CHAPTER 9

Vernacular Biblical Literature in Sixteenth-Century Italy: Universal Reading and Specific Readers

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The sixteenth century saw a vast production of printed biblical literature in Italian, a significant part of which was devoted to the Psalms. In Christian tradition the Psalter, either in whole or in part, was always one of the major aids for exegesis, liturgy and devotion. In sixteenth-century Europe, the Psalms were central to the revival of biblical literature, which was connected with the climate of religious turmoil, the expansion of the printing industry and the rise of the vernacular tongues. In Italy, the decades of the 1520s and 1530s saw the dissemination of Erasmian and Lutheran ideas and the development of ‘evangelical’ thinking. They were also marked by the questione della lingua, which opposed two conceptions of the vernacular: one as an instrument of wide cultural transmission and the other as a medium of rhetorical and literary expression. This contribution, which will focus on printed Italian books on the Psalms in the sixteenth century, will therefore consider the issue of vernacular language and intended readership in connection with Italian history, religion and linguistics.

Italian Psalm Books in the Sixteenth Century: An Overview

The Psalms generated a remarkable quantity and variety of texts in sixteenth-century Italy.¹ From the early days of printing, the Psalter was available in the translation by Nicolò Malerbi, a Camaldolese monk from Venice. Malerbi

¹ Anne Jacobson Schutte provides a list of translations, commentaries, sermons, rewrites in verse and prose in Printed Italian Vernacular Religious Books 1465–1550: a finding list (Geneva: 1983) 86–90. As we will see, this production consisted of both old and new books. It was in any case part of a tradition of vernacular Bible translations which began long before the age of the printing industry (cfr. Corbellini S., “Looking in the Mirror of the Scriptures: Reading the Bible in Medieval Italy”, in François W. – Den Hollander A.A. (eds.), Wading Lambs and Swimming Elephants: The Bible for the Laity and Theologians in Late Medieval and Early Modern Era (Leuven: 2012). See also below, n. 58.