The previous chapters have made clear that Herbert of Bosham’s Psalterium cum commento, while part of an already existing tradition in its choice of biblical text for revision (Jerome’s Hebraica) and in its exegetical approach (a literal exposition of scripture), is unique in its combination of those two strands of scholarship. Three fundamental aspects underlying Herbert’s successful application of the literal sense of scripture to the Psalms are his extraordinary proficiency in Hebrew, his intelligent use of other Christian Hebraist material, and his unusual familiarity with rabbinic works in general and with Rashi in particular.

We now know that his grasp of the language extends over Hebrew grammar, vocabulary, some lexicology based upon the Mahberet Menahem and the Tesubot Dunash, and elements of textual criticism of the Masoretic text such as variant readings and kethib qere. Yet we should be careful not to judge Herbert’s linguistic skills by modern standards. Compared with twenty-first-century students of Hebrew, Herbert’s grasp of the language might seem patchy. On the one hand he is perfectly able to explain the difference between the causative (hifil) and the ‘plain’ (qal) active verb form of zkr/זכר in Psalm 86 (87): 4, to translate Hebrew verbal nouns by their closest Latin equivalents, namely gerunds, or to identify variant interpretations of the adverb ləma’an/לְמַעַן in Psalm 50 (51); on the other hand it is questionable whether he has, for example, a full notion of the basic Hebrew idiom of the so-called construct-chain or could systematically conjugate a Hebrew verb. Similarly, it is likely that his lexical horizon was defined by the vocabulary he needed in order to read the Psalms and to consult Rashi with the help of an interpreter.

On a second level it would be contrived to try and divorce the extent of Herbert’s Hebrew knowledge from the type of learning tools he used and from the help he received from his teacher(s). In the Psalterium we possess an, at the moment, unique case study of a twelfth-century Hebraist revising the Psalms with a variety of reference aids from both Christian and Jewish origin. Herbert is the only high-medieval exegete we know whose work
bears the undeniable influence of a body of revised readings of the Hebraica which are also present in several Hebrew-Latin psalters and in the Longleat Hebrew-Latin-French dictionary. Herbert is also our only attested Christian scholar at the time who quotes Rashi verbally with such frequency, refers to the Mahberet or to Dunash, or absorbs le’azim from Rashi and from Hebrew-French glossaries into his own translations.

Herbert’s rather functional knowledge of Hebrew, which seems to be so defined by his reference tools and by the directions of his teacher(s), raises the question to what extent we can call his individual revisions of the Psalm text ‘independent’ or ‘original’. He probably borrowed some of the vocabulary and translation techniques from studying one or more multi-lingual psalters, and his comments on text-critical aspects of the Hebraica reveal that he was familiar with an already existing body of variant readings on Jerome’s text which were, at least in part, derived from the hebraized glosses of the Theodulf recension. His choice of translations borrowed from rabbinic sources seems to have been guided by directions from his ‘loquacious’, and sadly anonymous, interpreter.

However, Herbert shows impressive resourcefulness in complementing text-critical skills with his knowledge of Hebrew. By purposefully selecting readings from a variety of Latin witnesses to the Hebraica, and combining them with translations and interpretations from the Masoretic text by Rashi and other Jewish sources, including at least one oral one, he has produced a revision of the Psalms which, as a whole, is truly original. As a result, instead of marking Herbert as an isolated figure on a lonely mission, we should consider him as standing at the crossroads of several contemporary movements, such as interest in the literal sense of scripture and in Christian Hebraism, and an already-established scholarly tradition, namely the revision of the Vulgate text, which to some extent had always included reliance on Jewish or Christian Hebraist sources. Within these different intellectual strands he stands out not so much as an innovator but as a scholar who, being more linguistically advanced than his fellow Hebraists, was not just able to continue the work of colleagues such as Andrew of Saint Victor, but could also improve it.

Although Herbert seems to have immersed himself more deeply in the study of Hebrew than any of his known peers, he shows but little interest in the theoretical aspects of the language. He hardly ever refers to Hebrew grammar rules and, unlike some of his contemporaries, never expresses a value judgment on Hebrew as a language. John of Salisbury calls Hebrew “more natural than the other [languages]” (“naturalior ceteris”) in the first