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"LET WOMEN NOT DESPAIR": RABANUS MAURUS ON WOMEN AS PROPHETS

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[Editor's Note: In his medieval commentary on the Book of Judges and in other writings, Rabanus Maurus refers to Deborah as a judge and prophet. The author argues that Rabanus's surprising openness to ecclesiastical ministry for women derives from the practice of lectio divina that he shared with pre-Scholastic theologians. The legacy of these theologians needs to be reappropriated and understood by the modern Church so that it will achieve a fuller assimilation of Christian tradition.]

RABANUS MAURUS (ca. 776–856) was one of the very few theologians during the early Middle Ages who gave exegetical attention to the Book of Judges.[1] As Abbot of Fulda and then Archbishop of Mainz, he was shaped by his pastoral responsibilties; the goal of his exegetical work was to make available to monks, bishops, and influential laity all that was both solid and necessary for an understanding of the text of the Bible. To this end he garnered what was helpful from the sources available to him, mining assiduously the Latin texts of the earlier tradition. Yet he was not a mere compiler. In attempting to put the wisdom of the past into a form coherent and meaningful to his intended audience, he inevitably made organizational and interpretive choices, contemporary applications, and a few comments of his own, which reveal both his mind and his contemporary situation. So it is with the Commentary on the Book of Judges. There one finds two sentences on the literal meaning of Deborah as a woman prophet that are not taken from his sources and are a significant departure from the rest of the commentary. His interpretation suggests that Rabanus understood history as an interpretive category that could illuminate the meaning of

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[1] The lack of critical editions of the exegetical works of Rabanus continues to impede their careful study. I have relied throughout on the texts in Migne, *Patrologia latina*, vols. 108, 111, 112.

the scriptural text, a methodological principle he might well have learned from the monastic practice of lectio divina.

In this commentary, as typically, Rabanus gives a detailed allegorical commentary on each verse of the Book of Judges. For the most part, these interpretations are obvious, part of the received tradition: Jael, the foreign woman, is the Church; her victory over Sisera is a conquest over carnal vices; the stake with which she kills the enemy is the wood of the cross. But in regard to Deborah, Rabanus interrupts the allegorical flow of his commentary in order to make this statement:

> First, let this idea itself be set forth anew: that although there were many men who were judges in Israel, of none of them is it said, as it is said of Deborah, that he is a prophet. In this issue, even the literal meaning [of the text] offers no small encouragement to the sex of women and it challenges them not to despair because of the weakness of their sex, since they are able to become capable of the gift of prophecy. Let them know and believe that this grace is given according to purity of mind rather than according to the differentiation of the sexes.[2]

Rabanus carefully draws our attention to the difference between the rest of the commentary and what he offers here as his personal interpretation. First, he points explicitly to Deborah's gender and to her singular distinction as prophet among the male judges. In allegorical interpretations, the gender of particular characters is often peripheral to their meaning, but here it is to be noted. Next he makes an explicit change in his method, turning from the received allegorical meaning to the literal. This highlights the originality of Rabanus's opinion that women may be prophets, an opinion not expressed in any of his sources that deal with the allegorical meaning of the text. His shift in method also connects this particular interpretation to the historical order rather than the mystical, to the changing world in which concrete human persons work out their salvation rather than to the world of eternal mysteries; in other words, he addresses the pastoral implications of the passage. In spite of the vast body of scriptural interpretations that considered women the source of human sinfulness and socially inferior because of their subjection to the body, Rabanus asserts that the charism of prophecy is open to women since it is given with regard to the quality of mind rather than to the bodily differentiation between the sexes.

To appreciate the full significance of Rabanus's statement, one must first inquire how he understood the exercise of the gift of prophecy in his own day. What did a Christian prophet do in the ninth century? For

[2] "Primo hoc ipsum quod cum plurimi judices viri in Israel fuisse referantur, de nullo illorum dicitur, quia propheta fuerit, nisi de Debbora muliere. Praestat et in hoc consolationem non minimam mulierum sexui etiam prima ipsius litterae facies, et provocat eas, uti nequaquam pro infirmitate sexus desperent, etiam propheticae gratiae capaces se fieri posse; sed intelligant et credant quod meretur hanc gratiam puritas mentis, non diversitas sexus" (PL 108.1134cd).

an answer, I turn to Maurus's own interpretations of the Pauline texts in which the charismatic ministry of Christian prophets is discussed, seeing Rabanus's exegesis in the Commentary on Judges against the background of the prior exegetical tradition. Then I explore some concrete aspects of Rabanus's historical context; these suggest possible reasons why Rabanus supposes women could aspire to fulfill the prophetic function as it was understood in his time. Rabanus appears conscious of the situation of real women as he offers his exegesis of this text. Finally I contrast Rabanus's treatment of women prophets with that of Aquinas to highlight the significant difference in method that Rabanus demonstrates.

THE EARLIER CHRISTIAN TRADITION OF PROPHECY

Despite a revival of the importance of prophets, including the possibility of women prophets, there appears considerable discomfort with the prophetic function in the earliest Christian communities as reflected in the New Testament. Paul is consistent in his approbation of prophets. In his various lists of the charisms that constitute the Church, the gift of prophecy is the only constant and it is always given second place, sometimes to the office of apostle, otherwise only to the gift of love (1 Corinthians 12:8–11, 28–30; 13:1–2; Romans 12:6–8). Even in dealing with the chaotic church at Corinth, Paul upholds the importance of prophecy; in doing so, however, he gives critical norms by which the true prophet can be discerned. The authentic prophet gives an intelligible message and functions always to build up the church community. These two norms—intelligibility and the building up of community—significantly affect the way in which later exegetes reinterpret the prophetic vocation.

Between the second and fifth centuries, the New Testament teaching on the charism of the prophet underwent significant modification. The Pauline texts seem to assume that prophecy is a practical ministry, a proclamation of moral truths important to the specific community; other New Testament texts emphasize the prophet's function in predicting the future. Under a succession of influences, not least but not only the condemnation of Montanism, the predictive function of the prophet was gradually deemphasized in favor of the prophet's role in giving practical moral instruction.[3] A few texts that are dated shortly after the New Testament reveal an ongoing tension about the nature of prophecy and illuminate the official situation of prophecy at the end of the first century and up to the Montanist period. One of the most helpful of these sources is the *Didache.*[4]

[3] Exegetes today tend to emphasize the prophet's role as social critic rather than as seer of future events. In the early Church, however, the need to find Christ in the Jewish Scriptures led to a greater emphasis on the prophet's predictive function.

[4] Scholars have long debated the dating of this document; though it was most likely put together around 150 C.E., it is clearly a compilation of at least two earlier documents,

In *Didache* 10:7–16:7, there are a variety of prescriptions for the reception and treatment of prophets; the author also records an important moment of transition. The "new" ministers, locally resident and officially elected, continue the same sacred roles as the earlier ministers who were itinerant and selected by the Spirit with the conferring of charismatic powers; the roles of the apostle, prophet, and teacher of earlier times are now found in the bishops, deacons, and presbyters. But prophets are still around. They may preside at Eucharist, and when they do so they are allowed to express the eucharistic prayers according to their own inspiration (10:7). The prophet is still described as "making ecstatic utterances" and enacting dramatic gestures or actions (11:9, 11). The authenticity of prophets is determined by their matching their actions to their words. False prophets are betrayed by self-interest: they may abuse hospitality by staying too long (11:5) or requesting money (11:12). A prophet who has been itinerant may wish to remain as resident prophet; such a one is entitled to a significant share of the community's material goods (13:5–7). A community without a "resident" prophet should give the prophet's share to the poor. In the *Didache,* as well as in the pastoral epistles and letters of Ignatius of Antioch, one sees that various local church communities are gradually becoming more reliant upon institutionalized ministries. As this shift takes place, prophets inspired directly by God become figures of the past, revered in memory; they may be considered the source of the gift occasionally conferred on those who hold established positions (*Polycarp* 2:2).[5]

The rise and condemnation of Montanism reinforced these gradual moves from charismatic to institutionalized prophet. The potential within prophecy for dividing the community and obscuring established doctrine had been recognized from the beginning; the flowering of that potential within the Montanist movement brought about not only its condemnation but, more importantly for this article, a critical rereading of those Pauline texts that gave explicit approval of prophecy as a divine gift. The work of John Chrysostom (ca. 347–407), Bishop of Constantinople from 398, marks a significant stage in this rereading.

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one of which, a primitive church order, contains important information for our study. This church order probably comes from rural Syria and may well be as early as 90–95. See text in Cyril C. Richardson, *Early Christian Fathers,* Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1953) 1.166.

[5] According to David E. Aune, "In early Christianity prophets flourished primarily during the period prior to the full institutionalization of the church. After the process of institutionalization was largely completed, a process which did not occur at the same time in all parts of the Greco-Roman world, the prophet became an endangered species, primarily because of the social changes which had taken place" (*Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Ancient Mediterranean World* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983] 204).

In his 29th Homily on Paul's Epistles to the Corinthians,[6] Chrysostom provides an exegesis of 1 Corinthians 12, a section of the New Testament that he describes as "very obscure" because his readers are ignorant of the actual situation of Paul's Corinthian community. In this context he raises two important questions: Why did the events described happen in that particular church? And why do they no longer take place?

Chrysostom's answer to the first question is straightforward: the presence of extraordinary gifts was a divine external verification of the invisible Spirit given to those whose conversion from paganism was new and sudden. He discusses the various charisms that functioned as confirming signs and he attributes to Paul his own anxiety to distinguish prophecy from soothsaying. For him, the major distinction between them was the presence or absence of rational control; soothsayers are "seized" and are always "under compulsion," whereas prophets have a "sober mind and composed temper" and always know what they are saying. To document his understanding of prophecy, Chrysostom resorts not to Paul, but to the prophets of the Old Testament, noting that "Jonah fled . . . Ezekiel delayed . . . [and] Jeremiah excused himself,"[7] all signs that they exercised freedom of choice in regard to the prophetic knowledge and mission which had been given. All of this, of course, speaks to Chrysostom's concern with Montanism rather than to Paul's with the Corinthians, for he reprises the argument that church critics leveled against that sect, that their prophecy was false because it was made during a state of rapture and outside of rational control.[8] In the same text, explaining that God did not coerce the Jewish prophets into obedience, Chrysostom gives his own version of Paul's criterion of intelligibility: "for to cause distraction and madness and great darkness is the proper work of a demon: but it is God's work to illuminate and with consideration to teach things needful." Though in context this is simply part of Chrysostom's critique of Montanism, the connection between prophecy and the teaching of what is "needful" (an echo of Paul's own criteria) became an important principle in subsequent interpretations of the prophetic gift.

Exegetes in the Latin tradition developed this principle until finally it was considered a second function of prophecy alternative to the

[6] PG 61.239–250, at 239; for English, see ed. and trans. Philip Schaff, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* (New York: Christian Literature, 1898) 12.168–175, at 168.

[7] Ibid. 170.

[8] There are those who attribute the condemnation of Montanism to the fact that women prophets in that sect were many and were given equal dignity with male prophets. Be that as it may, the impact of that condemnation went beyond its consequences for women; I argue that it helped to change the very notion of prophecy itself from a charismatic gift open to all to an institutionalized, practical gift supervised by the Church's authorities. In this, prophecy shared the fate of the Church's entire ministerial structure.

prophet's role in predicting the future. Ambrosiaster's expression of this is contained in a text of the late fourth century that also explicitly links the "needful teaching" of the prophet with the interpretation of Scripture. "We understand that there are two kinds of prophets: those who foretell the future and those who interpret the Scriptures."[9] Ambrosiaster had an insight similar to that of Chrysostom about the role of the divine Spirit on the side of illumination and understanding against the obscurantism promoted by diabolic influences. In any event, this understanding and distinction seems to have been almost universally accepted in the West by the latter half of the fourth century and was then repeated in later commentaries and discussions of prophecy. Eucherius of Lyons (d. ca. 449), whose work Maurus excerpts in his own Pauline commentaries, states what was the common opinion of his day: "The genus of prophecy is two-fold: one side belongs to teaching, the other, to divination. But while divination flourished more in past times, teaching grows more important in the present. When the teaching prophet pricks the consciences of those who hear, he then, indeed, reveals hidden things, the hidden things of the hearts of those who listen."[10] In Eucherius, prediction of the future even seems to lose importance as a thing of the past vis-à-vis the growing present importance of teaching.

Cassiodorus (ca. 485–ca. 580) can serve as the last witness to this late antique tradition. In one of the Prefaces to his Commentary on the Book of Psalms, he summarizes the tradition in a passage that would be widely available in subsequent centuries: "Clearly the prophet builds up the Church when through the function of this foretelling he makes wholly clear matters exceedingly vital that were unknown. Those who have been granted the ability to understand well and to interpret the divine Scriptures are obviously not excluded from the gift of prophecy."[11] Notice that even the predictive prophet is required to reveal "matters" that are "exceedingly vital." But what could be more vital to Christian life than the meaning of the scriptural text, too often closed to those who were not trained in its interpretation? Given the widespread influence of Cassiodorus's commentary, it is not surprising that from this point onward, the charism of prophecy would be understood as the gift of interpreting the Scriptures in a manner that was both pastoral and practical.

[9] PL 17.263abc. Rabanus copied Ambrosiaster's lengthy exposition on prophecy into his own commentary (PL 112.116b).

[10] "Prophetiae genus duplex est: doctrinae unum, aliud divinationis. Sed divinatio praeteritis temporibus magis viguit, doctrina praesentibus. Occulta autem cordis eius manifesta fiunt, dum in Ecclesia prophetante doctore conscientia compungitur audientis" (PL 50.805d).

[11] PL 70.13d. For an English text, see *Explanation of the Psalms,* 3 vols. trans. and ed. P. G. Walsh, Library of Christian Classics 51–53 (New York: Paulist, 1990).

RABANUS'S EXEGETICAL INTERPRETATION

It is this understanding of the role of prophet that Rabanus consistently applies to his reading of the Pauline texts on the charismatic ministries. In his Commentary on 1 Corinthians 12, Rabanus repeats the axiom that the prophet has two functions, affirming that both were practiced by the prophets of Paul's experience. In his Commentary on Paul's Letter to the Ephesians, Rabanus connects each of the Pauline ministers with the individual orders of the clergy as he knows them to be in his own day and says explicitly that "the apostles [of former times] are today's bishops while the [ancient] prophets are now those who explain the Scriptures."[12] He then identifies the deacons of Paul's day with the priests of his own. It is important to note here, also, that Rabanus includes the prophets among those charismatic ministries that have institutional counterparts in the ninth century. Just as apostles and deacons live on in the persons of bishops and priests, so too there is an institutionally sanctioned form of the prophet to be found in the late Carolingian church. In these two commentaries, Rabanus simply articulated the understanding of prophecy that the exegetical tradition had developed before him.

In his Commentary on Paul's Letter to the Romans, however, Rabanus views the gift of prophecy from the perspective of the theological relationship between nature and grace, and here too he notes his departure from what others have taught. He begins this topic with comments taken from Ambrose and Origen: from Ambrose, the idea that prophecy, though a gift of the Spirit, is given "according to the measure or limits of the recipient;"[13] from Origen, the understanding that "[Paul] assigns the function of prophecy to the eye because [prophecy] is to the mind—which is the interior eye—what seeing is to the eye."[14] In the juxtaposition of these two citations, Rabanus finds the critical question whether or not "there may be *in us* or *from us* some species of prophecy, which does not have everything from God, but takes a little something from human exertion."[15] Rabanus affirms that though oth-

[12] Apostoli episcopi sunt, prophetae vero explanatores sunt Scripturarum, quamvis inter ipsa primordia fuerint prophetae, sicut Agabus, et quatuor virgines prophetantes, sicut continetur in Actibus apostolorum [Acts 11:21], propter rudimenta fidei commendanda. Nunc autem interpretes prophetae dicuntur, evangelistae diaconi sunt, sicut fuit Philippus . . . " See the entire passage, in which Maurus repeats the idea several times (PL 112.430bc). It is worth noting, for the later contrast with Aquinas, that the examples he gives include "the four prophesying virgins" who taught the fundamentals of the faith.

[13] "Haec ergo datur pro modo accipientis . . . " (PL 111.1547c).

[14] ". . . verbi causa velut oculo visum, ita menti, quae est interior oculus, Prophetiae assignat officium" (PL 111.1547d).

[15] "Sed in his quaeritur si potest esse aliqua in nobis vel ex nobis Prophetiae species, quae non totum habeat ex Deo, sed aliquantulum etiam ex humanis studiis capiat" (PL 111.1549ab). See also the earlier passage: "Unde mihi videtur, tam ad Romanos quam ad Corinthios scribens, tres capiendae gratiae modos docere, ut ex nobis in eo agi aliquid

ers would consider this impossible, he believes that Paul says otherwise when he bids the Corinthians to strive for the greater gifts, especially prophecy (1 Cor 14:39). Just as one may willingly and consciously set one's heart on being a minister or a teacher of doctrine or on exhorting others to good works and work toward that end by study and labor, Rabanus continues, so someone may apply the same kind of study and labor to the pursuit of the natural foundation for prophecy.

Evidently, Rabanus must now more carefully define and distinguish the various kinds of prophecy, which in other places he has merely identified, since he is here affirming that the gift has a natural human foundation. He distinguishes between the first kind of prophecy that is introduced by the words "Thus says the Lord," which ended with John the Baptist, and a second kind, that of which Paul wrote when he instructed the Corinthians, "Let the one who prophecies speak to the people for their edification, exhortation, and consolation." This distinction is teleological as well as chronological. For in the first kind of prophecy, the purpose is to represent the mind of the Lord just as it is given, with immediacy and without qualification; in the second, the prophet intends to shape the revelation of the Lord to the situation of those who hear, in order to build up their faith and moral character, to exhort their wills to action, and to strengthen their hearts and their wills. Though this second kind of prophecy depends absolutely on grace, both for its authenticity and its efficacy, the one who desires to be given that grace may prepare for its reception by undertaking in faith the appropriate study. "Therefore it is possible for us to apply ourselves to zealous study (*studium*) for this kind of prophecy and it is in our power to give ourselves to this work (*operam*) and, if we do this according to the measure of our faith, that prophecy which is given by God may be added to us. This has been said to us about the grace of prophecy."[16]

There is no doubt about what kind of "study" and "work" Rabanus means here. If the role of prophecy is to interpret the Scriptures in a manner appropriate to the understanding and spiritual growth of those who hear, the natural preparation for this gift is the course of study prescribed for the interpretation of the Scriptures. A life-long teacher himself, Rabanus left many indications of what he thought the study of Scripture required. Following the program developed by Augustine in the *De doctrina christiana,* he believed profoundly in the

ostendat, plurimum tamen in Dei largitione consistere" (PL 111.1547d-1548a). ("Wherefore it seems to me," Rabanus writes, "that [Paul], writing to both the Romans and the Corinthians, teaches three manners of receiving grace in order to show that we may do something in regard to this gift, although for the most part it consists in the largesse of God.")

[16] "Et ideo adhibere studium ad hujuscemodi Prophetiam possibile est, et est in nostra potestate ut nobis in haec operam dantibus si, secundum rationem vel mensuram fidei haec facimus, addatur et illa quae ex Deo est Prophetia" (PL 111.1549c).

importance of learning the liberal arts and studying the literary complexities of the text. For him, then, the ministry of prophecy about which Paul wrote in the letters to the Corinthians and Romans is being exercised in his day by those who devote themselves to teaching others the practical application of Scripture to their own lives ("ad aedificationem et exhortationem et consolationem"); he believes that those who prepare themselves for this ministry through a faithful and zealous study of the text may be granted the charism (grace) that once was given in a more visibly spectacular way to the Christian communities familiar to Paul.

This is the understanding of prophecy that must inform our reading of Maurus's statement about Deborah that we cited in the beginning of this article. The very careful wording of his text reflects, first of all, the earlier exegetical texts which we have just cited and upon which Rabanus would naturally depend. It also shows, however, an understanding of his own historical context and, in particular, the situation of women in his own world: "the literal meaning [of the text] challenges [women] not to despair because of the weakness of their sex, since they are able to become capable of the gift of prophecy. Let them know and believe that this grace is given according to purity of mind rather than to the differentiation of the sexes." Two reiterations make these sentences unusually emphatic. One emphasis is created by the phrase "let them know and believe." This duplication of ideas not only strengthens his assertion but develops it: women must not despair but both understand and believe that they may become prophets. They can understand this with their natural intellect and a proper understanding of Scripture, and they must, in faith, hold on to the truth that he exposes in the text. The second emphasis results from the sequence of words of possibility: "they are able to become capable (*capaces se fieri posse*)" of the gift of prophecy. "They are able" because women have the mental ability to study whatever branches of human science are the necessary preliminaries to the understanding of Scripture. If women pursue such study, if they make themselves ready, they "become capable" of the gift that perfects their natural abilities and preparation; this gift is given not according to human modes of assessment but by the Holy Spirit and in accordance with "purity of mind rather than according to the [bodily] differentiation of the sexes." Such a judgment cannot be found, in any theoretical way, within the exegetical tradition that Rabanus inherited. Quite the contrary, there was already a significant body of opposing misogynist opinion, on both points. One must instead look to the life of Rabanus for examples of real women who may have led Rabanus to this extraordinary affirmation. Rabanus had been well schooled in the monastic tradition of lectio divina, and reading the biblical text in the light of his own experience and the history of "his people" would have been an intrinsic element of his exegetical method.

RABANUS'S COLLABORATION WITH WOMEN

Rudolph, the disciple of Rabanus at Fulda, wrote the first life of his teacher and abbot shortly after the latter's death.[17] In it he tells of Maurus's devotion to the Saxon nun Lioba, who had come from England at the invitation of Boniface, founder of Fulda, to share the mission for the evangelization of Saxony. According to Rudolph, Maurus also involved Lioba in his own evangelization project in Saxony; he tells us that Maurus undertook an extensive program for deepening the local faith that included building churches and promoting the cult of the saints through the spread of relics. In the course of this program, Maurus had the bones of a nun named Lioba brought to the crypt of the Church of the Mother of God that he had built near the monastery.[18] He also ordered his disciple Rudolph to write her life, a task he completed around 836.[19] This life of Lioba was a work of careful scholarship; Rudolph tells us that he consulted the written remembrances of four of Lioba's nun-disciples, Agatha, Thecla, Nan, and Eolobo, and he verifies as many of the details as possible from some old monks who had been or had known the eyewitnesses to the events (Lioba died in 779).

While this text is replete with miracle stories typical of the *vitae sanctorum,* it also places striking emphasis on Lioba's love for and study of the Scriptures. As a child, she was placed in a noted women's monastery that she might learn the sacred sciences; she preferred the books of Scripture to romances; living under a Rule which stressed manual labor, Lioba "worked with her hands at whatever was commanded her, . . . however, she spent more time in reading and listening to Sacred Scripture than she gave to manual labour."[20] Eventually her holiness and her scholarship moved Boniface to request that she join him in the evangelization of the people of Germany. As Abbess of Bischofsheim, she continued her studies even while she worked at forming nuns in the monastic tradition and the laity in the faith. Rudolph summarizes the integration of nature and grace that she experienced in these roles.

> So great was her zeal for reading that she discontinued it only for prayer or for the refreshment of her body with food or sleep: the Scriptures were never out of her hands. For, since she had been trained from infancy in the rudiments of grammar and the study of the other liberal arts, she tried by constant reflection to attain a perfect knowledge of divine things so that through the combination of her reading with her quick intelligence, by natural gifts and hard work, she became extremely learned. She read with attention all the books of the Old and New Testaments and learned by heart all the commandments of

[17] PL 107.39–64.

[18] PL 107.64a.

[19] *The Anglo-Saxon Missionaries in Germany*, trans. and ed. C. H. Talbot (London: Sheed and Ward, 1954) 205–26.

[20] Ibid. 211.

God. To these she added by way of completion the writings of the Church Fathers, the decrees of the Councils and the whole of ecclesiastical law.[21]

According to Rudolph, her scholarly acumen made her a skilled administrator, a wise counsellor, and an effective pastoral leader for the new Christians of Saxony. Because of her significant share in the missionary work of Boniface, she was given extraordinary privileges at his monastery of Fulda. She was the only woman allowed to enter the monastery for prayer, and at her death she was buried in the monastery's cemetery—privileges granted because "the holy martyr St. Boniface had commended her to the seniors of the monastery and . . . had ordered her remains to be buried there."[22] Rabanus, then, was formed to monastic life in a community that had preserved the memory of Lioba's gifts and of her influence and was hallowed by the presence of her remains. He remembered her pastoral influence when he himself became a pastor to the district of Fulda.

Lioba embodied all that Rabanus has written about the prophet in his commentaries on the Pauline literature, especially in his Commentary on 1 Corinthians. She has worked and prepared herself for the gift of interpreting the Scriptures through the ordinary means that Rabanus himself prescribed, the mastery of the seven liberal arts. That she has committed herself to this task (Rudolph uses the word *adhibeo*) is clear from the way in which he describes her: reading more often than she does manual labor, even though she works as faithfully as the Rule requires; having the Scriptures read to her while she takes the rest prescribed by the Rule. Rudolph also praises her for her devotion to the pastoral and spiritual needs of the faithful; not only does she attend to the religious formation of indigenous religious women, but with a wisdom that is truly prophetic she adjudicates local conflicts, protects her charges from natural disasters as well as from the malevolence of the powerful, and strengthens the faith of those she serves. It seems reasonable to conclude that the example of Lioba, a holy woman whose cult Rabanus took pains to cultivate, might well have come to mind as he provided an exegesis for the story of Deborah in the Book of Judges, moving him to suggest that the office of the prophet could be open to women.

There were others besides Lioba who could have reinforced that insight.[23] Rabanus would have known of the women in Charlemagne's

[21] Ibid. 215. That this is not a hagiographical topos but a specific assessment of Lioba's gifts is clear from a comparison with the life of St. Sturm, a contemporary and fellow missionary of Lioba. While Sturm too is praised for holiness, little is said about his biblical scholarship.

[22] Ibid. 223.

[23] About the level of literacy and the interest in biblical studies of Carolingian women, see Rosamond McKitterick, *The Carolingians and the Written Word* (New York: Cambridge University, 1989); Pierre Riché, *Education et culture dans l'Occident barbare VIe-VIIIe siècles* (Paris: Cerf, 1962).

family, particularly his sister Gisela and his daughter Rectruda, who exchanged letters with Alcuin about their reading difficulties and received from him a Commentary on the Gospel of John.[24] There is also the telling story of the woman who is brought to Rabanus's own diocese for judgment. Called both a "false prophet" and a "*magistra*" in the text, she is brought before a tribunal of bishops for falsely predicting the end of the world and for receiving gifts in exchange for prophecies. The allegations against her should be carefully noted. She is not indicted because she has claimed or been given the title of prophet but because she has violated the two ancient criteria by which a prophet's authenticity was measured: her predictions have not proved true, and she had traded her gift for material gain. The use of the title *magistra* is ambiguous. Is she merely described as teacher, or is she accused of assuming that function in the face of the many prohibitions against women teachers that had been handed down over the centuries?[25] Her punishment does not clarify the situation. She undergoes flagellation and is stripped of her *ministerium praedicationis* which the text asserts she had assumed in defiance of the law.[26] Her title *magistra* is not explicitly revoked but may well be at issue in the condemnation of her preaching ministry.

Finally, contemporaneous with Rabanus was Dhuoda of Septimania[27] who wrote a long and fairly complex treatise for her two sons, giving many examples of a pastoral interpretation of Scripture. In her *Liber manualis,* she claims the title *magistra;* she also defends it so vehemently that one is forced to infer that she knows many others would consider "teaching woman" an oxymoron. Dhuoda's text has survived for us to peruse and so we know her exegetical accomplishments.[28] For the most part, history has denied other women their own voices. But it is not unreasonable to suppose that Rabanus knew of these women and, perhaps, many others whose desire for and progress in biblical study moved him to draw a new conclusion from reading the story of Deborah.

[24] See their correspondence in PL 100.738–40. See also Joan M. Ferrante, "The Education of Women in the Middle Ages in Theory, Fact, and Fantasy," in *Beyond Their Sex: Learned Women of the European Past,* ed. Patricia H. Labalme (New York: New York University, 1980) 9–42.

[25] See below for the comment on Dhuoda as teacher. The prohibitions were "on the books," but women had always been allowed to teach other women, and Carolingian theologians such as Jonas of Orleans included the religious education of the household in the responsibilities he laid out for aristocratic women.

[26] *Annales Fuldenses,* ed. F. Kurze, Monumenta Germaniae Historica (Hannover, 1891) 36–37. See also Janet L. Nelson, "Les femmes et l'évangelisation au IXe siècle," *Revue du nord* 68, no. 269 (avril-juin 1986) 471–85.

[27] See the critical edition of Dhuoda's *Liber manualis,* ed. Pierre Riché, Sources chrétiennes 225 (Paris: Cerf, 1975), and the English translation, *Handbook for William: A Carolingian Woman's Counsel for Her Son,* trans. Carol Neel (Lincoln, Nebr.: University of Nebraska, 1991).

[28] See Marie Anne Mayeski, *Dhuoda: Ninth Century Mother and Theologian* (Scranton: University of Scranton, 1996).

To return to Rabanus's statement about Deborah, notice that he makes his remarks about the literal meaning of the text of Judges for the "consolation" of women, and then urges with even stronger language, "Let women not despair." If his understanding of the possibility of women prophets has been influenced by the words and actions, the desires and commitments of real women, then these comments about consolation and despair also suggest that he is aware of real women (and more than one or two of them) whose desire for study or for the opportunity for pastoral service have met with obstruction or rejection. These are the women who need his consolation and who are, possibly, close to despair. He told them unequivocally that their desire to study and teach the Scriptures is warranted by the scriptural text itself. And if they know his full teaching on the charism of prophecy, they might even find in his text an encouraging suggestion that such a work is truly a pastoral office, similar to that of the bishop and deacon, one necessary for the full life of the Church as expressed in Paul's list of charismatic ministries.

RABANUS VERSUS AQUINAS

But Rabanus Maurus was not a predictive prophet, however extensive his work as an expositor of Scripture. Later exegetes did not follow him in his literal interpretation of Deborah as judge and prophet. Aquinas's discussion of prophecy illustrates the direction in which the question of prophecy went in the Scholastic period and, by contrast, can illuminate the methods by which Rabanus arrives at his insight. Aquinas treats of prophecy in the *Summa theologiae* 2–2, qq. 171–74,[29] where, after having discussed those virtues that are appropriate to all Christians whatever their state of life (and the vices that threaten all equally), Thomas discusses the special gifts of the Spirit given to some. He divides the topic of prophecy into five points: the nature of prophecy, its causes, the manner of prophetic knowledge, the species or grades of prophecy, and finally ecstasy.

In discussing the nature of prophecy, Aquinas does not significantly advert to the early exegetical tradition on which Maurus depends. While he raises the possibility that prophetic knowledge encompasses more than future events, he does not consider any specific connection between prophecy and biblical interpretation; he quotes Cassiodorus's *Prologue* fives times, but each time he omits the sentence that affirms the prophetic nature of biblical interpretation, in spite of the exegetical tradition that he must have known.[30] Rather, he argues that there are three degrees of prophecy: to know what it is possible for anyone to

[29] Though I have consulted the Latin text for purposes of citation, I am using the translation done by the Dominican Fathers (New York and London: Blackfriars in conjunction with Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1970).

[30] Interestingly, Thomas quotes Maurus once, but only about the divining powers of Balaam.

know but which, because of external circumstances, is hidden from some (e.g., to know what someone had done in the prophet's absence); to know what cannot be known except through revelation but when once revealed is accessible to all through faith (such as the mystery of the Trinity); to know that which cannot be known at all except to prophecy because it lies in the future. For Aquinas, prophecy is most itself, therefore, when it reveals future events; knowledge of the future is that which "most properly belongs to prophecy" (q. 171, a. 3). Aquinas clearly shares the conviction of his own day that speculative knowledge was superior to practical knowledge. Furthermore, in his day the study of the biblical text was but the preliminary stage of the academic curriculum that culminated in the "higher learning" of speculative theology. This may be why he ignores the earlier and long-standing connection between prophecy and biblical interpretation.

Furthermore, Aquinas does not even consider here whether or not it is possible for women to be gifted with prophecy. There is, for instance, no discussion of women in his treatment of the natural dispositions required for prophecy (q. 172), where one might logically expect such a point to be debated. Indeed, in none of the four questions in which various aspects of prophecy are discussed does Aquinas make any reference whatever to the women prophets mentioned in the Jewish Scriptures or the New Testament.[31] Yet his text is filled with scriptural examples. Besides the writing prophets and Moses, whose preeminence as prophet is discussed in a separate article (q. 174, a. 4), Aquinas attributes the title and gift to Elisha, the sons of the prophets who live with him, Joseph, Solomon, David, Samson, Elijah, Samuel, Isaac, Jacob, the four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal, and the four hundred prophets of Asherah (1 Kings 18, 19). He even makes reference to the Sibyl (q. 172, a. 6) who spoke the truth about Christ, as well as an oblique allusion to the Witch of Endor (q. 174, a. 5).

Rather, Aquinas reserves the example of some of the women named as prophets in Scripture for q. 177, where he discusses not prophecy but the "charism of speech." In a. 2 of this question, he asked "whether the charism of wisdom in speech and knowledge pertains to women also."[32] To some degree, his placement of the question has already revealed the answer he will give but, as usual, he gives the opposing argument first: "The grace of prophecy is greater than that of speech just as contemplation of truth is greater than its enunciation. But prophecy is granted to women, as one reads of Deborah, of Hulda the prophetess, wife of Sellnor, and of the four daughters of Philip." Even

[31] Miriam is called prophet in Exodus 15:20; Deborah, in Judges 4:4; Huldah, in 2 Kings 22:14 (see also 2 Chronicles 34:22); and Noadiah, in Nehemiah 6:14.

[32] At least that is the title of the article as found in the body of the text. In the table of contents of the Blackfriars edition, the title is listed as "who are the fitting recipients of this charism"; and the topic of "women" is not listed in the general index. Modern editorial policy seems to collude with Aquinas in obscuring the role of women.

St. Paul speaks of every woman prophesying or praying" (ad 2). Against this scriptural evidence, Aquinas argues from the nature of public speech which he considers forbidden to women because of the supposed Pauline injunction in 1 Timothy 2. He therefore concludes that, although women may receive the gift of prophecy from the Holy Spirit, they may not use it except in the privacy of their own homes.

He has, as he believes, Paul's authority for this interpretation (even though he ignores Paul's axiom that the gifts of the Spirit are given for the building up of the whole community); perhaps more importantly, it is an interpretation that can be made consistent with Aristotelian anthropology. For ultimately, as can be demonstrated from other Thomistic texts, when it came to women's nature and their roles in church and society, the metaphysics of Aristotle was the determinative lens through which Aquinas read the Scriptures. In the *Summa theologiae* 1, q. 92, for instance, reading Genesis through the lens of Aristotelian biology, Aquinas argues the natural subjection of women. Even more instructive for our topic is *ST* 3 (Supplement), q. 39, a discussion over admitting women to holy orders. When setting up the argument that he intends to rebut, Aquinas constructs a parallel between prophets and priests as mediators and then cites Deborah and other women prophets as examples of God's willingness to give women these roles. In addition to the biblical evidence, he grants his opponents an argument from history, for the Church itself granted religious authority to women who were abbesses and superiors of religious communities. But again, Aquinas's response is based on an Aristotelian metaphysics, according to which women's nature lacks the essential capacity to signify "eminence of degree" and which keeps women "in a natural state of subjection." Thus Aquinas's philosophy can stand against the biblical examples of prophets like Deborah, the historical evidence of women who exercised religious authority as abbesses, and the theological truth that prophecy is a gift of the mind and therefore not subject to the condition of gender.

CONCLUSION

The contrast between Rabanus and Aquinas on this point is quite clear. Not that I wish to argue, against all the scholarship, that Maurus is a creative theologian; as a whole, the early medieval theologians were rarely brilliant, almost never innovative (Bede is the great exception).[33] But occasionally one finds a text, like this small bit of Rabanus Maurus, that surprises and intrigues, and I believe that this example of his work demonstrates the character of theology as practiced in the pre-Scholastic centuries. This theology has long been ignored by Catholic theologians in spite of their expressed obligation of

[33] On the other hand, their texts have been investigated so little that this judgement may well be too sweeping.

fidelity to the Church's tradition. Many write as if that tradition began with Aquinas; others read the Fathers of the Church, but skip from Augustine to Aquinas, without even a nod to the intervening centuries. More careful study of the output of those centuries can demonstrate, I believe, that their method and character resonate well with contemporary practice and concerns. Theologians such as Maurus knew their Scriptures well and labored under the ancient Christian conviction that the biblical text was the foundation of all theology. Further, they knew the biblical text not in isolation but in the context of a large body of interpretive material, much of it garnered and preserved from the theologically rich period of Christian late antiquity. To be sure, they lacked the critical skills of biblical interpretation that so enrich contemporary scholarship and they also lacked the texts, information, and skills necessary to grasp fully the work of the first five Christian centuries. But what they lacked in critical skills, they often made up for by their profound pastoral commitment. They searched continually not only for what was true within the text but also for that which could most powerfully serve the growth of their communities toward faith and service.

Though they did not know the historical-critical method on which theology must depend today, they brought their own particular sense of history to the reading of the text. They were convinced that the Word of God expressed in Scripture could be understood through the light of the Spirit of God who lived in the community of God's people. They believed that the saving events narrated in Scripture continued to take place in the concrete lives of those to whom they ministered, so that the historical realities of their own worlds could help them understand the meaning of the text. They believed that the word in the text was illuminated by the word at work in the world and vice versa. In these convictions, they were schooled by Jerome's great interest in the land and history of the biblical text. They had appropriated Augustine's sense that salvation history continued to unfold in subsequent periods and places, and had seen Bede make notable pastoral applications of this principle. They learned interpretation as the Church had taught it from the earliest days, in the liturgy, where a text was in dialogue with other texts and where the meaning of all texts was sounded in the life of the worshiping congregation. They were formed in the ancient monastic methods of lectio divina that required that they find the text expressed in their own life and the lives of their immediate community.

Rabanus, moved by the needs of his community, arrived at an interpretation closer to the historical meaning than early medieval theologians are generally given credit for and quite unlike the fantastic allegories for which they are so often dismissed. All of this means (as his interpretation of Judges demonstrates) that doing theology from the point of view of a particular group in the community is not a recent innovation; Maurus took women's experience seriously as a locus of

revelation, or at least as a light that can illuminate the biblical text and the intent of the divine author. In submitting the Bible to the lens of history, Maurus offered an alternative method to that of Aquinas who submitted texts to the discipline of Aristotle's metaphysics. Comparison of their texts about prophecy show, once again, that what matters is the choice of lens. If Aquinas's philosophical method has dominated Catholic theology in recent centuries, Rabanus offers the precedent of tradition to those who seek to do theology from the point of view of history and of the faith community in which they live.