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Suzanne LaVere, *Out of the Cloister: Scholastic Exegesis of the Song of Songs, 1100-1250*. Boston and Leiden: Brill, 2016. 194+vii. \$135.00 (hb). ISBN 978-9-0043-1198-5.

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Any new book devoted to the exegesis of scripture in the Middle Ages should be welcomed with open arms. *Out of the Cloister: Scholastic Exegesis of the Song of Songs, 1100-1250* by Suzanne LaVere has two especial merits: its user-friendly brevity, and its handy gathering together of a less known group of commentaries.

LaVere has helpfully chosen to survey a related set of commentaries on the Song of Songs. Instead of the better known monastic commentaries, with their colorful and mystical allegories of the “bride” as Mary or the individual soul, hers are commentaries that originated in the secular schools. Most school glosses zeroed in on the more practical applications to which a particular biblical book could be put: clarification of dogma, pastoral utility, moral education. The Song of Songs provided relatively limited material that could be so used, despite the most strenuous imaginative efforts of the commentators, so it is little wonder that the book was somewhat underutilized in the classrooms. The very low numbers of extant manuscripts that LaVere has to work with, in most cases, reinforces the impression that this was not material that was deemed essential for the formation of clerics in the twelfth- and thirteenth-century schools. Yet all of scripture was worth studying, therefore all of scripture was worth commenting, and it behooves us to understand what the schoolmen found useful in this most “monastic” text.

The scholars she chooses to work with are all connected to Paris, or to that cradle of the Parisian masters, Laon. The utility which the masters found in the Song of Songs boils down to a single theme, according to LaVere: that the active life is not only good, but in fact is superior to the life of contemplation; and that the active life is equivalent to preaching. In her introduction, LaVere situates this “radically new” (p. 1) point of view in a reaction to the rise of heresy, and more generally in the spirit of the late eleventh-century reform movement. It is specifically “scholastic” in that it promotes action, not contemplation, as the “ideal mode of living” (p. 2). This is the sole definition of “scholastic” that LaVere offers, but it has its merits.

Beginning with Anselm of Laon, LaVere lightly evokes the now-standard themes of reform and the pedagogical developments with which the school of Laon is associated. She then addresses the complex issues of the date and authorship of the various and sundry versions of “Anselm’s” commentary on the Song of Songs, and their relationship to the *Glossa ordinaria* on that book. She relies largely on Mary Dove and Rossana Gugliemetti, but her own diligent checking of some of the manuscripts that Gugliemetti had classified by incipits allows her to clarify a few points (pp. 11-17 and notes).^[1] On reasonable grounds she decides that several near-identical commentaries, anonymous or formerly attributed to Stephen Langton, can indeed be given to Anselm of Laon “or at least to his school” (p. 16). This argument, supported by the necessary and painstaking consultation of manuscripts, may well be the single most lasting contribution of the book.

Less convincing is LaVere's struggle with the relationships between the so-called "unabridged" version of Anselm's commentary, the various "abridged" versions (including those formerly attributed to Stephen Langton), and the Ordinary Gloss on the Song of Songs. This is a not uncommon hazard of working with these materials: whether manuscript X expands manuscript Y or Y abbreviates X is a Möbius strip of a problem which is nearly unsolvable without external evidence or subtle internal clues such as the way quotations are handled. She notes that the shorter versions contain glosses that are not in the "unabridged" version but she does not attempt an assessment of the outliers as a distinct group of comments, which might have thrown light on the source of these "additional interpretations." Instead, she proceeds on the assumption that "we may gain greater insight into all of Anselm's work...by examining manuscripts containing all versions" of his commentary (p. 18). Despite some initial attempt at rigor, LaVere ultimately remains rather generous in her acceptance of Anselm's authorship of the whole group of commentaries and their anteriority to the *Glossa ordinaria*.

Turning to the content of the commentary, LaVere picks out passages that prompt "Anselm" (no longer "or his school") to exhort his auditors to preach. She rightly notes that Anselm and the schoolmen who follow him all adopt an overwhelmingly ecclesiological approach to the Song, rather than the personal and affective exegesis of monastic commentators who equate the bride with the individual soul or Mary. Here, the bride is the Church, and the Church can be, as needed: the Church hierarchy, the secular clergy, all the faithful, Ecclesia or/and Synagoga (i.e., the assembly of the faithful before the coming of Christ, the Jews). A glitch in LaVere's analysis is that she does not consistently clarify to whom Anselm is referring when he speaks of the Church and its members: yet often, as when the Church is being exhorted to get up and preach, it really matters whether the flock or their pastors are being addressed (pp. 20-21). As she notes several times in passing, the popularity of lay preachers was simultaneously a cause, a result, and a problem related to the spate of religious enthusiasm that was also a cause of the growth of the schools. That Anselm is using the Song of Songs to urge the formation of future preachers is hammered home, but it is less clear whether he is giving his students material with which to construct sermons themselves, or whether they are themselves to embrace the *vita apostolica*. LaVere usefully notes the conservatively moralizing tone and the scepticism towards the more radical twinklings of "philosophy" (pp. 27-28), just as we would anticipate from Anselm, and a nicely specific warning for future preachers to gauge the intellectual level of their audiences carefully (p. 29).

Besides the need to preach to those who might slide into heresy, Anselm urged his students to convert the Jews. Curiously, LaVere claims that Anselm thought the heretics were incorrigible since they "willfully reject" knowledge of Christ, while the Jews are characterized as merely "ignorant" and thus more easily reeducated—if this is an accurate description of Anselm's view, it is the opposite of the expected formula (p. 32). However, a few pages later she has him urging the "capture" of the little heretical "foxes" who are then brought back into the church through "good works, examples of virtues, and your preaching"—a clear reference to the need to match the wandering lay charismatics at their apostolic game, though LaVere is rather diffident about it (p. 41). Regarding the Jews, Anselm reveals himself as both hopeful for the eventual conversion of Synagoga and generous with the praise that conversion will bring (p. 47).

Chapter one (on Anselm) and the final chapter five (on Hugh of St. Cher) clearly command the bulk of the author's attention, each weighing in at about 40 pages and bookending three chapters of 20-some pages each. I will skim through the main points of the intervening chapters and return to more detailed comments regarding that final chapter.

Chapter two, which deals with the Ordinary Gloss on the Song of Songs, recaps the background material from chapter one and adds a useful summary of the state of knowledge on the Gloss. Using Mary Dove's magnificent edition, LaVere is able to identify "approximately thirty" of the 200-plus untraced (i.e., not patristic or Carolingian) glosses as promoting the "new...doctrine" (p. 57) of the importance of preaching. The new glosses, both marginal and interlinear, are duly pointed out and

explained, and LaVere sums up by asserting that they “allow us to view the growing emphasis on the *vita apostolica* in a new context,” namely the reclaiming of the *vita apostolica* from the “wandering preachers” for those firmly within the “hierarchical order” of the Church—presumably the secular clergy (p. 68).

Peter the Chanter’s unpublished commentary is the subject of chapter three. The extensive use Peter makes of the Gloss, including the ecclesiological focus of the reading, is a nice reminder of the lasting import of the Laon masters on the developments in Paris. One thing Peter does that is different, though LaVere does not note it, is that he tends to use scripture to gloss scripture more frequently than his predecessors. (This trend will continue throughout the Middle Ages and has implications that extend beyond Nicolas of Lyra right to Martin Luther.) Peter’s assessment of the challenges to be found in glossing the Song of Songs is somewhat inconsistently presented by LaVere, who argues both that he agrees with the Jews that the book should be studied only by mature scholars (p.80) and that he found it to be “plain and easily grasped” (p. 75). Besides the use of scripture to gloss scripture, Peter also uses colorful material from bestiaries to provide memorable glosses on the meanings of the many animals who appear in the Song of Songs. Though her avowed focus is how these commentaries engage with preaching, she makes no mention of this trend, which Peter himself may have been in the vanguard of developing. She does, however, usefully point out both Peter’s explicit mentions that Christ “came to preach” and that Peter, a secular, was in tune with the growing enthusiasm for voluntary poverty and the apostolic life (pp. 89, 93).

Stephen Langton’s prolix “gloss on the Gloss” on the Song of Songs is shown in chapter four to be similarly supportive of the active life of preaching. LaVere addresses with some conviction the messy questions concerning the attribution of individual manuscript versions of the commentary (literal glosses alone, moral glosses alone, both together, and variants), and the degree to which these *reportationes* reflect Stephen’s teaching or direct oversight (pp. 101-105). Her discussion of literal, moral and spiritual exegesis as practiced by Stephen, however, seems underdeveloped. On page 110, LaVere returns to her topic, the call to preaching manifested in Stephen’s commentary. Somewhat surprisingly, she returns to a recapitulation of the “Mary/Martha” debate and argues that “some, including Langton” believed the active life to be superior to the contemplative. This seems unnecessary, it being the point of the entire book. To support her claim that preaching was urged by all levels of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, she adduces a letter of Innocent III to the bishop of Cagliari; but it seems to me that Innocent is here recalling a dilatory bishop to his principle occupation, rather than positing an argument about the relative merits of contemplation versus action (p. 111). LaVere sums up Stephen’s contribution by saying it is “another step in the evolution of the Song of Songs commentary” which it is, but mainly because it raises the Gloss to the dignity of a text to be commented itself, as she notes (p. 117). However, it is difficult to see how his ideas about the role or practice of preaching have developed at all.

The fifth chapter, on Hugh of Saint Cher, balances the heft and interest of chapter one. LaVere accepts Hugh as a “controlling mind” (as Lesley Smith has argued) but not the sole author of the commentary (p. 128 and notes 42-43). For all the influence that Hugh of Saint Cher had on subsequent generations, the number of extant manuscripts of this commentary is alarmingly small: in the case of the “long” version on which LaVere bases her chapter, exactly zero (p.131 and n. 54). This may reflect the limited interest in the Song of Songs for a university audience. She uses the commentary as found in Hugh’s *Opera omnia* (Venice 1732) and abandons the “short” versions extant in four manuscripts, with all their confusing immediacy. LaVere agrees with Dahan that the postills are rather old-fashioned, reflecting the “biblical-moral” exegesis of the pre-university schools more than the new “scientific” approach of the universities (p. 128). One novelty of this commentary is its sudden desire to include monastic (especially Cistercian) inspired themes of the “bride” as the individual soul plus a goodly dose of Marian interpretation, alongside the ecclesiological interpretations recycled from the schools’ commentators. Another innovation is the use Hugh makes of distinctions, but LaVere deals rather summarily with this, neither addressing the question of what printed marginalia might reasonably be regarded as “Hugh” (pp.

132, 135 n.67, 136) nor going beyond remarking that the addition of a preacher's tool was "not surprising, given that the postill was composed...by the Order of Preachers" (p.133). Similarly glancing mention is made of Hugh's rare references to classical works (p. 136). No mention is made of Hugh's extensive reliance on bestiaries, another area of his commentary that reflected current preaching methods.

Hugh's incorporation of Marian, specifically Cistercian, exegesis is laid out from page 137. Hugh does not pillage Bernard's and Thomas of Perseigne's commentaries for "any particular theme" though LaVere might have pointed out that Hugh (not Thomas) puts some of that material into the form of distinctions (p. 141), which would have shored up her desire to see Hugh's commentary as preaching oriented. Indeed she returns to this theme of preaching and the active life with patent relief on page 142, arguing that Hugh praises the active life even more strenuously than his predecessors in the schools. She insists that Hugh's most "original" contribution is that he "rails against the hypocrisy of monks and secular clerics who live leisurely lives and do not labor on behalf of others," defending the active life "in opposition to monastic and secular vocations." Several pages of extracts reveal direct engagement with other orders, such as the Carthusians, Cistercians, and Cluniacs, who search for "the bridegroom" but cannot find him; only the *praedicatores* can show the way (p. 148) because God cannot be found through contemplation. The often-acrimonious struggle among these three groups (seculars, monastics, and mendicants) is well known, but one weak point in LaVere's otherwise interesting evaluation is that the seculars were not "contemplatives" who did "not labor on behalf of others." Even the Cistercians were active in preaching, as LaVere herself notes (p. 124). Besides, LaVere does not reflect on why Hugh would rely so heavily on Cistercian commentary if he thought so little of them. More likely, Hugh's vitriol is directed against clergy of all sorts—regulars, seculars, canons, from the bottom to the top of the hierarchy—who succumbed to the temptations of the world, from power and wealth (at the top) to sex and food (among Hugh's students, probably); these tirades are common in sermons (and biblical commentaries) of the previous half-century, and antedate the rise of the mendicants. Hugh's emphasis on voluntary poverty and humility are not unexpected in a commentary by a mendicant, though LaVere seems to think that an argument needs to be made that he thought the Dominican order was the ideal way of life (p. 151).

The epilogue follows up on the future of mendicant commentary on the Song of Songs, providing a dozen pages on Peter Olivi and Nicolas of Lyra. LaVere looks for but does not find any special interest in preaching in these commentaries, and in general, little similarity to the earlier schools' commentaries. In Nicolas' literal interpretation of the Song of Songs she does find some useful comparison to the ecclesiological interpretations of the earlier schoolmen regarding the position of Synagoga, relating to his extensive use of Rashi and other Jewish commentary tradition (p. 167). LaVere concludes that neither of these mendicants seems interested in using his commentary to urge preaching and the active life. Her answer to this conundrum is that "the nature of biblical exegesis changed by the end of the thirteenth century" (p. 173), citing Beryl Smalley's still relevant observations to that effect.

This slim volume thus contains a very useful introduction to the commentary tradition on the Song of Songs as produced by the secular schools of northern France from ca. 1100 to its "epilogue" in the fourteenth century. The many long excerpts, often in parallel columns showing comparison to other commentaries, allows one a handy glimpse of the content, especially that devoted to the importance of preaching. LaVere's diligent work checking manuscripts attributed to Stephen Langton, Anselm, and others has cleared up a few important questions of attribution.

There are some issues that lessen the impact of this book. There is a vague sense of large amounts of scholarship semi-digested, as with her use of Dahan's and Bériou's work. This impression is reinforced by puzzling or confusing definitions, as of spiritual interpretation (p. 109) and distinctions (p. 132); and by the pervasive indefiniteness of her references to "clergy" and "Church" and to the intended audiences of these commentaries (as on pp. 64-65). Part of the problem is that the issues LaVere stirs up are

important and vast: the meaning of the apostolic life to various sectors of the Church, the complex relationship among monastics, mendicants and seculars, the participation of laity in the religious renewal of the period. It is difficult to circumscribe these in under 200 pages.

I would challenge some translations and interpretations. One such instance (pp. 154-5) takes Hugh's quite clearly allegorical interpretation of "villages" in Cant. 7:11 as "Christians of little learning" (*per villas neopyti et simplices ac rudes*) and turns them into literal villages which are then construed as evidence that the Dominicans preached not only in urban but in rural venues. A tragicomic image arises from a mistranslation on page 137, regarding a gloss on Cant. 2:7, which describes deer swimming across a river *alter alteribus clunibus supposito capite transeuntes*. LaVere has the poor deer "hold themselves up with the haunches of one placed on the head of another" instead of *vice versa*. Not only would this result in drowned deer, instead of more efficient swimming, but the reference is almost verbatim from the bestiaries, which she does not mention. A more serious mistranslation, because it changes the point that the commentator is trying to make, is from Anselm's comments to Cant.7:9: *Guttur tuum, id est maiores predicatorum tui erunt sicut vinum, id est inebriantes alios ut ipsi terrena oblivioni tradere faciant*. LaVere translates the phrase as "Your throat, that is, your great preachers who will be like wine, that is thus intoxicating others so that you may make them surrender to earthly oblivion" (p. 30). In fact, Anselm wants his preachers to make their audiences "hand over earthly things to oblivion": quite a different exhortation. Another gloss by Anselm might be less "enigmatic" if re-translated: *Botri extra vineas* are surely not "grapes without vines" (p. 36) but grapes harvested from outside the vineyard which *accepti sunt heretici*. I often get nonsense out of my own Latin translations, but when I do, I try again (or ask a friend!).

NOTES

[1] Mary Dove, ed. *Glossa Ordinaria in Canticum Canticorum*, Corpus Christianorum Continuation Mediaevalis CLXX (Turnhout: Brepols, 1997); Rossana E. Gugliemetti, *La Tradizione Manoscritta dei Commenti Latini al Cantico dei Cantici, Origini-XII Secolo* (Florence: Edizioni del Galluzzo, 2006).

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