

New College, MSS 8–13: A Remarkable Biblical Commentary from the Fifteenth Century

Ordering up a medieval manuscript always has some of the anticipation of Christmas, because you just do not know what size of box will arrive. Manuscripts come in all shapes and sizes, from tiny pocket books, with parchment thinner than modern paper, to—well, to MSS New College 8–13, six volumes of the biblical commentary in Latin by the Franciscan scholar Nicholas of Lyra (*d.* 1349).

On the shelf in the college’s special collections reading room, four of the six boxed volumes look like this:



The MSS on the shelf

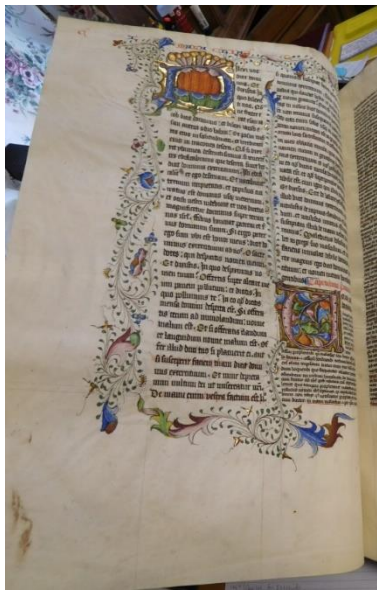
The nearby ‘ordinary’-sized books give some idea of scale. Each volume measures about 53 x 37.5 cm, with around 250 parchment folios. Lifting each volume from its specially made box onto the foam reading rest involved much huffing and puffing by reader and librarian alike. If R. L. S. Bruce-Mitford once famously described the weight of the Codex Amiatinus in Florence as close to ‘a small female Great Dane’, then each New College volume might perhaps resemble a springer spaniel.

These books comprise the six-volume set of Nicholas of Lyra’s *Postilla litteralis in totam bibliam*, his commentary on the Bible according to the literal sense of Scripture, and so they cover Genesis to the Book of Revelation. Nicholas of Lyra was one of the leading scholars of his day, and the *Postilla* became the ubiquitous biblical commentary for at least the next century. Hundreds of volumes of the *Postilla* still survive in libraries across Europe Lyra was said to be Martin Luther’s favourite scriptural scholar, and a punning rhyme from the sixteenth century held that:

*Si Lyra non lyrasset,
Lutherus non saltasset.*

[If Lyra had never played his lyre,
Luther would never have danced.]

Copies of the *Postilla* come in all levels of competence and expense, but this is a *de luxe* version intended to have fine initials and border decoration, in a variety of colours and conspicuous amounts of gold, at the beginning of each biblical book.



New College Library, Oxford,
MS 12, f. 47v
—beginning of the book of Malachi

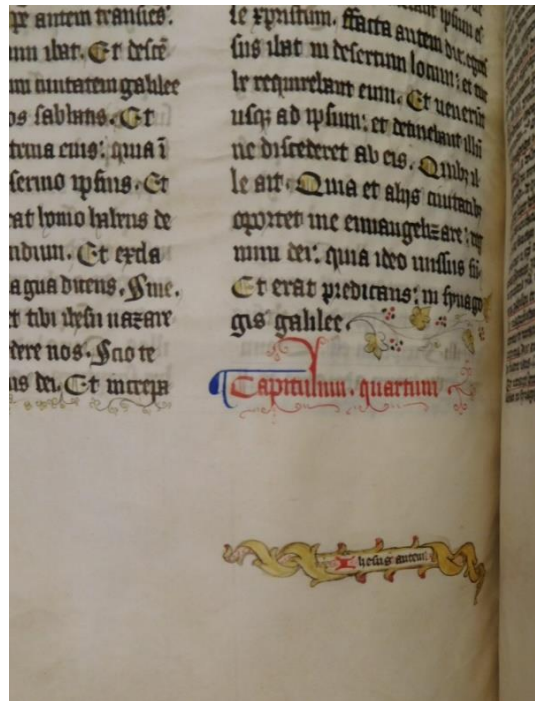


New College Library, Oxford, MS 12, ff. 15v–16r
—beginning of the book of Jonah

Many pages have further *jeux d'esprit*, with faces, animals, and foliate details:

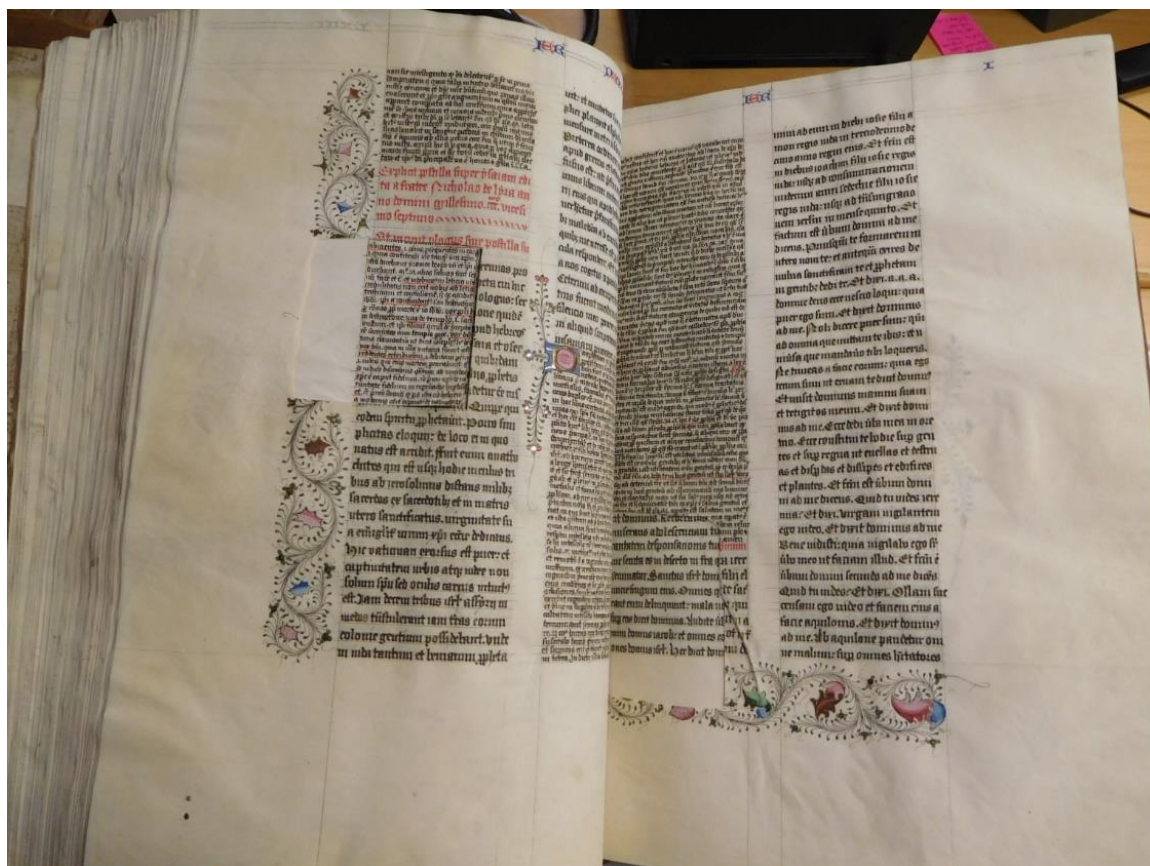


New College Library, Oxford, MS 8, f. 22v [detail]



New College Library, Oxford, MS 12, f. 200v [detail]

These glorious initials did not go unnoticed by readers, and at some point in its history the set was ravaged by a collector, who excised most of those in the earlier volumes, leaving pages a shadow of their former selves:



New College Library, Oxford, MS 11, ff. 67v–68r—excised initials

Nicholas's text is remarkable because of his determination to explain the meaning of Scripture following its literal sense, as far as he could. For much of its history, Christian exegesis (that is, interpretation) proceeded by looking for the hidden, non-literal, 'spiritual' senses, using allegory or tropology to expose the Christological, moral lessons which lay beneath the words on the surface, especially for the books of the Old Testament or Hebrew Bible. Nicholas took a different line, looking to find God in the plain meaning of the text; and to do that, he learned Hebrew, in order to understand the interpretations he found in the works of Jewish biblical scholars, especially the commentaries of a celebrated scholar from Troyes in northern France, Rabbi Solomon ben Isaac, known as Rashi (1040–1105).

In his general Prologue to the *Postilla literalis*, Nicholas tells his readers:

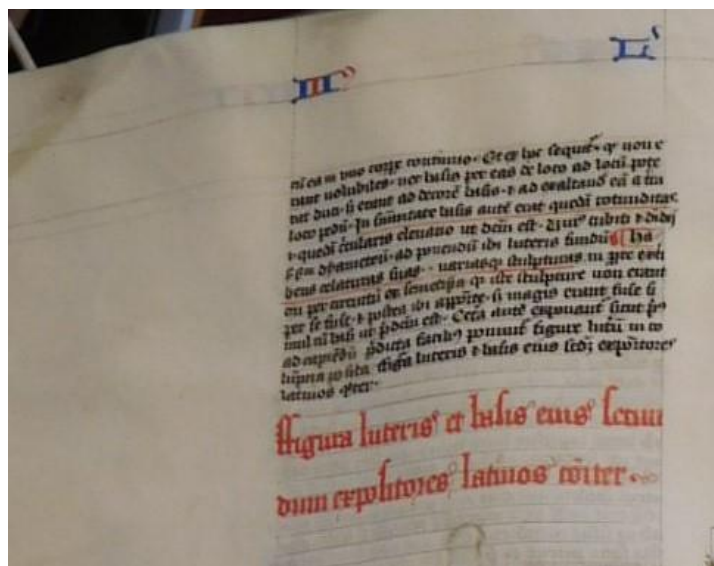
My intention is to cite the statements not only of Catholic but also of Jewish teachers, and especially Rabbi Solomon, who among all the Jewish exegetes has put forward the most reasonable arguments, in order to illuminate the literal meaning of the text.

In itself this is remarkable. But even more extraordinary is Nicholas's attitude to Rashi's interpretations. On many occasions, Nicholas gives both the customary Christian exegesis of a text *and* Rashi's commentary. When it comes to deciding which is the better view, Nicholas almost invariably comes down on Rashi's side: 'the Hebrews say, and it seems correctly . . .', or 'the Hebrews seem to understand this better when they say . . .', are phrases commonly to be found in his work.

This belief in the literal sense—in the idea that the details of the Bible will always make sense, if he can understand them correctly—lies behind another highly unusual feature of the *Postilla*, its drawings. At certain points in the scriptural text, Nicholas provides drawings (*figurae*) to aid his readers. Counting them is a little difficult, since it is not always clear which are connected

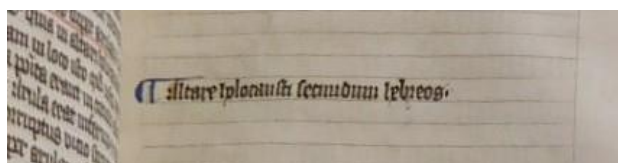
to others, but a full set comprises almost forty drawings. These are not straight illustration, and certainly not decoration; the drawings are an integral part of his exegesis, designed to show the reader exactly what he is trying to explain in words. They are clustered in particular parts of Scripture, especially the descriptions of the Temple and its furniture in Exodus, and in the vision of the rebuilt Temple in the book of Ezekiel.

Not all manuscripts of the *Postilla* have these drawings, but many do; and we can know that Nicholas meant them to be there, and (if he did not draw the original exemplars) directed their production himself, because he refers to them in the text and provides captions.

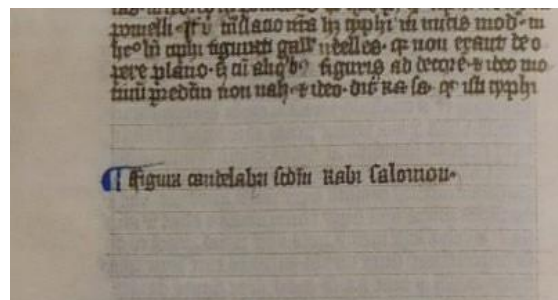


New College Library, Oxford, MS 9, f. 76v [detail]—
text with reference to the figures, and caption

Further, in about a quarter of the cases when the *Postilla* text is illustrated with a picture, there is not just one drawing but two: one shows the Christian exegesis of the text, and the other the Jewish. The dual illustrations are generally presented side-by-side or one above the other, and are accompanied by explanatory captions. Although these vary, they follow similar lines: ‘according to the Latins’ alongside ‘according to the Hebrews’ (*secundum latinos . . . secundum hebreos*); ‘according to Rabbi Solomon’ with ‘according to other learned men’ (*secundum Rabbi Salomon . . . secundum alios doctores*); or ‘according to the catholic doctors’ along with ‘according to the Hebrew doctors’ (*secundum doctores catholicos . . . secundum doctores hebreos*). Nicholas follows a common practice of using ‘Hebrews’ (*hebraei*) as a less pejorative word than ‘Jews’ (*iudaei*), when referring to Jewish scholars and scholarship. More interestingly, he gives Rashi and other Jewish scholars the title *doctor*.

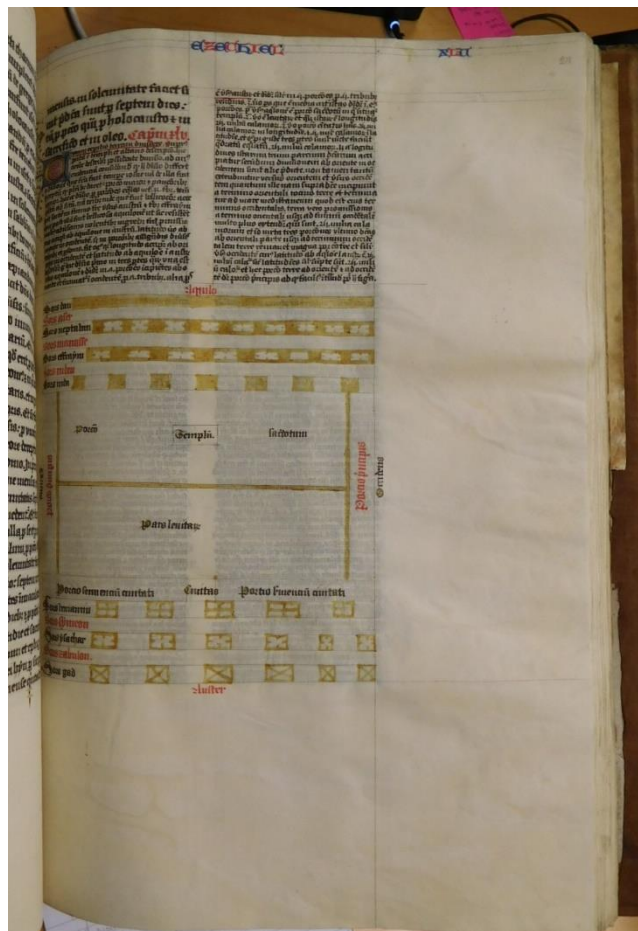


New College Library, Oxford, MS 8, f. 73r [detail]—
‘hebrews’



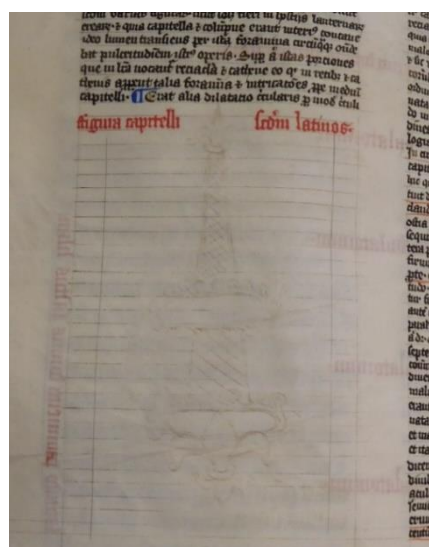
New College Library, Oxford, MS 8, f. 69v
[detail]—‘Rabi Salomon’, Rashi

The accurate transmission of these careful and important drawings was clearly difficult. The New College manuscripts, for all their decorative skill, have supplied them only in part. The scribes clearly knew where they should go: they have left spaces within the text and provided the correct captions. Where the drawings involve only ruled lines or circles which could be drawn with a pair of compasses, these are present and often touched with colour:



New College Library, Oxford, MS 11, f. 21r—Temple plan

But where free-hand drawing is required, then the space either remains blank, or else someone has provided a very loose basic drawing, such as for the image for the capitals from 1 Kings 7. This shows us the interesting lines of demarcation between those working on the book. Before the scribes began, the pages would have been prepared and the lines ruled, perhaps by an apprentice rather than the scribes themselves. Then the scribes supplied the commentary text, the captions and, probably, the drawings when they involved only lines and circles. The painters provided the general decoration of the volume; but there was then another skilled craftsman, whose job was the accurate reproduction of the more intricate drawings from the exemplar. Each had his own task. The unfinished state of the volumes, which to modern eyes is a flaw, seems to have bothered medieval people less—many *de luxe* books remain in some way incomplete.



New College Library, Oxford
MS 8, f. 76v—drawing of capital

Dr James Willoughby has discovered an entry for these Lyra manuscripts in the New College Bursars' Roll for 1465–6, when they were bought for 3*s* 6*d*. At that date, they would have been new or nearly new, but we do not know where they were made. More than a century after Lyra wrote his commentary, it was still an important text; but whether they were purchased for their scholarship or their artistic and antiquarian value, we do not quite know—the volumes have very few signs of use.

Lesley Smith
Professor of Medieval Intellectual History
Harris Manchester College, Oxford