CHAPTER 1

CONTINUITY AND CHANGE IN THE STUDY OF
THE BIBLE: THE TEN COMMANDMENTS IN
CHRISTIAN EXEGESIS

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Given that the Latin text of the Bible remained, broadly speaking, constant in the period covered by this volume, it must be reasonable to ask why we might expect there to be anything other than continuity in the Bible and its interpretation in the thirteenth century, why there should be change. In order to address this question, we need also to step back and consider the antecedence of “the thirteenth century” of this volume; that is, a period of development and consolidation that sets thirteenth-century France as the stage on which a new and important play will be enacted. For each of the different topics dealt with in this book, the key points at which change happens, or the spread of time over which we can see a sustained change occurring, will be different; for each, there is a different point—beyond the literal—where this conceptual thirteenth century begins. For scholars of the Bible and exegesis, it is impossible to consider the situation at the beginning of the thirteenth century without keeping in mind the innovations of what is generally described as the twelfth-century renaissance. Indeed, it is tempting to begin the “biblical” thirteenth century around 1110 and to run it forward till around 1340; and, although we will resist that temptation, nevertheless, we cannot ignore the twelfth-century changes altogether.

Why Expect Change?
The first part of an answer as to why we might expect change in the study of something as comparatively static as the Bible is that there was a contextual
change in who was making exegesis, where they were doing it, and who they were working for, that is to say, what audience they were expecting. During the twelfth century, the cutting edge of biblical exegesis (though, obviously, not all exegetical activity) moved from a monastic setting to a world of secular schools (that is, non-monastic, but necessarily clerical classrooms). Initially, these were schools attached to cathedrals and mostly presided over by a single scholar, but, as the century drew on, the constellation of schools in Paris coalesced into something appreciably more solid than the classes offered by individual teachers; they became the proto-university of Paris. Paris, indeed, became the European center of academic work on the Bible and theology, drawing in scholars from across the continent, and the place where popes came for academic advice.

Moving the center of biblical scholarship from monasteries to cathedral schools to a fledgling university meant more than a change of place: it signaled also a change in who was doing exegesis and for whom they were working. Crudely put, this was a movement from monks working for themselves (contemplatively?) and for fellow monastics; to clerics working for fellow clerks in (often the lowest of) holy orders, who may or may not have been intending to continue pursuing a scholarly life; and finally to university teachers who (increasingly during the thirteenth century) were mendicant friars working for fellow friars whose vocation was centered on work among the laity. Whereas monastic study could be unstructured, schools and universities required (again, increasingly over the thirteenth century) a syllabus, examinations, and qualifications that recognized achievement of a certain standard. Students had to produce work that followed set models in order to be considered qualified.

The second major reason we might expect to see change in biblical interpretation is more solidly rooted in the thirteenth century—the influence of the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, one of the aims of which was to provide for the education of both clergy and (indirectly) the laity. Lateran IV and the new mendicant Orders had a symbiotic relationship because the mendicants provided the personnel for the Lateran reforms; and there was symbiosis, too, in the relationship between the Paris schools and the Lateran Council. Without the need for a more educated clergy and the encouragement of the mendicants, the proto-university at Paris might well not have thrived as it did; without the financial underpinning that the mendicants (ironically) provided, the theology faculty might not have attracted enough students to survive, since in 1219 the university had been forbidden by Honorius III from teaching the money-spinning subject of civil law. For the mendicants who increasingly made up the body of teachers and students at Paris, the schools were a preparation for work outside academia and, in response to this, the sorts of material that mendicant scholars produced broadened and diversified the traditional mode of biblical commentary.