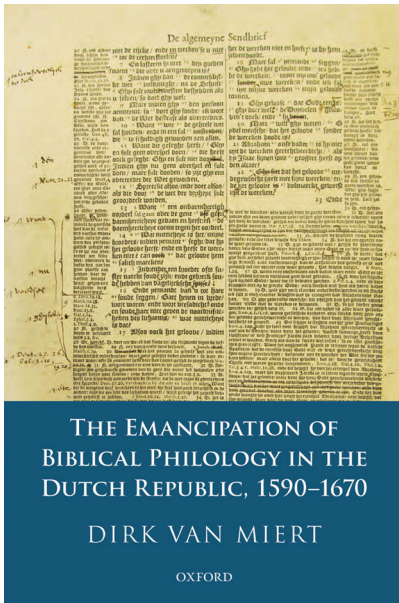


Review

Dirk van Miert, *The Emancipation of Biblical Philology in the Dutch Republic, 1590-1670*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 320 pp. ISBN 9780198803935.

Jetze Touber, *Spinoza and Biblical Philology in the Dutch Republic, 1660-1710*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 336 pp. ISBN 9780198805007.



For many students of literature, philosophy, theology, and intellectual history, Baruch Spinoza's 1670 *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* serves as an introduction to biblical philology *tout court*. Spinoza claims to investigate and interpret Scripture in a manner that parallels his approach to nature; he assembles, in turn, a history of Scripture in an effort to interpret the text on its own terms, *ex sola Scriptura*, with renewed precision and clarity. In the process, Spinoza exposes fundamental problems concerning the authorship of various books and the composition and historical transmission of Scripture at large. He uses his knowledge of Hebrew to show inconsistencies and anachronisms across the text, to undermine established interpretations of Scripture, and to foreground problems of chronology and historicity. He reveals Scripture as an imaginative (read: *not rational*) enterprise as well

as an unreliable source of knowledge concerning history, nature, or (arguably) ethics. His claims are remarkable and the book was famously incendiary, particularly where he relegated religion at large, and Scripture in particular (save for those few notes about loving God and one's neighbors), to the realm of politics, power, and obedience, to say nothing of his treatments of miracles, prophecy, or the Hebrew Republic. Spinoza's devastating accounts of faith and obedience take shape by way of philology, and so, for many readers who recognize the import and ingenuity of the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, it is all too easy to assume that Spinoza pioneers a new method, as if his is not *a* but *the* pivotal work in a history of biblical philology. The conclusions he reaches in the

Tractatus Theologico-Politicus seem exciting, idiosyncratic, and original, like his philosophy in the *Ethics*. In many ways they are, so for many readers his philological method seems equally original and idiosyncratic.

But this is not necessarily the case. Spinoza's claims are indubitably radical, and they evoked censure and correction and vitriol from many quarters across the Dutch Republic and beyond. But what is more difficult to parse is whether Spinoza's radical ideas proceeded from his philosophy or his textual and historical criticism. In their respective works – namely, *The Emancipation of Biblical Philology in the Dutch Republic, 1590-1670* and *Spinoza and Biblical Philology in the Dutch Republic, 1660-1710* – Dirk van Miert and Jetze Touber offer invaluable guidance, enabling readers to situate, with unparalleled insight, Spinoza's critical methods in a complex and dynamic history of biblical philology. Delivering careful and compelling treatments of the place of *critica sacra* in the Dutch Republic across the seventeenth century, van Miert and Touber allow us to understand not only whether Spinoza's claims are radical but also how and why. And while Spinoza is a figure that draws both works together, the greater achievement of both van Miert's and Touber's research is their comprehensive account of philology as it relates to philosophy and theology in the period. Each work is a major contribution to scholarship on the seventeenth century, either in training our attention to neglected arguments and archives or in revisiting, with startling context and clarity, familiar exegetical debates. And both van Miert and Touber resist the temptation to give an account of humanism or philology as necessarily radical, even if criticism generally renders the text of Scripture unstable, revealing human hands at work behind its divine façade, exposing problems and inconsistencies, inviting readers to historicize the foundational texts and institutions of Judaism and Christianity, challenging readers to reconsider the authority or example of Scripture for seventeenth-century audiences. Both works, instead, give a much more nuanced and satisfying account of biblical philology in the period, showing how key figures – some relatively familiar, some less so – negotiated the tensions between philology, theology, and philosophy, sometimes subordinating one to another, always recognizing the purchase and consequence of the *ars critica*. Together, van Miert and Touber offer a thorough and, frankly, inspiring introduction to biblical philology in the Dutch Republic, illustrating in great detail how textual and historical criticism changed religious scholarship and debate. They reveal the world to which Spinoza belongs and give us a clear sense of the ongoing debates over Scriptural authority and integrity in which he intervenes. Theirs is invaluable work, adding immeasurable depth to our understanding of philology and theology in the early modern Dutch Republic and in the Reformation world at large.

On its own, *The Emancipation of Biblical Philology in the Dutch Republic, 1590-1670* is a magnificent work, rigorous and detailed. Across eight chapters, as well as a substantive introduction and conclusion, Dirk van Miert demonstrates how philology afforded careful readers crucial resources, enabling them to marshal textual criticism, as well as the historical study of Biblical languages and the ancient world, towards various ends. Van Miert's abiding argument is that the historical-critical methods used to understand Scripture in the Dutch Republic during this period did not belong to any particular program or ideology. Despite the fact that philological approaches to Scripture often revealed the instability or flexibility of the text itself, philology was not necessarily used to undermine traditional

readings or the authority of the Dutch Reformed Church. On the contrary, representative figures from many different positions and confessions employed philology, sometimes to support established theological arguments, sometimes to challenge them, sometimes to shift the terms of religious debate altogether. In other words, the 'emancipation' in the title does not refer to any radical or heterodox program but rather to the degree to which philology emerged, over the course of a century, as a distinct enterprise, not necessarily in the service of any theology. For some, philology posed alternatives to divisive theological debates, enabling diverse readers to encounter Scripture by way of history, linguistics, or textual criticism not unlike that applied to ancient poetry or philosophy; for others, for these very reasons, it was seen as a threat.

Joseph Justus Scaliger, for instance, recognized the challenges that historical and textual criticism posed to so many of the assumptions about theology and authority held by his Reformed brethren. Philology threatened to expose the corruption of the text of Scripture, to trouble the canon of appropriate books and readings, and to undermine Latin and vernacular translations. It raised problems of authorship, historicity, and chronology, particularly after Scaliger and his acolytes corroborated Scripture with pagan texts, histories of Judaism, and documentary evidence of the early Church. Nevertheless, Scaligerian philology was not always employed against orthodox theological arguments. On the contrary, both the Contra-Remonstrant Franciscus Gomarus and the Remonstrant Hugo Grotius turned to philology to understand Scripture. The point, again, is not that philology necessarily challenged established theological positions; van Miert's brilliant point is that philology is distinct from theological disputation. As such, it was used to buttress orthodox and heterodox positions, even if it ultimately exposed the gaps between theological claims and the unstable Scripture used to support them. Van Miert's story is dynamic and his aim admirable. He unfolds the history of biblical philology in the Dutch Republic without sacrificing its complexity or resorting to easy assumptions about humanism, secularism, or inevitable modernity.

Working across languages and archives, van Miert ably illustrates how philology migrated from relatively effete academic discussions to robust public debates in the vernacular. For Scaliger, for instance, biblical philology was largely a private matter; he exercised caution, relegating his comments on Scripture to his correspondence. By the 1630s and 1640s, however, vernacular poems, pamphlets, and sermons all featured biblical philology, particularly in the so-called 'Hairy War', as preachers struggled to understand how Scripture should be interpreted in support of, or against, wigs, long hair, and 'love-locks'. Nevertheless, neither the resources nor the familiarity, nor the ambiguity of biblical philology are more evident than in the 1637 *Statenbijbel* – the vernacular translation of Scripture, authorized by the Synod of Dordrecht in 1618-1619 – a most influential work shaped by textual and historical criticism. As van Miert demonstrates in chapter three, editors and translators employed philological tools to render Scripture intelligible and accessible in Dutch, but they also attempted to subordinate philology to theology, using textual and historical criticism to fix meaning and ultimately support Contra-Remonstrant theological positions. This involved copious marginal notes that supported the translation by referring to original languages, variations, and historical details. The fruits of philological investigation were now evident to vernacular readers. As such, van Miert ultimately illustrates how

the States' Translation, in showcasing philology, at once supported an orthodox theology and exposed the instability of the text as well as the complexity of the enterprise itself. Over the course of the book, van Miert establishes, moreover, that generations of readers – scholars and vernacular readers – became increasingly familiar with biblical philology.

Aware of the volatility of biblical philology, many figures featured throughout *The Emancipation of Biblical Philology in the Dutch Republic* were reluctant to pursue historical or textual criticism beyond accepted theological positions, unwilling to risk confrontation with authorities or contradiction between Scripture and doctrine. Daniel Heinsius, for instance, challenged Theodore Beza's translations and interpretations of Scripture on philological grounds only. Even in his signal works on Scripture – the *Aristarchus sacer* and the *Sacrae exercitationes sacrae*, both of which testify not only to Heinsius' facility in languages and history but also to the increasingly prestigious place of biblical philology in academic circles – Heinsius stopped short of challenging the Dutch Reformed Church or Reformed orthodoxy at large. His aim was to buttress its authority, not challenge it. Hugo Grotius, however, was far more controversial than Heinsius, and certainly more ambitious. As van Miert makes clear, 'Grotius's commentary [the *Annotationes*] is the first attempt to explain the entire Bible against its historical, pagan background' (154). He readily employed philological tools to support his religious, political, and philosophical claims, particularly his minimal creed and ecumenical (or latitudinarian) visions. While Isaac de la Peyrère was also committed to a minimal creed that might unite otherwise factious Christians, he used biblical philology for remarkably different ends, revealing a complete split between his appeals to theological authority and his critical claims in the process. Across chapter seven van Miert explores how La Peyrère's controversial works, from his early *Du Rappel des Juifs* to his wild and incendiary *Praeadamitae*, were exercises in historical and textual criticism after Scaliger and Claude Saumaise (the subject of chapter six). When La Peyrère denied that Moses was the author of the Pentateuch, or when he recalibrated biblical chronology, and when he argued that there were human beings before Adam, he did so by comparing Scripture with histories of Judaism as well as pagan histories, by troubling established interpretations on linguistic and historical grounds – even after his paradoxical conversion to Roman Catholicism in 1656. Moreover, as contemporaries were incensed by La Peyrère's claims, they too waded into the waters of biblical philology, if only to prove him wrong. In the final sections of the work, van Miert illustrates how textual and historical criticism (and particularly chronology) became yet more autonomous in relation to theology, even as it was increasingly integral part of academic curricula, across the 1650s and 1660s. Theologians, in other words, needed to understand philology in order to counter the challenges critics posed, deliberately and unintentionally, to the authority of Scripture as well as its confessional milieu.

By 1670, then, philological arguments concerning the authority of Scripture, particularly those underlining biblical chronology and problems of translation, were relatively common among scholars and increasingly familiar to vernacular readers in the Dutch Republic. Figures like La Peyrère, Isaac Vossius, or Lodewijk Meier, with their controversial works, required opponents and discontents to acquaint themselves with historical and textual criticism, and to turn to philology to defend orthodox ideas, institutions, and practices. The authority of the Hebrew text; alternative translations of Scripture; the

chronology and geography of the Old Testament, in relation to the history of the New World; continuities across Judaism, early Christianity, and pagan religions and cultures; rationalist approaches to biblical miracles, inflected by textual criticism – such issues were discussed in classes, colleges, and coffee houses with greater frequency and intensity at mid-century. Biblical philology, moreover, was not merely employed to support or refute theological positions. Put another way: the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* was a controversial work, but Spinoza's turn to biblical philology was not in itself unique or original, nor were the ends to which he worked. Dutch audiences were well aware of the powers and challenges of historical and textual criticism and, by 1670, recognized Spinoza's as another in a series of philological exercises that threatened religious authority and the stability of Scripture itself.



SPINOZA AND BIBLICAL
PHILOLOGY IN THE DUTCH
REPUBLIC, 1660–1710

JETZE TOUBER

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Spinoza, both van Miert and Touber suggest, employed recognizable and relatively conventional philological tools and methods, albeit obscuring his debts to critics of the Bible since Scaliger in his prose. Where van Miert situates Spinoza in a trajectory of textual and historical criticism across the seventeenth century, Jetze Touber takes Spinoza's biblical philology as a point of departure. *Spinoza and Biblical Philology in the Dutch Republic, 1660–1710* is also, in its own, an exemplary study of biblical philology, rehearsing the encounters between Spinoza and his critics in order to illustrate the vital role biblical philology played in debates concerning the authority of Scripture. The work takes shape across five chapters, along with an exemplary introduction that situates Spinoza apropos of biblical criticism and the Dutch Reformed Church. Touber emphasizes, first, how the Dutch Reformed Church attempted to stabilize the theological interpretations of

Scripture by way of the Formularies of Unity: the *Statenbijbel*, the Heidelberg Catechism, the Belgic Confession, and the Articles of Dordrecht, all of which buttressed Reformed orthodoxy. But Touber duly illustrates, with remarkable care and insight, how there is no easy distinction between Calvinist orthodoxy and the heterodox drift of the *ars critica*. He introduces, instead, 'Scripturarianism', identifying members of the Dutch Reformed Church who emphasized philology in their treatments of Scripture, who often came into conflict with their brethren as well as with opponents of Dutch Calvinism and the public church. Thus Touber admirably delivers a rich and precise account of how biblical philology was used, not only to combat Spinoza and his kin but also in debates within the Church. Touber devotes chapter one to Spinoza's own biblical criticism. It is, truly, an invaluable contribution to Spinoza studies, not only as an outline of the method of the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* but also insofar as Touber draws distinctions between

Spinoza's philology and his philosophy. Chapter two, moreover, is equally invaluable, demonstrating how various critics responded to Spinoza from different perspectives: Jacobus Alting and Johannes Melchior, for instance, who marshalled their critical resources to defend the Reformed Church; the Cartesian Regnerus van Mansveld who recruited Grotius (once an assumed enemy of the Reformed orthodoxy), among others, to contest Spinoza's claims about the authorship of the Pentateuch; or Jean Le Clerc, a Remonstrant, who (after Richard Simon) offered challenging yet far less incendiary readings of Scripture in the wake of the publication of the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*.

Moreover, across the book Toubert traces how focus shifted, among philologists, from the constitution of Scripture at large to attempts to understand Scripture by way of linguistic, historical, and antiquarian research. Even as the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* revealed how unsettling philology could be, it was no longer assumed to be dangerous; biblical criticism, once relegated to scholarly Latin and exercised with caution, became increasingly appealing to pious vernacular readers for whom antiquarian studies of Scripture added depth and character to religion. This is the case, for instance, with Willem Goeree's exhaustive account of the history of the Jews, his *Mosaïze historie der Hebréeuwse kerke* (1700), giving readers a vivid picture of the Old Testament world based on sacred and secular sources alike. Antiquarianism was not without controversy, however, as when the Cambridge scholar John Spencer argued that Moses accommodated Egyptian ideas and practices, revealing disturbing continuities between paganism and biblical Judaism. His *De legibus Hebraeorum ritualibus* (1685) proved influential among Dutch readers and, even from an orthodox position, Spencer's work troubled the authority and divinity of Scripture in ways that even Spinoza might not.

Toubert duly urges readers to consider the place of textual criticism in local political terms, illuminating key distinctions between dogmatic theologians and Scripturarians in the process. Such is the case with Lambert van Velthuysen, for instance. He was certainly no Spinozan, but controversial nonetheless for his critical approach to Dutch Reformed authority in Utrecht, particular to an ongoing dispute between the municipal governors and the Church in the city. Frederik van Leenhof, in turn, seemed to drift toward (philosophical) Spinozism in his biblical criticism, renegotiating the relationship between philosophy and theology by way of historical criticism. And throughout chapter five – a superlative study of period approaches to the Fourth Commandment – Toubert surveys critical arguments concerning the Scriptural basis for the Sabbath as a day of rest. For many, the Sabbath was a matter of ceremony particular to the Old Testament. The Contra-Remonstrant Gomarus, for instance, proves himself a Scripturarian on this issue, arguing that there is no basis in Scripture for all mankind to observe the Sabbath, as a matter of morality – this, from a Dutch Reformed scholar, decades before Spinoza made a remarkably similar claim regarding ceremonial law! So too did textual scholars across a spectrum of religious and political positions argue that ceremonial laws were not universally binding, that there was no moral obligation to keep the Sabbath. Toubert's point, though, is hardly that this issue was resolved, but that biblical philology was integral to arguments for *and* against Sabbatarianism, and that the debates were difficult and indecisive precisely because of the conventionality of textual and historical criticism. Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, moreover, is a dispatch from this milieu, not a point of origin.

These are remarkable, rich studies, evidence of extraordinary erudition and careful research. Touber and van Miert have done us a great service, excavating scenes of biblical philology that add so much to our understanding of Spinoza, ongoing Reformation debates about Scripture and authority, and the Republic of Letters. In every chapter they set new agendas for research and present philology as a lively and exciting enterprise with high stakes and unintentional results. These exceptional studies warrant attention and deserve acclaim.

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