At least two events in 1546 proved crucial for the development of a Louvain school of biblical scholarship. During its fourth session, on 8 April 1546, the Council of Trent had declared the Latin Vulgate to be the authentic version of the Catholic Church – authoritative because it conformed to sound evangelical doctrine – while at the same time expressing the hope that a critical revision be realized as soon as possible.¹ Only a few weeks after the Council’s pronouncement, the Imperial authorities in the Low Countries, the Louvain Faculty of Theology, and the printer Bartholomew van Grave (Gravius) contracted an agreement with a view to the publication of a revised version of the Vulgate (and of both a Dutch and a French translation based upon it). The work of critically revising the Vulgate was entrusted to the Louvain theologian John Henten.

Also in 1546, Emperor Charles V appointed two so-called royal professors at the University of Louvain, one to lecture on Scripture and the other on scholastic theology. Instead of lecturing for six weeks a year, as was the custom for ordinary professors at the university, the holders of both new chairs had to lecture every day.² There is much to be said for the suggestion

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that in so doing, Charles V again associated himself with the spirit of the Council of Trent. During their humanistically or even Erasmian-inspired fifth session, on 17 June 1546, the Council fathers had expressed their desire that biblical studies be made available in institutes for training the clergy: in this way priests would be able to base their preaching on biblical texts. And although the Council fathers had not forbidden Catholics to read the Bible in the vernacular themselves, a far greater benefit was expected from priests and preachers who were able to explain the Scriptures according to the Tradition of the Church to their flock. Recognizing the value of the Scriptures for the life of faith in the Church, while at the same time on its guard against an idiosyncratic reading of the Bible, the Tridentine Church emphasized the position of the priests and preachers as mediating figures between, on one hand, God’s Word preserved in the Church, and on the other hand, the laity. With this measure the Council fathers sought to respond to Protestant claims that the Bible was the sole, necessary and sufficient basis of the faith and that doctrine as formulated by the Reformers – and not by the ‘Old Church’ – agreed with the Scriptures.

The contract for the revision of the Vulgate by John Henten and the establishment of the royal chair of Sacred Scriptures at Louvain together led to both the development of textual criticism of the Latin Vulgate in the Louvain theological milieu and the appearance of qualitatively good and influential Bible commentaries, mainly during the period between 1550 and 1650. Louvain biblical scholarship was moreover shaped by another,

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4 For a concise introduction to biblical scholarship in early modern Louvain, see Victor Baroni, La Contre-Réforme devant la Bible: La question biblique, La Concorde, Lausanne, 1943, pp. 235–237 and 287–296; Robert De Langhe, ‘Les recherches bibliques à l’Université de Louvain’ in Sacra Pagina: Miscellanea biblica congressus internationalis catholici de re