

## Safekeeping Memories of Transition and Trauma in Sixteenth-Century Dutch Bibles

By Renske Hoff

Eliesabet Campen died of smallpox in 1790, barely one year old.<sup>1</sup> In 1559, Siwerdt Janszoon's wife died in childbirth. Evertge Pieters fell ill in June 1647 and passed away within a month. Six children suddenly died in 1621 when the attic of their school collapsed. At first glance, the lives and tragic deaths of these early modern people have little in common. However, these events have all been recorded in blank spaces in sixteenth-century Bibles, in the handwriting of relatives and acquaintances. A considerable number of surviving Dutch Bibles from this time contain annotations by historic book users. Annotations demonstrate how the early modern Bible functioned as a space to shelter memories, secure identities, and provide, in Jason Scott-Warren's words, "anchors amid the flux of experience" (2). Usually written down within the blank areas in the front or back of the book, memories and experiences were tightly clasped between the binding and the biblical text. White spaces such as flyleaves, loose endleaves, and pastedowns were sites of transition, openness, and liminality, belonging as much to the book and its text as to the world of the reader. In their blankness and in-betweenness, these spaces of the early modern Bible enabled users to place their own experiences, memories, and emotions within the safety and guardianship of God's word. The negotiable, blank pages invited them to draw their own reflections, to grant themselves these places for production rather than merely reception, to put a pen to paper and materialise their memories (De Certeau 134).

This article explores the function of the Bible as an open space in which the temporal and exceptional could become durable. Through the lens of three types of transformative, impactful events that found their ways into the space of the book, I will display how people turned to their Bibles in various moments of disruption and insecurity. Firstly, the book regularly served as a place for the documentation and commemoration of crucial events within the family, such as births, marriages, and deaths. Genealogical annotations allowed for the transference of these memories from one generation to another, shaping social ties that crossed the boundaries between the living and the dead. Secondly, when local communities were disrupted by events such as political transitions or local catastrophes, people similarly turned to their Bibles to record these events in the safe space of the book. Moreover, a third category of impactful and unexpected occurrences were kept on flyleaves: extraordinary and impressive spells of weather. Each of these various examples demonstrate that when life proved vulnerable and unpredictable, the material book could come to serve as a place of refuge, assurance, and safekeeping.

**Family memorial in the sight of God**  
Bibles—including complete Bibles, New Testaments, Epistles and Gospels, and Psalters—were the type of books most likely to be owned by and recorded in the inventories of early modern households in the Low Countries (Dibbits 217, Kamermans 124, Blaak 27-28). The Bible

was an inherent "part of the cadences of daily life" (Narveson 53), defining beliefs, behaviours, language, and identity in both private and public spheres, across social-economic divides (Hamling 211). Bibles were regularly handed down from one generation to the next, allowing the book to function as a material transporter of identities and memories across multiple generations. Keeping record of a family's transitions, changes, and traumas was a practice that could "hold the dead in the minds of the living, and transmit the responsibility for remembrance forward to children and grandchildren" (Hodgkin 312).

A sixteenth-century book owner called Aernt Poelman illustrates how the Bible could be appropriated as a space of commemoration. His annotations were inscribed in a Dutch Bible printed by the Antwerp printer Henrick Peetersen van Middelburch in 1541 (Utrecht University Library 111 F 13). Poelman's moving account of the deaths of his wife and their new-born daughter fill the endleaf of his Bible. On the 20th of October (the year is unknown, but a previous annotation mentions that they were married in 1588), his wife gave birth to a daughter at five in the afternoon. However, he describes that "after that my wife suffered great distress ... [in which] there was no longer a real distinction between life and death."<sup>2</sup> They called for a midwife around midnight, but the help came to no avail: "around three o'clock she was found dead in bed, compliant to what the Lord has foreseen."<sup>3</sup> Poelman's daughter was baptised, died, and was buried within the first three days of her life. Although early modern accounts of personal memories often display little emotion (Pollmann "Memory" 1, 20), Poelman's affection towards his wife and child shine through when he refers to them as his "dear wife" and "dear, sweet daughter."<sup>4</sup> By writing down life events in his Bible, he created a space in which valuable memories of his wife and child could be sheltered and their stories passed

on to subsequent generations.

Like others of his time, Poelman made the vulnerability of human life part of the trustworthy, protective space of the biblical narrative through his annotations. Placed and kept in the same binding as the eternal word of God, the divides between the personal and the universal, the material and immaterial, and the transitory and the permanent became elusive. Jaspas Vinckel (1581-1638), an Amsterdam based merchant, similarly used the flyleaves of his Bible to place experiences of transition and distress "in the sight of God" (Scott-Warren 3). In his Bible, printed in 1542 by Jacob van Liesvelt (Württembergische Landesbibliothek Bb.niederländ.154201), he registered the births and deaths of his children between 1607 and 1622. With the birth of each child, Vinckel included a short benediction, such as: "Item on the 21st of July 1620, being between Tuesday and Wednesday at night, at half past two, my wife gave birth to my son Abraham Vinckel. The almighty God shall let him grow in virtuousness and [grant him] a blessed death and life. Amen."<sup>5</sup> Through these annotations, the Bible came to serve as a place of connection and communication between the earthly and the divine, allowing Vinckel to commemorate the lives and deaths of his children in God's material and spiritual embrace.

### Local disturbances and traumas

An overarching characteristic of the various genealogical notes in sixteenth century Bibles is that the events described announce disruptions, both positive and negative, and the transition to a renewed and altered situation. Marriages, births, and deaths transformed social positions and modified the relationships between each of the members involved. In a similar manner, it was at moments of political or societal disturbance and discontinuation that experiences and memories were entrusted to the book. Situations such as outbreaks of violence, transfers of political power, or traumatic accidents could greatly

<sup>1</sup> The arguments presented here have been developed within the research project "In Readers' Hands: Early Modern Dutch Bibles from a User's Perspective" (2017-2021). This NWO-FWO-funded project is a collaboration between the University of Groningen and the KU Leuven, and is supervised by Prof. Dr. Sabrina Corbellini and Prof. Dr. Wim François. The main aim of the project is to study the multitude of interactions—textual, conceptual, and material—between early modern readers and their Bibles. The research derives in particular from the surviving copies of Bibles printed by the Antwerp printers Jacob van Liesvelt, Henrick Peetersen van Middelburch, and Willem Vorsterman, between 1522 and 1546. My gratitude, furthermore, goes to Sabrina Corbellini, Olin Motezuma Burns, and Joe Saunders for their valuable comments on previous versions of this paper.

<sup>2</sup> ... daer na ijs mijn lijue huijsfrau in sullicken benauthijet geuest ... ende datter tuessent leijven ende die doot gheen onderschijet wel en was. All English translations are my own.

<sup>3</sup> ... ontrent de drije uiren soe ijs sijt opt gebeddet geuonden voer doot gevochsaeam dan die heer heeftet versijen

<sup>4</sup> lijue huijsfrau; lijue souete dochter...

<sup>5</sup> Item opten 21 Julij 1620 wessends tussen dinsdach en woensdach snachts, te half 3 uren, is mijn huijsvrouw, van mijn soen Abraham vinckel verloest. Die Almachtigen Godt wil hem in doechden lateen op wassen en een salich steruen ende leuen Amen.

unsettle local communities and disrupt feelings of security and predictability. The flyleaves of the early modern Bible provided space for the recollection of these events and the transfer of powerful memories from one generation to the next.

Jan Vrancx, who lived in Heverlee near Leuven from the 1550s onwards, left various annotations about life-altering moments in his Bible, which was printed by Marie Ancxt in 1560 (Maurits Sabbe Library P22.005.1/Fo BIJB 1560). The markings register his marriage and the births of his children, but also important events of recent, local history. One such event was the unsuccessful siege of Leuven by the army-commander Maarten (or Merten) van Rossum. Vrancx recollects that “in the year of our Lord 1542, Merten van Rossum was stationed before Leuven, on the first day of August, on the day of Saint Peter in Chains. But he was not able to fulfil his wish because God will resist so no one may trouble Leuven.”<sup>6</sup> The attempted siege and the grave brutalities that preceded it severely impacted local civilians and led to the publication of a wide range of pamphlets and chronicles reflecting on this violent episode (Pleij 188-189). Vrancx’s annotations not only give testimony to the impression these events made on him, but also display his wish to preserve his recollections of the siege within the personalised, secure space of his Bible. Vrancx’s concerns with local uprisings of violence also become clear in another note:

“... in the year of our Lord 1561, on the 9th day of May, on Saint Job’s Eve, great violence occurred [at] Terbank and at many other places.”<sup>7</sup>

This burning and plundering of Terbank was part of a long-lasting series of disturbances in and around Leuven in the second half of the sixteenth century (Van Uytven 379, 386). Although the societal impact of this particular affair was

considerably smaller than that of Van Rossem’s attempted siege, Jan Vrancx clearly considered it valuable to memorialise this outbreak of violence in his family Bible.

Another Bible in which local events are commemorated is a Bible printed by Willem Vorsterman in 1528 (Tilburg University Library TF PRE TFK 149). On a blank leaf, an anonymous user of the book left a handwritten note about a fatal, local accident in 1621: “Item, the attic of the large school has collapsed because so much hay was stored onto it, on the 17th of August, anno 1621. And six children died underneath the hay and have all been buried in the church.”<sup>8</sup> The annotator, who does not seem to be directly related to any of the victims, confided the accident to the pages of their Bible, generating a connection with the trauma and bereavement of the children’s parents. Like the bodies of the children were consigned to their graves in the church, the story of their tragic death was consigned here to the textual equivalent of the house of God. As genealogical annotations show how early modern people valued and engaged with the intergenerational bonds between family members, the commemoration of this event displays how “trauma shared can serve as a source of communality” (Erikson 459).

### The force of nature

“In 1704, on the 26th of July, very large hailstones fell here in Emmerich, which caused much damage to the windows and roofs.”<sup>9</sup> Franciscus Hendericks left his record of this surprising and damaging hailstorm in his 1535 Liesvelt Bible (Württembergische Landesbibliothek Bb.niederländ.153501), positioning it between his commemorations of family affairs and political events—such as the coronation of King Frederick I of Prussia in 1701 and the death of Emperor Leopold I in 1705.<sup>10</sup> Similarly observing a spell of

extreme weather, another Bible owner recorded in their New Testament from 1548 (Sint-Andriesabdij Brugge pret. 23) that “on the 1st of November 1786, and the following days, it was so cold that the Scheldt froze over in several spots and that at other [places] the anchor ice openly floated.”<sup>11</sup> Historical weather measurements show that November 1787 was indeed extremely cold, with temperatures falling as low as  $-5^{\circ}\text{C}$  in Amsterdam (Koninklijk Nederlands Meteorologisch Instituut). Both eighteenth-century annotators used a book that was printed two centuries prior to record these transitory experiences. A copy of Van Liesvelt’s Bible of 1526 (Leiden University Library, Collection Maatschappij der Nederlandse Letterkunde, I.N.L. Vide B 22 F 38) displays how Bibles were also used to memorialise events from before the printing date: a sixteenth-century annotator commemorated the fifteenth-century St. Elisabeth’s Flood. This annotation illustrates the fact that the flood of 1421, which took the lives of approximately two thousand people, remained part of the collective memory well into the sixteenth century (Van Asperen, Pollmann “Of Living Legends” 108-115). Hence, exceptional weather spells across several centuries were given a place of commemoration and durability by placing them in the trustworthy space of the sixteenth-century Bible.

Natural forces and spells of extreme weather could greatly impact a local community. This is particularly evident in an event recorded in the Bible owned by Jan Vrancx, mentioned above (Maurits Sabbe Library P22.005.1/Fo BIJB 1560). He commemorated that “... the destruction of Mechelen [took place] anno 1546, the seventh day of August ... by the great thunderstorm.”<sup>12</sup> The event he refers to is the major explosion of the Zandpoort in

Mechelen. The Zandpoort was one of the smaller town gates and was primarily used to store the gunpowder supply. During a heavy thunderstorm on 7 August 1546, lightning struck the gate, resulting in a catastrophic explosion. Surrounding buildings were utterly destroyed and hundreds of people were left dead or injured (Duke 125). Although Mechelen is located considerably further away from Vrancx’s home in Heverlee than the other events mentioned in his annotations, the impact of this enormous destruction was far-reaching.

Contemporary accounts in pamphlets and chronicles generally perceived the disaster in Mechelen to be a warning or punishment by God (Duke 125-128). Throughout the premodern period and across confessional divides, natural occurrences were generally understood as fundamental manifestations of God’s power (Jorink 20-24). Observing the weather and gaining knowledge about natural phenomena was, hence, highly relevant to a wide range of people (Johnston 395), not only because weather spells could greatly impact various personal lives and communities, but also because through studying nature, one could become convinced of the almightiness of God’s power (Pettegree 335). Available for both the literate and illiterate, reading the ‘Book of Nature’ served as a way to gain knowledge about God alongside the Scriptures. In the examples discussed here, Bible owners positioned their observations of influential and exceptional ‘chapters’ of the Book of Nature within the very book that held the Word of God.

### Conclusion

In many sixteenth-century Bibles the liminal spaces of endleaves and flyleaves are filled with experiences, memories, and identities as vibrant and dynamic as life itself. Simultaneously, it was here that

<sup>6</sup> ... int jaer ons heeren mvc ende xlij lach voer Louen Merten van Rossem den eersten dach van augusto, op Sinte Peeters Banden dach, mer hij en heeft synen wille niet moeghen volbringhen daer God wil strijden, daer en mach hem niemant hienderen Louen.

<sup>7</sup> ... int jaer ons Heeren mvc ende lxj den ixten dach meij, op Sinte Job aent, doen was den grote gheweldt Ter Banck ende tot tweel diuersche plaessen.

<sup>8</sup> Item is in die groten schol den solder in gevallen dar so veel horren op lach, den 17 Augustus anno 1621. Ende sijn ses kinderen onder dat horren doet bleuen ende sijn alle gader indie kyrck begrauen.

<sup>9</sup> Anno 1704 den 26 july syn alhier binnen emmerick seer grote hagelsteen gevalle waardoor viel schad geschiet is aen de glaes ende daeke.

<sup>10</sup> “Anno 1701, on the 18th of January, our elector was crowned king” (Anno 1701 den 18 januari is onse cuervorst coninck gecroont); “Anno 1705, on the 5th of May, King Leopoldus died” (Anno 1705 den 5 meij is den keiser Leopoldus gestorven).

<sup>11</sup> Den 1 9ber 1786 ende volgende dagen was het soo cout dat op verschijde platsen de schelde was toe gevrosen en in andere het grondeijs openbaerlijck dreef. Grondeijs is translated here as ‘anchor ice’, the formation of ice at the bottom of streams and rivers, which occurs at extreme temperatures.

<sup>12</sup> ... destruxij van Mechelen anno m vc xliij den viisten dach augusto ... van den groeten onweer.

transitions and transformations could eventually solidify, when the ink of an annotator's writing slowly settled between receptive paper fibres. The flyleaves of sixteenth-century Bibles were thus both inherently intertwined with and disconnected from the worlds in which they moved. As the examples presented in this article show, it was during moments of change, unpredictability, and personal or communal trauma that Bible owners found their books to be a place to safe-keep, stabilise, and commemorate those events that transformed their lives. In the hands of its users, the book could become a chest of memories and affirmations, guarded by wooden boards, patiently waiting before

being passed on as valuable heirlooms.

In the words of Evangelia Stead, books “partake of the way humans construct notions of truth, existence, the world, life itself” (14). This is not only the case for the practice of reading, but also for the practice of annotating a Bible. It is through handwritten notes on blank spaces at the beginning and the end of their books that users could reflect upon and establish their relationship with the events and experiences that shaped their identity. In the sacred space of the Bible, they could house themselves at their most vulnerable, their most shaken, their most impressed—all in the unlimited, tender care of the Word of God. ■

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## From Paris to Pixels: Publicising Medieval Manuscripts during the Coronavirus Pandemic

By Irene O'Daly

In early March 2020, I visited Paris for research. As the train left Brussels the woman beside me, who was in her early 20s, coughed twice, and then turned to me and said, “Don’t worry, it isn’t the coronavirus”. We both laughed, and I turned back to my laptop to focus on the notes I had prepared for the trip. Sitting on that crowded train, a week before the first Dutch lockdown, the virus was a worry, but an abstract one, with international and work travel still permitted. On my return, only six days later, the journey was quite different. As the train pulled out of Gare du Nord, I breathed a sigh of relief that I was on my way home, knowing that drastic restrictions were imminent.

During the year of limitations on work and life which followed, I often thought back on those halcyon days in Paris, considering the way in which the city’s atmosphere slowly began to reflect the growing sense of concern and urgency in reaction to the early pandemic. Billboards advertising the municipal elections due to take place later that week jostled with signs advising the frequent washing of hands. I saw a handful of people wearing facemasks, never imagining how ubiquitous they would become only months later. By the end of the week, the manuscripts’ reading room in the Richelieu branch of the Bibliothèque nationale de France (BnF, France’s national library), would close to the public, and since then the majority of my research, indeed the majority of my personal and professional life, has moved online. This short piece tells the story behind

that trip to Paris, from research to output, a story which parallels the proverbial shift from desk to desktop computer that has been the hallmark of the work-life of many researchers over the past year.

The principal objective of that trip to Paris was to gather material for an online exhibition which I was curating, along with three colleagues (Irene van Renswoude, Renée Schilling and Mariken Teeuwen) from Huygens ING, an institute of the Dutch Royal Academy of Arts and Sciences in Amsterdam. The exhibition, *The Art of Reasoning in Medieval Manuscripts* (which launched in February 2021), showcases research we carried out from June 2016–June 2020 as part of the project “The Art of Reasoning: Techniques of Scientific Argumentation in the Medieval Latin West (400-1400)” (art-of-reasoning-.huygens.knaw.nl). The objective of the project, which was funded by NWO (the Dutch Research Council), was to trace the techniques used by medieval scholars to express argumentation, and demonstrate how these were articulated in manuscripts of the period (en.huygens.knaw.nl). The exhibition, in turn, aims to present examples of these techniques to a public or interested academic audience, and so illustrate the novelty of medieval intellectual practices.

Several manuscripts from the BnF are featured in the exhibition, which allows the viewer to get (albeit virtually) close to the books owned and used by scholars of the past. Written on the inert skins of animals, medieval