

A Tissue of Truth

The Historico-Systematic Position of Meister Eckhart's Latin Bible Commentaries

Despite the scientific progress of the past few decades, the question concerning the systematic significance of Meister Eckhart's Latin works is still subject to discussion among scholars. Initially, Eckhart's great project called *Opus tripartitum* was to deal with philosophical and theological problems mainly in the form of thetic expositions and systematic discussions, and only secondarily in the form of Bible commentaries. Nevertheless, the first two systematic blocks, i.e. the *Opus propositionum* and the *Opus quaestionum*, have survived as mere fragments, while most of Eckhart's extant Latin writings are in fact exegetical works.

The present project is based on the hypothesis that this fact is not primarily due to losses of manuscripts but mirrors a shift in Eckhart's systematic approach, which leads him to develop his philosophico-theological project inside his Bible commentaries. This does not mean, however, that he intends to make the textual facticity of Holy Scripture disappear by "sublating" it into philosophical conceptuality. On the contrary, Eckhart's exegesis pays particular attention to the concrete form of the Latin Vulgate text, whose grammatical structures and words serve as starting points for speculative conclusions. The historical form of the biblical text is, therefore, not merely an external garb for an otherwise ideal content of thought but appears in its linguistic materiality as a carrier of rationally relevant meaning. Another particularity of Eckhart's exegetical approach lies in the fact that he does not write continuous commentaries on the Bible but apparently makes an eclectic choice of single passages or even isolated verses to comment on.

All these aspects confer a unique position to Eckhart's exegetical method in the context of late thirteenth and early fourteenth century scholasticism. On the one hand, Eckhart's program of a "parabolic" or "figurative" reading of Holy Scripture marks a return to the older tradition of patristic exegesis (Augustine and Origen in particular); on the other hand, there is no doubt that his speculative interpretation of linguistic and semantic structures is visibly influenced by the speculative grammar of his contemporary Thomas of Erfurt and the philosophy of language of other scholastic thinkers. The fact that Eckhart focuses on a few isolated passages of the Bible indicates that he no longer equals the scientific character of true knowledge with linear deduction from supreme principles. Rather, knowledge has the form of an "an-archic" or "pan-archic" network, where any given word can be taken as a starting point to gradually accede to the whole truth of the biblical text. Eckhart's exegetical approach announces, therefore, a profound change of paradigm in scholastic thought, insofar as it is characterized by a renewed attention towards the positivity of Holy Scripture and the contingent linguistic structures that mediate all human knowledge.