

THE OLD AND NEW LAW IN NICHOLAS OF LYRA'S PAULINE COMMENTARIES

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Readers familiar with the history of the Protestant Reformation might recall the old refrain: “Had Lyra not strummed his lyre, Luther would not have danced” (*Si Lyra non lyrasset, Lutherus non saltasset*). This is an overstatement to be sure, but it is certainly true that the Augustinian friar Martin Luther respected the sober exegesis of his Franciscan predecessor. It did not take Brother Martin, however, to secure the reputation of Nicholas of Lyra. Indeed, it would be fair to say that Lyra was the most influential biblical commentator of the Late Middle Ages. Born in Normandy c. 1270, Lyra entered the Franciscan Order in 1300 and was a master of theology at Paris by about 1309. He is best known for his commentary on the entire Bible known as the *Postilla Litteralis*, begun in 1322 and completed by 1331, the groundwork for which was probably laid when Lyra delivered his cursory lectures on Scripture decades before as a bachelor of theology. Lyra wrote three general prologues to the Bible in which he discussed his exegetical method, in addition to prologues written for specific biblical books, where he went into further detail regarding matters of authorial intention and literary composition. The Literal Postill proved to be a tremendously popular work for centuries to come; it survives in more than 800 manuscripts. In 1471–72 a five-volume set was first printed in Rome, and within a few decades Lyra’s commentaries were being printed alongside that other staple of medieval exegesis, the *Glossa Ordinaria*.¹

Lyra’s Exegetical Method

Lyra laid out his overall conception of Scripture as well as his basic hermeneutical principles across three general biblical prologues. The first prologue had been originally presented as a *principium*, that is, an encomium in praise of Scripture, which was customarily delivered by each newly incepting master of theology.² Medieval theologians were by definition Masters of the Sacred Page

1 See the recent essay collections: *Nicolas de Lyre: Franciscain du XIVe Siècle Exégète et Théologien*, ed. Gilbert Dahan (Paris: Institut d’Études Augustiniennes, 2011); and *Nicholas of Lyra: The Senses of Scripture*, eds. Philip Krey and Lesley Smith (Leiden: Brill, 2000).

2 I have followed the edition of the three prologues found in *Patrologiae Cursus Completus: Series Latina*, ed. J. P. Migne, 221 vols. (Paris: Garnier and J. P. Migne, 1844–1864), vol. 113 (hereafter, *PL*). I have also consulted the 1603 Venice *Biblia Sacra cum Glosa Ordinaria novisque additionibus*, which contains Lyra’s *Postilla Litteralis* and *Postilla Moralis*.

(*magistri sacrae pagniae*), and so it was fitting that they should extol the text that formed the basis of their discipline. It was in this first prologue that Lyra elucidated his broader vision of Holy Scripture as a sacred repository of divine wisdom; and it is here that he revealed the foundation of his hermeneutics. He adopted Sirach 24:32 as his lead text: “All these things are the book of life” (*Haec omnia liber vitae*). Scripture is the book of life (*liber vitae*), the key to true life for all who believe. In this vein Lyra cited Gregory the Great’s remark that “temporal life as compared to eternal life is more fittingly called death than life” (*Homily on the Gospels* 35). Lyra the theologian observed that the science of the philosophers is ordered to mundane ends, concerned as it is with this present life alone. Yet Holy Scripture is a unique book ordered toward happiness in the life to come, thereby surpassing the merely human knowledge acquired by philosophers. “The book containing Holy Scripture—although divided into many partial books and yet contained under one book—which is designated under the general name of the Bible, is properly called the Book of Life.”³

Although all medieval theologians agreed that Holy Scripture lay at the very heart of their discipline, there remained some discussion as to theology’s precise relationship with this most sacred text. Lyra, like his Franciscan predecessors St. Bonaventure and Peter John Olivi, equated Holy Scripture with theology. Scripture is properly called theology, says Lyra, precisely because it is the sole text of this science. God himself is its subject matter; indeed, it is a discourse about God (*sermo de Deo*). Holy Scripture—and thus theology itself—proceeds in the most certain manner, excelling all human sciences, which are confined by the limits of human reason.⁴

Lyra would then turn to the words of Deuteronomy 4:6, “For this is your wisdom, and understanding in the sight of nations” (*Haec est sapientia vestra, et intellectus coram populis*), to extol the riches of Scripture. Despite occasional expressions of condescension to pagan philosophy, Lyra actually incorporated a great deal of Aristotle into his own work. For he appealed directly to the *Metaphysics* (981b) when pointing out that wisdom (*sapientia*) properly refers to that science which treats the highest causes. Thus as Holy Scripture has God for its subject matter, who is himself the first cause of all things, so it must be designated as Wisdom. This is the wisdom of the saints: the very Wisdom that is Holy Scripture. Philosophical investigation has its place, but it remains an ancillary discipline, limited precisely because it does not operate under the grace of divine illumination. Although the philosophers do possess some knowledge of God, it remains confined to the properties that can be known by reason through the observation of created things. On the other hand, the prophets and apostles, who have handed down Holy Scripture

3 PL, 113:25c–d.

4 PL, 113:25d–26d.

through the revelation of the Holy Spirit, have a knowledge of transcendent divine properties that exceeds the investigations of human reason. The Trinity, according to Lyra, is a prime example of a truth that could not be reached by the efforts of unaided human reason, that is to say, reason unilluminated by grace. And if the Trinity is the goal of all human longing, then the study of Holy Scripture is no mere academic exercise. The person contemplating Holy Scripture, says Lyra, is borne along into the love of the very object of his cognition, who is God himself, and so comes to love God above all else.⁵

It was in his second prologue that Lyra more concretely explained the exegetical method that informs his great *Postilla Litteralis*. Drawing upon Revelation 5:1, "And I saw in the right hand of him that sat on the throne, a book written within and without, sealed with seven seals" (*Et vidi in dextera sedentis super thronum librum scriptum intus et foris signatum sigillis septem*). With this reference to a book written within (*intus*) and without (*foris*), Lyra acknowledged that Scripture possesses an exterior literal sense and an interior mystical sense. He insists from the outset, however, that the literal sense must ground the others. As a building that falls away from its foundation will collapse into ruin, so it is with mystical exposition that is not founded upon the literal sense. In this regard, Lyra was sounding a theme that can be traced back to Hugh of St. Victor in the twelfth century. And just like Thomas Aquinas (*Summa Theologia* I, q. 1, a. 10, ad 1), Lyra also cited Augustine's admonition (*Letter* 93.8) that arguments in matters of faith must proceed from the literal, rather than the mystical, sense.⁶

Lyra pressed on further than his predecessor Aquinas, however, as he developed what he termed the "double literal sense" (*duplex sensus litteralis*), which applies when there is both an historical and a mystical sense under the same letter. In these instances the historical truth recorded in the text must be preserved even as that truth points to a further spiritual understanding. Here Lyra presented an example that has direct relevance for his reading of the Pauline Epistles. He noted that, in 1 Chronicles 22:10, the Lord is presented as a father to King Solomon. Read literally (*ad litteram*), Solomon was indeed God's son by adoption, and thus by grace. Yet, as Lyra notes, the Apostle Paul had cited this very text in Hebrews 1:5 when speaking of Jesus Christ. And, according to Lyra, the Apostle was also reading the text "literally" (*ad litteram*) in an effort to prove that Christ is higher than the angels. Saint Paul's point of doctrine, however, cannot be based upon the mystical sense, since that would violate Augustine's aforementioned rule that the literal sense alone may form the foundation of dogma. Here, then, the same text is speaking literally about Solomon, God's son by grace, even as it also is speaking about

5 PL, 113:26d–27a.

6 PL, 113:29c.

Christ, God's Son by nature. The same text is fulfilled by both Solomon and Christ, although less perfectly by the former and more perfectly by the latter. Lyra admitted, however, that while each exposition belongs to the literal sense unqualifiedly (*simpliciter*), the second interpretation—referring to Christ—is itself mystical, or spiritual, in a certain respect (*secundum quid*) inasmuch as Solomon functions here as a figure of Christ (*figura Christi*).⁷

There are also instances when the same passage has both a literal and spiritual sense, as we find with the Apostle Paul's reading of the account of Abraham and his two sons, Isaac and Ishmael (Gen. 21:1–14). While what is recorded in the Book of Genesis is true according the literal sense, it is also true in the mystical sense, evinced by Paul's allegorical reading in which they signify the two testaments (Gal. 4:24). Even here, though, the possible meanings are not limited to the allegorical but can signify on the moral and anagogical level as well. Actually, Lyra's hermeneutical program outlined above might be said to anticipate what the 1993 Pontifical Biblical Commission referred to as the "fuller sense" (*sensus plenior*), wherein the historical integrity of the biblical author and his work are preserved even as the deeper meaning of the text is revealed.⁸

Lyra's Hermeneutics as Applied to the Pauline Epistles

The translation of Aristotle's works into Latin by the middle of thirteenth century had a significant effect upon biblical exegesis in the form of the so-called "Aristotelian Prologue."⁹ This was a way of introducing texts based upon Aristotle's four causes: material, formal, efficient, and final. Lyra composed such a prologue for the Pauline Epistles wherein he assessed the specific qualities and purposes of the Apostle.¹⁰ Here he stated that the wisdom of Saint Paul principally consists of his knowledge that the Lord Jesus Christ died for the redemption of the human race. This is apparent in the Apostle's remark to the Corinthians that he decided "to know nothing else among you except for Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:2). Applying the aforementioned Aristotelian schema of causes to the Epistles, the Apostle Paul, as writer (*scriptor*), is the efficient cause. The crucified Christ, the very wisdom of the Apostle's teaching, is the material cause in the sense of being the subject matter. The final cause is the usefulness of his teaching for the whole Church:

7 PL, 113:31d–32a.

8 Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (Boston: Saint Paul Books and Media, 1993), 84–87.

9 For more on the different genres of biblical prologues, see Alastair Minnis and A. B. Scott, *Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism c. 1100–1375* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988).

10 All references to Lyra's Pauline Commentaries are based on his *Postilla super Totam Bibliam*, 4 vols. (Strassburg: 1492; reprint: Frankfurt am Main: Minerva, 1971). These volumes are not paginated.

the life of grace here in the present and glory in the future. As for the formal cause, that is the double form of his teaching, namely, the form of the treatise (*forma tractatus*) and the form of its treatment (*forma tractandi*). The latter is the Apostle's own method of procedure (*modus agendi*). And when assessing particular Epistles, Lyra will typically offer a *divisio textus* at the outset whereby the Apostle Paul is found to divide his letter into three parts: salutation or preface; a detailed exposition (*enarratio*) or verbal explanation (*prosecutio*); and a consummation or conclusion.

Lyra's reading of Romans 9:32–33 offers a fine example of his subtle exegesis as he navigates the literal and spiritual meaning of the text, brought into play here by the Apostle's own citation of the Prophet Isaiah. The Apostle wrote: "Because they did not strive for it on the basis of faith, but as if it were based on works. They have stumbled over the stumbling stone, as it is written, 'See, I am laying in Zion a stone that will make people stumble, a rock that will make them fall, and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.'" The stone of offense, says Lyra, must be Jesus Christ, since Holy Scripture itself (Isa. 28:16) so designates him. Indeed, the text proves the case: when read literally (*ad literam*) this passage from Isaiah is understood to refer to Christ whom the leaders of the Jews took offense at. For they blasphemed his humanity when calling him a glutton and a drunkard (Luke 7:34), and likewise his divinity when they said that he cast out demons by the power of Beelzebub (Matt. 12:24). Yet everyone who believes—specifically through a faith formed by love—"will not be confounded" (*confundetur*), but rather honored in glory. Lyra points out here that Paul cited this passage from Isaiah according to the Septuagint translation. Whereas "in our translation" (*in translatione nostra*) it reads "will not make haste" (*non festinet*). Lyra has thus gone back to the book of Isaiah itself and quite possibly consulted the Hebrew text.¹¹

At all events, Lyra maintained that the latter reading can be taken in two ways. In one sense it refers to the time of the Prophet Isaiah so as to mean, "the one who believes in my prophecy 'will not make haste' believing that Christ is going to come immediately"; for it was a long time between Isaiah and the first coming of Christ. In another sense, it can refer to the time of Christ, who is speaking about his own second coming. Thus it means that the one who believes in Christ's preaching "will not make haste," believing that

11 Lyra not only read Hebrew but was conversant with rabbinic exegesis, most notably the work of Rabbi Solomon bar Isaac a.k.a Rashi of Troyes (d. 1105). Lyra may have acquired his proficiency in the Hebrew language while in Normandy through contact with the Jewish community at Évreux. Since the Jews had been expelled from France in 1306, it is possible that Lyra learned about rabbinical exegesis from converted Jews in Paris. On this subject, see: Ari Geiger, "A Student and an Opponent: Nicholas and his Jewish Sources," in *Nicolas de Lyre: Franciscain du XIVe Siècle Exégète et Théologien*, 167–203; and Deana Klepper, "Nicholas of Lyra and Franciscan Interest in Hebrew Scholarship," in *Nicholas of Lyra: The Senses of Scripture*, 289–311.

he is coming soon to render judgment. Lyra assures us, however, that, whether one follows the Septuagint or the Hebrew, there is really no contradiction. For we must remember, he says, that the Septuagint translators did not always translate word for word (*verbum ex verbo*), but sometimes sense for sense (*sensus ex sensu*). Lyra could therefore accommodate different versions of the text, whether based upon the Hebrew or the Greek, convinced as he was of the underlying coherence of Holy Scripture in its totality.

Proclaiming the New Law among the Gentiles

The events of the Jerusalem council as recounted in chapter 15 of the Acts of the Apostles presented Lyra with an opportunity to examine the transition from the age of the Old Law to that of the New. A review of Lyra's commentary on this chapter will help to provide context for his reading of Paul's own discussion of this matter as found throughout his Letters. Here at Jerusalem, Lyra found the Apostles Paul and Barnabas taking a contrary line to the Pharisees as they asserted that through the New Law, even Jews are freed from their obligation to observe the Mosaic Law. As for Gentiles, they have never been so obligated, since the Law had not been given to them in the first place. Gentiles are, however, bound to observe the moral component of the Law. For this, says Lyra, is actually the dictate of the Natural Law, to which all people are bound—a point that Lyra reckons Paul to have made clear in his Letters to the Romans and Galatians among other places.

Lyra continued this line of commentary as he turned to Peter's remark that the Old Law had been an unbearable burden for Jews (Acts 15:10). According to Lyra, Peter was referring only to the severity of the Law's judicial and ceremonial aspects. Thus, even as the multitude of ceremonial components seemed overwhelming, the moral precepts had always been observable. This is, again, because such precepts make up the order of the Natural Law that remains in force even in the age of the New Law. Here, though, Lyra further qualified Peter's words: the judicial and ceremonial precepts were not unobservable absolutely speaking (*simpliciter*). For, in fact, God would never have commanded anything that was impossible to perform. Hence when Peter said that the Law had been unbearable, or unobservable, he meant only that it was exceedingly difficult to follow.

As the council was drawing to a close it was time, in good magisterial fashion, for the Apostle James to offer a formal resolution of the matter. Lyra notes here that, although Peter was the indeed the chief apostle, he deferred in this instance to James, the bishop of Jerusalem, who was entitled to render a determination on this disputed question within his own diocese. The decision had been reached: Gentiles are to refrain from things polluted by idols, fornication, animals strangled, and blood. Lyra explains that the restriction of

the first two items made sense owing to the concern that the Gentiles might revert to idolatry and because they commonly believed that fornication was lawful. As for the dietary matters, even as these are really lawful foods, they nevertheless remained abhorrent to Jews. Thus, in the interest of preserving peaceful community life, the council requested that the Gentiles refrain from such foods. This was not, however, a requirement necessary for salvation along the lines of idolatry and fornication. For as Lyra comments, we often refrain from foods that our friends find abhorrent, despite the fact that, with the passing away of the Old Law, this command was no longer in effect. Jesus himself, notes Lyra, had said that "nothing which enters a man's mouth defiles him" (Matt. 15:10), nor is anything to be rejected that is received with thanksgiving.

The Law and Human Sinfulness

To more fully grasp Lyra's own understanding of Paul and the Law, it is helpful to begin with Paul's discussion of the Fall in the Letter to the Romans. When Lyra commented on Romans 5:12, he followed the traditional Western reading of the Latin text "*in quo omnes peccaverunt*": all human beings have sinned in Adam (*in quo*). The fact that the Law of Moses had not yet been given to man (Rom. 5:13) does not serve as an excuse. For Lyra points out that the Natural Law had been placed within the human heart from the beginning; hence the transgression was a sin. Although, on account of the multiplication of sins, the natural law had been obscured such that transgression of the Law was not then counted as sin. As for the state of humankind after the Fall, Lyra concluded that there was an infection of human nature brought about by Adam's trespass: this is the original sin passed down to posterity. Christ, however, justifies man with regard to both original and actual sin; through the gift of Christ many are rendered just.

It was in Romans 7 that the Apostle Paul had attempted to reconcile God's good gift of Torah with the reality of human sinfulness. Commenting on this chapter, Lyra found that concupiscence increased the incentive to sin, and Paul was thus seduced as he was drawn to consent to mortal sin. Lyra believes that Paul wanted to demonstrate here that the Law in itself is good, for the intention of the Law is to lead men to the good. Under the Old, Law God kept men in order by means of the ceremonial precepts and thus subjected them to these precepts for the sake of the good. Indeed, such a law must have been good since it pertained to the worship of God. God also arranged for men to live in peace with their neighbor through the judicial precepts of the Law and set man in order to himself through the moral precepts.

At this point, notes Lyra, someone might object that while the Law is good in itself taken unqualifiedly (*absolute*), it is nonetheless evil for fallen man

whose flesh rebels against his spirit. After all, it is through the Law that one is excited to sin. Thus it can be compared to wine which is absolutely good in itself and yet is evil for someone with a fever. Could something that is good in itself, namely the Law, have brought about death? Of course not! In fact, according to Lyra, the Law cannot be aptly compared to wine, since wine directly increases the heat of a fever and thus is evil for the sick man. Whereas the Law in itself does not generate the fever of concupiscence; that is the result of the evil already present within man and the wickedness of the demons. Thus the Law cannot be called evil any more than a good act can be blamed if it scandalizes someone on account of that person's own evil. Moreover, neither does the one performing the good act, nor the act itself, become any worse unless one intentionally set out to scandalize that other person in the first place. In that case, the act would have been evil based on the initial intention. The point is that the Law does not in itself excite concupiscence, even though it is true that concupiscence follows. The true cause of sin remains the evil of man himself and the wickedness of demons, the interior and exterior occasions for sin.

Lyra believed that the Apostle was not only making his case based upon an analysis of the Mosaic Law, however, but Natural Law as well. In fact, Lyra observed here that all written law, whether divine or human, is in a certain sense a determination of Natural Law. And thus if something is consonant with Natural Law it is good—just as a conclusion that follows from first principles. According to Lyra, there is within man a sort of double person (*duplex persona*), namely the rational and sensual, also known as the spirit and the flesh, the interior and exterior. And it is through reason that man is distinguished from the brutes. Thus when a man follows reason he is said to act and will as a man properly speaking. But when he follows sensual impulses he is acting as a brute inasmuch as he is not acting in accord with reason. Hence the Law is good insofar as it prohibits man from following sensual or carnal concupiscence. In this respect, then, it is in keeping with natural law. The Law can also be called spiritual insofar as it directs man to follow the instinct of the spirit or reason.

Man, on the other hand, can be called carnal when he follows his sensual impulses. In Romans 7:14 Paul is found to be speaking in the person of the fallen human race (*in persona generis humani lapsi*), as man so often follows after sensual impulses. When Paul referred to being “sold under sin,” he was referring to the sin of the first parents in which the human race incurred the rebellion of the flesh against the spirit. Mankind now finds itself unable to follow the dictates of right reason even though it knows that the Law is good—good precisely because it prohibits what is hateful to right reason. Thus when Paul speaks of “the sin that dwells within me” (Rom. 7:17), he is referring to concupiscence, which (as Lyra has explained) is called sin inasmuch as it is

the incitement, or cause, of sin. His flesh is now corrupted through the sin of Adam, since such an evil inclination was surely not in human flesh during the state of innocence. And further on, when Paul refers to himself as the "wretched man" (Rom. 7:24) he is again speaking on behalf of the human race when he prays for liberation. Although he also gives thanks through Christ (Rom. 7:25), confident that he will one day be liberated from the power of concupiscence, even as he has already been freed from guilt through baptism.

It is noteworthy that as Lyra explored theories of sin and concupiscence, he was careful to observe subtle textual variants. We see this in his comments on the Apostle's remark that he would not have known what it is to covet unless the Law had said: "Do not covet" (Rom. 7:7). What Saint Paul means, says Lyra, is that he would not have known that covetousness (*concupiscentia*) was actually a sin except for the commandment. Some editions of Romans have apparently supplied this extended explanation within the biblical text itself: "*nam concupiscentiam nesciebam [esse peccatum] . . .*" Although, according to Lyra, the corrected versions (*libris correctis*) rightly omit it. The meaning of the original text—that concupiscence is a sin—is surely implied (*subintelligendum*), however, and that is why some of the doctors had placed the word "sin" (*peccatum*) in their interlinear gloss. The error arose only later, according to Lyra, when an ignorant scribe inserted this gloss into the text of Romans itself.

The Place of the Law in Salvation History

When Lyra commented on the Apostle's remark in Galatians that "the Law is not from faith" (Gal. 3:12), he took the opportunity to address the larger issue of the role of Law within salvation history. Lyra argued here that in the Old Law the precepts were not given with regard to what one must believe, since that pertains only to the New Law where the content of the Christian belief is explained. Appealing to Romans 3:27, Lyra determined that the Old Law is aptly reckoned a law of deeds whereas the New Law is a law of faith. Yet Lyra was quick to point out that this does not mean that the people of the Old Testament were bereft of the faith without which it is impossible to please God (Heb. 11:6). Because Lyra believed that there is an inherent continuity to salvation history, he insisted that there must be a single faith all along. The Patriarchs were certainly holy and they pleased God, according to Lyra, although they did not possess an "explicit faith" like the people of the New Testament, where the truth was openly revealed through Christ. Thus, in addition to punishing sinners and moving people to yearn for Christ's coming, the Old Law—functioning as a figure of the New Law—served to introduce people to faith in Christ. This is because the figure leads, albeit imperfectly, to an understanding of what it symbolizes. In order to make sense of the unity of faith across the ages, Lyra drew upon the classic medieval

distinction between “implicit faith” and “explicit faith.” The Old Testament Patriarchs possessed only an implicit faith inasmuch as they lacked explicit knowledge of the content of their faith, which had not yet been fully revealed. Whether veiled or revealed, however, the content of faith remains the same from age to age.

It was along these lines, when commenting on Philippians 3, that Lyra addressed the cessation of legal obligations. Here, says Lyra, the Apostle spoke of receiving the spiritual circumcision, as opposed to the carnal, which had served as a figure of that true circumcision to come, namely, the baptismal water that removes both penalty and guilt. So it is that the spiritual circumcision succeeds the carnal as the perfect succeeds the imperfect and as the truth follows the shadow or figure. Thus to say that the legal obligations are still running their course is to imply that Christ has not yet come; the figure must cease, however, with the arrival of the truth. Paul now counts all trappings of the Old Law as loss for the “surpassing knowledge” of Christ—a teaching that exceeds not only that of the philosophers but even the Old Testament. For Paul has been “found in him [Christ],” which is to say that he has been incorporated into Christ through a faith that is formed by love (*per fidem caritate formatam*). And it is in this vein that Paul elsewhere speaks of “those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 8:1), referring to those who live through a faith formed by love and no longer under the Law.

When Paul does discuss those who are “under the Law” (Rom. 3:19), Lyra reckoned this to cover not only the Jews under the Law of Moses, but also the Gentiles under Natural Law. Consequently, the “works of the Law” (Rom. 3:20) covers both the Mosaic and the Natural Law. Here, though, we hit upon a conundrum. For Paul says that “through the Law comes knowledge of sin,” although not its remission, which comes only through grace. And yet there seem to be texts that contradict such an assertion—now we are back in the medieval lecture hall: “*sed contra hoc videtur*.” For one may cite the Book of Leviticus, where it is frequently stated that an offering of sacrifice is made for sin, and so the priest prays on behalf of the people in order that they might be forgiven. Lyra must, therefore, draw a distinction: it is not by the power (*virtus*) of the sacrifice in itself that the sins are forgiven. For as Hebrews makes clear: “it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins” (Heb. 10:4). Rather, such a sacrifice could be effective only insofar as it served as a declaration of Christ’s future sacrifice (*protestatio passuri*). That this was in fact a proleptic action would have been understood more clearly by the Jewish leaders, although also to some extent by the common people. Thus it was by the power of the faith of Christ (*virtute fidei Christi*) operative in such Old Testament sacrifices that grace could be conferred. This would have been the same faith, moreover, that is shared among the ancient and

modern believers who trust that sin was forgiven. Thus it was their faith, rather than the sacrifice itself, that allowed for the reception of grace and forgiveness of sin.

Christ is, moreover, "a priest forever" (Heb. 5:6) and thus stands in distinction to the temporal and figural priesthood of the Old Law. For, as Lyra notes, Christ's priesthood is both eternal and genuine, and he leads us into the brilliant vision of eternal life. Not only a priest, however, Christ offered himself up as the perfect sacrifice. When Lyra commented on 2 Corinthians 5:21, "He made him to be sin for us who did not know sin," he determined that Christ himself was not actually rendered sinful, but rather that God had made Christ a sacrifice (*hostia*) for human sin. Lyra supports this reading by noting that sacrifice is often referred to as sin in Scripture, here citing Hosea 4:8, "They feed on the sins of my people." Lyra takes this to mean that they feed on the sacrifices offered for sin. Such an offering on Christ's part is yet a further call to personal holiness on the part of the faithful for whom he offered himself. For, "that we might be made the righteousness of God in him" signals that Christ's perfect sacrifice ought thereby induce us to present our own bodies continually as a penitential sacrifice for sins through works of repentance.

In light of Christ's unique and final salvific act Lyra had to make sense of those times when the Apostle seemed to affirm the Mosaic Code, as when he proclaimed, "we do not overthrow the Law" through preaching the faith of Christ (Rom. 3:31). Lyra attempted to make sense of this statement by appealing to some basic principles of Aristotelian philosophy: When one thing is disposed to something else as its end, it then ceases having attained that end, although it is not said to be destroyed, but rather perfected. For even as it no longer exists under its previous form, it still abides in a sort of potential state (*virtualiter*) within the other, better thing. So it is with the Old Law having been disposed to the New and ordered to it insofar as the imperfect is ordered to the perfect.

This notion of the perfection, or full actualization, comes through again as Lyra comments on Paul's declaration that "Christ is the end of the Law" (Rom. 10:4). Here Lyra notes that the Apostle declares his intention: that the righteousness making one worthy of eternal life came not through the Law but through faith in Christ. In keeping with the discussion noted just above, Lyra writes here that perfection does not consist in the disposition of the matter, but rather in the introduction of the form to which the disposition is finally ordered. So it was that the Old Law was ordered to Christ as the imperfect to the perfect, which Paul had also pointed out in Galatians where he spoke of the Law as our pedagogue in Christ (Gal. 3:24). Eternal life could not have been found in the imperfect Old Law, therefore, but only in the faith

of Christ, which is its perfection. Thus, as Lyra sees it, by speaking of the “end” (*finis*) of the Law, Paul wanted to convey that the Mosaic Law had reached its goal in Christ. In Aristotelian terms, we might say that Christ was the final cause of the Law—the purpose for which it was created.

Did the Old Law in its own time ever make people righteous; did it justify anyone? The argument can be made that it did. Note the words of Leviticus 18:5, “Keep my laws and my statutes and by doing them man shall live.” This would seem to imply that circumcision must have taken away original guilt then just as baptism does now. After all, guilt cannot be removed except by grace, just as darkness cannot be overcome unless by light. If that is true, then it seems that circumcision must have conferred the grace that justifies; and it must have done so without qualification (*simpliciter*). Indeed, all the modern doctors appear to say that grace was conferred in circumcision. On the other hand, Paul says that “if justification comes by the Law then Christ died for nothing” (Gal. 2:21). Once more, Lyra notes that we need to make a distinction. With regard to Leviticus 18, the point was that a man will avoid the punishment of temporal and corporeal death accorded to transgression of the various statutes mentioned in that chapter.

As for the precept of circumcision, therefore, the grace that is conferred comes not through the act of circumcision itself, but through faith in the coming Messiah. This is the faith of Abraham whose own circumcision had functioned as a sign (Rom. 4:11). Hence the doctors say that the grace conferred by circumcision was bestowed in a different manner at that time than it is now granted through baptism. The latter sacrament derives its efficacy from the passion of Christ and confers the grace that it signifies—as all New Law sacraments do. As for Abraham’s circumcision, Lyra notes that this sign of faith must be clearly distinguished from what it signifies: the *signum* is one thing and the *res signata* another. The latter is greater since it is for the sake of the latter that the former exists. Lyra likens this relationship to a circle hanging in front of a tavern; it would not be there except to signify the wine that is within.

In the midst of this discussion, when Paul remarked that “where there is no law neither is there trespass” (Rom. 4:15), Lyra grants that this was unqualifiedly (*absolute*) true with respect to those things that were matters of indifference prior the Law. For such things were not evil except for the fact that they were prohibited; so it was with the ceremonial aspects for the most part. Yet Lyra cautions that the words of the Apostle should not be understood without qualification (*simpliciter*) regarding those things that were evil in themselves. For in the case of the aforementioned ceremonial aspects of the Law, they were only evil in a relative fashion (*secundum quid*).

Paul proceeded to tell the Romans that they have "died to the Law through the body of Christ" (Rom. 7:4), Lyra notes that this "incorporation" occurs when we become members of the body of Christ through baptism. This is the generation of a new life that, in turn, implies both the cessation of the old life and of legal observance. "Bearing fruit to God," then, entails performing the works of the new life. For the fruit itself denotes the nature of the soil in which the tree is planted. Through baptism, therefore, we are uprooted from the evil soil and planted in good ground, which is to say, in Christ. And so we ought to bear fruit for Christ.

As we bear good fruit, we are now "walking according to the Spirit" (Rom. 8:4), doing those works that follow from faith. Lyra will supplement these words of Paul with those of James: "Faith without works is dead" (James 2:26). He invokes this same admonition again when clarifying Paul's assertion that "the only thing that counts is faith working through love" (Gal. 5:6). Lyra insists once more that faith alone is not sufficient to achieve salvation. Here we have a prime example of Lyra's appeal to the principle of intertextuality as one biblical text is employed to further clarify another text. Far from being at odds, therefore, the letters of Paul and James are shown to complement each other. Placing them side by side will then reveal the fuller meaning (*sensus plenior*) that the Holy Spirit has intended.

As it stands, our new life, which is rich in good works, will clearly depend upon the very faith in Christ that liberates us from both original and actual sin, as well as the punishment that is owed to sin. It is rendered in baptism, the sacrament of faith, by which we participate in the passion of Christ. Once more, though, we are brought back to the question of faith as it was present among the patriarchs. Citing Acts 4:12, "There is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved," Lyra affirmed that at no time was anyone ever saved except through Jesus Christ. Yet this soteriological principle can be applied to human beings in two ways. We might say that the fathers of the Old Testament were saved through their faith in the Messiah who was to come. Or it could refer to the faith that is applied through the sacraments which serve as instruments of our justification. With respect to the second option, Lyra offers the example of the artisan, who serves as the principal efficient cause of a building while his hands are the instrumental cause. In the case of sanctification through grace, therefore, the divinity of Christ is the principal efficient cause while his humanity is the instrument: divine power is mediated through Christ's humanity. The sacraments of the Old Law could not possess such power from Christ's humanity, precisely because the Incarnation was still in the future; but the efficient cause cannot be posterior to its effect. Thus the patriarchs would have to be justified

purely on the basis of their faith in the coming Messiah, rather than their own sacraments.

The Righteousness of God under the New Law

We began this essay by noting that Martin Luther had relied upon, and respected, Lyra's Postill. That is not to say, however, that he always agreed with the venerable Franciscan. A case in point occurs when Luther was lecturing on Romans at Wittenberg in 1515–16, as he encountered the fateful passage of Romans 1:17, "For the justice of God is revealed therein, from faith unto faith, as it is written: The just man lives by faith" (*Iustitia enim Dei in eo revelatur ex fide in fidem*). Here we are left to ask what is meant by the phrase "from faith unto faith." Lyra contended that when Paul says that the righteousness of God is revealed "*ex fide in fidem*," this marks a transition from an unformed faith (*ex fide*) to a formed faith (*in fidem*). For the unformed faith lacks charity (*sine caritate*) and thereupon is formed by charity. It is the formed faith that perfectly vivifies and justifies: hence the true meaning of Habakuk 2:4—"the just man lives by faith." This reading is thereby in keeping with the traditional late medieval notion of "faith formed by love" (*fides caritate formata*) whereby—in Aristotelian terms—faith is moved from a state of potency to actuality through the addition of charity.

Luther would have none of it; having quoted Lyra, he promptly rejected his interpretation. A righteous person cannot live by such an unformed faith, says Luther, nor can anyone believe by means of it. Luther not only had Lyra at his side, but also Peter Lombard's *Magna Glossatura*, where he finds that this phrase may refer to a movement from the faith of the Old Law to the faith of the New Law. Luther reckoned this an acceptable interpretation, but insisted that there is still only one faith by which people are justified, even as it may become clearer over time. Luther, for his part, concluded that the Apostle was speaking less about the progression from one covenant to another and more about a personal development whereby the believer's own faith continues to grow.¹²

No matter what Luther made of Lyra's interpretation, the Franciscan was conveying a fundamental theological principle: the Christian life of faith is one marked by growth in charity. Thus in his commentary on Colossians, Lyra observed that to be rooted and built up in Christ (Col. 2:7) is to be rooted in charity and built up by the other virtues. He therefore concludes that faith in Christ forms the spiritual foundation of the salvific edifice, inasmuch as faith apart from good works is dead (see James 2:26).

12 D. Martin Luther's *Werke* (Weimar: 1883–1929), 56:172–173; *Luther's Works* (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1957–), 25:152–153. See Peter Lombard, *Collectanea in Epistolam ad Romanos*, in *Patrologia Latina*, 191:1323c.

Because faith must be actualized through love, so it is that justification does not merely consist in being counted as righteous, but in actually becoming such. Thus, when Lyra commented on Romans 5:1, he noted that justification (*iustificatio*) can be considered as a motion towards justice (*ad iustitiam*), just as being made white (*albatio*) is a motion towards whiteness (*ad albedinem*). On the one hand, justification is the simple state of glorification that does not involve a movement away from impiety. This was the sort of justification that Adam enjoyed in the state of innocence. Yet the other sort involves a change, that is, a movement away from guilt (*culpa*) towards righteousness; and it is in this way that man is now justified, having been born in a fallen state. This is the process whereby one moves from the starting point of guilt to the end point of righteousness. Change, as Lyra notes, is specifically denominated based upon the end point of the transformation. Thus the process of being made white (*albatio*) is so named based upon the quality of whiteness (*albedo*) that the object finally acquires at the end of the process. In this way also justification is not denominated by the guilt or impiety from which it begins, but from the grace of righteousness which it concludes. That is why, says Lyra, the whole process is more aptly named “justification” than “remission of sins,” although it includes both. And here we might just recall that the Latin noun “*iustificatio*” precisely conveys the sense of making (*facere*) one just (*ius*), whatever the range of meanings belonging to the Greek noun “*dikaiosune*” that it translates.

Ultimately, though, the process of justification comes back to the presence of love within the believer—indeed, even the presence of the Holy Spirit himself. Thus when commenting on Romans 5:5, “The love (*caritas*) of God has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which was given to us,” Lyra reckoned this love to be a pledge (*arra*) of future glory, which is being poured out like precious liquid into a vase. It is the Holy Spirit who infuses the love that is given to us not only by his gift, but in Himself. For it is through love that the Spirit now abides within us in a new way.

Postscript: A Central Theme in Nicholas of Lyra

It is remarkable how often Nicholas of Lyra steers the discussion of Pauline texts back to one central theme: the essential transformation of the human person through the power of grace manifested in love. Reading Ephesians 1:4, “Just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love,” Lyra addressed the question of predestination specifically as it relates to the call to sanctity. He noted that while election has taken place from all eternity, the effect of election takes place in time with the sanctification of the rational creature. That is why the Apostle Paul adds “that we might be holy” through grace in our heart, and “immaculate” through

purity of our conduct. Predestination, says Lyra, is the preparation of grace in the present and glory in the future. Still, it must be said that even as we are called to holiness, predestination is not based upon our own merits. Divine election is the beginning of a process whereby we are made acceptable in God's sight through the working of divine grace.

Along these lines, therefore, Lyra took Ephesians 1:6, "in which he gratified us (*gratificavit nos*)," to mean that God has made us pleasing (*gratos*) to himself. When Paul says that "by grace you have been saved through faith and not by works (Eph. 2:7)," we have thus been saved through our faith in Christ as opposed to the Law of Moses. "This is not from us" because the beginning of belief and all meritorious works depends upon God. Indeed, says Lyra, among those who witness miracles and hear the same word, the one who believes has been moved by God. For, as Christ says, "No one comes to me unless the Father who sent me draws him" (John 6:65). What we see here is that the act of sanctification is the result of a process that begins with divine grace; God is making human beings pleasing, or acceptable, in his sight by grace apart from any preceding merits—*gratia gratum faciens*. That is not say, however, that all human cooperation is excluded. As we noted above, Lyra by no means took the words "by grace you have been saved through faith and not by works (Eph. 2:7)," to be a Lutheran declaration of salvation by faith alone (*sola fide*). Rather, faith is contrasted here specifically with the ceremonial rites of the Mosaic law which has come to an end. The works of faith, however, will continue to flourish under the New Law as the human heart is infused with the love of the Holy Spirit.

We have seen that Lyra's principal concern has been to place love at the center of the Christian life that is lived out under the New Law. Commenting on the Apostle's discussion of the fulfillment of the Law in Romans 13:8–14, Lyra declared that in the time of the New Law the debt of love is maximally rendered, for it is the very law of love (*lex amoris*). All the commandments are ordered to the action of loving (*ad actum diligendi*) that is directed towards both God and neighbor. It is love, set into motion by grace, that brings human life into its fullness.