

Dirk van Miert, *The Emancipation of Biblical Philology in the Dutch Republic, 1590-1670* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018, xxiii + 296 pp., ISBN 978 0 19 880393 5).

The thesis which Van Miert defends in this book is that biblical philology in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries *in the long run* made a considerable contribution to undermining the authority of the bible. In this thesis the words ‘in the long run’ are of great importance. Before I examine this thesis, I shall discuss the nature of the book in general terms and look more closely at the idea of emancipation in its title.

In principle this book offers a history of biblical scholarship in the Dutch Republic from Joseph Scaliger to Baruch Spinoza, and it places that history firmly in the context of the ever-changing confessional, political and social debate of the time. Among others, it discusses Scaliger, Gomarus, Drusius, the States’ Translation, Daniel Heinsius, Grotius, Salmasius, reactions to La Peyre, Isaac Vossius and, briefly right at the end, Spinoza. Van Miert claims that Scaliger laid the foundations for almost a century of philologically and historically oriented biblical scholarship in the Dutch Republic and elsewhere. What is instructive in Van Miert’s argument is that he brings out Scaliger’s appreciation for both Gomarus and Arminius. Formerly Scaliger was claimed as one of the moderates, but that is mistaken. Van Miert quite correctly describes how Arminius indeed made use of philological observations on the bible, but exclusively in the service of his systematic theology. Van Miert also gives us an appreciation, in my view an accurate one, of the biblical philology practised by Drusius, Gomarus and Grotius, that of the eccentrics Salmasius and Isaac Vossius, and several others. Perhaps Coccejus deserved more attention: he has left a massive corpus of exegetical works, in which Greek and Semitic philology and knowledge of rabbinic literature play an important role. But Van Miert demonstrates very clearly that biblical philology was cultivated as intensively and as capably by stricter Reformed scholars as it was by moderates and Arminians. Sound biblical scholarship was not the prerogative of the moderates. Van Miert constantly points out, quite rightly, how far all these scholars placed their biblical studies at the service of their theology or their wider ideology. Practitioners of pure, disinterested biblical scholarship were rare in the period under discussion, but there were some: Scaliger and Drusius, and certainly Louis de Dieu.

According to Van Miert, the term ‘emancipation’ in the title of his book implies that in the seventeenth century the study of the bible developed into something ‘central to the Dutch Golden Age’ (13). Yet it is not immediately

clear, what 'emancipation' and 'central' mean here. Emancipation from what? A central position in what? I believe that Van Miert means three things, which I shall reconstruct here, but there is something to be said about each of them. 1) Biblical philology became a very important activity *in the field of the humanities* in the first half of the seventeenth century. But in my opinion this does not mean that it became a singularly important discipline in the whole academic terrain, which comprised mathematics and science, law, medicine and theology. One might well say that biblical philology earned itself a respectable place alongside classical and oriental philology. Van Miert also means, 2) that biblical philology gained ground within the more limited field of theology, e.g. in exegetical teaching and biblical commentaries. There is some truth in this. But here too, one must qualify this by pointing out that within theology, philology remained entirely subservient to doctrinal theology, dogmatic exegesis, controversial theology and practical ethical polemics, such as that about wearing long hair. It was not until after 1800 that the historical interpretation of the Old and New Testaments became an independent discipline within faculties of theology. Finally, 3) Van Miert means that biblical philology gradually developed from an academic discipline practised in Latin into a scholarly method outside academia (Grotius) and finally into a practice conducted in the vernacular (Dutch and French), in marginalia and pamphlets. Biblical philology underwent a kind of social emancipation.

Van Miert's notion of emancipation is thus somewhat ambiguous and open to discussion. But if the reservations and explanations above are kept in mind, I can live with it.

Let us turn now to the main thesis: did biblical philology contribute to weakening the authority of the Scriptures? Van Miert argues, very cautiously, that this was not necessarily the case, or not really detectable, for the practitioners of biblical philology up to about 1670. But ultimately this philology had produced so much criticism regarding the text, language and contents of the bible that Spinoza, whose philosophy had no more need for the bible, could give up the bible without scruples, referring specifically to the accumulated criticism of it. I can agree broadly with this view, but feel that a few caveats are in order. I shall name three.

a) In the first place, anyone who speaks of the authority of the Scriptures and its decline, must clarify precisely who still felt bound by that authority and for whom it lost its force. For authority can wane at any given moment for one person or group, while still being recognised in full by others. Such authority never disappears at the same time for everyone. This differentiation in society and over time deserves some attention. One must also clearly distinguish exactly what it is that is acknowledged as authoritative, or not. Someone can deny the historical and cosmological authority of the bible outright, but still maintain that he or she finds in it the *necessaria ad salutem* (the things that one must believe in order to be saved), and

therefore recognise the bible as God's authoritative Word. In short: to what precisely does that authority refer? This too deserves to be discussed with the due distinctions and caution.

b) Secondly, many biblical philologists of the seventeenth century explicitly testify that their textual criticism does not impair the authority of the Scriptures. Louis Cappel declared that recognising textual variants in the bible in no way endangered the authority as the Word of God and the sacred text. Daniel Heinsius stated that signalling textual variants did not damage the credibility of those things which it was necessary to believe, *quae necessario credenda sunt*. Grotius argued that the passage about the woman taken in adultery in John 7:53-8:11, was not originally part of John's gospel, but in his opinion it was still authoritative, because it was historically reliable and the church had recognised its authority. For Courcel too, textual variation was not a threat to the Christian faith. Some modern historians are in my opinion rather naive when they imagine that textual criticism or placing the bible in its historical context necessarily damaged the authority of the bible for researchers.

How was such damage avoided? Ultimately because criticism and faith are two different linguistic fields, two separate categories of discourse, or two branches of sport. One discourse can function without damaging the other at all, and vice-versa. A good tennis player who is also a good hockey player does not in practice confuse one sport with the other, if only because he or she plays them at different times. The rules and practices of one do not affect the rules and practices of the other. Moreover, philology and religion are activities of completely different natures: the first poses critical questions, the other is a matter of trust. Both activities run best when they are not mixed up with each other. Modern historians are wrong to think that scholarship and religion must agree and coincide with each other. In practice this is not so. Experienced specialists in the field of biblical studies knew just as well how to avoid this in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as they do in the twenty-first. Could it not be that not all modern historians are aware that scholarship and religion function as distinct separate symbolic universes, without necessarily damaging each other?

c) I exclude Dirk van Miert from those modern historians here, because in the fine last chapter of his book he makes several striking remarks on this theme. He observes that to believe that the enormous body of historical information on the text and contents of the bible 'principally undermined biblical authority, is easier to argue theoretically than to prove empirically' (235). This is very true; the decrease of authority simply cannot be verified. He also says 'Historians did not automatically dismantle the authority of ancient texts' (233). Again, very true. He also says that it would be wrong 'to assume that biblical philology *inevitably* led to the erosion of scriptural authority' (236). That too is correct. He even says, 'if we look at individual scholars, there was no straightforward relation between biblical philology

and the desacralization of the Bible' (245). This is absolutely correct. If one holds fast to this, that is if one does not blandly assume that criticism must immediately entail a risk to the authority of the Scriptures, then I am prepared to admit that the cumulative criticism of the seventeenth century *in the long run* was in fact a reason for Spinoza to feel justified in rejecting the authority of the bible. The same applies to Reimarus around 1750. But they had first taken the philosophical decision to reject any revelation. Compared to that philosophical decision, the biblical criticism of the preceding century was a fact of limited importance, no more than an argument a posteriori.

Conclusion: Van Miert has written an interesting book, which contains a great deal of truth. His main thesis continues to raise questions and deserves to be weighed with caution and prudence. But Van Miert shows that he is well aware of the need for this caution and prudence. I congratulate him and his readers on this learned study, especially the final chapter.

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