri eloquii, ut quidam ait, aliquando sic transacta narrat, ut ventura exprimat: sic factorem approbat, ut ei in mysterio contradicat; sic gesta damnat, ut haec mystice gerenda persuadeat." PL 109: 0639a. Rabanus is paraphrasing Gregory the Great who said in his commentary on Job: "Virtus sacri eloquii sic transacta narrat, ut ventura exprimat; sic in factorem approbat ut ei in mysterio contradicat; sic gesta damnat ut haec mystice gerenda persuadeat". Cf. Gregorius Magnus, *Moralia in Iob*, lib. 3, ed. M. Adriaen, CCSL 143 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1979), 150.

<sup>36</sup> Rabanus specifically mentions the parable of the king who holds a wedding feast for his son (Matthew 22:1-14; Luke 14:15-24). PL 109: 0639c.

<sup>37</sup> "Cum Redemptor noster, quem Assuerus et nomine exprimit et dignitate, interpretatur enim *ostium* sive *atrium meum*, cum Patre et Spiritu sancto sempiternum hominis imperium, tertio tempore istius saeculi incarnationis suae humano generi patefecit sacramentum, et nobis vitae aperuit aditum, spiritualesque epulas fidelibus suis abundantissime ministravit." PL 109: 0639b-0639c. I have not been able to find Rabanus's source for the idea that Ahasuerus means door or entry way. It is not the *Etymologiae* of Isidore of Seville, nor are they in Jerome's *Interpretation of Hebrew Names*, common sources for claims like these. I consulted the following editions: Isidore of Seville, *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville*, ed. Stephen A. Barney (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Hieronimus, *Liber interpretationis hebraicorum nominum*, ed. P. le Dejarde CCSL 72 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1959), 59-161. Jerome does not include any interpretations for names in the book of Esther.

<sup>38</sup> An interest in numbers, calendars, and calculations was integral to the Carolingian pedagogical scheme. It did not sit alongside literary interests, but was fully integrated with them. Number was a demonstration of the order with which God made the world and by which salvation history proceeded. Specific numbers often had allegorical implications, as we see in Rabanus's commentary. See John Contreni, "Counting, Calendars, and Cosmology: Numeracy in the Early Middle Ages" in *Learning and Culture in Carolingian Europe: Letters, Numbers, Exegesis, and Manuscripts* (Farnham: Ashgate Variorum, 2011), 50-52.

is the age of grace, when Christ became incarnate. The three ages are those which took place before the law, under the law, and after the law. The law refers to the Law of Moses, fulfilled, Rabanus believes, in Jesus Christ, specifically in the Gospel message and in the sacrament of his body and blood.<sup>39</sup> The seventh day of the feast, when Ahasuerus invites queen Vashti to come to him, symbolizes "the beauty of the time when the Lord incarnate, in his abundant mercy, explained all the mysteries of the law and the prophets by which the pious minds of religious men had been nourished."<sup>40</sup>

These elements of Rabanus's allegory provide the framework from which his essential spiritual interpretation emerges. This is an assertion of the primacy of the Christian and the Church over the Jew and the Synagogue. The feast, as an allegory for the spiritual riches provided by Christ after the incarnation, provides the setting; the lynchpin on which the allegory turns is Ahasuerus's relationship *vis-à-vis* Vashti and Esther. Vashti is the Jewish people:

Queen Vashti must be a symbol of the Jewish people, which at the time seemed to rule like a queen, since they were found to stand apart from all the other nations in their worship of a single God.<sup>41</sup>

The Jewish people are initially characterised by Rabanus as full of 'beauty' and 'nobility'; they are the first chosen people of God, who cultivated righteousness and knowledge of the law. Christ invites the Jewish people to the spiritual feast of the Gospel before anyone else so that their prerogative would be given proper recognition.<sup>42</sup> This has clear parallels with New Testament passages.<sup>43</sup> The feast Vashti holds for her women is a symbol for the Jews' worship in Jerusalem,

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<sup>39</sup> "Primum ergo tempus ante legem fuit, secundum sub lebe, tertium sub gratia, in quo videlicet evangelicam praedicationem ac corporis et sanguinis sui universis gentibus opulentissimam paravit refectionem." PL 109: 0639c

<sup>40</sup> "Septimus dies convivii pulchritudinem temporum significat in qua Dominus incarnatus omnia mysteria legis et prophetarum, quibus piaer mentes religiosorum hominum catenus pascebntur, abundantiori gratia manifestavit." PL 109: 0642c.

<sup>41</sup> "Quid per Vasthi reginam nisi plebs Judaica exprimitur, quae quasi regina regnasse videbatur, cum in cultu unius Dei caeteris gentibus praeeminere inveniebatur." PL 109: 0642b.

<sup>42</sup> "Cum Redemptor noster Christus, videlicet Dominus, sanctorum praedicatorum ordinem septiformis Spiritus sancti gratia repletum ad convocandam Judaicam plebem ad convivium spirituale direxit, quatenus ejus decor et nobilitas quam habebat ex praerogativa Patrum et legis prophetarumque scientia ac cultu pietatis, quem ante adventum Domini habuerat, caeteris nationibus celebriorem totius orbis innotesceret gentibus." PL109: 0643b

<sup>43</sup> For example, Matthew 15:26-28, when Christ tells the Canaanite woman that it is not fitting to take food from the children and give it to the dogs; Luke 24:47, when Christ tells his disciples that they must preach to all nations starting with Jerusalem; and Romans 1:16, when Paul says he preaches to the Jew first, and then to the Greek.

at the Temple, where before Christ's coming the Jewish people "demonstrated their observance of the law in worship, or rather by meditating on the Holy Scriptures, through which is supplied to its members the refreshment of spiritual knowledge by granting them the awareness of their power from Heaven."<sup>44</sup> But Vashti/the Jews "disdained to come [to the feast], not only showing her contempt for the emissaries but even rejecting the authority of the supreme king."<sup>45</sup>

Ahasuerus's dismissal of Vashti and election of Esther Rabanus equates with the Christian Church replacing the Jews as God's chosen people:

Now, what can it mean, when Vashti shows her arrogance and king Ahasuerus seeks the advice of the seven wise men (who are always at his side according to royal custom), and orders them to make some judgement about her, except that our Saviour, through his theologians (who are filled with the grace of the Holy Spirit, and are always careful to be in his presence by their upright faith and good works), declares his judgement upon the stubbornness of the Jewish people who are guilty of punishing and condemning him. He declared this sentence, namely, that they should be driven from the seat of the king, i.e., from their relationship with God for which they were ordained and chosen; and that another, better people, namely, the Church of the nations, should take their place in sincere faith and complete devotion.<sup>46</sup>

Rabanus puts Vashti's actions down to arrogance and stubbornness, and this is representative of the Jews. They are rejected by God because they reject Christ, just as Vashti is dismissed by Ahasuerus for refusing to come to his banquet.

The Jews are driven away; and just as Esther is put in Vashti's place, so the Church becomes the new people of God, the bride of Christ.<sup>47</sup> Esther is a symbol of the Church of the nations:

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<sup>44</sup> "Haec ergo convivium feminarum, ubi rex manere consueverat, fecit, hoc est, in ipsa Jerusalem, ubi templum Dei et Sancta sanctorum fuerant, cultu observantiam legis exhibuit, vel in Scripturarum sacrarum meditatione, in qua divinitus potentiae suae notitiam tribuens suis animabus refectionem scientiae spiritualis impendit." PL 109: 0642b.

<sup>45</sup> "Sed illa non solum legatos despiciens, verum etiam supremi regis imperium spermens venire contempsit." PL 109: 0643b.

<sup>46</sup> "Quid est quod superbiente Vasthi rex Assuerus septem sapientum, qui ex more regio semper sibi aderant, consilium quaerit, et sententiam super eam facere jubet, nisi quod Salvator noster per doctores suos Spiritus sancti gratia repletos qui ejus praesentiae recta fide ac bonis operibus semper assistere curant, plebis Judaicae contumacia, cujus poenae atque damnationis rea sit, depromit sententiam; scilicet ut de thoro regali, hoc est, de consortio Dei, quo ordinata ac praelecta est, expellatur, et locum ipsius altera, quae melior est ea, Ecclesia videlicet gentium, sincera fide ac plena devotione accipiat." PL 109: 0644b-0644c.

<sup>47</sup> As with Augustine, there is no clear sense here that Rabanus had actual Jewish communities in mind. His commentary was clearly not a polemical text, but an apologetic one. It is meant to offer a Christian interpretation of Esther for a Christian audience, not as a text to convert Jews.

What can Esther—whose name means *hidden*, and who was also called Hadassah, that is, *mercy*—signify if not the Church of the nations, which for its fidelity pleases God in the hidden places of his heart? [The Church] finds before the eyes of God more mercy and grace than the Synagogue of the Jews which the prophet Hosea rightly calls “No-mercy” on account of its wickedness.<sup>48</sup>

When Ahasuerus makes Esther queen in place of Vashti Rabanus allegorises this as the Church being put in place of the Synagogue, “which lost its place of honour when it spurned and crucified our king.”<sup>49</sup> The nuptial feast which is celebrated for Esther represents the joy that all the world experiences at this event, for “after all,” Rabanus says, “at this feast it is not meals of the flesh that the celebrants have the honour to consume, but the spiritual dishes of wisdom and virtue.”<sup>50</sup>

This contrast between flesh and spirit is the lesson behind the lesson, as it were. Rabanus finds a sacred meaning for Esther by providing it with a spiritual or allegorical interpretation, but the relationship between Jew and Christian which he posits is also about the hierarchy between literal/flesh and allegorical/spirit. The commentary contains significant implicit and explicit characterisations of the Jew, which, contrasted with a characterisation of the Christian, asserts that their very ability to discern a spiritual meaning in scripture is what elevates the Christian above the Jew, who refuses to rise above the literal/carnal meaning. For the Carolingian, Esther becomes a meta lesson on spiritual exegesis itself.

A quick look at a few other passages will demonstrate this more clearly. Rabanus asserts that Vashti’s refusal to come to Ahasuerus when summoned is a symbol for the Jews’ refusal to

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<sup>48</sup> “Quid per Esther, quae interpretatur *absconsa*, et altero nomine vocabatur Edissa, hoc est *misericordia*, nisi gentium Ecclesia designatur, quae in abscondito cordis sui propter fidei castitatem placet Deo, et misericordiam ac gratiam coram oculis Dei magis invenit quam Synagoga Judaeorum, quae merito impietatis suae absque misericordia per Oseam prophetam vocatur.” PL 109: 0646b. Isidore of Seville says that Esther's name means “hidden one”, which is probably where Rabanus got this idea. I was not able to find any designation for Hadassah. See Isidore of Seville, *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville*. ed. and trans. Stephen A. Barney (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 168.

<sup>49</sup> “...quae regem nostrum spernendo et crucifigendo honoris perdidit dignitatem.” PL 109: 0649c.

<sup>50</sup> “Quid est convivium permagnificum pro nuptiis Esther cunctis principibus et servis praeparari, nisi pro spirituali conjunctione Christi et Ecclesiae gaudium maximum in toto orbe terrarum a majoribus atque minoribus universis celebrari. In hoc enim convivio non carnales epulae, sed spirituales sapientiae et virtutum dapes a digne convivantibus sumuntur. Ubi sacrosancta mysteria corporis ac sanguinis Domini fideles quique ob salutis suae remedia percipiunt, in quo pastus aeternae vitae sistit. Dat rex noster requiem universis provinciis, ac dona largitur multiplicia, quando a peccatorum onere credentes sibi liberat, et donis spiritualibus eos remunerat.” PL 109: 649d.

accept Christ and to come to the spiritual banquet of the Gospel, and he ascribes this to a preference for the "letter". The Lord himself, Rabanus tells us, refers to this in the parable of the prodigal son, when the elder brother refuses to attend the feast for his younger brother:

This elder brother and the ancient people of the Synagogue, who are represented in the person of Queen Vashti, refuse to leave their dwelling place, that is, they refuse to tear themselves from the letter of the Law, but content to live by their own judgement, [and] exerting themselves for their earthly desires, they are exiled far from the homeland of the Holy Spirit and the counsel of the Father, forever brittle, hard, full of rancour and indignation.<sup>51</sup>

Rabanus characterises the elder brother, Vashti and the Jewish people they represent as stubbornly attached to the "letter" of the law, and this is proof of their "earthly"-mindedness.

Skipping the part in the parable when the father tells his elder son gently that he (the elder son) is always with him (the father), and that all the father's possessions belong to him, Rabanus focuses on Vashti's dismissal, which is a symbol for how the Jews are exiled from God because they refuse his invitation to the spiritual feast.

Implicitly, the Jews refusal to be parted from the letter of the Law is a rejection of any 'hidden' or 'spiritual' meaning in the Bible, of the type Rabanus is crafting for the book of Esther itself. Carnal or earthly, and literal are equated, and then contrasted with spiritual, just as Jew is contrasted with Christian. Rabanus's commentary portrays the Jews holding on to the letter of scripture, the literal meaning only, and refusing the spiritual meaning of scripture which is Christ. Rabanus goes on to say that the Jews are "weighed down by the burden of the Law while enjoying the pleasures of their earthly senses"; they are like those who "are fleshly, and can never be one with the spirit".<sup>52</sup>

While Rabanus's allegory begins with a positive assessment of the Jews' role in salvation history (they were a people of great beauty and nobility, meditating on the word of God), their

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<sup>51</sup> "Senior ergo ille filius et antiquus Synagogae populus, qui in Vashti reginae persona exprimitur, de domicilio suo egredi, hoc est, a legis littera avelli renuebat, sed suo arbitrio vivere contentus in terrenis desideriis desudando, longe a patria spiritus sancti ac consilio Patris factus extorris, semper rigidus ac durus, rancore atque indignation plenissimus." PL 109: 0643c.

<sup>52</sup> "...legis onere depressus, terrenorum sensuum voluptate perfruitur...et effectus caro nequaquam unum esse cum spiritu valet." PL 109: 0643d.

refusal to accept Christ brings about a negative transformation: bitter, jealous, and carnal, they reject Christ and are in turn rejected. Rabanus's exegesis of Vashti ends on a harsh note of condemnation, describing the Jews as the ones who condemned Christ. Rabanus declares that not all the Jews rejected the (spiritual) banquet. The virgins who are sought to be Ahasuerus's new bride are allegorized as catechumens: when they are sought the first time, they symbolize the Jews, when they are sought the second time, they symbolize the Gentiles. From among all these virgins Esther is chosen, and so, according to Rabanus, Esther represents them all as the Church, which arose "from both people". i.e., from Jews and Gentiles.<sup>53</sup>

Another dimension is added to Rabanus's characterisation of the Jews in his allegory of Haman. The villain of the story also represents the Jews. This characterisation includes a much more explicit invective, diffused slightly by existing alongside an allegory of Haman as a general 'enemy' of the Church. Haman is a symbol for any proud, powerful, or worldly person who desires to be shown the reverence which should be reserved for God alone.<sup>54</sup> More specifically, however, Rabanus says that Haman is an allegory for the Jews, who lost the "nobility of their race" when they refused to accept Christ.<sup>55</sup> When Haman describes to King Ahasuerus how he should behave toward the man he desires to honour, thinking initially that it is himself and then discovering to his dismay that it is Mordechai, Rabanus comments:

Here we see how the stubbornness of the Synagogue of the Jews was crushed, and the humility of the Church of the nations exalted; how the persecutors of the Christian faith, who once tore apart the flock of Christ like savage lions, have now been destroyed and reduced to nothing; and how those who proclaim Christ throughout the world have been raised up in a state of vigorous faith and exalted

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<sup>53</sup> "Quaeruntur et secundo regi virgines et congregantur, quia non sufficit Domino nostro Jesu Christo de Judaeis tantum primitivam sibi associare Ecclesiam, verum etiam de gentibus per praedicatores suos fidelium sibi multitudinem acquirit copiosam, ut fiat de utroque populo una Ecclesia catholica, sponsa videlicet ipsius nobilissima quae non habet maculam aut rugam." PL 109: 0650b.

<sup>54</sup> "Quid per Aman superbum, nisi fastus potentum hujus saeculi exprimitur, qui beneficiis diina pietate sibi collatis abutentes, proximos suos, quos consortes habent naturae, socios gratiae habere despiciunt. Unde honorem ac reverentiam, quam soli Deo impendere juste debuerant, in se nequiter transferre contendunt..." PL 109: 652b-652c.

<sup>55</sup> "Potest et per Aman istum Agagitem, quem Josephus de stirpe Amalec esse editum narrat, Judaeorum populus sanguinolentus figurari, qui prophetas occiderunt, et ipsum Dominum prophetarum atque Apostolos ejus interficere non timuerunt; qui generis nobilitatem propter incredulitatem et duritiam mentis suae perdentes..." PL 109: 652d-652d.

through the power of the virtues.<sup>56</sup>

Rabanus's allegory of Haman intensifies the anti-Jewish invective of the commentary and reiterates the contrast between literal and spiritual, this time declaring explicitly that Jews read their scripture incorrectly. The price of silver Haman was willing to pay king Ahasuerus for the death of the Jews, Rabanus likens to the Jews' attempting to appease God by the "carnal observance of the ceremonies of the law" even while they seek the death of Christ's witnesses (i.e., the Apostles).<sup>57</sup> This carnality of Jewish observance is linked to an assertion that the Jews misuse the Old Testament by failing to recognise its spiritual sense: Haman's use of the king's seal on his letters is like the Jews using the books of the Old Testament, which bear the "seal of heaven" improperly, and as evidence for their "heresy" rather than the truth of the Christian religion.<sup>58</sup>

In one instance Rabanus makes explicit the idea that even the law itself no longer belongs to the Jews. The gibbet is described as being fifty cubits high, Rabanus says, because the law was given fifty days after the lamb was sacrificed (i.e., fifty days after Passover, on the Feast of Weeks). The fifty cubit gallows on which Haman is hanged is a symbol of the law. The law was ordained, Rabanus says, for the salvation of the Jews, but it became the cause of their death when they failed to accept the one whom the law foretold. Haman constructed the gibbet to destroy Mordechai, but in the end he is destroyed by it; the Jews tried to appeal to the law in

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<sup>56</sup> Hinc videmus Judaeorum Synagogae contumaciam compressam, et humilitatem Ecclesiae gentium exaltatam. Hinc persecutores Christianae fidei, qui quondam ut leones feroces laceraverunt gregem Christi, modo destructi et ad nihilum sunt redacti: confessores quoque Christi in toto orbe statu sanae fidei erecti et potentia virtutum sunt sublimati. Caput in caudam et cauda in caput versa est, quia *Omnis qui se exultat, humiliabitur; et qui se humiliat, exaltabitur*. PL 109: 0658c-0658d.

<sup>57</sup> "Aman ergo decem talentorum pecuniam promittens regi, Judaeorum mortem expetivit: sic et Judaicus populus, carnali observantiae caeremoniarum legis deditus, Deum se per hoc placare credendo, verorum Christi confessorum, qui secundum Evangelicam doctrinam spirituale Deo servitium exhibebant, mortem meditatus est." PL 109: 653a-653b.

<sup>58</sup> "Unde sicut Aman epistolas dirigens regis signaculo eas munire curabat, quatenus per hoc facilius votum suum expleret, ita perfidia Judaeorum libros divinae legis, in quibus signaculum summi regis expressum est, hoc est, Spiritus sancti gratia manifestata est, ad comprobendam haeresim suam in testimonium non recte assumens, gentium conversionem ad societatem religionis reprobare nitebatur, et Christi Evangelium quasi contrarium divinis praeceptis condemnare." PL 109: 653b.

their persecution of the Apostles, but it is the law itself which condemns them.<sup>59</sup> The eunuch who alerts Ahasuerus to the existence of the gibbet "signifies the teachers of the law who brought to light—by reading the law itself—the deceit of the Jews and everything which they did contrary to the precepts of God"; that is, those learned Jews who accepted that Christ was the fulfilment of the law, who accepted the sacramental meaning of the Old Testament.<sup>60</sup>

Rabanus makes the same assertion with regard to Haman and Esther that he made with regard to Vashti and Esther: Esther is given Haman's house as the Church is given all the dignity and honour which had originally belonged to the Jews, which they lost by refusing to accept the incarnate word; Mordechai is given the ring originally granted to Haman to symbolise the fact that the "seal of faith" originally offered to the Jews but rejected by them is given to the nations by the Apostles.<sup>61</sup>

That the alleged literal mindedness of the Jews is in some ways linked to earthly-mindedness or 'fleshliness' is further demonstrated in the final sections of Rabanus's commentary. The Jews who Haman is preparing to destroy represent *Christians*, who are saved from the persecution of the *Jews*, just as the (actual) Jews in the story were saved from the persecution of Haman. When the Jews (as symbols for Christians) kill their enemies, this is allegorised as spiritual combat, not literal destruction. Rabanus exhorts the "true Jews" to "fight for the salvation of their souls" against "the false Jews who are the synagogue of Satan, and the

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<sup>59</sup> "Sed quaeri potest quid significet quod crux ipsa quinquaginta cubitorum facta esse legitur. Lex enim quinquagesima die post agni immolationem in monte Sina priori populo data est. Et quia diximus supra quod Aman significaret ipsos Judaeos tumultuantes contra Christum, qui in lege eis promissus erat, et Ecclesiam ejus persequentes; lex ipsa, quae eis ad custodiam vitae data est, quia per ipsam exstinguere nomen Christi, atque confessores ejus interficere moliebantur, mortis illis exstitit causa. Ita ut qui per legem injuste innoxios opprimere volebant, ipsi per eam justii judicii acciperent sententiam." PL 109: 0660b-0660c.

<sup>60</sup> "Harbona autem eunuchus, qui ipsam crucem factam prodidit, significat doctores legis, qui dolum Judaeorum et omnia quae divinis praeceptis fecerunt contraria, ipsius legis lectione manifestaverunt." PL 109: 0660c.

<sup>61</sup> "Quid est quod rex Assuerus dedit Esther reginae domum Aman adversarii Judaeorum, nisi quod rex verus et Dominus noster omnem dignitatem et omnem honorem quem prior populus ex scientia legis et prophetarum atque cultu piae religionis habuit, postquam adventum mediatoris Dei et hominum in carne sprexit, atque ejus Evangelium recipere noluit, totum ad sanctae Ecclesiae transtulit usum, ut ipsa possideret spirituales divitias, et custos fieret honestissima omnium virtutum." PL 109: 0661a; "Illud quoque quod subjungitur, tulisse regem annulum quem ab Aman receperat, et tradidisse Mardocheo, mystice exprimit quia signaculum fidei, quod perfidi Judaei et omnes persecutores nominis Christi sibi per praedicationem Evangelii oblatum recipere volebant, ad gentium salutem per apostolos Christi translatum est. Tenet ergo Esther domum Aman hostis Judaeorum, cum Ecclesia Christi mundum possidet, hostem quondam Christianorum." PL 109: 0661c.

incorrigible pagans and heretics, as well as the impure spirits with all their impieties and perverse notions."<sup>62</sup> 'True Jews' (i.e., Christians) are contrasted with and 'false Jews' (i.e., actual Jews), with special reference to the perceived 'carnality' of the Jews as opposed to the 'spirituality' of the Christian:

So it happens that just as the Jews killed in two days seventy-five thousand of their enemies, so too the faithful strive and attempt to truly defeat and scatter, in the light of the two Testaments, all those enemies who, because they are devoted to the five senses of the body and experience the law of God in the flesh, refuse to know it in spirit.<sup>63</sup>

Rabanus's interpretation represents the first effort by a Christian theologian to find a sacred meaning for Esther that is relevant for the Christian reader. He allegorises the text to teach the perceived truth that the Church has replaced the Synagogue of the Jews, and he interweaves his interpretation with reflections on the proper way to interpret scripture. The supposed literal, carnal, earthly-minded Jewish way of interpreting scripture is a foil for the Christian way, which is spiritual. Rabanus's basic interpretation was widely disseminated through the medium of the Gloss, to which I will now turn.

### 2.2.b: Glossa Ordinaria

The salient features of Rabanus's commentary became the standard interpretation of Esther, repeated by the Gloss and in several other contexts.<sup>64</sup> After a very brief introduction to the Gloss itself, I will examine a few examples of how this important twelfth-century work of exegesis interacted with and reshaped the Carolingian's allegorical reading. This was done in ways which

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<sup>62</sup> "...per praedicatorum suorum mandat veris Judaeis, et confessoribus suis in omnibus gentibus, ut in unitatem societatis et pacis convenientes pro salute animarum suarum certent; omnesque inimicos suos, tam visibiles quam etiam invisibiles, hoc est, falsos Judaeos, qui sunt synagoga Satanae, et paganos atque haereticos incorrigibiles nec non et immundos spiritus cum universis impietatibus et pravis inventionibus damnent..." PL 109: 0663d.

<sup>63</sup> "Unde evenit ut sicut Judaei in duobus diebus septuaginta quinque millia hostium interfecerunt, ita instantia et conatu fidelium hostes universi qui quinque sensibus corporis dediti carnaliter sapiendo legem Dei per septiformem Spiritus sancti gratiam, spirituali dogmate plenam atque perfectam, spiritualiter intelligere respuunt..." PL 109: 0667a.

<sup>64</sup> For example, in the *Bible Moralisée* (illustrated paraphrases of the Bible which offer interpretations through the interplay of text and image) Rabanus's basic interpretation is repeated, and the images contrast a rejected Vashti with a crowned Esther. For more information see Sara Lipton, *Images of Intolerance: The Representation of Jews and Judaism in the Bible Moralisée* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

reflect a greater emphasis on the universality of the Church's scope, and the role of preachers in spreading the Gospel message. Aspects of the Gloss will be revisited in chapter four when I look at Nicholas's spiritual commentary.

The *Glossa Ordinaria* (the 'standard' Gloss) is a collection of marginal and interlinear comments interwoven with the biblical text. These comments are primarily from patristic and Carolingian sources (with a very few early eleventh-century sources, such as Lanfranc and Berengar of Tours), and occasional notes or explanations from the Gloss compilers.<sup>65</sup> The project of 'glossing' the biblical text directly, rather than producing running commentaries in the usual way, was begun by Anselm (d. 1117) at the Cathedral school in Laon sometime in the very late eleventh or early twelfth century.<sup>66</sup> We speak now of '*the* Gloss'; but Lesley Smith warns against characterisations of the Gloss as a standardised text, noting that "at the height of its usefulness and influence, the Gloss text must have been constantly in flux".<sup>67</sup> When it ceased to be updated, it had been surpassed by other compilatory works, such as that of Hugh of St. Cher; but even when it stabilised c. 1200, it continued to be an important and influential source for biblical exegetes.

Rabanus's commentaries are ubiquitous in the Old Testament glosses, and are the almost exclusive source for the glosses on Esther.<sup>68</sup> The Carolingian provided the framework for, and the key elements of, the interpretation of Esther found in the Gloss, but the Gloss is not a simple reproduction. Occasionally through additions but more frequently through omissions, a certain nuanced difference of emphasis is introduced.

The essential allegory is the same: the Synagogue of the Jews has been put aside for the Church of the nations, and the Jews supposedly 'misread' the Old Testament because they read it

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<sup>65</sup> Lesley Smith, *The Glossa Ordinaria: the making of a medieval Bible commentary* (Leiden, Brill: 2009), 41-43. The scholars primarily associated with compiling the Gloss are Anselm, Ralph, and other scholars at Laon, Gilbert of Auxerre, and Alberic of Rheims. For the best analysis of the authorship of the Gloss, see ch. 1 in Smith.

<sup>66</sup> Smith, *The Glossa Ordinaria*, 17-23.

<sup>67</sup> Smith, *The Glossa Ordinaria*, 76.

<sup>68</sup> Smith, *The Glossa Ordinaria*, 54.

carnally rather than spiritually. There is, however, a much stronger focus on the role of preachers in making the Christian Church the church of all Gentiles. The popularity of the Gloss meant that its interpretive focus would penetrate medieval perceptions of the book of Esther to a greater extent than Rabanus's lengthier commentary would, and the important thing here is to see what the Gloss included, and what it did not, and how this reflects (and shaped) medieval Christian perceptions of the book of Esther.

The Gloss begins by declaring, like the Carolingian, in favour of the spiritual exposition, by reproducing as a marginal gloss Rabanus's initial assertion: Esther, one of the Hebrew writings, contains sacraments of Christ and the Church. Esther is a type of the Church, who frees her people and, by the death of Haman (who is called iniquity) she gives a part of the feast and festival day to future generations.<sup>69</sup> On Ahasuerus's feast, a marginal gloss paraphrases

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<sup>69</sup> All citations of the Gloss in this study will be taken from the Rusch edition (Strasbourg, 1480-1481), which has been reprinted in facsimile by Brepols of Turnhout (1992) with an introduction by Karlfried Froehlich and Margaret T. Gibson. Smith notes that the Rusch edition is a good edition of the first version of the twelfth-century text (although there were two and possibly three twelfth-century editions). While the Gloss text did more or less stabilize c. 1200, its compilation was a fluid process subject to revision. I am using the Rusch of Strassburg edition as that which Smith describes as the closest to the twelfth-century manuscripts. See Smith, *The Glossa*, 12-14, 75-76, 193. All references are made by indicating chapter and verse in the Douay-Rheims English Bible. All translations are my own.

Marginal Gloss, Esther 1:1: "Liber Hester quem Hebraei inter agyographa numerant: Christi et ecclesie continet sacramenta. Hester enim in typo ecclesiae populum liberat de periculo et interfect Aman qui interpretatur iniquitas partes convivii et diem celebrem convertit in posteros."

The Gloss also expands slightly on Rabanus's initial comment on the literal sense. Rabanus had specified that the "history of Esther was not only contained in the sacred book, but also in the *Antiquities* of Josephus, although in the latter the story is told differently in some ways"; he then gives a short comment on the identity of Ahasuerus: "Historiam Esther non solum divini libri, sed et Josephi Antiquitatum continent, licet in aliquibus historica narratione differant. Sed et illud in quaestionem convertitur quis ille Assuerus fuit qui regnavit ab India usque Aethiopiam super centum viginti septem provincias; nam hunc memoratus Josephus refert Cyrum esse filium Xerxis regis, qui post Darium patrum suum regnavit in Perside. Hunc ergo Cyrum dicit Artaxerxem apud Graecos vocari, qui Longimanus cognominabatur, regnum tenens annis quadraginta; sed ego non puto Esther eo tempore fuisse, nunquam enim Esdras de ipsa siluisset, qui scribit hoc tempore Esdras et Mennam reversos esse de Babylone, et ea deinceps consecuta quae ab his gesta referuntur. Eusebius ergo in Chronicis suis arbitrabatur hunc Assuerum esse Artaxerxem vocatum; regnavit quoque post Darium patrum suum cognomento Nothum, annis 40." PL 109: 0636c-0637a

The Gloss says: "that the history of Esther was written at the time of Ahasuerus we cannot doubt; but just who this Ahasuerus was, we do not know"; it then includes Rabanus's summary of Josephus and Eusebius, with more details from Eusebius and a comment on the Septuagint, which called Ahasuerus 'Artaxerxes'. Marginal Gloss: Esther 1:1: "Historiam Hester tempore Assueri fuisse non dubitamus, sed quis fuerit Assuerus ignoramus. Iosephus tamen memorat eum fuisse Cyrum, Xerxis filium, qui post Darium patrem Perside rexit imperium. Hunc Cyrum dixit Artaxerxem apud grecos vocari qui Longimanus cognominatus regnavit quadraginta annis, sed non videtur Esther eo tempore fuisse, sorte enim Esdras non preterisset eam qui de his que (captivis in Hierusalem redeuntibus de Babylone) gesta sunt textit historiam. Eusebius vero in Chronicis suis arbitrat hunc esse Artaxerxem qui cognominatur Memnon Darii et Pharastidis filium. Hic ab Hebreis Assuerus a Septuaginta interpretibus Artaxerxis vocatur qui regnavit post Darium patrum cognomento Nothum annis quadraginta."

Rabanus's comment on the hermeneutic principle of the senses of scripture: "Ahasuerus celebrated a great feast with riches and abundant delicacies. But the power of sacred speech is such that it tells us what has happened at some time in order to express what is to come".<sup>70</sup> The great feast itself is glossed with two extracts from the Gospels referred to by Rabanus when explaining that Christ allegorised a feast as the kingdom: "The kingdom of heaven is likened to a king, who made a marriage [feast] for his son"; and "a certain man made a great supper [feast], and invited many".<sup>71</sup> Rabanus's defence of the allegory, that the good deeds of many (sometimes sinful) Old Testament figures reveal the perfect deeds of Christ is also summarised.<sup>72</sup>

The Gloss proceeds in the spirit of Rabanus's exegesis: in the historical sense, the feast shows the pomp, riches, and luxury of a king; but allegorically it signifies the spiritual riches dispensed by Christ. The specific details of the allegory are not identical to Rabanus in every instance, but the idea is the same: the luxuries of the literal feast have spiritual meanings.<sup>73</sup> The day of the feast is described as a sacrament for the day of resurrection, the New Testament, and "true circumcision", a phrase not found in Rabanus but implicitly contrasting Jew and Christian as Rabanus contrasted the "true Jews" with the "false Jews".<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Marginal Gloss Esther 1:2: "Virtus namquam sacri eloquii sic aliquando transacta narrat ut ventura exprimat: sic factorem approbat: ut ei in ministerio contradicat sic gesta damnat ut hoc mystice gerenda suadeat."

<sup>71</sup> Cf. Matthew 22:2; Luke 14:16. Occurs in the Marginal Gloss Esther 1:3.

<sup>72</sup> Marginal Gloss Esther 1:3: "Huius convivii historia pompam divitiarum et luxum regis ostendit, sed Christi spirituales delicias quas unicuique dispensat allegorice significat. Christus enim est ille ditissimus rex qui uxoris sue, id est Ecclesie, precibus exoratus in deos, id est confessores suos, de manu inimicorum liberat atque ipsos iuste condemnat. Neque enim necesse est ut si aliquorum bona Christum significant eorum quoque mala ipsi scilicet Christo convenient. Moyses enim in multis Christum significavit sed non in hoc quod aquas contradictionis dubitavit, sed nec Aaron factura vituli, Nec Salomon in sorde libidinis. Sic Assuerus in isto iudicio ut in liberali convivio Christum significat, sicut Isaias in Cyro rege Persarum Christum significat de quo postea subiungit: "Accinxi te et non cognovisti me" etc. Si enim reges iniqui in malefactis diabolum significant, cur non reges iusti in benefactis Christum demonstrant? Nabuchodonosor iussit populos audita symphoniarum et musicorum voce prostratos statuas adorare et diabolum seculari dulcedine genus humanum inflectita mentis rectitudine ad sequendam avaritiam que est simulacrorum servitus."

<sup>73</sup> There are numerous examples. The various colours of the tents are "heavenly conversation", and "heavenly contemplation"; the beds of gold and silver are "the quiet of contemplation which is the rest of the saints"; the gold and silver which decorate the bed are wisdom and eloquence, for like gold wisdom is valuable and an eloquent man is called 'silver-tongued'; the pavement on which the beds rest is the humility of Church leaders (*praelatus*); the goblets from which they drink are the words of the Gospel; the diverse vessels in which the food is served is glossed "the Law, the apostles, and the prophets"; the meat itself is "the spiritual delights with which the soul is filled"; the wine is the words of God. Interlinear glosses on Esther 1:5-7: "Horti eterne iocunditatis ubi consite arbores fructifere, id est sancti meritis preclari"; "Christi enim regis nostra dono ibi sancti fruuntur regno perpetuo"; "Celestis conversationis; Celestis contemplationis".

<sup>74</sup> Marginal gloss Esther 1:5: "In sacramento dominice resurrectionis et novi Testamenti et vere circumcisionis."

Those for whom the feast is held are allegorised in a series of interlinear glosses: *for all the princes*, is glossed: "the apostles"; *and for his servants*: "whom neither death nor life shall separate from the love of Christ"; *for the most mighty of the Persians, and the nobles of the Medes, and the governors of the provinces*: "the bishops of the Church".<sup>75</sup> When it says all the people in Shushan were invited, *the people* is glossed: "even the Gentiles", and *invited* is glossed "by the apostles, whence: 'behold, we turn to the Gentiles'".<sup>76</sup>

In the Gloss, there is a new emphasis on the leaders of the church (the term generally used is 'praelatus', meaning, presumably, priests, monks, and bishops) preaching to the Gentiles. The essential allegory is identical to Rabanus's. The interlinear gloss on Esther 1:9 *And also Queen Vashti* reads: "The Jewish people, who seemed to reign, because they worshiped one God and so were put before all the nations."<sup>77</sup> Vashti's feast is glossed "the refreshment of the Law" and *in the Palace* has a marginal gloss: "In Jerusalem, where there was the temple and the holy of holies. Or in the meditation of the scriptures, where the divinity gives notice of his power".<sup>78</sup> King Ahasuerus orders his ministers to bring Queen Vashi (glossed "The Jewish People") before him (glossed "to the spiritual banquet") so that he might give her a crown (glossed "the honour of religion") and to show her beauty.<sup>79</sup> *To show* has a marginal gloss: "When the fullness of time had come, God sent his son', etc. For then the incarnate son of God revealed the mysteries of the Law with which he had previously nourished the faithful with abundant grace".<sup>80</sup> *Her beauty* is glossed "which she had as a prerogative of her Fathers who knew the Law and the Prophets".<sup>81</sup>

When Vashti refuses to come, a marginal gloss reads:

She despised not only his legates but also the king's command. Wherefore in the Gospel, when the elder son, being invited by his father to the banquet, refused to

<sup>75</sup> Interlinear Gloss Esther 1:3. Second interlinear gloss is referencing Romans 8:37-39.

<sup>76</sup> Interlinear Gloss Esther 1:5: "Etiam gentes"; "Per apostolos, unde: 'Ecce convertimur ad gentes'". Cf. Acts 13:46.

<sup>77</sup> Interlinear Gloss Esther 1:9. "Plebs iudaica que regnare videbatur, cum in cultu unius Dei preminebat ceteris gentibus."

<sup>78</sup> Interlinear Gloss Esther 1:9 "Refectionem legis." And Marginal Gloss Esther 1:9: "Hierusalem ubi templum et sancta sanctorum. Vel in sancte Scripture meditatione in qua divinitas potentie sue tribuit notitiam."

<sup>79</sup> Interlinear Gloss Esther 1:11 "Iudaicam plebam"; "ad convivium spirituale"; "honore religionis".

<sup>80</sup> Marginal Gloss Esther 1:11 'Ubi venit plenitudo temporis misit Deus filium' etc. Tunc enim Dei filius incarnatus legis mysteria quibus ante fideles paverat abundantiori gratia manifestavit." Cf. Galatians 4:4.

<sup>81</sup> Interlinear Gloss Esther 1:11 "prerogativa patrum scientia legis et prophetarum."

enter, and those who were called to dinner, occupied with other matters, refused to come, because of the indignation of the father, they were rejected, and others were appointed in their place.<sup>82</sup>

The *other* who should be put in Vashti's place has an interlinear gloss: "the Church of the Gentiles."<sup>83</sup>

The greater emphasis on the idea that the Church is the Church of the Gentiles is supported by the omission of Rabanus's assertion that the Church emerged from both Jews and Gentiles, represented by the virgins being sought twice. The Gloss, by contrast, says that when the virgins were sought a second time this means that through his preachers, Christ gathered to himself more than the community of the early (*primitiva*) Church, but a great multitude from the Gentiles.<sup>84</sup> Esther, chosen from among all these virgins, represents the Church, but the Church here is not described as the Church of both Jew and Gentile as in Rabanus. Here, the emphasis is exclusively on the Gentiles.

The two allegorical identities Rabanus provides for Haman are reproduced in the Gloss, but the identification of Haman as the Jews is more prevalent. At the start of chapter three, "After these things, king Ahasuerus advanced Haman, the son of Amadathi, who was of the race of Agag: and he set his throne above all the princes that were with him"; *Ahasuerus* is glossed "Christ"; *advanced* is glossed "in this world"; *Haman*: "means iniquity".<sup>85</sup> A marginal gloss on *the race of Agag* reads:

The powerful men of the world who abuse the favors bestowed on them by divine power, and who disdain to have as partners in their good fortune those who are their partners in nature; and they try to take for themselves the honor and reverence that ought to be shown only to God. Those who do not wish to consent to it are persecuted with hatred and cruelty, but by the righteous judgement of God they are caught in their own snares, and so it says: 'The justice of the righteous shall deliver them: and the unjust shall be caught in their own snares'. It is also possible that by Haman, whom Josephus says was of the race of

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<sup>82</sup> Marginal Gloss Esther 1:12 "Non solum legatos despiciens sed et regis imperium. Unde in evangelio senior enim filius a patre rogatus ad convivium noluit introire et qui ad cenam vocati aliis rebus occupati noluerunt venire, iuxta indignationem patrisfamilias reiecti sunt et alii loco illorum constitute."

<sup>83</sup> Interlinear Gloss Esther 1:19 "Ecclesia de gentibus."

<sup>84</sup> Marginal Gloss Esther 2:19 "Non sufficit Christo primitivam sibi sociare Ecclesiam, sed per predicatores de gentibus multitudinem acquisivit copiosam".

<sup>85</sup> Interlinear Gloss Esther 3.1 "Christus"; "temporaliter"; "iniquitas interpretatur".

Amalek, the Jewish people are symbolized. They killed the prophets, and the Lord of the prophets, and his apostles, losing the nobility of their race for their unbelief and hardness of heart.<sup>86</sup>

While the Gloss initially incorporates both Rabanus's more general identification of Haman with any man of rank and authority who abuses his power, and the allegory of Haman as the Jews, it is the latter interpretation which is reiterated throughout the Gloss, and not only in a way that contrasts the New Testament with the Old but also one which characterizes a perceived Jewish attitude toward Christians. When Haman goes to Ahasuerus to tell him about the people scattered throughout his land who use new laws and despise the king's ordinances, *Haman* is glossed "the Jewish people"; *the people* Haman is condemning (the Jews themselves in the story of Esther) are "Christians"; the *new law* is "the New Testament"; that they despise the king's ordinances has two glosses: *ordinances* is glossed "the Old Testament", and is followed by another gloss: "this is the opinion of the Jews, [about] the ones who despise the law which kills and follow the spirit which gives life".<sup>87</sup> The Gloss is asserting that the Jews believe Christians do not follow God's laws because they follow the spirit rather than the letter.<sup>88</sup>

In summary: the Gloss reproduces Rabanus's commentary, but, primarily by the interlinear glosses which weave an alternative story into the Esther text, it does so with a stronger focus on the role of preachers in spreading the Gospel message to the Gentiles, and a greater emphasis on the Church being the Church of the Gentiles whose great enemy is the

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<sup>86</sup> Marginal Gloss on Esther 3:1 "Potentes seculi qui beneficiis divina potestate collatis abutentes quos consortes habent nature dedignantur habere consortes gratie et honorem et reverentiam quam soli Deo debuerunt in sese transferre contendunt. Eos autem qui consentire nolunt odiis et cruciatibus persequuntur, sed iusto Dei iudicio in insidiis suis capiuntur iniqui. Unde dicitura : 'Iustus de angustia liberatur et traditur impius pro eo'. Potest per Aman quem Iosephus de stirpe Amalech esse commemorat Iudeorum populus figurari qui prophetas occiderunt et Dominum prophetarum et apostolos eius, generis nobilitatem propter incredulitatem et duritiam cordis". Cf. Proverbs 11:8; Cf. Rabanus PL 109: 0652b-0652d.

<sup>87</sup> Interlinear Gloss on Esther 3:8 "iudaicus populus"; "christianus"; "novi testamenti"; "legem veterem"; "opinione Iudeorum qui contemnit legem que occidit sequitur spiritum qui vivificat"

<sup>88</sup> Another example of this is a marginal gloss on the ring which the king gives to Haman: "Just as Haman, dictating the letters, tries to fortify them with the seal of the king, so that his wishes may more easily be carried out, so too the Jews take the books of the divine law, on which there is the seal of the supreme king (that is, the grace of the Holy Spirit) to prove their heresy."

See the Marginal Gloss Esther 3:10 "Sicut Aman epistolas dirigens, regis signaculo eas munire conatur, ut facilius votum expleatur, sic Iudei libros divine legis in quibus est signaculum summi regis id est gratia Spiritus sancti ad comprobendam heresim suam assumunt in testimonium, reprobantes societatem gentium et Christi evangelium quasi divinis preceptis contrarium." Cf. Rabanus PL 109: 0653A-0653B.

Jews.<sup>89</sup> Aspects of the Gloss will be returned to in chapter four when I look at Nicholas's moral commentary. Now I will turn to one final context for understanding Nicholas's exegesis, the *postillae* of Hugh of St. Cher.

### 2.2.c: Hugh of St. Cher

Hugh joined the Dominicans in 1225. Already a bachelor of theology, and probably a doctor of canon law, he taught for many years at the University of Paris before being made a cardinal in 1244.<sup>90</sup> While in Paris, Hugh was prolific in his efforts to equip his mendicant brothers for their work as preachers. In addition to commentaries on the *Sentences*, a commentary on Peter Comestor's *Historia Ecclesiastica*, numerous sermons, a treatise on the Mass, among other things, Hugh either compiled or directed the compilation of *postillae* (glosses) on the entire Bible.<sup>91</sup> These stay close to the text of scripture, and are in many ways an update on the Gloss. They include and often paraphrase material found in the Gloss, but include newer exegesis also.<sup>92</sup>

Hugh's commentary on Esther repeats the allegory which originated with Rabanus, with material also drawn from later sources, but primarily from the Gloss. His emphasis is very clearly on providing a tool for preaching and many of his comments have a moral or instructional flavour. For example, on the opening line of Esther, *in the days of Ahasuerus*, Hugh says:

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<sup>89</sup> In his study of the glosses on Joseph and his brothers in Genesis 37-50, Michael Signer argues that the spiritual, Christocentric agenda of the interlinear glosses have a distinctly anti-Jewish slant, even while they superimpose the Gospel story onto the Old Testament. The less polemical or invective marginal glosses Signer believes reflect the more tolerant attitudes of the later twelfth century, while the interlinear glosses represent the less tolerant attitudes of the later eleventh century, especially in Northern France. Michael Signer, "The *Glossa Ordinaria* and the Transmission of Medieval anti-Judaism", in J. Brown and W. P. Stoneman (ed.), *A Distinct Voice. Medieval Studies in Honour of Leonard E. Boyle, O.P.* (Notre Dame, Ind., 1977), 593-597. This seems to be true in the Glosses on Esther also.

<sup>90</sup> For a general introduction to Hugh of St. Cher's life and works, see: Louis J. Bataillon, G. Dahan, and P. M. Gy, *Hugues De Saint-Cher (1263): Bibliste et Théologien* (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2004).

<sup>91</sup> Beryl Smalley first suggested the possibility that the *postillae* were a collaborative effort, a suggestion taken up by other scholars. Lesley Smith has argued persuasively however that Hugh compiled the glosses himself, to synthesise a vast body of prior exegesis on the Bible as an aid to preaching. Lesley Smith, "Hugh of St. Cher and Medieval Collaboration" in *Transforming Relations: Essays on Jews and Christians throughout History in Honour of Michael A. Signer* (South Bend, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010), 245-259. cf. Beryl Smalley, *The Gospels in the Schools, C. 1100 C. 1280* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1985), 125-126.

<sup>92</sup> Smalley describes Hugh as a compiler in the tradition of the 'biblical moral school'. The aim of exegesis was to preach to the laity and other clergy. Smalley, *The Gospels in the Schools*, 135.

Ahasuerus is interpreted "entryway", or "my door"; [in] John 10:9 [Christ] says "I am the door"; Ahasuerus signifies Christ, even though [Ahasuerus] did bad things, nevertheless in his good actions he is a figure for [Christ]. Esther is the Church; the banquet is the spiritual delights of Christ and the Church. Ahasuerus reigned from India to Ethiopia, and Christ from sea to sea, from the river to the end of the world.<sup>93</sup>

In a few pithy sentences, Hugh summarises two points made in the Gloss (and adopted from Rabanus): Ahasuerus signifies Christ, not in his bad actions but in his good ones; Ahasuerus's name means "door" which is compared with Christ calling himself the door. Then, commenting on Ahasuerus's feast, Hugh says:

*He made [a feast].* Luke 14:16 "A certain man made a great [feast], and invited many". About this feast Isaiah 25:6 says "And the Lord of hosts shall make unto all people in this mountain, a feast of fat things, a feast of wine, of fat things full of marrow, of wine purified from the lees." Three things are put here on account of the three types of people who come to the feast: married or widowed, celibates, and virgins. Or on account of the triple joy they will have in the homeland. One is an exterior [joy] of bodily vision and the company of the elect, and then an interior joy, which is spiritual vision of God. This is signified by the marrow which is inside the bone, which is better than the fat outside the bone...<sup>94</sup>

Ahasuerus's feast has already been described as the spiritual delights of Christ and the Church, and here Hugh simply parallels the feast with a passage in the New Testament in which Jesus compares the kingdom of heaven to a feast. Ahasuerus's feast should be understood in the same way Jesus was using the imagery of the feast in his parable, and Isaiah can be understood as referring the *same* feast in his hymn of thanksgiving. All these mentions of a feast refer

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<sup>93</sup> The *postillae* survive in a long and short version. There is no critical edition of Hugh's commentary, but it is extant in many early printed editions. There is a list in B. Carra de Vaux, "La Constitution du corpus exégétique," Annexe 1, in Bataillon et. al. *Hugues de Saint-Cher*, 56-57. I am using an early printed edition of the long version from c. 1533. All citations will be indicated by chapter and verse in the DRB followed by biblical lemmata in Hugh's commentary. All translations are my own.

Hugh, Esther 1:1: "*In diebus Assueri*. Assuerus interpretatur atrium vel ostium meum. Johannes x.b: 'Ego Sum ostium'. Et significat Christum licet malus fuerit tamen in bonis actibus eum figurat. Hester ecclesiam. Convivium spirituales delicias Christi et ecclesi(a)e. Assuerus regnavit ab India usque ad E(a)thipiam: et Christus a mari usque ad mare: a flumine usque ad terminos orbis terrarum."

<sup>94</sup> Hugh, Esther 1.2: "*Feit*. Luc xiiii.d. 'Homo quidam fecit cenam magnam et vocavit multos'. De hoc convivio dicitur Esa xxv.c. 'Facies dominus exercituum omnibus populis in monte hoc convivium pinguium conuiuium vindemiae conuiuium pinguium medulla torum vindemiae defecate'. Tria ponit propter tria genera hominum qui erunt in conuiuio illo, scilicet coniugati vidue sive continentes et virgines. Vel propter triplex gaudium quod erit in patria. Unum exterius per corporalem visionem et electorum societatem. Secundum de interiori et spirituali dei visione. Et hoc significatur per medullam quae intus est in osse, et etiam est melior quam pinguedo extra ossa..."

allegorically to the spiritual feast of heaven. Hugh demonstrates for his student brothers how they might use Ahasuerus's feast to preach about the joys of the heavenly kingdom.

On Esther 1:11 when Vashti is introduced, Hugh unsurprisingly comments:

*Also Vashti.* Gloss: The Jewish people, who seemed to reign when they worshiped one God. *In the Palace.* Gloss: in the holy of holies, or in meditation on holy scripture, where divine power was made known...*Before the king.* To the spiritual banquet. *The crown.* Gloss: the honour of religions. *The people.* That is, the nations....*Beautiful.* But in what way was the synagogue beautiful, who is signified by Leah, who had watery eyes? The Gloss explains this by saying that she was beautiful by the prerogative of the patriarchs, who knew the law and the prophets... *Another.* The church of the Gentiles. Matthew 21:43: "the kingdom of God shall be taken from you, and shall be given to a nation yielding the fruits thereof".<sup>95</sup>

Medieval iconography that contrasted Synagogue with Church often portrayed the Synagogue as a blind woman. Part of this was in reference to the Jews' supposed blindness to the spiritual meaning of scripture.<sup>96</sup> Leah, Jacob's first but unpreferred wife, who is described as having weak or 'watery' eyes was also used as an allegory or image for the Jews. She too is 'put aside' for her sister Rebecca, an allegory for Christians.<sup>97</sup> Hugh seems to be referencing this here. The typical allegorical interpretation is reiterated by Hugh in his glosses on Vashti.

Interestingly, this is the only comment included about the Jews. Haman is *not* allegorised as the Jewish people. Hugh says simply that Haman hated the Jews because he was descended from Agog of the Amalekites whom King Saul killed; and that he hated Mordechai because the

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<sup>95</sup> Hugh, Esther 1.9-19: "*Vashti quoque.* Glos: plebs Iudaica que regnare videbatur cum cultu unius Dei. *In Palatio.* Glos: in sancta sanctorum vel in sancte scripture meditatione, ubi divinitas potentiae suae notitiam tribuit...*Coram rege.* ad convivium spirituale. *Diademate* Glos: honore religionis. *Populis.* Id est nationibus... *Pulchra.* Sed quomodo synagoga fuit pulchra cum significetur per liam que erat lippa? Glos solvit hic dicens: Pulchra prerogativa patrum: scientia legis et prophetarum... *Altera.* Glos: Ecclesia de gentibus. Mat xxi.d. '*auferetur a vobis regnum Dei, et dabitur genti facienti fructus ejus*'. Cf. Matthew 21:43.

<sup>96</sup> For a full discussion, see Nina Rowe, *The Jew, the Cathedral, and the Medieval City: Synagoga and Ecclesia in the Thirteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011). See also Wolfgang S. Seiferth, *Synagogue and Church in the Middle Ages: Two Symbols in Art and Literature*, trans. Lee Chadeayne and Paul Gottwald (New York: Ungar, 1970).

<sup>97</sup> See for example the Marginal Gloss on Genesis 29.16: "Rachel et Lyam in similitudinem Ecclesie et synagoge interpretatus est. Lyam maiorem natu synagoga significare existimat quia prior populum Dei genuit que oculis lippa dicitur quia lex per Moysen data cooperata est et signata. Rachel minor et pulchra prius sterilis post fecunda Ecclesiam significat que tempore posterior et sancta corpore et spiritu. Oculi eius decori quia evangelium videre meruerunt. Sed diu sterilis dum synagoga populum generavit. Pro Rachel Iacob servivit et supponitur ei Lya quia Christus ut Ecclesiam sibi assumeret prius sibi synagoga coniunxit."

Jew would not adore him, which Hugh glosses with reference to Deuteronomy and Matthew "You shall adore the Lord alone, and him only shall you serve".<sup>98</sup>

This is the aspect of Hugh's *postillae* of particular relevance to Nicholas's later commentary. While most of Hugh's commentary on Esther is an acknowledged repetition of the allegorical exegesis from the Gloss, framed in a way which facilitates preaching, the Dominican also includes more comments on the literal or historical meaning of the text, a departure from the earlier commentaries.

Rabanus had made two comments on the historical aspects of Esther which are repeated by the Gloss: he noted that while Josephus said Ahasuerus was probably King Cyrus of Persia, it is more likely that he was Artaxerxes who reigned after his uncle Darius. This is the opinion of Eusebius.<sup>99</sup> Rabanus also mentions that Shushan is the capital of Persia, named for the river which flows through it.<sup>100</sup> Hugh, on the other hand, includes a long paraphrase from the History of Alexander which describes the (rather fantastical) glories of Ahasuerus's palace in Persia;<sup>101</sup> and, on the opening lines of chapter two *after these things* (i.e., after Vashti's dismissal) he includes a gloss on the historical Ahasuerus and his circumstances:

Josephus says that King Ahasuerus took the separation from Vashti very hard, because he loved her very much. But he was not able to recall her because of the laws of the Persians and Medes, which it was not permissible to change. And therefore he had been sad, but afterwards [i.e. *after these things*] he was no longer

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<sup>98</sup> Hugh, Esther 3.1-2: "*De stirpe agag. Quam Samuel trucidavit... neque adorabat. 'Dominum deum tuum adorabis et illi soli servies'.*" Cf. Deuteronomy 6.13 and Matthew 4.10.

<sup>99</sup> "Josephus refert Cyrum esse filium Xerxis regis, qui post Darium patrum suum regnavit in Perside. Hunc ergo Cyrum dicit Artaxerxem apud Graecos vocari, qui Longimanus cognominabatur, regnum tenens annis quadraginta; sed ego non puto Esther eo tempore fuisse, nunquam enim Esdras de ipsa siluisset, qui scribit hoc tempore Esdras et Mennam reversos esse de Babylone, et ea deinceps consecuta quae ab his gesta referuntur. Eusebius ergo in Chronicis suis arbitrabatur hunc Assuerum esse Artaxerxem vocatum; regnavit quoque post Darium patrum suum cognomento Nothum, annis 40." PL 109: 636C-637A. Cf. Marginal Gloss Esther 1.1.

<sup>100</sup> "Susis metropolis est Persidis, quam aiunt historici Memnonis fratrem constituisse. Dicta autem Susis, quod immineat Susis fluvio, ubi regia est Cyri" PL 109: 637A. Cf. Marginal Gloss Esther 1.2.

<sup>101</sup> Hugh, Esther 1:2 "*Susa civitas. Hec erat metropolis persidis: ubi erat sedes regni: sic dicta a susi fluvio. Ibi erat domus aaueri vario lapide et candido strata: cuius colonne erant argenteae: tectum instat firmamenti habens gemmas diversi coloris ad modum fiderum et signorum dispositas: in quq erat hortus deliciarum in quo erat vinea habens vites argenteas: et palmites aureos...*"

sad.<sup>102</sup>

Hugh's glosses on the literal sense are often simply paraphrased from 'standard' Christian sources like Josephus (whom I will discuss in more detail in chapter three) and Eusebius, but they are not completely uninterrogated. When Esther and Mordechai are introduced in chapter two, Hugh questions, as neither the Gloss nor Rabanus did, how it can be understood that they were carried away from Jerusalem with Jeconiah. This would make Esther two hundred and fifty years old, Hugh says, and this is not reasonable. Rabanus, Hugh continues, explained everything mystically, but this question of the historical Esther and Mordechai is equivocal. Perhaps it refers to two different Mordechais, or perhaps when it says they were taken away from Jerusalem with Jeconiah it means Mordechai's parents were taken away then, but not Mordechai himself, who is only said to be taken away in the sense that he was a child of the exile.<sup>103</sup>

This might not be a very satisfactory explanation for the historical problem Hugh has located, but its inclusion indicates that the Dominican found the Gloss lacking in this respect, and recognised the importance of the omission. The new interest in these historical questions and problems which Hugh introduces in his *postillae* prepare the way for an examination of Nicholas's exegesis, the first full commentary on Esther exclusively devoted to the literal sense of this text. First, however, a quick look at medieval Jewish exegesis of Esther will also help inform my analysis of Nicholas's exegesis in the next chapter.

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<sup>102</sup> Hugh, Esther 2:1 "*His itaque etc...*Dicit enim Josephus quod rex Assuerus graviter tulerat separationem a Vashti quia nimis diligebat eam. Sed non poterat eam revocare propter leges persarum et medorum: quas transgredi non licebat. Et ideo cum tristis fuisset cessavit postea tristitia."

Josephus as a quasi Jewish source will be discussed in chapter three.

<sup>103</sup> Hugh, Esther 2.8 "*Hester Quoque...*sed Haec videtur innuere quod nabuchodonosor transtulit cum iechonia istam hester: quod non potest esse: quia sic haberet hester ducentos et quinquaginta annos. Tantum enim tempus vel maius fuit a translatione illa iechoniae usque ad assuerum: quod probari aperte potest per annos regum qui sibi successerunt in perside. Respondeo: Hester non fuit translata cum iechonia: nec etiam postea longo tempore. Et quod dicit hic Rabanus in gloss totum mystice intelligitur. Sed quomodo soluetur de Mardocheo de quo dicit ipse textus quod tunc fuit translatus scilicet cum Iechoniam. Posset solvi per equivocationem nominis: ut nonne Mardochei hic intelligantur duo sed ille qui cum Iechonia fuit translatus et ille qui adoptavis sibi hester in filiam. Vel potest dicit quod Mardocheus ideo dicitur translatus cum Iechonia quia parentes illius in quibus erat per causam materilaem sive seminalem tunc sunt translati qui postea genuerunt eum."

### 2.3: Jewish Exegesis of Esther

If *liber Hester* was in large part neglected by Christian exegetes, *megillat Esther* was one of the most commented upon texts in Ketuvim. Ancient and Medieval Jewish exegesis on Esther is a vast topic, and it is well outside the parameters of this study to provide anything that approximates a full summary. A brief sketch of rabbinic midrash on Esther (the Esther Rabbah), as well as the outlines of some prominent medieval exegesis will be sufficient to demonstrate that aspect of Jewish interpretation most relevant for this thesis: that unlike medieval Christians, Jews did not typically seek a sacred meaning for Esther outside of the historical events described by the scroll. Because these events are the foundation for the liturgical festival of Purim, they are the primary focus for the Jewish exegete. This does not mean, however, that their interpretations are devoid of allegorical or pedagogical elements, as they attempt to show how the story is not only a sacred one but a relevant one for their own communities.<sup>104</sup>

When approaching the Esther scroll, Jewish exegetes were confronted by the same problem as Christians: why is a story which is, on the face of it, so secular included in the canon of sacred texts? What is its theological relevance? Immanuel of Rome (d. 1335), a poet and exegete, sums up the problem by asking why the name of God is absent from the scroll (as translated by Walfish):

It is necessary to investigate the reasons that none of the holy names appears in the book. This book by right should be full of thanksgiving and praises and the telling of God's acts of kindness for He was exceedingly kind to that generation by the miracles and wonders that He showed them and the causes that He effected to save them.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Barry Dov Walfish provides a very helpful summary of medieval Jewish exegesis on Esther which I will rely on throughout this discussion. See Barry Dov Walfish, *Esther in Medieval Garb: Jewish Interpretation of the Book of Esther in the Middle Ages* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993). In addition to the exegesis I discuss here, there were also collections of Kabbalist, or mystical interpretations of Esther, but as Walfish points out, these were not typical and are not widely attested. Walfish, *Esther*, 36. In the interest of space, I will not discuss these collections here. As mentioned above, the Talmud also has a section on Esther, which deals primarily with laws regarding how the festival of Purim should be celebrated, or with extracts from the Esther Rabbah.

<sup>105</sup> Immanuel of Rome, translated by Walfish: *Esther*, 76.

Jewish exegetes made sense of the absence of God's name in various ways, and the word 'miracle' in Immanuel's assertion above became a typical way of doing so, influenced no doubt by the Esther Rabbah.

The Esther Rabbah is a collection of aggadic (narrative) midrashim on Esther in two parts. The first part was compiled around the sixth century CE. It interprets Esther on a verse-by-verse basis. The second, compiled around the eleventh century, greatly expands on the story of Esther by intertwining the text with interpretive paraphrases or inventing dialogues.<sup>106</sup> Esther Rabbah is typical of aggadic midrash, as discussed in chapter one, in the following ways: first, it manifests a hyper-parallelism, eliding words or passages from Esther with other words or passages from Tanakh to expand or broaden the interpretation.<sup>107</sup> A short extract from the very long exposition on the first few words of the first verse of the Esther scroll ("and it came to pass") gives a sense of this:

R. Simeon b. Abba in the name of R. Yohanan: "Any context in which the words, 'And it came to pass...' appear serves to signify either misfortune or good fortune. If it is a case of misfortune, it is misfortune without parallel. If it is a case of good fortune, it is good fortune without parallel."

R. Samuel b. Nahman came and introduced this distinction: "Any context in which the words, 'And it came to pass...' occur signifies misfortune, and any context in which the words, 'And it shall come to pass...' are used signifies good fortune."

They objected [to this claim], "And God said, 'Let there be light,' and it came to pass that there was light" (Gen. 1:3).

He said to them, "This too does not represent good fortune, for in the end the world did not enjoy the merit of actually making use of that light."

R. Judah [b. R. Simeon] said, "With the light that the Holy One, blessed be he, created on the first day of creation, a person could look and see from one side of the world to the other. When the Holy One, blessed be he, foresaw that there would be wicked people, he hid it away for the [exclusive use of the] righteous. 'But the path of the righteous is as the light of the dawn that shines more and more on the perfect day' (Prov. 4:18)".

They further objected, "And it came to pass that there was evening and morning, one day" (Gen. 1:5).

He said to them, "This too does not signify good fortune. For whatever God created on the first day of creation is destined to be wiped out. That is in line

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<sup>106</sup> See Moshe David Herr's entry for "Esther Rabbah" in the *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, Second Edition, ed. Fred Skolnik, Michael Berenbaum, Shlomo S. (Yosh) Gafni, and Rachel Gilon. Farmington Hills, MI: Keter Publishing House Ltd., 2007).

<sup>107</sup> See chapter one, footnotes 114 and 115 for characteristics of midrash.

with the following verse of Scripture: 'For the heaven shall vanish away like smoke, and the earth shall wax old like a garment' (Is. 51:6).<sup>108</sup>

The comment goes on in this way for several pages, detailing objections and counter arguments, all within the context of scripture. The purpose seems to be to intensify the point that Ahasuerus's ascension to the throne was a very bad thing indeed.<sup>109</sup>

This passages also illustrates another characteristic of midrash, the presentation of successive rabbinic voices or opinions. The passage references at least seven rabbis in its entirety. A similar example of biblical parallels and rabbinic synthesis is found in the passages which introduce Mordechai and Esther, which uses eleven biblical passages and references four rabbis to make the point that the Esther scroll intentionally juxtaposes the king's desire for a new queen with the introduction of Esther, to make it very clear that she will be the one who will save Israel from an impending threat, a sort of hidden prophecy within the text.<sup>110</sup>

Esther Rabbah also greatly expands on what is explicit in the text, interweaving it with dialogues, questions and answers, or interpretive paraphrase. This is the aspect of the midrash of greatest interest for this thesis, as it is through these expansions that the rabbis present a theological or sacred meaning for Esther. For instance, when Mordechai is first introduced he is called a Benjaminite, but also a Judean. In the middle of a long passage which compares Mordechai to other holy men in Tanakh, one of the rabbis introduces a question: why is Mordechai called a Judean when he is a Benjaminite. The answer provides a richer content for the events described in the text:

It is because he affirmed the unity of God before everyone in the world: "But Mordecai did not bow down nor prostrate himself before him" (Est. 3:2).  
Was he contentious? Did he disobey the king's orders?

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<sup>108</sup> Jacob Neusner, *Esther Rabbah I: an Analytical Translation* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1989), 35. Translations of Esther Rabbah I are taken from Jacob Neusner's newer analytical translation and indicated by page number, rather than part and section, which is more typical. Neusner divides his translation into the smallest units of text which, while it serves the interests of his project of analysing and comparing collections of Midrash, has no bearing on this thesis. Neusner only translated the first part of Esther Rabbah, so for parts two through ten I will use the earlier translation by Maurice Simon, *The Midrash Rabbah*, vol IV (London: Soncino Press, 1977). All citations from this translation will be indicated by section, part, and page number.

<sup>109</sup> Neusner, *Esther Rabbah I*, 24-39.

<sup>110</sup> Neusner, *Esther Rabbah I*, 131-132.

When Ahasuerus commanded people to bow down to Haman, he put an idol on his chest intending to make everyone bow down to an idol.

When Haman saw that Mordecai would not bow down to him, he grew angry. But Mordecai said, "There is a Lord who is exalted above all who exalt, and how am I going to abandon him and bow down to an idol?"

Because he affirmed the unity of God before everyone in the world, he was called a Judean.<sup>111</sup>

In this passage, which in its entirety is primarily concerned with describing Mordechai as a holy man, the question why Mordechai is described as a Judean becomes a means of expanding on the text, to emphasise his holiness as one who would not bow down to idols.

The idea that Mordechai refused to bow to Haman because it would have been an act of idolatry recurs frequently in *Esther Rabbah*. When the text describes how they questioned Mordechai about not bowing to Haman, and then reported the matter to Haman, *Esther Rabbah* states:

What did Mordechai say to those who asked him: WHY TRANSGRESSEST THOU THE KING'S COMMANDMENTS? (Est 3:3) R. Levi said: He said to them: 'Our master Moses admonished us in the Torah saying, *Cursed be the man that maketh a graven or molten image* (Deut. 27:15), and this wretch sets himself up as a deity. Isaiah the prophet admonished us, *Cease ye from man, in whose nostrils is a breath; for how little is he to be accounted!* (Isa. 2:22). What is more, I am the elect of the Holy One, blessed be He, since all the tribes were born outside of the holy land, but my ancestor was born in the Land of Israel.' They said to him: 'Then we shall tell Haman this.' Immediately, THEY TOLD HAMAN etc. (Est 3:4). Said Haman to them: 'Say to him: "Did not his ancestor prostrate himself before my ancestor, as it says, *Then the handmaids came near, they and their children, and they bowed down...and after came Joseph near and Rachel, and they bowed down* (Gen. 33:6-7)". Mordechai replied: 'Benjamin was not yet born.' They reported this to Haman, as it says, AND THEY TOLD HAMAN (Est. 3:4)<sup>112</sup>

The text from the Esther scroll "And they told Haman" is interwoven here with a dialogue that brings Mordechai and his pious intentions to light, and emphasises Haman's wickedness.

Another example of the rabbis expanding on the text to provide it with a theological or pious tone occurs at that moment when Mordechai goes to Esther to convince her to petition Ahasuerus on behalf of her people. The rabbis reiterate the point that Mordechai was avoiding

<sup>111</sup> Neusner, *Esther Rabbah I*, 137.

<sup>112</sup> Simon, *Midrash Rabah*, VII, 8, p. 83-84.

idolatry, this time by putting their explanation into Mordechai's own mouth in the form of a prayer. Esther has asked that he and the Jews fast and pray for her, but the days on which she asks them to fast occur on the Passover. The rabbis comment:

He sent back word to her: 'but these include the first day of Passover?' She replied: 'Elder of Israel, why is there a Passover?' Mordechai thereupon acceded to her request, as it says, SO MORDECHAI WENT HIS WAY AND DID AS ACCORDING TO ALL THAT ESTHER HAD COMMANDED HIM (Est 4:17). In Babylon they say that this means that he spent the festival of Passover in fasting on account of that calamity. Mordechai prayed to the Lord and said: 'It is fully known before the throne of Thy glory, O Lord of all worlds, that it was not from pride of heart or vaingloriousness that I acted in not bowing down to Haman, but through fear of Thee I did thus, not to bow down to him, for I was in fear of Thee lest I should assign Thy honour to flesh and blood, and I was not willing to bow down to any beside Thee. For who am I that I should not bow down to Haman for the salvation of Thy people Israel? For that I would even kiss his shoe-latchet. Now therefore, our God, deliver we pray Thee, from his hand and let him fall into the pit which he has digged and let him be caught in the snare which he has hidden for the feet of Thy saints, and let this sinner know that Thou hast not forgotten the promise which Thou has made to us, *Yet for all that, when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not reject them, neither will I abhor them, to destroy them utterly, and to break My covenant with them; for I am the Lord their God.*' (Lev 26:44).

What did Mordecai do? He collected the school-children and kept them without bread and water and put sackcloth on them and made them sit among the ashes, and they went on crying and weeping and studying the Torah. At that time Esther was greatly frightened at the evil which was threatening Israel, and she took off her royal robes and ornaments and she put on sackcloth and loosened the hair of her head and filled it with dust and ashes and afflicted herself with fasting and fell on her face before the Lord. And she prayed, saying: 'O Lord God of Israel who are Ruler from of old and didst create the world, help now Thy handmaid who has been left an orphan without father or mother and is like a poor woman begging from house to house. So I pray for Thy mercy from one window to another in the palace of Ahasuerus. And now, O Lord, grant success to thy humble handmaid here and deliver the sheep of Thy pasture from these enemies who have risen against us, for nought can hinder Thee from saving whether with many or with few. And do Thou, father of orphans, stand at the right hand of this orphan who trust in Thy lovingkindness, and make this man mercifully disposed toward me, for I am afraid of him, and cast him down before me, for Thou bringest low the proud.'<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Simon, *Midrash Rabbah*, VIII, 6, p. 107-108. The same point about Mordechai not bowing out of a desire not to engage in idol worship is repeated at VII, 6, p. 80-84. I will return to this in chapter three.

I have quoted at length here to give a sense of how Esther Rabbah provides a sacred meaning for Esther: by providing a pious explanation for Mordechai's actions and by putting prayers into the mouths of Mordechai and Esther, the story is re-shaped as one of God's saving providence.

More than this, Mordechai's certainty that God will save his people is meant to be a promise of hope to Jews of all time. Genesis 33.6-7, referenced in the passage above, details Jacob coming before Esau. Esau (Edom) became in rabbinic exegesis the paradigmatic enemy of the Jews, often understood as a typology for Christianity. Amaleq, Haman's ancestor, is the grandson of Esau, and the two are often conflated in rabbinic and medieval exegesis. Mordechai will not bow to Haman as Jacob bowed to his brother Esau, and he is confident that ultimately God will vindicate his cause.<sup>114</sup> This is the promise of the Purim festival: that ultimately the Jews will triumph over their enemies.

This is made clear too in Mordechai's exhortation to Esther. When in the text Mordechai says to Esther that if she does not speak to Ahasuerus herself the Jews will be delivered in some other way, the rabbis add significantly to Mordechai's message:

FOR IF THOU ALTOGETHER HOLDEST THY PEACE (Est. 4:14). 'If you keep silent now and refrain from pleading for you nation, in the end you will be silent in the time to come and you will not be able to justify yourself, because you had the opportunity of doing good in your lifetime and you did not do it. And do you imagine that the Holy One, blessed be He, will abandon Israel? In any case He will raise up a deliverer for them, as it says, THEN WILL RELIEF AND DELIVERANCE ARISE TO THE JEWS FROM ANOTHER PLACE. (Esther 4:14).<sup>115</sup>

Beginning and ending with the actual written text of Esther 4.14, the midrash interweaves it with a warning to Esther and a promise that the Holy One will never abandon Israel but will deliver them in some way.

For many medieval Jewish exegetes, the Esther story was applied prophetically to their own times, and turned into a promise of the final triumph of Jews over their enemies. As

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<sup>114</sup> For a full discussion of Edom/Haman as the typological enemy of Christianity in Jewish exegesis, see Malachi Haim Hacohen, *Jacob & Esau: Jewish European History between Nation and Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 75-77, 105-116.

<sup>115</sup> Simon, *Midrash Rabbah*, VIII, 6, p. 106-107.

Walfish notes "the events described in the Book of Esther take on cosmic significance, for not only does the book describe the salvation of the Jewish people at a particular point in their history, but it symbolizes the final redemption of the Jewish people at the end of days. This final redemption involves the ultimate defeat of the forces of evil symbolized by Amalek."<sup>116</sup>

I will return to these and other aspects of Esther Rabbah in chapter three. The main point here is that so far from departing from the historical context of Esther, this traditional Jewish interpretation provides the scroll with a sacred meaning by re-framing it as a story of God's providential action in history.<sup>117</sup> This interpretation is picked up by numerous medieval Jewish exegetes, and introduced or defended in various ways.

God's providential action in the Esther story is often adduced to supposed hidden miracles, which it is the exegetes job to reveal. Isaac ben Moses Arama (d. 1494, a Spanish rabbi) says that hidden miracles are always a manifestation of divine providence, and that miraculous events are proof of God's action behind the scene. One of the miracles Arama cites is Ahasuerus's sleep being disturbed and his consequent desire to have the chronicles read out to him. In rabbinic fashion, Arama greatly enhances the miraculous element, saying that the scribe who read of Mordechai's deeds was one of the sons of Haman and that he tried to erase the passages concerning Mordechai. The angel Gabriel filled them in again, so that king was reminded of his debt to Mordechai anyway.<sup>118</sup>

For Rashi too, King Ahasuerus's insomnia is described as a miracle brought about by God so that the king will hear and remember the great favour Mordechai did for him.<sup>119</sup> Rashi

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<sup>116</sup> Walfish, *Esther*, 93, see also 132-135.

<sup>117</sup> Interesting to note that the sections from the Septuagint that Jerome appended to his translation does this too, in a way very similar to passages in Esther Rabbah. See for example Esther Rabbah VIII, 5, which describes a dream Mordechai had of coming destruction and deliverance for his people. This is on p. 105-106 in Simon's translation.

<sup>118</sup> Discussed by Walfish, *Esther*, 79-80. Arama was paraphrasing another collection of rabbinic midrash on Esther.

<sup>119</sup>

נס היה... ויש אומרים שם אל לבו שזמנה אסתר את המן שמא נתנה עיניה בו ויהרגהו

All citations of Rashi are from the "Megilat Esther" in *Mikra'ot gedolot ba-Keter* edited by Menachem Cohen (Ramat Gan, Israel: Bar-Ilan University, 1992). Citations will be made by indicating chapter, verse, and page number from

presents Esther as a story of God's saving providence, in numerous ways. Mordechai is continually before the gate solicitous for Esther's welfare because he was given a "hint of salvation", and thought to himself that the only reason such a righteous Jewish woman should be taken to the bed of a Gentile was for the eventual salvation of her people.<sup>120</sup> For, Rashi says, the Holy One "prepares a healing for Israel before a plague comes upon them."<sup>121</sup>

In addition to Rashi, the following exegetes also explained the events in the book of Esther as being a manifestation of God's providence through miraculous events: Rashbam, and Joseph Kara (d. 1135, another rabbi of the northern French school), Saadiah Gaon (d. 942, an Egyptian Rabbi), Abraham Ibn Ezra (d. 1167, a Spanish biblical commentator), Maimonides (d. 1204), Gersonides (d. 1344, a French philosopher), and Joseph ibn Kaspi (d. 1349, a philosopher born in France).<sup>122</sup> Although these commentaries vary in the extent to which there is a philosophical engagement with the nature of miracles, and the degree to which the text of Esther is expanded upon or re-imagined through allegorical or mystical elements, the Jewish consensus

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this edition. See Rashi, "Megilat Esther" 6.1, p. 247. Commenting in the passage "The king's sleep was disturbed" Rashi comments: "It was a miracle. And some [Rabbis] say that he took to heart that Esther had invited Haman; [thinking] perhaps she had set eyes upon him, and he [Haman] would assassinate him." This is referencing a section on the tractate Megillah in the Talmud.

For English translations of Rashi on Esther, see: Rashi, *The Megillah And Rashi's Commentary With Linear Translation*. Trans. Avraham Schwartz and Yisroel Schwartz (New York: Hebrew Linear Classics, 1983). Of course, Rashi's interest in Peshat is also much in evidence. As discussed by Walfish, Rashi is interested in the grammatical and plain meaning of Esther also, and many of his comments are purely contextual and grammatical. Walfish, *Esther*, 15-16.

<sup>120</sup>

**ומה יעשה בה:** זה אחד משני צדיקים שנתן להם רמז וחשו: דוד ומרדכי; דוד: "גם את הארי גם את הדוב הכה עבדך..." "אמר: לא בא לידי דבר זה אלא שאסמוך עליו להלחם עם זה. וכן מרדכי אמר: לא אירע לצדקת זאת: שתלקה למשכב ערל אלא שעתידה לקום להושיע לישראל. לפיכך היה מחזר לדעת מה יהא בסופה

Rashi, "Megilat Esther" 2.11, p. 228. In English: "He [Mordechai] was one of two righteous men to whom a hint of salvation was given; David and Mordechai. David: *Even the lion and the bear has your servant slain*. He [David] said [to himself], 'this incident did not happen to me only that I should rely on it and do battle with this one [Goliath].' And similarly, Mordechai [said to himself], 'It did not happen to this righteous woman that she should be taken to a gentile's bed only that she is destined to rise to save Israel.' He therefore repeatedly went around to find out what would be her fate." Cf. 1 Samuel 17.36. Rashi is paraphrasing the Esther Rabbah 6.6.

<sup>121</sup>

**גדל המלך... את המן:** שהקדוש ברוך הוא בורא רפואה למכתן של ישראל קודם שיביא המכה עליהם

Rashi, "Megilat Esther", 3.2, p. 232.

<sup>122</sup> Walfish, *Esther*, 76-89.

throughout the Middle Ages is quite clear: Esther is a story of God's providential action on behalf of his people.

I have included this brief overview only to give a sense of the scope but also the coherence of the medieval Jewish tradition of exegesis on Esther. Not all of these commentaries were strictly historical in the sense that they were thought of or intended as an explanation of the historical events in Esther; but those historical events become the context in which Jewish exegetes and their communities reflected on God's providential action in their lives. There was no need for Jews to depart from the events described in the book of Esther to discern a sacred meaning in it. This is the tradition Rashi is writing in. His commentary is completely typical of his exegesis in that he was also interested in the linguistic and contextual questions in Esther, as were Rashbam, and Joseph Kara.<sup>123</sup> But his exegesis is saturated with rabbinic midrash. As we will see when we look at the literal commentary in the next chapter, Nicholas absorbed a great deal of the rabbinic tradition through his reading of Rashi.

### **Esther as a Sacred Text**

To summarise briefly: the seemingly secular nature of the story of Esther as it was canonised by the Church and the Masoretes meant that exegetes of both faiths were obliged to discover a sacred meaning in it. For the Jews, this did not mean departing from the historical meaning of the text, which for them was of primary value. This often meant the inclusion of midrashic expansion or paraphrases of the text.

In the Christian tradition on the other hand, Esther was primarily read 'spiritually', and it was via allegory that a sacred meaning was thought to be revealed, a meaning completely

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<sup>123</sup> Walfish, *Esther*, 14-44. Composed under Persian influence, the Hebrew text of Esther has many words or phrases which were difficult to understand, and different interpretations of the story were crafted depending on the reading of certain words or phrases. An important source for the historical details of Esther was the book of Josippon, a tenth-century history of the Jewish people during the Second Temple period. Incorrectly attributed to Josephus, it was widely read and considered historically reliable among medieval Jewish exegetes, however, only Immanuel of Rome used it as a source for his commentary on Esther, so I will not include a discussion of it here. Walfish, *Esther*, 43-44.

divorced from the historical events described. An early neglect of questions of historical interest was in some way mitigated by Hugh of St. Cher, who recognised the lacunae which Nicholas would later fill in his literal commentary on Esther, the subject of the next chapter.

### Chapter Three: Nicholas's hermeneutic principles and Jewish sources

In chapter one, I traced the tradition of medieval Christian exegesis and the history of Christian interest in the literal sense. Nicholas has long been recognized as the culmination of a school of medieval Christian exegetes seeking understanding of the literal sense from the Jews, but what relationship pertains between his literal and spiritual senses, and how deeply his recourse to Jewish texts influenced his method of exegesis, are questions still open to investigation.<sup>1</sup>

It would require more than a thesis to explore these questions in their many aspects, but an initial step is to make a clearer distinction between Nicholas's exegesis (the interpretation he gives a text) and his hermeneutic (how he arrives at or defends this interpretation), and the roles Jewish sources and the Hebrew language play; following this, it will be useful to look at the totality of Nicholas's exegesis, seeking to understand the relationship between the two commentaries.<sup>2</sup> This is the question of primary interest in this thesis: what is the relationship between the literal and moral commentaries on Esther? Is there an underlying principle or interest that shapes both commentaries? Does the influence of Jewish sources end with Nicholas's literal exegesis, or does it have some relevance for his spiritual commentary also? If yes, in what way? If no, why might this be? An answer to these questions will contribute to our understanding of how Christian interest in Jewish sources developed in the later medieval period in conjunction with changing perceptions of the four sense method.

In chapter two, we saw that despite the oft-repeated maxim that the literal must be the foundation for any other sense, the literal sense of Esther was largely neglected by Christian exegetes (a consequence of the seemingly secular nature of the story taken at face value), while the spiritual sense was primarily used to teach a lesson which contrasted Jews and Christians and

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<sup>1</sup> As discussed in chapter one, see Klepper, *The Insight*, 88-105.

<sup>2</sup> As Smalley demonstrated, inconsistency and confusion in method of expounding a sense (hermeneutic) and the sense itself (exegesis) abounds in medieval Christian scriptural commentaries and plagues scholars of their work to this day. See Smalley, *The Study*, 41-44.

their understanding of the Bible. Nicholas's commentary represents the first serious effort by a Christian scholar to understand the literal or historical sense of Esther before providing a spiritual interpretation.

This chapter will investigate Nicholas's hermeneutic of the literal sense of Esther as a precursor to considering whether it leads to any significant innovations in his spiritual commentary (the subject of chapter four). I have divided this chapter into two parts. In the first, I examine a fundamental principle of Nicholas's method of interpretation for what it might tell us about how he arrives at and defends his literal interpretation of the book of Esther. This will involve a close analysis of a representative aspect of his commentary, which relies heavily on Jewish sources. In the second part of this chapter, I will take a closer look at how Nicholas is using these sources. I hope this will provide a more complete picture of Nicholas's literal sense of Esther and the role Jewish exegesis plays in explicating it.

The fundamental hermeneutic principle which is the subject of the first part of this chapter is the *divisio textus* or *forma tractatus*, a characteristic feature of later medieval exegesis which Nicholas practised consistently and to an advanced degree.<sup>3</sup> What does this principle look like in practice?

### 3.1: The *Divisio Textus*

Nicholas's basic interpretive technique is to follow short excerpts of the biblical text with glosses clarifying their literal meaning. This can be anything from a simple explanation of an obscure word to an interpretive paraphrase or discussion. In sharp contrast to the allegorical interpretation of Esther already discussed, Nicholas is fascinated by the details and customs of the Persian court. He wants to get the details right, and will do his best to leave nothing to

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<sup>3</sup> Alastair Minnis, *Medieval Theory of Authorship: Scholastic Literary Attitudes in the Later Middle Ages*, Second Edition (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 145-148. Minnis analyses the *divisio textus* in the work of several thirteenth- and early fourteenth-century exegetes, including Nicholas.

obscurity. Jewish sources are of course indispensable to satisfying his eager interest in this sort of historical detail, and semantic considerations are helpful in clarifying potential confusions in the text; but his is not the haphazard investigation of an antiquarian, collecting details of the past for the fun of it. Nicholas's literal commentary on Esther has an overall purpose. It proceeds in a carefully structured way, with an attention to the form and sequence of the text, represented by the *divisio textus*, or *forma tractatus*. Nicholas's entire *postilla litteralis* is characterised by *divisio*, the purpose(s) of which must be explored in greater detail if his literal sense is to be understood.

A principle of narrative analysis, the *divisio textus* enacts what it describes: the division of the text into sequential narrative units. As Gilbert Dahan has shown, the *divisio textus* technique had already reached a mature form in the thirteenth century, and by the second half of that century appears in all textual studies, not only in the study of the Bible. It could be applied from the largest level (division of books) to the smallest level (division of verses).<sup>4</sup> It is an interpretation in itself. In identifying a narrative structure for the book of Esther, for example, Nicholas prioritises some aspects of the narrative over others, and suggests an implicit argument for a causal relationship between events. This is apparent from the first few lines of the commentary:

*In the days of Ahasuerus* (1.1). After describing the return of the [Jewish] people from the Babylonian captivity under Ezra and Nehemiah, another incident is described, that is, Queen Esther's liberation of the Jewish people who had been put in danger.

Regarding these events: first there is the promotion of Esther, then the liberation of her people in chapter three. About [Esther's promotion]: one might understand it in the way one understands [a principle of] the natural world, that the corruption of one thing begets another; so in its own way the exile of Queen Vashti is followed by the elevation of Esther. Necessarily then the expulsion of Vashti is dealt with first, then Esther's promotion in chapter two.

The occasion of Vashti's expulsion was a royal banquet to which she refused to go. And so the magnificence of this banquet is described first, then the disobedience of Queen Vashti where it says *now on the seventh day* (1.10).

There are three preliminary matters to be dealt with before the banquet itself is described, beginning where it says: *when the days of the feast were fulfilled* (1.5). The first question is: who was the host of this banquet? A question raised where it

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<sup>4</sup> Gilbert Dahan, *L'Exégèse chrétienne de la Bible en Occident médiéval: XII<sup>e</sup>-XIV<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris: Cerf, 1999), 271-272.

says *in the days of Abasuerus* (1.1).  
Now about this *Abasuerus*, expositors say various things.<sup>5</sup>

Nicholas describes the book of Esther as a story of essentially two parts, causally related: Esther is promoted, *and so* she is able to liberate her people. All the other moments of the narrative are building up to these moments. Esther is promoted because Vashti is expelled, Vashti is expelled because she refuses to come to the royal banquet, etc.

Once established, Nicholas keeps himself strictly to the narrative structure he identifies, and his literal exegesis emerges from within it. The elements of the narrative he identifies have a causal relation, and the commentary is characterised by consistently passive third person verbs modified by ordinal numbers or sequential terms: *primo describitur, secundo ponitur, hic consequenter agitur, postquam descripta est, secuta est*, etc.<sup>6</sup> The implied subject of these verbs is the events themselves described in the sacred text, which is difficult to render into readable English. A more strictly literal translation would be something like: "first the text puts Esther's promotion; second the liberation of her people in chapter three...first the text puts Vashti's rejection, second the promotion of Esther in chapter two....first the text describes the banquet, second the rejection of Vashti; but about the first thing [i.e., the banquet] first the text puts three preliminary

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<sup>5</sup> I have used an early printed version of Nicholas's *postilla litteralis* in a Strasbourg edition from 1492. All references are made by indicating either literal or moral commentary, and the chapter and verse in the DRB followed by the biblical lemma in Nicholas's *postilla*. The biblical lemmata are translated from the DRB. All English translations of the *postilla* are my own. The medieval bible was divided into chapters sometime in the twelfth century, and these were standard by the thirteenth; the 1492 edition of Nicholas's Esther commentary I am using has chapter divisions corresponding to modern Christian Bibles. The edition divides chapter into verses referenced from a to z (omitting j, u, and w), but as the division itself corresponds to modern verse division I have used verse numbers in my references.

Literal Esther 1:1: "*In diebus Assveri*. Postquam descriptus est progressus populi de captivitate Babylonica reducti sub Esdra et Neemia hic consequenter describitur incidens casus videlicet Iudaici populi in periculo positi liberatio per reginam Hester. Et circa hoc primo ponitur ipsius Hester promotio. Secundo populi sui liberatio iii capitulo. Circa primum sciendum quod sicut in naturalibus corruptio unius est generatio alterius, ita suo modo ad eiectionem Vasthi regine secuta est sublimitas Hester; et ideo ponitur primo ipsius Vashti deiectio. Secundo Hester promotio capitulo ii. Occasio vero deiectionis Vashti fuit regale convivium ad quod ipsa rennuit intrare. Ideo primo describitur huius convivii magnificentia. Secundo Vashti regine inobedientia, ibi *Itaque die septimo*. Circa primum primo ponitur triplex previum secundo ipsum convivium, ibi: *Cumque implerentur*. Primum previum est quis fuit actor huius convivii quod notatur cum dicitur: *In diebus Assveri*."

<sup>6</sup> Such can be found throughout the literal commentary. Even in these first opening lines, 'primo' occurs four times, 'secundo' three times, 'consequenter' once, 'postquam' once, and 'secuta est' once.

matters, second the banquet itself...the first preliminary matter is... etc." The effect of the Latin is a hyper-attention to the individual units of the narrative and their causal sequence.

Alastair Minnis argues that the practice of the *divisio textus* arises from a new interest in the role the human author played in writing scripture, itself a result of a belief that the literal sense is the sense intended by the author (an idea of late twelfth- and thirteenth-century exegesis as discussed in chapter one). This focus on authorial intention naturally meant a greater attention to the literary and narrative aspects of the text.<sup>7</sup> That the literal sense was that meaning intended by the author certainly helps resolve some of the ambiguity attached to Nicholas's conception of the literal sense, which seems to vary widely in different contexts. In some it resembles what would, a few centuries earlier, have been considered a spiritual rather than a literal interpretation, being explicitly Christological even in an Old Testament context.<sup>8</sup> As touched upon briefly in chapter one, in Nicholas's exegesis this produced his famous *duplex sensus litteralis*, by which a passage could speak literally of the human author's own situation while also speaking literally of a future, Christological situation. If the Holy Spirit intended something as a prophecy about Christ, this, for Nicholas, would be a literal meaning. But the human scribe might have in mind his own situation, which could also be a literal meaning.

While authorial intention greatly expanded the remit of literal interpretation and brought about a greater scrutiny of the narrative structure of sacred scripture, it created potential problems of its own. God cannot err. So long as the human scribe was seen simply as a divine mouthpiece, the fact that men certainly *can* err (not to mention sin) did not pose much of a problem. Give the human scribe more credit for his creative role, and you are faced with the

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<sup>7</sup> Minnis, *Medieval Theory of Authorship*, 145-159.

<sup>8</sup> For useful studies of the changing nature of the literal sense and how this influenced Nicholas's exegesis, see especially the chapters by Frans van Liere, Corrine Patton, Mary Dove, Michael Signer, and Mark Zier in Krey and Smith.

question: how could sinners write something free of faults and fallacies? This was a question which certainly exercised Nicholas's mind.<sup>9</sup>

It is a relevant concern for the literal sense of Esther because unlike many Christian commentators who say Ezra wrote the Esther scroll, Nicholas follows Rashi in asserting that Mordechai was the human author.<sup>10</sup> There is a crucial moment, identified by the *divisio textus*, when Mordechai acts in a way that Nicholas does not see as altogether defensible. This is the only time in his commentary Nicholas takes a brief excursus from the structure of the *divisio*, to explore the moral implications of Mordechai's action. Nicholas's careful exploration of the moral implications of Mordechai's decision not to kneel before Haman functions, I think, as an implicit defence of Mordechai's righteousness, a necessary defence if his reliability as the human author of Esther is to be safeguarded.

The *divisio textus* reflects more than an emphasis on the human author's role in scripture, however. If one were to schematize Nicholas's division of the text of Esther, according to his own identification at the beginning of each chapter, it would look something like this:

## I. Esther becomes Queen

### a. Vashti's rejection

#### i. Circumstances of the banquet

1. Who was Ahasuerus?
2. Where was the banquet?
3. When was the banquet?

#### ii. Circumstances of Vashti's refusal to come to the banquet

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<sup>9</sup> Minnis discusses in greater detail how the new interest in the literal rather than the allegorical sense in the late-medieval period brought the problem of human error forcibly to the minds of theologians: "Of course, the sins of the Scriptural *auctores* had always been known, but the early medieval stress on the allegorical senses of Scripture had ensured that the problem never arose in an acute form. However, when late-medieval commentators came to concentrate on the literal and historical sense of Scripture, they had to recognise the problem as a serious one." Minnis, *Medieval Theory of Authorship*, 103. Minnis also discusses Nicholas in this context, noting especially his efforts to present David, in his role as the author of the psalms, as a good kind and righteous man. Minnis, *Medieval Theory of Authorship*, 108-110.

<sup>10</sup> Literal 9.20: "*Scriptis itque...hec omnia in hoc libro conscripta quem librum scripsit mardocheus*"; Literal 9.32: "*Et omnia que huius libri etc...liber ab ipsa hester intitulatur licet mardocheus ipsum scripsit*." Literal 9.20: "*And [Mordechai] wrote...everything which has been written in this book, which was written by Mordechai*"; Literal 9.32: "*And everything that [is contained] in [the history] of this book...the book is titled Esther, although Mordechai wrote it*." Nicholas's identification of Mordechai as the author of Esther is not the common medieval Christian opinion, which is that Ezra wrote the book. Hugh of St. Victor, for example, says that Ezra wrote it: Hugh of St. Victor, *Didascalicon*, 105.

It is probable that Rashi is Nicholas's source here, as Rashi also asserts that Mordechai himself wrote the book:

**יכתב מרדכי. היא המגלה הזאת כמות שהיא**

Rashi, *Megillat Esther*, 9.20, 263. English: "*And Mordechai Wrote*. This scroll, as it is."

- iii. Vashti's dismissal
- b. Esther's promotion
  - i. Esther is joined with the other virgins
    - 1. The virgins in general are sought because the king is sad
      - 1. The king is sad because of his love for Vashti
      - 2. Plan to remedy the king's loneliness: seeking a new queen
    - 2. Esther specifically is brought to the king's house
      - 1. Details of Esther's life and of Mordechai
  - ii. Esther is promoted by Aegeo \*
  - iii. Esther is betrothed to the king
  - iv. The King's love for Esther is confirmed \*
    - 1. The Plot against the king
    - 2. Mordechai discovers the plot and saves the king's life \*

## II. Miraculous Liberation of the Jewish People

- a. The Jews are put in danger
  - i. Scheme against the Jews
    - 1. Reason/occasion for the scheme: Mordechai refuses to kneel
      - 1. *Quaestio*: was Mordechai's action just?
    - 2. Details of Haman's scheme
      - 1. Timing
      - 2. The casting of lots (*Purim*)\*
    - 3. Haman executes his plan
      - 1. Haman's dialogue with the Ahasuerus
- b. Esther Saves the Jews \*
  - i. Events leading up to Esther's petition
    - 1. Mordechai's lamentation
    - 2. Mordechai's conversation with Esther \*
      - 1. First admonition and response
      - 2. Second admonition and response
    - 3. Prayer and fasting of the Jews \*
  - ii. Esther's first petition (the banquet) \*
    - 1. To incline the heart of the king \*
    - 2. To confound Haman
  - iii. Haman's specific plot against Mordechai \*
  - iv. Haman is confounded \*
    - 1. The King cannot sleep \*
    - 2. Mordechai is exalted
  - v. Esther's second petition (to liberate her people)
    - 1. The death of Haman
    - 2. The liberation of the Jews \*

## III. Institution of the Festival/Afterwards \*

- i. Thanksgiving to God \*
- ii. Revenge taken
  - 1. General revenge
  - 2. Specific revenge (on Shushan)
- iii. The solemnity/festival (*Purim*) \*
  - 1. Mordechai's letters
  - 2. Esther's letter
- iv. Ahasuerus is rewarded \*

Every passage marked with an asterisk is explained wholly or in part with a direct reference to divine arrangement, or to a divine ordering of events. As I hope to demonstrate in this chapter, Nicholas's *divisio textus* suggests an implicit belief that the orderly structure of the narrative reflects the perfect orderliness of God's providential work in historic fact and the human author's inspired perception and record of that order. It is in the perfect cooperation of human and divine intention that the literal sense is found, and this literal sense, theologically relevant *because* it is historical, is written by the human author in such a way that God's orderly plan can be discerned in the text itself.

This is somewhat contrary to Dahan's claim, which is that the method of dividing the text presupposes on the part of the *exegete* an orientation for *his* commentary, and that, in theory, a division of any given text could vary *ad infinitum*. Dahan contrasts this with the 'schoolboy' exercise of finding in the text the intention of the author himself.<sup>11</sup> For Dahan, it is the exegete who determines how the text will be divided, to suit his own hermeneutic programme. On some level, this is simply true: Nicholas determines how he will divide the text. I believe however that Nicholas's hermeneutic programme is to discover what he perceives as the *right* division of the text, the one that will reveal God's presence and action on behalf of his people, the one that will show God's own perception of events which he communicated to his scribe, the human author of the text.

The *divisio textus* enabled Nicholas to establish an interpretive programme from which a single, coherent literal sense of Esther can emerge from the variety of questions and problems which pertain to or potentially obscure it. The detail can illumine the whole. It is easy to lose

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<sup>11</sup> Dahan, *L'Exégèse chrétienne de la Bible*, 272-273. Dahan says: "... cette technique présuppose de la part de ceux qui la mettent en pratique une vue d'ensemble de l'ouvrage commenté et de sa signification. De plus, il convient de bien insister sur le fait qu'il ne s'agit pas de la technique scolaire du "plan de texte", à laquelle tous les lycéens ont été soumis: en étant invité à établir le plan d'un texte étudié, l'écolier ou le lycéen doit retrouver une structure préexistante, en quelque sorte le plan que l'auteur du texte en question aurait eu en tête avant de la rédiger; théoriquement, tous les élèves attentifs doivent découvrir un plan identique. Il n'en est pas de même dans la technique de la *divisio*: bien que l'étude des passages narratifs aboutisse forcément à dégager les structures fondamentales de la narration, le découpage des textes est commandé par l'intention de l'exégète (et non de l'auteur), les "divisions" pouvant ainsi théoriquement varier à l'infini. De la sorte, la *divisio textus* donne d'emblée l'orientation herméneutique de la leçon."

sight of the woods by dwelling too closely on the trees: but Nicholas wants to use the trees to show the shape of the wood. His interpretation brings his perspective clearly before us: Esther is a true story of the past, a story of God's miraculous and providential protection of His people. The literal sense is certainly 'historical', in that it is for Nicholas the record of events that actually did happen; but historical record, for the friar, is only ever deeply theological. That these events happened in fact is only important enough to be recorded because they are a manifestation of God's providence, and, in the case of sacred scripture, written by his inspiration.

What makes Nicholas's literal commentary on Esther interesting is not necessarily this interpretation, which is, in any case, expected. What is striking is how keenly aware Nicholas is of potential problems which confront this literal sense, and his determination to resolve them. Of particular issue are questions of historiography and authorial reliability, both of which impact Esther's canonical status. These questions or problems are located by the *divisio textus* and resolved within the structure it provides. Especially noteworthy is how Jewish sources function on every level of this defence, contributing substantially to any possible victory for the historicity and canonicity of this text.

The remainder of this chapter will interrogate representative aspects of the literal commentary to demonstrate the role the *divisio textus* plays in providing Esther with a coherent and defensible literal interpretation, and the implicit assumptions about the literal sense which it suggests. Questions of historic credibility and authorial reliability are especially apparent. The question of Ahasuerus's identity provides an example of how Nicholas attempts to establish the historic credibility of Esther, and I will begin by examining Nicholas's treatment of this question. Mordechai's refusal to kneel to Haman is, for Nicholas, a morally ambiguous decision which impinges on Mordechai's reliability as the human author of Esther. I will therefore examine the implications of Nicholas's careful vindication of Mordechai (in the form of a *quaestio*) next.

Mordechai's righteousness and Haman's iniquity also have implications for the essential point of the story, and I will conclude this first half of the chapter by examining Nicholas's re-

portrayal of Esther's petition, to describe how the primary function of the *divisio textus* is to present the narrative as one of religious significance, a story of God's saving action on behalf of the righteous. An analysis of Nicholas's Jewish sources will be saved for the second half of this chapter, but their use will be noted throughout, as they exist throughout, and nowhere more clearly than in Nicholas's exploration of Ahasuerus's identity.

### 3.1.a: Historical credibility

The *divisio textus* Nicholas discerns within the book of Esther often impinges on questions of what and when, questions of basic historical interest. This is evident from the first moment of his commentary. Nicholas initiates the *divisio textus* by identifying two key moments in the book of Esther around which the literal sense will revolve: Esther becomes queen, and (in consequence) liberates her people. He works backwards from these major happenings to the minor events leading up to them, all of which will need to be commented upon and explained fully in the appropriate order. Esther is made queen, taking the place of Queen Vashti, and so Vashti's expulsion must be understood first. The occasion for Vashti's exile was a royal banquet which she refused to attend; so the banquet itself must be described first, and then the queen's disobedience. There are three 'preliminary matters' to be discussed before the banquet can be understood, and these are: who originated the banquet, where was the banquet held, and when. This first preliminary question brings Nicholas back to the opening lines of Esther: *in the days of Ahasuerus* (1.1). But these opening lines pose a tricky historiographical problem for Nicholas, and his first task as an exegete is to explore who this king might be.

Nicholas recognises and takes seriously a question still puzzling biblical scholars today: which Persian king was the Ahasuerus from the book of Esther? Nicholas takes the question seriously because he sees the problems it raises for the credibility of the literal sense. The central issue in addressing Ahasuerus's identity is reconciling it with Mordechai's age. The second

chapter of Esther says that Mordechai was made captive when Jeconiah was king of Juda.<sup>12</sup>

Nicholas's own words give the best indication of how problematic this potentially was, and his efforts in finding a solution. Above all else, he demonstrates a determination that the literal sense of Esther should make sense and be believable. To introduce the various aspects of the historiographical problem of Ahasuerus's identity, it will be helpful to quote at length:

Now about this *Ahasuerus*, expositors say various things.

Our interpreters generally say that this Ahasuerus was the 8<sup>th</sup> king of the Persians after Cyrus, when the two Magi who are said to have reigned for only seven months after Cambyses have been omitted. But this does not seem true: because Cyrus, after he secured the monarchy, reigned for 12 years according to the smallest calculation. Cambyses his son ruled for 8 years; Darius Hystaspis, 36 years; Xerxes son of Darius, 20 years; Artaxerses, 40 years; Xerxes II, 2 months; Sogdianus, 7 months; Darius Nochus 19 years, and he was succeeded by this Ahasuerus, as they say.

Now, if all these years and months are added to the 70 years of the Babylonian captivity, there are 205 years. Mordechai was made captive when Jeconiah [Jehoiachin] was king of Juda, as it says below in chapter two. In consequence of calculating the dates in this way, it is necessary to say that Mordechai, in the first year of the reign of Ahasuerus, was 205 years old at least! And furthermore one must add his age at the beginning of the captivity, which was likely 10 years or very nearly that (these were the years when Zedekiah reigned); and finally those years in which Ahasuerus reigned before he exalted Mordechai, which was 12 years. It is not probable that he lived such a long time. As David said many years before in Psalm 89/90:10: *and though men be so strong that they come to fourscore years: yet is their strength then but labour and sorrow [so soon passeth it away and we are gone]*.

Even if he had lived such a long time, it does not seem possible that he could then manage with such fortitude all those magnificent things which are written below concerning him, namely that he rode through the city, ruled over Esther's house, and carried on the king's business when he was second only to the king as it says below in chapter ten.

According to Josephus in book XI of the Jewish Antiquities, this Ahasuerus was the 4<sup>th</sup> king of the Persians after Cyrus, omitting as before the two Magi, and he calls him Artaxerxes. According to this, Mordechai was 156 years old at the beginning of Ahasuerus's reign. This is clear from the calculation above, because it was supposed that he was at least 10 years old before he was made captive, and then there were the 70 years from the time of the captivity, 12 from the time of Cyrus, 8 from the time of Cambyses, 36 from the time of Darius Hystaspis, and 20 from the time of Xerxes son of Darius, which when added together make 156 years. Again, it seems unlikely that he lived for such a long time, and even if he had, it seems unlikely that he would have had the strength to accomplish the things which were said of him above. Especially because these things were not done at the beginning of the reign of Ahasuerus, but a great time afterwards. It was in the third year of his reign that Vashti was rejected, as it says below in this chapter, and it was in the seventh year that he took Esther, which is clearly stated

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<sup>12</sup> DRB Esther 2.6.

in chapter two below. And it was after all these things that the deeds took place which are said concerning Mordechai.

Therefore, saving a better opinion, it seems that what Rabbi Solomon said seems most likely, namely, that this Ahasuerus was the immediate successor of Cyrus, although he was not descended from the king. He is the one spoken of in Ezra 4.6. According to this calculation, in the beginning of Ahasuerus's reign, Mordechai was 92 years old by the calculation above. However, in his comments on Daniel 11.2, Rabbi Solomon puts the reign of Cambyses son of Cyrus between Cyrus and Ahasuerus. He is compelled to do this by what it says at Daniel 11.2: *there shall stand yet three kings in Persia, and the fourth shall be enriched exceedingly*. This fourth according to Rabbi Solomon and other Hebrews was Darius the Son of Ahasuerus and Esther. Therefore, according to him and other expositors Cyrus was first, and it is necessary to put between Cyrus and Ahasuerus one other. Otherwise they would not be four [kings] but three. And so when we add the 8 years of Cambyses reign, Mordechai was, at the beginning of Ahasuerus's rule, 100 years old or perhaps a bit younger. Because in the beginning of his reign or in the absence of a king half a year and sometimes less than a year is counted.

And this final calculation seems to me the most likely.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Literal Esther 1:1: "*In Diebus Assverus...* De hoc autem Assvero varie loquuntur expositores. Dicunt enim expositores nostri communiter quod iste Ahasuerus fuit octavus rex Persarum post Cyrum, omissis tamen duobus magis qui post Cambisem dicuntur regna[vi]sse septem mensibus tantum.

Sed istud non videtur verum: quia Cyrus post monarchiam adeptam regnavit duodecim annis secundum minorem computationem. Cambises filius eius octo. Darius Histaspis xxxvi, Xerxes filius Darii xx, Artaxerses xi, Xerxes secundus duobus mensibus, Sagdianus mensibus septem. Darius Nochus xix cui successit iste Ahasuerus, ut dicunt. Si autem isti anni praedicti simul coniungantur lxx anni captivitatis Babylonice habentur cc et v anni. Igitur cum Mardocheus captivatus fuerit cum Iechonia rege Iuda, ut habetur infra capitulo ii. Oportet consequenter dicere secundum istam viam quod Mardocheus primo anno regni Assveri fuerit ccv annorum ad minus. Et cum hoc oportet addere annos quos habebat quando fuit in captivitatem ductus, qui fuerunt ad minus x vel circiter et xi anni quibus regnavit Sedechias, et annos quibus regnavit Assversus ante exaltationem Mardochei qui fuerunt duodecim.

Non est autem verisimile quod tantum vixerit quia iam ante per multos annos dixerat David: *Si autem in potentatibus octaginta anni, et amplius eorum labor et dolor*. Et dato quod tantum vixisset, non tamen esset tunc tante fortitudinis quod posset facere illa quae infra scribuntur de ipso videlicet quod ita magnifice equitaret per civitatem et domum Hester regeret, ac etiam negocia regni cum esset secundus a rege ut habetur infra x capitulo.

Secundum Iosephus vero libro xi antiquitatis Iudaice iste Ahasuerus fuit quartus rex Persarum a Cyro, dimissis tamen duobus magis ut praedictum est et vocat eum Artaxerxem: et secundum hoc Mardocheus in principio regni Assveri fuit c et lvi annorum, ut patet per praedicta quia supponitur quod ad minus habuit x annos antequam captivaretur, et lxx tempore captivitatis, et xii tempore Cyri et viii tempore Cambisis et xxxvi de tempore Darii Histaspis, et xx de tempore Xerxis filii Darii qui simul iuncti faciunt annos clvi.

Et sic adhuc non est verisimile quod tantum vixerit et dato quod vixerit non est verisimile quod fuerit tunc tante fortitudines quod facere potuerit ea quae praedicta sunt de eo. Maxime cum non fuerint facta in principio regni Assveri sed per magnum tempus postea, quia tertio anno regni sui abiecit Vashti ut habetur infra eodem capitulo, et vii anno regni sui accepit Hester, ut patebit infra ii capitulo et adhuc postea facta fuerunt ea quae dicta sunt de Mardocheo.

Et ideo salvo meliori iudicio videtur quod Rabbi Salomon verisimilius dicat, scilicet, quod iste Ahasuerus immediate successit Cyro in regnum, quamvis non esset de semine regio, ut dictum est supra Esdre iii.

Et secundum hoc Mardocheus in principio regni huius Assveri fuit nonaginta duorum annorum, ut patet per praedicta. Sed iste Rabbi Salomon Daniel xi inter Cyrum et Assverum ponit Cambisem filium Cyri regna[vi]sse. Et cogitur ad hoc ut ibidem dicitur: adhuc tres reges stabunt in Perside et quartus ditabatur operibus nimis<sup>13</sup>: et iste secundum ipsum et alios Hebraeos fuit Darius filius Assveri et Hester.

Cum igitur secundum ipsum et omnes alios expositores Cyrus sit primus: oportet quod inter Cyrum et Assverum ponatur unus alius, aliter non essent quatuor, sed tres tantum. Et sic cum Cambises regnavit octo annis, Mardocheus in principio regni Assveri fuit centum annorum vel forte minus, quia in principio vel in sine alicuius regis dimidius annus et aliquando minus pro uno anno computatur.

Et hoc ultimum dictum verisimilius mihi videtur."

We saw that Hugh of St. Cher did note that reconciling Mordechai's age with the activities recorded of him, and the established chronology of Persian kings, is an historiographical problem; Nicholas is the first Christian scholar to take it seriously and to explore potential solutions. The text states that Mordechai was made captive under Jeconiah, and this, a divine utterance in Nicholas's view, is the immoveable fact –the concrete temporal referent– with which Ahasuerus's identity must be reconciled. His manner of reconciling it demonstrates the essential role Jewish sources play in his attempts to establish the historic credibility of the book of Esther.

He begins with the opinion of 'our interpreters' that Ahasuerus was the eighth king of Persia but rejects this immediately.<sup>14</sup> Nicholas does not think that Mordechai could have carried on the king's business when he was 205 years old (or more), and we might be inclined to agree. It is not 'probable', Nicholas says, that Mordechai could have been so old. Nicholas will nevertheless not leap straight to the allegorical sense or ignore this problem. That Ahasuerus was Artaxerxes II is not probable, but a probable, or at least possible, identification is necessary if the literal sense it to be taken seriously.

He turns next to Josephus, a source also reproduced in Rabanus and, consequently, the Gloss.<sup>15</sup> Josephus's identification of Ahasuerus as the fourth king of Persia (Artaxerxes) is also dismissed and for similar reasons.<sup>16</sup> Mordechai could probably *not* have carried on the king's business when he was 156 years old, but the usual Christian sources which identify Ahasuerus as one of these later Persian kings necessitate such longevity. So which king was he?

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<sup>14</sup> Nicholas's assertion that most Christian expositors say Ahasuerus was the 8th Persian king after Cyrus is likely based on Rabanus's commentary which is repeated in the Gloss. Rabanus says he has adopted the view of Eusebius of Caesarea (d. 339), reporting it as follows: "in his Chronicle, Eusebius suggests that this Ahasuerus is called Artaxerxes, and that he reigned for 40 years after his father Darius called 'Nochus' (the Bastard)." PL 109: 0636d-0637a.

The Gloss repeats this assertion: "Eusebius suggests in his Chronicle that [Ahasuerus] is Artaxerxes who was called Memnon, the sons of Darius and Pharastides. In the Septuagint Ahasuerus is called Artaxerxes by the Hebrew [interpreters] and he reigned after his father Darius for forty years." Marginal Gloss 1.1. See footnote 17 in this chapter for the current consensus on the chronology of the Persian kings. Eusebius wrote his Chronicle in Greek (date unknown). It is a universal history divided into two parts: the first is arranged by timelines of the king's of (biblical) nations while the second is a series of parallel timelines. For details see: Timothy David Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1981), 112-113.

<sup>15</sup> I will discuss Josephus's status as a Christian source below.

<sup>16</sup> See Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, Trans. Henry St. John Thackeray, Ralph Marcus, Allen Paul Wikgren, and Louis H. Feldman (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998) Book XI, 182-186.

It will be helpful to take a step back to look at the chronology of biblical events which were vividly present to Nicholas but not, perhaps, to either a modern reader or to Nicholas's students at the University of Paris. First Nicholas runs through the list and the length of their reign: Cyrus, Cambyses, (Bardiya and Gaumata, the two Magi), Darius I, Xerxes I, Artaxerxes I, Xerxes II, Sogdianus, Darius II, Artaxerxes II.<sup>17</sup> To determine Mordechai's age he adds up the years of these reigns and then adds the 70 years of the Babylonian captivity. This is ambiguous, because medieval Jews had two possible dating schemes for the diaspora, as Nicholas is well aware.

Elsewhere in his commentary, Nicholas notes that the Jews calculate the 70 years of the Babylonian captivity from either the reign of Jehoiakim and the first deportation (609 BCE, in modern calculations) to the conquest of the Babylonians by Cyrus (539 BCE); or from the destruction of the Temple under Zedekiah (587 BCE), to when the Temple was being rebuilt under Darius (c. 517 BCE).<sup>18</sup> It is unclear to me, in the context of his Esther commentary, if

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<sup>17</sup> For current historiography on the Persian kings, see Pierre Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander: A History of the Persian Empire*, translated Peter T. Daniels, (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbraun, 2002), originally published *Histoire de l'Empire Perse* (Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 1996). Cyrus the Great ruled from 559-530 BCE. His son Cambyses II from 530-522. Cambyses reign was followed for a period of a few months by his brother Bardiya, or possibly a Magus (Zoroastrian priest) named Gaumata who was impersonating him. These are very likely the 'Magi' Nicholas refers to as being unimportant in the dating, as they ruled such a short time. Bardiya/Gaumata was killed by Persian aristocrats, and Darius the Great took the throne, ruling from 522-486. His son Xerxes I had the throne from 485-465. Current scholarly consensus is that this was the Ahasuerus from the book of Esther. He was succeeded by Artaxerxes I from 465-424. Xerxes II reigned for a brief forty-five-day period before being assassinated by his half-brother Sogdianus, who ruled six months before being murdered in his turn by Darius II. Darius II held the throne from 424-404, before Artaxerxes II assumed control from 404-358. Nicholas's calculations match this fairly consistently.

<sup>18</sup> See for example Nicholas's commentary on Jeremiah 29:10, which describes the Babylonian captivity as a period of 70 years. Nicholas comments here that the Hebrews calculate the 70 years in these two ways, from the transmigration under Jehoiakim to Cyrus, or from the destruction of Jerusalem under Zedekiah: Literal, Jeremiah 29:10 "...tot enim anni fluxerunt secundum Hebraeos a transmigratione Iochim usque ad primum annum Cyri secundum alios vero computatio istorum annorum incipit tardius scilicet a destructione civitatis sub Sedechia." The actual dating and impact of the Babylonian captivity are a complex historiographical problems well outside the scope of this thesis, but I will summarise the most relevant events in brief. In 605 BCE, Jerusalem was besieged by Nebuchadnezzar II of Babylon, who exacted tribute from Jehoiakim the Judean king. When Jehoiakim refused to continue paying this tribute, Jerusalem was again besieged in 598/597 BCE, an event which saw the death of Jehoiakim and the exile to Babylonia of the new king, Jeconiah, his court, and many others. This is when the book of Esther says Mordechai was taken from Jerusalem. Jeconiah's uncle Zedekiah was made king in Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar, but was later deposed and executed in 587 BCE for actions against the Babylonian empire. Nebuchadnezzar II destroyed Solomon's Temple in 588 BCE. Cyrus II, called the Great, the founder of the Achaemenid dynasty, conquered the Babylonians in 539 BCE, and allowed the Jews to return to Jerusalem in 538 BCE when the rebuilding of the Temple was initiated.

Nicholas adopts the former dating, or the latter; if the former, the first ten or twelve years of Mordechai's life are included in the 70 years; if the latter, the reigns of Cyrus, Cambyses, and Darius would overlap with the 70 years and would not need to be added to it when calculating Mordechai's age. The fact that he does add these dates to the Babylonian captivity suggests he has adopted the earlier dating, but made the mistake of thinking Mordechai's age at the time of his deportation needed to be added on top of this. The reference to when Cyrus "secured the monarchy" most likely refers to the time when Cyrus conquered the Babylonians, the *terminus ante quem* of the first dating of the captivity, another indication that this is the dating Nicholas most likely had in mind here.<sup>19</sup>

Either way, Nicholas establishes that both Eusebius and Josephus posit an identity for Ahasuerus that is unreasonable, in that it makes Mordechai simply too old. Nicholas turns to Rashi for a solution, and finds one; but it is far from a straightforward solution, as Rashi gives two different identities for Ahasuerus in different parts of his own commentary. These two identities are based on Rashi's commentaries on Esther, Ezra, and Daniel.<sup>20</sup> A brief excursus into these two exegetical contexts will demonstrate how Nicholas is consistent in his efforts to map out the historical timeline of the Old Testament, and in using Rashi to do it.

Ezra takes place in the context of the rebuilding of the Temple.<sup>21</sup> In Ezra chapter 4, having been permitted by Cyrus to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the Temple, the Jews are approached by the Samaritans who want to help in the building. Jewish leaders tell the Samaritans that they can have nothing to do with building a Temple to their God. The Samaritans hinder them in their building, it says, from the days of Cyrus to his son Darius. In

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The biblical books which recount aspects of the Babylonian exile, Jewish Diaspora, and the rebuilding of the Temple are: 2 Kings, 2 Chronicles, Jerimiah, Ezra, Tobit, Esther, Judith, Daniel, and Lamentations. Modern scholars wrestle with the same issues Nicholas was trying to clarify here.

<sup>19</sup> Nicholas says that Cyrus reigned for another 12 years after this period, but it was likely only 9. See footnote 17 in this chapter.

<sup>20</sup> Nicholas is using a commentary typically ascribed to Rashi, but Rashi did not write a commentary on Ezra-Nehemiah. The commentary on these books attributed to Rashi was written after his death. See Grossman, *Rashi*, 74.

<sup>21</sup> See footnote 18 in this chapter.

verse 6, it says they write a letter against the Jews in the reign of Ahasuerus, and in the passage immediately following it says they wrote a letter of accusation to Artaxerxes of the Persians in the Syrian language.<sup>22</sup> Their agitating interrupts the building of the Temple, but the Jews ultimately respond by writing their own letters to Darius, who, going through his archives, finds Cyrus's original permission and supports the Jews in their efforts. The Temple is completed in the sixth year of Darius's reign according to Ezra 6.15.<sup>23</sup>

The name 'Ahasuerus' is mentioned at Ezra 4.6, which says *and in the reign of Ahasuerus, in the beginning of his reign, they wrote an accusation against the inhabitants of Juda and Jerusalem*. In his commentary on the book of Ezra, Nicholas comments that according to 'our expositors', the Ahasuerus mentioned here is Cambyses, the son of Cyrus, and he is also called Artaxerxes.<sup>24</sup> In other words, the Ahasuerus in 4.6 is the same as the Artaxerxes named in 4.7, and they are both actually Cambyses the son of Cyrus. Nicholas rejects this explanation because it is not in the

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<sup>22</sup> Nicholas mentions this in his commentary on the ninth chapter of Esther, when Haman's ten sons are individually named when they are executed. Nicholas says that according to Hebrew sources, these ten sons are named individually because they were special enemies of the Jews, partners to the Samaritans who were trying to hinder the building of the temple. Nicholas takes this from the Seder Olam Rabbah, a second-century CE chronology of biblical events from creation to Alexander the Great. See Literal 9.6-7: "These [men] are named specifically because they were the principle adversaries of the Jews. For this reason, the Hebrew Gloss says that these sons of Haman were named with those of the Samaritans, who had written an accusation against the sons of the exile to hinder the building of the temple, falsely implying that they were rebuilding the city while pretending to build the temple, as it says in chapter 4 of the Book of Ezra. And according to the Hebrews this took place at the time of Cyrus, and then [their accusations] were renewed at the time of Ahasuerus, because [they were again prevented from building] at the time of Ahasuerus, whom the Hebrews say was the son of Cyrus. And this impediment [to building the temple] was done from the counsel of the sons of Haman, and was managed by their father. This gloss is taken from a certain Hebrew book which is titled Seder Olam Rabbah, that is, 'The Order of the World'."

Literal 9.6-7: "*Extra decem filios aman...isti specialiter nominantur quia erant principales adversarii Iudeorum. Unde dicit hic glossa Hebraica quod isti filii aman hic nominati fuerunt cum illis samaritanis qui scripserunt accusationem contra filios transmigrationis ad impediendum templi edificationem imponentes eis falso quod sub pretexto templi edificabant civitatem ut dictum fuit Esdre iiii, et hoc fuit tempore cyri secundum hebreos et iterum renovatum tempore assveri quia dicta inhibito iterum fuit renovata tempore assveri quem dicunt hebrei fuisse filium cyri, et istud impedimentum fuit factum de consilio filiorum aman patre eorum hoc procurante, et accipitur ista glossa de quodam libro Hebraico qui intitulum cedar colam id est ordo seculi."*

Rashi also references the Seder Olam Rabbah on the ten sons of Haman, that these ten sons were the ones who hindered Israel in the building of the Temple. See Rashi, Megillat Esther, 9.10, p. 261.

Seder Olam Rabbah was compiled between the second- and fifth-centuries CE. It lists the dates of biblical events from creation to Alexander the Great's conquest of the ancient Near East in 333 BCE. Talmud, early midrashim, and many medieval Jewish exegetes like Rashi frequently quote or paraphrase the Seder Olam. This is in from Seder Olam 29. See Heinrich Walter Guggenheimer, trans., *Seder Olam: The Rabbinic View of Biblical Chronology. Translated and with Commentary* (Northvale, N.J.: Jason Aronson, 2005).

It is curious that this is not cited in the opening lines when Nicholas is grappling with Ahasuerus's identity.

<sup>23</sup> DRB Ezra 4:1-6:15.

<sup>24</sup> The following summary is taken from Nicholas's literal commentary on Ezra chapter 4.

Hebrew: the identification of Ahasuerus with Artaxerxes, he says, was added to "our Bibles" (*bibliis nostris*); it was not original to the text but added later by a teacher in the "manner of a gloss" and inserted into the biblical text itself by incompetent copiers (i.e., it was a copyist's error).

Now, in his commentary on Esther, Rashi says that Ahasuerus was the king who reigned after Cyrus, after the seventy years of the exile.<sup>25</sup> This is the first calculation Nicholas gives according to Rashi in his Esther commentary; but, Nicholas says, in his commentaries on Ezra and Daniel, Rashi changes his mind. Here Rashi says that Ahasuerus is not the same person as the Artaxerxes mentioned in verse 7; rather, this Artaxerxes is Cyrus. Cyrus is his first name, while Artaxerxes is the name of the ruler of the Persians, as Caesar is the name of the rulers of Rome who all also have their own first names such as Julius, Augustus, Tiberius, etc.<sup>26</sup> Nicholas reports Rashi's opinion as follows:

Rabbi Solomon puts Cambyses between Cyrus and Ahasuerus, because this is more consistent with what is written in Esther and Daniel. So Cambyses was the one who hindered the building of the Temple. But this Ahasuerus was not the son of Cyrus, and in this he agrees with Josephus and others, namely, that the building of the Temple was hindered at the time of him who immediately succeeded Cyrus. But this is different from what was just said, that this Ahasuerus was not Cyrus's son. At the same place it says that Ahasuerus was the one who took Esther for his wife. Now Josephus puts four kings between Cambyses the son of Cyrus and the Ahasuerus who took Esther for his wife: that is, the two Magi without wisdom, then Darius son of Hystaspis, then Xerxes his son, who was succeeded by this Ahasuerus, whom he calls Artaxerxes. Some historiographers put even more kings between Cyrus and Ahasuerus, but this will all be more fully explained in the book of Esther, the Lord granting. It ought to be understood however that these kings of the Persians are found in different places in the Bible and in history named by several different names, so the same king sometimes seems to be several.<sup>27</sup>

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ויהי בימי אחשורוש מלך פרס היה שמלך תחת כורש בסוף שבעים שנה של גלות בבל  
Rashi, "Megilat Esther", 1.1, p. 214. "*In the days of Ahasuerus*. He was the king of Persia who ruled after Cyrus after the seventy years of the Babylonian exile."

<sup>26</sup> See footnote 22 in this chapter.

<sup>27</sup> Literal Ezra 4.6: "Rabbi Solomon...inter Cyrum et Assverum ponit Cambysum filium Cyri quia videtur magis consonum scripturis ut dicatur plenius super Esther et Daniel et iste Cambyses impedit aedificationem templi. Iste autem Assuerus non fuit filius cyri et in hoc covenit cum Iosepho et aliis scilicet that opus templi fuit impeditum ab illo qui immediate successit Cyro. Differt tamen iam hoc quod dicitur hic, quod non fuit filius Cyri. Iterum in hoc quod dicitur quod iste fuit Ahasuerus, qui accepit Esther uxorem. Iosephus autem inter Cambysem et filium Cyri et Assverum qui accepti Esther uxorem ponit quatuor reges sibi succedentes scilicet duos magos sine sapientes qui per

Rashi ultimately puts Cambyses between Cyrus and Ahasuerus because of what is said in Daniel. This is the context for Nicholas's second dating according to Rashi in his (Nicholas's) Esther commentary.

Daniel 11.2 records the words of the angel who is telling Daniel about the future of the Persian and Grecian kings. The angel says: *Behold, there shall stand yet three kings in Persia, and the fourth shall be enriched exceedingly above them all.*<sup>28</sup> Rashi begins his comment on this passage with a quote from the Seder Olam Rabbah, a second century CE chronology in the Hebrew language which provides a timeline of events from creation to Alexander the Great. Here it says the three kings are Cyrus, Ahasuerus, and Darius; Rashi explains the fourth king by quoting Joseph Ben Gorion (i.e., Josippon, a tenth-century Jewish scholar), that Cyrus was succeeded by Cambyses before Ahasuerus.<sup>29</sup> As Nicholas reports in his *postillae* on both Ezra and Esther, Rashi puts Cambyses between Cyrus and Ahasuerus, with Darius immediately following, to explain the four kings in Daniel's prophecy. In the final analysis then, Rashi gives two different identifications for Ahasuerus: he was the king who ruled either after Cyrus or after Cambyses. In determining Mordechai's age in his commentary on Esther and in clarifying Ahasuerus's identity in Ezra 4, Nicholas presents both Rashi's opinions.

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annum regnaverunt unus post alium desuncto Cambyse et Darium filium Hystaspis et Xerxem eius filium, cui successit Ahasuerus, qui accipit Esther uxorem quem nominat Artaxerxem. Aliqui autem historiographi adhuc plures ponunt intermedios quid autem circa hoc sit magis verisimile dicetur plenius super librum Esther domino concedente. Sciendum tamen quod isti reges Persarum in diversis locis in Biblia et in historiis inveniuntur nominati pluribus et diversis nominibus propter quod idem rex videtur aliquando esse plures."

<sup>28</sup> DRB Daniel 11.2.

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רבתינו ז"ל אמרו ב'סדר עולם...: זה כורש ואחשורוש ודריוש שבנה הבית; ומה תלמוד לומר רביעי? - רביעי'. למדי. אבל בספר יוסף בן גוריון... כתוב שהיה לו בן, לכורש, שמלך תחתיו לפני מלך אחשורוש, ושמו במבושה

Rashi, "Sefer Daniel" in *Mikra'ot gedolot ha-Keter*, 11.2, p.72. On *Behold three more kings*, Rashi comments: "Our Sages of blessed memory in Seder Olam said: 'This refers to Cyrus, Ahasuerus, and Darius who rebuilt the Temple. Now what is the meaning of the fourth? The fourth, counting from Media.' In the book of Joseph ben Gorion, however, it is written that Cyrus had a son who succeeded him before the reign of Ahasuerus, named Cambyses." For English translations of Rashi on Daniel, see: Moses Alshekh, Ravi Shahar, Ephraim Oratz, and Yitzchak Hirshfeld, *The Book of Daniel = Sefer Dani'el: Shield of the Spirit: the Commentaries of Rashi and Rabbi Moshe Alsbich on Sefer Daniel*. (Jerusalem: Feldheim Publishers, 1994), 453-454.

Joseph ben Gorion refers to Josippon, a text purportedly written by Josephus but actually written in the 10th century and based on Josephus's work. Josippon and Josephus as sources for medieval Jews and Christians will be discussed in the second part of this chapter.

Nicholas's commentary on Daniel 11.2 is also consistent with his exegesis of Esther and Ezra. He acknowledges the oft repeated opinion that the three kings plus the fourth king are Cyrus, Cambyses, Darius, and then Xerxes. But he says the Hebrew version (i.e., Rashi) seems better: the three kings are Cyrus, Cambyses, and Ahasuerus who married Esther, the fourth is Darius. This is better, he says, because it is more consistent, and makes sense of Mordechai's age.<sup>30</sup>

It is unclear how Nicholas (and Rashi) ultimately believe Ahasuerus fit into the typical chronology of the Persian kings. If Ahasuerus is the king who reigned after Cyrus, he must be identical with Cambyses. That cannot be the case because Cambyses came between Cyrus and Ahasuerus. But Ahasuerus cannot be Darius, because Darius is the fourth king. The biblical chronology is messy, but Nicholas (and Rashi) are trying their best to make sense of it. They believe there must be a reasonable explanation, one that can be true. They do their best to find what that is, but they also sometimes accept that not everything can be perfectly understood: as Nicholas notes in his commentary on Ezra 4, the chronology of Persian kings is simply unclear. They are known under different names in different places in the sacred text.

The meticulous care Nicholas takes in his attempt to unravel the chronology of the Persian kings in all three of these contexts (Esther, Ezra, and Daniel) demonstrates how seriously he believed a reasonable and consistent answer could be and had to be found. Like Rashi, Nicholas does not need to arrive at absolute certainty. A degree of uncertainty is acceptable to a scholar more interested in presenting his students with reasonable possibilities. If there is more than one reasonable possibility, he is happy for the reader or student to make up

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<sup>30</sup> See Literal on Daniel 11.2. The dating of Ahasuerus had important ramifications for Nicholas's interpretation of the prophecy of Seventy Weeks found in the book of Daniel, a prophecy Christians were eager to prove referred to Christ, and which Jews were equally determined should not so refer. Reconciling the dating of Ahasuerus with the age of Mordechai led Nicholas to revise his commentary on Daniel, as Mark Zier demonstrates. Zier argues that using Jewish sources to establish a more reasonable dating is part of a mendicant strategy to use Jewish sources to prove Christian truth. Mark Zier, "Nicholas of Lyra on the Book of Daniel", in Krey and Smith, 181-186. Presumably, Nicholas adopts Rashi's second dating of the four kings because it fits better with his commentary on the Messianic prophecies in Daniel, even though it makes Mordechai a little older than Rashi's first calculation from Esther.

his own mind. The thing of first importance is that there be *some* believable version of the events. It matters that Mordechai could have actually done the things written of him, because if the Bible is the word of God the literal sense must be *true*. So Nicholas assembles the sources available to him and evaluates them. After giving the common opinion of his Christian sources, and then Josephus's opinion, Nicholas declares in favour of what he describes as the most likely explanation, that given by Rashi, a Jew.

Although his painstaking exploration and consultation of both Christian and Jewish sources does not result in any single answer, it does illustrate the consistently positive attitude Nicholas takes toward his Jewish sources in attempting to clarify the historical aspects of the literal sense. His appreciation of his Jewish sources rests primarily on a determination that the details of the historic account of the book of Esther be credible.

This emphasis on the reasonableness or credibility of the historical sense is evident throughout Nicholas's commentary, and is often (but not always) established by recourse to Jewish texts or the Hebrew language. Potential problems or questions in the literal sense, identified by the *diviso textus*, are an opportunity for Nicholas to explore the sources available to him, especially Jewish ones, or to compare the Latin text with the Hebrew. Frequently, Nicholas pauses over some seemingly fantastic aspect of the Esther narrative with some version of the phrase "but this does not seem true" (*Sed istud non videtur verum*) or "this seems unlikely to me" (*Non est autem verisimile*); he will follow this up with an explanation he thinks "more likely" "more probable" or "better" (*verisimile, probabilius, melior*) or "more reasonable" (*rationabilior*).<sup>31</sup> The question of Ahasuerus's identity was a complex historiographical problem for Nicholas, one he grappled with in several exegetical contexts. He is consistent in his efforts to find a reasonable solution.

This seems an important point to make about the practice of division and sub-division of the biblical text in the later fourteenth century. The *diviso textus* itself an interpretation, and there

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<sup>31</sup> See examples of this terminology (all with an appreciative use of Jewish sources) at: Literal 1.1: "*In Diebus Assverus*"; 1.3: "*Tertio igitur anno*"; 1.4: "*Centum videlicet*"; and 7.4: "*Et gemens tacerent*".

is a reason Nicholas often prioritised passages that seemed in need of clarification on an historical level. Ahasuerus's identity was the most obvious example, but there are many others. Establishing the historic credibility of Esther served a real theological need particularly for Christians. If God is the first and primary author of Esther, the story must be *true*.

This certainty that Esther's story is true, that it really did happen, captures Nicholas's understanding of what history is. History is the true narration of events that have taken place in the past. When I discuss Nicholas's place in a specifically Franciscan tradition of historiography in chapter four, it will be clear that this emphasis on the past is important. History, for Nicholas, is concerned with persons, past times, and places; who and when (who was Ahasuerus? when was he king of Persia?) and where (the next questions Nicholas addresses, although much more quickly and easily, is Shushan's location). These questions matter for Nicholas, as they did for Hugh of St. Victor, because events taking place in time, especially those recorded in sacred scripture, reveal God's guiding hand. Tricky historiographical questions must be unravelled. Ahasuerus's identity was a particularly difficult historiographical problem, but the determination to understand and elucidate the historical aspects of Esther which Nicholas displays in this context is sustained throughout his commentary.

Jewish sources and the Hebrew language are frequently (almost exclusively) used by Nicholas when dealing with questions which impinge on the historic aspects of the text. His determination that the historical or literal sense be credible indicates the increased importance the literal sense had acquired by the fourteenth century, but also the potential problems that accompanied this change of emphasis in the four-fold hermeneutic. Suddenly confronted with seeming impossibilities, exegetes like Nicholas, recognising the importance of the literal sense as the rational foundation of any biblical interpretation, found themselves obliged to grapple with problems of historiography.

If historiographical questions such as that of Ahasuerus's identity were one problem created by a new emphases in biblical exegesis, the possibility of erroneous translations was

another. Recognising the errors the biblical texts they worked with contained, there was a serious attempt amongst Franciscans and Dominicans in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries to correct the Latin text by comparison with the Hebrew. Nicholas makes efforts in this direction in his commentary on Esther also. Frequently, Nicholas's efforts to clarify the historical aspects of the literal sense involve a process of comparison between the Latin text he is working with and the Hebrew text. Jewish sources and the Masoretic text are used in conjunction to yield a text which allows a better understanding of the literal meaning.

One example of this is Nicholas's exegesis of Vashti's dismissal. After grappling with Ahasuerus's identity, Nicholas moves on to clarify the other two matters preliminary to the banquet: the banquet was held in Shushan, the capital of Persia; it was held in the third year of Ahasuerus's reign, and probably lasted seven days.<sup>32</sup> All this discussion of the banquet and its host is preparatory for Nicholas's examination of Vashti's dismissal, the event which creates the circumstance for Esther's promotion. First, on verse 9, which says that Vashti held a separate banquet for herself and her women, Nicholas comments that this is essentially reasonable and

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<sup>32</sup> Nicholas notes the ambiguity of the text, which reads: *Now in the third year of his reign he made a great feast for all the princes...to wit, for a hundred and fourscore days; And when the days of the feast were expired, he invited all the people... and commanded a feast to be made seven days in the court of the garden.* (DRB1.3-5). Were there two feasts? Was there only one? Nicholas notes that in the *Historia Scholastica*, Peter Comestor (1100-1178) says that there were two banquets, one lasting 180 days and one lasting 7; but Nicholas thinks it is unreasonable that a banquet should have lasted 180 days, because "it does not seem true that important men could be absent for such a long time, especially that they should be so far removed from the land which they ought to be taking care of." He thinks it is more likely that the 180 days refers to the time of preparation for a banquet, stocking up food and wine etc. and that the banquet itself lasted only 7 days. See Literal 1.3-1.4: "*Tertio igitur anno imperii sui fecerat grande convivium cunctis principibus etc. ut teneret eos in amore et sui subiectione, cum viderent eius magnificentiam et potentiam, ideo subditur Ut ostenderet divitias gloriae regni sui etc. Centum videlicet et octaginta diebus. Aliqui dicunt hic quod tantum duravit primum convivium quod fuit in quadam mirabili domo habente columnas argenteas et testudinem ad similitudinem celi, gemmis lucentibus ornatam, ut dicitur in scholastica historia. Secundum autem convivium fuit in vestibulo horti, quod duravit septem diebus; sed non est verisimile quod homines notabiles vacarent tanto tempore, et maxime multum remoti a terris quas debebant custodire; et ideo videtur probabilius quod centum octaginta dies referantur ad tempus praeparationis: quia apparatus tanti convivii durantis septem diebus, et pro tanta multitudine hominum, non potuit esse parvo tempore; et secundum hoc non fuit nisi unum festum ipsius regis, quod fuit in vestibulo horti.*"

Peter Comestor's *Historia Scholastica* had established the study of history as the foundation for biblical scholarship. Nicholas recognises the problems this poses. Mark Clark argues that the most relevant version of the *Historia Scholastica* took shape in the context of Comestor's teaching and in collaboration with his brightest student, Stephen Langton. He makes the case for a "Langton" version of the text. Crucially, Clark argues that Comestor's *Historia Scholastica* brought the Victorine programme of historical exegesis squarely into the secular schools, and, by becoming a standard text book on the University curriculum, spread the influence of Victorine historicism. His was one of those texts which established the study of history as the foundation for biblical scholarship. See Mark Clark, *The Making of the Historia Scholastica, 1150-1200* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2015).

appropriate: women eat less than men do, and the Persians had a custom whereby the wives of nobles did not show themselves to other men. Therefore, Nicholas concludes, "the separation of women from men at meal times was conducive to the order of nature and decency of manners".<sup>33</sup>

Nicholas returns to this point when discussing Vashti's disobedience to Ahasuerus's command. The king asks her to come, Nicholas says, because he wanted to show off her beauty. She refused, and Nicholas says the Latin translation seems to imply that Vashti did this from contempt. It would be interesting to trace what Latin text Nicholas was using for this commentary on the book of Esther. In the Sixto-Clementine Vulgate published in 1592 the word describing Vashti's action is *contempsit*. It was probably this or a similar word in the version Nicholas was using. He must have compared his Latin with the Hebrew text, for he declares next that "the Hebrew version does not say she did this from contempt, saying this and no more: 'Queen Vashti refused to come in answer to the word of the king in the hand of the Eunuch'".<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, Nicholas says that according to Josephus Vashti refused to come because of the honourable custom of the Persians already mentioned, that the wives of noble men did not allow other men to see them.<sup>35</sup> As we saw in chapter two, the assumption of Vashti's contempt for Ahasuerus gave substance to the negative characterisation of the Jews in the spiritual sense. Nicholas thinks Josephus provides an insight which makes better sense of Vashti's action: she was doing what was honourable and decent, according to the custom of the Persians.

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<sup>33</sup> Literal 1.9: "*Vashti quoque*. Hic quarto describitur magnificentia convivii ex modo ordinandi quia mulieres comedebant segregate a viris et hoc rationabiliter. Primo quia mulieres sunt debilioris complexionis quam viri sunt etiam minoris potus et cibi et ideo ordinatius comedebant per se quam cum viris. Secundo quia consuetudo erat apud Persas quod coniuges maxime nobilium non dabant se aspectibus aliorum virorum et ideo talis segregatio mulierum a viris in prandio faciebat ad nature ordinationem et ad morum honestatem."

<sup>34</sup> Literal 1.12: "*Que rennuit etc* ... et litera Hebraica non notat eam de aliquo contemptu ubi sic habetur et non plus 'Et renuit regina vasthi venire secundum verbum regis in manu eunuchorum.'" The Hebrew reads:

וַתִּמָּאֵן הַמַּלְכָּה וַשְׁתִּי, לְבוֹא בְּדַבַּר הַמֶּלֶךְ, אֲשֶׁר, בְּיַד הַפְּרִיסִים

BHS 1.12

<sup>35</sup> Literal 1.12: "*Que rennuit etc*. et sic ista translatio notat reginam de contemptu qui est gravis culpa dicit autem Iosephus libro xi antiquitatis iudaice quod non fecit hoc ex contemptu sed propter honestam consuetudinem Persarum quae coniuges maxime nobilium non se dabant aspectibus aliorum virorum."

Use of Flavius Josephus (c. 37-100) is a hallmark of medieval Christian Hebraism, and his inclusion in Nicholas's commentary requires a brief comment. Josephus was a Jewish historian writing in Greek for a Roman and Greek audience. He witnessed the destruction of the Temple. His two most important historical works, the *Jewish Antiquities* and *Jewish Wars*, were translated into Latin in the transitional period between the fourth and seventh centuries, when many Jewish philosophical and historical texts were being transmitted to the West. Josephus was widely read by Christian scholars throughout the medieval period.<sup>36</sup>

His popularity was ensured by the appreciation he enjoyed among patristic scholars: Cassiodorus, Eusebius, and Jerome (among others) all used Josephus, and Jerome especially taught medieval scholars to consider Josephus a valuable source of background historical information for the events narrated in the Old Testament.<sup>37</sup> By the thirteenth century, *Jewish Antiquities* and *Jewish Wars* had become school texts, and the manuscripts were widely copied. This speaks, Karen Kletter notes, to the general interest of the period in ancient history and Christianity's own history.<sup>38</sup> *Jewish Antiquities*, which provides a narrative account of the Jewish people paralleling the Hebrew Bible, includes a section on Esther, and is one of Nicholas's most frequently cited sources in his commentary on the book of Esther.

Nicholas's use of Josephus demonstrates his interest in establishing the historic credibility of the book of Esther. He uses the *Jewish Antiquities* for its supposed information about the customs prevailing at the Persian court, and, in conjunction with the Hebrew original, it provides Nicholas with a better understanding of the literal sense.

For example, in his *divisio* for the second chapter of Esther, Nicholas notes that while Vashti's dismissal has been explained, there are certain other aspects of the narrative that need to be understood before Esther's promotion to the King's house can be discussed. First, it is

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<sup>36</sup> Karen Kletter, "The Christian Reception of Josephus in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages" In *A Companion to Josephus*, 368–381 (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd. 2015), 368-370.

<sup>37</sup> Kletter, "The Christian Reception of Josephus", 371-372.

<sup>38</sup> Kletter, "The Christian Reception of Josephus", 375.

necessary to understand why a replacement for Vashti was sought in the first place. Josephus is again Nicholas's source on this point. Expanding on Hugh of St. Cher's comment from the same source, Nicholas says that according to Josephus, Ahasuerus dismissed Vashti in anger and fear, because her public refusal to come before him might reflect badly on him. But the king regrets his decision later. Nicholas notes that Latin Bibles corrected by the Hebrew text include the phrase *he remembered Vashti*, a phrase found in the Hebrew version. This indicates that Ahasuerus was sad because he remembered Vashti's beauty and his love for her. It makes the king wretched and melancholy, because his punishment of her was unjust, in so far as Vashti had acted honourably. But he is afraid to recall her because he is afraid of being thought changeable by his ministers, who might already be inclined against him because he was not descended from the previous king, as Rashi says when discussing Ahasuerus's identity.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Literal 2.1: "After describing how Queen Vashti is cast out, the exaltation of Esther comes next, and this happens for her in four stages. First, she is joined with the other royal virgins; next she is hastened in womanly adornment where it says: *she pleased him*. Then she is betrothed to the king, where it says: *and so she was led to the chamber of the king*. Finally, the king's love for her is secured where it says: *and when [for a second time] the virgins were sought*. About the first of these four steps [i.e. Esther's being joined with the other virgins] the general reasons for this are discussed, and then a specific discussion of Esther takes place where it says: *there was a Jewish man*. The general reasons ought to be understood as Josephus says in book 11 of the Jewish Antiquities: when Ahasuerus became calm after the anger and confusion he suffered from Queen Vashti's deeds, as related above, he began to remember Vashti's beauty, and the love which they had for each other, and to grieve that he had sent her away, especially because he could not now call her back because of the irrevocable edict he had made, which he had published throughout his entire kingdom. And so his friends, seeing him continually anxious about her, tell him that he should have all the most beautiful virgins brought to him, and from among them choose she who is most pleasing to him and take her for a wife, so that his love for the next [woman] would lessen the grief of the [woman] who had come before. This is what it says: *When the wrath of King Ahasuerus was appeased*, that is when his anger and confusion had passed, because a man judges differently when he is angry than when he is not angry. So: *he remembered Vashti*. In Hebrew and the corrected books it says this, because Ahasuerus remembered Vashti's beauty and the love which had been between them when he was no longer angry. *What she had done and what she had suffered*. Comparing the punishment he had inflicted on her with her actions, it seemed to him that the punishment had exceeded the crime because of what was said above, because she had done what was honourable and modest in a woman. Accordingly he was anxious, not daring to call her back lest he provoke the foremost men of this kingdom against himself by breaking the irrevocable edict, and lest he get a reputation among all the people for being changeable, effeminate and soft, all on account of one woman, and in consequence be deprived of the kingdom, especially because he was not descended from the previous kings as Rabbi Salomon said in the preceding chapter."

Literal 2.1: "*His itaque gestis*. Postquam descripta est regine Vasthi deiectio, hic consequenter ponitur ipsius Hester exaltatio, et hoc in quatuor sibi gradatim succedentibus quia primo aliis virginibus regis sociatur. Secundo modus muliebris ei acceleratur, ibi: *Quae placuit ei*. Tertio regi desponsatur, ibi: *Ducta est itaque*. Quarto in amore regis firmatur ibi: *Cumque et secundo quaererentur*. Circa primum ponitur primo consultatio generalis. Secundo circa hester executio specialis, ibi *Erat vir Iudeus*. Circa primum sciendum quod sicut dicit Iosephus libero xi antiquitatis Iudaice sedata passione irae et turbationis in assero de facto praedicto vasthi regine c[o]epit recolere eius pulcritudinem et amorem quem habuerant ad invicem et dolerem de hoc quod abiecerat eam, maxime quia eam revocare non poterat propter edictum irrevocabile quod super hoc dederat et per totum regnum suum publicaverat. Propter quod amici sui videntes eum continue anxiam sua ferunt ei ut virgines pulcherrimas faceret ad se adduci et illam quae inter eas magis sibi placeret uxorem assumeret, et sic amor sequentis dolorem mitigaret praecedentis et hoc est quod dicitur:

Again, this reference to the Latin Bibles "corrected by the Hebrew version" raises questions about which Latin text Nicholas was reading. That he was reading it side-by-side with a Hebrew text, and using the latter to clarify and correct the former, seems clear. Jewish sources and the Hebrew text are used by Nicholas as authoritative means of correcting the Latin text in his Esther commentary, with the aim of establishing or clarifying the historical aspects of the narrative. Because God is the primary author the story must be literally or historically true. He is not interested in the Hebrew version for its own sake but because he believes it gives him, as a Christian, a better understanding of his own tradition.

I do not mean an emphasis on God's role as author as an argument against the well-established fact of Nicholas's interest in the human author and his role; far from it!<sup>40</sup> For Nicholas, it is in the perfect cooperation of the human author with the inspiration of God that the literal sense takes shape. In the context of Esther specifically, Nicholas's attentiveness to the role of the human scribe actually confronts him with a serious problem. Nicholas believes Mordechai is the author of Esther, and in the section which follows, I will examine how Nicholas uses the *divisio textus* to introduce and resolve a question which impinges on Mordechai's righteousness. Taken in connection with other comments Nicholas makes about

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*Postquam regis assveri indignatio deferbuerat, id est passio ire et turbationis transierat, quia aliter iudicat homo in passione positus et extra passionem. Recordatus est vasthi sic et in Hebreo et in libris correctis, quia quietata passione assverus recordatus fuit pulcritudinis ipsius Vasthi, et amoris qui fuerat inter ipsos. Que fecisset vel quae passa esset. Conferendo penam quam ei inflixerat, et factum quod ipsa fecerat: et videbatur sibi quod culpam pena excessisset rationibus supra dictis, quia fecerat honestate et verecundia muliebri, propter quod anxiebatur eam revocare non audens, ne principes regni contra se provocaret ex fractione edicti irrevocabilis, et ne a toto populo propter unam mulierem reputaretur mutabilis tanquam effeminatus et mollis, et per consequens regno privaretur maxime cum non esset de semine regio secundum dictum Rabi Salomon capitulo praecedenti."*

Cf. Rashi, who says that Ahasuerus reigned 'of himself' and was not of royal seed:

שמלך מעצמו ולא מזרע המלוכה היה

Rashi, *Megillat Esther*, 1.3, p. 214.

<sup>40</sup> In his analysis of Nicholas's Aristotelian prologue to the Psalms, Alastair Minnis illustrates Nicholas's belief that when God inspires a sacred author it is in cooperation with, not domination of, the mind of the creature. Nicholas was interested in the *mens prophetae*, the "mind of the prophet" and how it shaped the divine communication. Like Aquinas, Nicholas perceives two efficient causes in Scripture: God is the primary efficient cause (the one who inspires, the mover) while the human author is the secondary efficient cause (the one who is inspired and who writes, moved and moving). Minnis understands this to be the influence of Aristotelian theories of causality on theological works, arguing that delineating the authorial role according to the four causes greatly elevated that status of the human author and led to greater perception of and attention to aspects of literary form and narrative in scriptural commentaries. See Minnis, *Medieval Theory of Authorship*, 75-81, 91.

Mordechai being the author of Esther, I suggest that the attention Nicholas gives to this question arises from similar concerns as those which necessitated establishing the historical credibility of the book of Esther: that if Mordechai was *not* righteous, it jeopardises the reliability of the human scribe and therefore the book's claim to truth and religious significance –its canonicity, in fact.

### 3.1.b: Scribal Reliability

By the end of his exegesis on Esther's promotion, Nicholas's has examined how Esther acquired a royal position, clarifying, to the best of his ability, questions of historiography and philology along the way. This was the first part of his initial two-part division of the narrative: Esther is promoted, and (in consequence) Esther is able to liberate her people. He uses the opening words of the Esther chapter three, *post hec* ("after these things") to refer his reader back to this first level of his *divisio textus*: "these things" refer to the details of Esther's promotion, and "following this", Nicholas continues, "is everything to do with the liberation of [Esther's] people."<sup>41</sup>

Nicholas continues as usual with more specific levels of the *divisio textus*: first there is the iniquitous scheme or plot (*machinatio*) against the Jews, second their liberation from this scheme; the scheme is dealt with in three aspects: first there is the occasion for it (Mordechai ignores Ahasuerus's command to honour Haman), second the details of the scheme itself (the casting of lots), and third its being effected (Haman's conversation with king Ahasuerus).<sup>42</sup> Nicholas addresses all three of these aspects, but it is the first, the occasion or reason for Haman's machinations, which takes up more space than any other single exegetical comment in his literal *postilla* on Esther.

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<sup>41</sup> Literal 3.1: "*Post hec* descripta ipsius Hester promotione. Hic consequenter agitur de populi sui liberatione."

<sup>42</sup> Literal 3.1: "*Post hec*...Et primo ponitur contra populum iniqua machinatio, secundo mira populi liberatio in iii capitulo. Circa primum primo ponitur machinationis occasio. Secundo ipsa machinatio ibi: *quod cum audisset*. Tertio machinationis executio ibi: *Dixitque Aman regi*. Occasio autem machinationis contra Iudeos fuit eo quod mardocheus nolebat adorare Aman sicut etceteri."

The occasion is Ahasuerus's appointment of Haman to a position of authority second only to himself. Haman's ascendancy is immediate and marked: *all the king's servants, that were at the doors of the palace, bent their knees, and worshipped Haman: for so the emperor had commanded them, only Mordechai did not bend his knee, nor worship him* (3.2).<sup>43</sup> Mordechai's nonparticipation incites Haman's desire to destroy the Jews. Having heard from others in Shushan that Mordechai does not reverence him, and observing this himself, he becomes angry, and *he counted it nothing to lay his hands upon Mordechai alone: for he had heard that he was of the nation of the Jews, and he chose rather to destroy all the nation of the Jews that were in the kingdom of Ahasuerus* (3.6).

The reason for Mordechai's decision not to kneel is nowhere stated in the original text translated from the Hebrew (for Nicholas, the only canonical text, as we saw in chapter two), and Nicholas must know: why did Mordechai refuse to kneel? It seems that Mordechai's decision not to show the proper respect to a person in authority is unjustifiable, especially because it jeopardises the safety of his people. Was it the result of pride? Or is genuflection a reverential gesture that is only properly shown to God, a moral claim which would go a long way to justifying Mordechai? Nicholas includes a discussion of this question in the format of the *quaestio*, the only formally dialectical feature of his Esther commentary.<sup>44</sup> He introduces the *quaestio* by situating it within the *divisio textus*: "for a better understanding of this [that Mordechai refused to

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<sup>43</sup> The Latin is "adorabat", "to adore", which in the DRB is translated "worship"; in Hebrew it does not say adore or worship, but that they were commanded "to kneel and prostrate themselves before Haman". See BHS Esther 3.1:

כָּרְעִים וּמִשְׁתַּחֲוִיִּים לְהָמָן

It is the kneeling that becomes the point at issue. I have translated adorare as "venerate", "reverence" or "honour" because in modern English this makes better sense of what Nicholas is trying to say. There was obviously no question that Mordechai should adore Haman the way a person might adore God. Rather, the discussion is about what constitutes a licit and appropriate veneration of man.

<sup>44</sup> Apparent problems or contradictions between scriptural passages or between events in scripture and the teachings of the Church were typically resolved by *quaestiones*, dialectical investigations arising from the text which purported to show that the scriptures were in harmony with each other and consistent with the teaching of the Church. This practice began in the monastic and cathedral schools and contributed to the eventual distinction between exegesis and systematic theology (as the *quaestiones* themselves began to be gathered into collections separate from the scriptural context which had originally produced them). However, they continued to be characteristic of some exegesis also. They are regularly found in the the *postillae* of Hugh of St. Cher, for example. For more information see Smalley, *The Study*, 66-82; Frans van Liere "From Andrew of St. Victor to Nicholas of Lyra" in Krey and Smith, 70-72.

kneel] and everything else that follows it," Nicholas says, "we must ask the question whether veneration (*adoratio*) which is shown by genuflection ought to be shown to God only."<sup>45</sup>

Nicholas's treatment of this question implicitly presents Mordechai's decision *not* to kneel as a problem of a kind not so much historiographical as moral or ethical: was Mordechai, the righteous Jew, justified in refusing to kneel to Haman, thus endangering the lives of the Jewish people? A brief summary of the main points of the *quaestio* will indicate the problem this was for Nicholas.

The stated question is about what exterior acts or gestures constitute a licit veneration of created beings, and specifically if genuflection is licit. While not necessarily a question which occupies our thoughts today, it was certainly one of relevance to Nicholas. The *quaestio* proceeds in the usual fashion: Nicholas sets up the problem, describing inconsistencies in scripture on this question, and describing how an answer in the negative potentially problematised the practices of Christian Europe. He provides himself a framework for answering the question by introducing the classic scholastic distinction between *latria* and *dulia*, two different types of adoration or veneration.<sup>46</sup> *Latria* describes a type of adoration that should be shown only to God, while *dulia* is the sort that can be shown to those who participate in the excellence of God.<sup>47</sup> This distinction will help resolve scriptural inconsistencies and absolve Christian practices.

Scriptural inconsistencies span both Old and New Testaments. The arguments against kneeling to other people arise from the fact that Mordechai is traditionally commended for keeping his seat, and in Apocalypse 22, John is rebuked for kneeling to an angel. On the other

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<sup>45</sup> Literal 3.15: "*Statimque...*Ad maiorem intellectum huius capituli et aliquorum sequentium quaeritur hic utrum adoratio quae est per genuum flectionem sit soli Deo exhibenda."

<sup>46</sup> See for example Peter Lombard (d. 1160) on this distinction in the *Sentences*, book iv distinction 3 d.9 c.1-6; or Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274) in the *Summa Theologiae* II:II q. 103, a. 1-3. Peter Lombard, *The Sentences*, trans. Giulio Silano, 4 vols. (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2007).

<sup>47</sup> Literal 3.15: "*Statimque...*Quod adoratio manifeste ordinatur ad reverentiam illius qui adoratur. Reverentia autem deferenda est alicui propter excellentiam sue virtutis; et ideo ubi est singularis excellentia, ibi detur singularis adoratio. Talis autem est excellentia divina que est infinita; et ideo debetur sibi singularis adoratio, que a doctoribus vocatur adoratio latrie. Soli deo debite exhibende. Verumtamen, quia ex[c]cellentia divina communicatur excellentibus creaturis (non tamen univoce sed participative et diminutive) inde est quod alique adoratio defertur creaturis excellentibus, sicut angelis sanctis et personis in dignitatibus constitutis. Qui vocatur adoratio dulie."

hand, Abigail, who was a holy woman, knelt to David, and Abdias knelt before Elias.<sup>48</sup>

Furthermore, while many medieval Hebrew and Catholic *doctores* maintain that kneeling to anyone except God is iniquitous: "this seems exceedingly harsh," Nicholas avers, "because not only pagans but Christians, when showing reverence for persons of excellence, bend not only one knee but both..." and: "the Church knows this manner of veneration is done everywhere, and has said nothing. On the contrary she is always silent, as though conceding this to be lawful."<sup>49</sup>

Nicholas appeals to the distinction between *latria* and *dulia* to help him resolve this issue.

What constitutes an act of latreutical veneration has multiple aspects, one interior and some exterior:

...although adoration principally consists in an interior action of the mind honouring God, nevertheless adoration has in consequence [of this interior action] some exterior action or some exterior homage, which is a sign of the interior action... And in this both Hebrew and Latin scholars are agreed: some reverence or some more exterior [acts of] service, [there might be] one [such act] or many, ought to be shown to God alone.<sup>50</sup>

Everyone agrees on the distinction: there is a type of adoration reserved for God alone. Nicholas references Augustine's *De Civitate Dei* to emphasise that it is the interior aspects of veneration that are of greatest import: one needs to keep straight in one's mind the distinction between God

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<sup>48</sup> Literal 3.15: "*Statimque* Nec in hoc Mardocheus reprobatur, sed magis a scriptura sacra et doctoribus commendatur. Item apoc xxii dicit beatur ionannes *cumquam audissem et vidissem cecidi, ut adorarem ante pedes angeli, qui mihi ostendebat hec et dixit mihi: vide ne feceris* et sequitur: *deum adora*. Ex quo videtur quod adoratio per genu flexionem sit soli deo exhibenda. In contrarium videtur per illud quod habetur i regum xxv ubi dicitur quod abigail adoravit david de qua ibidem dicitur: *et procidit coram David super faciem suam: et adoravit super terram, et cecidit ad pedes eius*. Quod non potuit fieri sine genuum flexione, ergo non exhibetur homini excellenti illicite, quia alias david santus hoc non sustinisset sibi fieri nec Abigail, hoc fecisset quae sancta erat, et tenetur communiter a doctoribus in spiritu prophético tunc cum david locuta fuisse." cf. Apocalypse 22.8-9 and Samuel 25: 23-24.

<sup>49</sup> Literal 3.15: "*Statimque*... Dixerunt enim Hebrei quod genuum flexio unius vel duorum est huiusmodi, hoc accipientes ex dicto Mardochei in prae allegato capita. Et in hoc in parte secuti sunt eos aliqui Christiani; dicentes quod licet coram personis excellentibus licite possit unum genu flecti, tamen coram solo deo duo genua sunt flectenda. Sed hoc dictum videtur nimis duorum quia non solum Gentiles sed etiam Christiani reverendo personas excellentes utuntur genuflexione non solum unius sed amborum.... quia ecclesia sciens ubiquam talem adorandi modum non praedicat: contrarium sed semper tacet qui concedens hoc esse licitum."

<sup>50</sup> Literal 3.15: "*Statimque*... De primo vero adoratione est hic questio. Circa quod sciendum quod licet adoratio principaliter consistat in actu interiori mentis deum reverentis, habet tamen ex consequenti aliquem actum seu aliquod obsequium exterius quod est signum actus interioris. Sicut actus fidei primo et principaliter consistit in actu interiori mentis prime, veritati propter se assentientis, secundario tamen consistit in actu exteriori confessionis... Etiam in hoc doctores Hebrei et Latini conveniunt: quod sit aliqua reverentia seu servitus exterior una vel plures soli deo exhibenda seu exhibende."

and mere men, however excellent; but customs do arise, such as genuflection, by which men are honoured in an appropriate way.<sup>51</sup> The passage from Apocalypse is not really to the contrary, because Gregory the Great said the angel rebuked the disciple not because John sinned by kneeling to him, but to indicate the excellence and superiority acquired by human nature after the incarnation of God.<sup>52</sup>

Furthermore, Nicholas says, everyone agrees and it is even suggested in the Bible (Nicholas cites 1 Samuel 24, Judith 10.10 and 1 Peter 2.18) that people in positions of authority (even wicked people) ought to be accorded the honour due to their position, for earthly power reflects heavenly power. Haman occupied an exceptionally high position, and ought to have been accorded due honour.<sup>53</sup> The question was one of contemporary relevance for Nicholas. Mordechai's decision would not have been a straightforwardly meritorious one from the perspective of a clergyman in a position of proximity to the royal house. As Philippe Buc argues, Nicholas was strongly in favour of an absolutist monarchy. Buc illustrates how in his exegesis on the book of Kings, Nicholas characterises the power of temporal rulers as legitimate, God given, and to be absolutely respected. Nicholas describes aristocratic offices as entailing "magnificence" and "pomp", Buc notes, and he declares that the duty of the Christian is to obey God first and his temporal superiors second.<sup>54</sup> From all this, it seems that Nicholas would have considered kneeling to Haman non-problematic at least and meritorious at best. Genuflection has biblical

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<sup>51</sup> Literal 3.15 "*Statimque...*". Nicholas quotes *De Civitate Dei* book 10 chapter 4.

<sup>52</sup> Literal 3.15: "*Statimque...*Prohibitio ergo angeli non fuit ad ostendendum illam adorationem esse illicitam, sed ad ostendendum excellentiam quam natura humana consecutam est per filium Dei eam sibi in unitate suppositi assummentem, secundum quod exponit beatus Gregorius [h]omelia quinta evangeliorum."

<sup>53</sup> Literal 3.15: "*Statimque...*Reverentia autem deferenda est alicui propter excellentiam sue virtutis", and later: "...homines mali quamdiu tolerantur a deo in statu excellenti sunt honorandi. Unde et David sanctus Saulem pessimum ipsum persequentem adoravit ut habetur i Regum xxiiii. Similiter Iudith que inter mulieres sanctas computatur adoravit Holofernem pessimum genuum flexione secundum quod habetur Iudith x *Adoravit eum prosternens se super terram et levaverunt eam servi Holofernis iubente domino suo.* Propter quod apostolus Petrus i Petrus ii dicit: *Servi subditi estote in omni timore domini non tantum bonis et modestis sed etiam discolis hec est enim gratia.* Aman vero erat in potestate constitutus scilicet a rege secundo, ut supra dictum est: propter quod ratione status et officii erat adorandus." Cf. 1 Samuel 24, when David kneels to Saul; Judith 10.20, when Judith reverences Holofernes, and 1 Peter 2.18 where the Apostle exhorts servants to be subject to their masters.

<sup>54</sup> Philippe Buc, "Nicholas of Lyra's Mirror of Princes" in Krey and Smith, 84-89, 92-93, 98, 107.

precedent (inconsistencies notwithstanding) and the sanction of Holy Church; why then did Mordechai not kneel?

So, Nicholas has a problem. It is a problem specific to the story of Esther and a problem for the literal sense. Nicholas is not turning his literal commentary into an opportunity to enter into dialectical discussions of *latría* and *dulia*; the *quaestio*, like every other aspect of his commentary, arises from the *divisio textus*: Mordechai's decision not to kneel is the cause of the plot against the Jews; we need to understand it before we can understand what happens next. Nicholas has already reminded us what this is: Esther's "miraculous" liberation of her people. He is setting himself up to show how God is present in the book of Esther through his providential ordering of events, but to do that he needs to demonstrate that Mordechai's act was righteous. While the stated question is whether or not it is appropriate to kneel to anyone except God, there is an implicit interest in justifying Mordechai's decision not to kneel. If he was not a righteous man, his reliability as the human author of Esther is potentially problematised. This being the case, the righteousness of Mordechai and the iniquity of Haman become the main point at issue towards the end of Nicholas's *quaestio*.

Nicholas briefly entertains the idea that Mordechai refused to kneel from a sort of repugnance to Haman's pride and arrogance; but this is no good, for, in keeping with Buc's analysis, Nicholas believes, "wicked men are tolerated in distinguished positions for a long time by God, and their office ought to be respected."<sup>55</sup> He references David's homage to Saul, and 1 Peter 2.18 (*Servants, be subject to your masters, etc.*) in support of this. Haman had a right to be revered for the position which he occupied. How can Mordechai be justified?

Given the discussion in chapter two, it is unsurprising that the Jewish tradition ultimately gives Nicholas the insight he needs to solve this problem. The Hebrews, Nicholas says, believe that because Haman was in a position of authority, he had every right to expect the appropriate

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<sup>55</sup> Literal 3.15: "*Statimque.....homines mali quamdiu tolerantur a deo in statu excellenti sunt honorandi.*"

homage from men. But because he sought homage as *it ought to be rendered to God only*, he forfeited all such rights, and Mordechai, having recognized this, refused to kneel to him:

Therefore, another thing is said: that what was lawful to show [Haman] in certain respects might become unlawful because of the specific circumstance...veneration by genuflection is permitted, and it is lawfully shown to created beings who occupy high positions; but it is illicit to be rendered with a bad intention, that is, if it is shown [to a man] as though to God, or if on the part of the recipient it is received in this way...And it was in this manner that Haman sought to be adored, as the Hebrews say.<sup>56</sup>

Nicholas concludes that the licit or illicit nature of the act is derived from the interior disposition with which the act is rendered or received. "As the Hebrews say", Haman was attempting to make himself like a god; therefore, Mordechai could not show him any reverence.<sup>57</sup>

Nicholas ultimately vindicates Mordechai by adopting the Jewish explanation of Mordechai's action which we saw in the *Esther Rabbah* and repeated by Rashi, among others. Mordechai did not bend his knee, "because in his pride, Haman wished to appropriate the divine honour for himself, making them adore him as though he were God, as it says in the Hebrew Gloss, and this was unlawful".<sup>58</sup> Nicholas provides this short and initial explanation in the main body of his commentary on Mordechai's refusal. He returns to it in the *quaestio* at the end, resolving the problem of Mordechai's righteousness by asserting that the specific circumstances made it impossible for Mordechai to do what would otherwise have been lawful: Haman desired to be honoured as though he were a god, and "as the Hebrews say and as this chapter details" Mordechai could not become complicit in an act of idolatry.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Literal 3.15: "*Statimque...*Sic in praeposito: licet adoratio per genuflexionem, licite impendatur excellentibus creaturis; tamen redditur illicita per malam intentionem; exhibentis si hanc exhibeat quasi Deo, vel ex parte recipientis si exigit isto modo...Et hoc modo querebat adorari Aman, ut dicunt Hebrei, et habitum est capitulum praecedenti..."

<sup>57</sup> The term *Hebrei* is implicitly positive. It is a reminder of the strange equivocality at the heart of medieval Christian Hebraism, that Christians described Jewish opinions which they liked and found useful as belonging to the *Hebrei* while the Jews themselves they referred to quite negatively as the *Judei*. This was true of many Christian exegetes. Regarding Nicholas's use of the terms specifically, see Klepper, *The Insight*, 48.

<sup>58</sup> Literal 3.2: "*Solus autem mardocheus...*Quia ex superbia sua volebat sibi arripere honorem divinum faciens se adorari tamquam Deum ut dicit hic glossa Hebraica et hoc erat sibi illicitum."

<sup>59</sup> Literal 3.15: "*Statimque.....*quod aliquid de se licitum ratione alicuius circumstantie sit illicitum. Sicut dare elemonam mulieri paupercule licitum est et meritorium, si tamen fiat intentione pertrahendi eam ad luxuriam illicitum est. Sic in praeposito: licet adoratio per genuflexionem, licite impendatur excellentibus creaturis; tamen

This comment, attributed to the Hebrew Gloss, is adapted from Rashi who in turn took it from a the rabbinic tradition.<sup>60</sup> Nicholas often referred to Rashi as the "Hebrew Gloss", a title illustrative of his attitude that Rashi's work was in some sense a Jewish equivalent of the *Glossa Ordinaria*, the distillation of the Hebrew tradition which he thought of as primarily literal and historical.<sup>61</sup> Rashi's comment here would have been considered an insight just as historiographical in nature as those on Ahasuerus's identity. This explanation is a solution for Nicholas's problem which establishes that Mordechai's act was righteous.

Rashi's exegesis also emerges from within the narrative structure Nicholas identifies with the *divisio textus*. Rashi's comment on *after these things* (3.1) is to the effect that the events which had come before (i.e., Esther's elevation and Mordechai's saving the king) had been done for the salvation of Israel. We saw in the last chapter that he adopts a reading from the Babylonian Talmud (*Megillah* 13b) when he says that God had prepared a remedy for Israel in advance of their peril.<sup>62</sup> It is in this context that Rashi's comment that Haman made himself a god must be read: whatever Haman might do, the Holy One has ordered everything in his providence, and will preserve Israel from all harm. This fits in well with Nicholas's assertion that we must understand Mordechai's action before we can understand Esther's liberation of her people.

Just as there was a real theological need to understand how Ahasuerus could have been a real Persian king, there is a theological need to understand how Mordechai's decision was a righteous one. Failure in either jeopardises Esther's canonical status. If the story is not true, how

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redditur illicita per malam intentionem; exhibentis si hanc exhibeat quasi Deo, vel ex parte recipientis si exigat isto modo. Sicut legitur de Nabuchodonosor rege Assiriorum Iudith iii quod precepit Holoferni ut omnes deos terre exterminaret, ut ipse solus deus diceretur. Et hoc modo querebat adorari Aman, ut dicunt Hebrei, et habitum est capitulum praecedenti.."

<sup>60</sup> Rashi's comment reads:

שעשה עצמו אלה

Rashi, "Megilat Esther", 3.2, p. 232. English: "He [Haman] made himself a god." Cf. Esther Rabbah 7.3 et alia. as discussed in chapter two.

<sup>61</sup> Hailperin, 131–133, 139, 207; Judith Olszowy-Schlanger, "A School of Christian Hebraists in Thirteenth-Century England: A Unique Hebrew-Latin-French and English Dictionary and Its Sources" *European Journal of Jewish Studies* 1, no. 2 (2007), 261; Benjamin Williams, "Glossa Ordinaria and Glossa Hebraica: Midrash in Rashi and the Gloss" *Traditio* 71 (2016), 182-183.

<sup>62</sup> See chapter two, footnote 121.

could it have been inspired by God? If Mordechai is not righteous, how could he be the inspired scribe? How could the story have any relevance for the Christian?

While Nicholas in the fourteenth century had a much more appreciative attitude toward the role of the human author than Hugh of St. Victor did in the twelfth, the mendicant nevertheless would have agreed with the Victorine when he described the character of sacred scripture:

Only that scripture is rightly called "sacred" that is inspired by the Spirit of God and that, administered by those who have spoken by the Spirit of God, make the human person holy – reforming him according to the likeness of God, instructing him to know God, and exhorting him to love Him. Whatever is taught in it is truth; whatever is prescribed in it is goodness; whatever is promised in it is happiness. For God is truth without falsehood, goodness without malice, happiness without misery.<sup>63</sup>

Under divine inspiration, Mordechai recorded the events of his own life, and Nicholas is at pains to demonstrate that this record is a true and reliable one which reflects God's providential action on behalf of His people. This becomes especially clear in the ninth chapter, which deals with the establishment of the festival of Purim, and describes Mordechai writing letters detailing "these events" for the Jewish people. Nicholas is quite clear: Mordechai wrote the book "that all [the Jews] might understand more clearly the divine favour conferred upon them, or rather the divine favours demonstrated in this book's series."<sup>64</sup>

The "series" [of events] in the book of Esther is that series made explicit by the *divisio textus*. This hermeneutic principle reveals the structure of the narrative which reflects the order of events. Efforts to establish the historical credibility of the text and the reliability of the Mordechai arise from specific moments in the *divisio* and always contribute to a better understanding of the story as a whole. We must know who Ahasuerus (possibly) was before we can be sure of anything else; Mordechai's righteousness must be beyond doubt if the providential events which follow are to be properly understood.

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<sup>63</sup> Hugh of Saint Victor, *On Sacred Scripture* 1, trans. Frans van Liere, in *Theory*, 213.

<sup>64</sup> Literal 9.20: "*Scipsit itaque...ut omnes clarius cognoscerent divinum beneficium eis collatum, vel potius divina beneficia prout continetur in serie huius libri.*"

This is especially true because the events which follow Mordechai's initial conflict with Haman are explicitly presented by Nicholas as the direct action of God. It is this providential action which is the literal sense of Esther, reflected in and revealed by the *divisio textus*. The language he uses reflects the attitude implicit in the *divisio textus* hermeneutic: things happen by God's special "ordering" of events (*divina ordinatio* or *divina providencia*), or by his disposition or arrangement (*divina dispositione*). This is reflected in the orderliness or sequence of the narrative. We can see this especially clearly in Nicholas's presentation of Esther's petition.

Every particular aspect of the text is fitted into the general interpretation of the book as a story of God's providence. The part illumines the whole, and so no detail is unimportant. If Nicholas does not comment on a verse it is because he thinks the literal meaning is obvious. *Et patet littera* ("the literal meaning is evident") is frequently the only comment appended to verses he considers devoid of any ambiguity of language, obscurity of historical context, or ethical problem. This seems to me the most fundamental purpose of the *divisio*: it is an implicit argument for an order in the narrative that reflects the essential orderliness of God's action in history. It reflects Nicholas's belief in the dual authorship of Scripture, and it demonstrates an appreciation of and interest in salvation history, the animating principle of Nicholas's commentary on the book of Esther. This will be the subject of the final section of this chapter.

### 3.2: Sacred Meaning in the Literal Sense of Esther

We have seen how the *divisio textus* indicates the importance of establishing the causal sequence of events in an exposition of the literal sense, a series or sequence of events which creates the same orderliness in the narrative that is found in God's ordered providence. "First this, then this" and "to understand this, we must first understand this"; these are constant refrains in Nicholas's literal commentary. The literal sense, to the extent that it is historical or concerned with historiography, conceives of *historia* as a narrative of events.

Sometimes the assumption underlying the *divisio textus* principle becomes more explicit. Nicholas explains things happening by God's special "ordering" of events (*divina ordinatio* or *divina providencia*), or by His disposition or arrangement (*divina dispositio*); the language of order and sequence Nicholas uses about God's action in history parallels the order and sequence his *divisio* establishes for its historical record. If we look back to the scheme of Nicholas's *divisio* included at the start of this chapter, it becomes quickly apparent that, for Nicholas, history is a deeply theological subject. All those passages marked with an asterisk are explained wholly or in part as coming about by the will of God.

This language of divine order or arrangement is evident throughout the commentary. Aegeo's preference for Esther when she is first brought to the palace happens by God's 'ordering' (*divina ordinatio*); Mordechai uncovers the plot of Bagathan and Thares by an act of God (*a Deo factum est*); when Esther goes before the king without being summoned, her beauty is increased by a special grace of God (*ex speciali gratia Dei*) so that Ahasuerus's heart might be inclined toward her; Haman came to the banquet with the king by divine arrangement (*divina dispositio*), so that he would become hateful to the other princes who would be jealous of his influence; God brings about the sleeplessness of the king (*a Deo factum est*) so that he will read the records of his reign, and God arranges things such that Ahasuerus should read those passages concerning the deeds of Mordechai, "so that Mordechai's righteousness would be rewarded while Haman's pride would be confounded."<sup>65</sup>

Ascribing things to the special arrangement of God is never an effort to avoid historiographical or other problems, nor does Nicholas offer 'providence' in lieu of an understanding of the historical situation. For example, the passage when Mordechai discovers the plot of Bagathan and Thares, for example, is attributed to the direct action of God, but the moment itself, which arises from an ambiguity in the text, is also fully explained by an appeal to

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<sup>65</sup> See Literal 2.9: "*Que placuit ei*"; 2.19: "*Cumque secundo*"; 5.2: "*Placuit oculis eius*"; 5.8: "*Veniat rex*"; 6.1: "*Noctem illam*"; and 6.2: "*Ventum est*".

the Hebrew language and other contextual information. Immediately before the treachery of Bagathan and Thares, the text describes how Ahasuerus loved Esther, made her queen, and celebrated with a banquet, before suddenly and inexplicably saying that virgins are sought a second time.<sup>66</sup> Several of the themes we have looked at in this chapter are demonstrated in Nicholas's treatment of this passage, which I will include in full:

Following this, it is related how the king's love for Queen Esther is confirmed. This was due to the fact that she preserved his life by denouncing the plots that were being plotted against him. This was done by God, so that the favour which Esther had found with the King might not be diminished, because she would not tell them her country and her people. Because it says: *When for the second time the virgins were sought*; evidently, [they were sought again] after Esther's coronation, intimating that the king might have preferred to put another in her place, because she did not wish to reveal her nationality and her people. And so it says immediately afterwards: *Neither had Esther as yet declared her country and people, according to his commandment.* [The command] of Mordechai, whose command she in no way wished to put aside.

*At that time*, the time when the virgins were brought there, and the time when Mordechai, anxious for Esther, was lingering by the gate. *Bagathan and Thares were angry*, plotting [Ahasuerus's] death secretly. The cause of this plotting is not explained here, nor in any of the Hebrew or Latin glosses which I have seen; but one frequently finds that servants of kings plot their deaths. *Who were porters and resided in the first entry of the palace.* For this whole passage, there is no more in Hebrew than: "Guardians of Furniture."<sup>67</sup> The reason for this difference is this: the Hebrew word here is equivocal. It can signify both entry and furniture. Our translation follows the first signification, while the Hebrews follow the other, which more closely harmonizes with the next passage, which says: *and they designed to rise up against the king and kill him.* For the porters of the palace did not have opportunity such that they were able to kill the king with weapons, when he had guards protecting his person, neither could they enter in the manner of his familiars to the interior [of the palace] that they might give him poison. But those who are guardians of his gold and silver furniture on which he was served could easily have done this. These men were of this sort, as the Hebrews say.

*And Mordechai had notice of it.* Josephus says that he knew this from a certain Hebrew who was a very familiar servant of one of those eunuchs; Rabbi Solomon says that he knew it because they spoke about the king's intoxication

<sup>66</sup> DRB Esther 2.16-20.

<sup>67</sup> I am unsure what Nicholas is getting at here. The Hebrew text is below, but the word in the Hebrew does not seem to indicate anything about furniture, and there is nothing like that in Rashi or any other commentary I have read.

בְּיָמֵי הַהֵם וּמַרְדֵּכַי יוֹשֵׁב בְּשַׁעַר-הַמַּלְאָךְ קִצְרָא בְּגִתָּו וְאֶרֶשׁ שְׁנֵי-סָרִיסֵי הַמַּלְאָךְ מִשְׁמַרְי הַסֶּף וַיִּבְקֶשׁוּ לְשַׁלֵּחַ זֶד בְּמַלְאָךְ  
אֶחָשׁוּרָשׁ

[poisoning?] in front of Mordechai, in a Persian dialect, believing that Mordechai was thoroughly ignorant of this idiom.<sup>68</sup>

*It was inquired into, and found out that it was true. And it was put in the histories and recorded in the chronicles before the king.* So that they might have a public record, where any notable deed whatever was written. The king had one book in which the deeds of his own time were recorded for the memory of the future, because men are guided in their future undertakings by what has happened before.<sup>69</sup>

While Nicholas does say that the discovery of Bagathan and Thares' plot was brought about by God's providence, this is not a means of evading an exploration of what happened in more concrete terms. Esther's reticence about her nationality is due to Mordechai's command to her mentioned in a previous verse; this reticence might have jeopardised her new status as queen, but the foolish traitors spoke about killing the king in a dialect known to Mordechai. Unfortunately, Nicholas's hard work amongst the "Hebrew and Latin glosses" did not provide him with any information for why these men wanted to kill the king; but the Hebrew original has at least, according to Nicholas, clarified what their employment was, which makes better sense of how they were planning to carry out their treacherous intention.

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<sup>68</sup> Rashi says it became known to Mordechai because "they were discussing their affairs before him in the Tarsean language, and they did not know that Mordecai was familiar with seventy languages, for he was one of those who sat in the Chamber of Hewn Stone."

ויוודע הדבר למרדכי: שהיו מספרים דבריהם לפניו בלשון תורסי, ואין יודעין שהוא מכיר בשבעים לשון, שהיה מיושבי לשכת הגזית

Rashi, *Megillat Esther*, 2.22, p. 232. The Chamber of Hewn Stone is where the Sanhedrin sat.

<sup>69</sup> Literal 2.19- 23: "*Cumque secundo.* Hic consequenter agitur de confirmatione amoris ipsius regis ad hester reginam, quod fuit ex hoc quod conservavit sibi vitam suam denunciando insidias quae sibi parabantur. Et hoc a deo factum est, ne gratia quam hester apud regem invenerat minueretur eo quod patriam suam et populum noluerat indicare, et hoc est quod dicitur: *cumque secundo quaerentur virgines* videlicet post coronationem hester simulando quod rex aliam sibi praeponere vellet, eo quod patriam et genus perdere non vellet, et sic moveretur ad indicandum ideo subditur: *Necdum prodiderat etc. iuxta mandatum eius* scilicet Mardochei cuius mandatum pro nullare volebat praeterire. *Eo igitur tempore*, quo virgines sic adducebantur, et quo mardocheus sollicitus pro hester ad portam regis morabatur. *Irati sunt Bagathan et Thares* occulte tamen machinantes in eius mortem causa tamen huius machinationis non exprimitur hic nec in aliqua glossa Hebraica vel Latina quam viderim. Sed frequenter inventum est quod servi regum machinantur in mortem eorum. *Qui ianitores erant et in primo palatii limine residebant*, pro tota ista litera non est plus in Hebraeo *Custodes suppellectilis* et ratio huius diversitatis est: quia dictio Hebraica quae hic ponitur, equivoca est ad limen et suppellectilem translatio tamen nostra sequitur primam significationem, Hebrei autem sequuntur aliam cui magis concordat litera sequens, cum dicitur: *Volueruntque in regem insugere et occidere eum*. Ianitores enim palatii non sunt tante potestatis quod per arma regis possint occidere, cum habeat custodes corporis sui, nec sic intrant familiariter ad interiora quod possint sibi venenum propinare. Sed illi qui sunt custodes suppellectilis auree et argenteae in qua servitur regi possunt faciliter hoc facere, cuiusmodi erant isti, ut dicunt Hebrei: *Quod Mardocheum non latuit* dicit autem Iosephus quod hoc scivit per quemdam Hebraeum qui erat famulus valde familiaris unius illorum eunuchorum; Rabbi Solomon vero dicit quod hoc scivit, quia coram mardocheo in idiomate tharsensi de regis intoxicatione loquebantur, credentes quod mardocheus illud idioma penitus ignoraret. *Quesitum est inventum*, quod ita erat secundum veritatem. *Mandatumque est historiis et annalibus traditum coram rege*, quia propter historias communes ubi scribebantur facta notabilia quilibet rex pro tempore suo faciebat scribere unum librum in quo facta sui temporis ponebantur et hoc ad memoriam futurorum quia ex factis praeteritis diriguntur homines in agendis de futuro."

Nicholas could have provided a literal sense of this passage without any reference to divine providence, and this is frequently the way. He explains a verse contextually or by recourse to Jewish sources or the Hebrew language. The inclusion of divine providence is almost never an explanation of a specific event, but it reflects a key aspect of Nicholas's conception of the literal sense of Esther: that history, or deeds done in time, is theological, because it can never be anything but a revelation of God's action in the temporal sphere.

Nicholas's sensitivity to the causal sequence or series of events, combined with his presentation of these events as God's action or providence infuses his literal sense with a very theologically oriented view of history. Nicholas's literal sense is Hugh of St. Victor's *historia*: it is not merely the record of past events, it is the record of God's work of restoration. Several scholars have noted the importance of chronology or series in Hugh of St. Victor's conception of *historia*. Grover Zinn describes Hugh of St. Victor's goal in making the literal sense the foundation of exegesis as the "intention to understand the [biblical] text as history, as the account of an ordered series of events."<sup>70</sup>

While order and sequence is important in understanding Hugh's idea, perhaps more vital for Hugh is the idea that *historia* is the first signification of scripture (the literal sense), and specifically the record of deeds done in the past for the purpose of restoration. This last point, effectively argued by Franklin T. Harkins, reveals how deeply theological Hugh's conception of history was. *Historia* is theological because the record of any past event is nothing less than a

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<sup>70</sup> Grover A. Zinn, "Historia fundamenta est: The Role of History in the Contemplative Life according to Hugh of St. Victor," in *Contemporary Reflections on the Medieval Christian Tradition: Essays in Honor of Ray C. Petry*, ed. George H. Shriver (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1974), 138. See also 140-141.

Marie-Dominique Chenu also saw chronology, order, and series as the hallmarks of twelfth-century historical theology, which was essentially about showing God's action in human history, what today would be called Salvation History: "...le trait caractéristique d'une histoire par opposition à la connexion logique des disciplines théoriques: c'est une *series*, une succession, et une succession organisée, une continuité articulée, dont les liaisons ont un sens, qui est précisément l'objet de l'intelligibilité de l'histoire...des initiatives de Dieu dans les temps des hommes, des événements de salut... Le temps n'est donc pas seulement une durée cosmique, mais une succession historique d'événements, un *processus saeculi*: la conjonction des deux mots *mundus* et *saeculum* souligne la dimension humaine, voire religieuse *decurrentibus temporibus usque ad finem saeculi*, de cet ordre mystérieux et intelligible..." Marie-Dominique Chenu, *La théologie au douzième siècle* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1957), 66-67.

Mark Clark argues that Comestor's *Historia Scholastica* also operates in this tradition. It is an attempt to provide an historical biblical narrative, which is the literal sense and the foundation for any further study. Mark Clark, *The Making of the Historia Scholastica*, 28-37.

manifestation of God's providence. *Historia*, or the literal sense, is the record of God's restorative acts, and it is by reading of God's work of restoration that man takes the first step in being restored himself. He passes from *historia* to *doctrina* (allegory); but it is contemplating history (i.e., God's past work) that lays the foundation for a persons restoration to grace.<sup>71</sup>

It is a similarly theological idea of history which underpins Nicholas's literal exposition of Esther. The literal sense acquires a theological value in its own right, not in spite of but rooted in the causal sequence of events which the *divisio textus* carefully reveals. The order of the narrative reflects the orderliness of God's providence, which is the point of history, and the fundamental literal sense of Esther.

There is one moment in the text when Nicholas does seem to depart from what I have described. The record of Mordechai's and Esther's deeds in the king's books is ultimately important in Haman's downfall. The night before Haman plans to hang Mordechai on the gibbet, Ahasuerus reads the record of Mordechai's deeds and chooses to reward him immediately, effectively removing him from the sphere of Haman's malice. Nicholas does explain the king's sleeplessness explicitly as an act of divine providence: "this [the king's sleeplessness] was arranged by God," Nicholas says, "so that the death of Mordechai, which had been planned for the next day, might be prevented."<sup>72</sup> The king cannot sleep, so he asks for the record of his reign to be read to him, because as Josephus says he wanted to spend his vigil profitably. They open to the place which tells of Mordechai's uncovering of the plot against the king, and "God arranged it to happen this way" Nicholas says, "so that Mordechai's righteousness would be rewarded while Haman's pride would be confounded."<sup>73</sup> No other

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<sup>71</sup> Franklin T. Harkins, *Reading and the Work of Restoration: History and Scripture in the Theology of Hugh of St. Victor* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2009), ch. 3, see esp. pp. 145, 159, 178, 180, 183. Chapter 4 examines how the movement from *historia* to *doctrina* is a movement from literal to allegorical in Hugh's exegesis.

<sup>72</sup> Literal 6.1: "*Noctem illam duxit rex insomnem. Quod a Deo factum est ut mors Mardochei disposita in crastino impediretur.*"

<sup>73</sup> Literal 6.1-2: "*Inssitque sibi affere historias etc. quia sicut dicit Iosephus vigiliam illam nolebat transire in ocio sed expendere in aliquo utili pro regno suo et ideo fecit coram se legi facta praeterita regni sui, quia memoria praeteritorum dirigit in agendis respectu futurorum. Ventum est ad illum locum quod ordinatione divina factum est ut mardocheus iustus remuneraretur Aman autem superbus confunderetur ceterae patent usque ibi:*"

explanation for Ahasuerus's insomnia is given by Nicholas, which seems to belie my assertion above, that the reference to divine providence is arises from an attitude toward history rather than as a 'solution' for an inexplicable literal passage.

I do not think this example is really to the contrary, however. The literal meaning or first signification of these passages is not problematic or inexplicable. They do not pose any problem for Nicholas, and he could have simply said *patet littera*, "the literal meaning is obvious". That he ascribes Ahasuerus's insomnia and dutiful reading of the chronicles to God's will still, I think, arises from his attitude toward history. They are taken by him as an opportunity to remind his students that the point of history in general and Esther in particular is that it reveals God's providence. As we saw in chapter two, Rashi and the Jewish tradition in general described many of the events in Esther as miraculous, and the story as a manifestation of God's providence. Nicholas follows their lead in finding a sacred meaning for the literal sense of Esther.

These are only a few of numerous moments where Nicholas interjects the will of God into the story.<sup>74</sup> The literal meaning of the story is one of God's saving action, and every moment of the *divisio textus* relates to this essential meaning. Not only is Haman confounded, but the tables are turned, and the Jews are given permission to destroy the enemies who would have destroyed them. "Thus it is clear" Nicholas comments "that the very day Haman's lot had assigned for the killing of the Jews, it was ordained for the contrary by divine providence, namely, for the death of their enemies."<sup>75</sup> The Jews' rejoicing, Nicholas says, is so great, that people of other religions convert to Judaism, because they can see that the Jews have a provident God protecting them, "who had so suddenly and miraculously cast down their enemies and lifted them up".<sup>76</sup> At the very end of the commentary, when discussing how Mordechai made a record

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<sup>74</sup> The outline of the *divisio textus* at the start of this chapter has made a note of all these passages with an asterisk.

<sup>75</sup> Literal 8.12: "*Et constituta est per omnes provincias una ultionis dies etc, et sic patet quod eadem dies quae per sortem ipsius aman erat deputata ad interfectionem Iudeorum, per divinam providentiam ordinata est ad contrarium, scilicet, ad interfectionem suorum inimicorum.*"

<sup>76</sup> Literal 8.16: "*Iudeis autem nova... credentes quod haberent deum celi provisorem, qui tam subito et mirabili modo hostem eorum deiecerat, et eos sublevaverat.*"

of the events and solemnized the feast of Purim for the Jews, Nicholas reiterates the point again: Mordechai wrote it all down, he says, so that the Jews "would understand more clearly the divine protection which had been bestowed on them, or more importantly, so that they might know all the kindnesses bestowed by divine providence just as they are set forth in the sequence of this book, in order that they might take the fourteenth and fifteenth days as feast days"; the feast of the Jews is called Purim from the word for casting lots, because "from the will of divine providence, the lots which had been intended to cause harm to the Jews was turned to their good".<sup>77</sup>

The consistent evocation of God's ordering providence makes Nicholas's literal commentary resemble Rabbinic commentaries on the book more than any Christian commentary. The story is a particular example of a universal truth, that God is guiding the events of history. This is a standard characteristic of most prominent medieval Jewish commentaries on Esther, as discussed in the last chapter.

Also like rabbinic commentaries, Nicholas's conception of what history is allows for a literal sense which includes much that might seem extra-historical and extra-literal. He can be expansive in communicating what he believes to be Mordechai's intention in writing the book of Esther. An example of this is Nicholas's exegesis of Mordechai's conversation with Esther, preparatory to her first petition to Ahasuerus. His exegesis here demonstrates that Nicholas not only relied on the content of Jewish exegesis, he was also influenced by Jewish exegetical practices.

After the *quaestio* dealing with Mordechai's decision not to kneel, Nicholas refers his reader back to the *divisio textus*: now that everything which had to do with Haman's scheme has been dealt with (*Postquam descripta est...*), next, the text describes Esther's liberation of her people

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<sup>77</sup> Literal 9.20: "*Scipsit itaque... ut omnes clarius cognoscerent divinum beneficium eis collatum, vel potius divina beneficia prout continetur in serie huius libri, ut quartadecima et XV diem pro festis*"; Literal 9.26: "... et propter hoc appellati sunt dies sortium in plurali, et ex facto divine providentie que sortem illam ordinatam ad malum Iudeorum convertit in bonum ipsorum."

(*hic consequenter describitur...*). Esther liberates her people by her petition(s) to Ahasuerus. This has two aspects: first there is the preparation for Esther's petition, then the petition itself. There are three preparatory aspects of Esther's petition: first Mordechai's lamentation, then his conversation with the queen, then the prayer of the Jewish community.<sup>78</sup>

Mordechai's lamentation is a result of becoming aware of the edict regarding the destruction of the Jews hung up all around Shushan. Esther 4.1 reads: *Now when Mordechai had heard these things he rent his garments and put on sackcloth, and cried in a loud voice.* Nicholas intersperses this verse with short comments attempting an exposition of Mordechai's feeling at this calamity:

*Now when Mordechai had heard these things.* When he heard about the condemnation of the Jews by the publication of the edict, which was told about before. *He rent his garments,* as a sign of his sorrow, *and put on sackcloth,* as a sign of his humility, *and cried in a loud voice,* because of the condemnation of the innocent.<sup>79</sup>

Mordechai goes immediately to the palace, but he cannot enter even the outer court of the palace in sackcloth, so he sends a messenger to Esther to tell her what has happened. Nicholas says that Mordechai's conversation or admonition of the queen takes place in two stages of two parts each: the first admonition (Mordechai tells Esther that she must intercede on behalf of her people), and Esther's response (she dare not go to the king unless she is summoned). Then there is the second admonition and Esther's response. Nicholas's portrayal of this second conversation is modelled on a specifically Jewish exegetical practice.

In the biblical text itself, Mordechai and Esther are communicating with each other by Esther's messenger Athach, because Mordechai cannot enter the palace in sackcloth and ashes.

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<sup>78</sup> Literal 4.1: "*Que cum audisset...* Postquam descripta est contra populum Iudaicum Aman machinatio, hic consequenter describitur eiusdem populi liberatio, quae facta est per petitionem regine hester. Circa quod sic proceditur quia primo ponitur petitionis dispositio praevia, secundo petitio ipsa capitulum quinque. Circa primum primo ponitur Mardochei lamentatio; secundo regine monitio, ibi: *Egressusque Athac*; tertio communis oratio, ibi *Rursumque*."

"*Now when Mordechai had heard these things.* After describing Haman's plot against the Jewish people, the liberation of that same people is described next; and this is brought about by Esther's petition. This is told in two steps: first prior arrangements for the petition are made, and then the petition itself is made in chapter five. About the prior arrangements: first there is Mordechai's lamentation; then his warning to the queen at the passage which begins *and Athach going out*; third, the prayer of the community at the passage which begins *and again Esther sent to*."

<sup>79</sup> Literal 4.1: "*Que cum audisset mardocheus,* scilicet, condemnatione Iudeorum praedictam per edicti publicationem, ut praedictum est. *Scidit vestimenta sua,* in signum doloris. *Et indutus est sacco,* in signum humiliationis, *Voce magna clamabat,* propter innocentium condemnationem."

Mordechai is outside the palace, Esther is within. Mordechai tells Athach to exhort Esther to go to the King and plead for her people. Esther sends word that she is afraid to go: she has not been summoned, and to go before the Ahasuerus without being called would mean death. The passage following this reads: *He [Mordechai] sent word to Esther again, saying: Think not that thou mayest save thy life only, because thou art in the king's house, more than all the Jews: For if thou wilt now hold thy peace, the Jews shall be delivered by some other occasion: and thou, and thy father's house shall perish. And who knoweth whether thou art not therefore come to the kingdom, that thou mightest be ready in such a time as this?*<sup>80</sup>

Nicholas takes this message from Mordechai and greatly expands it, interweaving Mordechai's words with an interpretation of them, and ascribing to Mordechai a direct recognition of God's saving action:

*Think not that thou mayest save thy life only, from the sentence that has been given against the Jews, because you are queen. For if thou wilt now hold thy peace, for your own life, as you are thinking of doing, the Jews shall be delivered by some other occasion, because God has many ways of freeing his servants, and thou and thy father's house shall perish, by divine justice, because you neglected your people now, and who knowest whether [thou art not therefore come to the kingdom] that thou might be ready in such a time as this? that is, a time of affliction for your people, that they might be freed by you?*

It was as though he said: in the beginning, your promotion was not understood by anyone, but the reason becomes clear in its effect: your promotion to the kingdom was brought about by God so that you might free your people.<sup>81</sup>

The *quasi dicat* ("it is as though he said:") introduces a short summary of the exegesis from the perspective of Mordechai, whose actual words to the queen have already been substantially expanded upon.

The manner in which Nicholas gets his point across by putting his own interpretation into Mordechai's mouth is a very rabbinic practice, reminiscent of the Esther Rabbah examined

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<sup>80</sup> DRB 4.13-14.

<sup>81</sup> Literal 4.13-14: "*Ne putes quod animam tuam tamen liberet a sententia contra Iudeos data, per hoc quod tu es regina: Si enim nunc silberis de vita tua tantum cogitans per aliam occasionem liberabuntur Iudei quod Deus habet multos modos servos suos liberandi, et tu et domus patris tui peribitis, divina iusticia, eo quod populum tuum neglexeris. Et quis novit utrum etc. ut in tali tempore parareris id est in afflictione populi tui ut per te liberaretur. Quasi dicat: a principio tue promotionis nullus hoc cognovit, sed modo per effectum patet, quia a deo facta est tua promotio ad regnum ut liberet populum tuum.*"

in the last chapter, or Rashi's exegesis (which was itself often derived from rabbinic sources).<sup>82</sup>

The time Nicholas spent with his Jewish sources influenced his method of providing a literal/historical sense. Like Rashi, he puts pious words into Mordechai's mouth. It is another way of communicating that just like Mordechai, the author of Esther, recognized God's saving work in his situation, so too should the reader recognize it.

We have seen that the content of Jewish exegesis is the preferred source of historical insight for the literal sense of the book of Esther. Jewish sources influence Nicholas's literal sense throughout the commentary. They provide the best explanation of Ahasuerus's identity; they make sense of Vashti's refusal and Ahasuerus's efforts in replacing her; they vindicate Mordechai and safeguard his status as the quintessential righteous man; and they provide Nicholas a model of interjecting comments on the providential action of God into a narrative devoid of his name. At the turning point of the narrative, when Esther makes her first petition, Nicholas includes an exegesis which is not derived from any Jewish source that I have been able to find (Nicholas does not ascribe it to any source); but it is made in a very Jewish way. This indicates that perhaps it was not only the content of Nicholas's literal sense but even his method at arriving at or presenting the literal meaning which was influenced by his recourse to Jewish sources.

### **A Theology of History and the Elevation of the Literal Sense**

What conclusions can be drawn from this analysis of Nicholas's literal sense of Esther? Previous Christian exegesis on the book of Esther, as we saw, proceeded by investing atemporal imagery with spiritual significance. Ahasuerus and the others are timeless 'types' or 'figures' which teach doctrinal truths of the faith. For Nicholas, the literal sense of Esther has its own religious

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<sup>82</sup> For a more detailed look at Rashi's exegesis on Ketuvim specifically see Grossman, *Rashi*, ch. 5. Grossman points out that when Rashi explores the emotions and motivations of biblical characters, he is often interweaving midrash with the plain meaning. Grossman notes that some 25% of Rashi's commentary is taken from rabbinic midrash, and functions in a variety of ways one of which is to "broaden the narrative background for the actions and motives of the protagonists."

significance rooted in its happening in actual fact. It is an inspired record of God's providential action on behalf of his people. The *divisio textus* provides the literal sense with a structure from which various questions of historiography or ambiguities in language can be addressed and related to this essential literal meaning of Esther. Like Hugh of St. Victor and his school, Nicholas understands history as a record of God's action in the past, essential to understanding his plan of salvation. Like his Jewish sources, Nicholas sees Esther as a story of God's saving providence in history. This becomes the foundation for his spiritual commentary, as we will see in the next chapter.

## Chapter Four: Nicholas's Moral Sense of Esther

Nicholas's purpose in his literal interpretation is to show how Mordechai's record of the events which took place in the reign of Ahasuerus reveal a concrete and specific example of God's providential action in history. Nicholas's *divisio textus* is an implicit argument for an order in the narrative, an order Nicholas believes was intended by the human scribe, Mordechai, who is trying to capture or reflect in his written record the perceived fact that the Jews' deliverance was only possible because God arranged all things in such a way that his people, the Jews, would be protected from their enemies. This theological attitude toward history gives the literal/historical sense theological value in its own right. Jewish sources play an essential role in providing this theological and historical literal sense of Esther.

The next step is to look at the spiritual commentary, to determine if Nicholas's new approach in the literal sense is concomitant with any significant innovations in the so-called 'moral' commentary. This is the focus of the final chapter. Are the scholarly interests which influenced Nicholas's recourse to Jewish sources in the literal also manifest in his second commentary? Is the result a moral commentary substantially different from the standard allegorical interpretation? To initiate an analysis of Nicholas's spiritual interpretation on Esther, it will be helpful to begin with the latter question, and to situate Nicholas's second commentary on Esther in relation to the standard Christian allegory, that is, the interpretation which originated with Rabanus, was widely disseminated in the Gloss, and repeated by Hugh of St. Cher.

### 4.1: Vashti as the Synagogue

The analysis of Rabanus in chapter two demonstrated that for the Carolingian exegete (and the Gloss), the spiritual meaning of Esther is that it teaches the idea that the Jewish people and their religion, sometimes designated 'Jewish people', sometimes 'Synagogue', have been replaced by

the Christian people and the Christian religion, designated 'Church', often 'Church of the Gentiles'. The Jews read the Bible "incorrectly" because they read it literally and not spiritually.

This interpretation is given priority by Rabanus, who sees it as the sacramental (hidden) but more essential meaning of the story. A few centuries later, the interlinear glosses weave this understanding into the text of Esther itself.

This idea of a transfer of authority and privilege from Synagogue to Church, while evident throughout the commentary, is introduced in the allegorical identities Rabanus provides for Esther and Vashti. Ahasuerus is allegorised as Christ; Vashti is the Jewish people. Vashti is put aside for Esther (the Church) just as the Synagogue/Jews are put aside for the Church/Christians. This involves a characterisation of Vashti/Synagogue as contemptuous, proud, bitter, and jealous. The contrast between Church and Synagogue carries a particularly fierce invective in the allegorical identity of Haman. Haman is also allegorised as the Jews who persecuted Christians, or persecutors in general. This involves a characterisation of the Jews as iniquitous and hateful toward Christ and his followers.

Compare the basic aspects of this interpretation with Nicholas, who says:

By King Ahasuerus Christ is signified, first by reason of interpretation. For 'Ahasuerus' is interpreted 'blessed'. Christ however is not only blessed, but the blessedness of other holy people. Second, by reason of his kingly dignity, because Christ is not only king, but king of kings and lord of lordship as it says in Apocalypse 19.<sup>1</sup>

King Ahasuerus, Nicholas says, signifies Christ the King. Vashti is understood as the Synagogue:

*Vashti*. By her the synagogue is understood, for [Vashti] means 'completed.' Now, the synagogue was brought to completion with the passion of Christ, for from that time these legal observances were dead, and after the publication of the

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<sup>1</sup> Moral Esther 1.1: "*In Diebus Assueri...* Igitur per regem Assuerum Christus significatur, primo ratione interpretationis. Nam Assuerus interpretatur beatus: Christus autem non solum beatus est, sed etiam sanctorum aliorum beatitudo. Secundo ratione regiae dignitatis, quia Christus non solum est rex sed etiam rex regum, et dominus dominantium, ut dicitur Apocalypsis 19." Cf. Revelation 19.16.

Unfortunately, as with Rabanus, I have not been able to discover where Nicholas found the supposed meaning for the names of Ahasuerus, Esther, Mordechai, or Haman. They are not the *Etymologiae* of Isidore of Seville, nor are they in Jerome's *Interpretation of Hebrew Names*, common sources for claims like these. It would seem unlike Nicholas to make the meaning up. I consulted the following editions: Isidore of Seville, *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville*, ed. Stephen A. Barney (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Hieronimus, *Liber interpretationis hebraicorum nominum*, ed. P. le Degarde CCSL 72 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1959), 59-161. Jerome does not include any interpretations for names in the book of Esther.

Gospels they were deadly. In the meantime, these laws could be observed by the Jews. Therefore it adds: *Made a feast. In offering sacrifices...In the palace. In the temple, where Divine answers were given before the time of Christ's passion.*<sup>2</sup>

So far, Nicholas appears to be following the allegory of Rabanus. Vashti is understood as the Synagogue of the Jews, who offered sacrifices in the temple which became obsolete after the time of Christ's passion. Similarly, he allegorises Esther as the Church, but, and this is an important hint of differences to follow, Esther might also be an allegory for Mary, the mother of God:

*Let virgins be sought etc.* Although any person who perseveres in the integrity of the faith is called a virgin and the bride of God, the Church, as the assembly of such persons, is called the beloved bride of God, and this is signified in the Song of Songs 6:7-8 where it says: *There are threescore queens, and fourscore concubines, and young maidens without number. One is my dove, my perfect one is but one.* Therefore each virgin who was sought for the king signifies one of the individual faithful, but by Esther who was pre-elected the Church is signified. And the messengers who were sent to find them signify the apostles and other preachers.

It is possible also that Esther designates the Virgin Mary and the messengers the angels who visited her, especially the angel Gabriel who was sent to her specifically in Luke 1.<sup>3</sup>

The significance of the allegory concerning the Virgin Mary will be discussed below. Putting that aside, it seems that in its fundamental aspects Nicholas repeats the standard Christian allegory:

Ahasuerus is Christ and Vashti is the Synagogue, who is put aside for Esther, the Church.

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<sup>2</sup> Moral Esther 1.9: "*Vashti*. Per istam intelligitur synagoga, nam interpretatur diffinitio consummata, finis autem synagogae consummatus fuit in Christi passione, nam ex tunc legalia fuerunt mortua, et post publicationem evangelii mortifera: tempore tamen inter medio a Iudaeis poterant observari, ideo subditur: *fecit convivium* in oblatione sacrificiorum... *In palatia* in templo quo dabantur divina responsa ante passionis Christi tempora."

<sup>3</sup> Moral Esther 2.2-3: "*Quaerantur regi puellae virgines ac speciosae, et mittantur qui confiderent etc.* Quamvis autem quaelibet persona perseverans in integritate fidei virgo dicatur et Dei sponsa, tamen ecclesia ex personis talibus congregata dicitur sponsa Dei praedilecta et hoc significatur Canticum 7 cum dicitur: *Sexaginta sunt reginae, et octuaginta concubinae, et adolescentularum non est numerus. Una est columba, mea perfecta mea.* Igitur per singulas virgines quaesitas pro rege significantur singulae fideles personae, sed per Esther quae fuit prae electa, signatur ecclesia, et per nuntios ad quaerendum missos apostoli et praedicatorum alii. Potest etiam per Esther virgo Maria designari et per nuntios angeli eam visitantes, et specialiter Gabriel angelus ad eam specialiter destinatus Lucae 1."

Imagery from the *Song of Songs* had long been used in ecclesial discourse on the nature of the Church and the Church's relationship to God. Interestingly, Nicholas understood the literal meaning of the *Song* to be about Christ and his people, first the Synagogue and then the Church. The first part of the *Song* is a parable for God's relationship with the Jewish people, through all the vicissitudes and triumphs written of in the Old Testament. The second part of the book is a parable for the Christian Church. See the introduction by James Kiecker in *The Pastilla of Nicholas of Lyra on the Song of Songs*, edited and translated James George. Kiecker (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1998). See also Mary Dove, "Literal Senses in the Song of Songs", in Krey and Smith.

This is less straightforward than it seems however. In its finer details there are many subtle but important differences between the Carolingian's and the Franciscan's allegories of Vashti as Synagogue and Esther as the Church. The weight of these differences will be more strongly felt when the overall trajectory of Nicholas's moral commentary has been explored, and especially in his exegesis of Haman. Before attempting any further comparison of Nicholas and Rabanus on their representation of Vashti and Esther, therefore, I will give an overview of the content of Nicholas's moral commentary. What becomes clear immediately is that Nicholas's interest in history, and his theological attitude toward history, is just as present in his moral as in his literal commentary on Esther. More than this, Nicholas's approach is firmly rooted in a specifically Franciscan approach to Church history which is deeply theological and sacramental, as I will discuss.

#### **4.2: History by Analogy: the Second Historical Sense of Esther**

In what follows, I will show how Nicholas's spiritual interpretation of Esther tells a chronological story of the history of the Church, beginning with the apostles and ending, astonishingly, with Godfrey of Bouillon (1060-1100), the first Christian ruler of Jerusalem, a kingdom established by Christian victories in the First Crusade (1096-1099). Nicholas's allegory has a tropological edge, and reflects many ecclesial ideas and assumptions. These aspects of the commentary will be put aside for now, but I will discuss their significance later in this chapter. Here I will focus simply on a few representative aspects of Nicholas's allegory of the book of Esther as Church history, exploring some of the sources and ideas which underpin it.

His allegory begins with the apostolic period, which includes allegories about Peter, Paul, and Barnabas. It will become apparent in this first part of Nicholas's commentary that the allegory of Vashti as the Synagogue, and other references to Jews in the moral commentary, are historically specific and not made with reference to the Jewish people in general. After dealing with the apostles, certain aspects of the history of the early Church are presented. Nicholas's

exegesis here draws upon and is influenced by hagiographies and early-medieval chronicles. It revolves primarily around wicked Roman emperors and the Christians they persecuted. It is significant that the allegory proceeds primarily by analogy between historical events in this period of the Church's history and the events which took place in the book of Esther. Finally, the allegory concludes with the more recent past, the establishment of the Holy Roman Empire and the victories of Charlemagne and Godfrey of Bouillon against enemies of the Church. Throughout his moral postilla on Esther, Nicholas makes it clear that, like the literal, the purpose of his exegesis is to reflect on God's providential action in history, on his establishing and strengthening his Church. After illustrating this chronology in Nicholas's commentary I will discuss how this is a specifically Franciscan approach to historiography.

#### **4.2.a: Apostolic Period: the Church is founded**

It is apparent from the start of Nicholas's moral commentary that he does not allegorise Vashti as the Jews in general, but anchors his allegory in a specific moment in time. When Nicholas begins his spiritual interpretation of Esther by identifying Ahasuerus as Christ and Vashti as the Synagogue, it is because "Vashti" means "completed": the Synagogue was "brought to completion" (*consummatum fuit*) with Christ's passion. This is the historic moment of the founding of the Church of Christ. The law and the prophets are fulfilled in him and so the time of the Synagogue is "completed".

Nicholas emphasises this by saying that the seventh day of the feast, when Ahasuerus invites Vashti to come to him, represents the seventh week after Easter (*hebdomada septima post pascham*) when the Holy Spirit descended on the apostles and initiated the Church. It is in this context that Vashti's refusal to come is interpreted: Mamuchan and Bazatha, the two servants sent to summon Vashti, signify the apostles. These apostles, after the descent of the Holy Spirit,

first preached the Gospel to the Jews, as the book the Acts of the Apostles records. Nicholas comments:

Christ commanded [the apostles] to call the people and the leaders of the Synagogue to the banquet of the new testament, on account of which Paul and Barnabas say to the Jews in Acts 13.46-47: *To you it behoved us first to speak the word of God: but because you reject it and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold we turn to the Gentiles. For so the Lord hath commanded us.* And this 'rejection' is signified by what follows:  
*But she refused.* And on account of her contempt for the preaching of the apostles, Jesus Christ the king of kings dismissed the Synagogue primarily for her unbelief.<sup>4</sup>

It is confusing that Nicholas, who spent so much time in the literal commentary explaining that Vashti was *not* being contemptuous, repeats Rabanus's standard interpretation here. It raises interesting questions about how Nicholas conceived the literal being the 'foundation' for the allegorical interpretation, questions for which I have no definitive answer. I will analyse some of the details in this passage when I return to the comparison of Nicholas and Rabanus on the question of Vashti's identity. For now, the element of Nicholas's allegory most worth noting is a temporal one: while Rabanus turns Vashti's rejection into an allegory for the Jewish people in general, emphasising that it is the Jewish people (*plebs Iudaica*) who reject Christ himself, Nicholas situates the Vashti allegory in the specific context of events recorded in the Acts of the Apostles, a perceived historical moment.<sup>5</sup> After the Holy Spirit descended on them (cf. Acts 2), the

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<sup>4</sup> Moral Esther 1.10-12: "*Itaque die septimo. Christus vocare populos et principaliter synagogam ad conuiuium novi testamenti propter quod Paulus et Barnabas dixerunt Iudaeis Actus 13 Vobis oportebat primum loqui verbum Dei: sed quoniam repellitis illud, et indignos vos indicatis aeterna vita, ecce conuertimur ad gentes, sic enim praecepit nobis Deus.* Et haec repulsio signatur per hoc quod subditur.

*Quae renuit* et propter contemptum praedicationis apostolorum Iesus Christus rex regum synagogam pro maiori parte in incredulitate dimisit."

<sup>5</sup> The first part of the book of the Acts of the Apostles picks up from the end of Luke's Gospel account, and the general scholarly opinion is that Luke authored both. The end of Luke's Gospel relates how before he ascended into heaven to be seated in glory at the right hand of the Father, Christ promised to send the Holy Spirit to his followers, who would be empowered by this Spirit to spread the Gospel of Christ to the ends of the world. The first two chapters of Acts describes this descent of the Holy Spirit, and the initial preaching of Peter and the other apostles. The first part of the book details the activities and preaching of early Christian communities in Jerusalem. The second half introduces Paul. The second half of Acts primarily records the deeds of Paul and his helper Barnabas. The entire book details many encounters between the apostles of Christ and the leaders of the Jewish communities from which they emerged, the ones to whom the apostles first preached. In both the book of Acts, and the Epistles of Paul, there is evidence of tension between the Jewish Christian communities and emerging Gentile Christian communities, a tension which coalesced around the need to observe the precepts of Jewish Law. While certainly a work of theology, arguing a particular religious view, the book of Acts includes many historical elements and

apostles began to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ openly, and they did so first in the synagogues, to the Jewish communities of which they were members. The passage quoted by Nicholas from Acts details how Paul and Barnabas are preaching in synagogues, and many Jews are following them. The 'leaders' of the Jews are described as envious, and speak out against the disciples. Paul's response is that passage quoted by Nicholas.

Vashti's contempt represents the rejection of the 'Synagogue', i.e., the leaders of the Jews, at a particular moment in time. The disciples' response is to turn to the Gentiles. The preaching to the Jews was one moment in a series of moments which saw the early spread of Christianity. This comment on Vashti's rejection, allegorised in the context of the Acts of the Apostles, links very closely with Nicholas's comment a few passages later, concerning Bagathan and Thares, the eunuchs who attempted to kill King Ahasuerus and whom Mordechai denounced to Esther.

These two, Nicholas says, are an allegory for the Pharisees and the Sadducees, "who, after the ascension of Christ, sought to kill him in his members, and to completely blot out the name of Christ, as is clear from Acts 8 and several other passages of the same book."<sup>6</sup> Mordechai, who denounced their malice to Esther, is a symbol for Peter, who denounced to the Church the malice of those who would destroy the people of God.<sup>7</sup> This is the only other context in which Jews appear in Nicholas's moral postilla on Esther. The portrayed malice of the Jews who opposed the apostles is much in evidence, but once again the allegory is anchored in a

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provides an account of the activities of the earliest Christian communities. For more information see A. E. Harvey, "The Acts of the Apostles" In *A Companion to the New Testament* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 386-485. See also Mikael C. Parsons, "The Third Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles" in *The Cambridge Companion to the New Testament*, ed. Patrick Gray (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 134-154.

<sup>6</sup> Moral Esther 2.21: "*Eo igitur*. Per duos eunuchos qui voluerunt regem interficere, significati fuerunt Pharisei et Saducaei, qui post ascensionem Christi quaesierunt ipsum in membris fuit occidere, et nomen Christi eius penitus delere, ut patet Actus 8 et aliis eiusdem libri pluribus locis." Cf. Acts 8, which comes immediately after the stoning of Stephen and describes a "great persecution of the Church in Jerusalem" a persecution primarily at the hands of Saul; however, Nicholas quotes a passage in this comment (but not included above) is actually from Acts 4:23: *When they were released, they came to their own and they announced to them how much the chief priests and elders had spoken to them*. This happens after Peter and John are released after being questioned by the Pharisees and the High Priests and, returning to their friends, they relate what happened to them.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Acts 4.

particular moment in time, in a particular instance of conflict between the leaders of Jewish and Christian communities recorded in the book of Acts.

Now, Rabanus allegorises Bagathan and Thares as the Scribes and Pharisees also: "what could these two eunuchs designate," Rabanus says, "except the scribes and pharisees of the Jews, of whom it was said that they had the key to knowledge but would not enter and would not permit anyone else to enter either."<sup>8</sup> Giving the allegory a particularly polemical twist, Rabanus goes on to mention various points in the Gospel accounts when the Scribes, Pharisees, and Herodians plot to destroy Jesus, ultimately succeeding in bringing about his crucifixion. This interpretation is significantly absent from Nicholas's spiritual interpretation. Nowhere in his commentary does Nicholas describe the Jews as killers of Christ.

The initial, illuminating feature of Nicholas's moral commentary which we see here is his interest in telling a story, through allegory, of specific moments in the history of the early Church. Unlike the standard interpretation, Vashti's rejection is not a symbol of the Jews as such, who rejected (and, the implication is, continue to reject) Christ and are replaced by the Church; Bagathan and Thares are not an allegory for those many instances in the Gospels where the Pharisees and Sadducees plot against Christ. Vashti's rejection is allegorised as a particular historical moment, as are the Pharisees and Sadducees.

The decrease (even absence) of anti-Jewish polemic in Nicholas's spiritual interpretation, while striking when compared to Rabanus and the Gloss, is not from an impulse we might today describe as ecumenical. Nicholas makes it clear in many contexts that he thought the Jews simply got it wrong when it came to Christ's messiahship, and he asserts here that their law and sacrifices have been definitively "completed". What the above analysis demonstrates however is that unlike Rabanus and the Gloss, Nicholas apparently felt no need to be polemical about this. His interest in the moral commentary on Esther is to reflect on the history of the Church, and he

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<sup>8</sup> "Quid per hos duos eunuchos...nisi Scribae et Pharisaei designantur Judaeorum, de quibus dictum est quod habentes clavem scientiae, nec ipsi introierunt, nec alios introire permiserunt." PL 109: 0650d-0651a. Cf. the interlinear gloss on Esther 2.21.

begins with this history as recorded in the book of Acts. Jews function in his commentary exclusively in this historical context. We saw in chapter one that he gave a rational defence of Jewish "unbelief", and he makes no statements in his moral commentary about Jews in general or contemporary Jews.

#### 4.2.b: The History of the Early Church

So far, Nicholas has kept his allegory within the context of the New Testament. His emphasis is not on the life of Christ, however, but on the story of the early Church recorded in the book of Acts. When Haman enters the Esther narrative, Nicholas introduces an allegory which departs from the context of inspired scripture:

After the persecution of the Jews, the persecution by the leading men of the Romans ensued. The Romans endeavoured in many ways to destroy the name of Christ and to kill Christians. Therefore, by Haman, whose name is interpreted 'wickedness', one might understand the most iniquitous Nero, whom the king of kings exalted to the highest place in the Roman empire (for all power comes from God) as it says in Proverbs 8:15: *by me kings reign*. The empire was legitimate, and so people subject to the Romans venerated Nero as emperor. Now by Mordechai, who did not wish to kneel before Haman, Peter the apostle is signified, and any of his good successors, indeed, any Christian who did not wish to obey the commands of the sacrilegious leaders, on account of which these same leaders persecuted the Church severely, the first persecution having been stirred up by Nero.<sup>9</sup>

Here, Nicholas introduces post-biblical history into his allegorical interpretation of Esther, the history of the Church.

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<sup>9</sup> Moral Esther 3.1: "*Post haec rex Assuerus etc.* Post persecutionem Iudaeorum secuta est persecutio principum Romanorum, qui multum conati fuerunt nomen Christi delere et Christianos interficere. Igitur per Aman qui interpretatur iniquitas, potest Nero nequissimus intellegi, quem rex regum exaltavit ad sublimitatem imperii Romani. Nam omnis potestas a Deo est, Proverbus 8: *Per me reges regnant*. Et propter dignitatem imperii venerabantur Neronem populi Romanis subiecti. Per Mardocheum autem qui coram Aman noluit genuaflectere significatur Petrus apostolus, et quicumque successor eius bonus imo etiam quilibet eius Christianus qui sacrilegis principum mandatis noluerunt obedire, propter quod dicti sacrilegi persecuti sunt graviter ecclesiam, excitata tamen fuit prima persecutio per Neronem." Isidore of Seville says that Haman signifies 'wickedness'. See Isidore of Seville, *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville*, ed. and trans. Stephen A. Barney (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 137.

Nicholas allegorises Haman as Nero (37-68), Roman emperor and an (in)famous persecutor of the early Church.<sup>10</sup> The 'fittingness' of the allegory is in the meaning of Haman's name and a sort of analogy between Haman and Nero. In a comment which reminds us of Nicholas's discussion of legitimate power in the literal postilla, Nicholas notes that all power comes from God: Nero's reign was legitimate, just as Haman's had been, but they had wicked designs for their power. Just as Mordechai recognised Haman's idolatrous intentions and in consequence did not wish to kneel to him, so too Peter, and many other worthy Christians, did not follow the desires of the sacrilegious Roman. Mordechai and St. Peter, Nicholas discovers, had something in common: they were persecuted by those with legitimate, God given authority because those corrupt authorities had blasphemous and idolatrous schemes.

It is no longer the case that the Old Testament references things in the New Testament; here, the story of Esther can be allegorised to refer to events in the history of the early Church. Might the influence of Hugh of St. Victor be discerned here? Hugh had divided all of Sacred Scripture into two testaments of three parts each: the Old Testament with the Law, Prophets,

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<sup>10</sup> Final emperor of the Julio-Claudian dynasty which he brought to a crashing conclusion, the deeply complex and frequently re-evaluated emperor Nero became a classic villain in the medieval Christian imagination for his persecution of Christians and supposedly false accusations that Christians set the fire which destroyed huge sections of Rome in 64 C.E. For an introduction to the complex and diverse considerations of the 'Neronian Age' see the collection of papers in *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Nero*, ed. Shadi Bartsch, Kirk Freudenburg, and Cedric Littlewood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017). The article by John Pollini, "Burning Rome, Burning Christians", argues that it might actually have been Christians who started the fire which burned huge sections of central Rome.

Tacitus (56-120) and Suetonius (69-122), imperial historians, both include in their (largely condemnatory) record of Nero's reign stories of gruesome and torturous executions of Christians taking place in the emperor's pleasure gardens. For a discussion of Christian persecution under Nero, see Wolfram Kinzig "Persecutions in Rome under Nero and Domitian" in *Christian Persecution in Antiquity* trans. Markus Bockmuehl (Waco Texas: Baylor University Press, 2021); originally published in German: Wolfram Kinzig, *Christenverfolgung in der Antike* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2019). Kinzig, although aware that much of his source material is martyrology (and therefore hortatory in nature), nevertheless believes that these sources basically reflect fact. Other scholars consider that the persecutions were a myth, or at least vastly exaggerated. For one argument among many, see: Brent D. Shaw, "The Myth of the Neronian Persecution" in *The Journal of Roman Studies* 105 (2015): 73-100. The important thing for this thesis is that Nicholas would certainly have accepted that the stories of these martyrs were true, and that Nero was indeed a wicked persecutor of Christians. He was known to a Christian posterity as the first Pagan persecutor of Christianity, and the proliferation of martyrologies and hagiographies which detail the stories of the Christians who were thought to have lost their lives due to his wickedness shaped the medieval perception of him. For more on these early sources, see Timothy David Barnes, *Early Christian Hagiography and Roman History*, 2nd revised edition (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016), ch. 2.

and Hagiographies, and the New Testament with the Gospels, apostles, and Fathers.<sup>11</sup> Extending Sacred Scripture to include the Fathers, specifying figures like Bede who wrote chronicles, histories, and hagiographies, was an innovation on Hugh's part; and here we find Nicholas using hagiographical material to extend his own allegory of Esther.

Reading through Nicholas's moral commentary so far, we have certain mile-markers, as it were, in a simple and standard chronology of the history of the early Church: Vashti is an allegory for the Synagogue, which is completed when Christ came, ushering in the age of the Church (Esther); Vashti's refusal to come to the feast is like the refusal of the leaders of the Jews to listen to the Gospel message of Peter and Paul, which resulted in their turning to the Gentiles; Bagathan and Thares are symbols for the Pharisees and Sadducees, who are spoken of in the book of Acts as persecuting the very earliest Christian communities (which were still primarily Jewish); after this early persecution, Nero persecuted the Christians, because many of them, including St. Peter, refused to obey his sacrilegious commands. This is symbolized, according to Nicholas, by Mordechai's refusal to kneel and Haman's consequent hatred of him.

Nicholas does not allegorise Haman as the Jews, and it is not simply that he is a symbol of a general persecutor. Nicholas tries to anchor his allegory in concrete aspects of the story in the book of Esther which in his perception correspond in some way with the story of the Church. Haman's authority was legitimate; so was Nero's. Haman was idolatrous and blasphemous, which is why Mordechai could not fall in with his wishes, even though it put the lives of the Jews at risk. Similarly, Peter could not obey the idolatrous commands of Nero, and the Christian communities were in consequence persecuted. Nicholas attempts to build his allegory by analogy.

This allows for a certain fluidity in the spiritual interpretation. Other aspects of the events in Esther allow Nicholas to draw different parallels, and to provide new allegorical

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<sup>11</sup> Hugh of St. Victor, *Didascalicon*, 103-104. The 'Fathers', according to Hugh, are "the holy Fathers and Doctors of the Church –Jerome, Augustine, Gregory, Ambrose, Isidore, Origen, Bede, and many other orthodox authors."

identities. When, for example, Haman is invited to Esther's feast along with Ahasuerus, the allegorical identities shift. Esther's feast is an allegory for the Eucharist. I will discuss the importance of the Eucharist in the moral commentary later in this chapter. The relevant point here is that because Haman is invited to Esther's feast and because the feast is the Eucharist, he becomes a fitting allegory for another wicked potentate from the early history of the Church, one who had originally been a Christian, and had therefore been called to the Eucharistic banquet, before he abandoned the faith:

Haman is called [to Esther's feast], and by him Julian the apostate is most appropriately designated, because just as [Haman] was a persecutor of the Synagogue, [Julian] was a persecutor of the Church. He was a Christian and ordained a subdeacon, and so he was called to the banquet of the Church militant and consequently to the banquet of the Church triumphant, but only potentially.<sup>12</sup>

I will discuss Julian the apostate and the place he occupied in the medieval Christian imagination in a moment, but it is worth pausing to consider Nicholas's presentation of this allegory. "Just as Haman was a persecutor of the Synagogue," Nicholas says, "Julian was a persecutor of the Church"; again, the allegory is suggested by analogy between historical events recorded of the Jewish people in the Hebrew Bible, and historical events in the history of the Church. In the history of the Jewish people, there was a moment when a man who exercised legitimate power sought to persecute and destroy them. This is analogous, in Nicholas's mind, with moments in the history of the Christian people, when men in positions of legitimate authority sought to persecute and destroy *them*. Also very striking in this passage is the use of the typological terms "Synagogue" and "Church", not in the usual comparison, contrast, or opposition, but in similarity and analogy.

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<sup>12</sup> Moral Esther 5.4: "*Obscero ut venias... Et similiter Aman vocatur, per quem conuenienter Iulianus apostata designatur qua sicut ille fuit persecutor synagogae, sic iste ecclesiae, fuit etiam Christianus et subdiaconus ordinatus et sic ad conuiuium ecclesiae militantis fuit vocatus secundum actum et per consequens ad convivium ecclesiae triumphantis, sed in potentia tantum.*"

Haman was allegorised as Nero initially because Nero was associated with idolatry. The Roman emperors wished to be worshipped as though they were gods, which was the initial cause of the conflict between Haman and Mordechai as Nicholas spends so much time demonstrating in the literal commentary. Since Esther's feast is an allegory for the Eucharist, Haman's invitation to and eventual departure from the feast means that Julian is more fittingly understood here: Julian was raised a Christian, he was invited to the Eucharist, but rejected Christianity in favour of Neoplatonism. This is further emphasized in the next comment, on Haman's leaving Esther's (first) banquet:

*So Haman went out.* By his going out of the banquet, his departure from the fellowship of Christians is signified, and because he then ascended to the Roman Empire, he is said to be *joyful and merry*; but only with an impulsive and earthly joy.<sup>13</sup>

Nicholas's allegory here is certainly forced. In the literal sense, Haman was invited to the banquet of Esther as a stratagem for his eventual undoing. Presumably any invitation to the Eucharistic banquet is a sincere invitation. Nicholas's method in the spiritual commentary is typically to illustrate perceived historical analogies, but the comparisons sometimes seem stretched by the admixture of typological aspects. Nevertheless, the internal logic is more or less clear: if in Nicholas's typological framework a banquet or a feast signifies the Eucharist, Haman's invitation suggests as an allegorical identity a wicked persecutor who was at one time a Christian and therefore invited to the Christian fellowship. Julian "the Apostate" was the classic example of a wicked Roman ruler who began as a Christian and then rejected the faith.

The change in Haman's allegorical identity also provides a new allegorical designation for Mordechai. When he leaves Esther's banquet, Haman sees Mordechai before the gates of the palace. Nicholas comments:

*And when he saw [Mordechai sitting before the gate of the palace].* In this instance, because [Mordechai] did not show Haman any reverence, Mordechai signifies the blessed

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<sup>13</sup> Moral Esther 5.9: "*Egressus est.* Per egressum a conuiuio significatur eius recessus a Christianorum consortio, et quia tunc ascendit ad Romanum imperium ideo dicitur, *laetus et alacer* tamen propter impetum et temporale gaudium."

Bishop Basil, who refused to obey the sacrilegious commands of Julian the Apostate. Because of this, Julian was angry and threatened him, that his city and his people should be destroyed when he should return from the war with Persia, just as Haman sought to hang Mordechai and to destroy the Jewish people.<sup>14</sup>

Initially, Mordechai was Peter, now he is Basil (of Caesarea). When Haman leaves Esther's feast, he is so enraged at Mordechai's refusal to reverence him that he determines upon an act of particular violence against the Jewish man, and begins to build a gibbet on which to hang him. Nicholas draws a parallel to a direct threat issued by Julian to Basil of Caesarea.

If this seems obscure or esoteric, the comments following are more so. Esther's petition at the second feast represents members of the Church praying on behalf of Bishop Basil, and Nicholas comments:

And in this way the church of Blessed Basil prayed for his counsel, that is, that he might be delivered with the people from the death that Julian the Apostate had threatened him with. And St. Mercurius was sent to kill Julian, just as Haman was hung on the gibbet prepared for Mordechai by the King's order. Would that this happened to all evil people who plot against the innocent, as Psalm 9:16 says: *Their foot hath been taken in the very snare which they hid.*<sup>15</sup>

We might wonder who St. Mercurius was, who sent him to kill Julian, whether he succeeded, and any number of other questions, which makes it obvious that in these terse comments Nicholas is assuming considerable knowledge on the part of his readers. In fact, the story of Bishop Basil and Julian the Apostate would have been perfectly familiar to Nicholas's students at the University, and probably many medieval Christians.

The often miraculous stories of saints and their spiritual and physical contests with sinners was the result of a complex process of blending and transmitting facts and fables.

Describing the textual histories of the hagiographies and martyrologies which influenced

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<sup>14</sup> Moral Esther 5.9: "*Cumque vidisset. Per istum Mardochoeum qui reuerentiam ipsi Aman non exhibuit, significatur beatus Basilius episcopus, qui mandatis Iuliani apostatae sacrilegis noluit obedire, propter quod iratus Iulianus comminatus fuit ei, quod eius ciuitatem et populum destrueret, quando de bello Persidis redieret, sicut Aman quaerebat suspendere Mardochoeum et populum perdere Iudaeorum.*"

<sup>15</sup> Moral Esther 7.3: "*Dona mihi. Sic autem petiuit ecclesia beati Basilii ad eius monitionem, scilicet ut liberaretur cum populo a morte sibi comminata per Iulianum apostatam. Et missus fuit sanctus Mercurius ad interficiendum Iulianum, sicut Aman de mandata regis suspensus fuit in patibulo quod parauerat Mardochoeum, et utinam sic accidat omnibus malum machinantibus aduersus innocentes, ut impleatur illud Psalmus novem In laqueo isto quem absconderunt, comprehensus est pes eorum.*"

Nicholas's moral commentary is well beyond the scope of this thesis, but I will trace the tradition that Nicholas inherited by briefly summarizing the medieval reception of the story of Julian the Apostate and Bishop Basil. This will help to build up a picture of how a late medieval scholar like Nicholas (and his readers) would have thought about these particular saints and sinners, and give some indication of the types of sources Nicholas was using for his moral commentary.

The Roman Emperor Julian (331-363) was Caesar of the West from 355-360. In his analysis of early Christian reception of Julian the Apostate, Peter van Nuffelen identifies three (necessarily overlapping) modes in which Christians engaged with the emperor: 1) a polemical mode, especially characteristic of the fourth century, as Christians contemporary with Julian reacted to his attempts to exclude Christianity from public life.<sup>16</sup> 2) An historical mode, as fifth-century historians began writing histories of the early Church. These were especially important in creating an historical image of Julian for posterity, which typically characterised him as a persecutor, a failed philosopher king, and linked him with magic and divination. From his image as a persecutor, there arose 3) hagiographical traditions of the confessors and martyrs whom he persecuted, including Basil of Caesarea.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> The following summary is taken from Peter van Nuffelen, "The Christian Reception of Julian" in *A Companion to Julian the Apostate*, ed. Hans-Ulrich Wiemer and Stefan Rebenich (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 360-397.

<sup>17</sup> The fifth-century histories which form the bulk of van Nuffelen's analysis are: the *Historia Ecclesiastica* of Socrates Scholasticus (ca. 439-440), a Greek historian of the early Church; the history of Sozomon (ca. 445-448); and that of Theodoret (ca. 448-450). The Latin sources for the life of Julian and Basil were based primarily based on these Greek sources, and of especially importance was Rufinus's continuation of Eusebius's history of the Church (Rufinus was writing ca. 402). As van Nuffelen illustrates, the creation of an image of Julian as persecutor was in part the result of additions and falsification to Julian's letters. Of particular importance are forged letters supposedly exchanged between Julian and Basil of Caesarea. These letters are an instance of a tradition that began to link Julian, the deserter of the faith, with Basil, a bulwark of orthodoxy. Basil of Caesarea (330-379) was the bishop of Caesarea Mazaca in Cappadocia. He was an important figure in the fight with the Arians and a supporter of the Nicene Creed. The historical image of Julian created by these histories and forged letters led to the third mode of Christian engagement with him, that of hagiography. See Nuffelen, "Christian Reception", 368-377. Scholasticus *Historical Ecclesiastica* is translated by A.C. Zenos in the *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series*, Vol. 2. ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1890). Rufinus has been translated by Philip R. Amidon, see Eusebius and Rufinus, *History of the Church*, trans. Philip R. Amidon (Washington, D.C: The Catholic University of America Press, 2016). See pp. 445-450 for Rufinus on St. Basil. See also: Hippolyte Delehaye, *Les légendes grecques des saints militaires* (Massachusetts: A. Picard, 1909), 91-101; and Basil of Caesarea, *Saint Basil: The Letters*, trans. Martin Rawson Patrick Deferrari (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1950). Another important source was certainly the Pseudo-Amphilochian *Life of St. Basil*, which was translated into Latin. Baynes traces the stages of the legend of Basil, Julian and Mercurius, which in its earliest form was probably Syrian. The Pseudo-Amphilochian *Vita* was written in the fourth century, when saints cults were still largely localised. The legend of a saint being sent from heaven to slay Julian was, in this context, directly related to saints specific to

Through these sources, Julian came to loom large in the medieval imagination as a classic foe of Christianity. Christians saw the Roman empire as a unique and essential part of the story of the building of Christendom. The conversion of Constantine, the first Christian emperor, was seen as a triumph for Christianity, while Julian was typically perceived as a "wicked apostate, tyrant, and heretic, the archetypal foe of the holy Christian community, the intimidating example of evil" in Stefan Rebenich's words.<sup>18</sup> The prominence of this image of Julian is demonstrated by its repetition in many later medieval Latin sources, including the *Legenda Aurea* (written c. 1230-1298); numerous reproductions of the *Historia Tripartita* of Cassiodorus (d. 585); the *Historia Romana* of Landolfus Sagax (c. 1000), a Lombard historian who continued the project of the seventh-century Lombard historian Paul the Deacon; and Otto, bishop of Freising, who wrote the *Chronica seu historia de duabus civitatibus* between 1143-1146.<sup>19</sup>

For a quick summary of the perception Nicholas and his audience might have had of Julian and Basil, a useful source is the *Legenda Aurea* or "Golden book of legends". This was a hugely influential compendium of saints' lives written in the 1260s by an Italian Dominican, Jacobus de Voragine.<sup>20</sup> It was based on many patristic and medieval sources, and was part of a more general thirteenth-century movement to produce aids for preachers, providing them with

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Caesarea: Basil and Mercurius. See Norman Baynes, *The Death of Julian in a Christian Legend*. (London: Society for the Promotion of Roman Studies, 2004), 25-26. See also John Wortley, "The Pseudo-Amphilochian Vita Basilii: An Apocryphal Life of Saint Basil the Great" *Florilegium (Ottawa)* 2, no. 1 (1980): 217-239.

<sup>18</sup> Stefan Rebenich, "Julian's Afterlife: The Reception of the Roman Emperor" in *A companion to Julian the Apostate* (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 399.

<sup>19</sup> Rebenich, "Julian's Afterlife", 398-401. Rebenich also notes a vernacular history written sometime in the mid twelfth-century, the *Kaiserchronik*, which details the lives of Caesars from Julius to Conrod III, and is predicated on the idea that the German Holy Roman emperors were the successors of the Roman Caesars. This sources includes the story of Mercurius slaying the wicked Julian.

<sup>20</sup> A translation of the *Legenda Aurea* was made by William Granger Ryan in 1993. A second edition was produced in 2012 with an introduction by Eamon Duffy. See Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints*, trans. William Granger Ryan (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993, 2nd edition 2012). The following general information to the *Legenda Aurea* see Eamon Duffy's introduction, pp. xi-xx. While it was one of many thirteenth-century hagiographies, Jacobus's text was one of the most widely used and influential, and survives in almost a thousand manuscript copies. According to the prologue, Jacobus wanted it organised according to the four distinct periods of deviation, renovation, reconciliation, and pilgrimage. These four periods are meant to correspond to moments in salvation history, stages in human life, and liturgical cycles. Eamon Duffy notes that in fact the book is in five unequal sections corresponding to the main liturgical divisions: Advent-Christmas; Christmas-Septuagesima; Septuagesima-Easter; Easter-Pentecost; Pentecost-Advent. Bishop Basil is included in the section from Christmas to Septuagesima.

inspiring and instructive material for their sermons. There is a section on Bishop Basil, which includes many stories of fantastic miracles and triumphant encounters with devils. It also includes the story of Basil, Julian, and Mercurius.

In the *Legenda Aurea*, the story goes like this: Julian, described as "a most wicked wrongdoer" was once a monk who pretended to great piety; but he renounced Christianity when he became emperor, planning to use magic to achieve his ambitious ends instead of submitting humbly to a Christian way of life. On his way to war in Persia, he stopped at Caesarea, and Basil sent him four barley loaves as a peace offering. But the emperor was displeased with the gift, sending back bales of hay with a threat that he would kill Basil and destroy the city on his way back from the war with Persia. Basil and his congregation pray that they might be saved. That night, Basil is asleep in the Church of Holy Mary in Caesarea, and he has a vision of a woman seated on a throne –clearly Mary, the mother of God, herself. "Quickly," the woman says, "summon Mercurius to me! He shall put to death the apostate Julian, who in his insolent pride blasphemes me and my Son!" St. Mercurius was a soldier and martyr, killed by Julian a few years earlier for his adherence to Christianity, and buried in that very Church. The woman in his dream sends Mercurius to kill Julian, and Basil, upon awakening, goes to the tomb, where he can find neither the body nor the weapons of St. Mercurius which had been buried there. Basil goes back to sleep, but he returns to the tomb in the morning, this time finding the body and the weapons, covered in blood. News reaches him the next day that Julian had been killed by the lance of an unknown soldier, dying with the words "Galilean, you have conquered!" on his lips.<sup>21</sup>

We see that Nicholas's short comments on Mercurius's slaying of Julian are even more fantastic than we might have first supposed, considering that Mercurius was sent to do the deed from the grave. These hagiographical accounts of Basil and the villainous Julian would have been well known stories in the fourteenth century, popularised especially by works such as the *Legenda*

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<sup>21</sup> Summary from Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend*, trans. William Granger Ryan, 128-130.

*Aurea*, but existing in other contexts also.<sup>22</sup> These texts often had a tropological element. They were meant to inspire to good works by relating the good works of others, to strengthen one's conviction in the faith by relating the miracles of the saints.

In the case of St. Mercurius, he was martyred by Julian, but miraculously sent to kill the emperor, delivering on the apostate's own head the death he had intended for Basil and his congregation. Nicholas parallels this with Haman's being hung from the gibbet he had intended for Mordechai on the eve of the destruction of the Jews. Nicholas quotes Psalm 9 in relation to both events, drawing a parallel between them. The straightforwardness of the comment, given its implicit content, provides another window into Nicholas's conception of history. For Nicholas, there is nothing *not* historical about a miracle. The miraculous is a matter-of-fact part of the history of the Church.

We saw in the literal commentary that Nicholas's idea of history is deeply theological, and here we see another facet of this. Benedicta Ward discusses how in the medieval period, miracles were not conceived of or written about as events working against the natural order of things. In the medieval perception, miracles were not infractions of the law of nature; rather, creation itself is a miracle.<sup>23</sup> Everything that works properly, such as plants growing from seed to root, to tree, or the sun rising and setting each day, is miraculous.<sup>24</sup> There were also many special miracles, to be sure, but this was not "un-natural" because God created the natural world with a potential for His own miraculous work within in. For a medieval person, miracles are signs of

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<sup>22</sup> A shortened version of the story is also found, for example, in the *Chronica seu historia de duabus civitatibus*, the "Chronicle or history of the two cities" (written 1143-1146) by Otto, bishop of Freising. In this history of the Church, modelled on Augustine's idea of the City of God, the bishop includes the story that it was due to the prayers of St. Basil that Mercurius hurled the weapon that killed Julian: "We read in the Life of Saint Basil that it was in consequence of the prayers of this holy man Basil (for Julian had then determined that on his return he would utterly destroy Caesarea in Cappadocia, over which Basil presided) that this weapon had been sent from heaven by the blessed martyr Mercurius; by way of proof, it is declared that a spearhead, which lay near the tomb of the martyr, was found to be bloody in the morning." See Otto I, Bishop of Friesing, *The Two Cities: a Chronicle of Universal History to the Year 1146 A.D.*, trans. Charles Christopher Mierow, ed. Austin Patterson Evans, and Charles Knapp (New York: Octagon Books, 1966), 290.

<sup>23</sup> Benedicta Ward, "Miracles in the Middle Ages" in *The Cambridge Companion to Miracles*, ed. Graham H. Twelftree (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 149-164. See also Benedicta Ward, *Miracles and the Medieval Mind: Theory, Record and Event, 1000-1215* (London: Scolar, 1982).

<sup>24</sup> Ward, "Miracles", 149.

God in God's creation.<sup>25</sup> History is about the story of God's natural creation; miracles naturally had a place.

This was also true because, as in the literal postilla, Nicholas uses his moral commentary on Esther to present the history of the Church as unfolding under the guidance of providence. After Nero and Julian, the allegory continues with the triumph of the Church in Rome. Haman, who represented successively two wicked Roman emperors, has his house given over to Mordechai the Jew. This, Nicholas says, speaks figuratively of when Rome became a Christian city:

*On that day [King Abasuerus gave the house of Haman, the Jew's enemy, to queen Esther]. This passage speaks with figurative language of how the city of Rome was given to the Christians. Haman was a figure of Julian the Apostate who had ruled in Rome, and many other persecutors; And Mordechai [came in before the king]. As said above, by Mordechai we understand blessed Peter, and any other good bishop who was worried about the safety of the Church. Many good bishops had fled their churches before the baptism of Constantine, on account of the atrocities of the persecutions. But when [Constantine] was baptized, the churches were opened and the bishops who had fled returned to them, to minister in their churches before the face of the heavenly king; this is represented by Mordechai going before the face of the king [Ahasuerus].<sup>26</sup>*

The giving of an enemy's house to the king's faithful servant is a figure, Nicholas says, of when the city of Rome became a Christian city. The persecutions were eventually overcome by God's providence.

#### 4.2.c: The Recent Past and God's Continued Providence

Nicholas began his allegory with the emergence of the Church under the apostles and moved from there to the hagiographical period of the early Church with her larger-than-life saints and

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<sup>25</sup> This is characteristic of medieval theology. See for example Thomas Aquinas's discussion of God's miraculous power in nature: Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 105, a. 6. Cf. Aquinas on special Miracles being a grace: Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 178, a. 1.

<sup>26</sup> Moral Esther 8.1: "*Die illo per hoc autem fuit figurata concessio urbis Romanae facta ecclesiae in qua regnaverat Iulianus apostata figuratus per Aman, et plures alii persecutores, et Christiani. Et Mordochaeus, sicut dictum est supra per Mardochaeum intelligitur beatus Petrus, et eadem ratione per eum potest intelligi quilibet bonus praelatus de salute ecclesiae sollicitus. Multi vero boni praelati propter atrocitatem persecutionis fugerant de ecclesiis suis ante baptismum Constantini, sed ipso baptizato apertae fuerunt ecclesiae et reversi fuerunt praelati fugitivi, ut in ecclesiis suis ministrarent ante faciem regis caelestis, quod figuratum fuit per ingressum Mardochaei ante faciem regis.*"

sinners. Nicholas brings his allegory up to within a few centuries of his own lifetime, to the deeds of Charlemagne and Godfrey of Bouillon in the eighth/ninth and twelfth centuries. These passages emphasise again how Nicholas portrays history continuing to unfold under God's providential care, conflating the victories of Christian rulers with God's own victory.

Mordechai is given Haman's house, Rome becomes a Christian city; but just as the Jews in Esther still needed to contend with their enemies and conduct a 'double slaughter' in Shushan, so Christians still have their enemies to contend with. The 'double slaughter' conducted by the Jews Nicholas allegorises as the deeds of Charlemagne and Godfrey of Bouillon, Christian kings who fought against the "enemies" of the Christian faith:

*Therefore [on the thirteenth day] of the twelvemonth. In this chapter is described the double slaughter of the adversaries of the Jewish people, by which was figured the double slaughter of the adversaries of the Christian people. The first was in the time of Charlemagne the Great. The second in the time of Godfrey of Bouillon, as is widely written in their deeds.<sup>27</sup>*

Charlemagne (748-814) and Godfrey (1060-1100) lived almost three centuries apart, and in different places. In reality, their lives were not similar, but Charlemagne was later re-interpreted as a crusader against Islam, and it was perception which allows Nicholas to speak of them in common: he presents them both as famous Crusaders, men who went on 'pilgrimage' against the Muslims.

Charlemagne was crowned Holy Roman Emperor by Pope Leo III in 800, the first to take the title since Romulus Augustulus three centuries earlier.<sup>28</sup> His aggressive expansion of the kingdom he had inherited from his father included military offensives against the Aquitainians, Avars, Bavarians, Bretons, Danes, Lombards, Saxons, Slavs, and Saracens. When Nicholas speaks of what is written of Charlemagne's deeds or *gesta*, he is likely thinking of sources such as

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<sup>27</sup> Moral Esther 9.1: "*Igitur duodecimi. In hoc capitulo describitur interfectio duplex adversariorum populi Iudaici, per quod figurata fuit duplex interfectio adversariorum populi Christiani. Prima fuit tempore Caroli magni. Secunda tempore Godfridi de Buillione, sicut in eorum gestis scribitur diffuse.*"

<sup>28</sup> For a study of Charlemagne and his reign, see Rosamund McKitterick, *Charlemagne: The Formation of a European Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); and Janet L. Nelson, *King and Emperor: A New Life of Charlemagne* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2019).

Einhard's *Vita Karoli Magni* (c. 817, but debated), Notker the Stammerer's *Gesta Karoli Magni* (c. 900), the *Annales regni francorum* (written between the 8th-9th centuries), or Pseudo-Turpin's *Historia Caroli Magni* (c. 1200).<sup>29</sup> These sources describe Charlemagne's military conquests as being primarily conflicts between Christians and pagans or infidels. His triumphs are portrayed as triumphs for the faith.<sup>30</sup> Pseudo-Turpin's *Historia Caroli Magni* is especially relevant, as it is a legendary account which begins with St. James appearing to Charlemagne in a dream and commanding him to wrest Spain from the Saracens or Muslims. The text includes descriptions of numerous (fictional) triumphant battles against Islam by both Charlemagne and Roland, his noble companion.<sup>31</sup> The unknown author of this text claims to be a contemporary of Charlemagne, the archbishop Turpin, but in reality the text was written much later. Texts such as this one re-invented Charlemagne as a famous crusader who fought against the power of Islam<sup>32</sup>

Godfrey of Bouillon was another famous crusading figure. The younger son of Eustace II, the Count of Boulogne, he joined the First Crusade in 1096, and, when the Count of Toulouse declined the offer, became the first ruler of Jerusalem when the crusaders had managed to secure that city.<sup>33</sup> The principal source for Godfrey's march to Jerusalem is the *Historia Hierosolymitanae expeditionis*, the "History of the expedition to Jerusalem" written by Albert of

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<sup>29</sup> Einhard was a Frankish courtier under Charlemagne and his son Louis the Pious. For Einhard and his life of Charlemagne, see Thomas Hodgkin, *Charles the Great* (London: Macmillan, 1897). Notker was a Benedictine monk who wrote an early biography of Charlemagne. See Einhard and Notker, *Two Lives of Charlemagne*, edited by David Ganz (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2008). The *Annales regni Francorum* are a contemporary record of the Frankish kingdom and the deeds of her kings from 741 to 829, probably written by a series of men intimately acquainted with the court. For information on the date, authorship, and content of the *Annales*, see the introductory essay by Bernhard Scholz in his translation: *Carolingian Chronicles: Royal Frankish Annals and Nithard's Histories*, translated by Bernhard Walter Scholz and Barbara Rogers (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1972), 2-21. The *Historia Caroli Magni* details legendary stories of Charlemagne's campaigns in Spain. It was written sometime in the 12th century, although it claims to have been written by a contemporary of Charlemagne, Turpin, Archbishop of Rheims. It was an enormously popular text. For an introduction and English translation see Kevin R. Poole, *The Chronicle of Pseudo-Turpin: Book IV of the Liber Sancti Jacobi (Codex Calixtinus)* (New York: Ithica Press, 2014).

<sup>30</sup> In the *Annales regni Francorum*, for example, Charlemagne's and the Franks' efforts are frequently accompanied by miracles, and their victories are spoken of as happening by the will of God, for the salvation of the Christian people.

<sup>31</sup> For a detailed introduction to the text, see the Introduction in Poole's translation: Poole, *The Chronicle*, XI-XLVI.

<sup>32</sup> For an account of how Charlemagne attained this legendary status as a great crusader, see Poole's introduction: Poole, *The Chronicle*, XXIX-XXXIV.

<sup>33</sup> For details on Godfrey, the Crusade, and the Kingdom of Jerusalem, see Caiman Jān, *Godfrey of Bouillon: Duke of Lower Lotharingia, Ruler of Latin Jerusalem, c.1060-1100*, (London: Routledge, 2017); John Carl Andressohn, *The Ancestry and Life of Godfrey of Bouillon* (Indiana: University of Indiana Press, 1947); Jonathan Riley-Smith, *The First Crusaders, 1095-1131* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

Aachen between 1125 and 1150.<sup>34</sup> It was well known, and was used as a source text for the *Historia* of William of Tyre (d. 1186), a chronicler who grew up in Jerusalem at the height of Christian power there, and who also recorded the events of the First Crusade.<sup>35</sup> Godfrey is presented in these sources as a perfect saint and legendary Christian hero.<sup>36</sup>

In his spiritual commentary on Esther, these two men are presented by Nicholas as simply and straightforwardly as they are spoken of in the medieval records of their deeds: they are Christians fighting and triumphing against the enemies of Christianity, just as the Jews triumphed against their enemies in Persia. Both Charlemagne and Godfrey were crusaders, whose main adversary, in many sources relating to them, is Islam. In his coupling of these men, Nicholas is placing an implicit emphasis on the Crusades and on liberation of the Christians and Jerusalem from the Muslims. Just as the Jews in Shushan were liberated from the evil plots of Haman, so Christians in the Holy Land were liberated from the Muslims.

Nicholas uses the moral commentary to describe and compare where the Church has been, and where the Church is now. In the literal sense, Haman is the main adversary of the Jews from whom they are liberated; in the moral sense, we ought to ask who is the main adversary of the Christians? Who is in need of liberation? This changes through time: the first persecution was under the Sadducees and Pharisees, the second under the Roman emperors. These entities are threats no longer. The moral commentary concludes with two famous crusaders and their violent but triumphant battles against the Muslims. Nicholas was writing in a time of great anxiety about the spread of Islam, and this might indicate something of Nicholas's own position on crusading.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Albert of Aachen, *Albert of Aachen: Historia Ierosolimitana, History of the Journey to Jerusalem*, ed. and trans. Susan Edgington (Oxford: Oxford University School of Archaeology, 2007).

<sup>35</sup> William of Tyre, *A History of Deeds Done Beyond the Sea*, ed. and trans. Emily Atwater, William Babcock, and August Charles Krey (New York: Columbia University Press, 1943).

<sup>36</sup> Andressohn, *The Ancestry*, 5-6.

<sup>37</sup> Nicholas's literal commentary on the Apocalypse or Book of Revelation also shows anxiety about and preoccupation with the threat of Islam. I will discuss the Apocalypse commentary in more detail below. See Philip Krey, "The Apocalypse Commentary of 1329: Problems in Church History" in *Krey and Smith*, 275-276.

The memory of Francis's journey to convert the Muslim ruler of Egypt and Dominic's plan to go on mission amongst the Muslims was taken by many mendicants as an example to be followed. In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, both orders expended considerable time and resources on missionizing among the Muslims, and they were supported in their efforts by many popes.<sup>38</sup> Today, scholars debate whether mendicant missions to Islam were an implicit criticism of the violence of the crusades, or if mendicant missionary propaganda contributed to the violence of crusading rhetoric.<sup>39</sup> One and the same Franciscan or Dominican friar was sometimes known for preaching crusades against the Muslims, and at other times for advocating peaceful effort to convert the Muslims, even to the point of martyrdom.<sup>40</sup> At least in his moral commentary on Esther, Nicholas does not express disapprobation of the violence of the crusades; on the contrary, he seems to commend it.

Nicholas portrays both the Jews' battles against their enemies and the Christians on crusade as justified struggles against the enemies of God. He concludes his comment on the double slaughter of the Jews' enemies by asserting that "the fact that the Jews did not want to plunder the goods of the slain signifies that Christians fighting against infidels, and indeed in any just war, should not be motivated by temporal gain, but by the zeal of faith and the love of justice."<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, the rest the Jews take after their slaughter is a sign of thanksgiving:

*On the fifteenth day they rested.* By this it is shown that thanks are to be given to God for physical victory and much more for spiritual victory, as to the main victor. As it says in Deuteronomy 8.17-18: *Lest thou shouldst say in thy heart: My own might, and the strength of my own hand have achieved all these things for me. But remember the Lord thy God, that he hath given thee strength, that he might fulfil his covenant, concerning which he*

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<sup>38</sup> Benjamin Kedar, *Crusade and Mission: European Approaches toward the Muslims* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984) Ch. 4. The question of Francis's motivation in going to confront the Muslims is debated. It is especially unclear if Francis was opposed to or in sympathy with the crusade itself. See for example Adam L. Hoose, "Francis of Assisi's Way of Peace? His Conversion and Mission to Egypt" *The Catholic Historical Review*, 96 (2010), 449–469; John Tolan, *L'Europe latine et le monde arabe au Moyen Âge: Cultures en conflit et en convergence* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2019).

<sup>39</sup> Cf. Kedar, *Crusade and Mission*, and Christoph Maier, *Preaching the Crusades: Mendicant Friars and the Cross in the Thirteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

<sup>40</sup> Kedar, *Crusade and Mission*, 136-140.

<sup>41</sup> Moral Esther 9.1: "Igitur duodecimi...Per hoc autem quod Iudaei occisorum bona noluerunt praedari significatur, quod Christiani pugnantes contra infideles et etiam in quolibet bello iusto, moveri non debent propter lucrum temporale, sed zelo fidei et amore iustitiae."

*swore to thy fathers, as this present day sheweth.*<sup>42</sup>

Nicholas argues for a correspondence between the Jews fighting their enemies in Persia and the Christians fighting their enemies in Christendom: these are both triumphs of the people of God against the enemies of God, and to God should the main thanks be given for any victory. This is implicitly a positive assessment of both historical Jews and contemporary crusaders against Islam. Every victory of the righteous, in spiritual and temporal matters, ultimately derives from God, and is perceived as being *for* God. These historical events are properly understood, according to Nicholas, as happening under the guidance of Providence.

The initial question "did Nicholas depart from the standard Christian interpretation in any significant way" is answered thoroughly in the affirmative. Nicholas's spiritual interpretation of the book of Esther is no longer an argument that the Church of the Gentiles has replaced the Synagogue of the Jews. Nicholas did believe that, of course; but Nicholas's moral commentary allegorises the book of Esther along a timeline of Christian history to within a few centuries of Nicholas's own lifetime, and has, as its determining principle, the same fascination with history, understood as God's action through time, which was remarkable in the literal commentary.

Returning, then, to the comparison which opened this chapter: a significant point of differentiation between Nicholas and Rabanus is at the level of terminology. Recall from chapter two that Rabanus begins his commentary on Esther by stating that the book contains in a mystical way many 'sacraments' of Christ and the Church.<sup>43</sup> As discussed, *sacramentum*, the word Rabanus uses here, for him meant the hidden but more essential meaning of a word, event, or person. He is representative of a moment in Christian exegesis that saw a greater priority in the spiritual interpretation of the Old Testament, perceiving the literal as a 'covering' for truths stated openly in the New Testament.

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<sup>42</sup> Moral 9.2: "*Quintodecima autem die percurrere, etc.* Per hoc autem ostenditur, quod de corporali et multo magis de spirituali gratie Deo sunt reddende tanquam victori principali. Deut 8.d *Ne dixeris in corde tuo: Fortitudo mea, et robur manus meae, haec mihi omnia praestiterunt in corde tuo. Fortitudo mea, et robur manus mea haec omniamibi prestiterunt sed recorderis Domini Dei tui, quod ipse vires tibi praebuerit, ut impleret pactum suum, super quo iuravit patribus tuis, sicut praesens indicat dies.*"

<sup>43</sup> PL 109: 0635c.

Ahasuerus, therefore, is a "sacrament" for Christ, and Esther is a "sacrament" for the Church of the Gentiles, established by Christ and his apostles. While the text seems to speak of the wealth and power of an earthly king, it is more importantly a "more sacred mystery" (*sacratior mysterium*) referring to Christ and the Church.<sup>44</sup> Rabanus gives this spiritual interpretation priority over any other sense, describing it as the sacramental or hidden meaning of the book.

Nicholas does not employ the term *sacramentum* in describing the spiritual sense of Esther. The terms he uses most frequently are *significat* "it/he signifies" or *intelligitur* "he/it is understood [as]" or *convenienter* "fittingly".<sup>45</sup> An allegory from 'fittingness', for Nicholas, is more about historical analogy than sacramentality or hidden truth, as we saw above.

This difference in terminology represents very different attitudes toward the allegorical sense of Esther, a difference expected from the development of the fourfold hermeneutic. For Rabanus, the spiritual sense of Esther is the more important, sacramental meaning, 'hidden' behind the literal words. For Nicholas, the events in the story suggest a spiritual interpretation by analogy and fittingness.

Nicholas has not only redefined the literal, he has revolutionized the spiritual interpretation of Esther as well. Just as the literal meaning of Esther was about a moment in the history of the Jewish people, the spiritual interpretation is about the history of the Church. The essential point of both commentaries is the same: God is the guiding force behind the unfolding of history.

This is accompanied by a significant decrease or even absence of the negative characterisation of the Jewish people characteristic of Rabanus and the Gloss. Rabanus declares that the Jewish people (*plebs Judaica*) must be designated or represented (*exprimitur*) by Vashti, because it seemed that the Jews reigned like a queen when, unlike other nations, they worshiped

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<sup>44</sup> This point is made consistently, but see for example the beginning of Rabanus's commentary PL109: 0635c-0637d.

<sup>45</sup> This is true throughout the Moral commentary on Esther. For examples of each, see Moral Esther 1.1-3.

one God.<sup>46</sup> Rabanus quotes Galatians 4, "when the time was completed" in reference to the time of Christ's incarnation, saying the 'completion' spoken of here came about when Christ clarified the meaning of the prophets of the Old Testament. At that time he invited the Jewish people to his new spiritual feast of the Gospels; but, like Vashti, they rejected the invitation out of pride and contempt, they refused to come, and they refused to be parted from the 'letter' [of scripture]. Rabanus characterises them as bitter, rancorous, stubborn, and full of contempt, the ones who condemned and punished Christ.<sup>47</sup>

Vashti represents the Jews *because* of her perceived action of scorn, which Rabanus allegorises as the Jews' rejection of Christ and his Gospel. Vashti is dismissed for her contempt of the king, and another, better queen is put in her place. In consequence, the Jews "are exiled a long way from the holy spirit and the council of the Father" for scorning Christ and his emissaries.<sup>48</sup> Esther, "whom no one can doubt" is a type of the Church, is put in her place. It is Ahasuerus's preference for Esther over Vashti that makes Esther a fitting allegory for the Church.

For Nicholas, too, it was a foregone conclusion that the Jewish religion was brought to completion at the time of Christ, because Christ fulfilled the prophecies. This was no longer an argument that needed to be made, explained, or defended. Nevertheless, Nicholas says Vashti is a symbol of the Synagogue because her name means "completed"; it is Vashti's name, not her action of perceived scorn, which suggests her allegorical identity. Her 'contempt', as we saw above, was allegorised in a specific historical context from the Acts of the Apostles.

Finally, it is noteworthy that Rabanus uses the terms *plebs Judaica* and *Synagoga* seemingly interchangeably. The interlinear Gloss on Vashti at 1.9 copies Rabanus's designation of Vashti as the *plebs Judaica*.<sup>49</sup> Nicholas only ever designates Vashti as 'Synagogue'. The terms 'Synagogue' and

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<sup>46</sup> PL 109: 0642b.

<sup>47</sup> Summary made from PL 109: 0642b-0644c.

<sup>48</sup> PL109: 0643c "Longe a patria Spiritus sancti ac consilio Patris factus extorris"; Also PL109: 0637d.

<sup>49</sup> Interlinear Gloss Esther 1.9.

'Church' designate religious bodies and the ideas they espouse. There is something less aggressive in this than the terms 'Jewish people' and 'Christian people'. In fact, we saw that when Nicholas does use the term 'Jewish people' he uses it to provide a positive comparison between the Jews in Esther and contemporary Christians. He sometimes also compares Synagogue and Church positively. Nicholas's commentary eschews the repeatedly negative characterisation of the Jews present in Rabanus and repeated in the Gloss. The focus is no longer on contrasting Synagogue and Church, but on exploring the history of the Church, or the way in which the Church makes salvation possible. The absence of anti-Jewish language characteristic of the standard allegory of Esther is significant given Nicholas's own historic context in fourteenth-century France.

Before exploring some further aspects of Nicholas's moral postilla on Esther, I will conclude this section by demonstrating how Nicholas's innovative spiritual interpretation of this book sits squarely within developments in Franciscan exegesis, and Franciscan attitudes toward history. It is to this tradition that I will now turn.

### **4.3: Franciscan visions of History**

The gospel or "good news" of the Christian faith is that when his creation fell through sin, God became incarnate in Jesus, suffered the consequences of sin even unto death, and rose again, thus conquering death once and for all and bringing about the salvation of his creation, a salvation which will be fully realised at some point in the future when Jesus comes again. Given this belief, a medieval Christian scholar had a perspective on history that embraced the past, present, *and* future. Even if they did not know the details, they believed they knew the end of the story.

There were some medieval theologians, Franciscans among them, who thought that a close study of what had happened and what was happening would help them predict even the details of what would happen, to discern the events of the end times. John's book of Revelation,

also known as the Apocalypse, was an especially relevant text for medieval scholars interested in history, especially when history shaded into eschatology, the study of the end times when Jesus would come again.

Nicholas is a Franciscan particularly interested in history as we have seen. Although it is outside the scope of this thesis to treat the question of medieval or even Franciscan historiography in all its complexity, what I want to demonstrate here is that Nicholas's moral commentary on Esther, which tells a chronological and narrative story of the history of the Church by a comparison with events in the Old Testament, resonates with wider trends in Franciscan historiography in this period. Utilising Philip Krey's translation and analysis of Nicholas's literal commentary on the Apocalypse, I will situate Nicholas in this tradition, before demonstrating how his moral commentary on Esther contributes to our understanding of Nicholas as a Franciscan theologian of Church history.

#### **4.3.a: History as Past, Present, and Future**

In his study of Franciscan historical writing and historical reflection from the time of Francis's death to ca. 1350, Bert Roest argues that Franciscan exegesis in this period prepared the way for a more appreciative attitude toward historical exegesis and historiography in general. Roest sees Franciscan interest in history as an important part of Franciscan self-understanding and religious learning in the aftermath of Francis's death.<sup>50</sup> For Franciscans, Roest asserts, scripture "described the whole world from the point of view of man's salvation" and therefore, while a Franciscan theologian was a scholar of scripture before all else, his approach to scripture was that of one seeking to understand the story of God's creation and salvation of humanity.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Bert Roest, *Reading the Book of History: Intellectual Contexts and Educational Functions of Franciscan Historiography 1226-ca. 1350* (Regenboog: Stichting Drukkerij C., 1996), 68.

<sup>51</sup> Roest, *Reading the Book*, 153.

Roest demonstrates that the primary influence on Franciscan conceptions of history is Hugh of St. Victor's insistence on the importance of the literal/historical sense of scripture as the foundation for any other sense (as discussed in chapter 1), and the Victorine's assertion that the historical process was essentially sacramental, animated by the process of divine restoration and illustrative of man's spiritual development.<sup>52</sup> As Roest asserts, "a knowledge of history became in this vision the very foundation of theological understanding".<sup>53</sup>

Hugh was of course an Augustinian, and his ideas are based on an Augustinian view of time, as touched upon briefly in chapter one. The Bible is a history book of the people who really matter. In many ways, this was a justification for a Franciscan way of life. It allowed Franciscans to conceive of themselves as having been raised up by God to help a corrupted Christian society.<sup>54</sup> Franciscans saw the foundation of their order as an event "of world-historical significance".<sup>55</sup> They were following the *vita apostolica*, living life as it was lived in the Gospel by Christ and his followers, and this would help renew the world.

What it meant to live in accordance with the Gospel was understood in different ways within the order, and would become a vexed question in the *usus pauper* controversy, as discussed in chapter one. This idea that Francis and his order were making history (or, perhaps more properly, the belief that God was using them to make history) also influenced Franciscan ideas of history itself. For some of these scholars, the radical nature of many eleventh- and twelfth-century events (the founding of new orders, the crusades, the rise of Islam, etc.) gave their ideas about history a distinctly apocalyptic edge.<sup>56</sup> The influence of the Calabrian exegete Joachim of Fiore (d. 1202) was especially important in this regard.

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<sup>52</sup> Roest, *Reading the Book*, 153-154.

<sup>53</sup> Roest, *Reading the Book*, 155.

<sup>54</sup> Roest, *Reading the Book*, 157-159.

<sup>55</sup> Roest, *Reading the Book*, 158.

<sup>56</sup> The apocalyptic character of Franciscan historiography in this period is not strictly separate from the argument of the spiritualist Franciscans, but discussing the interrelation between the two is too complex and lengthy a topic to be included here.

It is well outside the scope of this thesis to engage with all the complexities of Joachim's thought and its scholarly reception, especially given that Joachim's view of history is not consistent.<sup>57</sup> It is enough to say here that Joachim had an idea of history which embraced past, present and future: he believed there existed a concrete historical analogy or concordance between the period of history recorded in the Old Testament (the Age of the Father, which was divided into seven sub-periods) and the period which began with the New Testament and extended to his own day (the Age of the Son, also composed of seven periods). He believed that the final historical period (the Age of the Holy Spirit) was immanent, and that this Age would be a time of spiritual renewal, a time when Muslims and Jews would convert. This Age would be characterised by perfect peace and contemplation, and the Church would be led by spiritual men.

These three historical periods corresponded to the persons of the divine Trinity. Each period of history, according to Joachim, follows the pattern of the first period, that recorded in the Old Testament. Therefore, this first Testament can act as a sort of key to the meaning of history: understanding how the events in the second age parallel events in the first can enable eschatological predictions or prophecies about the immanent third age. For Joachim and his followers, history was therefore deeply eschatological and prophetic.

Many scholars note the influence of Joachim on Franciscans who are interested in history, especially where this interest overlaps with Franciscan commentaries on the Book of

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<sup>57</sup> For selected bibliography on Joachim of Fiore and his ideas of history, see: M. W. Bloomfield, "Joachim of Flora: A Critical Survey of his Canon, Teachings, Sources, Biography, and Influence", *Traditio*, 13 (1957), 249-231; Bernard McGinn, *The Calabrian Abbot: Joachim of Fiore in the History of Western Thought* (New York: Macmillan, 1985); H. Lee, M. Reeves, G. Silano, eds., *Western Mediterranean Prophecy: The School of Joachim of Fiore and the Fourteenth-Century Breviloanum* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1989); Marjorie Reeves, *Joachim of Fiore and the Prophetic Future: A Medieval Study in Historical Thinking*. New revised edition (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 1999); idem., *The Influence of Prophecy in the Later Middle Ages. A Study in Joachimism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969); idem., "The Abbot Joachim's Sense of History" in *1274-année charnière-mutations et continuités* (Paris: 1974), 781-796; Delno West, ed., *Joachim of Fiore in Christian Thought. Essays on the Influence of the Calabrian Prophet*, 2 vols (New York: B. Franklin, 1975). E. Randolph Daniel, "The double Procession of the Holy Spirit in Joachim of Fiore's Understanding of History", *Speculum*, 55 (1980), 469-483.

Revelation, or the Apocalypse.<sup>58</sup> Joachim was especially influential on the spiritualist Franciscan Peter John Olivi, with rather unfortunate results for him.<sup>59</sup> Olivi adopted Joachim's view that the final Age was the Age of the spirit, that this Age was immanent if not already beginning; but he radicalised Joachim's thought in new ways. He put Francis and his order at the very centre of this new Age. As David Burr discusses, Olivi asserts more forcefully than any other mendicant in this tradition that Francis was a 'model' of Christ, an *alter Christus*; that Francis's rule was another gospel; that the third Age, which would follow Francis's rule, would thereby return to an apostolic way of living, especially characterised by poverty.<sup>60</sup> Olivi went so far as to say the Pope would be the enemy of evangelical poverty represented by Francis and his order, to whom he also gave a significant eschatological role.<sup>61</sup>

Olivi's commentary on the Apocalypse (which was ultimately suppressed and condemned between 1318 and 1326) became important for the spiritualist Franciscans in their contest with the papacy and the leaders of their order.. To put a very complex matter simplistically, any hint of Joachimism amongst the Franciscans was often condemned because of the role it played in the spiritualists' contests with the papacy and the leaders of their order, rather than because of the views in themselves.<sup>62</sup>

However, Joachim's ideas about history, and especially his idea of a correspondence between the Old and New Testaments, also influenced perfectly uncontroversial Franciscans.

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<sup>58</sup> For a good overview of Joachim's influence on various Franciscans, see especially David Burr, *Olivi's Peaceable Kingdom: A Reading of the Apocalypse Commentary* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press), 2016, 2-21, 181-185. Cf. Bert Roest, *Franciscan Commentaries on the Apocalypse, Studies in Church History. Subsidia* 10 (1994): 33-37. Roest stresses that there were Apocalypse commentaries that do not show Joachim's influence, pushing back against too narrow a view of the nature of Apocalypse Commentaries. There was also, in general, an apocalyptic trend in the order, as noted by Burr, although he stresses that this was not due exclusively to Joachim's influence.

<sup>59</sup> For a thorough investigation on the influence of Joachim on Olivi's apocalypse commentary, see Burr, *Olivi's Peaceable Kingdom*, ch. 8.

<sup>60</sup> Burr, *Olivi's Peaceable Kingdom*, 186-187. As discussed in chapter one, the issue of poverty was central to much of the embittered disagreement in the Franciscan order in this period. Olivi was not an isolated figure. Gerard of Bo'go San Donnino (d. 1276), for example, also came very near to claiming that Francis was the angel who bore the seal of the living god (cf. Apocalypse 7), that the Franciscans were the spiritual men who would bring about the spiritual renewal, and that this renewal would essentially dissolve the current ecclesiastical structure so that it could be replaced by the Franciscans.-Roest, *Reading the Book*, 166.

<sup>61</sup> *Nicholas of Lyra's Apocalypse Commentary*, ed and trans. Philip D. W. Krey (Kalamazoo: University of Michigan Press, 1997). See Krey's Introduction, pp. 13-14.

<sup>62</sup> For a detailed exploration of this process, see Burr, *Olivi's Peaceable Kingdom*, ch. 1.

Bonaventure's (d. 1274) *Collationes in Hexaëmeron* are based on Augustine, but significantly influenced by Joachim.<sup>63</sup> The *Collationes* present a scheme of history which is deeply theological. Josef Ratzinger explains that the *Collationes* are in some ways a response to the question of Joachimism and Spiritualism in the order, and grew out of a real need within the order for a "fundamental treatment of the theology of history".<sup>64</sup> Like Joachim, Bonaventure thought that one could not know the future if one did not know the past, and that by understanding how the New Testament 'maps on to' the Old Testament, some knowledge of the future could be deduced.<sup>65</sup> Although his *Collationes* are not a commentary on the Apocalypse as such, they do reference that book frequently. Like Olivi, Bonaventure believed he was living in the sixth Age, and that the seventh Age was immanent. He also identifies the angel in the sixth seal of the book of the Apocalypse, the one who will usher in the seventh Age of peace, as St. Francis.<sup>66</sup> Bonaventure avoids the spiritualising tendencies of Olivi however, and rather than turning Francis into another Christ, his *Collationes* are essentially and determinedly Christocentric. For Bonaventure, the meaning of history is found in scripture, which in the final analysis is about Christ.<sup>67</sup>

We have seen that Joachim's idea of a correspondence between Old and New Testaments influenced Franciscan perceptions of the *historical* relationship between the two, not just the spiritual, and that it contributed to an apocalyptic or eschatological vein in Franciscan interpretations of the Apocalypse, often portraying Francis himself as a harbinger of the final Age. I will turn now to Nicholas's exegesis on the Apocalypse, to see how he fits into a Franciscan tradition of Apocalypse interpretation.

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<sup>63</sup> Bernard McGinn, "The Significance of Bonaventure's Theology of History" *The Journal of religion* 58 (1978): S64–S81; Josef Ratzinger, *The Theology of History in Saint Bonaventure*, trans. Zachary Hayes (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1971); David Burr, *Olivi's Peaceable Kingdom*, 33-44. For an overview of Bonaventure's scheme of history and it compares with Augustine, see Ratzinger pp. 10-20.

<sup>64</sup> Ratzinger, *The Theology of History*, 3, 6.

<sup>65</sup> McGinn, "The Significance", S68-S69; Ratzinger, *The Theology of History*, 11-12.

<sup>66</sup> McGinn, "The Significance", S70-S71.

<sup>67</sup> McGinn, *Bonaventure's Theology of History*, S73-S77.

#### 4.3.b: Nicholas's Apocalypse Commentaries

Because the images, experiences, and dreams John describes in the Apocalypse are prophecies, Nicholas's literal sense of this book is, in effect, an interpretation of these prophecies. Nicholas comments on the manner in which the Apocalypse reveals history: "in the spirit of certain images," he says, "[John] saw the course of history from the time of the apostles to the end of the world, namely, the tribulations, consolations, and notable changes, of which some have already occurred and others are in the future."<sup>68</sup> Nicholas reasserts what he means by the literal sense here: "the literal understanding is not what is signified by the words immediately, but it is what the images signify".<sup>69</sup>

A full summary of the Apocalypse is unnecessary to my purposes: a brief overview of the first part will provide the necessary context both for situating Nicholas in the Franciscan tradition of exegesis on this book, and for a selected comparisons between Nicholas's exegesis on the Apocalypse and his moral commentary on Esther.

After John relates how he was instructed to write down his visions, the book begins with messages sent to the seven churches of Asia. The throne of God appears, surrounded by twenty four thrones on which elders are seated. Four living creatures appear. A scroll with seven seals appears. A lamb with seven eyes and seven horns takes the scroll and is worshipped; the lamb opens the seals one by one. The opening of the first four seals produces the appearance of horses and riders with various weapons. The fifth seal produces the souls of the martyrs who are given white robes and told to rest. The sixth seal produces an earthquake, which cause the stars

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<sup>68</sup> *Nicholas of Lyra's Apocalypse Commentary*, ed and trans. Philip D. W. Krey (Kalamazoo: University of Michigan Press, 1997). Krey's Introduction will be referenced as Krey, "Introduction" with page number; Nicholas's literal postillae as *Apocalypse Commentary* with page number. All translations of the Apocalypse Commentary are Krey's. Nicholas of Lyra, *Apocalypse Commentary*, 66.

Krey has a footnote on this passage, noting that Nicholas is following the lead of Alexander Minorita and Peter Auriol in using this passage to assert an historical literal interpretation. See footnote 1 on page 72. For a complete overview of Nicholas's literal commentary on the Apocalypse, see Krey, "The Apocalypse Commentary of 1329: Problems in Church History" in Krey and Smith, 269-275.

<sup>69</sup> Nicholas of Lyra, *Apocalypse Commentary*, 66.

to fall from heaven, and every mountain and island to be moved out of place. People retreat to caves, and any survivors call on the mountains to fall on them. A great multitude then stands before the throne of God, clothed in robes made white with the blood of the lamb. The seventh seal produces seven trumpets which are given to seven angels. An eighth angel appears amidst tempestuous happenings, and after the eighth angel has wreaked havoc on the earth the seven original angels sound their trumpets. Each trumpet produces a different destructive effect on the earth.

Nicholas interprets the messages to the seven churches as literally that: messages to seven churches in John's own time.<sup>70</sup> Throughout the commentary, Nicholas employs his double literal sense to demonstrate that the series of visions or revelations John recounts refer to historical events in the apostle's own context while also telling the general history of the Church from the Apostolic age to the end of time.<sup>71</sup>

From the start of book four, however, Nicholas begins to interpret the visions as relating to history after the apostolic period. The third horse, for example, which is red, and to whose rider "*it was given that he should take peace from the earth, and that they should kill one another*" (Apocalypse 6.4) is interpreted by Nicholas as the emperor Nero, who "started the first persecution against the Church, that is, the persecutions instigated by Roman emperors. The Church had endured persecution earlier by the Jews."<sup>72</sup> The horse is red because of the bloody-mindedness of the Romans under Nero, who removed peace from the earth because the empire was "thrown into confusion" by his wicked deeds.<sup>73</sup>

Nicholas's literal exegesis of the Apocalypse proceeds from Nero to persecutions under Titus, Domitian, Trajan, Marcus Aurelius, Severus, Maximinus, Decius, Valerian, Aurelian, and

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<sup>70</sup> Nicholas of Lyra, *Apocalypse Commentary*, 42-64.

<sup>71</sup> For Nicholas's use of the double literal sense in this context and for his interaction with other Franciscan Apocalypse Commentaries see Krey, "Introduction", 17-23.

<sup>72</sup> Nicholas of Lyra, *Apocalypse Commentary*, 83.

<sup>73</sup> Nicholas of Lyra, *Apocalypse Commentary*, 83.

ending with Diocletian.<sup>74</sup> The Church is "consoled" under Constantine (cf. Apocalypse 7, which describes an angel appearing and ordering four other angels to hold back their destruction); then intellectual battles with various heretics are described; the angels in this part of the vision are linked to specific popes who confronted the heretics.<sup>75</sup> After the heretics, the visions are interpreted as military battles with the Vandals, Italians, and Goths, succeeded by consolations under Justin I, Justinian, and Justin II.

The appearance of each of the seven angels at the opening of the seventh seal (Apocalypse 13) is linked with particular historical persons. Muhammad is the second beast which appears at the opening of one seal (Apocalypse 13:11), and St. Boniface, Lombards, and Carolingians all feature.<sup>76</sup> The second and third angels both refer to Charlemagne; when the second angel (Charlemagne) pours out his bowl it is in reference to Charlemagne's defeat of the Saxons; when the third angel (Charlemagne) pours out his bowl, it is in reference to his defeat of the Muslims and the Huns.<sup>77</sup> The seventh angel is Peter the Hermit who, by his "efficacious words" galvanised the Pope and Christian princes to free the Holy Land. (i.e., called Christians to the First Crusade).<sup>78</sup>

As in his moral commentary on Esther, Nicholas expresses no disapproval of the violence of the crusades. In fact, the Apocalypse commentary expands on the portrayal of Charlemagne and Godfrey as crusaders liberating the Holy Land. "Liberation" is the predominant term. Charlemagne's "liberation" of the people living in the Holy Land was "short-lived", Nicholas says: the people living there were once again in "harsh servitude" before they were once again liberated by Godfrey of Bouillon.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Nicholas of Lyra, *Apocalypse Commentary*, 86-91.

<sup>75</sup> Nicholas of Lyra, *Apocalypse Commentary*, chs. 7-9.

<sup>76</sup> Nicholas of Lyra, *Apocalypse Commentary*, chs. 13-14.

<sup>77</sup> Nicholas of Lyra, *Apocalypse Commentary*, 178-179.

<sup>78</sup> Nicholas of Lyra, *Apocalypse Commentary*, 188.

<sup>79</sup> Nicholas of Lyra, *Apocalypse Commentary*, 184-189.

Philip Krey does not discuss Nicholas's moral commentary on the Apocalypse, but even a cursory look at this second commentary suggests that it serves primarily to provide tropological reflections on the chronological history presented in the literal commentary.<sup>80</sup> For example, when the book of the Apocalypse opens with John's vision of the seven golden candlesticks and in their midst "one like the Son of Man", Nicholas comments:

According to the literal sense, by the likeness of the Son of Man in the midst of the candlesticks is understood Christ in the midst of the churches spread throughout the world, for their preservation and consolation, as he promised Matthew: "Behold I am with you always, etc."

Morally, however, by Christ can be understood any good priest, because he is the Lord's vicar. For this reason Luke 10 says "He who hears you hears me".

Therefore, a priest should be like the Son of Man, that is, Christ. His vicars should be conformed to Him as much as our frailty can bear.<sup>81</sup>

The Son of Man is described as clothed in a white robe with a golden girdle. Nicholas says of the white tunic that it signifies chastity, while the golden girdle signifies charity: "and the girdle is well called," Nicholas concludes, "because it unites and binds a man with God and his neighbor

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<sup>80</sup> For the Moral Postilla on the Apocalypse, I have used an early printed version of the *Biblorum Sacrorum cum Glossa Ordinaria* published in Venice in 1603 which includes the Nicholas's Moral Postillae along with the additions of Paul of Burgos. All citations will be indicated by chapter and verse in the DRB followed by the biblical lemma in Nicholas's *postilla*. The biblical lemmata are translated from the DRB. All English translations of the *postilla* are my own.

Nicholas begins the moral commentary by saying that the Apocalypse contains all that has been revealed in sacred scripture, but to understand it the reader must have faith, hope, and charity: Moral Apocalypse 1.1: "Sicut dictum fuit in expositione literali, beatus Iohannes in principio libri huius reddit auditores benevolos, dociles, et attentos. Per librum autem istum qui dicitur Apocalypsis, id est, revelatio, potest inteligi tota scriptura sacra que est divinitus revelata. Ad quam redduntur auditores dociles per fidem quae aperit ipsius intelligentiam, sicut dicitur Isa. 7. secundum aliam translationem. Nisi credideritis non intelligetis. et ad Hebrae 11. Dicitur credere enim oportet etc. et sic est etiam in aliis scientiis in quibus oportet discipulum in multis credere doctori quae postea intelliguntur ab ipso. Attenti vero redduntur auditores per spem, quae est certa expectatio futurae beatitudinis cuius viam ostendit sacra scriptura. Quilibet autem attentus est ad confiderandum viam quae ducit ad terminum desideratum. Benevoli vero redduntur auditores per charitatem quae facit ad Deum conformitatem i Joan 4...propter quod talis est benevolus ad audiendum Dei verba, quae traduntur in sacra scriptura."

<sup>81</sup> Moral Apocalypse 1.12: "*Et conversus vidi septem candelabra aurea etc.*

Secundum sensum literalem per similem filio hominis existentem in medio candelabrorum intelligitur Christus existens in medio ecclesiarum per orbem diffusarum ad conservationem et consolationem earum, sicut promisit Matthaei ultim. d. Ecce vobiscum sum omnibus diebus etc. Moraliter autem per Christum potest inteligi quilibet bonus praelatus, eo quod est eius vicarius: propter quod dicitur Luc. 10.c. Qui vos audit me audit, ideo praelatus debet esse similis filio hominis, id est, Christo, cui debet eius vicarius conformari quantum potest fragilitas nostra pati."

with firm love, and is said to be about the breast, that is, near the heart, because what is loved with love is held in the heart.<sup>82</sup>

Nicholas appears to use the moral commentary on the Apocalypse to universalise aspects of the chronological history in the literal postilla, often in a moralising vein. The red horse in the literal was a symbol for Nero; in the moral, it is a symbol for any carnally minded man "scorched by the fires of lust".<sup>83</sup> Because the second beast in the literal commentary is the Muhammed "who gave a false law to the Ishmaelites", in the moral commentary Nicholas says the second can signify any heretic who gives a false law to his followers.<sup>84</sup> The moral commentary augments or supports the moral aspects of the chronological history provided by the literal.

There are many points of difference between the chronology of history Nicholas presents in his literal commentary on the Apocalypse and his moral commentary on Esther. For one thing, the Apocalypse commentary is much longer and references many sources, especially sources of an historical nature, both ancient and near contemporary.<sup>85</sup> The important similarity, however, is that it is, like Esther, a linear or chronological account of the history of the Church from the time of the Apostles to the recent past.

Krey notes that in writing his literal commentary, Nicholas was directly influenced by two other Franciscan commentaries on the Apocalypse: those of Alexander Minorita (d. 1271) and Peter John Auriol (d. 1322), the latter an opponent of the spirituals. Both of these men also

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<sup>82</sup> Moral Apocalypse 1.13: "*Vestitum podere* id est, tunica linea alba usque ad talem perstringentem per quam significatur castitas perfeuerans usque ad finem vitae; *et praecinctum ad mamillas zona aurea*: Per zonam auream significatur charitas, quae pretiosior est virtibus aliis sicut autum ceteris metallis. Et bene dicitur zona quia iungit et stringit hominem cum Deo et proximo dilectione firma et dicitur esse circa mamillas, id est, prope cor, quia quod charitate diligitur, corde habetur."

<sup>83</sup> Moral Apocalypse 6.4: "*Et exivit alius equus rufus*: Per quem moraliter significatur homo carnalis igne luxuria adustus."

<sup>84</sup> Moral Apocalypse 13.11: "*Et vidi aliam bestiam*. Hoc literaliter exponitur ad Mahumeto quod legem falsam dedit Ismaelitis; ideo mystice potest exponi de quolibet heresiarcha qui doctrina erronea dat discipulis suis."

<sup>85</sup> In his literal postilla on the Apocalypse, Nicholas uses many annals and chronicles, as listed by Krey: "Eusebius's *Ecclesiastical History*, Jerome's *Lives of Famous Men*, Hugh of Fleury's *Historia Ecclesiastica* (1109), Sigebert of Gembloux's *Chronicles* (1030-1112), Peter Comestor's (d. 1179) *Historia Scholastica*, Ekkehard's *Historia Hierosolymitana*, William of Tyre's (c. 1130-86) *Historia rerum in partibus transmarinis gestarum*, Vincent of Beauvais's (ca. 1190-ca. 1264) *Speculum Historiale*, James of Vitry's (ca. 1160-1240) *Historia Orientalis*, and individual reports of travelling friars and one bishop whom he knew." Krey, *Introduction*, 19-20.

wrote literal commentaries on the Apocalypse which told chronological histories of the Church<sup>86</sup> Krey provides a summary of these two commentaries in comparison to Nicholas's which demonstrates a discernibly increasing pessimism from Alexander to Nicholas, brought about by the Franciscan order's difficult position *vis-à-vis* the papacy as the thirteenth century drew to a close, as discussed in chapter one. Of the three, Alexander is the most optimistic about the Franciscans' eschatological role, and Peter too interprets events in the Apocalypse as referring to the foundation of the mendicants and their preaching. Krey demonstrates that Nicholas is much more conservative than these two: he tends to avoid extremes of praise (or censure) of historic figures, he interprets many of John's visions as relating exclusively to the apostle's own context and, most distinct of all, his historical interpretation goes only to the twelfth century. He does not posit an apocalyptic role for Francis and his order. He frequently disagrees with and seeks to correct the interpretations of Alexander and Peter. Krey notes that Nicholas refuses to interpret chapters 17 to 20 at all, because he thinks these have to do with current and future events; not having the prophetic gift himself, Nicholas will not comment on them.<sup>87</sup>

Krey asserts that Nicholas's literal commentary on the Apocalypse, unlike those of Joachim and his Franciscan followers, is *not* concerned with the start of a new Age: on the contrary, Nicholas believes the Church will endure for a long time in history. Rather than thinking that the visions in the Apocalypse portrayed universal or repetitive problems in the Church, Nicholas represented them as portraying specific historical events.<sup>88</sup> His moral commentary can provide universal lessons on the specific historical events, but he is primarily interested in the story of the Church in the past, and especially in showing its Christological character.<sup>89</sup> As Krey asserts, "it is a profound concern for history and its importance for theology, and in this case the historicity of the incarnation, that drives Nicholas' exegesis."<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>86</sup>Krey, "The Apocalypse Commentary", 267-268.

<sup>87</sup> Krey, "Introduction", 14-23.

<sup>88</sup> Krey, "Introduction", 13.

<sup>89</sup> Krey, "The Apocalypse Commentary", 268-269.

<sup>90</sup> Krey, "The Apocalypse Commentary", 287.

The exploration above should make it clear that Nicholas was operating in a Franciscan tradition when he wrote a chronological literal/historical commentary on the Apocalypse which traces the history of the Church. He departs significantly from some other Franciscans, especially those influenced by Joachimism, by eschewing eschatological interpretations.

The chronological history he provides in his moral commentary on the book of Esther is another instance of his pre-occupation with the history of the Church and it explores the same chronology. The moral commentary on Esther is based not on visions and prophecies however, but on analogous events in the history of the Jewish people. Given this fact, a fruitful next step in understanding medieval Franciscan conceptions of history and the senses of scripture will be a closer comparison between Bonaventure's *Collationes* and Nicholas's two commentaries. As McGinn notes, Bonaventure's theology of history cannot be separated from his hermeneutics: "Bonaventure insists that as the New Testament has grown out of the Old, we must be able to make precise comparisons between the two, indeed, even comparisons of the literal sense of one testament with the literal sense of the other, 'ut littera ad litteram'."<sup>91</sup> Ratzinger stresses the same point, asserting that for Bonaventure, there is a double relation between the two Testaments: "the first is a dynamic relation whereby one Testament comes from the other and emerges out of the other. The second is a more static relation in which one Testament stands over against the other."<sup>92</sup> The Old and New Testaments, for Bonaventure are related "as tree to tree; as letter to letter; as seed to seed. And as a tree comes from a tree, a seed from a seed, and a letter from a letter, so one Testament comes for the other Testament."<sup>93</sup> Bonaventure, according to McGinn, is interested in presenting "historical comparisons based upon a letter-to-letter connection."<sup>94</sup>

This sounds similar to what Nicholas is doing in his two commentaries on the book of Esther. McGinn also describes Bonaventure as not only aware of the historical dimension of

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<sup>91</sup> McGinn, *Bonaventure's Theology of History*, S68.

<sup>92</sup> Ratzinger, *The Theology of History*, 12.

<sup>93</sup> Translated and quoted in Ratzinger, *The Theology of History*, 12.

<sup>94</sup> McGinn, *Bonaventure's Theology of History*, S68.

Christianity, but as "concerned with the theological meaning of the historical process itself."<sup>95</sup> This is true of Nicholas also. What I have described as Nicholas's interest in revealing God's providential action as recorded in sacred Scripture is really nothing other than trying to make theological sense of temporal events, just as Bonaventure was doing. A closer comparison between Nicholas's two commentaries and Bonaventure's letter by letter comparison between the Old and New Testaments would be a worthwhile undertaking which will contribute to our understanding of a specifically Franciscan approach to history and where this approach intersects with the senses of scripture.

Sadly, such a comparison is outside the remit of this thesis. Clearly however, Nicholas was not the only Franciscan interested in the relationship between the Old and New Testaments as a means of exploring the history of the Church in a chronological way rooted in the literal sense.

As this necessarily brief overview has shown, by allegorising the book of Esther to tell a chronological history of the Church through analogy with the history of the Jews, Nicholas is operating in a Franciscan tradition of historiography. But by stopping at the victory of Godfrey in Jerusalem (1099-1100), he is critiquing this tradition as well: as in his Apocalypse commentaries, Nicholas will not try to predict the future or discern the end times. For Nicholas, however, the history of the Church is the history of Salvation, and therefore the history of the world. Krey notes that Nicholas's historical literal sense is influenced by "Christology, trinitarianism, eucharistic piety, and ecclesiology."<sup>96</sup>

These aspects of Nicholas's Apocalypse commentary are also very much present in his Moral commentary on Esther. Although he will not attempt to discern the end times, it is Nicholas's belief in the ultimate salvation of the world through Jesus Christ which makes his idea of history deeply theological. Like Bonaventure, Christ is at the centre of Nicholas's

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<sup>95</sup> McGinn, *Bonaventure's Theology of History*, S79.

<sup>96</sup> Krey, "Introduction" 18.

historiography. In the final section of this chapter, I will return to Nicholas's moral commentary on Esther to explore in more detail the ways in which his history of the Church is Christologically –and especially sacramentally– inflected.

#### 4.4: Old Typologies, New Significance

At the heart of Nicholas's moral commentary on Esther is an insistence on the importance of prayer as a real remedy for sinful humanity. The Eucharist is also vitally important. The allegory of Ahasuerus as Christ is shaped by the then widespread devotion to the Eucharist as God's chosen means of sanctifying his people. These two aspects are related of course, as it was only within the Church and her prayerful liturgies that the Eucharist, the true presence of God, was given. In the final part of this chapter, I will look at the allegories of Esther and Ahasuerus to demonstrate how in the moral commentary, Nicholas is not only offering a reflection on the history of the Church but making a strong assertion of the necessity of the Church to the salvation of humankind.

##### 4.4.a: Esther as the Church or the Virgin Mary

Nicholas's comment on Esther 4.15, when the queen asks Mordechai to instruct the Jews to pray and fast for her as she prepares to petition Ahasuerus on their behalf, is a useful point of departure for understanding Nicholas's allegory of Esther as both the Church and the Virgin Mary:

The fact that Queen Esther orders the Jews to fast and pray devoutly signifies that the Church Triumphant or the blessed Virgin wish those faithful to them to do likewise. They [the Church and the blessed Virgin], are praying to the true king of heaven for them, on account of which, those who pray for themselves are disposed to obtain grace.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Moral Esther 4.15: "*Rursumque Esther*. Per hoc autem, quod Esther regina mandavit Iudaeis, quod essent in afflictione et oratione devota significatur, quod ecclesia triumphans, vel virgo beata volunt sibi devotos facere talia, ut

Here, Nicholas draws another parallel between Jews and Christians, this time in terms of the efficacy of their prayers. The importance and power of petition, indicated by Esther's success in the court of king Ahasuerus, becomes the determining factor in Nicholas's dual allegory of the queen as the Church and the Virgin Mary.

Nicholas allegorises Esther as the Church in the first instance. For Nicholas, Esther is not the Church because the Church replaced the Synagogue as Esther replaced Vashti; Esther is the Church because, like Esther, the Church has an intercessory role in bringing about the salvation of the faithful. This is why Nicholas includes another allegorical identity for Esther as the Virgin Mary. Both allegories are suggested by a perceived identity of function between Esther, the Church, and Mary, as intercessors on behalf of God's people.

The pivotal moment in the narrative of the book of Esther is when she petitions the king for her own life and the lives of the Jewish people. Nicholas's dual allegory derives from analogy with Esther's intermediary function: just as Esther petitioned before the throne of King Ahasuerus for the lives of the Jews, so the Church and the Virgin Mary pray for the 'lives' (physical and spiritual) of the catholic faithful before the throne of the King of kings, Christ himself.

This is the theme throughout the commentary. When Esther hears that Mordechai has come to the gate of the palace in sackcloth she is disturbed and sends clothes to him; so the Church and the Virgin Mary, Nicholas comments, are disturbed by the distress of the good bishop Basil, and seek to procure divine consolation for him. If it sometimes seems that prayers are not immediately heard Nicholas says calmly, this is only because it is sometimes not expedient for prayers to be heard. This is suggested by the fact that initially Esther refused to go to King Ahasuerus. Just as Esther ultimately agreed, eventually the Church and the Blessed

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orantes pro ipsis regem caeli vero eius exaudiantur, per hoc, quod illi pro quibus volunt orare ad impetrationem gratiae disponuntur."

Virgin will bring the prayers of the faithful to God.<sup>98</sup> This is portrayed by Nicholas in concrete historical terms. As we saw, Esther's second petition at the feast is like the prayers that were heard on behalf of Blessed Basil, prayers which procured his deliverance from Julian the Apostate by miraculous means.<sup>99</sup>

This intercessory power is derived from an idea of the Church as a complex body including those faithful in both heaven and earth, and the belief in the bodily assumption of Mary into heaven. These ideas are never explicitly articulated by Nicholas, but they are frequently referenced, and his allegory of Esther will be better understood if some aspects of his theological framework are clarified. Nicholas gestures toward both these ideas in his comment on Esther 2.16. When Esther is confirmed in the king's love, the words *so she was brought* are explained by Nicholas in this way:

*So she was brought.* This is mystically fulfilled in the ascension of Christ, when he brought the Church of the righteous with himself into heaven; or in the assumption of the Virgin to glory, when she was exalted above the angels.<sup>100</sup>

This terse comment assumes knowledge of two beliefs: that when Christ ascended into heaven after his resurrection (cf. Mark 16.19-20 and Luke 24.50-53), in some sense he brought the

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<sup>98</sup> Moral Esther 4.4: "*Quod audiens.* Nam ecclesia audiens afflictionem boni praelati debet merito turbari, et mittere sibi vestem, procurando sibi suis orationibus, divinam consolationem, sicut ecclesia procuravit Petri liberationem Act. 12...Per hoc autem, quod Esther de accessu ad regem ad precandum pro liberatione populi primo se excusavit postea vero consensit, significatur, quod triumphans ecclesia et virgo beata videntes, quod non sit tempus liberationis populi fidelis ab afflictione, nam aliquando non expedit, et pro tunc cessant orare, sed postea tempore competenti faciunt"

"*And when she heard it.* For the Church, hearing of the affliction of the good bishop, is rightly disturbed, and she ought to send clothes to him, so that by his prayers he procures for himself divine consolation, just as the Church procured freedom for Peter in Acts 12[.5-14]..."

Now, that Esther at first excused herself from going to the king to pray for the liberation of her people and afterwards agreed, signifies that the Church triumphant and the Blessed Virgin see if it is not the time for the faithful people to be free from affliction, for sometimes it is not expedient, and for that time they cease to pray, but afterwards they return to their prayers at the appropriate time."

<sup>99</sup> Moral Esther 7.3: "*Dona mihi.* Sic autem petivit ecclesia beati Basili ad eius monitionem, scilicet ut liberaretur cum populo a morte sibi comminata per Iulianum apostatam."

"*Give me.* And in this way the church of Blessed Basil prayed for his counsel, that is, that he might be delivered with the people from the death that had threatened him by Julian the Apostate."

<sup>100</sup> Moral Esther 2.16: "*Ducta.* Hoc mystice fuit impletum in ascensione Christi, tunc enim ecclesiam iustorum secum duxit ad coelestia, vel in assumptione virginis gloriosae, quando fuit super angelos exaltata."

Church with him; and that Mary, because of her special status as the Mother of God, was taken into heaven body and soul, and knew neither death nor corruption.

The first belief arises from an idea of the Church as comprising three "states": those faithful on earth are the Pilgrim or Militant Church, who are still making their journey toward heaven; those who have died but not yet attained full sanctification are thought to be in an intermediate state known as purgatory, and comprise the Suffering Church; those who are in heaven behold God as he is, and are the Church Triumphant. These last are meant to pray for the Church Suffering and Church Militant. The terms "Church Triumphant" and "Church Militant" are used frequently in Nicholas's commentary to refer to these different states which comprise the Church.

When Nicholas first introduced the allegory of Esther as the Church, it was in the context of the virgins being gathered for King Ahasuerus. By the many virgins who are sought for the king, Nicholas says, individual members of the Church are indicated, but Esther, chosen from amongst them, represents the Church itself. Later comments make it clear that he understands the Church as comprised of these states, mentioning the Militant and Triumphant several times.<sup>101</sup> In the passage which opened this section, for example, it is the "Church Triumphant"; Nicholas is saying that those members of the faithful in heaven wish those members on earth to be devout in their prayers and fasting.

Clearly this idea of the Church allows for great flexibility in Nicholas's allegory of Esther. Depending on the context, her intercession can represent the prayers of the Church Militant to

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<sup>101</sup> For example, Moral 1.5: "*He invited all the people*. Because he wishes all men to be saved in consequence of having received this sacrament. *Seven days*. That is, all time, which takes place in cycles of seven days. *In the court of the garden*. That is, [the court] of the church militant, about which the Song of Songs 4:12 says: *my sister, my spouse, is a garden enclosed. And the [forest]*. The church is called a forest, for in her there are many good persons like [there are] trees [in a forest]: fruitful by their holy lives and aromatic in their good reputation. *By the care of the King*. That is, by the divinity [of the king], [it] was planted. for he is the principle husbandman of the Church." "*Intravit omnem populum*. Quia vult omnes homines saluos fieri, et per consequens ad hoc sacramentum admitti. *Septem diebus* idest, toto tempore quod septenario dierum reuoluitur. *In vestibulo borti* id est, ecclesiae militantis, de qua dicitur Canticum 4: *Hortus conclusus soror mea sponsa. Et nemoris*. Dicitur autem ecclesia nemus, nam in ea sunt multae bonae personae tanquam arbores fructiferae per sanctam vitam, et aromaticae per bonam famam. *Quod regio cultu*, idest divino. *Consitum erat*. Nam ipse est cultor ecclesiae principalis."

those in heaven, or the prayers of the Church Triumphant in heaven before the throne of God. The main point is that the Church, in her various states, prays and is heard by Christ, as Esther petitioned and was heard by Ahasuerus. This reality of being before God and the intercessory power this gives the Church is the determining factor of the allegory. Nicholas's idea of history is saturated with his theology. When Esther is received graciously by King Ahasuerus despite not being summoned, Nicholas comments "for [the Church] also is pleasing to the heavenly king for her steadfastness, and the blessed Virgin on account of the full glory of her body and soul."<sup>102</sup>

This second idea, that Mary was assumed body and soul into heaven, was not yet a matter of official doctrine, but it had, by the fourteenth century, gained wide acceptance.<sup>103</sup> A crucial aspect of Mary's assumption, emphasized again and again by Franciscan theologians, is the idea that at the throne of God she has become a powerful intercessor for sinners.<sup>104</sup> It is here that Nicholas's two allegories for Esther align: Esther can be understood as the Church Triumphant or Mary, because they are both praying for the Church Militant, just as Esther prayed for the Jewish people.

Nicholas idea of history is more complex and theological than simply relating events of the past. For Nicholas, Mary's assumption is an historical fact with real theological significance.

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<sup>102</sup> Moral Esther 5.2: "*Cumque vidisset* Ecclesia namque caelesti regi placuit propter eius constantiam, et virgo beata propter plenam corporis et animae gloriam."

<sup>103</sup> The Assumption of Mary was not formally made a doctrine of the Catholic Church until 1950, when Pius XII promulgated the apostolic constitution "Munificentissimus Deus". A belief in the Assumption was widespread in the medieval Latin west, however, by the sixth century. An especially influential text in spreading belief in Mary's assumption is the apocryphal fifth-century narrative called the *Transitus*, which details Mary's falling asleep and being taken to heaven by her son. For a succinct overview of the development of belief in the Assumption, see Hilda Graef, *Mary, A History of Doctrine and Devotion, vol. I: from the beginnings to the Eve of the Reformation* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1963) 133-138.

There are other possible indications of belief in the Assumption as early as the second century. For a thorough discussion and analysis of these narratives see Stephen Shoemaker, *Ancient Traditions of the Virgin Mary's Dormition and Assumption*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); Steven Shoemaker, "The Ancient Dormition Apocrypha and the Origins of Marian Piety: Early Evidence of Marian Intercession from Late Ancient Palestine" in *Presbeia Theothokou: The Intercessory Role of Mary across Times and Places in Byzantium (4th-9th Century)*, ed. Leena Mari Peltomaa, Andreas Külzer, Pauline Allen (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2015), 23-39.

<sup>104</sup> Steven McMichael, "The Virgin Mary Is Taken to the Throne of God: The Assumption of Mary in the Sermons of Bernardino da Siena", in *Medieval Franciscan Approaches to the Virgin Mary: Mater Misericordiae Sanctissima, Misericordia, et Dolorosa*. Leiden: Brill, 2019), passim. Mary as an intercessory power was always at the heart of devotion to her Assumption. Shoemaker and Graef both make note of this in their analysis of the emergence of the cult of Mary's Dormition and Assumption. Shoemaker, *Ancient Traditions*, passim; Graef, *Mary*, 135-137.

He points to what he perceives as important historical events which also have theological importance, events which say something about how God is operative in His creation.

At the medieval universities questions about Mary were becoming increasingly discussed and debated.<sup>105</sup> Mary does, however, also occupy a place of some prominence in the lives and writings of Francis and Clare, and it is possible that Nicholas's inclusion of Mary reflects the character of the Franciscan community in Paris.<sup>106</sup> Marian devotion had an important role in Franciscan spirituality, helping especially to articulate what it meant to live a life of poverty.<sup>107</sup> The preaching of the Friars in vernacular languages contributed to a significant increase in devotion to Mary among the laity in the later Middle Ages, and it was predominantly Franciscans in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries who defended the Immaculate Conception of Mary (the belief that she was conceived without sin) which was widely contested at the time, and disavowed especially by prominent Dominican figures such as Thomas Aquinas.<sup>108</sup>

Franciscan devotion to Mary often meant a strong emphasis on her Assumption. As discussed by Steven McMichael, both Francis and Clare and their orders observed the Assumption of Mary as a major feast; Anthony of Padua (d. 1231) preached his first sermon on the Assumption; Bernardino of Sienna (d. 1444) wrote extensively on the Assumption and

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<sup>105</sup> It is outside the remit of this thesis to discuss these developments here. In any case, it is more important here to demonstrate how interest in Mary was an important aspect of Franciscan life at this time.

<sup>106</sup> Michael Blastic demonstrates that the maternal aspects of Mary's life were a metaphor and exemplar for the lives of the Friars Minor and the Order of St. Clare. Michael W. Blastic, "The Virgin Mary in the Writings of Francis and Clare of Assisi" in *Medieval Franciscan Approaches to the Virgin Mary: Mater Misericordiae Sanctissima et Dolorosa*, ed. Steven McMichael and Katie Wrisley Shelby (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 13-25. Blastic surveys the writings of Francis on Mary, concluding that Mary's acceptance of God's plan, giving flesh to Christ the Word, made her a metaphor for what the Friars Minor meant to do in their everyday lives: "every disciple of Christ is called, like Mary, to live the Gospel in one's life. As Mary's body gave flesh to the Son of God, so, by following the footprints of Jesus Christ in and through one's body in the world, one lives as a disciple of Christ. Embodied discipleship, modelled on that of the perfectly realized disciple, Mary, the God-bearer, accomplishes the mission Francis received to rebuild the church, the *Domus Dei*."

Furthermore, Catherine Mooney discusses how Clare was perceived in many ways to be an imitator of Mary rather than Christ. See Catherine M. Mooney, "*Imitatio Christi* or *Imitatio Mariae*? Clare of Assisi and her Interpreters" in *Gendered Voices: Medieval Saints and their Interpreters* ed. Catherine M. Mooney (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 52-77.

<sup>107</sup> For a superabundance of evidence, see the collection of essays in *Medieval Franciscan Approaches to the Virgin Mary*, ed. Steven McMichael and Katie Wrisley Shelby (Leiden, Brill, 2019). This collection includes useful bibliography of Italian scholarship on the subject, which is extensive.

<sup>108</sup> Miri Ruben, *Mother of God: a History of the Virgin Mary* (London: Allen Lane, 2009), 197-216; Graef, *Mary*, 298-305. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, pars III, q. xxvii, a. 2.

gathered what others had written about it. He was quoted in "Munificentissimus Deus", the 1950 constitution which made the Assumption a formal doctrine of the Church.<sup>109</sup>

Whether or not the emphasis on Mary in Nicholas's moral commentary is reflective simply of the university context in general, or a Franciscan character in particular, would be difficult to determine without a more detailed comparison to other Franciscan texts being written in Paris around this time. This is well beyond the scope of this thesis. The emphasis on Mary is striking however, and the idea of the Assumption as an historical event did seem to be a matter of preoccupation amongst the Order.

What is certain however is that Nicholas allegorizes Esther as the Virgin Mary, and not only as the Church, because the meaning of the allegory is not that the Church replaced the Synagogue, but that Esther's petitionary function in the Persian court becomes a context for reflecting on the Church's and Mary's petitionary function at the throne of God. Nicholas conceives of this as a practical and historical reality: the prayers of the Church on earth, in concrete historical situations, are heard by the Church in heaven, and answered. Similarly Mary, who is present in a unique way in heaven because of her historic bodily assumption, is a powerful intercessor for those in need.

By putting prayer at the centre of the moral commentary on Esther, Nicholas is revealing again his perspective on history as unfolding under God's guidance. The efficacy of prayer is rooted in the belief that the Church and her most venerated member, the mother of Jesus, are before the throne of God just as Esther was present in the court of Ahasuerus. It is within the context of the Church community that the prayers of the faithful are heard. The Church

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<sup>109</sup> Steven J. McMichael, "The Virgin Mary Is Taken " in 366-368.

It is worth noting that in one of his sermons on the Assumption, Bernardino compares Mary to Esther: just as Esther was taken from the house of women (the Church militant) to the house of the King (the house of God) so Mary was taken into heaven. Nicholas's link between Esther and Mary is evident in later contexts also, although Bernardino's point is that Mary is at the throne of God, while Nicholas's is her petitionary function at that throne. See McMichael, "The Virgin Mary is Taken", 375-376.

A collection of Bernardino's sermons has been translated into English by Campion Murray, *Eleven Sermons on the Blessed Virgin Mary, Saint Bernardino of Siena*, Early Franciscan Ascetical Writings, viii (Phoenix: Tau Publishing, 2012).

occupies a unique place in history, which for Nicholas is only important because it is salvation history.

The importance of the Church in the salvation of humankind is also apparent in Nicholas's allegory of Ahasuerus as Christ. I will examine this final aspect of Nicholas's commentary to demonstrate that the point of interpreting Ahasuerus as Christ is to assert the necessity of the Eucharist in the redemption of the world.

#### 4.4.b: Sacraments and Sacramentality: Ahasuerus as Christ

We saw that Nicholas began his moral commentary by saying that Ahasuerus signifies Christ because all kingship can be an allegory for Christ's kingship; Christ is king of kings and lord of lordship. Furthermore, Ahasuerus's name, Nicholas says, means "blessed"; Christ is the source of all blessedness. Shushan, the capital of Ahasuerus's kingdom, means "joy or gladness"; these are characteristic of Christ's kingdom.<sup>110</sup>

While Nicholas in this instance is following the same interpretive strategy as Rabanus, in linking Ahasuerus's allegorical identity to the meaning of his name, the designation he gives for that name differentiates the focus of the two commentaries. Rabanus says 'Ahasuerus' means "door" or "my entryway".<sup>111</sup> Christ, Rabanus says, "opened the way to salvation" for all the nations in the third age of the world, the age of Grace.<sup>112</sup> The Gloss and Hugh of St. Cher build on this interpretation, declaring that 'Ahasuerus' means "door" or "my entryway", but then simply quoting John 10:7 when Christ says "I am the door for the sheep".<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Moral Esther 1.2: "*Quando Sedit...Susan enim gaudium vel laetitia interpretatur. De civitate vero superna in qua cives sunt angeli dicitur Psalmus 86: Sicut laetantium omnium habitatio est in te.*"

<sup>111</sup> Cf. PL 109: 0639b. I was not able to find any source for Rabanus's or Nicholas's claims about the meaning of Ahasuerus's name. See footnote 1 in this chapter.

<sup>112</sup> "Cum Redemptor noster, quem Assuerus et nomine exprimit et dignitate, interpretatur enim *ostium* sive *atrium meum*, cum Patre et Spiritu sancto sempiternum hominis imperium, tertio tempore istius saeculi incarnationis suae humano generi patefecit sacramentum, et nobis vitae aperuit aditum, spiritualesque epulas fidelibus suis abundantissime ministravit." PL 109: 0639b-0639c.

<sup>113</sup> Gloss Esther 1.3: "Assuerus scilicet, qui Christum ostendit nomine et dignitate, interpretatur enim 'atrium meum' vel 'ostium'. Christus autem dicit 'Ego sum ostium ovium' etc.; Hugh of St. Cher, Esther 1.1: "Assuerus interpretatur atrium vel ostium meum. Johan x.b. Ego sum ostium. Et significat christum licet malus fuerit tamen in bonis actibus eum figurat."

John 10 is the chapter in which Christ provides the metaphor of himself as the good shepherd. He is the true shepherd of the sheepfold (i.e., Israel, cf. Isaiah 40) but comes for other sheep too, that there should be but one fold and one shepherd.<sup>114</sup> This idea of the entryway, then, was a context for understanding the universality of Christ's message: from a Christian perspective, that he came for the Gentile as well as for the Jew. Rabanus describes Ahasuerus/Christ as the door or entryway to emphasise his role in providing salvation to *all* nations and peoples (Rabanus several times employs the term 'Church of the nations' in his allegory of Esther). This is another way of reiterating what Rabanus sees as the hidden meaning of the book of Esther. We saw in chapter two that the Gloss intensifies this idea of the Church being the Church of the Gentiles.

While the allegory is the same for Nicholas and Rabanus (Ahasuerus is a symbol for Christ), the essential focus of Nicholas's spiritual interpretation is different. Nicholas wants to emphasise a characteristic of Christ's, his 'blessedness'. This meaning is more closely connected to the feast, which is not, as in Rabanus, the "wealth of spiritual riches" (*divitiarum spiritualium magnitudinem*) provided by Christ at his Incarnation.<sup>115</sup> The feast, Nicholas says, is specifically the Eucharist, which is the wealth and glory of the heavenly kingdom. The emphasis is not on the opening up of a general spiritual feast to the nations, but on the blessedness of Christ in providing the Eucharistic banquet in the Age of Grace.

This reflects contemporary discourse on the Eucharist in general, and we might look at the theology of another Franciscan to provide some context in particular. Bonaventure in his commentary on the *Sentences* spends more time in discussion of the Eucharist than any other sacrament. In the course of his exploration of the institution of the Eucharist, Bonaventure addresses the question whether the Eucharist was instituted "from the beginning".<sup>116</sup> The

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<sup>114</sup> Cf. John 10:16.

<sup>115</sup> PL109: 0637c.

<sup>116</sup> The following summary is taken from the translation of Bonaventure's commentary on the *Sentences* Book IV, d. 8, p. 1, a. 2, q. 1: Bonaventure, *Commentary on the Sentences: Sacraments*, ed. and trans. J. A. Wayne Hellmann, Timothy LeCroy, and Luke Townsend (New York: Franciscan Institute Publications, 2016), 184-186.

intricacies of Bonaventure's sacramental theology are outside the scope of this thesis, but he concludes his answer to this question by declaring that the Eucharist, because it is the true body of Christ which He received from the Virgin Mary and which he himself offered at the Last Supper, could not have been instituted from the beginning but only in the Age of Grace, especially because in the Eucharist is found the maximum fullness of Grace, the greatest blessing. This is the eucharistic theology that forms the background of Nicholas's allegory.

The Eucharist was understood to be the true, bodily presence of the historic Jesus, which those in heaven see directly but which the faithful on earth see under the appearance of bread and wine. The Eucharist was a link between the Church Militant and Church Triumphant. Just as Ahasuerus's feast was meant to show the glory of his kingdom, Nicholas says, the Eucharist is the glory of the heavenly kingdom, for it is the presence of Christ himself, beheld clearly by the Church Triumphant even if he is only seen by the Church Militant under "another appearance", i.e., bread and wine.<sup>117</sup>

So, the term *sacramentum* does operate in Nicholas's moral postilla, but in a much more specific way than in Rabanus's commentary. By the fourteenth century, *sacramentum* could only designate the seven sacraments, and in Nicholas's commentary it indicates not a hidden sense, but *the* sacrament, the Eucharist, which comes to the faithful under the appearance of bread and wine. While Rabanus and Nicholas both root Ahasuerus's allegorical identity in the meaning of his name, the designations they give reflect the different emphases of their spiritual interpretation of Esther.

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<sup>117</sup> Moral Esther 1.4: "*That he might show the riches and glory of his kingdom.* Truly [in this age of Grace] [Christ] shows his faithful the most precious food, by which glorious angels are restored in seeing it properly, but the faithful are restored by this sacrament under another appearance."

"*Ut ostenderet divitias etc.* Tunc enim ostendit fidelibus suis cibum preciosissimum, quo reficiuntur angeli gloriosi in specie propria: fideles autem in hoc sacramento sub specie aliena."

Nicholas also says explicitly that the wine served at the feast is an allegory for the precious blood, which comes to the faithful under the appearance of wine:

Moral Esther 1.7: "*Bibebant etc.* quia virtus eucharistiae sugitur in vi amoris. *Vinum quoque* per quod sanguis Christi pretiosissimus designatur, qui nobis in hoc sacramento sub specie vini datur."

They both use the supposed meaning of Ahasuerus's name to establish his allegorical identity as Christ in such a way that the point of their spiritual interpretation is reiterated: for Rabanus, Ahasuerus means entryway, because Christ became the means by which the Church of the Gentiles, replacing the Synagogue of Judaism, enters into salvation. For Nicholas, Ahasuerus means blessed, and Christ is the source of all blessedness, a blessedness which comes to the faithful in the Holy Eucharist.

This is expressive of the growing importance and centrality of the Eucharist in medieval theology. The continuing importance and debates about this sacrament dominated theological discourse in the Middle Ages, resulting in many canonical rulings regarding the proper celebration of the Eucharist.<sup>118</sup> By the fourteenth century, the Eucharist had become the most important sacrament of the Catholic faith, and theologians were busy trying to understand, as far as possible, this mystery.<sup>119</sup> Concomitant with this theological interest was a remarkable increase in devotion to the Eucharist in the high and late Middle Ages, among clergy and laity alike.<sup>120</sup>

The debates about the nature of Christ's sacramental presence are not reflected in Nicholas's moral commentary, but the interest in and devotion to the Eucharist certainly is. Lateran IV (1215) had mandated that all the laity receive the Eucharist at least once a year.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> See the following: Gary Macy, "Theology of the Eucharist in the High Middle Ages"; Stephen E. Lahey, "Late Medieval Eucharistic Theology", 499-500; Ian Christopher Levy "The Eucharist and Canon Law in the High Middle Ages" in *A Companion to the Eucharist in the Middle Ages*, edited Ian Christopher Levy, Gary Macy, and Kristen Van Ausdal (Leiden: Brill, 2012).

<sup>119</sup> For a discussion of late medieval Eucharistic theology, see Stephen E. Lahey, "Late Medieval Eucharistic Theology", in *A Companion to the Eucharist in the Middle Ages*, ed. Ian Levy, Gary Macy, and Kristen Van Ausdal (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 499-538. The mystery came down to three basic philosophical principles: presence, place, and quantity. In what way is Christ present if the appearance of bread and wine remain? If the accidents of bread and wine remain, how can they occupy, or in what way can they occupy, the same place as the body of Christ, and in what quantity? As Stephen Lahey points out, behind these questions "is the problem of the miraculous and its *relation* to the mundane." For a discussion of late medieval Eucharistic theology, see Stephen E. Lahey, "Late Medieval Eucharistic Theology", in *A Companion to the Eucharist in the Middle Ages*, 499-538; Lahey, "Late Medieval Eucharistic Theology", 500.

<sup>120</sup> For discussions of medieval popular devotion to the Eucharist, see: Miri Rubin "Popular Attitudes to the Eucharist" in *A Companion to the Eucharist in the Middle Ages*, ed., 447-468; Miri Rubin, "Sacramental Life," in *The Cambridge History of Christianity, IV. 1100-1500*, ed. Miri Rubin and Walter Simons (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 219-237; Miri Rubin, *Corpus Christi: the Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: the Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).

<sup>121</sup> Macy, "Theology of the Eucharist", 366.

While the laity were encouraged to participate in the Eucharist, and even required to receive the sacrament, there was also some debate about its worthy reception and the consequences of receiving the sacrament in an unworthy state, or a state of mortal sin. This is reflected in Nicholas's commentary. When the King and Haman go into Esther's feast for the first time, Nicholas comments that the feast is the banquet of the Eucharist, and that:

God, who is signified by the king, and a sinner, who is signified by Haman, went into the Eucharistic banquet, but in different ways. God enters to provide the feast, the sinner enters to misuse it and to take it unworthily, so that *he eats and drinks judgement for himself* (1 Corinthians 11:29).<sup>122</sup>

In addition to being described as the glory of the heavenly kingdom, Nicholas emphasises the importance of the sacrament in human salvation: Ahasuerus invites all people to the feast, and this is a symbol for the universal call to the Eucharist, because "[Christ] wishes all men to be saved in consequence of having received this sacrament".<sup>123</sup> Salvation here is linked with reception of the Eucharist. This is tantamount to saying that salvation is only possible from within the Church, a classic Augustinian opinion Nicholas certainly would have held. This is a strange paradox, an exclusionary welcome. *Only* through the Holy Eucharist, *only* in the Church of Christ can anyone be saved, but everyone is welcome to come to that feast, to find a home in that Church. History is still marching on, God is still at work, there is still time; this is the implied purpose of Nicholas's moral commentary. This is a point he makes in his literal commentary on Ruth also. As Lesley Smith demonstrates, the message of Nicholas's literal commentary on the book of Ruth is that salvation is possible only through Christ.<sup>124</sup>

In general, the spirit of Lateran IV is discernible, the council which declared that "there is but one universal Church of the faithful, outside which no one at all is saved." The Eucharist was

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<sup>122</sup> Moral Esther 7.1: "*Intravit itaque*. Deus qui per regem et peccator qui per Aman significantur, intravit ad conuiuium eucharistiae, sed tamen diuersimode, quia Deus intrat ut conuiuium faciens, peccator autem ut abutens et indigne sumens, quia *iudicium sibi manducat et bibit*." Cf. 1 Corinthians 11.27-29.

<sup>123</sup> Moral Esther 1.5: "*Intravit omnem populum*. Quia vult omnes homines saluos fieri, et per consequens ad hoc sacramentum admitti."

<sup>124</sup> Smith, *The Rewards of Faith*, in Krey and Smith, 55-58; Cf. Smith's translation of Nicholas's commentary on Ruth: Lesley Smith, Lesley, *Medieval Exegesis in Translation: Commentaries on the Book of Ruth* (Kalamazoo, Mich: Medieval Institute Publications, 1996) 67.

administered by the clergy from within the Church according to her liturgies. As in the literal commentary, we see that history is always linked, in Nicholas's mind, with salvation. The literal sense of Esther is the historical account of the salvation of the Jews from Haman's plot, the moral sense is an account of how salvation in general is being brought about. For Nicholas, world history is ultimately salvation history, and so history is inflected sacramentally after Christ's institution of the Church. The Church, through the sacraments and especially through the Eucharist, is God's chosen way of saving humankind, carrying on the work Christ while he was on earth.

### **History and Salvation in the Church**

This chapter opened with the question: how we can understand Nicholas's moral commentary in relation to the standard Christian interpretation of this book? We have seen that it is a remarkable departure in many ways, and yet it arrives at the same essential assertion: the Church is God's chosen means of salvation. In the final analysis, it seems that Nicholas's spiritual interpretation of Esther is just as much about the Church as Rabanus's was, but with a very different emphasis. Rabanus perceives his task as "uncovering" hidden references to the Church in contrast to the Synagogue, while Nicholas wants to use the story of Esther to reflect on the Church's unique and exclusive role in the history of salvation. Rabanus wants to use the story to teach or illustrate an idea, that the Church had replaced the Synagogue; Nicholas wants to reiterate that God is directing the course of history *through the Church*, and it is only through the Church that salvation is possible. In this way, even the spiritual commentary is a literal/historical reading. We have seen that Nicholas is participating in a specifically Franciscan attitude toward historiography when he does this. The Franciscan order had been developing a distinct attitude toward historiography evident in the Apocalypse commentary tradition which highlights the salvific function of the Church, and often the role of the Franciscan order.

In Nicholas's moral commentary on Esther, the salvific function of the Church is obvious in the petitionary role the Church and Mary play, and the centrality of the sacrament of the Eucharist. Like his Apocalypse commentary, there is no assertion of the Franciscan order's role in salvation history specifically. There are however many assertions of ecclesial authority found throughout the moral postilla. One example of this is Nicholas's allegory of the exaltation of Esther and Mordechai, as we saw: the power of the Roman empire is transferred to the Church and her bishops.

Furthermore, that Ahasuerus gave the ring originally gifted to Haman to Mordechai means that "by divine ordination, the power of investing bishops with their staffs and rings was taken away from earthly princes and retained by the prelates of the Church only."<sup>125</sup> The term "divine ordination" (*divina ordinatio*) was frequently used to describe God's providence or guiding role in the literal commentary, and it appears in the moral commentary to make an assertion of support for the authority of the Church against that of temporal rulers, the outcome of the so-called Investiture Controversy.<sup>126</sup> Nicholas frames this as a divine arrangement. It is God's will, Nicholas argues, that the Church has authority on earth. Nicholas goes on to say that when Esther is put in charge of Mordechai's household, this means "no priest is to be instituted except through the Church, represented by the name of Esther."<sup>127</sup>

Finally, in the penultimate comment of the moral commentary, Nicholas gives Mordechai another allegorical identity, when king Ahasuerus (i.e., Christ) exalts him: "By this Mordechai, whom King Ahasuerus exalted, and made his second, is signified the high priest

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<sup>125</sup> Moral Esther 8.2: "*Tulit itaque. Hoc autem mystice fuit impletum, quando divina ordinatione sublata fuit a principibus terrenis potestas investiendi episcopos et abbates per baculum et annulum et remansit praelatis ecclesiae tantum.*"

<sup>126</sup> The debate over power and who could legitimately exercise it—ecclesial authorities or temporal rulers— which dominated medieval Europe from the ninth to the twelfth centuries was symbolically distilled in the question of who had the right to invest bishops and abbots with their spiritual office. For a detailed account of the investiture controversy and the socio-political factors that contributed to it, see Uta-Renate Blumenthal, *Der Investiturstreit* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1982); translated into English in 1988: Uta-Renate Blumenthal, *The Investiture Controversy: Church and Monarchy from the Ninth to the Twelfth Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988).

<sup>127</sup> Moral Esther 8.2: "*Tulit itaque... quod nullus instituendus est praelatus, nisi per ecclesiam Esther nomine figuratam.*"

whom Christ exalted over the whole Christian people, making him his vicar."<sup>128</sup> The moral commentary ends with an assertion of the authority of the Pope, Christ's vicar on earth. The authority of the Church and her hierarchy is asserted by Nicholas as an historical and providential reality: it is Christ who appointed the Pope.

Mordechai is appointed to a place second only to the king. The pious Jew *seeks the good of his people*, and it is on this exhortatory note that Nicholas concludes his commentary:

By this it is shown that the high pontiff's interest must be turned to seeking the good of the Christian people. And likewise other prelates under him, let each one in his own province or diocese concentrate on the honor and glory of our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom be honor and glory forever and ever, Amen.<sup>129</sup>

These comments sit very strangely beside Nicholas's staunch royalist sympathies as described by Phillippe Buc, and Nicholas's own arguments with Pope John XXII as discussed in chapter one.<sup>130</sup> It is consistent however with Nicholas's Apocalypse commentary. In neither of these two commentaries does Nicholas try to give the Franciscan order any particularly special role in salvation history, or put his order in contest with the papacy. Perhaps his exhortation that "the high pontiff's interest must be turned to seeking the good of the Christian people" can be read as a veiled rebuke of certain popes.

Whatever he thought about the papacy, it is clear that for Nicholas, the Church, in her unique position bridging heaven and earth, her divinely ordained authority and hierarchy, and her sacraments, is the context in which salvation takes place. The moral commentary ends with an appeal to all prelates to concentrate on the honour and glory of Jesus Christ. As Mordechai was exalted by Ahasuerus, so the Pontiff is appointed Christ's earthly minister; as Mordechai sought

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<sup>128</sup> Moral Esther 10.2: "*Qui exaltavit Mardochoeum*. Per istum Mardochoeum quem rex Assuerus exaltavit, et fecit a se secundum, significatur pontifex summus quem Christus exaltavit super totum populum Christianum, faciens ipsum sibi vicarium."

<sup>129</sup> Moral Esther 10.3: "*Quaerens bona populo suo*, per hoc ostenditur quod studium summi pontificis verti debet ad quaerendum bonum populi Christiani. Et similiter alii praelati sub ipso, quilibet in sua provincia vel dioecesi intendere dent ad honorem et gloriam domini nostri Iesu Christi, cui est honor, et gloria in secula seculorum amen."

<sup>130</sup> Philippe Buc, *L'ambiguïté du livre: prince, pouvoir, et peuple dans les commentaires de la Bible au Moyen Âge* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1994), 308-311.

the good of the Jewish people, so the Pope should seek the good of the Christian people, as should each and every bishop in his own diocese.

The history of the Church is the primary interest of Nicholas's moral commentary on Esther, which is as much a departure from the standard Christian interpretation as his literal had been. Because the literal sense of Esther is about a moment in the history of the Diaspora Jewry, it becomes the foundation for a reflection on a series of moments in the history of the Church in adversity. As in the literal sense, it is clear that Nicholas's idea of history is deeply theological. The history of the Church reveals God's will for saving his people.

Nicholas's idea of history as the unfolding of God's providence through time is inextricably bound up in the idea of the Church as God's chosen providential instrument (as Israel and the Synagogue were the chosen instrument before Christ's Passion). History is about recognising in temporal events God's work of salvation, but that work takes place in and through the Church. History takes account of heroes and villains: the former are those empowered by God to defend his Church, as Charlemagne and Godfrey did; the latter are those whom God suffers, for a time, to persecute his Church and to shed the blood of martyrs.

With the institution of the Church, Nicholas's idea of history becomes sacramental. History is the unfolding of God's providence but the providence of God is inflected sacramentally in the moral postilla, which has to do with the history of the Church, and not in the literal postilla, which has to do with God's providence before the Church and therefore before sacraments. Perhaps Nicholas called his commentary 'moral' because, as in the traditional scheme, it is meant to teach the Christian what to do: pray and receive the sacraments, without which no salvation is possible.

## Conclusion

After reviewing what we know or can infer about Nicholas's early life, and situating him in the story of medieval Christian exegesis in general, I concluded chapter one with a few questions to guide this thesis: when Nicholas asserts that the literal is the 'foundation' for any other sense, what does this mean? Does his use of Jewish sources in the literal influence his moral commentary in any way?

Analysing the relationship between the literal and moral commentaries on the book of Esther was determined to be a useful context in which to explore these questions because, as discussed in chapter two, the standard Christian interpretation was an allegory arguing that the Church of the Gentiles had replaced the Synagogue of the Jews as God's chosen people; there had never been any real engagement with the literal sense of Esther by medieval Christians.

The first step therefore was to understand Nicholas's literal meaning of Esther, and how Jewish sources are operative in this context. In chapter three I analysed Nicholas's interpretation of the literal sense of Esther, and especially the role Jewish sources played in his exposition. Nicholas's literal sense of Esther is an innovative one, providing for the first time a serious examination of the historical aspects of the book, and presenting this history as having religious significance in that it is a story of God's providential action in history. Jewish sources were indispensable both to Nicholas's efforts to understand the historical sense and in his presentation of this sense as something sacred in its own right. This theological attitude toward history increases the importance of the literal/historical sense of Esther, which no longer needs to be allegorised to have significance for the Christian.

This literal interpretation is unique to Nicholas, and we have seen that his allegorical commentary on Esther is also a radical departure from the standard Christian allegory. Nicholas uses the book of Esther to tell the history of the Church, which, as far as he is concerned, is the history of the world, presenting this history as sacramental and divinely ordained. The spiritual sense of Esther, for Nicholas, is not about teaching a lesson about the relationship between Jews

and Christians, but about demonstrating for the believer that history is nothing less than the story of God's salvific action, right up to the present day. Both the literal and the moral commentaries are characterised by this focus on salvation history. Just as the events described in the book of Esther are one concrete example of God's saving action in the history of the Jewish people, so too are the many stories which make up the entire history of the Church.

In his two commentaries on the book of Esther, Nicholas is showing his readers that God's intervention in history did not stop at the end of the New Testament, or even with the patristic period; instead, he uses examples from the recent past to show his readers that God's providence is still at work in the world, so that they too have time to be saved. It is an 'evangelical' sort of message, characteristic of his order. In doing so, Nicholas is putting himself into a tradition of Franciscan historiography which sought to discern God's action in temporal events and which asserted most strongly the role of holy men in cooperating with God's providential plan. But Nicholas does not follow those Franciscans who wish to project ideas of their order into the future. Nicholas's essential critique of his fellow Franciscan interpreters is his belief that history has to do with the past and the present, but not the future; with what has happened and how this reveals God's presence today, but not with speculating on how God will act tomorrow. In Esther, he eschews any eschatological interpretations, just as he did in his literal commentary on the Apocalypse.

What sort of conclusions might we draw from this? What questions still need to be addressed? Clearly, much more work needs to be done on Nicholas's moral postilla on other books, to determine how typical this type of historical/spiritual sense is of his other exegesis. Generally speaking, historians of exegesis have neglected or completely ignored the Moral Postilla. Smaller than its literal counterpart and written later, the Moral Postilla is often overlooked, not least because of the extraordinary and idiosyncratic nature of the Literal Postilla. I hope that this thesis has demonstrated that the Moral Postilla should be overlooked no longer, but should be taken seriously as part of Nicholas's overall interpretation of the Bible.

Nicholas's moral interpretation of Esther as a chronological history of the Church aligns with his interpretation of the Apocalypse as we have seen. While acknowledging therefore that more work needs to be done with the moral commentary in general, I suggest that Nicholas's programme for the interpretation of Esther demonstrates the most fundamental characteristic of his approach to the study of the Bible: that it is historical, even while his idea of history is deeply theological, sacramental, and providential. This must be taken into account in any evaluation of his attitude toward the senses of scripture and scriptural exegesis.

My study of the literal and moral commentary on Esther, then, has come to important conclusions which must now be taken into account in any further study of Nicholas. My study of these two commentaries and the relationship between them has demonstrated an important element of Nicholas's exegetical programme in general. Like Augustine, Nicholas sees the Bible as a book of world history. Most of what is distinctive about Nicholas's exegesis can be understood in those terms. His use of Jewish sources always serves a better understanding of the history of the text; his division of the text takes place along lines which allow him to reveal the course of history; "fittingness" in the moral commentary is always via analogy with other historical situations. In light of the relationship between his literal and moral commentaries on Esther, Nicholas of Lyra is best described as a theologian of history, and as an historian of the Church.

For Nicholas, the Church of Christ leads human persons into the way to salvation and eternal life. This is the essential story that the Bible has to tell, and it is told in the interplay between the history of the Jewish people in the Old Testament and the history of the Christian people. Another fruitful avenue for exploration will be to compare what Nicholas is doing in his literal and moral commentaries with Bonaventure's idea of letter to letter comparison in his *Collationes in Hexaemeron*. This might shed more light on a specifically Franciscan tradition of biblical historiography and where this tradition is influenced by the senses of scripture hermeneutic.

Finally, Does the moral postilla on Esther help us understand Nicholas as a Christian commentator who used Jewish sources – a ‘Christian Hebraist’, as he has so often been described? Is it worth calling Nicholas a Christian Hebraists, with all the complicated nuances this term has accumulated, as touched upon briefly in chapter one? Yes, Nicholas does look for and uses Jewish sources, but he is doing something with these sources which is complex and nuanced. He is not an antiquarian interested or fascinated by the Jews, he is an historian who is interested in the Jews as one of many valuable sources of historical knowledge. Jewish sources are sometimes deemed useful because he wants to understand the story of Christ and His Church, and from Nicholas's perception this story began with the history of the Jewish people. Their exegesis sometimes contains a deeper knowledge of a fundamental text –the Old Testament or Hebrew Bible–which for Nicholas ultimately tells the story of the Christian Church.

I think it is safe to say that whatever the term 'Christian Hebraism' might mean when applied to Nicholas, it certainly must mean a scholar who, while deeply Christological, uses Jewish sources because he is as interested in the history of salvation as it unfolded before the time of Christ as after His Incarnation. Nicholas uses Jewish scholarship to go back into history as far as he can in the Literal Postilla, and he uses the Moral Postilla to go as far forward as he can with his Christian understanding of history. Clearly however, the *divisio textus* leaves out the Jewish idea of history as their history; the Jews and their sources are, as ever, left behind in the literal, and do not feature in the moral.

That said: while Nicholas is a theologian of the historical and sacramental Church in the final analysis, I do wonder if the Franciscan appreciated his Jewish sources so much because he perceived in them an attitude toward history which he shared. For both Nicholas and his medieval Jewish sources, Esther teaches the believer that history is nothing less than the manifestation of God's guiding hand.

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