

***Bibelrezeption in der Aufklärung*, by Christoph Bultmann**

Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012 | x + 256 pages | ISBN: 978-3-16-151968-0 (softcover) €39.00

A gathering of essays originally published between 2001 and 2012, *The Reception of the Bible in the Enlightenment's* implicit, overall goal is related less to questions of reception theory than it is to show that the popular image of the Enlightenment as a strike against religion is on shakier ground than a secularizing narrative would like it to be. Voltaire, Hume, and Paine cease to be representative figures and become specific voices within a panoply of Enlightenment perspectives. Bultmann analyzes eighteenth-century interpretations of the Hebrew Bible, with the question of how philosophers related exegetical procedures to the tenets of natural religion as one of his central concerns. As a counterweight to narratives of the Enlightenment as a key moment of secular progress, the book adds detail to arguments such as David Sorkin's *The Religious Enlightenment*, Louis Dupré's *The Enlightenment and the Intellectual Foundations of Modern Culture*, and Thomas Howard's *Religion and the Rise of Historicism*. Bultmann aims for a strictly historical approach to



his subject—he brackets the question about the extent to which the respective claims of the Enlightenment and Christianity can be reconciled within a systematic theology—yet his overall sympathies lie with those thinkers who attempted such a reconciliation. While I share these sympathies, I would have liked them to have been better interrogated. Bultmann does not engage important critiques of the Enlightenment such as those of Adorno and Horkheimer, Foucault, or feminist analyses of the gendering of secularism. He distances himself from such critiques in a footnote, distinguishing his approach from that of Stephen Moore and Yvonne Sherwood in *The Invention of the Biblical Scholar* (186). The almost total exclusion of such perspectives allows Bultmann to proceed with his detailed readings of specific Enlightenment texts as an implicit endorsement of the Enlightenment project.

The explicit, narrower goal Bultmann sets for himself is to gain an understanding of the development of those biblical hermeneutics that seek to free biblical interpretation from dogmatic limitations (2). The cumulative effect of the volume makes clear that he favors those Enlightened thinkers who took on a double move of freeing biblical interpretation from dogma and reconfiguring, not rejecting, human religiosity. To this end, he outlines his guiding ideas in three strokes at the outset of the book. First, he highlights the preacher Johann Joachim Spalding (1714–1804) as paradigmatic for the work of biblical interpretation in the Enlightenment. Second, he raises the question of periodization. It is in the way he pursues this question that his task of providing a counterweight to secularizing narratives of the Enlightenment is most apparent. Bultmann situates the Enlightenment reading of the Bible in a “stable tradition” that includes the sixteenth-century writers Erasmus, Sebastian Castellio, and Drusius (191). This move allows him to weaken the Confessional/Enlightened dichotomy and position critical approaches to the Bible within the mainstream of Christian thought well before Schleiermacher and later liberal theologians. Third, he pursues the ethical foundation for pluralism. The book proceeds through a series of loosely connected portraits of figures of the European Enlightenment, with emphasis on German figures. This format is both a weakness and a strength of the book. The weakness lies in the fact that as a collection of previously published articles, the book moves haphazardly through the various figures he analyzes. Examining the essays in light of the three broad strokes Bultmann sets forth in his introduction, one finds that the extent to which they correspond to his stated aims varies widely. Yet, the method of providing a series of portraits is also the book’s greatest strength. One gets varying angles on a single figure

and discovering interconnections and direct lines of influence between the figures makes for a very subtle way of viewing the writers.

The very first sentence explicitly equates the reception history of the Bible with the history of exegesis. Once Bultmann has established that reception history is the history of exegesis, he asserts that while it has become self-evident for biblical interpreters to ask questions of origins, they have let questions of reception languish. However, he is able to situate his work within German scholarship of biblical reception in the Enlightenment. Nevertheless, his equation of “reception” and “exegesis” narrows the theoretical content of “reception history,” excluding literary and artistic adaptations of biblical literature or the presence of biblical subtexts in non-religious discourses. The absence of engagement with reception theory proper—neither Wolfgang Iser nor Hans Robert Jauss makes an appearance—might account for such a narrow understanding of his task. One essay, on Robert Lowth and Horatian poetics, allows Bultmann to explore a broader understanding of reception than indicated in his introduction. The bifurcation of biblical interpretation from biblical subtext is especially apparent in an essay on toleration in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries: biblical argumentation simply disappears from view. Equating “reception” with “exegesis” also leaves the Bible unfazed by “readerly” approaches that probe how interpretive conflict reveals the text’s indeterminate meanings.

The substance of the book is in nine chapters on Johann Joachim Spalding, Robert Lowth, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, Johann Gottfried Herder, Alexander Geddes, and Wilhelm de Wette. Bultmann’s project of weakening the opposition between “Confessional” and “Enlightened” approaches is most apparent in his essays on Spalding and Lessing. He first turns to Spalding’s 1772 text “On the Usefulness of Preaching and Its Promotion” to show how an Enlightened Lutheran responded to a cultural situation in which the question of the Church’s relevance and authority was under challenge. The terms with which Spalding had to frame his argument were those of natural religion. He contextualizes Spalding’s argument by turning to the rebuttal by James Foster (1697–1753) to Matthew Tindal’s articulation of natural theology; Spalding was one of Foster’s German translators. Bultmann finally turns to Spalding’s use of specific New Testament texts. In particular, Spalding reads Paul as a defender of both the traditional doctrine of justification by faith and as a proponent of natural theology. Bultmann next examines Robert Lowth (1710–87), a Bishop and Professor of Poetry at Oxford who gave literary lectures on the psalms. Here, Bultmann notes two

reasons it would have been odd for Lowth to present lectures on Hebrew poetry: first, Horace or a Latin poet would have been a more seemly topic for an eighteenth-century literary scholar; second, poetry, despite its presence in the Bible, has a disruptive effect on dogmatic religion (42). This essay includes a lengthy discussion of the reception of Horace. In his essay on Lessing's understanding of the Bible, Bultmann departs from his focus on the Hebrew Bible to examine the role of the divided will in Romans 7 as central to Lessing's understanding of religion. Through an analysis of Lessing's early poem "Religion," Bultmann shows that the Lutheran emphasis on the weakness of the will motivates Lessing's understanding of religion in general. The chapter on the image of Moses in early modern handbooks provides a counterweight to the general position presented in the rest of the essays. This chapter documents the prevalence and wide distribution of the pre-critical assumption of Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch in popular, commercially successful handbooks. Here, the role of Castellio in his overall argument becomes ambiguous. Bultmann locates Castellio as a formational figure of critical Bible reading, but also situates Castellio as a key source for the handbooks which disseminated the pre-critical assumption of Mosaic authorship. It seems to bemuse Bultmann that the handbooks virtually ignore Moses's role as the deliverer of the law. However, the ability to interrogate our assumptions about what is central and what is peripheral in a text is precisely the value of historical studies of reception. A stronger investigation of the significance of this difference may have illuminated the background against which eighteenth-century critical investigations proceeded. Alexander Geddes (1737–1802) was an English precursor to the higher criticism of the nineteenth century and was particularly interested in textual studies. He translated the Bible and provided rationales for his translations. Bultmann discusses both Geddes's approach to textual criticism and his understanding of the ethics of the Hebrew Bible. He does not, however, connect Geddes's ethical sensibility as a reader of the Bible to his anti-slavery activism. The essay on de Wette examines the impact of the philosophy of Kant, Schleiermacher, and Fries on his exegesis. The book closes with an essay on Herder's impact on Psalm criticism through de Wette, concluding that there was both openness and opposition to a literary approach to the Psalms and that Herder's conception of the psalms as odes is more important to biblical criticism than his specific historical theories.

The book's merits lie chiefly in the discernable erudition Bultmann brings to his task. He has a strong command of a wide range of primary sources and

is able to situate his arguments in relation to several different contemporary arguments. Unfortunately, Bultmann's writing skills do not rise to the level of his research skills. Often key ideas remain implicit, requiring the reader to guess at the motivation for an argument. Prolegomena sometimes overwhelms argument. For example, the treatment of the book's hero, Spalding, begins with the question of whether he wrote a theological classic. The essay works on the question, comes up with an equivocal answer, and drops Spalding for the rest of the book—two passing mentions aside. Poor organization makes this fascinating collection an often frustrating read.

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