THE SUMMARIUM BIBLICUM: A BIBLICAL TOOL BOTH POPULAR AND OBSCURE

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A common, mostly fifteenth-century, addenda to the Late Medieval Bible are biblical summaries. These are a unique literary type – either in verse or in prose, they shorten the biblical text and aim at helping one memorize its contents. The one that accompanies the Late Medieval Bible most frequently is a curious poem of some 220 “non-sense” verses, beginning:

Egreditur. dormit. variantur. turris. it Abram.

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2 See Greti Dinkova-Bruun, “Biblical Versifications from Late Antiquity to the Middle of the Thirteenth Century: History or Allegory?” in Poetry and Exegesis in Premodern Latin Christianity: The Encounter between Classical and Christian Strategies of Interpretation, ed. Willemien Otten and Karla Pollmann, Supplements to Vigiliae Christianae 87 (Leiden, 2007), pp. 315–342; eadem, “Biblical Versification and Memory in the Later Middle Ages” in Culture of Memory in East Central Europe in the Late Middle Ages and the Early Modern Period, ed. Rafal Wójcik, Prace Biblioteki Uniwersyteckiej 30 (Poznan, 2008), pp. 53–64; Francesco Stella, La poesia carolingia latina a tema biblico, Biblioteca di medioevo latino 9 (Spoleto, 1993); Sabine Tiedje, “The Roseum Memoriale divinorum Eloquiorum Petri de Rosenheim: A Bible Summary from the fifteenth century” in Retelling the Bible: Literary, Historical, and Social Contexts, ed. Lucie Doležalová and Tamás Visi (Frankfurt am Main, 2011), pp. 335–353; and, for the argument that these texts belong together, also Lucie Doležalová, “The Dining Room of God: Petrus Comestor’s Historia scholastica and Retelling the Bible as Feasting” in the same volume, pp. 229–244, at pp. 241–244.


Here, the Bible is condensed in an extreme way: each biblical chapter is usually “summarized” in a single keyword. These keywords are then organized in hexameters. The purpose of the text appears to be clear: to help one remember the contents of the Bible. As one of the prologues notes, this is the Bible as in a small sack – quasi in saculo – making the huge and complex text digestible, understandable and even memorizable, and thus readily at hand any time. By the help of this brief poem, readers or users can remember what happens at which place in the Bible. In order to do that, however, they have successfully to decode the relationship between the individual keywords and the particular chapter contents. This is sometimes simple (e.g., sex = “six” days of creation in Genesis 1; prohibit = “he prohibits” – God’s prohibition to eat from the tree of knowledge in Genesis 2), other times difficult, and yet other times impossible. Thus, active use of this text actually equals riddle-solving.

A solution to the brevity of the Summarium’s keywords is provided by interlinear glosses that often accompany the text. In general, they differ in each manuscript, and were copied together with the main text only on some occasions, while on others scribes created their own solutions, or at least interpreted those found in their model text with considerable latitude. The glosses are an opportunity to include further explanatory information on the keyword as an appropriate representation of the particular chapter.

The text is traditionally called Summarium Biblicum, although this title does not appear in the manuscripts. It has commonly been attributed to Alexander de Villa Dei (Alexander de Villedieu or Déols, ca. 1175–1240), the author of an extremely popular versified grammar Doctrinale puerorum (composed ca. 1200), although there is no clear evidence to support this attribution. Actually, the oldest manuscript I have so far consulted dates to the beginning of the fourteenth century, and thus it is quite possible that the text was written only at the end of the thirteenth century. There are several fourteenth-century copies from France, German-speaking

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5 This prologue appears together with the Summarium in Bodl., MS Marshall 86, fol. 100r. Clermont-Ferrand, Bib. mun., MS 44, fol. 147r, and BSB, Clm. 14023, p. 643.

6 See the detailed discussion of the Book of Esther below.


8 Greti Dinkova-Bruun has expressed her doubts about the attribution (“Biblical versification”, p. 321). Existing manuscripts actually contain only attributions to Albertus Magnus, Johannes Chrysostomus, and Bartholomaeus Tridentinus (see Doležalová, ”Biblia quasi in sacculo”, pp. 7–8), but there seems to be little ground for these, too.