Paul in Louvain’s Augustinian Bible Exegesis

In 1546, an important initiative in the field of Bible commentary and, insofar as we can use this word in a 16th century context, biblical exegesis, was taken in Louvain. In that year, the Emperor Charles V appointed two so-called ‘royal professors’ at the University of Louvain, one of them in the Sacred Scriptures (and the other in Scholastic Theology). There is much to be said for the suggestion that, in doing so, Charles V associated himself with the spirit of the Council of Trent. During their humanistically or even Erasmian inspired fifth session of 17 June 1546, the Council fathers expressed their desire that biblical studies should be made available in institutes for training the clergy: as such, priests would be able to base their sermons on biblical texts.\(^1\)

The decision of the Council gave an important impetus to what has been called the Golden Age of Catholic Exegesis during the period

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between 1550 and 1650. In Louvain, the institution of a royal chair of Sacred Scriptures at the Faculty of Theology brought about qualitatively good biblical studies.²

The first royal professor of Sacred Scriptures was John Leonard van der Eycken, or Hasselius (†1552). He served as part of a delegation to the Council of Trent in 1551 and his chair, meanwhile, was entrusted to the young doctor Michel de Bay or Michael Baius (†1589). When Van der Eycken passed away in Trent in 1552, his young substitute remained in his post until his death in 1589. However, Hasselius and Baius did not produce any significant Bible commentaries. As such, Baius is mainly known for his radically Augustinian doctrine of grace and salvation, which eventually earned him a papal condemnation in 1567. His like-minded friend and colleague John Hessels (†1566),³ lecturer of theology and Sacred Scriptures at the Premonstratensian abbey of Park, professor at the Faculty of Theology and since 1562 titular of the royal chair of Scholastic Theology, did produce some interesting Bible commentaries. The irony of the situation, thus, is that Baius, professor royal of Sacred Scriptures for nearly four decades, did not leave any significant Bible commentary to posterity, whereas Hessels, his colleague in Scholastic Theology, did. Among the latter’s writings we find a commentary on Paul’s First Epistle to Timothy, posthumously published in 1568 by his younger colleague Henry Gravius, together with a commentary on the First Letter of Peter and a commentary on the First Letter of John in the same year, and a commentary on the Gospel of Matthew published in 1572. Hessels can be considered

² Wim François, “Exégèse biblica agustiniana en Lovaina en el siglo XVI,” Augus