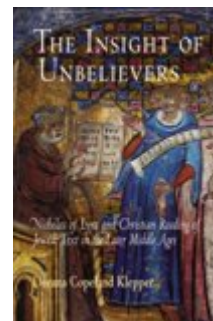


Deeana Copeland Klepper. *The Insight of Unbelievers: Nicholas of Lyra and Christian Reading of Jewish Text in the Later Middle Ages.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007. 240 pp \$55.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8122-3991-1.



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Commissioned by Susan R. Boettcher

Nicholas of Lyra's *Postilla litteralis super Bibliam* (1322-31) was, after the twelfth-century *Glossa ordinaria*, the most widely copied and disseminated of all medieval Bible commentaries (p. 6). In Nicholas's own time and for centuries afterward, the *Postilla* served as a key reference work for scholars who wished to establish the literal sense of a passage and who wanted information on how Jews interpreted particular passages within the Hebrew Bible. Nicholas's intellectual achievement was, however, a paradoxical one. To establish the literal sense of passages from the Old Testament he chose to read the biblical text in Hebrew with the help of Jewish writers, above all with the biblical commentary of R. Solomon b. Isaac of Troyes (1040-1105), known by the acronym Rashi. Yet theologians had believed and taught since the first century CE that Jews were religiously blind to the most important truths taught by their own Scriptures. How trustworthy was any Jewish commentator for establishing the meaning of a biblical passage? The burden of this book is to explain how Nicholas of Lyra (c.1270-1349) was able to re-

solve this paradox not only to his own satisfaction, but in a way that so many other later readers found convincing as well.

Deeana Copeland Klepper's discussion is divided into five chapters, chapters 1-2 relating to the *Postilla*, chapters 3-4 relating to Nicholas's quodlibetical disputations, "whether the Jews knew Jesus of Nazareth to be the messiah promised to them," and "whether from Scriptures received by the Jews [i.e., the Old Testament] it is possible to prove effectively that our savior was both God and man." The final chapter is devoted to the reception of both Nicholas's commentary and disputations in the later Middle Ages. One of the great strengths of Klepper's exposition is that she provides a clearly drawn context for each of Nicholas's works in its own time. In chapter 1 she discusses earlier medieval Christian Hebraism, including not only the work of such acknowledged Hebrew scholars as Hugh and Andrew of St. Victor and Herbert of Bosham, but also lesser-known figures.[1] She considers how they might have

learned Hebrew, what textual resources (such as interlinear Latin translations) were available to them for learning, and of course the social and institutional context in which they studied the language. Franciscans, such as Nicholas, were by and large more interested in using Hebrew for purposes of biblical commentary, while Dominicans tended to focus on the uses of Hebrew for missionary purposes (p. 11). Klepper also notes that this scholarly activity took place in a period of growing intolerance toward Jews, and expulsions first from England in 1290, and then a series of expulsions from France, the first from 1306-15, and the final expulsion in 1322. Where Nicholas's predecessors could converse with living rabbis concerning the meaning of particular texts, Nicholas and those who came later worked with rabbis only through the texts they left behind (p. 5).

In chapter 2, Klepper discusses Nicholas's *Postilla*, which was an unusual biblical commentary in its time, both for its sheer breadth (both Old and New Testaments), and for its focus on the literal sense, rather than on the other "spiritual" facets, allegorical, tropological, and anagogical. Nicholas's use of Jewish sources, above all Rashi's commentary, made it unique. He referred routinely to Jewish sources in order to clarify the sense of unclear passages in the Vulgate, to call into question patristic interpretations that conflicted with the literal sense of a passage, to harmonize the Christian interpretation of a text with Jewish ones (using the Septuagint, the Targums, and Titus Flavius Josephus), and to explore the problem of Jewish faith and unbelief. Klepper's discussion of Nicholas's sources outside of Rashi's commentary is vague in places. She asserts that Nicholas knew Aramaic and could read the Targums independently, though she does not systematically compare his citations with secondary citations in Rashi's commentary, where Nicholas may well have cribbed them (as she notes that he did in Genesis 49). She also notes Nicholas's use of the Septuagint, Josephus (*Antiquities* [c. 94] and *The*

Jewish War [c. 75]), and, in some fashion, Maïmonides' *Guide for the Perplexed*, perhaps at second hand through Raymond Martini's *Pugio fidei* [c. 1280].

The problem of Jewish unbelief for Nicholas and his contemporaries is the focus of Klepper's discussion in chapters 3 and 4. In chapter 3, she sets out the theological and philosophical context within which Nicholas worked. Jewish unbelief and resistance to the Christian faith was not only a worrisome problem for Christians religiously, but also philosophically. How could Christians claim that Jewish scripture, properly understood, pointed the way to Christian truth when the Jews themselves rejected Christian doctrine? Philosophical debates over knowledge, cognition and the attainment of certitude, informed by Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, served to reinvigorate the old discussion among Christian theologians. Nicholas's own understanding of the question (presented in chapter 4) is expressed in two of his quodlibetical disputations, delivered early in his career, before the publication of the *Postilla*. One of them concerns whether the coming of Jesus the messiah can be proved from Jewish scripture (which he answered in the affirmative), the other concerns whether the dual nature of Christ as God and human could also similarly be proved, which he believed was less clear. Embedded within these exegetical disputations is Nicholas's own explanation for Jewish unbelief, that the Jews of Jesus' own day suffered from "temporary ignorance" derived from moral weakness, distinct from their "customary perceptiveness" (p. 88). The Jews of Nicholas's own time suffered, he believed, from cupidity and the fear of poverty, which also affected their judgment. Nicholas also asserted that Jews were raised in an environment hostile to the Christian faith, cursing Christians "every day" in synagogues. Jews also, from Nicholas's perspective, refused to accept Christianity because of the sheer difficulty of Christian theology, with its plurality of persons in the Godhead, the

mystery of the Eucharist, and so on. Nicholas believed, too, that Jews suffered too from a genuine but "misguided" sense of loyalty to God, which hindered their acceptance of Christian doctrine.

In the final chapter, Klepper discusses the continued use of both Nicholas's *Postilla* and the two disputations. Her study of the hundred or so surviving copies of the 1309 *Quaestio de adventu Christi* reveals that it continued to be used after Nicholas's time as a theological/scholastic question, as a work of anti-Jewish polemic for would-be missionaries, and as an exegetical adjunct to the *Postilla*, or perhaps as a way to underscore Nicholas's theological loyalties. The *Postilla* itself came to represent a domesticated stand-in for Jewish opinion, obviating the need for most Christians to learn Hebrew themselves. This view infuriated Paul of Burgos, who wrote his *Additiones* (after 1391) as a gloss to the *Postilla* for the use of his son.

This slim but satisfying book does an excellent job of placing Nicholas in the context of his times and explaining why theologians for the next 150 years and more would continue to use the *Postilla* with profit.

Note

[1]. Deborah L. Goodwin, *"Take Hold of the Robe of a Jew": Herbert of Bosham's Christian Hebraism* (Leiden: Brill, 2006).

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