

Humanism and the Bible: The Contribution of Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples

STÉPHANE SIMONNIN

Abstract

The French humanist Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples (ca. 1460-1536) enjoyed in his lifetime a notoriety second only to Erasmus himself. His numerous works of biblical scholarship, his commentaries and homilies, and his translation of the Bible into French make him one of the most significant forerunners of the Reformation in Europe. His scholarly achievements as well as his profound piety deserve to be better known. While an in-depth study of Lefèvre's scholarly achievements and theology is obviously not possible here, I propose to highlight his main contribution to biblical scholarship and hermeneutics.

I. *Introduction*

On August 15, 1427, Bernardino of Siena, one of Italy's most famous late medieval preachers, preached a sermon about the Virgin Mary, the official protector of Siena. His text was Psalm 132:8.¹ He read out the verse from the Latin Bible and translated it into vernacular Tuscan with the following words: "Dearest brethren, the words just read are from the prophet David ... Speaking through the Holy Spirit, he says of Mary, who was ascending

¹ "Arise, Lord and come to your resting place, you and the ark of your might" (NIV).

to heaven to God the Father, ‘Arise, Lord, in your rest, you and the ark of your sanctification.’”² Two things strike us immediately. The first is Bernardino’s text: he preaches from the Latin Bible, which he has to translate orally, and the Latin reads “ark of sanctification” instead of “ark of your might,” as in our modern versions. The second is that Bernardino applies the verse to the Virgin Mary with no apparent justification. These things strike us because of the intellectual and theological revolution that took place in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries: the rise of humanist scholarship, characterized by a desire to go “back to the source” (*ad fontes*) of ancient texts by ridding them of medieval glosses and errors.

It is often thought that the Bible was “rediscovered” by humanists and reformers after centuries of neglect. The reality is much more complex, and numerous works have demonstrated that the Bible was thoroughly studied by theologians³ and was central in matters of doctrine and preaching throughout the medieval period.⁴ However, what humanism did was to raise three fundamental questions about the Bible: the accuracy of the original text (the textual criticism issue), the accuracy of the Vulgate (the translation issue), and the proper understanding of the text (the hermeneutical issue).

Erasmus is the symbol of that humanist challenge, and his publication of the New Testament in Greek in 1516 is rightly regarded as a landmark. However, other scholars before him and during his lifetime made important and often neglected contributions. Among those was the French humanist and biblical scholar Jacques Lefèvre d’Étaples (ca. 1460–1536)—usually known by his Latin name, Faber Stapulensis—who in his lifetime enjoyed a notoriety second only to that of Erasmus himself. In the first two decades of the sixteenth century, Lefèvre published a series of scholarly studies and commentaries on the Bible, a translation of the Bible into French, and, at the end of his life, a series of devotional meditations on the New Testament. Lefèvre’s achievements deserve to be better known, and I believe that both his contributions and limitations illustrate the strength and limits of humanism with regards to its influence on the Reformation.

² Bernardino da Siena, *Prediche Volgari sul Campo di Siena 1427* (Milan: Rusconi, 1989), 1:85 (my translation).

³ See Beryl Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1964).

⁴ See for example Alistair McGrath, *The Intellectual Origins of the European Reformation* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 34–66.

II. Lefèvre's Career in Context

A full account of Lefèvre's life is obviously outside the scope of this study, but a brief summary of his career and its historical context will help us appreciate his contribution to the study of the Bible.⁵

We know very little about the first part of his life. Most scholars agree, on the scanty evidence available, that he was born around 1460 in Étapes in Picardy (northeastern France). That means that he was very much a fifteenth-century man in his education, more so than Luther or even Erasmus. Therefore, he must have been around 80 years old, an advanced age for the time, when he died in 1536. He studied in Paris and was ordained priest at an unknown time. He taught philosophy in Paris from 1490 to 1507. In the early part of his life, he was significantly influenced by Italian humanists and by mystics. In 1492 he traveled to Italy and met some of the most famous humanists of the time.⁶ He admired their zeal to recover the authentic text of ancient Greek philosophers by working on the original text and ridding that text of medieval glosses, and he was also struck by their application of the same zeal to their study of the Scriptures.

Under the influence of mystical writers, Lefèvre also seriously considered withdrawing to a monastery. He did not do so for various reasons, mainly because he did not want to abandon his scholarly activities. However, the desire remained with him ever after and, unlike most other humanists, he kept a close relationships with mystics influenced by the *Devotio Moderna*.⁷ This is an interesting difference from Erasmus: Erasmus was a monk by necessity who did all he could to escape from the monastic life, whereas Lefèvre was a secular scholar who longed all his life for the monastic life. This Italian and mystical influence proved decisive in the sense that in Lefèvre the humanist could never be separated from the mystic and Bible exegete. Lefèvre's intense piety struck his contemporaries. As Luther wrote

⁵ The best overview of Lefèvre's life and achievements remains Guy Bedouelle, *Lefèvre d'Étapes ou l'intelligence des Écritures* (Geneva: Droz, 1976). See also Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *Lefèvre, Pioneer of Ecclesiastical Renewal in France* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984). Hughes's work is the most detailed study of Lefèvre's theology, but his thesis of Lefèvre as a proto-Lutheran is unconvincing. See the review of his book by Douglas H. Shantz, "Lefèvre: Pioneer of the Ecclesiastical Renewal in France: A Review Article," *Calvin Theological Journal* 20.2 (November 1985): 263–67.

⁶ Especially Marsilio Ficino (1433–1499), Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463–1494), and Ermolao Barbaro (1410–1474).

⁷ For Lefèvre and mysticism, see Jean Dagens, "Humanisme et Évangélisme chez Lefèvre d'Étapes," in *Courants religieux et humanisme à la fin du XV^e et au début du XVI^e siècle: Colloque de Strasbourg, 9–11 mai, 1957* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1959), 121–34.

to a friend in 1517, “I am afraid Erasmus does not exalt Christ and God’s grace enough and in this he is much more ignorant than Lefèvre.”⁸

Until 1507, Lefèvre dedicated himself to the publication of scholarly editions of ancient Greco-Roman texts. Then, in the second period of his life (1507–1521), he turned all his attention to the Bible and began to publish scholarly commentaries and textual critical works for which he is widely admired throughout Europe to this day. During that period Lefèvre took part in all the controversies about the Bible between humanists and the church, and he also began to be concerned about the spiritual education of ordinary people who could not read Latin. He reached the peak of his fame in Europe sometime around 1519. The later part of his life was the most difficult. From 1520 onward, Lefèvre was increasingly attacked by the religious authorities, most notably the Sorbonne, for his opinions and writings. Despite his scholarly abilities and his piety, which were widely recognized, he was increasingly suspected of heresy. In 1521 he accepted an invitation to help Bishop Briçonnet reform the teaching and piety in his diocese of Meaux (twenty-five miles northeast of Paris). During those fruitful few years Lefèvre worked closely with many interesting characters like Guillaume Farel, who considered Lefèvre his mentor and stayed close to him until the end. The work in Meaux soon faced dangerous opposition, and Lefèvre fled to Strasbourg and led an itinerant life until he found refuge in southwest France at Nérac with Marguerite of Navarre (the King of France’s sister), who was sympathetic to the new evangelical ideas. He stayed there until his death in 1536. In 1534 Calvin visited Nérac when he had to flee from Paris and met with Lefèvre. Neither of them left an account of that meeting, but Beza did: “This good old man ... was delighted with young Calvin and predicted that he would prove a distinguished instrument in restoring the kingdom of heaven to France.”⁹

During that final period, Lefèvre’s intellectual activity remained intense and was exclusively focused on the Bible. In particular, he published a commentary on the four Gospels (1522); a commentary on the Catholic Epistles (1524); the *Epistles and Gospels for the Fifty-two Sundays of the Year* (ca. 1525), a series of simple meditations on selected passages of the New Testament published anonymously and written with several collaborators but unanimously attributed to Lefèvre; and the whole Bible in French (published in Antwerp in 1530). Lefèvre’s contribution to the humanist

⁸ Martin Luther, WA, Br. 1:90.

⁹ Theodore Beza, *Life of Calvin*, quoted in Bruce Gordon, Calvin (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 38.

challenge to the church can be summarized under two headings: his challenge to the Vulgate and his contribution to biblical hermeneutics.

III. *Challenge to the Vulgate*

To appreciate the value and audacity of scholars like Lefèvre we must bear in mind that the Latin translation of the Bible (later called the Vulgate) reigned supreme. The Vulgate had never been officially “authorized” by the church, and no standard text existed until the church authorities produced one in 1592. There were some variations in the Vulgate text, but it seems that they were simply ignored, most probably because scholars and exegetes did not have the requisite knowledge of biblical languages to assess them. Let us recall that the Council of Trent, in its fourth session on the canonical scriptures (April 1546), decreed that the Vulgate was “approved by the church” and “held authentic,” and that “no-one dare or presume under any pretext whatsoever to reject it.”¹⁰

It was only from the middle of the fifteenth century that Italian scholars began to challenge cautiously the authority of the Vulgate, most notably Lorenzo Valla (1407–1457), one of the unsung heroes of the rediscovery of biblical scholarship. Valla spent months comparing the Latin New Testament with the Greek text and proposed a series of corrections in his scholarly work *Adnotationes in Novum Testamentum*. He never dared publish them; they were only published by Erasmus in 1506. No matter how bold Erasmus was in publishing this work, it was Lefèvre who was the first to put Valla’s ideas into practice, as Erasmus himself admitted.¹¹ He first did so in his *Quintuplex Psalterium* (Fivefold Psalter) written in 1508 in Paris for a group of monks and published in 1509.¹² The *Quintuplex* was a critical edition of the Psalms with five Latin versions, including the *Psalterium Hebraicum*, a separate version translated by Jerome from the Hebrew. That stunning work of scholarship was carefully read by Martin Luther and Huldrych Zwingli.¹³ After each psalm, Lefèvre included a brief commentary that set out the historical or, more often, the spiritual context of the psalm.

¹⁰ Anyone doubting the enduring authority of the Vulgate may look at Pope Leon XIII’s encyclical “*Providentissimus Deus*” (1893) and Pius XII’s encyclical “*Divino afflante Spiritu*” (1943). These make interesting reading.

¹¹ Bedouelle, *Lefèvre d’Étaples*, 81.

¹² A copy of a 1513 edition is available online at the Bibliothèque nationale de France website: gallica.bnf.fr.

¹³ Luther’s annotations of Lefèvre’s *Quintuplex* occupy sixty pages in the Weimar edition of his complete works (vol. 4).

Significantly, Lefèvre approached the text as he had approached Aristotle's works a few years before: he first established an accurate text, not in the original Hebrew language, which the monks did not understand, but in Latin, which was the language of their daily devotion. Nonetheless, the translation inconsistencies between the different versions were there for all to see. For example, in Psalm 132:8 mentioned in the introduction, the inconsistency is clearly laid out: the main Latin versions read "the ark of your sanctification" (*arca sanctificationis tuae*) but the *Psalterium Hebraicum* correctly reads "the ark of your strength" (*arca fortitudinis tuae*). It should be noted that the simple act of putting alternative texts in several columns next to the official Latin text was in itself audacious.

How much Hebrew did Lefèvre really know? It seems not a great deal: he usually argues from the *Psalterium Hebraicum* rather than the Hebrew text itself. Lefèvre himself, with his characteristic humility, did not claim great fluency with the language. However, like all other humanists at the time, he was fully supportive of Johannes Reuchlin's efforts to promote the study of biblical Hebrew and Jewish studies, and he undoubtedly learned some Hebrew from Reuchlin's groundbreaking grammar of biblical Hebrew.¹⁴ He felt the importance of recovering the *veritas hebraica* and, although the result is not always acceptable by modern standards, the *Quintuplex* certainly showed the way ahead.

Lefèvre's next serious challenge to the Vulgate came in his commentary on Paul's Epistles published in 1512, which one commentator called "perhaps the first ever Protestant commentary since it is the first in modern times to be based on the original text without reference to the Church Fathers."¹⁵ In that work Lefèvre not only provided explanations that included corrections of the Latin version but also made new translations of his own. Generally speaking, Lefèvre was much less prolix than Erasmus and did not always explain the rationale behind his changes. His concern seems to have been to stay closer to the Greek text and keep his own interpretations to a minimum. However, he sometimes felt the need to add words where he thought clarification was needed, and some of his interpretative choices are surprising. For example, he added the word *solum* (only) in his translation of Galatians 2:16: while the Vulgate says, "We know that man is not justified by works of the law but on the contrary through faith in Christ Jesus," Lefèvre writes, "but *only* through faith in Jesus Christ." No justification is

¹⁴ *De rudimentis Hebraicis*, published in 1506.

¹⁵ Jean de Savignac, "Commentaires de Lefèvre d'Étaples sur certains textes de Paul," *Études théologiques et religieuses* 53.3 (1984): 301.

provided in the commentary, which shows that Lefèvre thought his change was self-explanatory. Even more interesting is his translation of the same verse in the New Testament in French eleven years later (1523). This time, Lefèvre has removed the “only” but translated *pistis christou* as “the faith of Jesus Christ.” It seems clear that Lefèvre had come to believe that Christ’s own faith was the foundation of justification. While it is difficult to draw any categorical conclusion about Lefèvre’s theology from these translations, they do give an insight into his constant meditation on the Scriptures and his willingness to challenge conventional translations and traditions.

Lefèvre was well aware of the audacity of his challenges to the received text. He ingenuously tried to mitigate it not only by printing his own translation in smaller type but also by claiming, somewhat foolishly, that the Latin version used in the church was not Jerome’s translation but an older one that Jerome himself had criticized. It is not necessary to delve into the controversy aroused by those statements and his proposed changes, but it is indicative once again of what was at stake.¹⁶

From then on, Lefèvre would continue providing his own translations in his commentaries and devotional works every time he felt it necessary, and with growing confidence. One could quote many examples in his works, but I shall mention only one that is significant and sums up the whole new atmosphere of the 1520s. It is found in his devotional work *Epistles and Gospels* published in 1525, which contains a series of simple homilies of a devotional nature on selected passages of the New Testament.¹⁷ This work shows that Lefèvre’s understanding of Scripture was increasingly influenced by Luther’s theology, as is clearly shown by the forty-eight statements condemned as heretical by the Sorbonne! Commenting on John 1:19–28, Lefèvre mentions in passing that the name “Bethania” (v. 28) is the result of a corruption and the right name is “Bethabara.”¹⁸ That affirmation was vehemently condemned by the Sorbonne, which called it “scandalous,” “odious,” and “not to be preached to people.” This example is significant precisely because of its insignificance. Lefèvre’s casual correction in passing of a town’s name in the Gospel and the vehement reaction that it caused illustrates the growing gulf between humanists like him and the ecclesiastical authorities.

¹⁶ For an overview, see Richard Cameron, “The Attack on the Biblical Work of Lefèvre d’Étaples, 1514–1521,” *Church History* 38.1 (March 1969): 9–24.

¹⁷ Jacques Lefèvre d’Étaples et ses disciples, *Epistres et Évangiles pour les cinquante et deux dimanches de l’an*, ed. Guy Bedouelle and Franco Giacone (Leiden: Brill, 1976).

¹⁸ The reading “Bethania” is marked with a “C” in the fourth edition of the United Bible Society New Testament in Greek indicating that the committee had difficulty in deciding which variant was correct.

Lefèvre's translation options were not always as bold as we would want today. For example, the way he deals with the Greek verb *metanoëō* is interesting. That verb was famously translated in the Vulgate "do penance" (*poenitentia agere*). Erasmus had already claimed that this was a wrong translation, and in his *Annotationes* (1519) he proposed "*ad mentem redite*," which could be translated something like "come back to your senses." Lefèvre did not deem it necessary to change the traditional translation. However, in his commentary on Paul's epistles he showed that he perfectly understood the etymology of the word: "Penance means thinking again and coming back to one's senses."¹⁹ Lefèvre evidently thought it was not always necessary to change well-known words or expressions provided they were reinterpreted properly. That Luther had his most decisive theological insights reading the Bible in Latin shows that Lefèvre was probably right on that point.

The translation of the Bible in French is the one work for which Lefèvre is remembered today outside the narrow circle of Reformation and humanism scholars. This is the work that occupied the last fifteen years of his life, and he worked relentlessly to improve and modify his translation. The publication dates themselves witness to his labor: the four Gospels in French, June 1523; the complete New Testament, November 1523; the Psalms, February 1524; the whole Old Testament except the Psalms, 1528 (in Antwerp); the complete Bible in one volume, 1530 (again in Antwerp). Again, this activity was audacious and frowned upon by many at the time, and Lefèvre never lost an opportunity in his prefaces to repeat that he had the express assent of King Francis I. Indeed, the king, under the influence of his sister Marguerite of Navarre, wanted, in Lefèvre's own words, "the Word of God and the true and pure Gospel of Christ to be freely available in his wide kingdom."²⁰ Lefèvre's translation is essentially from the Vulgate, but with the help of other documents: a French translation (also from the Vulgate) published by Jean de Rély, a French humanist, in 1487 and, most probably, the Latin version of the Old Testament translated directly from the Hebrew by the Italian Hebraist Sante Pagnini and published in Lyon in January 1528. In 1534 Lefèvre published an edition of the Bible (his last) in which the translation of the Old Testament has been improved, most notably in the Psalms. Despite the fact that Lefèvre's Bible was censored in 1541, its legacy was continued in Pierre Robert's 1535 translation, which became the foundational Bible of the French-speaking Reformed church.

¹⁹ Lefèvre's commentary on Heb 6:1, cited in Bedouelle, *Lefèvre d'Étaples*, 172 (my translation).

²⁰ Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples, "Dedicatory Preface to the Commentaries to the Catholic Epistles (1524)," in *The Prefatory Epistles of Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples and Related Texts*, ed. Eugene F. Rice Jr. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1972), 481.

Apart from the scholarly achievement that this translation represents, Lefèvre's motivations are even more interesting. His passion was to make the Word of God available to people who had neither formal education nor understanding of Latin. Therefore, the Bible needed not only to be translated but also to be preached and explained in simple terms. This idea was the driving force behind the relentless work that cost him so much time and energy. It was also the drive for various innovations in the printing, which Lefèvre wanted as readable as possible. For example, an edition of his French New Testament was published in Neuchâtel in 1534 with large fonts for elderly people and readers with limited ability.²¹ He also understood that the Bible in the vernacular language was an indispensable tool for faithful preaching, which was itself one of the keys for the reformation of the church. In fact, we know that distribution of free copies of the New Testament took place in Meaux in 1525 "for the honor of God to those who do not have the means to buy them."²² This is what Lefèvre says with palpable joy to Guillaume Farel when telling him about his new edition of the New Testament in French being put to good use in Meaux: "Now, in our whole diocese, on festive days and especially on the Lord's day, the Gospel and the Epistles are read to the people in the vernacular, and if any exhortation is given, it is based on the Epistle, or the Gospel, or both."²³ But Lefèvre's clearest stance on this is best seen in his prefatory epistle to the four Gospels in French written at Meaux and dated June 8, 1523, in which he clearly sets out his program:

So that all those who know the French language but not Latin may be better able to receive that grace [the gospel of salvation] ... the Gospels are made available to you in the vernacular tongue from the Latin version that is read everywhere, without adding or removing anything, so that the simple members of Christ's body may be as certain of the evangelical truth as those who have it in Latin.²⁴

He then carries on boldly: "Let us know that men and their doctrines are nothing if not corroborated and confirmed by the Word of God. But Jesus Christ is everything; is all man and all deity; and all men are nothing if not in him; and all words of men are nothing if not in his Word."²⁵ He then goes

²¹ Bedouelle, *Lefèvre d'Étaples*, 112, n. 52.

²² *Ibid.*, 113, n. 56

²³ Letter of Lefèvre d'Étaples to Guillaume Farel, July 6, 1524, in *Correspondance des Réformateurs de langue française*, ed. Alphonse Herminjard (Geneva: Georg, 1866), 1:221 (letter 103; my translation).

²⁴ Lefèvre, *Prefatory Epistles*, 450.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 452.

on answering at length all the most common arguments against the translation of the Bible in vernacular languages. Firstly, some argue that it would be better to give “the simple” a simplified paraphrase of the Bible rather than the text itself, which is too complex. Lefèvre responds with a simple and powerful argument that has perhaps been forgotten by some translators today: paraphrase is unacceptable because it risks communicating a meaning different from the one the Holy Spirit communicated to the evangelists and “mixing the words of man with the Word of God.” Secondly, many argue that it is not advisable to make the gospel available in vernacular languages because they contain many complex and obscure points that will be misunderstood and thus be the cause of many errors. If this is the case, responds Lefèvre, then the evangelists should not have made the Gospels available to the Greeks nor Jerome to the Latins because there are many obscure things in the gospel that neither could have understood. These points simply have to be believed, as the Lord said: “Believe the gospel.” Besides, Lefèvre points out, all the famous heretics of the ancient world like Arius and Sabellius were scholars, not simple people, and they fell into heresy while reading the Scriptures in Greek or Latin!

Lefèvre drives the point home passionately in one of his finest exhortations:

If some want to prevent Jesus Christ’s people from having the gospel in their own language, let them know that Christ speaks against them through Saint Luke when he says “Woe to you doctors of the law because you have taken away the key of knowledge; you did not come in and you prevented them to come in.” And doesn’t he also say through Saint Mark “go through the world and preach the gospel to all creatures”? And through Saint Matthew “teaching them to keep all that I have commanded you”? And how will they teach them to keep Christ’s commandments if they don’t want the people to see and read the gospel of God in his own language? They will have to give account of this before the tribunal of the great judge on the day of judgment and also if they have preached certain things to the people making them believe that they were words of God while they were not.²⁶

What is really interesting in all this is Lefèvre’s faith in people’s ability to understand the Scriptures. His conviction may sound banal nowadays, but it was particularly modern at the time, and it contrasts with the reticence of other humanists and of even the Reformers themselves. This actually points to an interesting contradiction at the heart of the humanist movement: the desire on the one hand to make the Scriptures available in vernacular languages and the conviction on the other hand that an accurate interpretation

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 454–55.

required a knowledge of the original languages. Erasmus was clearly more reticent than Lefèvre on this point. Many quotes could be produced, but this one from the 1515 edition of his celebrated *Adages* is revealing. Commenting on the adage “*illotis manibus*” (“with unwashed hands”) and another similar adage, Erasmus says,

Both proverbs are to be used of those who rush into an undertaking either recklessly, or else without sufficient knowledge of the important facts ... as if an attempt to interpret Divine Scripture were made by one who was unschooled and ignorant of Greek, Latin and Hebrew, and of the whole antiquity—things without which it is not only stupid, but impious, to take on oneself to treat the mysteries of Theology.²⁷

Even if Erasmus’s target was ignorant monks or university theologians, the thought is still revealing. The Reformers themselves have also shown ambivalent attitudes on this point. While denouncing the erroneous teachings of the Roman church and calling for the Bible to be made available to all, they have sometimes taken a different stance when responding to radical Reformers. One thinks, for example, of Zwingli dismissing the Anabaptists’ arguments because of their lack of knowledge of biblical languages.²⁸ We find none of this reticence in Lefèvre but only a sincere, perhaps naïve, faith in people’s ability to understand Scripture with the help of the Holy Spirit, as we will see in what follows.

IV. *The Hermeneutical Issue*

As mentioned in the introduction, the humanist challenge to the church was not only at the level of textual criticism and translation into vernacular languages, but also at a hermeneutical level: assuming we have a correct text, how are we to interpret it? This is a question on which Lefèvre left one of his most characteristic marks, although I would suggest that his main insights have generally been misunderstood.

In the early sixteenth century, the hermeneutical rules inherited from Augustine via the medieval scholastic theologians defined four classic senses of Scripture: a literal sense and three nonliteral or “spiritual” senses: the “allegorical” (what must be believed), the “tropological” (what concerns moral conduct), and the “anagogical” (what is hoped for).²⁹ At the risk of

²⁷ Desiderius Erasmus, *Erasmus on His Times: A Shortened Version of the ‘Adages’ of Erasmus*, ed. Margaret Mann Phillips (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), 75.

²⁸ McGrath, *European Reformation*, 129–30.

²⁹ For a brief summary of the medieval fourfold sense of Scripture, see McGrath, *European Reformation*, 148–50.

oversimplifying, we can say that this fourfold sense of Scripture raised a twofold challenge: firstly, how does one keep the nonliteral senses (especially the allegorical one) from degenerating into arbitrary personal interpretation? This was not always avoided, but medieval theologians tended nonetheless to give priority to the literal sense, at least in theory.³⁰ Secondly, how does one carry out a literal exegesis of the Old Testament without falling into the trap of “Jewish exegesis”? The return *ad fontes* advocated by humanists made that problem particularly acute, and Erasmus warned against it.³¹ The twofold trap of fanciful allegorical interpretations and mere “Christian midrash” was a real issue for sixteenth-century exegetes. It is in this context that Lefèvre left his mark.

The starting point is, again, his *Quintuplex* (1509). In that work, as is commonly asserted, Lefèvre made a decisive step toward “modern” or “Protestant” hermeneutics by replacing the fourfold sense of Scripture with one “literal-Christological” sense. In other words, according to Lefèvre, the only true and real sense of Scripture is christological. The Scriptures are about Christ, so the christological sense is the one intended by the Holy Spirit. Therefore, it can be defined as the true “literal” sense, as opposed to a “Judaizing” literal sense that only sees and expects a literal-historical fulfillment of the Scriptures. In the preface he explains that he was prompted to reflect on this by hearing the monks in Paris complain that they struggled to go beyond the literal meaning of the Psalms, which they found unhelpful and discouraging. Interestingly, Erasmus had made the same observation in his *Enchiridion Militis Christiani* a few years before.³² Lefèvre then started wondering whether there was another sense and concluded that there was: it is “the sense that the prophet intended and of the Holy Spirit speaking in him ... I call this sense literal but it coincides with the Spirit.”³³ Therefore, Lefèvre posits a “dual literal sense,” a proper one focused on Christ and the “letter that kills” that the Jews follow. Then Lefèvre gives several examples of this in the preface itself and many more in the main part of the work. For example, the anointing of the Lord in Psalm 2 is understood by the Jews to be only peoples rebelling against King David, whereas the apostles, filled

³⁰ See, for instance, Thomas Aquinas’s discussion of the literal sense in his commentary on Peter Lombard’s *Sentences*, Question 1, Paragraph 5.

³¹ Letter to Wolfgang Capito, quoted in McGrath, *European Reformation*, 243, n. 19.

³² “I believe that there is no other reason for the disappearance of monastic devotion, piety, and fervor everywhere than this, that they stick as long as they live to the letter and do not search for the spiritual understanding of Scripture” (quoted in Heiko Oberman, *Forerunners of the Reformation: The Shape of Medieval Thought*, trans. Paul L. Nyhus [New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1966], 292).

³³ Lefèvre, *Prefatory Epistles*, 193.

with the Holy Spirit, understood the passage in the “literal” sense of rebellion against the Lord Jesus Christ.

Identifying the true literal sense with the christological sense of Scripture was certainly an interesting idea, but it is not, I suggest, where Lefèvre made his most innovative contribution. Firstly, that idea was not entirely new. In the early fourteenth century, Nicolas of Lyra had expressed a similar idea in his massive commentaries on the Bible (*Postilla Litteralis et Moralis*). Lyra concentrated on the literal sense using both Christian and rabbinic traditions, saying in particular that it was sometimes the Old Testament author’s intention to prophesy about Christ, which implied a twofold literal sense, one relating to the time of the prophet and one to the time of the fulfillment of his prophecy.³⁴ Lefèvre seems to have gone further than Lyra only insofar as his twofold literal sense included only one “proper” literal sense: the christological one. The purely historical sense was discarded as the “letter that kills.” It is nonetheless true that Lefèvre certainly gave a whole new vigor to the idea of christological interpretation of the Old Testament. One wonders whether Calvin would have been less reluctant to point to Christ in his sermons on Job had he been more confident of the validity of Lefèvre’s idea.

Secondly, it has to be said that Lefèvre was only talking about the Psalms, that he never discarded the fourfold sense of Scripture, and that he did not follow his own rule consistently. In a key passage in his commentary on Galatians 4:24, in which Paul famously refers to “allegory,” Lefèvre explains in detail how he wants to combine his “literal spiritual” sense with the fourfold sense:

These four senses must not be sought everywhere ... Therefore, let us not confuse these senses: those that require a literal sense, let us interpret them literally; those that require allegory, let us interpret them allegorically; if they require both, let us concede them both as in the story of Abraham and his sons, since the Spirit intended both history and allegory. Let us keep the anagogical interpretation only for those texts that express themselves in this way. Indeed, bringing dignified things down to the undignified ones is worse than lifting inferior ones to the superior.³⁵

In other words, the distinction between the letter and the spirit does not nullify the fourfold sense, and different texts have different requirements. Following this principle, Lefèvre always interprets Christ’s parables allegorically. The result is often not acceptable by modern interpretative

³⁴ Oberman, *Forerunners of the Reformation*, 286.

³⁵ Bedouelle, *Lefèvre d’Étapes*, 183–84 (my translation).

standards, as, for example, the parable of the woman hiding three measures of flour till it was all leavened (Matt 13:33), which for Lefèvre represents God's wisdom that has hidden Christ in the three great regions of the world (Europe, Africa, and Asia). The other important principle that comes out from the above quote is the dignity of Scripture. Lefèvre is always worried about not attributing enough dignity to the Word of God; this seems to be for him the major sin of the exegete. The above quote makes it clear that for Lefèvre the most dignified sense of the Scriptures is the anagogical one. In that sense, he is still very much in agreement with the medieval exegetes.³⁶

Ultimately, what is significant in Lefèvre's exegesis is not the discovery or recovery of a "literal-christological" sense of Scripture, but rather the deeply spiritual and individual emphasis of his exegesis. Henri de Lubac summed it up perfectly in his assessment of Lefèvre in his seminal work on the medieval exegesis of Scripture.

His exegesis is much less historical than theological, and not a scientifically or impersonally objective theology but one entirely oriented toward the exegete's spiritual life. In other words, Lefèvre d'Étapes examines his text recognising the Word of God which, at this very moment, speaks to him. If he reads St Paul, it is not in order to reconstruct the thoughts of a man at a given time, it is in order to listen to "Jesus Christ who speaks through Saint Paul."³⁷

I believe Lubac is right and pays Lefèvre the best possible compliment. Lefèvre's scholarly efforts were aimed at hearing Christ speak directly to him through the Holy Spirit. We sense that he is close to Luther's decisive breakthrough that another great Catholic theologian called "the personal and spectacular relationship created by the Word of God."³⁸

That leads us directly to what I believe is Lefèvre's most insightful contribution to the hermeneutical debates of his day: his view on the role of the Holy Spirit and the comparative absence of any reference to the tradition of the church. We saw earlier the remarkable faith Lefèvre had in the ability of ordinary believers to understand the Scriptures in their own tongue. That faith was rooted in his faith in the Holy Spirit who, for Lefèvre, is self-evidently the author of Scripture and therefore also its interpreter. Mere grammatical and philological analysis will not reveal the true literal sense of Scripture. What is needed is not a grammar or a dictionary but the Holy Spirit. The same applies to commentaries.

³⁶ See Henri de Lubac, *Exégèse médiévale: les quatre sens de l'Écriture* (Lyon: Aubier, 1964), 2.2:419.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 2.2:420–21.

³⁸ Yves Congar, *L'Église de saint Augustin à l'époque moderne* (Paris: Cerf, 1970), 353.

One principle that Lefèvre articulated was that one has to believe in order to understand. However, I believe he meant much more than the classic Augustinian *credo ut intelligam*. He meant rather two things. First, you must believe even if you do not understand; this is part of the humble submission of the believer to God. Secondly, you must believe to understand because one must have the Holy Spirit in oneself for a proper understanding of Scripture, and one cannot have the Holy Spirit if one does not believe. In fact, said Lefèvre, the problem with the Jews is not that they do not believe because they are stuck with the “letter that kills,” but quite the opposite: they are prisoners of their wrong literal interpretation precisely because they do not believe. The same principle applies to commentaries: they are helpful only because they are themselves enlightened by the Word! As Lefèvre says in his preface to his commentary on the four Gospels,

No matter how fine they [commentaries on the Gospels] may be, they cannot add any light to the Gospels, something which is as impossible as adding light to the sun. Rather, the Gospels shed light on the commentaries themselves. Otherwise, they are like colours in darkness and like thick clouds in the mind.³⁹

The idea that the Holy Spirit interprets Scripture is an idea that Lefèvre pushed very far, to the point of making the Holy Spirit the interpreter of Scripture “in us.” He developed that idea, which is perhaps one of his finest insights, in his commentary on John 16:25–26. Talking about the mystery of the eternal generation of the Son by the Father, he notes that if the apostles could understand it, it was because of “the Spirit who understood in them,” adding, “If someone wants to understand, let him ask the Spirit so that it may not be he himself who understands but the God who understands in him.”⁴⁰ In his comment on 1 John 5:7 he will repeat the idea and push it further: “The Spirit of God alone can do everything and does everything in us.”⁴¹ Again, the context is the testimony of the Holy Spirit about the generation of the Son. That sentence was immediately censored by the Sorbonne.

What is important to see here, however, is that for Lefèvre the Holy Spirit speaks to the individual believer more than to the church. Indeed, Lefèvre

³⁹ Lefèvre, *Prefatory Epistles*, 440.

⁴⁰ “Eam Spiritus intellegebat in ipsis ... Si quis ergo illam intelligere velit, poscat id a Spiritu, ut ipse non sit qui intellegat sed Deus in ipso” (quoted in Bedouelle, *Lefèvre d'Étaples*, 187, my translation).

⁴¹ “L'esprit de Dieu seul peut tout et fait tout en nous” (Lefèvre d'Étaples, *Épîtres et Évangiles*, ed. Bedouelle and Giaccone, 172).

is mainly concerned with nurturing the piety of individual believers.⁴² The “spiritual meaning” does not coincide with the “church” meaning. In this he clearly contradicts the opinion of most medieval scholars, most notably Gerson and, closer to Lefèvre himself, Prieras, who had affirmed exactly the opposite a few years before. A century before Lefèvre, Jean Gerson (1363–1429), the chancellor of the University of Paris, opposed the Hussites’ doctrines, which they claimed were based on the literal sense of Scripture, a doctrine that they call “Scripture alone,” as Gerson pointed out. To this Gerson opposed the “true” literal sense of Scripture, which was revealed by Christ and the apostles and handed down by the tradition of the church: “The literal sense of Scripture is not to be defined in terms of the insights of any given individual but in terms of the decisions of the Church, inspired and governed by the Holy Spirit.”⁴³ In 1503 Prieras, in his famous hermeneutical treatise *Aurea Rosa*, sided with Gerson and rejected Lefèvre’s ideas in advance as untenable. For Prieras, if there is a twofold literal sense, one results from mere human investigation and the other is derived from the teaching authority of the church. Consequently, as Prieras clearly spells out in his attack against Luther in 1518, whoever does not submit to the teaching of the Roman Church is a heretic.⁴⁴

The contrast with Lefèvre’s ideas is clear. Does that mean that for Lefèvre the Scriptures have pre-eminence over church traditions? It would seem so despite what many scholars have claimed. When it comes to Lefèvre’s idea of the church, most scholars insist that he never challenged the ecclesiological presuppositions of the Roman church; this is indeed true. However, in several instances he seems to have moved toward affirming the pre-eminence of Scripture over the church. One scholar has recently highlighted a very good example.⁴⁵ In 1517 Lefèvre was caught in a controversy about the identity of Mary Magdalene: it was traditionally thought that Mary Magdalene, who is mentioned in the resurrection narratives, was also Martha’s sister and the sinful woman mentioned in Luke 7. Lefèvre went against the church tradition in claiming that they were different women.⁴⁶

⁴² Lefèvre’s focus on explaining the Scriptures to individual believers is probably driven to some extent by his mystical conception of Christianity, which was influenced by Cusa and the *Devotio Moderna*. See Bedouelle, *Lefèvre d’Étapes*, 60–70.

⁴³ Quoted in Oberman, *Forerunners of the Reformation*, 289.

⁴⁴ “Decalogus ... in praesumptuosas Martini Lutheri Conclusiones de Potestate Papae.” See Oberman, *Forerunners of the Reformation*, 291–92.

⁴⁵ Jonathan Reid, *King’s Sister: Queen of Dissent, Marguerite of Navarre (1492–1549) and Her Evangelical Network* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 147–48.

⁴⁶ Contemporaries were shocked by Lefèvre’s opinion, and he felt the need to publish no less than four treatises on that subject. The tradition and liturgy of the church was at stake. For

He had to defend himself against criticism, and he affirmed his respect for the church, saying that “wherever the church is there is the spirit of God,” and he affirmed his desire “not to deviate from the position of our mother the holy church by a hair’s breath.” Nonetheless, he later added,

Clearly those authors [who refute Lefèvre’s views] are influential, and there is a great crowd of them. But the gospel is stronger than an infinite number of authors. Old habits die hard, even when they are false, and usually, although false, they claim the authority of the church.⁴⁷ But the truth is stronger still.⁴⁸

One cannot help thinking that Lefèvre affirms, as cautiously as he can, his conviction that church traditions have to be challenged by a proper exegesis of Scripture. This is confirmed by Lefèvre’s surprising conception of the church. Some scholars have wondered what exactly Lefèvre meant when he spoke about the church. He seems to refer more to the body of individual believers united through their love of Scripture than to the church as an institution. In the *Epistles and Gospels*, the church is always defined as the community of believers incorporated into Christ, “the body of Christ,” and not in terms of hierarchy.⁴⁹

This is further confirmed by what may be the most striking aspect of his exegesis: the almost complete absence of reference to church traditions, something that becomes clearer with time. One example among many will suffice: Lefèvre’s defense of the doctrine of purgatory. In his commentary on the Gospels, he attempts to defend the doctrine of purgatory from a text not usually used at the time for such a defense: the story of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16. Lefèvre thinks that the rich man is not in hell but in purgatory. He argues this with an imaginative exegesis of the rich man’s request that Lazarus be sent to his family to warn them (v. 27). For Lefèvre, that the rich man still desires the well-being of people in this world is proof that he cannot be reprobate and therefore is not in hell. From that hypothesis he develops a careful demonstration that the rich man is in purgatory and then gives traditional descriptions of heaven, purgatory, and hell, adducing other passages of Scripture.⁵⁰ However, significantly, he only argues from

more details about this controversy, see Cameron, *The Attack on Lefèvre*, 13–15.

⁴⁷ Not “Old habits die hard, even when they are false, and especially when, though false, they claim the authority of the church,” as translated in Reid, *Marguerite of Navarre*, 148.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 148 (my translation). “Certes les auteurs sont puissants, et nombreuse est la foule des auteurs. Mais l’Evangile est plus fort qu’une infinité d’auteurs. Puissante aussi est une vieille habitude, même si elle est fausse, et, d’ordinaire, bien que fausse, elle revendique l’autorité de l’église. Mais la vérité est plus forte encore.”

⁴⁹ See “Introduction,” *Epistles et Evangiles*, ed. Bedouelle and Giacone, xlix–l.

⁵⁰ Bedouelle, *Lefèvre d’Étaples*, 202.

Scripture without any reference to the tradition of the church, which he could not have ignored! That is perhaps what captures Lefèvre's originality best. If one wonders what a "forerunner of the Reformation" might look like, one need look no further than a humanist trying to defend the doctrine of purgatory from Scripture alone! It is interesting to note that Lefèvre's thought about this text evolved; only three years later, in his homily on Luke 16 in the *Gospel and Epistles*, all references to purgatory are gone. Instead, the emphasis is on the supremacy of Scripture and the futility of the prayers for the dead. Lefèvre declares, in a sentence condemned by the Sorbonne as "impious heresy,"

In that place [where the rich man is] there is no remedy, and God's justice must be accomplished, as shown from the fact that no prayer for him or others, for the dead or the living, could obtain anything. He thought he could be answered by Abraham and that Abraham could do something, but ... Abraham directs him back to the Word of God. For this is where we must go. It is through the Word that God, by giving faith, wants to save us, and not through those who passed away from this world.⁵¹

This shows a remarkable evolution in the thinking of a humanist who started publishing scholarly works on the Bible less than twenty years before. Who knows where Lefèvre would have ended up had he been twenty years younger?

⁵¹ *Epistres et Evangiles*, ed. Bedouelle and Giacone, 232 (my translation).