



## Sermon on St. Nobody | Nemo [Sermon]

### Text Information

Author | Anonymous

Language | Latin

Period | 13th Century

Genre | Parody

Source | Bayless, Martha, ed. *Fifteen Medieval Latin Parodies*. Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 2018.

Collection | Prayer, Spirituality, and Life after Death: Global Medieval Perspectives

URL | [sourcebook.stanford.edu/text/sermon\\_on\\_st\\_nobody/](https://sourcebook.stanford.edu/text/sermon_on_st_nobody/)

Translation by Emma Grover.

### Introduction to the Text

The "Sermon on St. Nobody" is a pseudo-hagiographical text that relies for humorous effect on a simple conceit: it treats the Latin word *nemo*, meaning no one or nobody, as a name, then quotes the Bible and other prominent texts to give an account of this supposed saint's extraordinary deeds; for example, from Job 12:14, "If God imprisons a man, it is Nobody who can release him."

The many variations of the "Sermon on St. Nobody" are part of a lively tradition of religious parody that flourished across medieval Europe, especially in the later Middle Ages. Medieval education, especially monastic education, fostered a deep familiarity with a relatively consistent textual canon, an environment almost tailor-made for parody. That this account of "St. Nobody" was written in Latin makes the erudition of the intended audience clear, as does the deep familiarity with biblical passages that is required to get the jokes. Other such parody saints also emerged in the later Middle Ages, such as St. One-Another (*Invicem*), whose veneration Jesus especially promotes with the command to "love one another." None of these others, however, seems to have achieved such widespread success as St. Nobody: half a dozen separate versions of the "Sermon on St. Nobody" have been identified, from nineteen different manuscripts. Nor did St. Nobody remain popular exclusively among monks; he moved out of the monastery in the early modern period and was referenced in vernacular art and literature, including, as Bayless notes, Shakespeare's *Tempest*.

### Introduction to the Source

The first iteration of the "Sermon on St. Nobody" was written by one Radulphus in the late thirteenth century. The text was, however, embedded in a much longer tradition of medieval Latin parody, and it would be transformed by that tradition in turn; the iteration of the "Sermon on St. Nobody" presented here for the most part resembles Radulphus' version only in concept. The Latin text used for this translation is taken from Graz, Universitaetsbibliothek 904, fols. 175r-176v, as edited by Martha Bayless. This particular manuscript dates to c. 1425 and contains a hodgepodge of religious and secular texts, including a selection of verse proverbs in both Latin and German.

### Further Reading

Bayless, Martha, ed. *Fifteen Medieval Latin Parodies*. Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, Toronto, 2018.

Billy, Dennis J. "Hagiographical parody in the Ysengrimus," *Quidditas*, vol. 12 (1991), pp. 1-12

Doležalová, Lucie. "Receptions of Obscurity and Obscurities of Reception: The Case of the Cena Cypriani," *Listy filologické / Folia philologica*, vol. 125, no. 3/4 (2002), pp. 187-197



## Sermon on St. Nobody | Nemo [Sermon]

Vir erat in oriente, Nemo nomine, et erat uir ille ut allter lob inter omnes orientales. Magnus namque erat iste Nemo sanctus: magnus in genere et prosapia, magnus in potencia, magnus in scientia, magnus in clemencia <et> in compassione, magnus in honore et reuerentia. Hec autem omnia supra dicuntur ex sacra scriptura, cui nephas est reclamandum et contradicendum.

Item Nemo, dico, primo fuit magnus in genere et prosapia et similis Ade, qui fuit nec creatus nec genitus sed formatus secundum prophetam dicentem: Dies formabuntur et Nemo in eis. Fuit eciam de genere militari, unde apostolus: Nemo militans deo. Imo fuit nobilitate miles qui propriis et non alienis stipendiis militauit, unde illud apostoli: Nemo tenetur propriis stipendiis militare.

Eciam fuit de genere non qualicumque sed regali, Ecclesiastici ii: Nemo ex regibus sumpsit exordium. Eciam fuit de cognacione uirginis gloriose eo quod fuerit de stirpe regia et de cognacione Elizabet, Luc 1: Nemo est in cognacione tua. Nec fuit solum de stirpe regia sed cum ipso deo legitur semper regnaturus, Ecclesiastici xxi: 'Nemo semper regnaturus.'

Secundo, dixi, iste Nemo magnus fuit in potencia, prius quia aperit quod deus claudit, unde illud: Deus claudit et Nemo aperit. lob 12: Si incluserit hominem, Nemo est qui aperiat. Item de manu dei audacter eripit, lob 2: Cum sit Nemo qui de manu tua possit eruere. Item edificat quod deus destruit, unde lob: Si deus destruit, Nemo est qui edificat. Item ipsum deum superat et uincit, Ecclesiastici ii: Nemo uincit deum. Propterea quod deus fecit, iste Nemo illa potest facere si uoluerit, sicut dixit Nicodemus in ewangelio: Nemo potest ista signa facere que tu facis. Item gaudium ab apostolis potenter tollit, unde in ewangelio: Et gaudium tuum Nemo tollet a uobis. Imo quod maius est, animam a Christo rapit: Animam meam Nemo tollit. Item duobus dominis potest seruire utiliter, quod multis uidetur impossibile et quod est contro ewangelium, iuxta illud ut habetur in ewangelio: Nemo potest duobus dominis seruire.

There was a man in the East by the name of Nobody, and this man was as another Job among all the Easterners. For that Nobody was a great saint: great in origin and lineage, great in power, great in learning, great in mercy and in compassion, great in honor and reverence. More is said of him than all others in sacred scripture, which it is a sin to protest or speak publicly against.

I say first that Nobody was great in origin and lineage and was like Adam, who was not begotten or born but was formed, as the prophet says: Days will be formed and Nobody in them.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore he was of a warlike origin, hence the apostle says: Nobody fighting for God.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, he was a soldier of renown, who served at his own expense and not others', hence the following, of the apostle: Nobody serves as a soldier at his own expense.<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, he was not of a common but a regal origin, as in Ecclesiastes 2: Nobody began life among kings.<sup>4</sup> For he was of the relatives of a glorious virgin, who was of a regal lineage, and of the relatives of Elizabeth, as in Luke 1: Nobody is among your relatives.<sup>5</sup> Nor was he only of a regal lineage, but it is said of him by God himself that he will reign forever, Ecclesiastes 21: Nobody will reign forever.<sup>6</sup>

Second, I said this Nobody was great in power, because he opens what God closes, hence the following: God closes and Nobody opens.<sup>7</sup> Job 12: If God imprisons a man, it is Nobody who can release him.<sup>8</sup> He also takes boldly from the hand of God, as in Job 2: Since it is Nobody who can pluck [me] from your hand.<sup>9</sup> He also builds up what God destroys, hence Job: If God destroys it, it is Nobody who can build it up.<sup>10</sup> He also surpasses and conquers God himself, as in Ecclesiastes 2: Nobody conquers God.<sup>11</sup> For this reason God made it so that this Nobody could do whatever he wanted, just as Nicodemus says in the Gospel: Nobody can do the signs you do.<sup>12</sup> And Nobody shall take your joy away from you.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, what is greater, he takes away life from Christ: Nobody takes away my life.<sup>14</sup> He can also serve two masters usefully, which seems impossible to many and is against the Gospel, just as follows, as it is had in the Gospels: Nobody can serve two masters.<sup>15</sup>



Tercio dixi quod iste Nemo magnus fuit <in> scientiis. Sciuit utrum amore uel odio dignus sit. Eciam magnus in scientia, principaliter in grammatica, Prisciano se conformans, ipso attestante: Neminem inueni mihi socium. Fuit enim magnus in arismetica, secundum illud apostoli: Nemo poterat dinumerare turbam. Fuit magnus in musica, item Apocalypsis: Nemo poterat dicere canticum. Fuit eciam magnus propheta, secundum Matthei dictum: Nemo propheta acceptus in patria sua.

Item fuit magnus in clementia et compassione. Primum signum compassionis quia Christo fuit compassus in cruce morienti, unde illud Isaie: Ecce quomodo moritur iustus et Nemo considerat. Eciam martiribus compassus fuit pro Christo morientibus, iuxta illud: Viri iusti tolluntur et Nemo percipit corde. Item Lazarus mendicante compassus fuit qui poscrebat uentrem suum saturari de micis que cadebant de mensa diuitis, et Nemo ei dabat.

Item filio prodigio compassus fuit, Luc iii, qui cupiebat uentrem suum saturare de siliquis quas porci comedebant et Nemo illi dabat. Fuit eciam pauperum consolator, unde Ecclesiastici x: Verti me ad alia et uidi calumpnias que sub sole geruntur et consolatorem Neminem inueni. Eciam fuit magnus in uita contemplatiua, deo et sanctis seruicia impendenda, iuxta illud: Nemo accendit lucernam.

Eciam magnus fuit in uita actiua iuxta illud: Nemo mittens manum ad aratrum. Item ut omnem eius dignitatem ita concludam breuiloquio, fuit iste sanctus Nemo ita dignus quod singulari honore honorauit eum dominus per suas salutationes sibi transmittendo: Neminem salutaueritis per uiam. Fuit magnus domini consiliarius, ut ibi: Nemini dixeritis uisionem hanc. Eciam ex speciali auctoritate concedit ei ut possit cum duabus contrahere matrimonium, iuxta decretum: 'Nemo licet habere duas uxores.' Fuit iste Nemo magnus in audacia, quia cum Iudei non fuerunt ausi manus mittere in Ihesum, ipse audacter irruit in eum et ligauit eum et sepeliuit, iuxta illud: Et Nemo in eum misit manum.

Third, I said that Nobody was great in knowledge. He knew whether he was worthy of love or hate.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, he was great in learning, chiefly in grammar, describing him thus with Priscian himself affirming: I have found Nobody my peer.<sup>17</sup> For he was great in arithmetic, according to the apostle, as follows: Nobody could number the crowd.<sup>18</sup> He was great in music, also in Revelation: Nobody could sing that song.<sup>19</sup> And he was a great prophet, according to the saying of Matthew: Nobody the prophet was accepted in his **homeland**.<sup>20</sup>

He was also great in mercy and compassion. The first sign of his compassion was that he had pity for Christ dying on the cross, hence the following from Isaiah: Behold how the righteous man dies and Nobody looks.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore he had pity for the martyrs dying for Christ, according to the following: Righteous men are taken up and Nobody takes it to heart.<sup>22</sup> He also had pity for Lazarus the beggar who asked that his belly be filled with crumbs that fell from the wealthy man's table,<sup>23</sup> and Nobody gave to him.<sup>24</sup>

He was also the comforter of the poor, hence Ecclesiastes 10: I turned myself to others and I saw the foul deeds that came to pass under the sun and I found Nobody to be a comforter.<sup>25</sup> He was also great in the contemplative life, the service to God and the saints to which one ought to devote oneself, according to the following: Nobody lights a lamp.<sup>26</sup>

He was also great in the active life, according to the following: Nobody putting his hand to the plow.<sup>27</sup> Also, so that I might thus define all his dignity with concision, this Saint Nobody was so worthy because the Lord honored him with a remarkable honor by sending his greetings to him: greet Nobody on the way.<sup>28</sup> He was the Lord's great confidant, as then: tell this vision to Nobody.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, the Lord allows him by special decree to enter into marriage with two women, according to the doctrine: "Nobody is permitted to have two wives."<sup>30</sup> This Nobody was great in boldness, since when the Jews did not dare to lay hands on Jesus, he bravely rushed at him, tied him up, and buried him, according to the following: And Nobody laid hands on him.<sup>31</sup>



In fine iste sanctus Nemo accusauit eam mulierem deprehensam in adulterio, iuxta illud dictum domini: Mulier, qui sunt qui te accusabat? Nemo te contempnauit? Respondit mulier: Nemo, domine. Item ut omnem eius concludam dignitatem, iste Nemo, uana huius mundi uidens, conscendit ad celestia, iuxta illud Job ii: Nemo ascendit in celum. Ut illuc ascendamus hoc prestet nobis deus trinus et unus. Amen.

Finally, this Saint Nobody accused the woman caught in adultery, according to the following saying of the Lord: Woman, who are they who accused you? Has Nobody condemned you? The woman answered: Nobody, Lord.<sup>32</sup> Also, so that I might conclude his dignity, this Nobody, seeing the emptiness of this world, ascended to the heavens, according to the following from Job 2: Nobody ascended into heaven.<sup>33</sup> May we ascend there, where God, triune and one, may stand before us. Amen.

## Critical Notes

### Translation

- 1 This refers to Ps. 138:16.
- 2 This refers to 2 Tim. 2:4.
- 3 This refers to 1 Cor. 9:7.
- 4 This refers to Wis. 7:5. Adding to the parodic effect, the in-text citation is false, and the quote has been truncated in such a way that the meaning is radically reshaped; "*ex regibus*" qualifies "*nemo*" in the original context rather than *sumpsit*" exordium, as it does here.
- 5 This refers to Luke 1:61.
- 6 Not only is the in-text citation here false, but this is not actually a biblical quote.
- 7 This refers to Rev. 3:7.
- 8 This refers to Job 12:14.
- 9 This refers to Job 10:7. The truncation of the quote gives the *cum* clause causal force rather than the concessive of the original context.
- 10 This refers to Job 12:14.
- 11 This is not actually a biblical quote.
- 12 This refers to John 3:2.
- 13 This refers to John 16:22.
- 14 This refers to John 10:18.
- 15 This refers to Mat. 6:24.
- 16 This refers to Eccl. 9:1.
- 17 This refers to Priscian's *Institutiones* 17.87.
- 18 This refers to Rev. 7:9.
- 19 This refers to Rev. 14:3.
- 20 This refers to Luke 4:24 (in-text citation false).
- 21 From the sixth responsory for Holy Saturday; cf. Isaiah 57:1-2.
- 22 From the sixth responsory for Holy Saturday; cf. Isaiah 57:1-2.



- 23            This refers to Isaiah 57:1.
- 24            This refers to Luke 16:21.
- 25            This refers to Eccl. 4:1.
- 26            This refers to Luke 11:33.
- 27            This refers to Luke 9:62.
- 28            This refers to Luke 10:4.
- 29            This refers to Mat. 17:9.
- 30            There is no specific source.
- 31            This refers to John 7:44.
- 32            This refers to John 8:10-11.
- 33            This refers to John 3:13 – another egregiously false in-text citation.