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The seventeenth-century Dutch Republic has long been studied by scholars interested in charting the moment at which the status of the Bible underwent a transformative reappraisal. The crucial event, such accounts generally agreed, came in 1670: the publication of Benedict de Spinoza’s *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* marked a watershed, as the previously unsystematic attacks on the Bible’s authority by figures such as Thomas Hobbes and Isaac La Peyrère were finally replaced by a comprehensive historicisation of the Bible’s text, and a replacement of the truth of its message with a new philosophy that invalidated any appeal to revelation. This account was set within a broader historiographical narrative of seventeenth-century Dutch intellectual life, which maintained that the Enlightenment depended on developments in early modern natural philosophy and, above all, the remarkable effervescence of, and debate over, Cartesianism in the second half of the century.

The editors of this volume propose to examine an alternative, and explore instead the hypothesis that ‘humanist-inspired biblical criticism contributed significantly to the decline of ecclesiastical truth claims’ (p. 1). This is an ambitious design, and one marked by the editors’ decision to include not simply the sixteen essays themselves – for the most part stemming from a conference held in 2012, albeit with some additional invited contributions – but also two additional introductory essays (the first by all four editors, the second by Henk Nellen and Piet Steenbakkers) that attempt to bring out the volume’s programmatic appeal. The conclusion these essays are reported to present is resounding: rather than philosophy, it was the ‘hard sciences’ of history and philology that were responsible for the ‘slow revolution’ that saw a ‘rational approach’ erode the previously sacrosanct status of the Bible (15). The volume’s geographical focus is likewise vindicated, since this shift can indeed be said to have taken place ‘in the period and geography’ covered here, ‘the Dutch Protestant world of the seventeenth century’ (3).

The programmatic formulation of these general ambitions and conclusions does, however, present a slightly misleading impression of the volume’s actual contents. Few of the essays presented here lead directly or unproblematically to these conclusions. Those that do present the matter in such stark terms, such as Jonathan Israel’s reiteration of his views regarding Spinoza’s importance, for the most part indicate their proximity to the
historiography this volume is said to be intended to replace. The majority of the erudite and wide-ranging contributions instead begin to indicate an increasingly varied and complex understanding of seventeenth-century ‘biblical philology’. A series of the essays demonstrate the ‘orthodox’ were either unbothered by, or confident enough to reject, philology’s incursions: David Kromhout and Irene E. Zwiep’s subtle essay on the Bible in Jewish Amsterdam confirms the findings of other recent work that shows the real story was not the undermining of the Bible’s authority by new criticism, but the reappropriation of the biblical text at the centre of Jewish life and worship; Aza Goudriaan counters the prevailing image of Gisbert Voetius as an arch-dogmatist by revealing his appreciation of biblical criticism, including, and notably, that by Catholic scholars; Bernd Roling demonstrates that mainstream practitioners of physico-theology continued to uphold miraculous interpretations of Joshua 10:1-10 far into the eighteenth century.

As a whole, the essays thus demonstrate the limits of studies of biblical philology in the seventeenth century framed in terms of whether or not they eroded the Bible’s authority. Those pieces that briefly gesture in conclusion to this question, such as Dirk van Miert’s learned study of Daniel Heinsius and Hugo Grotius, Anthony Ossa-Richardson’s elegant essay on the hitherto unduly overlooked figure of André Rivet, Benjamin Fisher’s study of Menasseh ben Israel’s chronological scholarship, and Jean Bernier’s investigation of Pierre Bayle’s work, are to be welcomed more for the increasingly complicated stories they begin to tell about their subjects’ concerns: Grotius’s use of biblical criticism to support specific theological designs; Rivet’s intricate assemblage of historical material to combat Roberto Bellarmino; Menasseh ben Israel’s engagement with contemporary Christian scholars; and Bayle’s growing appreciation for, and selective redeployment of, the results of biblical scholarship. This general observation likewise holds for those essays that focus less on philology per se, including Kęstutis Daugirda’s study of Remonstrant hermeneutics, Maria-Cristina Pitassi’s patient exposition of Bayle’s relationship to Arminianism in the Commentaire philosophique (1686), and Martin Mulsow’s demonstration of how the Bible could be used and appropriated to political purposes.

At their strongest, the essays in this volume begin to put forward intriguing and significant new interpretations of seventeenth-century biblical scholarship. Jetze Touber’s learned and well-argued essay puts forward an intriguing tripartite division of later seventeenth-century Dutch intellectual life, demonstrating that Spinoza’s work was less notable in itself, than in how it struck a series of hitherto unappreciated fault lines within the Dutch Reformed Church. Anthony Grafton’s striking essay reveals how Spinoza, far from
innovating in his work, was in fact often reliant on much older sources, such as Jacob ben Chajim Ibn Adonijah’s introduction to the Rabbinic Bible (1524-1525). In the standout contribution, Scott Mandelbrote’s remarkably erudite and thoughtful essay paints a novel picture of a well-known late seventeenth-century figure, Anthony van Dale. Mandelbrote’s wide-ranging piece, which comes to focus on van Dale’s engagement with debates surrounding the ‘Letter of Aristeas’, excels in decisively replacing earlier views on van Dale’s debts to radical philosophy and other such sources by instead establishing the local religious context of van Dale’s work in his Mennonite community.

All told, the essays presented here do fairly represent the current state of research in this field, albeit not in the way the programmatic surveys initially suggest. Instead, they reveal a snapshot of a subject in rapid transition, one increasingly focused on new – and more interesting – questions, which have the promise to alter our understanding of early modern biblical scholarship.

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