Fable and Fact: Judging the Language of Scripture (Judges 9:8–15) from Antiquity to Modernity*

Jon Whitman
The Hebrew University of Jerusalem; jon.whitman@mail.huji.ac.il

◼ Abstract

In the movement of scriptural interpretation from antiquity to the modern period, critical attention in the Christian world recurrently turns to a provocative passage in the book of Judges. The passage (Judg 9:8–15) is a story about talking trees, a tale that is repeatedly called a "fable" (*fabula*) by Christian interpreters. In seeking from varying perspectives to explain the role of a fabulous dialogue in the discourse of truth, such interpreters suggest pressing issues in the assessment of figurative language. These issues include the controversial concept of the "literal" sense of Scripture; its potential relation to a "literary" sense of the text; the broader relation between scriptural and literary texts in general; and finally the complex interplay between factual and fabulous modes of expression.

In this expansive movement a decisive turning point is the late-medieval period. During this period commentary on the fundamental test case in Judges displays revealing changes in critical orientation. To assess those changes, it is important to investigate a broad range of interacting developments in exegesis, semiotics, homiletics, rhetoric, and poetic theory. The implications of this formative activity eventually extend far beyond the Middle Ages to the modern period. In the end,

what is involved in the historic encounter with the passage in Judges is far more than the interpretation of a story. It is the intricate intersection of fable and fact in the changing poetics of Scripture itself—and beyond Scripture, in the intriguing poetics of imaginative language at large.

◼ Keywords

fable, imaginative language, literal sense, scriptural interpretation, poetics, critical theory

◼ Introduction

Nearly two thousand years ago, a writer in the emerging Christian Church sent a letter of cautious exhortation to a leader of the Church at Ephesus. The letter, traditionally ascribed to Paul and eventually included in the New Testament as the Second Epistle to Timothy, no sooner encourages Timothy than it forewarns him. "Preach the word" (λόγον; *verbum*), reads the letter. "For there shall be a time, when they will not endure sound doctrine . . . [a]nd will indeed turn away their hearing from the truth (ἀληθείας; *veritate*), but will be turned unto fables (μύθους; *fabulas*)."[1]

The general warning, with its strict distinction between the discourse of "truth" and the diversion of "fables," is of course not unique to 2 Timothy. In a broad sense, it reflects a claim expressed elsewhere in Christian Scripture about the distinctive validity of the divine word, in contrast to words of less reliable designs.[2] For hundreds of years, readers in the Christian world invoked that distinction to limit potential comparisons between their Scripture and the scriptures of others, including the "fables" of pagan poets.[3] Yet, as suggested by the testimonies below, the more they explored the modalities of those scriptures—their own as well as others'—the more they came to qualify the general distinction, and finally to call into question

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[1] See 2 Tim 4:2–4. Though I have specified certain fundamental expressions in the Greek text, cited from *The Greek New Testament* (ed. Kurt Aland et al.; 3rd ed.; Stuttgart: United Bible Societies, 1983), for the passage at large I have presented a translation that closely reflects the Vulgate, the text familiar to the medieval commentators central to this essay. See *The Holy Bible* [Douay-Rheims version] (1899; repr., Rockford, IL: Tan Books, 1971), with *Biblia Sacra: Iuxta Vulgatam Versionem* (ed. Robert Weber, with the assistance of Bonifatius Fischer et al.; 3rd ed. prepared by Bonifatius Fischer et al.; Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1983), from which the Latin expressions are drawn.

[2] Forms of the term μύθος (*mythos*), translated by forms of the term *fabula* in the Vulgate, appear five times in the New Testament, always with negative valences: 1 Tim 1:4; 1 Tim 4:7; 2 Tim 4:4; Titus 1:14; 2 Pet 1:16. See vol. 4 of *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (ed. Gerhard Kittel; trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley; 1967; repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1969), s.v. μύθος, section E, 781–92.

[3] Already in antiquity the distinction is nonetheless modified at times by Christian commentators. See, for example, Anders Cullhed, *The Shadow of Creusa: Negotiating Fictionality in Late Antique Latin Literature* (trans. Michael Knight; Beiträge zur Altertumskunde 339; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2015), with studies cited in the following note and my discussion below.

even the special status of the divine word itself. In the end, in a fateful turn of the prophecy in 2 Timothy, they found that in the very effort to construe the word of Scripture, they themselves tended to turn "unto fables."

The complex engagement of Christian civilization with discourse that it regards as fabulous has long been examined in an extensive range of scholarship.[4] But such scholarship has largely concentrated on Christian approaches to fabulation *outside* Scripture—from the exposition of mythological tales to the composition of fictitious narratives. In this discussion I would like to focus instead on changing treatments of an imaginative passage *inside* Scripture, a passage that is repeatedly called a fable—*fabula*—in Christian interpretation itself. While attitudes toward this provocative text partially overlap with attitudes toward imaginative language at large, the scriptural status of the passage places special pressure on critical evaluations of its poetics. I wish to investigate that critical process as the passage is reassessed in diverse interpretive genres over time.

The varying perspectives on this text in the array of commentaries and treatises that I will be considering have never before been coordinated with each other. Some of these accounts, to my knowledge, have scarcely received consideration at all in modern academic settings. The accounts themselves range in scope from brief reflections about the text to elaborate readings of it. Their shared concern with this particular passage is all the more striking in view of their own structural and conceptual diversity. For such discussions not only show how different commentators—sometimes even the same commentator—can reframe a text according to changing interpretive contexts and designs. More extensively, they show how the arresting traits of the text itself can keep claiming anew the attention of commentators, pressing them to try to come to terms with it. Though I will be referring to approaches to the passage during the course of more than fifteen hundred years, I will be focusing on a decisive turning point in its interpretive history: the late Middle Ages. Since the broad movement from antiquity to modernity that I wish to explore is intricate—with interacting developments in exegesis, semiotics,

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[4] On some of the foundational forms of this engagement, see, e.g., Paule Demats, *Fabula. Trois études de mythographie antique et médiévale* (Publications romanes et françaises 122; Geneva: Droz, 1973); Peter Dronke, *Fabula: Explorations into the Uses of Myth in Medieval Platonism* (Mittellateinische Studien und Texte 9; Leiden: Brill, 1974); Jon Whitman, *Allegory: The Dynamics of an Ancient and Medieval Technique* (Oxford: Oxford University Press / Clarendon Press, 1987); Peter G. Bietenholz, *Historia and Fabula: Myths and Legends in Historical Thought from Antiquity to the Modern Age* (Brill's Studies in Intellectual History 59; Leiden: Brill, 1994); *Poetry and Exegesis in Premodern Latin Christianity: The Encounter between Classical and Christian Strategies of Interpretation* (ed. Willemien Otten and Karla Pollmann; Supplements to Vigiliae Christianae 87; Leiden: Brill, 2007); and Cullhed, *Shadow of Creusa*. On the particular case of a relationship between the term *fabulationes* in the Vulgate and the term ἀδολεσχίας (*adoleskhias*) in the Septuagint, see the diverse early Christian attitudes toward ἀδολεσχέω (*adoleskheō*) explored by Jonathan Stavsky (in research that he kindly provided to me in prepublication form), "Oral Tales and Written Truth in the Early Reception History of LXX Psalm 118(119)," in *Psalms in/on Jerusalem* (ed. Ilana Pardes and Ophir Münz-Manor; Perspectives on Jewish Texts and Contexts 9; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2019) 43–66.

homiletics, rhetoric, and poetic theory—it may be useful to indicate in advance the general lines of my inquiry.

After presenting the passage, I would like first to consider some of the principal ways in which it is approached in the Christian world by the early Middle Ages. I would then like to examine how in the late Middle Ages the conspicuously figurative language of the passage comes to test the very notion of the "literal" sense of Christian Scripture. This development, in turn, implies intriguing questions about the relation between the "literal" sense of the scriptural text and its "literary" sense. Finally, I would like to suggest how from the late-medieval to the modern period such questions raise still broader issues about the relation between scriptural and literary texts as a whole and about the interplay between factual and fabulous modes of expression at large.

The passage itself, which appears in the book of Judges, is a story about talking trees. The very presence of the story in Scripture seems to complicate the kind of distinction that is expressed in 2 Timothy between divine truth and diverting fable, and for generations of Christian interpreters, this passage in Judges is a critical test case for judging the language of Scripture itself.

■ Scriptural Story

The story is told by an individual named Jotham.[5] Jotham is one of some seventy sons of a renowned leader in ancient Israel. The leader himself, Gideon—a man also called in Scripture Jerubbaal—had refused an offer of kingship from the Israelites. After Gideon's death, one of his many sons, Abimelech—born to a concubine from Shechem—kills all the other sons of Gideon except Jotham, and the men of Shechem treat Abimelech as a king.

Jotham, in turn, climbs to the top of mount Gerizim and addresses the men of Shechem. "The trees . . . ," Jotham cries out at the opening of his fabulous story,

> **8 The trees went to anoint a king over them: and they said to the olive tree: Reign thou over us.**
> **9 And it answered: Can I leave my fatness, which both gods and men make use of, to come to be promoted among the trees?**
> **10 And the trees said to the fig tree: Come thou and reign over us.**
> **11 And it answered them: Can I leave my sweetness, and my delicious fruits, and go to be promoted among the other trees?**
> **12 And the trees said to the vine: Come thou and reign over us.**
> **13 And it answered them: Can I forsake my wine, that cheereth God and men, and be promoted among the other trees?**
> **14 And all the trees said to the bramble: Come thou and reign over us.**

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[5] Given the familiarity of the King James Version, I normally use its forms for proper names (which vary in different English translations), though for the passage at large (Judg 9:8–15; cited below, with typography modified) I again use the Douay-Rheims version.

15 And it answered them: If indeed you mean to make me king, come ye and rest under my shadow: but if you mean it not, let fire come out from the bramble, and devour the cedars of Libanus.

As it turns out, God sends an evil spirit between Abimelech and the people of Shechem, and in the raging conflicts that ensue, both he and they are utterly destroyed.

◼ From Antiquity to the Early Middle Ages: Opening Frameworks

The tale of Jotham calls special attention to itself in more ways than one. Though the tale is related in a book traditionally regarded as a historical narrative, the story is situated at a noticeable "remove" from the action—not only because of the speaker's mountaintop location, but also because of his linguistic mode. Figures of speech and verbal flourishes, of course, appear throughout Scripture, but unlike brief metaphorical turns (e.g., hills rejoicing in a biblical psalm), Jotham brings into the annals of Judges an extended tale of sustained fabulation in which the personified characters operate in their own autonomous foreground. And unlike exemplary tales that may be fictional but remain technically possible (e.g., the parable of misconduct that Nathan tells David), plausibility is hardly a feature of the story of Jotham. In fact, with its talking trees, it suggests the kind of narrative—both untrue and unrealistic—that in ancient rhetorical discussions is repeatedly called *fabula*.[6]

Nor is the "message" of the tale less oblique than its mode. Not only its general orientation, but its very cast of characters has long had its ambiguities for readers. It is not clear, for example, whether the three figures that reject the offer of kingship are to be correlated with three individuals, and if so, who they might be—though in midrash and related Jewish commentary, for example, the olive, the fig, and the vine sometimes come to be correlated with three previous Israelite leaders,

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[6] Though my analysis below shows how approaches to the story frequently intersect with other concepts of fabulation, here I wish only to note that this particular concept of *fabula* (recurrently cited in commentary on the tale) highlights the acute degree of fictionality in the story. For ancient rhetorical accounts of *fabula* as narrative that is neither true nor verisimilar, see *Rhetorica ad Herennium* 1.8.12–13; Cicero, *De inventione* 1.19.27; and Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria* 2.4.2. On the expansive adaptation of this conception of *fabula* in later theories of narrative, see Päivi Mehtonen, *Old Concepts and New Poetics:* Historia, Argumentum, *and* Fabula *in the Twelfth- and Early Thirteenth-Century Latin Poetics of Fiction* (Commentationes Humanarum Litterarum 108; Helsinki: Societas Scientiarum Fennica, 1996). On Christian applications of *fabula* in this specific sense to the story of Jotham, see my discussion below, with my account of variations in the usage of the term, differences in the classification of the tale (e.g., "parable"), and shifts in theoretical orientation as commentators assess the scriptural story vis-à-vis broader notions of fabulous discourse. On formative conceptions of "fables" at large, with differing but intersecting terms for various kinds of "stories"—including Greek αἶνος (*ainos*), λόγος (*logos*), μῦθος (*mythos*), and ἀπόλογος (*apologos*); Latin *apologus*, *fabula*, and *fabella*—see the detailed study of Gert-Jan Van Dijk, *Ainoi, Logoi, Mythoi: Fables in Archaic, Classical, and Hellenistic Greek Literature; With a Study of the Theory and Terminology of the Genre* (Mnemosyne, Bibliotheca Classica Batava, Supplementum 166; Leiden: Brill, 1997).

Othniel, Deborah, and Gideon.[7] Even that thorny character, the "bramble," has not always been treated as the villain of the piece.[8] For the late-antique Christian Methodius of Olympus, the bramble refers to "the law which was given to the apostles for the salvation of the world," since they taught virginity, and the bramble resembles virginity in view of its "strength and firmness against pleasures."[9] A recent commentator on Methodius's argument has given his point about the bramble what might be called a pricklier formulation: the bramble keeps "intruders out."[10]

While such interpretation already suggests something of the semantic instability that a fable potentially introduces into the discourse of truth, my aim is not to focus on early interpretive efforts to redirect the discourse, nor is it to consider only particular interpretations of characters in this passage. For the moment, I want rather to call attention to a broadly formative treatment of the tale by one of the foundational Christian thinkers of late antiquity. The commentator is the rhetorician-turned-theologian Augustine—the first interpreter to situate the story in an extended treatment of semiotics.

The semiotic scope of Augustine's treatment of the tale is all the more important because of his long-standing ambivalence toward imaginative techniques and texts at large. Despite his early training in the verbal arts and his lingering attraction to the lore and literature of Roman antiquity, he is more cautious, for example, about the extent to which the idioms of mythological discourse can be conceptually adapted by

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[7] A version of this correlation (which includes Barak along with Gideon) appears already in *Midraš Tanḥuma*, in the recension edited by Salomon Buber, מדרש תנחומא [*Midraš Tanḥuma*] (2 vols.; 1885; repr., New York: Sefer, 1946) 1:103 (in the page numbering for בראשית [*Bereyšit*]). For a translation of this passage and the controversial question of dating the material in the work, see *Midrash Tanḥuma (S. Buber Recension)*, vol. 1, *Genesis* (trans. John T. Townsend; Hoboken, NJ: Ktav, 1989) 115 and xi–xii. The correlation with Othniel, Deborah, and Gideon appears in Rashi (eleventh to early twelfth century) and other sources. For this and different correlations in Jewish commentary, such as the parallel (in view of Judg 8:22) with three generations from Gideon to his grandson—a parallel given expression by Joseph Kara (partially contemporary with Rashi) and the twelfth-century commentator Joseph Kimḥi—see Uriel Simon, "המשל ושברו ומסגרתם—משל יותם הסיפורית" [English title (with English summary, pp. I–II): "The Parable of Jotham (Judges IX, 8–15): The Parable, Its Application and Their Narrative Framework"], *Tarbiẕ* 34 (1964) 1–34, at 1 n. 3, and 14 n. 51, along with the broader discussion in the article on problems of contextualizing the fable.

[8] For the character introduced in Jotham's tale (Judg 9:14) as האטד (*ha'aṭad*; *rhamnum* in the Vulgate) the term *bramble* is used in the Douay-Rheims version, the King James Version, and a range of other translations. This is the English expression normally used in my discussion, though the question of the precise identity (and translation) of *aṭad* in this passage is a subject that has been given an interpretive importance of its own; see my comments at the end of this essay.

[9] See Methodius of Olympus, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins* 10.2–3, in *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins; or, Concerning Chastity* (trans. William R. Clark), in *The Writings of Methodius, Alexander of Lycopolis, Peter of Alexandria, and Several Fragments*, vol. 14 of *Ante-Nicene Christian Library: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325* (ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1869) 103–4. On Methodius (whose death has been dated to the early fourth century), see the introduction in this volume, ix–x. For favorable views of the bramble in later interpretation, see n. 121 below.

[10] See David M. Gunn, *Judges* (Blackwell Bible Commentaries; Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005) 123.

Christians than an earlier interpreter like Lactantius or a later one like Fulgentius.[11] He appears to be largely silent about even explicitly Christian poetry composed in his own period but not liturgical in design, such as Prudentius's expansive personification allegory, the *Psychomachia*.[12] While his early theorizations of poetic invention suggest tentative defenses of fiction, over the course of his work as a whole he repeatedly qualifies his regard for a poet or a passage by extended critiques of the *fabulae* or *figmenta* of the human imagination.[13] Still more generally, he recurrently indicates pressing opposition to any kind of lying, no matter how commendable the cause.[14]

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[11] See, e.g., the detailed study of Augustine's views in Cullhed, *Shadow of Creusa*, 123–300, with discussions of Lactantius, 313–27 (including the much-cited passage in *Divine Institutes* 1.11 on the use of "color" by poets and "poetic license"), and Fulgentius, 402–32, and my additional references in this and later notes. Though Augustine utilizes Lactantius (explicitly cited in *City of God* 18.23), the very ways in which they approach passages of shared interest can dramatize their differences in orientation; see *City of God* 4.9–11, with Sabine MacCormack, *The Shadows of Poetry: Vergil in the Mind of Augustine* (The Joan Palevsky Imprint in Classical Literature; The Transformation of the Classical Heritage 26; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 24–38, including the comment that (in contrast to Lactantius) Augustine evaluated a shared set of Virgilian passages "as evidence not for pagan monotheism, but for the interminable fragmentation of Roman concepts of deity" (34). Even when Augustine seems to offer an opening for mythographic activity, he significantly limits the opening; compare, e.g., his celebrated comments on Egyptian gold and silver in *On Christian Doctrine* 2.40.60–61 with his critical remarks on Neptune in 3.7.11–3.8.12. On Christian and pagan approaches to mythology during the transition from late antiquity to the early Middle Ages, compare, e.g., Demats, *Fabula*, 5–60, and Whitman, *Allegory*, 58–121. In this essay, of course, my aim is not to survey early treatments of mythological discourse but to focus on the critical frameworks of commentators (such as Augustine) who specifically treat a fabulous story in the book of Judges.

[12] See especially H. J. Westra, "Augustine and Poetic Exegesis," in *Poetry and Exegesis* (ed. Otten and Pollmann), 11–28. Not even the appeal to Christian typology in the *Psychomachia* elicits an approving comment from Augustine, at least in the extant sources; it can only be imagined how alien he would find a flamboyant narrative with no clear Christian affiliation like Martianus Capella's early fifth-century *Marriage of Philology and Mercury*. It seems that Augustine's contemporary, Jerome, may be no more welcoming than Augustine to poetic activity (instead of exegetical prose) by Christians in this period; see M. Vessey, "*Quid facit cum Horatio Hieronymus?* Christian Latin Poetry and Scriptural Poetics," in *Poetry and Exegesis* (ed. Otten and Pollmann), 29–48.

[13] Compare, e.g., the early theorizations (from the 380s) in *De ordine* 2.14.40–41 (on the reasonable lie—*rationabile mendacium*—in poetry) and *Soliloquies* 2.11.19–20 (on *fabula* as a *mendacium* composed for use or pleasure) with the wide-ranging criticism of fabulous discourse in Augustine's work at large (up to and including the late *City of God*)—a tension exemplified by multiple citations in Cullhed, *Shadow of Creusa*, 83–300 (with his argument, 140, that "the shift from *fictum* to *factum* dominates the overall picture of Augustine's writings" but that "poetry never lost its attraction for him"); Westra, "Augustine and Poetic Exegesis"; and MacCormack, *Shadows of Poetry*. For a brief example suggestive of Augustine's turns in orientation, see his comments on the "Muses" in *De ordine* 2.14.41 and *On Christian Doctrine* 2.17.27, discussed by MacCormack, 63–64; compare Westra, 19–21, on the complications involved in Augustine's conception of a "Christian aesthetic" in *On Christian Doctrine.*

[14] See the comments, with extensive bibliography, in Erika T. Hermanowicz, "Augustine on Lying," *Speculum* 93 (2018) 699–727.

But is Jotham's tale of talking trees a lie? Writing a treatise *Against Lying* in the early fifth century, Augustine approaches the tale as one of many forms of indirect signification, among them parables (*parabolae*); tropical expressions (*tropicis . . . locutionibus*), including metaphor (*metaphora*), whereby a word is transferred "from its proper object to an object not proper" (*de re propria ad rem non propriam . . . translatio*); and certain prophetic utterances and actions (*locutiones actionesque propheticae*).[15] Such forms of signification, designating one thing by another (*aliud ex alio*), are not lies, maintains Augustine, when they point (albeit indirectly) to what is true. In fashioning of this kind (*in quo genere fingendi*), even "human deeds or words" have been assigned to "irrational animals or things without sense"—not only in secular letters (*saecularium litterarum*), as in the cases of Horace and the fables of Aesop (*Aesopi . . . fabulas*), but also in Holy Writ (*litteris . . . sacris*), "as in the book of Judges," where "the trees seek them a king . . ." (*ligna sibi regem requirunt*). All is fashioned (*fingitur*) with the aim of reaching the thing intended (*intenditur*).

Augustine's influential discussion associates the tale of Jotham with figurative activity at large, including stories in "secular letters,"[16] and it suggestively touches on fundamental issues such as propriety and intentionality in the use of language. But the discussion potentially raises a host of unresolved questions about figuration. For example, though in one sense Augustine distinguishes between what is spoken and what is signified, he tends radically to conflate them with each other in describing how such discourse is actually "true." "Yet *true* things, not false, are *spoken* (*dicuntur*); because *true* things, not false, are *signified* (*significantur*) . . . ;

[15] For the text, see *Ad Consentium contra mendacium*, ed. Joseph Zycha, in *Sancti Aureli Augustini De fide et symbolo . . .* (CSEL 41; Vienna: Tempsky; Leipzig: Freytag, 1900), esp. 10.24–13.28 (pp. 499–510). I have drawn upon the translation of H. Browne, *To Consentius: Against Lying*, in *St. Augustin: On the Holy Trinity. Doctrinal Treatises. Moral Treatises*, vol. 3 of *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church* (ed. Philip Schaff; Buffalo: Christian Literature, 1887) 891–98. The work (dated to 420) was preceded by Augustine's much earlier *De mendacio* (which does not explicitly refer to the tale of Jotham). On some of the religious and historical contexts of these works, see, e.g., Boniface Ramsey, "Two Traditions on Lying and Deception in the Ancient Church," *The Thomist* 49 (1985) 504–33, with the reassessment of Hermanowicz, "Augustine on Lying," including 718 nn. 64–65.

[16] In view of this passage, including Augustine's explicit reference to Horace, it would be advisable to revise the claim of Hermanowicz ("Augustine on Lying," 708) that "[w]hat poets employ in the creation of literary works, the 'reasonable lie' (*rationabile mendacium*) . . . receives no attention at all" in *Against Lying*. Cullhed, *Shadow of Creusa*, 229–40, explores some of the implications of the passage for Augustine's attitudes toward fiction in general. It remains revealing that years after writing *Against Lying*, when Augustine discusses in book 4 of *On Christian Doctrine* "eloquence" inside and outside Christian Scripture, he indicates that "those things in that eloquence which our authors have in common with pagan orators and poets do not greatly delight me." See *On Christian Doctrine* (trans. D. W. Robertson, Jr.; Library of Liberal Arts; Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1958), 4.6.10, with the remarks of Donald G. Marshall, "Making Letters Speak: Interpreter as Orator in Augustine's *De Doctrina Christiana*," *Religion and Literature* 24.2 (1992) 1–17, at 9. For all his comments about scriptural tropes and turns in *On Christian Doctrine*, Augustine makes no explicit reference there to the radical fiction of Jotham's story.

the things that are *signified* (*quae significantur*) namely, those *are* the things *spoken* (*ipsa dicuntur*)."[17] Intensely determined to show the veracity of apparent falsehoods in Scripture, Augustine scarcely examines here the nuances of their textuality. If a figurative story is ultimately "true," could any such story—even, for example, a pagan story suitably construed—potentially be as acceptable as a scriptural one?[18] Might there be different genres of fiction that represent the truth with different degrees of probability or clarity?[19] Within the general category of figuration, in what ways might the semiotics of "utterances" differ from the semiotics of "actions"?[20] And as for the story of Jotham, just what is the truth that it signifies? Over the course of a millennium and a half after Augustine, such questions will repeatedly try the thoughts of Christians who seek to judge the language of Scripture.

In the assessment of the passage in Judges a crucial intermediary between Augustine and later interpretation is the sixth-to-seventh-century churchman Isidore of Seville. Though Isidore's foundational comments draw partly on Augustine, his own writing situates the story of Jotham not in a brief treatise on lying but in two diverse compilations that virtually exemplify the expansive range of his interests, from theological investigations to linguistic ones. These generically distinct works present two quite different accounts of the story, reflecting the varying contexts and aims of Isidore's remarks. To my knowledge, no published study has clearly recognized this duality, but it displays contrasting perspectives that deeply affect Christian reading for hundreds of years.

One of the two accounts might be called a "spiritual" interpretation. It appears in a work of *Questions on the Old Testament* (*Quæstiones in Vetus Testamentum*), which discusses what Isidore calls the "mystical sacraments" of scriptural history (*plena mysticis sacramentis*).[21] This account calls the tale a parable (*parabolam*) and

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[17] See Augustine, *Against Lying* 10.24 (*Contra mendacium*, ed. Zycha; trans. Browne, 892; my highlighting): "tamen uera, non falsa dicuntur, quoniam uera, non falsa significantur seu uerbo seu facto. quae significantur enim, utique ipsa dicuntur."

[18] Though in his voluminous work as a whole (as indicated above in nn. 11 and 13) Augustine variously discusses this kind of question, my point is that *Against Lying* does not clearly engage the issue.

[19] Related questions can be raised with regard to different imaginative forms in Scripture (e.g., verisimilar parable, visionary prophecy, etc.), but even Augustine's extended discussion of scriptural imagination in *On Christian Doctrine* (to say nothing of his briefer treatment in *Against Lying*) does not clearly assess differing modes of possibility—which will be a recurring issue in the later interpretation of Jotham's story; see my discussion below.

[20] On some of the complexities of this issue—never fully clarified in *Against Lying* or in Augustine's remarks beyond this treatise on matters involving figuration *in uerbis* and figuration *in facto*—see, e.g., Armand Strubel, "'Allegoria in factis' et 'allegoria in verbis,'" *Poétique* 23 (1975) 342–57; Whitman, *Allegory*, 77–83 and 122–31; and (with particular reference to the story of Jotham) my discussion below.

[21] See his prefatory comments in *Mysticorum expositiones sacramentorum seu Quæstiones in Vetus Testamentum*, in PL 83, 207B. For my quotations (below) from the account of the tale of Jotham, see PL 83, 386B–388C; my translations and paraphrases (with selected Douay-Rheims formulations). On the question of whether Isidore's account draws upon a lost Augustinian source, see the note beginning "Cap. vi. n. 1" near the bottom of PL 83, 386.

treats it as a kind of apocalyptic drama. Gideon, according to the account, is a type of the Lord (*typum Domini*). His concubine is the Synagogue (*Synagogam*)—what is called in the book of Revelation (*in Apocalypsi*) the synagogue of Satan—from which the vilest son, the Antichrist, is to be engendered in the last times (*De qua ultimis temporibus nequissimus filius, id est, Antichristus est generandus*). By contrast, Jotham signifies the remnant of Israel (*figura est residui populi Israel*) that ascends to the height of faith and virtues. The restlessly searching trees are vagrant and vacant men (*vagos, et vanos*), ready for everlasting fire. They merit not the olive (the grace of the Holy Spirit and the unction of peace), nor the fig (the sacred law), nor the vine (the Savior, who says in the Gospel: "I am the true vine"—*ipse in Evangelio ait:* Ego sum vitis vera). The thorny bramble points to the Antichrist (*typus Antichristi*); its fire is his iniquity, which will consume all who trust in him as well as himself.

While it would be possible to examine this account in detail, I want only to note in passing that it conspicuously shifts the immediate orientation of the story from the history of ancient Israel to the destiny of humankind, and that it radically diffuses any deep distinctions between objects and figures and words. From its perspective, an actual person like Jotham is no less a sign than figurative characters like the trees, who are themselves no less signs than a brief figure of speech like the "true vine." Everything is a cipher—both in the sense that it is a code and in the sense that it has virtually no substance of its own. The content of both the story that Jotham tells and the history to which he belongs seems almost programmed, as it were, according to a predetermined model. Even the bramble is related to Abimelech not so much directly as through their shared significance, the Antichrist. Such early Christian interpretation offers one way to accommodate a fable to the discourse of truth. In its approach, it nearly seems as if fables are finally no more or less figurative than facts themselves.[22]

This interpretation of the tale of Jotham later passes almost verbatim into the ninth-century work of the expansive early-medieval commentator Rabanus Maurus.[23] With little alteration it eventually passes into the most pervasive commentary on the Christian Bible in the Middle Ages, the *Glossa ordinaria*, which in its development from the ninth to the twelfth century eventually takes the composite form of both marginal and interlinear glosses that accompany the main text. To the end of the Middle Ages and long afterward, a reader of the glossed Christian Bible encountering the trees' appeal to the vine, for example, would find written in Latin in the interlinear space above the line with "vine" the word "Christ," followed by the words "who said 'I am the true vine.'"[24] A format of this

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[22] On this kind of overlap between words and things in early Christian figuration, see Whitman, *Allegory*, 77–83, 122–31, cited above in n. 20, with the corresponding question in the body of the text on the semiotics of utterances and actions in Augustinian thought.

[23] See Rabanus Maurus, *Commentaria in librum Judicum* 2.11, in PL 108, 1171B–1173B.

[24] The general effect can be sensed from the first printed edition of Christian Scripture with the *Glossa ordinaria*, a fifteenth-century publication available in a facsimile reprint as *Biblia latina*

kind makes it difficult even to conceive the words of the scriptural text without their "spiritual" glosses.

Yet there is a quite different account of the tale of Jotham in the work of Isidore of Seville, and it has far-reaching consequences of its own. Though part of this account is derived from Augustine, Isidore's own presentation of it appears in a work that is less theological than philological (as it were) in orientation. The work is the encyclopedic *Etymologies*, one of the fundamental reference books of Christian learning for a thousand years after its composition near the end of Isidore's life.

In this work, the fable of Jotham is discussed not in distinctly "mystical" but in broadly moral terms, and it is associated with an account of narrative genres, ordered according to their relative closeness to the realm of fact. One kind of narrative is "fable" (*fabula*).[25] "Fables," indicates Isidore, are not actual events (*res factae*), but only verbal inventions (*loquendo fictae*). Some fables, he continues, concern "human morals" (*mores hominum*), like "Aesop's fables," or a passage "in the book of Judges," in which "the trees seek a king for themselves." "The whole story is made up especially for the moral, so that we arrive at the matter (*rem*) that is intended (*intenditur*) with the true meaning, though, to be sure, by means of a made-up narrative."[26] Shortly after this account of fables, Isidore closes his general discussion (and the first book of the *Etymologies*) by distinguishing (under the influence of earlier compositional theory) three orders of narrative. Histories (*historiae*) are "true deeds that have happened"; plausible narrations (*argumenta*) are "things that, even if they have not happened, nevertheless could happen"; and fables (*fabulae*) are "things that have not happened and cannot happen, because they are contrary to nature."[27]

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cum glossa ordinaria: Facsimile Reprint of the Editio Princeps, Adolph Rusch of Strassburg 1480/81 (introd. Karlfried Froelich and Margaret T. Gibson; 4 vols.; Turnhout: Brepols, 1992). See the treatment of Judg 9:8–15 in vol. 1, p. 487 of this edition, including the scriptural text (the two middle columns), the marginal gloss (the two side columns), and the interlinear gloss—for the cited passage, Judg 9:12, the insertion beginning almost directly above (slightly to the left of) the word *vitem* (vine)—*christum*, followed by *qui dixit. ego sum vitis vera* (abbreviations expanded).

[25] For the section on *fabula*, see *Etymologies* 1.40 in *Isidori Hispalensis Episcopi Etymologiarum sive Originum Libri XX* (ed. W. M. Lindsay; 2 vols.; Scriptorum Classicorum Bibliotheca Oxoniensis; 1911; repr., Oxford: Oxford University Press / Clarendon Press, 1971). I have drawn upon the translation in *The "Etymologies" of Isidore of Seville* (trans. Stephen Barney et al.; 2006; repr., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) 66–67.

[26] See Isidore, *Etymologies* 1.40.6 (ed. Lindsay; trans. Barney et al., 67): "quod totum utique ad mores fingitur ut ad rem, quae intenditur, ficta quidem narratione, sed veraci significatione veniatur." For a comparison between this statement and its Augustinian source, see my discussion below.

[27] See Isidore, *Etymologies* 1.44 (ed. Lindsay; trans. Barney et al., 67): "Nam historiae sunt res verae quae factae sunt; argumenta sunt quae etsi facta non sunt, fieri tamen possunt; fabulae vero sunt quae nec factae sunt nec fieri possunt, quia contra naturam sunt." On the deployment of the triad *historia, argumentum, fabula* in ancient rhetorical discussions and the far-reaching afterlife of the triad in medieval critical theory, see the references in n. 6 to *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, Cicero, Quintilian, and the study of Mehtonen, *Old Concepts*; compare my discussion below.

Perhaps I could note briefly just two aspects of this approach to the tale of Jotham. First, unlike Isidore's approaches in *Quaestiones*, this discussion conceives the tale not from the perspective of apocalypse, or even a specifically Christian spirituality, but from the perspective of generally human ethics—what Isidore calls in the passage cited above *mores hominum*.[28] Second, while the *Etymologies* of course recognizes that the fable is a figurative tale, it implies more pressing inquiries than the *Quaestiones* about the status and function of figuration. It is true that even a fable points to a matter (*rem*—a thing) that is intended (*intenditur*), but of all forms of narrative it is the furthest removed from factual matters themselves. Though Isidore does not here cite the passage from 2 Timothy, a Christian reader of the *Etymologies* might well inquire about the conditions under which Scripture itself, the discourse of truth, would turn, in the words of 2 Timothy, "unto fables."[29]

Such questions, in fact, increasingly preoccupy Christian interpreters of the fable of Jotham and scriptural figuration as a whole in the later Middle Ages. Their efforts to clarify the functions of such passages eventually promote not only new attitudes toward the relationships between words and things, but more specifically, new approaches to the "literal sense" of scriptural language—and finally, in effect, to its "literary" sense. It can even be argued, it seems to me, that the developing focus on the "ethics" of imaginative narrative is allied with the developing sense of the "poetics" of the scriptural text. Perhaps even a few engagements with this late-medieval movement can suggest something of that provocative—and deeply conflicted—process.[30]

■ The Late Middle Ages: Thirteenth-Century Perspectives on Literality and History

Under what critical circumstances do late-medieval interpreters assess the story of Jotham? In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries—the very period when the *Glossa ordinaria*, with its "spiritual" treatment of the story, is broadly institutionalized and widely disseminated in Christian Europe—powerful new forces are reshaping the basic principles of exposition and composition. Sustained studies exploring the styles and genres of texts and, more deeply, their logical, ethical, and psychological

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[28] See also the later statement cited above in n. 26 ("quod totum utique ad mores fingitur ut ad rem . . ."), in which Isidore adds *ad mores* to his Augustinian source ("quod totum utique fingitur, ut ad rem . . ."; *Contra mendacium* 13.28 [ed. Zycha]).

[29] Given the express disparagement of "fables" in 2 Tim, such an inquiry about the very manner and character of the passage in Judg would not necessarily be precluded or resolved by recourse to a "spiritual" interpretation of the story. But as indicated below, this kind of linguistic and generic inquiry comes noticeably into the interpretive foreground with late-medieval movements to reevaluate the "literal" and "historical" dimensions of Scripture.

[30] In a more extensive discussion of late-medieval approaches to the story of Jotham, it would be possible to consider, for example, comments by Conrad of Hirsau, Rupert of Deutz, and Peter the Venerable in the twelfth century. But in view of the practical limits and particular focus of this selective analysis, it seems to me more useful to feature the thirteenth-century treatments discussed below.

rationales develop in a variety of forms, ranging from elaborate "introductions" to authoritative writers—both scriptural and secular—to detailed "arts" of poetry (*ars poetriae*) and preaching (*ars praedicandi*).[31] A case in point is one of the first treatises on the art of preaching, the early thirteenth-century *Summa de arte praedicandi* of the theologian Thomas of Chobham, which shows how pointedly strategies of scriptural interpretation can interact with theories of imaginative expression during this period.[32] More particularly, it shows how Jotham's fabulous tale of talking trees can become not only an emblem of events in the book of Judges but an exemplum of the dilemmas of fiction in its most radical form.

Already in the prologue of his treatise, discussing ways of signifying in theology, the late-medieval writer investigates the critical implications of fundamental concepts that date back to Augustine and Isidore. Calling attention to the exegetical distinction between signification by words (*significationem vocum*) and signification by things (*significationem rerum*), Thomas proceeds to elaborate signification by "words" with the threefold grammatical or rhetorical classification of *fabula*, *argumentum*, and *historia*.[33] But as his subsequent references to non-Christian and

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[31] On the consolidation and distribution of the *Glossa ordinaria*, see Margaret T. Gibson, "The Glossed Bible," in *Biblia latina cum glossa ordinaria* (introd. Froelich and Gibson) 1:vii–xi, and Christopher Ocker, "Scholastic Interpretation of the Bible," in *A History of Biblical Interpretation* (ed. Alan J. Hauser and Duane F. Watson; assoc. ed. Schuyler Kaufman), vol. 2, *The Medieval through the Reformation Periods* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009) 254–79, at 259–60. On "introductions" to authoritative writers, see the critical study of A. J. Minnis, *Medieval Theory of Authorship: Scholastic Literary Attitudes in the Later Middle Ages* (London: Scolar, 1982). As the discussion of Minnis suggests (26, 40–49, 60, 87, 89, 96, 108, 156), though introductions to scriptural authors at times intersect with the *Glossa*, such introductions include conceptual and structural designs that pass far beyond the compilation of diverse glosses. On medieval "arts" of poetry and preaching in their intellectual and practical contexts, see *Medieval Grammar and Rhetoric: Language Arts and Literary Theory, AD 300–1475* (ed. Rita Copeland and Ineke Sluiter; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), hereafter *MGR*, 544–50, with 1–60, 368–75, and 684–98. As this important work indicates, such arts are facilitated by broader changes in the study of grammar and rhetoric during this period, with the increasing shift from early-medieval forms of marginal glossing to systematic, continuous treatises on the arts of language.

[32] For the original text, see Thomas of Chobham, *Summa de arte praedicandi* (ed. Franco Morenzoni; CCCM 82; Turnhout: Brepols, 1988). For selected passages in translation, see *MGR* (ed. Copeland and Sluiter), 616–38; the translations below are drawn (in slightly adjusted form) from this work. On Thomas's treatise, composed perhaps in the 1220s, see the introductory comments in *MGR*, 614–16.

[33] See *Summa* (ed. Morenzoni), 4–5 (*MGR* [ed. Copeland and Sluiter], 616–17). By Thomas's period, of course, Augustine's distinction of signification by words and signification by things (indicated above in n. 20) has been mediated by other theologians; see *Summa*, 5, notes to ll. 66–77. As Thomas's later comments show, his own approach to the broad distinction has its complications. See his inclusion of the "fleshly spouse" (*sponsam carnalem*) of the Song of Songs and the name *David* in the category of "things" (prologue to *Summa*, 7–9; *MGR*, 619–20), and compare my discussion below. Both the general distinction regarding words and things and the triad of *fabula*, *argumentum*, and *historia* are jointly presented in a brief twelfth-century discussion of Peter of Poitiers, in *Petri Pictaviensis Allegoriae super tabernaculum Moysi* (ed. Philip S. Moore and James A. Corbett; Publications in Mediaeval Studies 3; Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1938) 100, though Peter does not refer in this discussion to the story of Jotham.

Christian sources suggest, such a neat concatenation is limited by the acute falsehood of *fabula*. "The signification of words is threefold: fable (*fabula*), plausible narration (*argumentum*), history (*hystoria*). Fable is what contains neither truth nor probabilities, and according to Macrobius, the philosophical treatise eliminates this kind of fiction from its sacred precincts; no less does theology reject it (*theologia repellit*), just as the apostle said to Timothy: 'avoid old wives' tales'" (Vulgate: *aniles fabulas*; 1 Tim 4:7).[34]

Yet when Thomas proceeds in the treatise to describe the narrative forms appropriate to a preacher, he not only allows *fabulae* to be included in a sermon, but grants that such a mode of composition is included in Scripture itself. "However, sometimes fables (*fabule*) are mixed in with the sermon, not for the sake of fictional events themselves, but for the sake of the significations which may be understood through the stories. . . . The holy writers also mix such fables (*fabulas*) into their narratives. Thus it is read in Judges that all the trees came to the olive tree, the fig tree, and the vine to choose themselves a king. . . ."[35] The tension displayed here between two characterizations of *fabula*—as outsider or as insider—will persist in Christian interpretation long after Thomas of Chobham, and long after the Middle Ages. It reflects in part the complications of a narrative form at once radically fictive and redeemably true, complications that had been exercising Christian thought at least since Augustine sought to explain how apparent falsehoods could be facts.

In the case of Thomas's guide for preaching, the complications are inseparable from its late-medieval ambience. By the time his treatise is composed, the term *fabula* and cognate forms like *fable* had become widely diffused and acutely ambivalent—invoked by a host of writers to censure various deviations from spiritual responsibility or historical accuracy,[36] yet adapted by others to explore the potentialities of imaginative activity.[37] However intriguing those potentialities might be, *fabula* never wholly escaped the liabilities of its own semantic range. Even in the ambitious twelfth-century movement to give certain kinds of "fabulous narrative" (*narratio fabulosa*) philosophic respectability—a movement drawing upon the influential late-antique writer Macrobius[38]—a prominent commentator pointedly excluded *Aesopic* "fables" from the precincts of philosophy, to say nothing of the higher spheres of theology.[39] (Macrobius himself had specified that exclusion, as

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[34] See *Summa* (ed. Morenzoni), 5 (*MGR* [ed. Copeland and Sluiter], 617).

[35] See *Summa* 7.1 (ed. Morenzoni), 266 (*MGR* [ed. Copeland and Sluiter], 629). In view of this passage and related questions, it appears that the approach of Mehtonen, *Old Concepts*, 52–54, to Thomas of Chobham and, more broadly, to the distinction between poetic and biblical realms of discourse needs reassessment; see my discussion below.

[36] See the detailed survey in D. H. Green, *The Beginnings of Medieval Romance: Fact and Fiction, 1150–1220* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) 134–42.

[37] See Mehtonen, *Old Concepts*, 119–44, with her discussion at large.

[38] See the celebrated passage in Macrobius's *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio* 1.2.

[39] See Dronke, *Fabula* (cited above in n. 4), 15–21 and 68–69, on the treatment of Aesopic fables in comments on Macrobius associated with William of Conches; even the single cited manuscript that links "'impossible' fiction" with "theologians" (*divini*) uses *argumentum*, not *fabula*, in the

Thomas notes in his prologue, cited above.) As for the tension in Thomas's own treatment of *fabula*, the crucial question potentially posed by that treatment is not whether his account has its internal strains but whether even the word of God might have internal strains, with the inclusion of fables in the discourse of truth.

In Thomas's treatise there are some suggestive but elusive approaches to this question, beyond the remark (cited above) about fictional events used for the sake of their significations (*significationes*). Referring, for example, to a brief fable elsewhere in Scripture about a thistle and a cedar,[40] he classifies it not as a *fabula* but as a kind of "history" (*hystoria*) that is called "metaphor" (*metaphora*)— "metaphorical history," as it were.[41] Later in the treatise he again refers to Jotham's story itself, this time classifying it as a kind of *narratio* or *expositio* that presents not actual deeds (*rerum gestarum*), as in the case of "histories" (*hystoriis*), but rather *prout* ("as") actual deeds (*res prout geste*)—although not "according to the letter" (*ad litteram*) but "according to the understanding" (*ad intellectum*).[42] In medieval manuals of composition, combining the word *prout* with "deeds" at times suggests not only "plausibility," but also "mendacity";[43] for his part, the mentor Thomas stresses the "understanding" of Jotham's story. But aside from the question of just what that "understanding" is, it remains unclear from Thomas's comments whether or not Jotham's story is (like the thistle/cedar story) a kind of "history," and if it is, how such a story (not to be construed "according to the letter") might belong to a Scripture in which the "literal" sense itself had long been regarded *as* the "historical" sense.

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specified passage. On twelfth-century adaptations of the further argument (specified by Macrobius) that "fabulous narrative" in general is not appropriate for what is supremely divine, see Winthrop Wetherbee, *Platonism and Poetry in the Twelfth Century: The Literary Influence of the School of Chartres* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972) 113, n. 105, referring to a twelfth-century *Aeneid* commentary and to the work of Abelard. In different contexts compare the terminological and conceptual questions regarding *fabula* discussed by Suzanne Reynolds, *Medieval Reading: Grammar, Rhetoric and the Classical Text* (Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature 27; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 142–44.

[40] For the fable (expressed by Jehoash, the king of Israel, in a scornful message to Amaziah, the king of Judah), in which a thistle requests that the daughter of the cedar marry the son of the thistle, see 4 Kings (Vulg. numbering) [2 Kings] 14:9 and 2 Chr 25:18. For Thomas's account, see the prologue to *Summa* (ed. Morenzoni), 6 (*MGR* [ed. Copeland and Sluiter], 617).

[41] Notions of "metaphorical history" appear in a number of interpreters before Thomas. See, for example, Peter of Poitiers, in *Petri Pictaviensis Allegoriae*, 101–2, though the discussion of "metaphorical history" and "allegory" in the editorial introduction to this volume (xx–xxiii) needs to be revised in view of Peter's specification (101) that he uses *allegoria* to refer to Christ and Church. As for Thomas, he does not explicitly include Jotham's story in the category of "metaphorical history"; see my discussion below.

[42] See *Summa* 7.2 (ed. Morenzoni), 272 (not in *MGR* [ed. Copeland and Sluiter]): "Dicuntur etiam res prout geste quamuis non ad litteram tamen secundum intellectum. . . ."

[43] See Laurie Shepard, *Courting Power: Persuasion and Politics in the Early Thirteenth Century* (Garland Reference Library of the Humanities 2095; Garland Studies in Medieval Literature 17; New York: Garland, 1999) 12–15. The reference (14) to Bernard Silvestris needs greater caution regarding both the attribution to Bernard and Bernard's chronology.

No thirteenth-century inquiries probe such issues more intently than treatments of the tale of Jotham in the systematic theological *summae* of the period. Beyond approaches to the story in previous settings, their accounts aim not only to justify imaginative language in Scripture, but to integrate it theoretically with the very concept of the "literal" or "historical" sense—a complex concept susceptible to variation over time. The study of such scholastic discussions at large has been especially facilitated by the foundational work of A. J. Minnis, and though my own orientation differs in certain respects, I am deeply indebted to his expansive scholarship.[44] As for the particular passage in Judges, to appreciate something of how the story can be scholastically reassessed only a short time after Thomas of Chobham's art of preaching, it is useful to turn to a theological *summa* composed partly by Alexander of Hales (d. 1245).

The *summa* tellingly classifies the story of Jotham not as a *fabula* but as a *parabola*—a category evocative of parables in the Gospels.[45] The story is considered

[44] The investigations by Minnis of such scholastic discussions appear not only in the classic book-length studies *Medieval Theory of Authorship* (cited above in n. 31) and *Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism c. 1100–c. 1375: The Commentary-Tradition* (ed. A. J. Minnis and A. B. Scott, with the assistance of David Wallace; rev. ed.; Oxford: Oxford University Press / Clarendon Press, 1991), hereafter cited as *MLTC*, but also in a wide range of important articles, a number of which are cited below. Among differences in orientation, perhaps the most significant is my assessment of the implications of late-medieval expansions of the category of the "literal sense." More extensively than might be inferred from parts of the work of Minnis, it appears that such expansions eventually tend (both conceptually and historically, in the passage from the Middle Ages to the Reformation) to incorporate within the "literal sense" meanings previously regarded as "allegorical" or "spiritual"—and thus to make the "literal sense" nearly open-ended in scope. Among a range of discussions of aspects of this movement, a formative early study is James Samuel Preus, *From Shadow to Promise: Old Testament Interpretation from Augustine to the Young Luther* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press / Belknap Press, 1969); compare my comments below in nn. 55, 72, and 73. For some recent perspectives on the movement at large, see Jon Whitman, "The Literal Sense of Christian Scripture: Redefinition and Revolution," in *Interpreting Scriptures in Judaism, Christianity and Islam: Overlapping Inquiries* (ed. Mordechai Z. Cohen and Adele Berlin, with the assistance of Meir M. Bar-Asher, Rita Copeland, and Jon Whitman; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016) 133–58. Though the overall argument of that article contrasts substantially with formulations about the "high-water mark of medieval literalistic exegesis" and "the thoroughgoing rejection of allegorical exegesis by theologians of the Reformation" (*MLTC*, 206), I wish to stress the continuing importance of Minnis's stimulating work.

[45] For the text, see *Doctoris Irrefragabilis Alexandri de Hales Ordinis Minorum Summa theologica* (ed. the Fathers of the Collegium Sancti Bonaventurae; 4 vols.; Quaracchi: Ex typographia Collegii S. Bonaventurae, 1924–48), Tractatus introductorius, q. 1, c. 4, a. 4.i–ii (vol. 1, pp. 11–12). For a translation, see *MLTC*, 220–23, on which I have drawn (in a slightly modified presentation). On the story of Jotham as a *parabola*, see the phrase *in huiusmodi parabolis* ("in parables of this kind"). As previously noted, Isidore of Seville had used the term *parabola* in his "spiritual" interpretation of the tale; the theological *summa* draws the term into a semiotic discussion. Though Thomas of Chobham's presentation is ambiguous, it appears that he distinguished *parabolae* from the story of Jotham; see the contrasting formulations in *Summa* 7.2, ll. 412–13 and l. 421 (ed. Morenzoni, 272). In the theological *summa*, the specific article under discussion includes an explicit reference to Gospel parables (*parabolicis evangelicis*), although the semantic breadth of the term *parabola* (including the general notion of "comparison") and the term *parabolicus* (including the general notion of "metaphorical") appears to facilitate the complex movement between arguments in the

in the course of a discussion of the senses of Christian Scripture, including its "literal or historical" sense (*litteralis sive historicus*).[46] Noting and then countering the view that the parabolic mode is not "historical," the *summa* maintains that the historical understanding (*historicum*) is spoken of in two ways (*dupliciter*). It involves not only things (*rem*) but also likenesses to things (*rei similitudinem*)—"as in parables" (*sicut in parabolis*). With regard to the "parables in the Gospels" (*parabolicis evangelicis*), adds the *summa*, "Augustine says" (*dicit Augustinus*) that they must be understood "not in terms of their actually happening but of the possibility of their happening" (*non ut essent, sed ut esse possent*).[47] It has been thought that the writer of this part of the *summa* refers here to the very passage in Augustine's *Against Lying* cited near the beginning of my discussion, but that passage has no clear parallel to the argument in the *summa* about parable and "possibility" (*sed ut esse possent*).[48] Whatever the writer's specific source material, I think his view here evokes a broad notion to which I referred already in the consideration of Isidore of Seville—the notion of "plausible" narration that had long been associated with *argumentum* ("things that, even if they have not happened, nevertheless could happen," as Isidore puts it regarding that category in the triad of *fabula*, *argumentum*, and *historia*).[49] It is revealing that shortly before this thirteenth-century *summa*, Thomas of Chobham's account of the triad explicitly associates *argumentum* with both possibility ("things which, even if they did not happen, nevertheless might have happened") and "parables" (*in parabolis*).[50]

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article. See my discussion below, with Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short, *A Latin Dictionary* (1879; repr., Oxford: Oxford University Press / Clarendon Press, 1969), s.v. *parabola* and *parabolice*, and *Novum Glossarium Mediae Latinitatis ab Anno DCCC usque ad Annum MCC* (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1957–), s.v. *parabola*, senses 1 and 2, and *parabolicus*, senses 1 and 2.

[46] Though my focal points here are literality and historicity, in a more extended analysis it would be possible to examine other aspects of the discussion in the *summa* about scriptural language, including its epistemological features (using figurative discourse to mediate spiritual understanding); its affective designs (contrasting with rationative methods); and its multiform "mode" (suiting, for example, different human conditions). On such issues in the *summa*, see A. J. Minnis, "*Quadruplex Sensus, Multiplex Modus:* Scriptural Sense and Mode in Medieval Scholastic Exegesis," in *Interpretation and Allegory: Antiquity to the Modern Period* (ed. Jon Whitman; Brill's Studies in Intellectual History 101; Leiden: Brill, 2000) 231–56, esp. 233–41.

[47] See q. 1, c. 4, a. 4.i (*Doctoris Irrefragabilis*, vol. 1, pp. 11–12); *MLTC*, 220–22.

[48] Both *Doctoris Irrefragabilis* and *MLTC* associate the reference to Augustine with *Against Lying* 10.24, but that section in Augustine's treatise does not recognizably discuss this notion of "possibility." A passage closer to the argument in the *summa* appears in *Against Lying* 13.28, but even that section does not clearly refer to "possibility." Whether or not the formulation in the *summa* is clearly paralleled elsewhere in Augustine's writing (as it is not, for example, in a discussion of parable in Augustine's *De Genesi ad litteram* 8.4), it seems to me that the *summa* here reflects more than Augustine; see my subsequent comments.

[49] For the quotation and translation of the passage from Isidore's *Etymologies* ("quae etsi facta non sunt, fieri tamen possunt"), see n. 27 above and the corresponding discussion. This notion of *argumentum* (in the context of the "triad") dates back at least to the first century BCE; see the references in nn. 6 and 27 above. The explicit correlation between *argumentum* and "parable" appears not in the *Etymologies* but in later works; see my discussion below.

[50] For the passage from Thomas ("que si non facte sunt, fieri tamen poterunt"), see *Summa de*

But what about the kind of story about which Thomas of Chobham had been noticeably ambivalent—an *impossible* story? As the analysis in the *summa* proceeds, it almost seems as if the writer has in mind that question, as he presses the issue of the literal sense (*de sensu litterali*).

> Again we ask the question whether the literal sense is founded on the truth. For it seems at times to be founded on a lie, [as in] Judg 9:8: "The trees of the forests went forth to anoint a king for themselves." But that seems to be outside of what we know to be true. . . . We must therefore state that in parables of this sort (*in huiusmodi parabolis*) there is truth in respect of that purpose to serve which (*id propter quod*) they are spoken. . . . Thus, we must note that in historical statements (*in historicis*) there is truth as far as the signification of words is concerned, while in parables (*in parabolicis*) there is truth in terms of the signification of things (*significationem rerum*).[51]

The *summa*, of course, is not the first work to argue that the tale of Jotham is true because of the *purpose* for which it is told. The basic argument is implied by Thomas of Chobham, and it goes back at least to Isidore and Augustine. But the *summa* explicitly places that argument in a discussion of the "literal" sense, in effect making what is intentional an aspect of what is literal. From this perspective, the transferred sense of even an elaborately extended tale belongs to the literal sense. As the closing comment suggests—even while it retains a distinction between historically direct and parabolically indirect language—because of this semantic transfer, the words of the tale are finally aligned with things.

This approach to the language of Christian Scripture develops momentum in the slightly later work of Thomas Aquinas. In one of his earliest writings, originally composed in the 1250s, Aquinas briefly cites the tale of Jotham, later indicating that when a speaker uses "figurative expressions" (*figurativis locutionibus*), the "sense of the words" (*sensus verborum*) is what the speaker "intends" (*intendit*), and specifying that words spoken by diverse speakers are to be diversely assessed.[52] But some ten or more years afterward, near the opening of the *Summa theologiae*, Aquinas is offering more pointed formulations about what he calls the "parabolical

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arte praedicandi (ed. Morenzoni), 5, trans. in *MGR* (ed. Copeland and Sluiter), 617. Thomas is not the first to associate explicitly *argumentum*, possibility, and parable; see the association in the twelfth-century *De divisione philosophiae* of Dominicus Gundissalinus, translated in *MGR*, 478.

[51] See q. 1, c. 4, a. 4.ii (*Doctoris Irrefragabilis*, vol. 1, p. 12); *MLTC*, 222–23 (spacing modified).

[52] See Thomas Aquinas, *Scriptum super Sententiis* III, d. 38, a. 3, in *Corpus Thomisticum* (ed. Enrique Alarcón; Fundación Tomás de Aquino; 2000–2018), http://www.corpusthomisticum.org/; for this passage (text published in Parma in 1858; transferred by Roberto Busa; newly examined and arranged by Enrique Alarcón; Fundación Tomás de Aquino; 2011), see http://www.corpusthomisticum.org/snp3037.html. On the dating of Thomistic works cited in this paragraph, see James A. Weisheipl, *Friar Thomas D'Aquino: His Life, Thought, and Works* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1974; repr. with corrigenda and addenda, Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1983), 358–62.

sense" (*sensus parabolicus*) in general, with reference to the *sensus litteralis*.[53] As he puts it, the

> literal sense (*sensus litteralis*) is that which the author intends (*intendit*), and . . . the author of Holy Scripture is God. . . . The parabolical sense is contained (*continetur*) in the literal. . . . Nor is the figure itself (*figura ipsa*), but that which is figured (*id quod est figuratum*), the literal sense. When Scripture speaks of God's arm (*brachium*), the literal sense (*litteralis sensus*) is not that God has such a member, but only what is signified by this member (*id quod per hoc membrum significatur*), namely, operative power (*virtus operativa*).[54]

There is nothing remarkable in Aquinas's basic view that in scriptural references to God it is necessary to pass beyond corporeal imagery to theological reality. That general view had been conventional since antiquity. The importance of Aquinas's account in this influential *summa* lies in his far-reaching theorization of literality, which he coordinates—via the intention of the author—with the turns of figurative language. His broad argument that the literal sense is what the author intends and that it encompasses the projected sense of figurative expressions has fateful consequences in the Christian world. It helps to enlarge expansively the very category of the "literal" sense, and at the same time to give the "literal" sense a metaphorical density, as it were, thickening it to include significations beyond the surface of the text. In a recent study exploring this momentous change in medieval and modern approaches to literality and textuality, I have offered a composite survey reassessing Aquinas's approach in the *Summa* and its historical contexts.[55] But given the focus of this discussion the issue at stake is the specific case of Jotham.

[53] On the semantic breadth of the term *parabolicus* (including the general notion of "metaphorical"), see n. 45 above.

[54] For this passage (which does not explicitly cite the story of Jotham), see Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* I, q. 1, a. 10, Resp., and I, q. 1, a. 10, ad 3, in *Summa theologiae* (ed. P. Caramello; 5 vols.; Turin: Marietti, 1952–1956), vol. 1, p. 9; trans. in *Basic Writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas* (ed. Anton C. Pegis; 2 vols.; New York: Modern Library, 1945), vol. 1, p. 17 (spacing modified).

[55] See Whitman, "The Literal Sense of Christian Scripture," cited above in n. 44. Although the approach in the *Summa* partially overlaps with issues considered, for example, by Stephen Ocker in *Biblical Poetics Before Humanism and Reformation* (2002; repr., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), the kind of metaphorical density indicated here by Aquinas appears to me to differ substantially in scope from the kind of wide-ranging "verbal signification" that is attributed to Aquinas in Ocker's work (pp. 38–43). Aquinas argues in this critical discussion (*Summa theologiae* I, q. 1, a. 10 [ed. Caramello, vol. 1, pp. 8–9]; typography adjusted in passages quoted below]; trans. in *Basic Writings* [ed. Pegis], vol. 1, pp. 16–17) that the semantic transfer in figurative expressions is necessary in order to reach the "first signification whereby words signify things (*res*)"—the signification that "belongs to the first sense, the historical or literal" (*primum sensum, qui est sensus historicus vel litteralis*). Stressing the foundational function of such designated "things," Aquinas proceeds to argue that the signification whereby things (*res*) signify other things (*res alias*) is called the "spiritual sense" (*sensus spiritualis*). A formulation such as the statement that for Aquinas the "verbal signs of scripture, and not the 'things' indicated by them, are revelatory—as words" (Ocker, 40) seems to me to need revision, and the view that for Aquinas "the literal sense says everything that the spiritual senses say" (Ocker, 42) seems not as nuanced as Aquinas's argument that "nothing necessary to faith is contained under the spiritual sense which is not elsewhere (*alicubi*) put forward

If the "literal" sense is not the figure itself, but what is figured, just what *is* figured by the tale of Jotham? What is it that the author of the tale "intends"? Is the tale a figure for a specific moment in the time of the judges, or a cipher for the general movement to the Last Judgment? That this is not merely a theoretical question is dramatized in the revealing treatment of the tale by one of the most important theologians in the generation after Aquinas, the late thirteenth-century thinker Henry of Ghent.

In discussing the senses of Scripture in his *Summa of Ordinary Questions*, Henry indicates—in what is by this time a standard argument—that the historical truth is expressed sometimes in straightforward terms, sometimes in "transferred" and figurative terms (*sermone translato & figuratiuo*). In view of such transfer, the "parables in the Gospels" relate to the "historical sense," and the "metaphor" (*metaphora*) about "how the trees chose themselves a king (Judg 9[:8]) relates to history (*historiam*). . . ."[56] Yet in the same work, two questions later, when he notes the argument that truth does not inhere in every sense, since, for example, the tale of the trees is "quite at variance with the truth," the "history," in at least one respect, seems nearly to disappear. The argument opens conventionally enough: "whenever the text literally interpreted can have no true historical meaning (*verum sensum historicum*), then recourse must be had to the mystical sense (*mysticum*). . . ." Of course—we might think—the text itself has no true historical meaning; its historical sense lies just on the other side of the trees, with the Shechemites and Abimelech. But Henry continues: "So, that text has no true historical sense of its own (*Litera ergo illa nullum habet sensum proprium historicum verum*), but the words are put there figuratively for the sake of the mystical sense (*pro sensu mystico figuratiue*), and the passage ought to be understood metaphorically (*metaphorice*)." And as the notion of mystical transfer virtually assimilates the notion of metaphorical transfer in his account, Henry invokes a revealing authority: "*This is how Isidore expounds it* in the *Gloss* [the *Glossa ordinaria*], for he understands the trees as signifying men according to the allegorical sense (*allegoricum sensum*) of the text."[57] The sudden transport here to the mystical regions of the *Glossa ordinaria* is bracing,[58]

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clearly by the Scripture in its literal sense." Aquinas's approach in his work at large to the concept of the "literal sense" has its ambiguities—ambiguities that promote later modulations in the concept. But in interpretive theory the widespread extension of the *sensus litteralis* to include senses previously called "spiritual" is principally a feature of developments after Aquinas himself (among them, the "double literal sense" specified in the fourteenth century by Nicholas of Lyra). See in particular my discussion and annotation in "The Literal Sense of Christian Scripture," 140–43, 149–55; compare the comments above in n. 44 and below in nn. 72 and 73.

[56] See *Summa quaestionum ordinariarum*, a. 16, q. 3, ad 5, in vol. 1 of Henry of Ghent, *Summae Quaestionum Ordinariarum (Reprint of the 1520 Edition)* (2 vols.; Franciscan Institute Publications, Text Series 5; 1520; repr., St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute; Louvain: Nauwelaerts; Paderborn: Schöningh, 1953). Here and below I have expanded abbreviations in this edition; the translation is based on *MLTC*, 262.

[57] See *Summa quaestionum ordinariarum*, a. 16, q. 5; trans. in *MLTC*, 263–64 (my highlighting).

[58] A further investigation would be needed to assess the extent to which Henry's turn "upward"

and the aesthetic consequences are telling. As the tale is oriented toward a higher order, its apparent texture in its immediate historical context tends to be thinned almost into sheer transparency, a kind of gossamer for the *Gloss*.

Yet the trace of elusiveness about the tale—and more broadly, about the texture of figuration—is not only a function of mystical attitudes. It has its expression even in the somewhat later medieval commentator whose interpretation of Christian Scripture is often considered decisively "literalistic," Nicholas of Lyra. To explore his attitudes toward the story of Jotham is to investigate some of the dilemmas—and possibilities—of critical activity in a new phase.

■ The Late Middle Ages: Fourteenth-Century Approaches to Textual Density and Diversity

Though no single commentator completely exemplifies changing views of the tale of Jotham in the fourteenth century, Nicholas's prominent work offers a number of useful starting points. He considers the story not only in detailed commentaries about it but also in theoretical remarks about its relation to the literal sense, both in his *Literal Postill* on the Christian Bible, completed in the early 1330s, and in his *Moral Postill*, completed in 1339.[59] In the prior work, after citing the verse about the trees appealing to the bramble, he indicates that "from the way the text goes on, it is made abundantly clear that this is understood as referring to the citizens of Sichem and to Abimelech, for they anointed him as their king over them. . . . And the literal sense is not that which is signified by the words (*per voces*), but that which is immediately meant by the things signified (*per res significatas*)—as is illustrated by the example of Abimelech and the Sichemites. . . ."[60] Such a comment seems a programmatic application of Aquinas's approach to the *sensus litteralis*, shifting it from what is apparently said to what is actually meant.

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here may be related to certain Neoplatonic strains in his thought. On some of the relations between his semiotic and theological perspectives, see the overview in Minnis, "*Quadruplex Sensus, Multiplex Modus*," 241–44, with the bibliography in n. 20 (241).

[59] On the dating of these works, see the introduction to *Nicholas of Lyra: The Senses of Scripture* (ed. Philip D. W. Krey and Leslie Smith; Studies in the History of Christian Thought 90; Leiden: Brill, 2000) 3–4, 6; on the extraordinary diffusion of the *Literal Postill* (including a vast number of extant manuscripts), see 8–12, with Deeana Copeland Klepper, *The Insight of Unbelievers: Nicholas of Lyra and Christian Reading of Jewish Text in the Later Middle Ages* (Jewish Culture and Contexts; Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007) 6, 32, 117–18. With the development of printing, both *Postills* (along with the *Glossa ordinaria*) frequently accompany the presentation of the Vulgate.

[60] See (in Nicholas's *Postilla litteralis super Bibliam*) the opening of his *Literal Postill on the Song of Songs*, in vol. 3 of *Biblia Sacra cum Glossis, Interlineari, et Ordinaria . . .* (6 vols.; Venice, 1588), 355r. In the presentation of Nicholas's remarks in my overall discussion, I have expanded Latin abbreviations, and I have used the translations of Denys Turner, *Eros and Allegory: Medieval Exegesis on the Song of Songs* (Cistercian Studies 156; Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1995), with slight modifications (such as the use of the Douay-Rheims forms "Sichem" and "Sichemites"); for this passage, see 393 and 395.

Yet in the prologue to the *Moral Postill*, the formulation that the literal sense is not what is signified by the words is explicitly reversed.[61] Some passages, Nicholas indicates, have "no literal sense, strictly speaking," like the passage in Judges about the trees (*Ierunt ligna . . .*). The "literal sense, strictly, is that which *is* signified by the words (*Sensus enim literalis est proprie, qui per voces significatur*) . . . and there is no such sense in these passages. . . . For it would follow that the literal sense of Scripture were false, for trees never did nor could they do any such thing." Is the literal sense what is *not* signified by the words (as in the first formulation), or what *is* signified by the words (as in the second formulation)?[62] It seems that even the most elemental conceptions of literality have a persistent way of turning back upon themselves.

Yet if Nicholas's apparent reversal suggests the elusiveness of the *sensus litteralis*, his approach does not seem to me reducible to indecisiveness. However variable his formulations in this matter—which he seeks to clarify slightly later in the prologue, when he states that "in many places in my writings . . . I have *called* a metaphorical sense 'literal' " (*sensum parabolicum vocaui . . . literalem*)[63]—his general position seems to me at once to have a certain consistency and to mark a significant change in the late-medieval treatment of the story and its implications. Perhaps the point is best illustrated by the continuation of the previously cited passage from the *Moral Postill*. "For trees never did nor could they do any such thing. . . . Rather, in these passages there is a mystical sense (*sensus mysticus*) which is to be understood of the things signified." A "mystical" sense? At that crucial point, Henry of Ghent turned his eyes up to the *Gloss*. Nicholas of Lyra, by contrast, turns his eyes down to the text. What is for him the "mystical" sense? "For by 'the trees' are to be understood the citizens of Sichem, who made Abimelech their king to rule over them, *as is explained in that very place in the text*. . . ."[64] The point is not just that in medieval interpretation the term *mysticus* can designate not only a spiritually occult reading but, more generally, a verbally oblique one. The point is that in this passage from the *Moral Postill,* what is called the "mystical" sense in

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[61] See the "Prologus" to the *Postilla moralis super Bibliam*, in vol. 1 of *Biblia Sacra cum Glossis*, 4r–4v; trans. Turner in *Eros and Allegory*, 391 (slightly modified, with my highlighting). The reversal is notable not because the *Moral Postill* has the same celebrity as the *Literal Postill* (which it does not), but because it evokes some of the complications in theories of literality. On differences in the scope and diffusion of the two *Postills*, see Klepper, *Insight of Unbelievers*, 36–37, 117–18.

[62] The issue, of course, is what is meant by "what is signified" by the words. Everything that is finally signified by a text is signified in some sense (directly or indirectly) by its words. On attitudes toward this issue in Nicholas and others, see the discussion below.

[63] See the continuation of the paragraph in the "Prologus" (vol. 1 of *Biblia Sacra cum Glossis*), 4v; trans. Turner in *Eros and Allegory*, 391 (my highlighting). From this perspective, there would be no contradiction between (1) saying that the trees have no literal sense in their own right and (2) saying that the literal sense of the trees (involving their projected sense) lies beyond them, in the citizens of Shechem.

[64] See the "Prologus" (vol. 1 of *Biblia Sacra cum Glossis*), 4v; translation adapted from Turner, *Eros and Allegory*, 391 (slightly modified, with my highlighting).

the story of Jotham is basically the same as what is called in the passage from the *Literal Postill* the "literal" sense: the trees signify the citizens of Shechem. And that sense is "explained," as Nicholas puts it, "in that very place in the text" (*vt ibidem in textu exponitur*).

Beyond his theoretical comments, Nicholas's extensive treatment of the tale of Jotham draws the passage into the texture of the book of Judges in a way that seems to me markedly more intricate than prior Christian interpretation.[65] Even his approach in the *Moral Postill*, which abstracts characters in the tale (e.g., the olive, the fig, and the vine as three *genera hominum*), is in a sense an elaborate modulation of his detailed discussion in the *Literal Postill*. The bramble, for example, is specifically aligned in the *Literal Postill* with Abimelech, and generalized ethically in the *Moral Postill* as men "unworthy of advancement" (*indigni promotione*)—but in neither case is it the Antichrist.[66] This is not to say that Nicholas's ethical perspective on the story in the *Moral Postill* is necessarily better or worse than the apocalyptic approach in the *Glossa ordinaria*; each has its own interest. Nor is it to say that Nicholas does not entertain his own extended interpretive speculations, even in the *Literal Postill*. In that work, for example, he expresses sustained interest in the view of the "Hebrews" (*Hebræi*) that the olive, the fig, and the vine signify Othniel, Deborah, and Gideon.[67] In fact, midrashic transfers such as Rashi offers in his comments on the story (e.g., the olive tree as Othniel, because Othniel comes from the tribe of Judah, and "Judah" is called in Jeremiah an olive tree) acquire considerable expansion in Nicholas's "literal" account.[68] By its very mode, of course, the figurative tale of Jotham lends itself

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[65] For Nicholas's elaborate engagement with the opening of Judg 9 in his *Postilla litteralis* and *Postilla moralis*, see vol. 2 of *Biblia Sacra cum Glossis*, 43v–44v.

[66] This should not be regarded as a matter of course. Even in the *Literall Postill*, when he considers the vine's statement that "my wine . . . cheereth God" (Judg 9:13), Nicholas "expands" a reference in Rashi's commentary to ritual libations with a christological association (43v): "This can also be expounded regarding the sacrament of the Eucharist, which is most acceptable to God (*Deo acceptissimum*), in which wine is changed into the blood of Christ (*conuertitur vinum in sanguinem Christi*)." (Compare the reference to the Virgin Mary in the *Moral Postill*, 44r.) Though in his *Literal Postill* Nicholas regularly draws upon Rashi's commentary, at times he rejects, reworks, or supplements Rashi, especially for certain passages with traditional christological alignments. See, e.g., Herman Hailperin, *Rashi and the Christian Scholars* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1963); *Nicholas of Lyra* (ed. Krey and Smith); Klepper, *Insight of Unbelievers*, including 10–12, 32–60, 111, 117; and compare nn. 67–68 below.

[67] He considers this approach to be interpreting *magis literaliter vt videtur* than interpreting the three figures as other sons of Gideon (43v).

[68] With regard to the olive tree, for example, the kind of tight transfer that is briefly indicated by Rashi (Othniel/Judah/olive tree) is elaborately supplemented by Nicholas's account of how the "fatness" of the olive is beneficial (for the "purest" oil for lamps in the Tabernacle; for food; for medicine) and how the *pietas* of Othniel alleviated the distress of the Israelites (*Literal Postill*, 43v). It is possible to find partial parallels to elements of this account in comments on the tale by Jewish interpreters other than Rashi. On "pure" olive oil, for example, see מדרש תנחומא [*Midraš Tanḥuma*] (ed. Buber, cited above in n. 7), 1:103 (in the page numbering for בראשית [*Bereyšit*]), trans. in *Midrash Tanḥuma* (trans. Townsend), 115; on forms of light and food, see David Kimḥi's

to metaphorical refraction, and Nicholas of Lyra is not the first to exemplify the phenomenon. But from his recurrent efforts in the *Literal Postill* to recall specific contexts in the book of Judges[69] to his general emphasis in the *Moral Postill* on the dilemmas of governance, Nicholas seems almost to imply that whatever their interpretive turns, readers should not miss the forest for the trees.

To appreciate the extent to which late-medieval approaches to literality can be informed by what might be called the effort to "contexture" imaginative expression, it is possible to turn to a somewhat later fourteenth-century account by Hermann of Schildesche, whose lectures at a cathedral school between 1345 and 1350 are presented in his *Compend on the Meanings of Sacred Scripture*. The exploration of this account has been facilitated by the pioneering research of Christopher Ocker, who has provided a valuable edition and discussion of part of the text.[70] In offering some further perspectives on that text, my discussion situates it in an interpretive context considerably different from Ocker's study—beyond broad distinctions in scope and focus.[71] Whereas Ocker's work aims to show that late-medieval interpreters blend the "historical" or "literal" with the "spiritual," my analysis here of late-medieval interpreters investigates a contrasting (at times nearly reverse) process: how such interpreters (confronting the radical test case of Jotham's "impossible" tale) seek to transform the *fictional* into the "literal" or "historical."[72] While I share with Ocker and others the view that in late-medieval interpretation at large the categories of "literal" and "spiritual" increasingly overlap, there are critical intricacies and ironies in late-medieval "literality" that seem to me to require further investigation.[73]

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commentary (Judg 9:9), in נביאים ראשונים :מקראות גדולות [*Miqra'ot Gedolot: Neḇi'im Rišonim*] (new ed.; Jerusalem: Schocken, 1959). But Nicholas's account in the *Literal Postill* appears to have a character of its own (beyond the explicitly christological comment cited above in n. 66).

[69] See his comments in the *Literal Postill* on Judg 9:9, 9:11, and 9:14, with his introductory statement (citing *Ierunt* in Judg 9:8) that the letter appears to resist (*obuiare*) a particular interpretation.

[70] On Hermann, who became a master at the University of Paris in 1334 and later held substantial ecclesiastical offices, including the position of cathedral lecturer of the diocese of Würzburg, see Ocker, *Biblical Poetics*, 94. For selections from Hermann's *Compendium de quatuor sensibus Sacre Scripture*, see 224–38 of this work, with Ocker's discussion, 94–106.

[71] Regarding scope and focus, Ocker does not seek "to trace traditions of the interpretation of particular passages" (*Biblical Poetics*, xi) and instead explores commentaries on diverse subjects, primarily from the thirteenth to the sixteenth century. By contrast, in this essay my analysis focuses on the interpretive trajectory of a specific scriptural passage (the striking tale of Jotham) over a much broader expanse of time.

[72] For the effort to show interpreters blending the "historical" or "literal" with the "spiritual," see, e.g., *Biblical Poetics*, 47–48, 58–59, 68, etc. The specific attention given in the volume to the "impossible" tale of Jotham is limited; see the partial edition of Hermann of Schildesche's treatise and the discussion of it (which includes two brief notes, 95 n. 57 and 99 n. 71, on other interpreters who treat the tale).

[73] A case in point is the view in *Biblical Poetics* that the fifteenth-century commentator Dionysius the Carthusian alleged that "Nicholas of Lyra . . . was too allegorical when occasionally appealing to a sense 'rather mystical and spiritual than literal,' for example, in his exegesis of Jacob's deathbed speech to his son" (*Biblical Poetics*, 23, a view appearing also in Ocker's "Scholastic Interpretation

This is not to suggest that I wish here to trace in detail Hermann of Shildesche's own meticulous dissection of the *sensus litteralis*, which he divides into the literal *historical* sense (the relating of deeds) and the literal *non-historical* sense (the specifying of commandments), and then subdivides according to whether the *language* used in each category of the "literal" sense (historical and non-historical) is proper or figurative—and then, in the case of figurative language, still further subdivides according to whether the figurative signification is "tropical" (*tropicus*), or "parabolic" (*parabolicus*), or "symbolic" (*symbolicus*), or "poetic" (*poeticus*)— all of them, it should be stressed, still within the *sensus litteralis*.[74] In so punctilious a classification there is something worrisomely suggestive of Shakespeare's Polonius. But Hermann's argument that the literal sense can present history in either "proper" or "non-proper" language has a special point when applied to the book of Judges.

"For the literal historical sense is proper (*sensus litteralis hystoricus proprius*)," indicates Hermann,

> when under proper words someone's deeds are told, as in the book of Judges chapter 9: the deeds of Abimelech are told under proper words, where it is said how he killed seventy-two sons of Jerubaal, his brothers. . . . But the non-proper historical sense (*sensus hystoricus non proprius*) is when someone's deeds are told figuratively (*figuratiue*), namely parabolically or enigmatically, as in the same place in the ninth chapter (*ibidem ix. capitulo*), where under the figures of a riddle almost poetically (*quasi poetice*) they are told about him, that "the trees of the forests went out that they might anoint over themselves a king, and then they said to the bramble, rule over us!," through which tree he was represented.[75]

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of the Bible," 267–68); compare *Biblical Poetics*, 182: "Denys the Carthusian criticized Lyra for allegorizing." A reassessment of the sources shows that the alignments in this case are almost the reverse in part and considerably more complex at large. In treating Jacob's speech in his *Literal Postill*, Nicholas had considered a received christological interpretation of words in Gen 49:11 to be "more mystical than literal" (*magis mystica quam literalis*), and he had suggested interpreting the words "otherwise" (*aliter*). By contrast, Dionysius, supporting the view that the "literal sense" of a metaphorical locution is its projected meaning, criticizes Nicholas not for "allegorizing" but for failing to recognize in this case that a christological sense is the [redefined] "literal sense." But nothing more vividly shows the increasing complications in the concept of the "literal sense" than Dionysius's subsequent comments, when he entertains a still different interpretation of the verse for anyone who would wish to speak "as if literally and superficially" (*quasi litteraliter et superficialiter*). For Nicholas, see his *Postilla litteralis super Bibliam*, in vol. 1 of *Biblia Sacra cum Glossis*, 117v. For Dionysius, see Dionysius the Carthusian, *Enarratio in Genesim*, in vol. 1 of *Doctoris Ecstatici D. Dionysii Cartusiani Opera Omnia* (cura et labore monachorum sacri ordinis Cartusiensis; Montreuil: Typis Cartusiæ S. M. de Pratis, 1896) 444–45. In a different setting it would be possible to explore other questions regarding Ocker's perspectives in *Biblical Poetics* (e.g., my comments above in n. 55 about his view of literality in Aquinas), but his learned study remains a copious and important resource.

[74] See the text in Ocker, *Biblical Poetics*, 226–38, with Ocker's partial translation and discussion, 94–106.

[75] For the text, see Ocker, *Biblical Poetics*, 227; the translation is drawn from Ocker, 95.

Hermann's account does not just show how "proper" and "figurative" language can each relate to history. It suggests how the two modes of language can be used to tell nearly the same history, how they can be not just contrasted with each other, but correlated with one another. In such a coordinating process, "proper" history can modulate into figurative history, and still remain historical—even, in Hermann's terms, "literal." And the idiom of that scriptural history is "almost poetical"—a category that Hermann later associates with acute kinds of impossibility, like the attribution of rational properties to irrational things, "as is read," he indicates later in the treatise, "in Judges 9" (*ut Judicum ix. legitur*).[76] For Isidore in his encyclopedic, early-medieval *Etymologies*, the impossibility of *fabula* places it at the furthest remove from *historia*. For Hermann in his late-medieval *Compend on the Meanings of Sacred Scripture*, not only does the poetic tale of Jotham belong to the *historia* of Scripture in practice; it belongs there, as a distinct modulation of the literal sense, in theory. The *sensus litteralis* is increasingly evoking, even in such analytic contexts, another sense of the word *litteralis*—that which concerns literature, the "literary" sense.[77]

By the time Hermann of Schildesche is locating the story of Jotham in the "literal sense," several generations have passed since the apparent ambivalence of Thomas of Chobham about whether fables belong in Christian Scripture at all. During that time, as the discussions I have cited suggest, a kind of verbal space increasingly opens between the notion of the "letter" as scriptural history and the notion of the "letter" as grammatical propriety[78]—a space that facilitates the general sense that even an extended episode in Scripture can be presented "non-properly," obliquely—that is, imaginatively. In the case of Jotham's story, that opening is reinforced by ethical approaches to the interpretation of the tale. In such

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[76] See the text in Ocker, *Biblical Poetics*, 230.

[77] On the word *litteralis* meaning "of or concerned with literature, literary" as early as the eighth century, see R. E. Latham and D. R. Howlett, with the assistance of J. Blundell et al., *Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources*, vol. 1, *A–L* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975–1997), s.v. *litteralis, literalis*, sense 5, which opens with a quotation from Alcuin; compare J. F. Niermeyer and C. van de Kieft, rev. J. W. J. Burgers, *Mediae Latinitatis Lexicon Minus* (2 vols.; Leiden: Brill, 2002), s.v. *litteralis*, sense 2. This is not to say that in the fourteenth century the word *litteralis* could refer categorically to "literature" or "literary" in the much later sense of "imaginative" expression; from antiquity to the Middle Ages, a broader concept of "literature" is suggested by the term *litterae*, which includes in its semantic scope "letters" and learning. See, e.g., Lewis and Short, *A Latin Dictionary*, s.v. *Litterae*, senses 5 and 9, and *Dictionary of Medieval Latin*, s.v. *littera, litera*, sense 12. But the *litterae* of "humane letters" can evoke the arts of language; see, e.g., *MGR* (ed. Copeland and Sluiter), 699–700, discussing the use of the term *litterae* by the thirteenth-century "master of rhetoric and *dictamen*," Guido Faba. As for the term *litteralis* in the fourteenth century, it is striking that among the "figurative senses" (*figuratiuis . . . sensibus*) that Hermann of Schildesche indicates can be "reduced to the literal sense" (*reducantur ad sensum litteralem*) is the "poetic sense, that is, the fictive" (*sensus poeticus, id est fictus*), which Hermann specifically illustrates by Judg 9; see the text in Ocker, *Biblical Poetics*, 228 and 230.

[78] On these notions in early conceptions of the *sensus litteralis*, see Whitman, "The Literal Sense of Christian Scripture."

approaches, the figures of the story do not just belong to a universal sign system in which everything—from the teller of a tale to a tree to a trope—denotes a single, overarching, spiritual design. Instead, the figures of this specific fable come to summon up at least initially a particular historical configuration—even while they themselves keep their verbal distance, remaining in their own linguistic domain. A realm of "aesthetic" discourse, as it were, is opening up in the very precincts of sacred history. From this perspective, the interplay between the "literal" and the "literary" in late-medieval interpretation is not just a matter of turns in interpretive idiom; it is a matter of turns in imaginative and intellectual orientation.

There is more than one way in which an emphasis on the ethics of Jotham's imaginative story facilitates the exploration of its poetics. In the late Middle Ages, ethics is the philosophic category with which Christian interpreters repeatedly align poetry.[79] In light of the topic and technique of Jotham's cautionary tale, it may be especially pertinent that an influential late-medieval guide for rulers (*De regimine principum*) promotes the view that the mode of treating moral matters (*in toto morali negotio*) is by its very nature "figurative and broad" (*figuralis et grossus*)—using types and figures (*typo et figuraliter*) to cover variable cases, to stimulate the affections, and to accommodate a wide audience.[80] It has long been observed that medieval Christian commentary may be wary of particularly emphasizing the "ethics" of Scripture lest the emphasis imply that the sacred text is merely a moral treatise (or a poetic construction).[81] But the recurrent role of Jotham's tale in the increasing coalescence of scriptural ethics and poetics is finally not governed by biblical interpretation alone. I would not wish to close this discussion of the critical late-medieval period without at least glancing at intersecting approaches

[79] On the recurrent view that *Ethicae subponitur*, see, e.g., Judson Boyce Allen, *The Ethical Poetic of the Later Middle Ages: A Decorum of Convenient Distinction* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982) 9–10, with the detailed documentation in the notes. On medieval discussions which complicate that view by stressing the imaginative vividness of poetry, see the extensive study of Vincent Gillespie (who kindly provided me with a prepublication form of the study), "*Ethice Subponitur*? The Imaginative Syllogism and the Idea of the Poetic," in *Medieval Thought Experiments: Poetry, Hypothesis, and Experience in the European Middle Ages* (ed. Philip Knox, Jonathan Morton, and Daniel Reeve; Disputatio 31; Turnhout: Brepols, 2018) 297–327. On late-medieval approaches to the intersection of ethical teachings and imaginative turns in Judg 9, see my comments below.

[80] On these introductory perspectives in the late thirteenth-century treatise of Giles of Rome (Aegidius Romanus), *On the Instruction of Princes* (*De regimine principum*), see the quotations and comments in Allen, *Ethical Poetic*, 14–17, and the translation in *MLTC*, 248–50. As indicated by Allen (who does not refer in his discussion to Jotham's tale), terms such as *figuralis*, *typo*, and *figuraliter* are used here to suggest notions of figurality and exemplarity broader than strict Christian "typology." My point, of course, is not that the precise kind of figuration used by Jotham is invoked by Giles of Rome (who does not cite Judg 9 in these passages). Rather, Giles evokes in theory a general association between moral instruction and imaginative mode that has an interpretive parallel in late-medieval approaches to reading—including the reading of the tale of Jotham; see my discussion below.

[81] See, e.g., A. J. Minnis, "Literary Theory in Discussions of *Formae Tractandi* by Medieval Theologians," *New Literary History* 11 (1979) 133–45, at 140–41, and the editorial remarks in *MLTC*, 201–2, 211–12.

to the story of Jotham from the other side of interpretation—the interpretation of imaginative literature itself.

Shortly after Hermann of Schildesche offers his lectures on the senses of Christian Scripture, a quite different expositor, Pierre Bersuire, opens his extraordinarily influential *Ovid Moralized*, completed by 1362, with a familiar quotation: " 'They will turn away from listening to the truth and will turn to fables,' says Paul . . . in 2 Tim 4[:4]."[82] But Bersuire resourcefully turns the warning against fabulous discourse into a defense of engaging it.

> I can indeed adduce this quotation to show that often one must use fables, enigmas, and poems so that some moral sense (*aliquis sensus moralis*) may be extracted from them. . . . For this is what Holy Scripture appears to have done in several places, where it is commonly acknowledged that it has concocted fables (*fabulas . . . confecisse*) to demonstrate some truth. This is seen from the fable of the trees wishing to elect a king in Judg 9[:8]. . . .[83]

To moralize the fables of the poets is finally to collaborate in the vision of Scripture itself. As Bersuire later continues: "Therefore, because I see that Scripture uses fables to point out some truth . . . it seemed appropriate for me . . . to set my hand to moralizing the fables of the poets (*moralizandum fabulas poetarum*). . . . For a man may, if he can, . . . build and construct the ark of the covenant from the treasures of the Egyptians (*de thesauris Egipciorum tabernaculum federis edificet & componat*)."[84] Nearly a thousand years earlier, Augustine had defended the use of pagan lore by observing that by divine authority the Israelites took Egyptian gold and silver, enabling the objects of value to be put to better use.[85] But Pierre Bersuire—elaborately reworking ancient mythology with his imposing, multifaceted commentary, periodically provided with biblical "prooftexts"—virtually seeks to turn pagan literature into building material for the ark of the covenant itself.[86]

By the early 1370s, when Giovanni Boccaccio is completing his *Genealogy of the Gentile Gods*, the pagan poets themselves are explicitly and elaborately treated as "theologians" (*theologos*).[87] Boccaccio's conception of *fabula* passes

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[82] See the prologue in Petrus Berchorius, *Reductorium morale, Liber XV: Ovidius moralizatus, cap. i.; De formis figurisque deorum* ([ed. J. Engels]; Werkmateriaal [3]; Utrecht: Instituut voor Laat Latijn der Rijksuniversiteit, 1966), hereafter cited as *Ovid. mor.*, 1; the translation is drawn from *MLTC*, 366. On the dating and development of the *Ovidius moralizatus* (in its original form designed to be part of the *Reductorium morale*; later revised, in the redaction cited here; and eventually circulated independently), see *MLTC*, 317–18. I referred to the quotation from 2 Tim 4:4 at the beginning of this essay.

[83] See *Ovid. mor.*, 1 (trans. drawn from *MLTC*, 366), with the editorial comments in *MLTC*, 323–24.

[84] See *Ovid. mor.*, 2 (trans. *MLTC*, 367).

[85] See the celebrated passage in Augustine's *On Christian Doctrine* 2.40.60–61, with n. 11 above.

[86] Far more intricate in his mythography than early Christian interpreters, Bersuire not only gives pagan mythology a dazzling array of *in bono / in malo* glosses, but even specifies his own "fourfold" system of interpretation (distinct from the fourfold system in Christian biblical interpretation); see, e.g., the editorial comments and translated excerpts in *MLTC*, 323–24, 366–72.

[87] In his extensive discussion of the relations between "poetry" and "theology" in *Genealogy* 14

far beyond Isidore's inherited (and conspicuously restrictive) category of stories that are "not actual events." Boccaccio's approach may draw in part (directly or indirectly) upon the Macrobian view that "fabulous narrative" (*narratio fabulosa*), broadly conceived, can be a medium not only of expressing the truth, but also of engaging a wide range of philosophic subjects. The general view had been adapted by medieval Christian interpreters to allegorize the fables of pagan mythology,[88] but Boccaccio extensively applies diverse concepts of fabulous discourse (including the more limited kind of *fabula* noted by Isidore) to Christian Scripture itself.[89] For Boccaccio, *fabula* at large includes forms of imaginatively inflected expression that pagan poetry shares with "nearly the whole of the Old Testament" (*omne fere sacrum Veteris Testamenti volumen*), as well as verisimilar accounts—describing what "could have occurred, or might at some time" (*esse potuere vel possent*)—like the parables of Jesus.[90] With regard to the radical test case of Jotham's fable, I want only to note a revealing pronouncement in the closing book of the *Genealogy* in which Boccaccio associates pagan poets with what is called "physical theology," comprising insights about both the natural and moral realms (*naturalia . . . atque moralia*). Even "sacred (*sacri*) theologians," he argues, "turn physical (*physici*)

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and 15, see, e.g., the statement "poetas gentiles dicimus esse theologos" (I allege that the pagan poets are theologians), in Giovanni Boccaccio, *Genealogie deorum gentilium* 15.8 (ed. Vittorio Zaccaria), in *Tutte le opere di Giovanni Boccaccio* (ed. Vittore Branca; vols. 7–8; I classici Mondadori; Milan: Mondadori, 1998) 8:1544; trans. in *Boccaccio on Poetry: Being the Preface and the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Books of Boccaccio's "Genealogia Deorum Gentilium"* (trans. Charles G. Osgood; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1930; repr. [with adjustments], Library of Liberal Arts; Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1956) 121. For briefer, earlier discussions of related attitudes in Petrarch's *Letters on Familiar Matters* (*Epistolae familiares*) 10 and Boccaccio's *Short Treatise in Praise of Dante* (*Trattatello in laude di Dante*), see the texts translated in *MLTC*, 413–15 and 494–98, with the editorial comments on 388–90 and 455. On the telling contrasts between such attitudes and earlier notions indicated in Aristotle and Augustine about poets as "theologians," see, e.g., *Boccaccio on Poetry* (trans. Osgood), 162–63 nn. 12 and 19 (on *Genealogy* 14.8). On the historicizing impulse in Boccaccio's attitudes toward the relations between pagan poetry and Christian theology, see, e.g., Jon Whitman, "Present Perspectives: The Late Middle Ages to the Modern Period," in *Interpretation and Allegory* (ed. Whitman), 259–314, at 269–73, with the references in nn. 43–45 (pp. 271–72), and David Lummus, "Boccaccio's Poetic Anthropology: Allegories of History in the *Genealogie deorum gentilium libri*," *Speculum* 87 (2012) 724–65.

[88] On Macrobius's view and its vogue in twelfth-century mythography, see the references in nn. 38 and 39 above.

[89] For Boccaccio's fourfold classification of *fabula*, see *Genealogy* 14.9. On Macrobius's possible influence upon the conception of Boccaccio (who explicitly refers in the first book of the *Genealogy* to the canonical passage in *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio* 1.2), see *Boccaccio on Poetry* (trans. Osgood), 164–65 nn. 7, 8, and 15, though I think that Osgood does not adequately recognize here other potential influences (including late-medieval approaches to *parabola* and verisimilar narrative) and the distinctiveness of Boccaccio's own synthesis. For some comments on the question of Boccaccio's relation to the triad (*historia, argumentum, fabula*) registered by Isidore, see *Boccaccio on Poetry* (trans. Osgood), 163–65 nn. 2, 7, 8, 14, and 16; Bietenholz, *Historia and Fabula* (cited above in n. 4), 146–47, 151–54; and Mehtonen, *Old Concepts*, 146–47; compare n. 90 below.

[90] See *Genealogie* 14.9 (ed. Zaccaria); *Boccaccio on Poetry* (trans. Osgood), 48–50. On the alignment between "possibility" and parable, see the discussion correlated with nn. 48–50 above.

when occasion demands; if in no other way, at least they prove themselves physical theologians as well as sacred when they express truth by the fable of the trees choosing a king."[91] The fable of Jotham, having acquired by the fourteenth century an emphasis more ethical than apocalyptic, has turned into a prooftext for the poetics and ethics of Christian Scripture itself. In such a passage, it seems, divine Scripture has a mode and a message as human—and as humble—as one of Aesop's fables.

But not for every commentator. There are periodic warnings in the late thirteenth and fourteenth centuries against the association of Scripture with fabulous expression.[92] In 1377–1378, only a number of years after the completion of the *Genealogy of the Gentile Gods*, the controversial theologian John Wyclif announces that "we must learn a new grammar and a new logic when attempting to explicate or understand Holy Scripture."[93] What Wyclif calls the "truth of Holy Scripture" passes so far beyond any human convention that it breaks the very categories of normal language and thought. When, near the opening of his treatise, he assesses at great length the tale of Jotham, he gives it an explosive range of meanings, ethical and spiritual, ancient and contemporary. The olive, the fig, and the vine signify now Othniel, Deborah, and Gideon, now the three "persons" (*persone*) pertaining to the three ages (*trium temporum*) of the state of the Church, with a particular turn on the current age: "the priests of Christ, who ought to be vicars of the true vine, should not hold civil dominion. . . ."[94] The bramble "mystically signifies Abimelech" (*significat mistice Abymalec*) but yet is "especially the Antichrist" (*specialiter anticristus*), who "comes in the time of John the Evangelist, and remains all the way to the Day of Judgment" (*durat usque ad diem iudicii*). . . .[95] It is as if

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[91] See *Genealogie* 15.8 (ed. Zaccaria); *Boccaccio on Poetry* (trans. Osgood), 121–23. Earlier, in his fourfold categorization of *fabula* (*Genealogy* 14.9), Boccaccio uses the fable of Jotham to exemplify one of the four categories.

[92] See the editorial comments in *MLTC*, 211; Minnis, *Medieval Theory of Authorship*, 143–44; and Ocker, *Biblical Poetics*, 147.

[93] See *John Wyclif's "De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae"* (ed. Rudolf Buddensieg; 3 vols.; 1905–1907; repr., New York: Johnson Reprint Corporation; Frankfurt am Main: Minerva, 1966), c. 3, vol. 1, p. 42; in later citations of this text, abbreviated as *De Ver. Sacr. Scr.*, chapter numbers of Wyclif's work (e.g., 3) are followed in parentheses by volume and page numbers of Buddensieg's edition (e.g., 1:42). Unless otherwise indicated, translations are from the selected translation of Ian Christopher Levy, *John Wyclif: "On the Truth of Holy Scripture"* (Commentary Series; 2001; repr., Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, Western Michigan University, 2003); for this passage, see 65. On "a new grammar and a new logic," see also, for example, *De Ver. Sacr. Scr.* 1 (1:11) and 4 (1:87), trans. Levy, 48 and 86. In my consideration below of Wyclif's work I have benefited especially from A. J. Minnis, "'Authorial Intention' and 'Literal Sense' in the Exegetical Theories of Richard FitzRalph and John Wyclif: An Essay in the Medieval History of Biblical Hermeneutics," *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, vol. 75, sect. C, no. 1 (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 1975); G. R. Evans, "Wyclif on Literal and Metaphorical," in *From Ockham to Wyclif* (ed. Anne Hudson and Michael Wilks; Oxford: Blackwell, 1987) 259–66; and Kantik Ghosh, *The Wycliffite Heresy: Authority and the Interpretation of Texts* (Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature 45; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

[94] See *De Ver. Sacr. Scr.* 4 (1:66–69), trans. Levy, 75–77.

[95] See *De Ver. Sacr. Scr.* 4 (1:68 and 1:70), first phrase translated in selected material of Levy,

the scriptural *historia* and the *Glossa ordinaria* were both running late to a joint appointment and urgently texting each other.

Yet for Wyclif, none of this is either a mere "history" or a mere "gloss." Scripture, he continues, needs to be comprehended in its "wholeness (*integritate*), as it pertains to the sense of the author (*ad sensum autoris*). For then it will be found to be true (*vera*) in every respect."[96] In fact, "*any* sense (*quilibet sensus*) which the letter possesses can fittingly be called the *literal* (*literalis*) according to the intended literal sense"—in the Latin, *de virtute sermonis*, according to the underlying force of the discourse.[97] In effect, all conventional distinctions between "literal" and "figurative," between the part and the whole, between history and futurity, finally collapse in the plenitude of divine intentionality.

◼ From Early Modernity to the Present: Exploring the Imagination

"What could this passage of Scripture be except a fable or a poem?" asked John Wyclif in the late Middle Ages, after quoting at length Judg 9:8–15—and then he sought urgently to show that conventional notions of "fable" and "poem" were inadequate to the "new grammar" and "new logic" demanded by divine Scripture.[98] But the grammar and logic of the early-modern period have a distinct momentum of their own. The late-medieval movement toward a "literary" sense of the tale of Jotham expands in scope in the modern era—almost as if scriptural commentary, having provisionally examined some of the relations between the *littera* of the story and the matter of history, could increasingly explore its imaginative implications. Even a selective glance at the far-reaching reassessment of Jotham's tale during the course of the modern period reveals provocative changes in approach to judging the language of Scripture.

Already in early Reformation commentary, the story comes to be affiliated with a breathtaking array of imaginative writing at large—secular as well as sacred. This "apologue or fable" (*apologum seu fabulam*), maintains the influential Protestant theologian Johannes Brenz in commenting on Judges in 1535 (as he employs one of

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76, followed by my translation. For a detailed discussion of the passage as a whole, see Ghosh, *Wycliffite Heresy*, 25–28.

[96] See *De Ver. Sacr. Scr.* 4 (1:80), trans. Levy, 80.

[97] For the quotation ("quilibet sensus, quem habet litera, possit de virtute sermonis dici congrue literalis"), see *De Ver. Sacr. Scr.* 6 (1:119–20), trans. Levy, 104 (my highlighting). On Levy's translation of *de virtute sermonis* here, see his comments on 11 and 33. For assessments of the Latin phrase ("by force of the word") in this passage and in Wyclif's work at large, see Ghosh, *Wycliffite Heresy*, 35–37 and 225–26 n. 27, with his broader discussion, 22–66, including the comments on Wyclif's "philosophical realism" (28) and his stress on "'real' and not merely 'perceived' correspondences between vehicle and tenor" (32). On Wyclif's approaches to literality, intentionality, and scriptural plenitude, see, e.g., *De Ver. Sacr. Scr.* 1 (1:5), 3 (1:40–41), 5 (1:103), and 6 (1:114, 1:122–23, 1:126), trans. Levy, 43, 63–64, 93, 102, 106, 109.

[98] See *De Ver. Sacr. Scr.* 4 (1:63): "quid ergo foret ista scriptura nisi fabula vel poema?"; trans. Levy, 73, with the subsequent arguments in *De Ver. Sacr. Scr.* 4 (1:73) about "fabulas poetarum" and "non sensus fabulosus" and my discussion above.

the ancient terms for "stories," *apologus*[99]), belongs to the serious, not the scurrilous, kind of *fabulae* (*genus fabularum*).[100] Devised by prudent men for educational and ethical purposes (*ad institutionem morum*), stories of this kind combine teaching with pleasing. "Hence were born the apologues of Aesop," and hence "the poetry of Homer about Achilles and Ulysses, likewise of Virgil about Aeneas." It is this "learned kind" of fabling to which the apologue in Judges pertains (*Ad hoc igitur eruditum genus fabularum pertinet hic Apologus*). Perhaps more strikingly than in any previous Christian commentary, Jotham's story now has its place not merely with Aesopic tales but with exemplary literature at large. To this same *genus*, Brenz continues, prophetic visions (*uisiones Prophetarum*) can be referred, and he suggests an alignment of Gospel parables (*parabolas Euangelicas*) with it.[101] Though more pressing critical distinctions—e.g., between *fabulae* that are verisimilar (*verisimiles*) and those that are remote from probability (*a probabilitate longissime*)—are specified by Peter Martyr Vermigli some years later in his commentary on Judges, Vermigli's own sense of the kinds of *fabula* (*Species Fabulæ*) remains broad, even while he pointedly notes that Jotham's story antedates the stories of Hesiod and Aesop.[102] In such commentary, that exceptional *fabula* in Judges turns virtually into a familiar phenomenon, generically allied with edifying fabulation as a whole.

Even when the scriptural *fabula* is more narrowly framed, its imaginative features can have telling implications for concepts of sacred history. In the vast sixteenth-century treatise that has been regarded as the first monument to the hermeneutics of the new learning—the *Key to Sacred Scripture* (*Clavis Scripturae Sacrae*) of Matthias Flacius Illyricus[103]—a section on kinds of similitudes provides an account of *fabula* with a revealing turn. The account begins in a customary

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[99] On Latin *apologus* (Greek ἀπόλογος), see Van Dijk, *Ainoi, Logoi, Mythoi* (cited above in n. 6), 90–92. The term is used at times in medieval interpretation at large; see, e.g., Mehtonen, *Old Concepts*, 140–41.

[100] See Johannes Brenz, *In Librum Iudicum et Ruth Commentarius* (Haguenau, 1535) 154–55.

[101] See Brenz, *Commentarius*, 155: "In hoc enim genus referri possunt uisiones Prophetarum. . . . Quid si & in hoc genere recenseas parabolas Euangelicas. . . ."

[102] See *In Librum Iudicum D. Petri Martyris Vermilii Florentini . . . Commentarii Doctissimi* (Heidelberg: E Typographeio Johannis Lancelloti, 1609) 99r–100v. On "Species Fabulæ" as "Comœdiæ, Tragœdiæ, Satyræ," etc., see 99v. It might have displeased the compilers of the *Glossa ordinaria* to know that when Vermigli treats the bramble in the story (100r–v), he passes from a reference to Pliny for botanical information on the thorn to a critique of the kind of power exercised by the Pope. On the chronology of Vermigli's commentary, first published in its entirety in 1561, see Torrance Kirby, "Political Theology: The Godly Prince," in *A Companion to Peter Martyr Vermigli* (ed. Torrance Kirby, Emidio Campi, and Frank A. James III; Brill's Companions to the Christian Tradition 16; Leiden: Brill, 2009) 404 n. 13.

[103] My citations of the work (first published in 1567) refer to *Clavis Scripturæ, S. seu De Sermone Sacrarum Literarum* (2 pts.; Basel: Per Sebastianum Henricpetri, 1617). On assessments of its importance, see Werner Georg Kümmel, *The New Testament: The History of the Investigation of Its Problems* (trans. S. McLean Gilmour and Howard C. Kee; New Testament Library; Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1972; repr., London: SCM, 1973) 27, and Kathy Eden, *Hermeneutics and the Rhetorical Tradition: Chapters in the Ancient Legacy and Its Humanist Reception* (Yale Studies in Hermeneutics; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997) 90–91.

manner. "A fable is a fictive narrative (*Fabula, est narratio ficta*) drawn either from inanimate things, or from plants, or from animals, endowed by a certain personification (*prosopopœiam*) with sense and reason, by which human affairs (*humanæ res*) are depicted. As when in Judg 9 the trees want to establish a king over themselves. . . ."[104] It may be a sign of humanist education that when Flacius cites a classical example, he turns not to Aesop but to "the fable of Menenius Agrippa about the belly and the contentious members of the body"[105]—the kind of fable that Shakespeare dramatizes a few decades later in *Coriolanus*. But then Flacius directly and intriguingly transfers the classical fable back to his sacred text: "And Paul expresses this to some extent (*Quam & Paulus aliquatenus expressit*) in Rom 12 and 1 Cor 12." Rom 12 and 1 Cor 12? Suddenly, even Paul's discussion in Romans and Corinthians about Christians as members of the body of Christ seems almost to become a *fabula*.[106]

The evaluation of the *fabula* of Jotham in the *historia* of Judges gradually acquires newly evocative forms in the continuing reassessment of its poetics. At least as early as the seventeenth century, Jotham's imaginative story elicits commentary about the originary, "Eastern" ambience of figurative language in Scripture.[107] The tale comes to be an early touchstone for an increasingly "aesthetic" appreciation of the Bible; as Joseph Addison writes at the opening of an early eighteenth-century essay on "fables," "*Jotham*'s Fable of the Trees is the oldest that is extant, and as

[104] See Flacius, *Clavis Scripturæ*, pt. 2, col. 334 (abbreviated typography expanded). An earlier section of the treatise (pt. 1, col. 294), which offers a less attractive notion of *fabula*, suggests something of the lingering tension in Christian attitudes toward *fabula* that I have been tracing from the start.

[105] See Flacius, *Clavis Scripturæ*, pt. 2, col. 334. Boccaccio (*Genealogy* 14.9) and Vermigli (*In Librum Iudicum*, 99v) had previously referred to Menenius Agrippa in their discussions of *fabula*—though not with the counter-turn described below.

[106] See Flacius, *Clavis Scripturæ*, pt. 2, col. 334, with Rom 12:4–5 and 1 Cor 12:12–27. The general notion of "comparing" classical tales with Christian texts dates back to the ancient apologists, but Flacius does not here argue that Menenius Agrippa's fable imperfectly expresses what *Paul* writes; he argues that what Paul writes "to some extent" expresses the *fable*. This is not to suggest that Flacius is "heretical" here but to note that such "philological" turns will have an expansive afterlife in later "literary" approaches to Christian Scripture. In commentary on Paul's conception during the modern period, of course, there are frequent references to Menenius Agrippa—though substantial questions remain concerning the potential status of that classical fable in Paul's mind and in Christian approaches to the "body of Christ." On imaginative "alignments" with Jotham's tale in commentary on the book of Judges itself, see, e.g., the elaborate *quaestio* on Jotham's use of *apologus* in Nicolaus Serarius's early seventeenth-century commentary, which invokes a broad range of authors, classical and Christian, writing during the course of approximately two thousand years: *Iudices et Ruth Explanati à Nicolao Serario Societat. Iesu . . .* (Mainz: E Balthasaris Lippij Typographeo, 1609), quæstio 15 on Judg 9, pp. 258–61.

[107] See the opening of the comment on Judg 9:8 in Matthew Poole, *Annotations upon the Holy Bible*, vol. 1 (London: John Richardson, 1683): "A Parabolical Discourse, *usual among the Ancients, especially in the Eastern parts*; wherein, under the names of Trees, men are represented" (my highlighting). The general argument that scriptural language is informed by an "Oriental" imagination antedates Poole's commentary, of course; the argument is repeatedly applied to Jotham's story in later commentary on Judg 9.

beautiful as any which have been made since that time."[108] But over the course of the eighteenth century, the assessment of *fabula* acquires more intensively historicist forms, aiming to clarify far more than the particular *historia* to which a story may refer. In theories of the human imagination that anticipate the Romantic movement, fabulous discourse in antiquity becomes a vivid testimony to the primal history of humankind, its animated language an expression of elemental sympathy with the natural world. A wide-ranging application of this view to the idiom of Scripture is displayed in Johann Gottfried Herder's *On the Spirit of Hebrew Poetry*, published in the 1780s.[109] Herder finds in the "poetry" of the Hebrew Bible "a community of feeling and sympathy (*ein gemeinschaftliches Mitgefühl*) between brute animals, men, plants, and all that has life"; in its "sympathy" (*Teilnehmung*) with the world of plants, he argues, such poetry readily "personifies them" (*alles so gern personifizierten*).[110] As he writes later in the treatise, the Hebrew language is "full of personifications" (*Die Ebräische Sprache ist solcher Personendichtungen voll*), and it is "undeniable, that this sympathy, this transfer of one's self into the objects around us" (*diese Teilnehmung, diese Versetzung in fremde Gefühle*), has formed "not only the inspiring principle of language, of speech, but to a certain extent also the first development and existence of moral principle" (*das erste Wesen der Moral*).[111] Animated language so conceived is far more radical than

[108] See *Spectator* 183 (1711), in *The Spectator* (ed. Donald F. Bond; 5 vols.; Oxford: Oxford University Press / Clarendon Press, 1965) 2:219–23. With his broad conception of "fable," Addison considers not only ancient figures such as Aesop, Prodicus, and (in view of certain "Ancient Criticks") Homer, but also recent authors such as Spenser and La Fontaine. On the "aesthetics" of Jotham's tale, already in the sixteenth century Peter Vermigli calls it "most elegant" (*Apologo elegantissimo*); see *In Librum Iudicum* (cited above in n. 102), 99r. Notions of the "aesthetics" of the Bible, of course, date back to antiquity, but the eighteenth century develops (far beyond the sense of the "beautiful" in Addison's comment) what has been called "the poetic Bible"; see Jonathan Sheehan, *The Enlightenment Bible: Translation, Scholarship, Culture* (2005; repr., Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007) 148–60.

[109] See *Vom Geist der Ebräischen Poesie. Ein Anleitung für die Liebhaber derselben und der ältesten Geschichte des menschlichen Geistes*, in *Schriften zum alten Testament* (ed. Rudolf Smend; Bibliothek Deutscher Klassiker 93; Frankfurt am Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1993), vol. 5 of Johann Gottfried Herder, *Werke in zehn Bänden* (ed. Günter Arnold et al.; 10 vols.; Frankfurt am Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1985–2000), hereafter abbreviated as *Vom Geist*, cited by book and section numbers (followed in parentheses by page numbers in *Schriften*); for a translation, see J. G. Herder, *The Spirit of Hebrew Poetry* (trans. James Marsh; 2 vols.; Burlington, VT: Edward Smith, 1833), hereafter abbreviated as *Spirit*, cited by volume and page numbers.

[110] See *Vom Geist* 1.3 (*Schriften* [ed. Smend], 722 and 724–25); *Spirit* (trans. Marsh), 1:71 and 1:73. Herder includes in this discussion a specific reference to "pastoral fables like that of Jotham" (Marsh, 1:73). Brief expressions of a "botanical" approach to the fable of Jotham appear already in Johann Georg Hamann's *Aesthetica in Nuce* (1762); for a translation, see Johann Georg Hamann, *Writings on Philosophy and Language* (trans. and ed. Kenneth Haynes; Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) 64, with nn. f and g.

[111] See *Vom Geist* 2.1.2 (*Schriften* [ed. Smend], 967); *Spirit* (trans. Marsh), 2:11–12. Compare the subsequent discussion that begins with references to "personified object" (*personifizierter Gegenstand*), "fable" (*Fabel*), and "the East" (*Morgenland*); *Vom Geist* 2.1.3–4 (*Schriften* [ed. Smend], 969–72); *Spirit* (trans. Marsh), 2:14–17.

the kind of *fabula* invoked for nearly a thousand years from Isidore of Seville to Matthias Flacius. It does not just offer a *comparison* with plants or animals for moral purposes; it expresses a *communion* with the creaturely world that is itself foundational for moral behavior (*das erste Wesen der Moral*).[112] If there is a kind of mysticism in this view, the mysticism applies not, as in Isidore's apocalyptic account of the tale of Jotham, to the last age of the human race, but to its primordial stages. In "the beautiful fable of Jotham," writes Herder, "trees speak and act, for Israel then lived beneath the trees (*denn Israel lebte damals unter Bäumen*) the life of herdsmen or cultivators of the soil. . . ."[113] In that formative world, *fabula* is no mere poetic device. Its poetry is by its very nature an exposé of history; the primal act of fabling is itself the crucial fact.

But other ways of "historicizing" the imaginative language of Scripture are destined to displace such effusive views and to relegate the fable of Jotham to a rhetorical flourish of relatively limited interest. One expression of that tendency is an assessment by an influential nineteenth-century philologist-theologian (a clergyman who eventually helps to initiate the project of the *New [Oxford] English Dictionary*), Richard Chenevix Trench. A fable like Jotham's story, he argues in a widely circulated work, never passes beyond the framework of earthly morality, and even the orientation of its plot—transgressing the natural order—exposes its strain.[114] The fable of Jotham as a narrative invention limited to moral instruction and remote from the factual realm—such a conception might have pleased that early-medieval philologist-theologian of the *Etymologies*, Isidore of Seville. But by the time of Richard Chenevix Trench, broad interpretive movements are increasingly arguing that even the scriptural *historia* itself may be remote from the factual realm. Already in the eighteenth century, Voltaire wryly comments that one

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[112] Philosophic conceptions of a congruence between physical and moral realms originate in antiquity, but Herder is stressing the linguistic and moral dimensions of the "sympathetic" imagination itself. And though Jotham's tale is in one sense "contrary to nature" (in Isidore's classification of *fabula* in the *Etymologies*; n. 27 above), in Herder's conception the tale is doubly "organic"—with its imaginative "mode" (giving voice to the natural world) *participating* in its "message" (evoking the nature of Israelite life); see the comments below.

[113] See *Vom Geist* 2.8 (*Schriften* [ed. Smend], 1164–66); *Spirit* (trans. Marsh), 2:200–201. In the passage Herder explicitly refers to "the fables of Æsop and Menenius Agrippa" (Marsh, 2:200).

[114] See Richard Chenevix Trench, *Notes on the Parables of Our Lord* (12th ed.; New York: Appleton, 1867). The work, published in its original form in London (Parker) in 1841, passes into a multitude of "editions"; "twelfth" is the designation indicated on the title page of the 1867 American edition. On "fable," see 9–10, where Trench argues that among "forms of composition" the "fable" is "essentially of the earth" and "just reaches that pitch of morality which the world will understand and approve. But it has no place in Scripture," at which point in the text an asterisk signals a footnote referring to the "two fables that are found in the Old Testament," "that of the trees which would choose a king" and "the brief one of the thistle and cedar." These fables, the author continues in the footnote, do not "impeach the universality" of the rule, for the speakers are not God or "messengers of his, delivering his counsel," but "men, and from an earthly standing point, not a divine." The "parable," he later writes (15, in a passage [not in the 1841 edition] beginning "To sum up all"), "differs from the fable, moving as it does in a spiritual world, and never transgressing the actual order of things natural. . . ." On the "brief" fable of the "thistle and cedar," see n. 40 above.

of the critics of the book of Judges maintains that "the story (*fable*) of Abimelech's reign is more of a fable than that of the trees."[115] And with the intensification of the "historical-critical" method in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, commentary on Judges comes to question not only whether Jotham ever uttered such words, but even whether his fable belongs to the "history" of the text in the mere sense of belonging to the original narrative.[116] It would be acutely ironic for late-medieval commentators to be told that this is the way in which Jotham's story finally "fulfills its historical role."

From such recent perspectives, the fable of Jotham may seem only a minor footnote in a far-reaching controversy about the historical and imaginative dimensions of Christian Scripture at large. But for well over a millennium, the fable acquires an interpretive history in the Christian world that is—if I may use the term—fabulous. Already by the early-medieval phase of that history, the story turns into a figure with two distinct kinds of significance—mystical and ethical. By the late Middle Ages its assigned "significance," especially as the intended sense of an ethical tale, comes to be a rationale for including figurative meaning within the literal sense itself. Possessed of such metaphorical density, the literal sense of Christian Scripture increasingly converges with a "literary" sense of the text. Conversely, literary expression at large, even in non-Christian texts, comes to be defended by reference to scriptural fable. At times in the movement to the modern period, the fabulous and factual seem almost reflexes of each other—until that interplay between the imaginative and the historical eventually calls into question the very notion of the historicity of Christian Scripture itself.

Still, it is never possible to know for certain when history will return to mystery.[117] Not long ago, in the opening decade of the twenty-first century, an article appeared that included an extended investigation of the botanical identity of that "bramble"— Hebrew *aṭad* (אטד)—in the fable of Jotham.[118] The author concluded that the *aṭad*

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[115] For this comment, see Gunn, *Judges* (cited above in n. 10), 126.

[116] For views about such questions from different times and perspectives, see George F. Moore, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Judges* (The International Critical Commentary on the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments; 1895; repr., Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1989) 244–46, 250–51; Simon, "Parable of Jotham" (cited above in n. 7); and Wolfgang Bluedorn, *Yahweh Versus Baalism: A Theological Reading of the Gideon-Abimelech Narrative* (Journal for the Study of the Old Testament, Supplement Series 329; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001) 211–18, which includes extensive bibliographical reference points.

[117] Among the topics raised in recent scholarship related to Jotham's story is the question of whether there may be an allusion to it in Mark 8:24 (with its configuration of "men," "trees," and "walking"); see R. S. Sugirtharajah, "Men, Trees and Walking: A Conjectural Solution to Mk 8:24," *Expository Times* 103 (1992) 172–74. For this reference I am grateful to David Lincicum, who has explored the question in research that he kindly made accessible to me. The further issue of how humans and plants can be related in different imaginative forms has a nearly unlimited scope. The critical literature on metamorphosis stories, for example, is voluminous, though such stories tend to differ generically, methodologically, contextually, and historically from the fable of Jotham.

[118] See Silviu Tatu, "Jotham's Fable and the *Crux Interpretum* in Judges IX," *Vetus Testamentum* 56 (2006) 105–24.

was quite possibly what is called by botanists *Ziziphus spina-christi*—that is, in an expression conspicuously highlighted in the article in a bold font, "**Christ Thorn**."[119] "Its scientific name," the author continued, "comes from the perception commonly accepted among scholars that its thorns make the tree the most plausible candidate for the plant of which Jesus' crown was made."[120] Could contemporary scholarly methods be returning indirectly to the methods of Methodius—to whom I referred near the opening of this essay—who associated the "bramble" with "the law which was given to the apostles for the salvation of the world"?[121] This is of course not to say that that was the "author's intention" in his recent article. It is nonetheless striking that the official abstract of the article maintains with regard to the plant in question that "Only such a *literal* rendering prompts the *prophetic* value of Jotham's imprecation . . . ," and that the title of the article is "Jotham's Fable and the *Crux Interpretum* in Judges IX."[122] The *crux*—the cross—of interpreters? Perhaps I am only reading between the lines. But if the history of this fable tells us anything, it is that in reading Scripture, even according to what may be called its "literal" sense, readers are always reading between the lines, composing with their own assumptions their own interlinear glosses. Not that Scripture does not speak in its own right; it talks far more than trees. The question is: how to judge what it says.

[119] See Tatu, "Jotham's Fable," 117, referring at this point to the botanist Michael Zohary, in *Plants of the Bible: A Complete Handbook to All the Plants with 200 Full-Color Plates Taken in the Natural Habitat* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982) 155. For *spina-christi* the article uses an upper-case *C* (apparently not the conventional form, though a form possible to find).

[120] See Tatu, "Jotham's Fable," 117. Zohary's own comments in *Plants of the Bible*, 154–55, are more cautious; with regard to the "crown of thorns," a different plant, "the thorny burnet (*Sarcopoterium spinosum*)," he indicates, might "with much more reason be regarded as the plant in question. . . . Christian tradition, however, looks upon the *Ziziphus* as the 'crown of thorns'. . ." (comments not quoted in the article). On this and other associations with *Ziziphus spina-christi*, see, e.g., Amots Dafni, Shay Levy, and Efraim Lev, "The Ethnobotany of Christ's Thorn Jujube (*Ziziphus spina-christi*) in Israel," *Journal of Ethnobiology and Ethnomedicine* 1 (2005), https://doi.org/10.1186/1746-4269-1-8; on Tatu's further argument, see below.

[121] In his seventeenth-century account of earlier treatments of Judg 9, Cornelius a Lapide refers to the interpretation of Methodius, whom he considers to have spoken *ingeniose* about the matter, but *minus . . . apposite* at this point according to the letter (*ingeniose dicta sunt, sed minus huic loco apposite ad litteram*). The bramble, Cornelius continues, here denotes the tyrannical Abimelech, and thus cannot suitably (*apte*) represent Christ, the cross, and chastity, but rather Antichrist (*potius Antichristum*). Cornelius nonetheless cites comments by the Jesuit theologian Jacob Gretser (almost his exact contemporary) correlating the bramble in this passage with the crown of thorns. See *R.P. Cornelii Cornelii* [both names] *a Lapide . . . Commentaria in Josue, Judicum, Ruth, IV. Libros Regum et II. Paralipomenon* (2 vols.; Lyon: Apud Fratres de Tournes, 1732) 1:120. The seventeenth-century Jesuit writer Jacob Masen also includes such a correlation in his *Orthodoxi Concionatoris Antiquo-Novi . . .* (2 vols.; Mainz: Sumptibus Johannis Petri Zubrodt, 1678) 1:120 and 1:122 (Concio 27). (These commentators are not mentioned in the article of Tatu; on his approach to literality in Judg 9, see below.)

[122] For the quotation from the abstract (with my highlighting for the words *literal* and *prophetic*), see Tatu, "Jotham's Fable," 124.