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“Take Hold of the Robe of a Jew”: Herbert of Bosham’s Christian Hebraism

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REVIEW

Deborah L. Goodwin

*“Take Hold of the Robe of a Jew”:
Herbert of Bosham’s Christian Hebraism*

(Leiden, Brill: 2006) Cloth, xii + 300 pp.

Reviewed by John T. Slotemaker, Boston College

Among the Hebrew books that make up the Christian Scriptures Genesis, Psalms, and the Song of Songs are the most commented on in medieval Christian exegesis. The medieval Psalms commentaries often follow closely the tradition found in Augustine’s *Ennarrationes in Psalmos* and Cassiodorus’ *Expositio Psalmorum* of offering a Christian, or christological, reading of the Psalms. This is hardly surprising, given that the Psalms were already a source of christological speculation in the Gospels, the book of Hebrews (10:5-9), and Acts (2:25-32). What is surprising is that in the mid-twelfth century the Abbey of Saint Victor – with an emphasis on the literal/historical sense in the writings of Hugh and Adam of St. Victor – had a significant influence on the writings of Herbert Bosham (c.1120–c.1194), who produced a “literal” commentary on the Psalms that follows closely the writings of Rabbi Solomon ben Isaac of Troyes (Rashi) and broke with the received Christian commentary tradition. The present work by Deborah Goodwin is an analysis of Herbert’s literal commentary on the Psalms, a commentary that is of interest to Christian-Jewish relations because of its provocative literal interpretation of the Psalms and Herbert’s use of Rashi’s exegetical work. The originality of Herbert’s literal commentary is found in his close allegiance to Rashi and in his hesitancy to interpret the Psalms as “christologically” as previous Christian exegetes.

Herbert’s literal commentary on the Psalms has received little attention (see R. Loewe, “Herbert of Bosham’s Commentary on Jerome’s Hebrew Psalter,” *Biblica* 34[1953]: 44-77; 159-102; 275-298; and B. Smalley, “A Commentary on the *Hebraica* by Herbert of Bosham,” *Recherche de Théologie Ancienne et Médiévale* 18 [1951]: 29-65), partially because it exists only in one manuscript (MS 2, Saint Paul’s Cathedral Library, London) and is thus far unedited, making Goodwin’s recent work a welcome contribution. Goodwin begins by locating Herbert historically, culturally, and intellectually in twelfth century England and France. Goodwin’s historical analysis in the first chapter is illuminating, tracing Herbert’s complex relationships as: (1) a defender of Thomas Becket (*Vita Sancti Thomae*); (2) a student, defender, and editor of Peter Lombard; (3) a visitor to the Abbey of St. Victor and student of Hugh’s exegetical tradition; and (4) a visitor to the Cistercian house at Ourscamp in Arras (also involved in Christian Hebraism). The attention Goodwin gives to the political and intellectual currents of the twelfth century locates Herbert in a vibrant culture of Christian Hebraism.

The second chapter considers Herbert’s methodology as developed in the Psalms Commentary, emphasizing Herbert’s divergence from previous Christian tradition in three foci. First, Herbert chose to comment on Jerome’s *Hebraica* Psalter, not the traditional Gallican version that previous Christian scholarship had focused on. Second, the emphasis on a literal commentary, and not an allegorical or tropological analysis, demonstrates a clear break with earlier Christian exegesis. Finally, Herbert relies closely on the exegesis of Rashi and other Jewish *litteratores*. The central claim of chapter two – defining Herbert’s originality as a Christian exegete – is

strengthened in chapters three and four through a comparison of twelfth century Christian Hebraism. The comparison of Herbert to other twelfth century authors leads into a discussion of Herbert's knowledge of Hebrew in chapter five. Goodwin argues that while R. Loewe's claims of Herbert's expertise in Hebrew (see above for reference) are somewhat exaggerated, there is every reason to think that he was a fine Hebraist.

The heart of Goodwin's analysis is found in chapter six. Identifying Herbert's hermeneutic – as grounded in Hugh of St. Victor and Rashi – Goodwin considers various pericopae for detailed analysis. For example, in Psalm 44 [45] and 79 [80], Herbert offers a strikingly original interpretation of the passage in question. Here Herbert is portrayed between the Christian tradition of *adversus iudaeos* literature and Psalms commentaries and the Jewish exegesis of Rashi, often interpreting particular passages with striking originality. Goodwin considers Herbert's exegesis of Psalm 44 [45]:15, “the maiden in her train, her companions who follow her.” Rashi glosses this verse by indicating that it means the Gentiles will follow the Jews, citing Zechariah 8:23, “They will take hold of the Robe of the Jew's garment...saying ‘Let us go with you, for we have heard God is with you.’” Herbert follows Rashi's exegesis – citing Zechariah 8:23 – and considers this interpretation significant for both Jews and Christians: for Jews, it indicates that salvation is through the messiah who is expected in the future; for Christians, it indicates salvation through Christ and the apostles (*ex parte impletum/in part*). But the final eschatological fulfillment will occur when all Israel will be saved (Romans 11:26).

According to Goodwin, the significance of this passage is in Herbert's outlook – his eschatological perspective that understands Zechariah 8:23 as supporting both Jewish and Christian eschatological expectations. Psalm 44[45]:15, following Rashi, is read in light of the Zechariah passage, such that Christians take hold of the robe of the Jew in their ultimate eschatological hope. In the end of days, both Christians and Jews will share the messiah. Goodwin concludes the work with exegesis of this and other passages that indicate the innovative quality of Herbert's literal exegesis of the Psalms.

Goodwin's work is a fine achievement both in its historical and cultural overview and in its unearthing of Herbert's exegesis of the Psalms. She is to be applauded for her careful paleographical work, presenting a fuller picture of this important and relatively unknown Christian exegete. There are two points that deserve mention in response to Goodwin's work. First, Goodwin somewhat overstates the case for Herbert's originality regarding his commentary on the Psalms by arguing that he applies a “Victorine method to a ‘non-Victorine’ text” (p. 4). Hugh of St. Victor previously commented on the Psalms (*Expositio super Psalmos*, PL 177, col. 589-634); while Hugh's incomplete work is certainly not a literal commentary, it certainly warrants greater attention. Second, Goodwin's work is focused on the first ninety chapters of Herbert's Psalms commentary and leaves unexplored the final third of the work. This, presumably, was necessitated because M. Gruber's complete translation of Rashi's *Commentary on the Psalms* was not yet available (having published the first ninety chapters in 1998). One can only surmise about the potential comparisons given the publication of Gruber's now complete translation (2004) and hope that Goodwin will continue her work on Herbert. Notwithstanding these limitations the book is to be commended to scholars working in twelfth century exegesis and the *Hebraica veritas* tradition, not to mention those interested in this “road not taken” in Christian-Jewish relations. The work is at once careful, insightful, and a pleasure to read.