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#### Mediävistische Perspektiven auf eine europäische Erzähltradition

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*Margriet Hooguliet*

*Et en sainte escriture ice lisant trovon*

Readers and Reading Practices of the ›Bible‹ in Romance  
(c.1150) by Herman de Valenciennes

*Abstract.* Modern researchers are often puzzled that Herman de Valenciennes used twelve-foot verse for his translation of the Bible into the Romance vernacular dating from c.1150, instead of prose, because they perceive an opposition between the sacred text and the chosen form, that of profane epic narrative. This article will argue that verse narrative was regularly used for hagiographic texts, as well as for adaptations of the Bible, both in the Romance vernacular and in Latin. Furthermore, a close reading of Herman's ›Bible‹ will show that the translator intended to guide his readers towards a correct interpretation of the biblical text and that he anticipated specific reading practices: discontinuous and following the annual cycle of the liturgy and Divine Office, communal and performative, probably including para-liturgical practices by singing voice.

There are two ways in which one may write the introduction to the history of medieval French literature. The first one – more common – starts with the Song of Roland. The second one – just as acceptable – starts with the St Albans Psalter. It was there, in this Psalter, that one of the most seminal texts of the Middle Ages was written – the Song of St Alexis – [...]. (Agrigoroaei 2019, p. 29)

This bold and thought-provoking statement by Vladimir Agrigoroaei about the lack of attention given to the hagiographic beginnings of medieval French literature touches at the heart of many scholarly discussions about a twelfth-century verse narrative recounting major parts of the Bible, in

modern research referred to as the ›Bible‹ or ›Roman de Dieu et de sa Mère‹ (c.1150)<sup>1</sup> written by Herman de Valenciennes: Is this text a vernacular Bible translation and adaptation, or should it rather be considered as narrative epic literature? In addition, modern research usually perceives a fundamental generic opposition between the content of Herman's text (Bible, sacred text, prose) and its form (epic literature, fiction, verse, poetic language). For example, Maureen Boulton (2015, p. 4) has recently qualified medieval French retellings of Christ's life as ››Christian entertainment‹ in rivalry with secular literature, and convey[ing] only the rudiments of official doctrine, mixed with a considerable dose of legend and folklore. Such narratives might be termed ›pious fictions‹‹. When discussing Herman's ›Bible‹, Boulton suggests that Herman imitated the popular literary mode of worldly literature:

like that of the romance, the success of the epic genre in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries inspired religious writers to adopt either its form or its themes for the treatment of biblical material, in works presumably aimed at the same audience. (Boulton 2015, p. 82)

In this article I intend to contribute to the discussions concerning Herman's vernacular Bible translation and adaptation from the perspective of medieval reading cultures by asking if the translator really did imitate the literary mode and narrative approach of Old French epic poetry, the *chansons de geste*, in order to adapt the text of the Bible to the literary taste of his lay audience and to the narrative forms with which they were already familiar, as suggested by Boulton and others.<sup>2</sup>

Earlier, Maria Teresa Rachetta (2004, p. 58) criticised this idea, which is current in modern research, in her words a ››littéralisation de deuxième degré‹: a deliberate borrowing of the forms of epic literature. Building further on Rachetta's seminal work, I will show that a broader documentation of the textual culture of religious verse narrative in Latin and in Old French constitutes a further argument sustaining Rachetta's concept of the ››litté-

realisation de premier degré« (2004, p. 59, 72, 90): the use of a formal narrative »language« that is innovative, flexible, and adaptable to different discourses. In addition, Herman's text contains very informative indications about the audience he intended to reach, the reading practices he had in mind for them, and specific reading practices with which he could expect that his readers were familiar. Therefore, a close reading of Herman's Bible translation and adaptation will form the second part of my approach. As I will show, Herman's ideas of ideal and intended reading practices of his vernacular text most likely included the liturgical reading of Bible verses as well as liturgical drama performed by singing voices. But before proceeding to an analysis of Herman's ›Bible‹, it is first necessary to prepare the ground by presenting the available historical information about the translator and his text.

## 1. Herman de Valenciennes and his vernacular Bible translation

The translation and adaptation of parts of the Bible into Romance<sup>3</sup> verse by Herman de Valenciennes only survives in fragmented form, in at least thirty-five medieval manuscripts. The oldest textual witnesses are dated to the late twelfth century.<sup>4</sup> There is some discussion about the most plausible dating of the text's composition: Traditionally, it was thought to be c.1190, while the most recent conclusion by Maria Teresa Rachetta (2018, p. 262), based on the surviving manuscripts, situates its composition at an earlier date: c.1150. The majority of manuscripts, including some of the earliest copies, reproduce Herman's text in a variant of Old French usually referred to as Insular French or Anglo-Norman.<sup>5</sup> The translator's mother tongue must, however, have been closer to Picard French as used in the area that is now northern France (Saint-Omer, Arras, Douai, Valenciennes) and Belgian Flanders. Since frequent commercial and cultural exchanges existed between this area and the British Isles just across the channel (Nicholas

2019, p. 110–123; Gameson 2002), it is not surprising that Herman's ›Bible‹ survives in several linguistic variants of Old French.

Taken together, Herman's ›Bible‹ in Romance counts over 7,000 lines, mostly in twelve-foot verse and some parts in ten-foot verse, forming irregular stanzas (*laisses*) of rhyming verses. In the modern critical edition of the text by Ina Spiele (1975), the ›Bible‹ starts with Genesis, but Maria Teresa Rachetta (2018, p. 270–271) has shown convincingly that Herman actually started with translating and composing the last part, the Life and Assumption of the Virgin (›Bible‹, v. A 1–562), to which he later added three parts: (1) a selection of Bible books from the Old Testament and the Gospels until the meeting of Martha and Mary (›Bible‹, v. 1–4819); (2) from the raising of Lazarus to Christ's Crucifixion based on the Gospels (›Bible‹, v. 5041–6974); and (3) a third, now lost, continuation recounting Christ's Passion.

Herman did not compose a literal Bible translation in the modern sense of the word. It is rather a selection and adaptation of the Latin Vulgate Bible, at times paraphrasing and summarising the original text and transposing it from prose to verse. On the other hand, Herman did incorporate very easily recognisable excerpts from the Old Testament books Genesis, Exodus, Samuel, and Ruth, as well as from the Four Gospels. The selection of Bible fragments often follows the biblical Pericopes as found in the liturgy of the Mass, in the Latin Breviary, and in liturgical Hymns. This liturgical aspect is important, and I will come back to this point below. The most important other sources reproduced by Herman are the ›Liber de nativitate Mariae‹ (sixth to eighth centuries); the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew (seventh century); and the ›Liber de transitu Mariae‹ attributed to Pseudo-Melitus (sixth century; Spiele 1975, p. 70–71). Although generally considered apocryphal books, in late antiquity and the Middle Ages these texts were widely used as quasi-canonical sources with a spiritual value potentially equalling that of the Bible. For example, the above-mentioned works used by Herman were all widely used in liturgical celebrations (Tóth 2011).

Notwithstanding modern evaluations questioning the accuracy of Herman's ›Bible‹, the translator himself repeatedly insists on the truthfulness of his text and on the reliability of his translating activities, while rendering the Latin text of the Vulgate in the vernacular:

Signor, or entendez! Parole orrez senee,  
Elle est toute veraie si n'est pas controvee,  
Estraitte est d'evangile et en romanz tornee.  
(›Bible‹, v. 4581–4583)

Now listen, Gentlemen. You will hear wise words. It is completely true and not false. It is extracted from the Gospels and turned into Romance.

Or escoutez, signor, ice que vos dirai!  
Dirai vos verité, sachiez, n'en mentirai.  
[...]  
Gel truis en l'evengile, la lettre enten et sai:  
La mort, la traïson de lui vos conterai,  
De latin en romanz la vos transposerai.  
(›Bible‹, v. 4720–4728)

Now listen, Gentlemen, to what I will tell you. Know that I will tell you the truth and that I will not tell lies. [...] I find it in the Gospels. I am learned in Latin: I will tell you about his [Christ's] death and the treason. I will transpose it for you from Latin into Romance.

By presenting his translation and adaptation as reflecting the biblical truth, Herman assures his readers that they are accessing the text of the Latin Vulgate through his translation into Old French verse (Corbellini/Hoogvliet 2014; Rachetta 2014, p. 66–69). In fact, by frequently repeating phrases such as *Et en sainte escripture ice lisant trovon* (›And, reading in Sacred Scripture we find the following‹; ›Bible‹, v. 471), Herman emphasises that he is reading the Latin Bible and that his audience is reading the biblical text with him and through him. Since it is Herman himself who is addressing the reader directly by talking about his reading practices of the Bible, it is possible to consider his text also as a *reportatio*, a recording in writing of

Herman's voice that can be reactivated by each reading performance of the text, either by reading it aloud or in silence.

Herman is actually quite talkative about himself, and he gives precise information about his life and background. For example, he tells his readers that he is still a young cleric and that he was born in Valenciennes: *Clers sui, povres de sen si sui .i. jones hom / Nez sui de Valenciennes, Hermant m'apele l'on*; (>I am a cleric, not very wise, because I am still a young man. I was born in Valenciennes, and I am called Herman.<<sup>6</sup>; >Bible<, v. 2012–2013).

He is strikingly frank and honest about himself: *Je sui molt tres pecherres, pas nel vos celerai* (>I am a deeply sinful man, I will not hide it from you<; >Bible<, v. 5623). Apparently without any feelings of shame, Herman describes elsewhere in his text how he got drunk during a Christmas evening and had a violent argument with one of his fellow clerics who had misbehaved, because of which Herman got so angry that he threw a burning log towards him. In the fury of the moment, he burnt his finger, and the next morning the wound was badly infected. Herman felt that he was fatally ill and he had a priest called for his last confession. He remained ill with a high fever for eight days, until the night of Epiphany (6 January, Three Kings' Day), when the Virgin appeared to Herman in his sleep and promised him a full recovery if he took a vow to write a book about her life and that of Christ:

Je ai non Marie, pas nel te celerai.  
 Tu seras bien gariz qant de ci tornerai,  
 Se tu fais mon commant et ce que te dirai.  
 Fai la vie en .i. livre ensi com je fui nee,  
 [...]  
 De latin en romanz soit toute transposee!  
 (>Bible<, v. 447–458)



My name is Mary, I will not hide it from you. You will recover well when you turn away [from the sin of anger]. If you follow my orders and if you do what I tell you: Make a book about my life, how I was born [...]. It must be translated entirely from Latin into Romance.

Herman replied to the Virgin that he did not have any experience with such a project and that he had doubts about his skills as a translator: *Dites, ma bele dame, ice comment ferai? / Onques itel mestier certes ne commançai.* (>Tell me, my beautiful Lady, how will I do that? I have certainly never taken up such a work<; >Bible<, v. 459–460)

In short, Herman, a cleric living in an unnamed community of professed religious men, possibly situated in or near Valenciennes, was facing the pioneering and difficult task of translating the Life of the Virgin and the Bible from Latin into the Romance vernacular. An early form of Picard French was probably his mother tongue and, being a cleric, he would have been well-trained in Latin; at least he would have been closely familiar with the Latin Bible texts of the daily prayers of the Holy Office and the liturgy: »The clergy internalized the Latin of the Bible by singing it day after day, year after year« (Boynton/Fassler 2012, p. 376). Which existing texts could Herman have chosen as a source of inspiration for his translation project, and what might have been the narrative frame of reference of his own textual culture and that of his readers?

## 2. The textual culture of hagiographic and biblical verse narrative in Old French and Latin

Herman composed his >Bible< in vernacular verse most likely around the middle of the twelfth century, a period that saw a noticeable rise in the production of texts in the Old French vernaculars in a broader sense (Short 2018, p. 312; Careri/Rubi/Short 2012, p. xv–xvi, xvii–xviii, xxiii–xxv).<sup>7</sup> On the one hand, the translator was working in a context of textual innovation and creativity, and yet at the same time, in order to produce a vernacular

text that his audience would interpret correctly, it would have been important to use narrative forms that were adapted to his future audience's textual skills and expectations. As will be discussed in more detail below, Herman was probably addressing the laity in his vernacular Bible, and it seems that he felt that he had to make sure that his lay readers would approach and read the translation in a correct way.

As discussed in the introduction, modern research has often suggested that Herman was transposing the forms and narrative modes from profane literature, such as epic poetry and chivalric literature, to his vernacular Bible translation, a narrative field with which Herman would not have had much experience and which would have been unfamiliar to him. The most frequently suggested textual example for Herman's ›Bible‹ is the monumental ›Chanson de Roland‹, the oldest surviving epic verse narrative (*chanson de geste*) in Old French with which Herman's ›Bible‹ shares a narrative orientation towards action and outwardly expressed emotions, as well as the versification in assonance or rhyming verses, grouped in stanzas of irregular length, although the ›Chanson de Roland‹ is written in eight-foot verse and not in twelve-foot, as used by Herman. The ›Chanson de Roland‹ was composed most likely around 1090, while the only surviving manuscript is usually dated to the first half of the twelfth century, but this is a very tentative dating based on palaeographic characteristics alone.<sup>8</sup> Only two other *chansons de geste* predating c.1150 survive: the ›Chanson de Guillaume‹ and ›Gormont et Isembart‹.

Twelve-foot narrative verse was also used in the chivalric novel the ›Roman d'Alexandre‹ in the now lost version of Lambert le Tort and in a later version written by Alexandre de Bernay in c.1180–1185, but this latter text is probably slightly later than Herman's translating activities. Finally, modern research has suggested that the chivalric narratives by Chrétien de Troyes may have had an influence on the narrative approach of Herman's vernacular Bible translation and adaptation. Chrétien was active in Champagne and Flanders from the 1160s onwards: slightly later than Herman's

main period of activity. It should be noted, however, that all datings mentioned here are estimations only and it is impossible to state with certainty if one work preceded the other.

In fact, the conjecture that Herman would have turned to profane literary works as vernacular examples for his Bible translation is mainly based on the specific expertise of historians of medieval literature, all of whom have been trained by studying texts that are considered as belonging to the profane literary canon that was established by applying modern definitions of the literary text. Modern concepts of literature have also contributed to the creation of a completely artificial and ahistorical watershed between medieval profane and religious texts. However, as argued by Vladimir Agrigoroaei (2019) in the quotation heading this article, it actually makes sense to consider hagiographical verse texts as the beginning of textual cultures in Old French, just as much as the ›Chanson de Roland‹. Maria Teresa Rachetta (2014, p. 92–94) has also identified hagiographic verse texts in Old French as part of the textual horizon of expectation of Herman and his audience (see also: Segre 1974; Campbell 2011). In fact, the majority of surviving manuscripts with texts in Old French from the twelfth century reproduce religious texts rather than profane works (Careri/Rubi/Short 2011, p. xliii–xlv). In addition, I would suggest the consideration of Latin textual culture as well, most notably Latin Bibles in verse and Latin hagiography as the textual world that informed Herman’s translation and versification project (see also Rachetta 2014, p. 59–64).

In reality, the majority of oldest surviving texts in the earliest forms of Old French are hagiographic narratives composed in verse and these were probably used for para-liturgical performances (Frank-Job 2009): The earliest example is the short narrative poem ›Séquence de Sainte Eulalie‹ (c.880), most likely a (para-)liturgical chant, and, composed a century later, the ›Vie de Saint Léger‹ (late tenth century) and the ›Passion de Clermont‹ (late tenth century), both surviving with musical notation; the ›Chanson de Sainte Foy‹ (c.1060–1080), written in a southern variant of Romance and

closer to Latin than the other texts listed here; and the above-quoted ›Vie de Saint Alexis‹ (middle of the eleventh century).<sup>9</sup> Around the time that Herman was active more saint's lives were composed in vernacular verse. Most notably the poet Wace left a number of these works, all composed before 1155: the ›Vie de Saint Nicolas‹, the ›Vie de Sainte Marguerite‹, and the ›Conception Notre Dame‹.

In reality, Herman's ›Bible‹ formed part of a first surge in verse translations and adaptations of the Bible into Old French that manifested itself from the middle of the twelfth century onwards (Lobrichon 2001, 2009; Varvaro 2001; De Poerck/Van Dyck 1970; Smeets 1970). A verse translation of a story from the New Testament was probably written at the same time as Herman's translating activities. This is the ›Épître farcie de Saint Étienne‹ (middle of the twelfth century?) in which the biblical Pericopes of the Latin liturgy alternate with Old French verses recounting the story of the first martyr Saint Stephen after the Acts of the Apostles. This bilingual text was intended to be sung during the liturgy of the first day after Christmas (27 December; Haines 2009).<sup>10</sup> Other surviving translations of the Bible into Old French verse include a paraphrase of Exodus, originating from northern France (late twelfth century); a fragment of a verse translation of the book of Maccabees in ten-foot verse (twelfth century); and the verse ›Histoire de Joseph‹, written in French Normandy (second half of the twelfth century).

These translations of the prose text of the Latin Bible into Old French verse did not occur in a textual vacuum: A considerable body of narrative verse texts in Latin was already circulating widely from late antiquity onwards, including religious texts such as saint's lives, Passion stories, and verse paraphrases of the Vulgate Bible (Dinkova-Brun 2007; Smolak 2001; Raby 1953). As Jean-Yves Tilliette (2012, p. 239) observes, in medieval Latin textual culture »there is no exclusive province reserved for poetry, and more explicitly [...] poetry has the right to treat any possible subject in verse«. As a consequence, narrative verse would not have been an unusual

choice for Herman and the other translators of religious and biblical texts into Romance.

Medieval Latin poetry could adopt two forms of versification: firstly, metrical verse, following the rules of classical poetry with patterns of long and short syllables; and secondly, rhythmical verse with patterns of accented and unaccented syllables, and relying more on end rhyme or assonance (Tilliette 2012, p. 241–247). Many surviving medieval Latin hagiographical texts and Passion stories are composed in metrical verse. This poetic form is more difficult to follow when read aloud and requires an attentive and private consultation by readers with an advanced knowledge of Latin. Texts such as these were most likely used for individual devotion and meditation (Dolbeau 2002, p. 131, 134; Tilliette 2012, p. 244). Latin biblical and hagiographical narratives in rhythmical verse, on the other hand, were probably primarily intended for oral, musical, and communal forms of reading (Tilliette 2012, p. 244). And this was most likely the intended function of the translated vernacular verse adaptations of the Bible as well, which were also composed in rhythmical and rhyming verse.

In the Latin textual culture of the Middle Ages it was not problematic to transpose the text of the Latin Vulgate Bible into poetic verse, while it was also accepted to paraphrase the original text in order to make its religious meaning more explicit (Smolak 2020). For example, the Gospel-based ›Carmen Paschale‹, composed in Virgilian heroic verse by Sedulius in the fifth century, was widely read throughout the Middle Ages. Around the time that Herman was composing his vernacular verse Bible there was also a considerable rise in the production of Latin verse adaptations of the Bible (Dinkova-Brun 2007). For example, Petrus Riga composed in Reims his ›Aurora‹ (c.1140–1209), a verse adaptation of parts of the Old Testament, often with the character of a paraphrase, together with exegetical interpretations revealing its hidden meaning. In fact, Latin verse adaptations and paraphrases of the Bible such as these were a more likely source of inspiration for Herman's ›Bible‹ in Romance verse than the ›Chanson de Roland‹.

To sum up, Herman started working on his translation and versification project of the Latin Bible and quasi-canonical works in Latin about the Virgin in a textual culture where the use of narrative verse and poetic forms for hagiography or recounting the Bible was generally accepted, both in Latin and in Old French. The Bible in narrative verse and including a certain degree of paraphrasing even seems to have been endorsed because it could communicate the accepted interpretation and reveal its hidden religious meaning. The middle of the twelfth century was also marked by a surge in hagiographical texts and biblical paraphrases in Latin and in Old French. The use of rhythmic verse (an option for Latin and the only possibility in vernacular languages) was particularly oral and communal in character, such as reading the text aloud for an assembled audience, while ›reading aloud‹ could also be performed by singing voice. Because of the innovative character of his project, Herman had to train his readers by teaching them correct reading practices, both in the sense of reading as a skill and reading as interpreting the biblical text.

### 3. Readers and reading practices of Herman's ›Bible‹

Authors often anticipate the reception of their texts and try to guide future readers towards the correct reading of their works, for example by inserting explicit directions for specific reading practices. These may be concerned with reading in a technical sense (for example, reading the text in the correct order, or reading with the correct mindset) and with reading in the sense of ›interpreting the text and finding the correct meaning‹. Herman, too, has added a multitude of reading directions and guidelines for the correct consultation of his ›Bible‹. In fact, throughout the biblical text the reader is continuously guided by Herman's voice as the textual narrator and as the author. Close reading of Herman's ›Bible‹ and scrutinising these directions allows for a reconstruction of the intended readership and interpretative framework that Herman had in mind. These were, of course, not

necessarily followed by his actual readers, but nevertheless, Herman's comments on the intended use and interpretation of his text can be used to reconstruct the outlines of his implied audience and their reading practices. In the words of Kirsty Campbell an »implied reader« is:

a hypothetical construct, the sum of all the author's assumptions about the persons he or she is addressing. Implied readers are those who will respond to the work in an ideal fashion – those who can follow its directions, share its assumptions, get its jokes, and understand its allusions (Campbell 2010, p. 28; see also: Strohm 1983; Iser 1974).

In this paragraph, I will discuss how Herman's text conceptualises reading and interpreting the ›Bible‹ in Romance and the characteristics it attributes to readers and reading practices such as interpreting and performing. The specific circumstances of reading envisioned by Herman were most likely collective and communal forms of reading, including para-liturgical and performative reading practices, possibly by one or more singing voices.

Nowhere in the text does Herman state explicitly that he composed his ›Bible‹ for lay people. However, he does mention that he translated and recounted the Vulgate Bible for people who did not understand Latin: *Et lise le romanz qui le latin n'entent!* (›And those who do not understand Latin should read this text in Romance‹, ›Bible‹, v. 5602). In the historical context of twelfth-century clerical communities this category also included novice brothers, but in that case, however, Herman would have addressed his audience as *Frere* (›brothers‹). Herman's repeated use of the word *Signor* (›gentlemen‹) indicates that he had a group of laymen in mind.<sup>11</sup> At only one place in the text does Herman include women in his intended audience: *Signor qui Deu amez, entendez bonement, / Et dames et puceles trestuit communement!* (›Gentlemen who love God, listen earnestly and also ladies and virgins all together‹, ›Bible‹, v. A 196–197).<sup>12</sup> Even if Herman did not describe his intended audience explicitly, it was most likely a group

of lay people, whom he addressed categorically as ›gentlemen‹, even if women and children may also have been present.

As discussed above, Herman invites his lay audience to read the Latin Bible with him (*Et en sainte escriture ice lisant trovon*) and he emphasises frequently that he is guiding his readership to the correct reading and interpretation of the Latin Bible (*Dirai vos vérité*). At several places in his text Herman describes Jews with books in their hands as intradiegetic readers, but, contrarily to Herman's truthful reading of Sacred Scripture, the Jews are invariably framed as defective readers who refuse to accept the religious truth. For example, when discussing the prophecy about the Virgin mother of the Messiah, based on the *virga* (›twig‹) mentioned in Isaiah 11:1,<sup>13</sup> Herman tells his audience:

Or oez des Gius, com furent deputaire.  
Ancontre lor escrit – si com il m'est viaire –  
Ce que dist lor escriz com il furent contraire  
Que d'aus naistra Cristus et rois et empeaire.  
Et naistra de la virge, qui bien voet que il paire  
(›Bible‹, v. 5077–5081)

Now listen about the Jews, how they were mistaken. In my opinion they go against the meaning of their scripture. Their scripture tells how they were opposed to the prophecy that Christ would be born from them, the king and emperor. And that he would be born from the Virgin, who wishes that he would incarnate.

This repeated contrasting of the ›erroneous‹ reading of Scripture by the Jews with the ›correct‹ reading to which Herman guides his audience shows that the intended effect of his ›Bible‹ in Romance is a conversion of the reader by accepting the indispensable redemptive role of Christ, the Messiah from the Old Testament, and his Virgin Mother as prophesised by Isaiah. The perceived threat of interpretations of the Bible other than Christian ones is an indication of the presence of Jewish communities in northern France and the southern Low Countries during the twelfth century, a



demographic situation that changed dramatically during the following centuries because of the anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism agitated by religious and polemic texts such as Herman's ›Bible‹ (Boulton 2015, p. 81–140).<sup>14</sup>

A second desired transformative effect of Herman's ›Bible‹ is the moral conversion of himself and of his audience. The intended reader's response to his translation is in Herman's words *amender*, a moral and spiritual reform of his readership: *Qui bien i met s'entente s'amendera sa vie* (›The reader who applies himself/herself will improve his/her life‹, ›Bible‹, v. 3214); and *Por amor Deu le faz, por amander la gent* (›I have translated this text for God and in order to reform (lay) people‹, ›Bible‹, v. 5601). And Herman's intention is not only to correct his readership; the translation project of the Bible is also a penance for his own sin, the sin of anger of which he is guilty and which should be amended. In this context, it is not surprising that Harman has inserted the story of his drunkenness and his anger immediately following the destruction and punishment of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah (›Bible‹, v. 331–397): Herman is a sinner, as were the inhabitants of these cities (see also Boulton 2015, p. 86, 88). I will come back to Herman's sin of anger below.

Herman the author anticipates that his ›Bible‹ in Romance will be read by others, and he identifies several possible reading practices:

Cil qui liront de toi ice que fait avom,  
Qui liront cest escrit et qui l'escriveront,  
Cil qui lire nou sevent et lire le feront [...]  
(›Bible‹, v. A557–559)

Those who will read here about you [the Virgin] what we have written, who will read this writing and who will copy it; those who cannot read and who will have it read to them.

In the Middle Ages reading was by no means limited to individual reading, but it could also take the form of reading by copying a text, as well as collective forms of reading where a text was read aloud for an audience, a practice coined in modern research as ›aurality‹, a mix of orality and reading

with one's ears (Coleman 1996; Green 2007, p. 7–23; Hoogvliet 2013b, p. 255–257). Aural readers were not necessarily illiterate, as is testified by the monastic practice of *lectio divina*, where one of the monks or nuns would read aloud from the Bible for the community assembled during meals. By referring frequently throughout his ›Bible‹ to the activity of listening Herman underlines that he anticipated above all oral, aural, and communal reading practices of his text:

Signor, or entendez, .i. romanz vos dirom  
[...]  
Par foi, se m'escoutez, vos orrez raison voire;  
Par bon cuer l'entendez, que Diex vos doint sa gloire;  
N'est pas controveüre, escrit est en estoire,  
Por amor Dieu vos pri que l'aiez en mmoire.  
Ce nos dist danz Hermans, qui dist parole voire.  
Ne se doit crestiens de bien oïr recroire:  
Qui bien oit et bien fait tempres est en vitoire.  
[...]  
Signor, or entendez, que Dieux vos benoïe,  
[...]  
Se bien ne l'escoutez, vos ferez grant sotie  
(›Bible‹, v. 398–419)

Gentlemen, listen to me, we will tell you a story in Romance [...] I swear, if you listen to me you will hear a true argument; Listen to it willingly so that God will give you his bliss; It is not a false invention, but it is written as true history. For the love of God, I ask you to remember it. Master Herman, who says true words, tells us this: A Christian should not give up listening well; Who listens well and does good, will soon be in glory. [...] Listen, Gentlemen, may God bless you [...] If you do not listen well, you will commit a great stupidity.

Herman's ›Bible‹ is actually a very vocal text in which multiple voices are present (see also Boulton 2009, p. 115–120). Firstly, there is the voice of the Herman the author, the translator, and the narrator, who is responsible for the umbrella history of the Bible and who gives information about himself at several moments in the text. Besides Herman, there is a multitude of other voices. For example, in the beginning of the Old Testament the voice

of God is represented in direct speech, as are Adam's voice, those of Eve, the Devil, Cain, Abel, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, and many others. Upon closer inspection it appears that a huge part of the Romance text consists of dialogues in direct speech and that these dialogues are an important factor contributing to the progress of the biblical narrative.

In some places the dialogues are very lively, with voices changing even within one verse:

»Abrehan, amis Deu, ou ies? Ne responderas?  
-Je sui ci; di que voes. -Enten ça, si l'orras:  
Tu demandes enfant, voirement l'averas.  
-Coment avra il non? -Le non tu li donras.  
-No ferai voir. -Qui donc? -Diex, or le me diras!  
-Voire voir, Ysaac par non l'apeleras«  
Molt fu liez Abrehans si dist: »Deo Gratias«.  
(›Bible‹, v. 529–534)

»Abraham, God's friend, where are you? Why don't you answer me? -I am here. What do you want? -Listen and you will understand: You asked for a child and certainly you will have him. -What will be his name? -The name that you will give him. -I would really not do that. -Who then? -God, you will tell me. -Certainly, you will call him by the name Isaac.« Abraham was very happy and said: »Deo Gratias«.

The theatrical qualities of dialogues such as these are an invitation for performative reading practices, with different voices taking up the ›roles‹ of the characters, possibly taking the form of liturgical drama (Boynton/Fassler 2012, p. 393–396). Ina Spiele has noted earlier the theatrical characteristics of some of the passages of Herman's ›Bible‹, and she has identified the Latin liturgical play ›Officium Stelle‹ as one of the sources of his recounting of Christ's nativity and the adoration of the Three Kings (Spiele 1975, p. 45–49; Stevens 1986, p. 348–351). André de Mandach and Ève-Marie Roth (1989) have suggested that this part of Herman's ›Bible‹ was actually a theatre play by his hand that was inserted into the biblical text.

Works of liturgical drama such as the ›Officium Stelle‹ survive with musical notation, and this suggests that it is highly likely that at least parts of Herman's ›Bible‹ could also be read aloud and performed by singing voices. Performing texts musically was a very common feature of medieval reading culture, as Suzan Boynton and Margot Fassler observe:

It is often overlooked that most of the genres studied today as texts were actually rendered musically. Not only were biblical and poetic texts sung to more or less elaborate melodies, but also prayers and many other prose texts were intoned or chanted, such as the homilies, epistles, commentaries, and hagiographic narratives that served as lessons in the Divine Office. (Boynton/Fassler 2012, p. 377; see also: Dyer 2022)

With this in mind, it is not surprising that in one thirteenth-century manuscript an incomplete part of Herman's ›Bible‹ is continued by another Bible-based work in Old French, the ›Histoire Joseph‹, to which the scribe has added musical notations.<sup>15</sup> As discussed above, the ›Épître farcie de Saint Étienne‹, almost contemporaneous with Herman's ›Bible‹, was also intended to be sung during the liturgy.

More intricate links between Herman's ›Bible‹ and the liturgy have been detected by Ina Spiele, most notably the correspondences between the Latin Bible as reproduced in the Missal and the Breviary:

In order to tell us Christ's life, [Herman] translates the Gospel of the day, from Christmas until Good Friday. [...] It is clear that the poet has chosen those biblical fragments that the liturgy prescribed, although sometimes in a different order. Moreover, this choice was not arbitrary: at those points where parallel Gospel texts exist, Herman translates the one imposed by the liturgy. (Spiele 1975, p. 41–42)<sup>16</sup>

In his ›Bible‹ Herman also refers explicitly to the annual liturgical cycle of the Virgin, most notably to the most important feast, the Assumption of the Virgin on 15 August: *El mois d'Aoust transi ce trovons en l'estoire* (›In the

month of August [the Virgin] was taken into raptures, as we find in the story, ›Bible‹, v. A523; see also: Spiele 1975, p. 114; Lamy 2017, p. 649).

With the centrality of the liturgical year in mind, the specific moment of the Virgin's appearance to Herman, the night of Epiphany, becomes very meaningful, because the liturgical Gospel reading of that day includes the quest of the Three Kings and Herod's anger, as recounted in Matthew 2 (›Bible‹, v. 3469–3689). John Stevens has shown that liturgical plays evoking *Herodes iratus*, the angry Herod, regularly formed part of the ›Officium Stelle‹, the liturgical play that was to be performed during the liturgy of Epiphany and which was also used by Herman. The ›Officium Stelle‹ also occurs with the title ›Ordo ad representandem Herodem‹ (Stevens 1986, p. 348–351; Skey 1983). It is very likely that Herod's menaces and rage offered possibilities for memorable dramatic and thunderous performances in church spaces (Stevens 1986, p. 350; Skey 1983, p. 65–69). Herman's ›Bible‹ evokes Herod summoning the clerics of the city to look up in their books the prophecy concerning the birth of a child in Bethlehem who is destined to reign over the people of Israel. In Herman's rendering, too, Herod responds with rage: *Quant ce oï Herodes a pou n'enrage vis, / Geta les de laiens, a pou nes a ocis* (›When Herod heard this, his face became very angry. He chased the clerics out from there and was not far from killing them‹, ›Bible‹, v. 3604–3605). So, it is very meaningful that in the text of his ›Bible‹ Herman was ordered by the Virgin to do penance for his sin of anger on this specific day and, being familiar with liturgy, the Divine Office and memorable enactments of the enraged Herod in liturgical drama, this would have resonated strongly with him and with a large part of his audience.

The close links between Herman's ›Bible‹ and the liturgy finally suggest a specific reading practice: not in a chronological and linear fashion starting with Genesis and ending with the Death of the Virgin, as suggested by the ordering of the fragmented manuscript tradition in the critical edition by Ina Spiele (1975), but in a specific discontinuous and non-linear reading practice following the annual cycles of Old Testament and Gospel readings

for the liturgy and the Divine Office (Hoogvliet 2013a) – biblical reading practices with which the cleric Herman would have been intimately familiar and which would have helped the laity to understand the biblical texts in Latin that were voiced in churches during liturgy, the prayers and hymns of the Divine Office, and liturgical drama. The numerous links between Herman's ›Bible‹, the liturgy, and the Divine Office suggest that the vernacular text may not only have been performed in ›the guest houses of abbeys, in chapter house's refectories and in ladies' bed chambers« (Spiele 1975, p. 4). Herman's vernacular and rhyming ›Bible‹ may well have been read aloud, sung, and performed in church spaces as well, as part of paraliturgical Bible reading practices similarly to the ›Épître farcie de Saint Étienne‹.

#### 4. Conclusion

Taking all considerations into account, the ›Bible‹ translated and adapted by Herman de Valenciennes around 1150 shares many of its formal and narrative characteristics with epic literature (*chansons de geste*) in Old French from the same period. However, the historical textual culture both in Latin and in Old French shows that this typical verse form with rhyming irregular stanzas and its specific narrative approach was not unique to epic texts in the vernacular. As a consequence, it would be too far-fetched to assert that Herman could only turn to ›profane‹ epic literature as examples for his vernacular Bible and that it would be a hybrid text or a biblical epic. In fact, the result of Herman's textual activity was a ›littéralisation de premier degré‹, as suggested earlier by Maria Teresa Rachetta: a first-degree use of a literary form for a translation and adaptation of the Latin Bible in a period of linguistic and textual innovation and at the beginning of a new surge in the production of hagiographic and biblical verse texts, both in Latin and in Romance.

Herman's particular way of presenting his Bible translation shows that he perceived it as a gateway to reading the Latin Vulgate, enabling his readers to read the Latin Bible together with him: *Et en sainte escriture ice lisant trovon*. Because of the relative novelty of the biblical text translated into Romance and the potential reception by a broader lay audience than was possible by using Latin, Herman most likely felt that it was necessary to guide his readers towards the correct interpretation. As a consequence, he aimed to train his audience by repeatedly contrasting his ›correct‹ reading of the biblical text with the ›erroneous‹ reading by the Jews. Another intended effect of Herman's ›Bible‹ upon the readers was to bring about a process of conversion and correction of sin, just as Herman himself had to do penance for his own sin of anger by translating the Latin Bible and texts about the life of the Virgin into Romance.

The text of Herman's ›Bible‹ contains numerous references to ›aurality‹ and auditive reception, which of course does not preclude other reading techniques. However, the primary intended reading practice as evidenced by Herman's remarks was most likely a public and communal reading performance, possibly by singing voice. The specific selection of Bible texts and some of Herman's textual directions strongly suggest a para-liturgical function for his ›Bible‹ in the vernacular, probably also including some form of liturgical drama, which may well have been located inside church spaces during the liturgy, in a way comparable to that of the ›Épître farcie de Saint Étienne‹ from the same period. The alignment of Herman's ›Bible‹ with the annual biblical reading cycles of the liturgy and the prayers of the Divine Office are an indication that the text was not primarily intended for linear and chronological reading practices, and this could in part explain the fragmented textual survival of his text. More information in the future about historical readers and their reading practices will hopefully lay the foundation for deep and systematic research into the surviving manuscripts, the material texts, and the codicological contexts of Herman's ›Bible‹, as started by Maureen Boulton (2015, p. 92–109).

## Anmerkungen

- 1 All quotations from Herman's ›Bible‹ are taken from the edition by Spiele 1975.
- 2 See also: Boulton 2012, p. 35: »It is clear from this exploration of the Bible's style that Herman de Valenciennes cast his poem in epic form even as he adapted that form to a subject matter not conducive to the use of epic form and that the techniques were not completely familiar to him«; Birge Vitz 2012, p. 836: »Formally, versifications of the Bible naturally tended to reflect contemporary genres. Epic and romance were often the inspiration«; Patterson 2022, p. 49: »Verse biblical translations, such as [...] Herman de Valenciennes's *Romanz de Dieu et de sa mere* make biblical narrative conform to the conventional versification of romance or epic, and these translations also tend to adopt more generally the narrative conventions of these genres«; Robertson 2002, p. 1001: »emprunter la forme de la chanson de geste«.
- 3 *Romanz* is the terminology used by Herman himself (›Bible‹, v. 4583) to refer to the vernacular language he is using. The term *roman* was most likely used to refer to the variants of Old French from the northern areas, see: Lusignan 2012, p. 84–92.
- 4 Geneva, Bibliothèque de Genève, Comites Latentes 183, and Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS nouv. acq. fr. 4503. See: Careri/Rubi/Short 2011, p. 54–55, 192–195. For all manuscripts of Herman's ›Bible‹, see: Rachetta 2018; the [Jonas database](http://jonas.irht.cnrs.fr/oeuvre/5132) and <http://jonas.irht.cnrs.fr/oeuvre/5132>.
- 5 For the problematics of this terminology according to which there would have been an opposition between the insular and the continental language and culture, between the British Isles and continental France and Flanders, in a context where most of western France belonged politically to the Plantagenet kingdom, see: Careri/Rubi/Short 2011, p. xxxiii–xxxv; Busby 2002, p. 490–497.
- 6 See also ›Bible‹, v. 5610–5619: Herman states that he was born in Hainaut and baptised in Valenciennes, where he grew up as well. Count Baudouin of Flanders (1088–1120), countess Yolande (c. 1090–1131; marriage in 1107), and several barons were present at his baptism, which took place on the same day as the confirmation of bishop Dudart. The same bishop tonsured him later as a cleric. His father's name was Robert and his mother's Erambord, both passed away already. Bishop Dudart may have been Burchard of Aachen (Bishop of the diocese of Cambrai 1114–1130; Ott 2015, p. 83). If this identification is correct, Herman would have been born and baptised in 1114, tonsured at the age of fifteen or sixteen just before 1130, and he would have been around 35 at the time of the composition of his ›Bible‹ in c.1150.



- 7 For the earliest texts in Old French, see also: [Corpus Représentatif des Premiers Textes Français](#) (CoRPTeF); Asperti 2006; Zink 2013; Avalle 1962.
- 8 Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Digby 23. On this manuscript, see: Careri/Rubi/Short 2011, p. 126–127; Taylor 2002, p. 26–70. For references to manuscripts, modern editions, and further bibliography of the ›Chanson de Roland‹ and the other Old French texts mentioned here see: [The Jonas database of the Institut de Recherche et d’Histoire des Textes](#); Hasenohr/Zink 1992.
- 9 It is noteworthy that part of Herman’s ›Bible‹ and the ›Vie de Saint Alexis‹ were copied together in a 12<sup>th</sup> century manuscript (Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS nouv. acq. fr. 4503, f. 1r–11r, Herman de Valenciennes, ›Assomption de Notre Dame‹; 11v–19v, ›Chanson de Saint Alexis‹). See: Careri/Rubi/Short 2011, p. 192–195.
- 10 With musical notation in a 15<sup>th</sup> century manuscript from Amiens (Amiens, Bibliothèque municipale, MS 573) and performed by Donatienne Bresseur (Uden 2018 and planned in Amiens in 2023 or 2024).
- 11 In Old French *signor* is the first case plural.
- 12 At one instance Herman seems to address an exclusively male audience: *Au naturel pechié des femes vous tenez, / D’espouses, de parantes, signor, bien vos gardez!* (›Resist the natural sinfulness of women, Gentlemen, protect yourselves against spouses and female relatives‹, ‘Bible’, v. 396–397).
- 13 A well-known wordplay on the similarity between *virga* (›twig, branch‹) and *virgo* (›virgin‹): *Et egredietur virga de radice Iesse et flos de radice eius ascendet* (›And there shall come forth a rod out of the root of Jesse, and a flower shall rise up out of his root‹, Is 11:1).
- 14 For the presence of Jewish communities and Jewish-Christian relations in the Middle Ages, see most recently: Hatot/Olszowy-Schlanger 2018; Rubin 2004; Chazan 2016.
- 15 Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS nouv. acq. fr. 10036, f. 92r–104r and 105r–132v.
- 16 Spiele 1975, p. 41–42: »Pour nous raconter la vie du Christ il traduit l’Évangile du jour, depuis Noël jusqu’au vendredi saint. [...] Il est évident que le poète a choisi les fragments bibliques que lui proposait la liturgie, bien que parfois dans un autre ordre. Ce choix n’était d’ailleurs pas arbitraire: là où il existe des textes parallèles Herman traduit celui que la liturgie impose«. English translation by MH. See further: Spiele 1975, p. 76–81, 103–108, 118–120, 123–127, 360, 378, 385; Smeets 1982, p. 250–252.

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