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Review

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Reviews

THE BIBLE: ITS CRITICISM, INTERPRETATION AND USE — IN 16TH AND 17TH CENTURY ENGLAND, by Dean Freiday. Catholic and Quaker Studies No. 4, 1110 Wildwood Avenue, Manasquan, N.J. 08736, 1979. 195 pp., \$8.50 plus \$1 postage and handling.

The intellectual and spiritual agitation of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England is nowhere more keenly felt than in its theory and practice of scriptural interpretation. Dean Freiday's careful study successfully introduces the reader to the beginnings of our own methods of biblical interpretation, and at the same time summarizes many of that era's broader themes. In the process of examining how Scripture was interpreted, he explores the democratic impulse of the Protestant Reformation and the Enlightenment passion for classical antiquity, two powerful and far-reaching forces which effectively undermined the "consensus of the ages" and opened the way for "modernity," a new self-understanding to which a non-traditional religious consciousness was related as both cause and effect.

For Christians, the hermeneutical question, the arduous task of properly interpreting the written witness of the early church in terms of and in spite of prevailing culture, and properly applying that witness to various immediate circumstances, is nearly as old as Scripture itself. But scriptural exegesis took on special importance for the first Protestant reformers and their heirs, since the Reformation's vitality and claim to spiritual authority had a common root — the rediscovery of the Bible. Anglicans, reform-minded would-be purifiers of many persuasions, radicals who left the established church, in fact *all* parties in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England, inevitably appealed to Scripture to support the distinctive aspects of their own practice and proclamation. Biblical authority was important for every Christian group, and amid the Renaissance interest in ancient manuscripts and the excitement created by early modern science and philosophy, Christian scholars returned to an ancient question: "How should the Bible be interpreted?"

One would therefore expect to find many books on the subject of early modern hermeneutics. But such is not the case. Books about the history of the interpretation of scripture typically move from sketchy treatments of patristic, medieval, and early Reformation notables to Schleiermacher, Strauss, and F. C. Bauer. Kümmel's excellent history of New Testament interpretation, for instance, devotes less than fifty of its more than five hundred pages to the first seventeen centuries, and the *Cambridge History of the Bible* largely ignores England's contributions in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Whatever the reasons for this hiatus in interpretation history literature, there is clearly a need for a book like this one. There is simply nothing else like it in print.

Recognizing the bulk and diversity of this era's theological literature, Dean Freiday has chosen not to attempt a comprehensive theoretical framework supported by examples from various writers. No single line of development is proposed, no central motif suggested. Instead, he has supplied just enough background material at the outset to allow eleven important writers to speak intelligibly. In the early chapters, special attention is given to England's inheritance from Rome and the first reformers, and to the humanist interest in ancient texts. John Colet and William Tyndale are introduced first, because they were pioneers in "plain sense" interpretation, the sort usually taken for granted today, but which in the sixteenth century represented a bold departure from the traditional multi-level, imaginative approaches to Scripture refined by Peter Lombard and Thomas Aquinas in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries and common even before the time of Origen and Augustine.

Thomas Cranmer and Richard Hooker are known as the sixteenth-century architects of the English church. The *Book of Common Prayer* and *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* were early accepted as the bases of Anglican theology and order. Cranmer rejected any "novel doctrine," ideas not grounded in the apostolic era, and spent much energy making a new English translation of the Bible available in every parish. Hooker stressed "natural law," but also considered the Scriptures to be the authoritative, final deposit of truth. Hugo Grotius was an influential Arminian scholar who contributed much to the new emphasis on grammatical and historical interpretation. John Wilkins not only helped found the Royal Society and introduce the Copernican theory and empirical/inductive research into England, he wrote important works on preaching, the Bible, linguistics, and even science fiction!

John Bunyan, a "mechanick" preacher and author of the well-known *Pilgrim's Progress*, stands out from the small circle of well-educated scholars assembled by the author. Bunyan's vivid, apocalyptic-laced allegory is a contrast to both the typically abstract flights of traditional spiritualizing and the more straightforward "common sense" style then ascendant at Oxford and Cambridge. Richard Baxter worked to build a national church which would be both inclusive and concerned for holiness. His moderate theology, prolific writing, and diligent catechizing made Baxter an influential pastor. With John Owen, the Protestant tendency to deify the letter of Scripture reaches the level of bibliolatry, the author thinks. For Owen, the Holy Spirit is found only in the Bible, which has an inherent efficacy because of the Spirit's imprint.

The last interpreters considered are Quaker Samuel Fisher and Richard Simon, a Catholic. For Fisher, biblical interpretation is rightly done only within the context of Christian experience, of obedience to the "mind of Christ," faith lived out as directed by Christ as present teacher. Fisher sought to avoid both the biblicism and the rationalism prevalent in seventeenth-century England. Simon, a French Oratorian, is notable not only for his pioneering rejection of Mosaic authorship of the first five books of the Old Testament, but for his modern understanding that biblical writers were not passive penmen and his unwillingness to recognize biblical authority in scientific matters. The final chapter supplies additional background about the nature of revelation and the new philosophical and scientific understandings of the period. Some enduring insights drawn from these early modern interpreters are sketched in the concluding paragraphs.

The Bible opens with this statement of purpose: "to see the Catholic and Quaker contributions of the era in proper perspective." Given the magnitude of this task, the book is remarkably successful. Do not be misled by its slender appearance, which belies the amount of compact prose inside. Dean Freiday offers the reader condensed, but not predigested, information about eleven early modern writers and the world they helped shape. The opening sections which introduce each interpreter work well in making the historical milieu more vivid, and in providing material especially relevant to an understanding of the particular writer. Topics explored in these opening sections include: humanism, Anglican history, church-state theory, Arminianism, "mechanick" preaching, the new science, Quaker use of Scripture, and Roman Catholic biblical

interpretation. Each of the thinkers chosen by the author made major theological contributions to this period, and the inclusion of the little-known Richard Simon is especially welcome. The writers are treated sympathetically, and for the most part are allowed to speak in their own words.

Only John Owen fails to win the author's admiration. It is true that Owen strongly emphasizes the Spirit's use of means, especially the letter of Scripture, but the charge of bibliolatry misses the subtleties of his Scripture/Spirit/human capacity theory. Rather than attempt a comprehensive survey, Dean Freiday has selected an appropriate "broadly cross-sectional approach" to the period, but the six important writers chosen to represent the middle and late seventeenth century are not, taken together, indicative of the period's theological spectrum. It could be argued that the ideas put forward then by Socinian rationalists and Cambridge Platonists touched only the educated elite. But neither a "spiritual Puritan" such as Rous or Saltmarsh, nor a Latitudinarian writer like Stillingfleet or Tillotson can be excluded on this basis. Over all, the book lacks the "middle ground" important for connecting the general information about the period and the words by and about individual writers. Further research is needed to draw lines of comparison between the Quaker and Catholic modes of biblical interpretation, and relate them to other seventeenth-century approaches.

Dean Freiday has previously given us a readable edition of Barclay's *Apology*, and now he has made an important contribution to the field of interpretation history. The awareness that hermeneutics, like the Bible itself, has a history brings with it a sense of humility, for the obviously conditional character of earlier efforts to interpret Scripture faithfully is a reminder that today's understandings, as important as they are for this generation of Christians, are not final. Historical awareness brings a sense of gratitude as well, an appreciation for those who have labored, and are laboring, to establish the biblical texts and to interpret them in such a way that their power to counsel and inspire is continually renewed.

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