

# Deconstructing the Bible: Understanding the Crisis in Biblical Interpretation

## Outline Part 2

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### I. **The English Reformation**

[grounded in Scott Hahn and Benjamin Wiker's important volume, *Politicizing the Bible: The Roots of Historical Criticism and the Secularization of Scripture 1300-1700*; Eamon Duffy's *The Stripping of the Altars*; and Gerard Wegemer's, *Thomas More: A Portrait of Courage*]

#### A. King Henry VIII (1491-1547)

1. Surrounded by advisors who became instruments of the Protestant reform/revolt within his realm.
2. Many of his key advisors, who would play an important role as apologists defending his regime, were influenced by the works of Marsilius of Padua, John Wycliffe, and Machiavelli.
3. St. Thomas More was a faithful advisor and servant to the King, but eventually, his advice was no longer able to prevent the King from turning down the wrong path.
4. King Henry VIII wanted Anne Boleyn as a concubine. She refused, saying she would only be with Henry if he would make her queen. Henry was already married to his brother's (now dead) former wife, Queen Catherine of Aragon. He had had to get a dispensation in order to marry her in the first place. The pope refused him another dispensation, explaining that he could not marry Anne Boleyn, that Catherine was his true wife. St. Thomas More tried to advise him the same.
5. Biblical scholars and theologians from across Europe from across Europe were sought to way in on the controversy.
6. Henry argued, following his advisors, that he was illicitly married to Catherine, and that therefore God was punishing him by not granting him any male offspring. Thus, he needed to divorce Catherine, and could marry Anne Boleyn.

7. Henry split from the Catholic Church, declared himself head of both church and state within England, and “married” Anne Boleyn *prior* to divorcing Catherine.
8. He liquidated the monasteries and gave over much of the wealth to his noble family supporters.
9. This history proves important because England then provided the seedbed for Deistic biblical criticism which would aid the march toward modern biblical criticism.

## II. The Seventeenth Century

[grounded in Scott Hahn and Benjamin Wiker’s important volume, *Politicizing the Bible: The Roots of Historical Criticism and the Secularization of Scripture 1300-1700*; My own, *Three Sceptics and the Bible: La Peyrère, Hobbes, Spinoza and the Reception of Modern Biblical Criticism*; My own forthcoming volume, *Theology, Politics, and Exegesis*; and William Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence*]

### A. The “Wars of Religion”

1. We typically hear about the violent conflicts of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century as “wars of religion.” The work of scholars, especially William Cavanaugh [“‘A Fire Strong Enough to Consume the House’: The Wars of Religion and the Rise of the State,” *Modern Theology* (1995); and *The Myth of Religious Violence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009)] has shown the problems with this view.
2. “Religion” as we now define it (as separable from the “secular”) was only then being redefined [see here also Andrew Jones, *Before Church and State: A Study of Social Order in the Sacramental Kingdom of St. Louis IX* (Emmaus Academic, 2017)]
3. Many of the battles were primarily between Catholics and other Catholics. E.g., the last 15 years (the bloodiest ones) of the Thirty Years’ War was fought primarily between the Habsburgs and the Bourbons—the two largest Catholic dynasties of Europe. In what sense were they “religious”? Protestant often teamed up on either side.
4. But, these so-called “religious” wars became the justification for modern “secular” politics. The argument was that we need a secular state (or state religion that everyone would follow—whosever realm, his religion) to avoid conflict, like the “religious wars.”

5. This also became the justification for the newer “scientific” approach to biblical interpretation.

B. Isaac La Peyrère (c. 1596-1676)

1. French Calvinist likely from Jewish ancestry.
2. Served as secretary, diplomat, and spy for Prince of Condé (Calvinist at the time).
3. Created a theo-political messianic vision for the king of France (initially thought to later be the Prince of Condé, as a Protestant king).
4. Queen Christina of Sweden (1626-1689), who had been patroness of French philosopher René Descartes (1596-1650), became La Peyrère’s patroness to help him publish his theo-political work of biblical interpretation, *Prae-Adamitae* (Pre-Adamites, translated into English as *Men Before Adam*).
5. Queen Christina, England’s Oliver Cromwell, and Condé were involved in a plot to oust Louis XIV as king of France and place Condé on the throne. The plot failed because no one could agree on who would start things going. La Peyrère was in the middle of this controversy. Condé’s family likely had converted to Calvinism, along with many other noble families in France, after seeing the financial success of English noble families following the Protestant reform. Except that in the case of France, Louis XIV would have had less authority over his church/state had he left the Catholic Church. France already had concordats allowing Louis (the king) to appoint bishops and keep money that would have gone to Rome.
6. La Peyrère’s biblical interpretation served these political ends. He did a number of things to destabilize the biblical text—or its authority (or the authority of its traditional interpretation). One of the things he did was to challenge the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch. This was viewed then as important because it was a means of denying God’s intervention in history—specifically in the history of Israel. It was thought that if Moses wasn’t responsible for the Pentateuch, then perhaps God never appeared to him in the first place. Perhaps the Ten Commandments were just made up—a means of controlling the people—as Machiavelli would have argued.

7. La Peyrère ends up converting to Catholicism under pressure, and becomes a member of the Oratorians.

#### C. Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679)

1. Important political theorist. Influenced by Machiavelli and others. Argued for the status quo in English—that the sovereign should be head of both church and state within their realm.
2. When the English Civil War was about to break out, so he fled to France in self-imposed exile.
3. In France he spent time at the Prince of Condé's Chateau, where and when La Peyrère was around—even though there is no hard evidence of the two ever having met or spoken. They shared many, many, many of the same friends.
4. It was here in France that Hobbes wrote his most famous and far-reaching political work, *Leviathan*.
5. Much of *Leviathan* deals with biblical interpretation. His biblical interpretation clearly supported his politics. One of the arguments he makes is that state-appointed interpreters should be the arbitrators of biblical interpretation. He challenges the notion that Moses wrote the Pentateuch (concedes only some of Deuteronomy may go back to Moses). Relied upon three of the many arguments La Peyrère had made, but very weak arguments that only deal with three verses, not necessarily the entire Pentateuch.
6. Although *Leviathan* was published in 1651, prior to La Peyrère's work (1655 in Latin, 1656 in English), La Peyrère's had already circulated and was copied (long prior to publication) in the 1640s and was already receiving published refutation long before Hobbes's *Leviathan* was completed.

#### D. Baruch or Benedict Spinoza (1632-1677)

1. Raised Jewish in Amsterdam, the son of Portuguese Jews in exile.
2. Was excommunicated from the Jewish community in Amsterdam.
  - a. The reasons for his excommunication are not completely known.

- b. Often it is thought that Spinoza was banned from the Jewish community for theological/philosophical reasons, like those expressed in his more mature works.
  - c. It seems clear, from the archival work of the historian Odette Vlessing, that Spinoza's ban can be explained by the twin facts of his bringing embarrassment on the Jewish community for blaming his dead father (a prominent member of the synagogue) for his debt, and also going outside the bounds of the Jewish community to have his debt cancelled. The Sephardic Jewish community in Amsterdam had some real autonomy in that they were allowed to take care of many political/governmental matters among themselves, including dealing with debts, etc. Spinoza went to the secular Amsterdam authorities to get a formal guardian (although in his twenties already) and thereby cancel his debts to the members of the Jewish community. This could have been seen as a threat to their autonomy.
3. After his excommunication, Spinoza lashed out against the Jewish community in vengeance (my interpretation) through his heterodox writings which were harsher to the Old Testament than to the New Testament.
  4. Spinoza befriended a number of heterodox Protestants, especially Collegiants and Quakers. He wrote many works for them.
    - a. His first work was on Descartes' philosophy
    - b. He also wrote, for them, a Hebrew grammar.
  5. Spinoza was influenced by a number of sources
    - a. Francis Bacon (1561-1626) influenced him, so that just as Bacon tried to develop a history of nature by tearing it apart, so too Spinoza hoped to develop a natural history of Scripture, by tearing it apart.
    - b. Descartes also influenced Spinoza, who became quite familiar with his philosophy.
      - 1) Descartes espoused a methodic doubt—doubt everything that can be doubted.

- 2) As Hahn and Wiker especially have shown, Descartes tried to mathematize the natural world.
  - 3) Descartes also emphasized the necessity of coming up with a method for understanding anything.
  - c. Hobbes likely influenced Spinoza. Spinoza owned a copy of Hobbes' political work, *De Cive*. It is also likely that Spinoza was aware of Hobbes' *Leviathan* after it was translated into Latin---it appears that Spinoza did not know English.
  - d. La Peyrère is another likely influence, since Spinoza had his work in his library as well. The two also may have met (as the work of Richard Popkin seems to indicate).
6. Spinoza published his famous *Tractatus theologico-politicus* (*Theological Political Treatise*) in 1670.
- a. Spinoza's explicit purpose of his *Tractatus* is to end conflicts he considered "religious," like the Thirty Years' War. He thought that if he could devise a "scientific" method for reading and interpreting the Bible, then violent religious conflict would be brought to an end.
  - b. In his *Tractatus* Spinoza showed himself a true disciple of Machiavelli (whose work he knew well) in engaging the Bible from a position of skepticism, attributing various motives to political purposes.
  - c. The 7<sup>th</sup> chapter of his *Tractatus* laid out his method, which appears praiseworthy, until you realize that the complete histories and information he requires biblical interpreters to uncover is an impossible task. He maintains all of this historical, cultural, and linguistic information must be gathered first, prior to any theological interpretation. Such an impossible task was by design, as David Dungan (*A History of the Synoptic Problem*) demonstrated.
  - d. One central part (and very controversial at that time) was Spinoza's arguments against the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch, which may have been inspired by La Peyrère (and perhaps Hobbes).
7. Spinoza's work became incredibly influential, as Jonathan Israel especially has shown. Even to this day, the method Spinoza laid out in

his *Tractatus* is by and large followed in modern biblical criticism. On his influence in the Enlightenment where, contrary to the opinions of so many scholars, Spinoza's thought was debated in virtually every area on virtually every topic. See Jonathan Israel, *Radical Enlightenment* (Oxford University Press, 2001); and Jonathan Israel, *Enlightenment Contested* (Oxford University Press, 2006).

E. Fr. Richard Simon (1638-1712)

1. Simon was a French Catholic priest and member of the Oratorians.
2. In 1678 he published his *Histoire critique du Vieux Testament* (*Critical History of the Old Testament*).
  - a. His *Histoire critique* was ostensibly a response to the skeptical biblical interpretation of La Peyrère, Hobbes, and especially Spinoza.
  - b. In reality, Simon used Spinoza's method and took it further, multiplying greatly the problems Spinoza identified with the text of the Bible.
  - c. The *Histoire critique* was also intended as a defense of Catholic tradition against the Calvinist scholars with whom Simon was in contact.
    - 1) His arguments in favor of Catholic tradition, however, were fairly weak.
    - 2) Simon basically multiplied what he saw as problems and contradictions within the biblical text, and said, to Protestants, what amounted to: "This Bible is riddled with all manner of errors. If you want to believe such a book is inspired by God, you need Catholic tradition which says it's inspired. Otherwise, you're left with a book that is full of contradictions." In other words, the Bible appears to be full of errors and falsehoods, but the Catholic Church says it's the inspired Word of God. So, despite all appearances to the contrary, it really is the inspired Word of God. But no one would ever have come even close to saying anything remotely like that, had it not been for arbitrary tradition.
3. Simon befriended La Peyrère among the Oratorians, and La Peyrère inspired Simon's work.

4. Simon got in trouble for his work. When he was asked to submit a copy, he knew the questioning of Mosaic authorship would get him in trouble, so he removed those portions from his text before sending in the copy for examination...but he forgot to remove that from the table of contents, so his book got condemned anyway and was burned on fires.
5. Simon was asked to stop publishing. So, instead, he began publishing his works that were banned, in the Dutch Republic (the Netherlands of Spinoza).
6. He was eventually expelled from the Oratorians.

### III. **The Reception of 17<sup>th</sup> Century Skeptical Biblical Criticism at the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century and in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century**

[grounded in Scott Hahn and Benjamin Wiker's important volume, *Politicizing the Bible: The Roots of Historical Criticism and the Secularization of Scripture 1300-1700*; My own forthcoming volume, *Theology, Politics, and Exegesis*; and Jonathan Sheehan, *The Enlightenment Bible*; as well as the forthcoming volume I am co-authoring with Scott Hahn]

- A. John Locke (1632-1704) was an important source of biblical criticism in England. He was very much influenced by Richard Simon's work, and had not one but two copies of Simon's *Histoire critique* in his library, one of which he heavily annotated.
- B. John Toland (1632-1704), an English Deist, was an important conduit of these biblical methods. Toland was very much like the picture of Averroism we get where he believed certain truths were only accessible to the philosopher, to the specialists. Deism held that God was off in the distance and was not a personal God; He was a watchmaker who set things going and then stepped back out of the picture.
- C. Johann Salomo Semler (1725-1791) was an important German biblical scholar in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.
  1. Semler brought a number of Deist biblical scholarly works into the German speaking world.
  2. Semler also brought the work of Richard Simon into the German speaking world.

3. Semler also argued for a complete separation of theological and biblical scholarship, where biblical scholarship would be more historical, without theological influence.

#### IV. **The Beginnings of Eighteenth Century Biblical Scholarship**

[grounded in My own forthcoming volume, *Theology, Politics, and Exegesis*; and Jonathan Sheehan, *The Enlightenment Bible*; Michael Legaspi, *The Death of Scripture and the Rise of Biblical Studies*; as well as the forthcoming volume I am co-authoring with Scott Hahn]

##### A. From Patrons to University

1. In the seventeenth century, much of early modern biblical interpretation flourished either as the result of individual patrons (like La Peyrère's work) or was written for specific individuals (like much of Spinoza's work).
2. In the eighteenth century, Enlightenment universities became the new patrons supporting biblical scholarship.

##### B. Johann David Michaelis (1717-1791)

1. Michaelis became supremely important in this century by transforming biblical interpretation into modern biblical studies.
2. Michaelis had studied classical Greek and Latin, and he wanted to make Hebrew another classical study.
3. Classics (Greek and Latin) had undergone a complete transformation at the hands of Johann Matthias Gesner (1691-1761) and Christian Gottlob Heyne (1729-1812).
  - a. The Philhellenic movement and Neo-Humanist Movements attempted to utilize the classic past for contemporary Germany.
  - b. The study of Classical antiquity became important for recovering the Greek and Roman past for the Germanic present.
  - c. Germany was severing ties with its Catholic past, and even Christian past, and attempting to recover civic virtues from

pagan Greece, pagan Rome, and even their own Germanic pre-Christian pagan past.

4. Michaelis tried to do something similar with Hebrew antiquity. He made the Old Testament appear to be foreign, as a dead artifact from an ancient Hebrew past. Then, he wanted to mine it for civic virtues, much as his classical professor colleagues and teachers had done/were doing for classical antiquity.
5. Through his travels to England, and especially through the influence of the English Robert Lowth (1710-1787), who transformed the Old Testament prophets into mere secular antique Hebrew poets—Michaelis brought this English biblical criticism to the German speaking world.
6. Michaelis thus transformed biblical interpretation into a work of secular history, cultural studies, and philology. This does not mean he was not theologically interested—he was. He held to traditional positions like the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch (and even the rabbinic tradition of the Mosaic authorship of the Book of Job). He simply, like Semler, wanted to separate the work of theology of biblical studies. This ensured biblical studies a place at the increasingly secular Enlightenment universities.
7. Jean Astruc's (1684-1766) 1753 work in defense of the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch, *Conjectures sur la Genèse (Conjectures about Genesis)*, opened the door for the development of the Documentary Hypothesis by arguing for literary evidence (different vocabulary, style, etc.) that Moses relied upon earlier sources to compile Genesis and the very beginning of Exodus.
  - a. Michaelis argued against Astruc, because he thought Astruc had gone too far, and that his method was somewhat arbitrary.
  - b. Michaelis' student Johann Gottfried Eichhorn (1752-1827) was made aware of Astruc's work through Michaelis' critique of Astruc, and thus Eichhorn was able to carry Astruc further in developing the Documentary Hypothesis, which revived the skepticism of La Peyrère, Hobbes, Spinoza, and Simon, building upon the methodological framework of Spinoza and Simon, with a more thoroughgoing and careful critique.