

Beyond Telling a Story: On the Role of Narrative in Late Medieval Prayers and Devotions on the Passion of Christ

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Medieval prayers and meditations are not primarily narrative texts. Their purpose is not to tell a story but to allow a devotional audience to communicatively address the divine, to immerse in a situation and state of mind outlined by the text, and to ask for salvific effects prefigured by the words that are to be uttered or pondered upon by the devotee. At the same time, prayers and meditations often employ narrative elements and passages as well as references to religious narratives well-known to their original audience. As I will argue in my paper, such narrative components can have a range of different functions within the context of a late medieval culture prayer and piety. For example, narrative passages in devotional texts often aim at stimulating affective or imaginative responses on the side of the reader and thus support an overarching program of immersion. Additionally, narrative references can render specific supplications or concerns plausible by tying them back both to biblical stories and to contemporary theological and exegetical debates. In so doing, they often highlight aspects and points that are of special importance to a specific group of devotees, for example a particular religious order or a group defined by geographical origin, social status, or gender. In my paper, I will sketch out these roles of narratives and narrative references by looking at a selection of 14th and 15th century German prayers and meditational exercises on the Passion of Christ, starting with Henry Susos Hundred Meditations and ending with Martin Luthers criticism of meditational devotion to the Passion. In summary, I will show, these texts illustrate how late medieval devotional literature employs narrative for purposes beyond telling a story. This sheds some light on both the affordances and the limits of narrative within the context of premodern cultures of piety.

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