FROM SACRED HISTORY TO THE HISTORY OF RELIGION: PAGANISM, JUDAISM, AND CHRISTIANITY IN EUROPEAN HISTORIOGRAPHY FROM REFORMATION TO ‘ENLIGHTENMENT’

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HISTORIOGRAPHICAL REVIEW
FROM SACRED HISTORY TO THE HISTORY OF RELIGION: PAGANISM, JUDAISM, AND CHRISTIANITY IN EUROPEAN HISTORIOGRAPHY FROM REFORMATION TO ‘ENLIGHTENMENT’*

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ABSTRACT. This essay is a critical historiographical overview of the recent literature on the writing of sacred history (history of the biblical Jews and early Christians) and history of religion in early modern Europe. It considers the rise of interest in this branch of intellectual history in the last decade, placing it in the context of the rise of the history of scholarship as a historical discipline. It then charts how the characterization of early modern history of religion as stale, pedantic, and blandly ‘orthodox’ until it was swept aside by a critical and heterodox ‘enlightenment’ is being revised, first in new approaches to early modern histories of biblical Judaism and historicizations of the Old Testament, second in new readings of early modern scholarship on primitive Christianity. It concludes by suggesting new avenues of research which divorce narratives of intellectual change from the linear and inconclusive emphasis on ‘enlightenment’, favouring an approach that conversely emphasizes the impact of confessionalization in creating a newly critical scholarly culture.

The early encounter between the Judaeo-Christian tradition and Graeco-Roman scholarship enacted a historiographical revolution. Seeking to prove both the veracity and priority of their beliefs, the Hellenistic Jews of the first and second centuries BC and their Christian successors eschewed the invented speeches and dramatic jumps of locale and chronology favoured by the civil historians, in favour of direct citation and quotation of documents, precise marginal references, a relatively strict chronological order, and a simple rhetorical style with little authorial intervention, all helped by maximal...
exploitation of collaborative modes of production and of the codex format. This tradition found its apogee in Eusebius’s *Church history* (c. 324).¹

The revival of classical learning in the Renaissance, as well as re-igniting the study of Greco-Roman antiquity, also witnessed the revival of interest in sacred history: the history of biblical Judaism and of early Christianity.² This interest was not limited to scholars, many examples testifying to the relevance of sacred history at different levels of early modern life. Local elites used it to defend their privileges and identities.³ Accounts of the lives of early Christians could form archetypes for biographies of the Reformers.⁴ Publishers’ coffers were replenished by sales of the great epics of ecclesiastical history, like Cardinal Cesare Baronio’s famous *Annales ecclesiastici*, the second edition of which accounted for 13 per cent of the revenue of the Plantin Press in 1590–5.⁵ As late as the Restoration, the future lord chancellor could change his mind on ecclesiastical policy after consulting Ignatius and Cyprian.⁶ From Sixtus IV’s Rome to post-fire London, church architecture reflected early Christian ideals.⁷

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⁵ Jan Miachielsen, ‘How (not) to get published: the Plantin Press in the early 1590s’, *Dutch Crossing*, 34 (2010), p. 109, to which my attention was drawn by Ditchfield, ‘What was sacred history?’.


And if everyone knows that the puritans banned Christmas, until very recently we had not realized that their argument depended on late sixteenth-century chronological scholarship that found the celebration’s historical roots in a hangover from the Roman feast of Saturnalia. Reasons of space dictate that this essay must concern itself with scholarship only, but this should not obscure the broader cultural significance of our subject.

I

This essay will describe what its author perceives to be a revisionist moment; although it inevitably risks caricature, we must first paint a brief picture of what is being revised. Synthesized from the existing literature, a standard narrative could run something like this. In its accounts of Jewish, Christian, and pagan religion, early modern historiography was marked by a fundamental absence of ‘criticism’, in two respects. On the one hand, it was mere pedantry: ‘learned accumulation’ which generated nothing but ‘intellectual regression’. On the other, it slavishly espoused ‘orthodox’ narratives. Protestants wrote histories of the church’s corruption by the papacy, Roman Catholics of its unchanging adherence to papal tradition, and both of the ancient Jews as God’s unique chosen people. It took a veritable crisis to destroy this stale, crumbling, and pedantic orthodoxy, and that crisis came from late seventeenth-century heterodoxy and irreligion. Spinoza’s biblical criticism – accompanied by that of his intellectual predecessor Isaac La Peyrère and supposed successor Richard Simon – was a radical break from the past that for the first time decentred the Jews and showed the Old Testament to be a work designed for a specific time and place. At the same time, there was a quasi-inevitable shift from emphasis on an early ur-religion by some avant garde clerics like the Cambridge Platonists and ‘latitudinarians’ to emphasis on the commonality of ‘natural religion’, attack on priestcraft, and denial of revelation by deists and philosophes, all culminating in Hume’s *Natural history of religion* (1757).


9 Hugh Trevor-Roper, ‘The historical philosophy of the enlightenment’ (1963), in idem, *History and the enlightenment* (New Haven, CT, and London, 2010), pp. 1–2 (note that the ecclesiastical historians are being particularly accused here).


seventeenth-century crisis could also be found in patristic scholarship, where the sweeping away of a tired and complacent orthodoxy by the dawning sun of ‘enlightenment’ paved the way for the (in)famous chapters 15 and 16 of Gibbon’s Decline and fall (1776). By the mid-eighteenth century, in short, ‘real’ history had replaced Christian ‘ideology’: although, rather paradoxically, the new ‘enlightened’ history was itself tied to an ideology, one of anticlericalism and tolerationism.

How did this narrative come into existence? Partly, as we shall see, it was the product of the false genealogies constructed by the eighteenth-century anticlericals themselves. But its most lasting roots were planted in the nineteenth century, by those operating in the context of English religious reform, such as Mark Pattison, Leslie Stephen, and John Tulloch. Although it was far from their central concern, all three placed the rise of a historicist attitude to religion in late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century England (as part of the rise of a ‘rational Christianity’). And, aware of the looming contemporary figure of the German critic, they followed the influential analysis of one such German critic, Gotthard Victor Lechler (Geschichte des Englischen Deismus (1841)) in ascribing the genesis of German historical-critical methodology to the mid-eighteenth-century reception of English deism.

This story’s success has proved remarkably long-lasting. Both German and English liberal theologians have continued to ascribe the genesis of a historical-critical approach to the late seventeenth century, albeit sometimes incorporating teleological claims about earlier Reformed emphasis on literalism as


12 E.g. Hugh Trevor-Roper, ‘From deism to history: Conyers Middleton’ (c. 1982), in History and the enlightenment, p. 112. But there is a paucity of work on eighteenth-century patristics.

13 Scott Mandelbrote, ‘Biblical hermeneutics and the sciences, 1700–1900: An Overview’, in Jitse M. van der Meer and S. Mandelbrote, eds., Nature and scripture in the Abrahamic religions: 1700-present (2 vols., Leiden, 2008), 1, p. 16: ‘Our own view of the religious and intellectual history of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries has largely been formed by the writings of these men, and it reflects their sense of the meaning of that period, one which to them had far more immediacy and polemical value, and far more direct importance for their own sense of identity, than perhaps it need have to us today’. My comments on this issue are in general heavily indebted to this essay.


opening the door for this development. This chronology has been picked up both by intellectual historians and by biblical scholars writing the history of their own discipline. Since citing nineteenth-century Englishmen fell out of fashion some time ago, intellectual historians now tend to cite Paul Hazard’s *La crise de la conscience européenne (1680–1715)* (1935) when delineating this chronology; but Hazard’s work was no less the product of contingent (and related) forces, in this case French Catholic modernism.

A similar deist-centred chronology was established for the history of the study of early Christianity, albeit for different reasons. On the one hand, those with a strong theological allegiance continued to insist on the continuity of the approaches established soon after the Reformation. Catholic historians insisted on the continuity of Catholic patristics post-Baronio; Anglicans similarly maintained the continuity of Anglicanism as a putative patristic-grounded *via media* from Hooker onwards. Once again, the whig tradition could then claim that this ‘orthodoxy’ was swept away by a vibrant and progressive heterodox historical criticism, and we return to a simple heterodox/progressive vs orthodox/conservative model of change. And once again, this narrative was adopted not just by historians, but also scholars interested in the prehistory of their own approaches: thus, Albert Schweitzer placed the deist Hermann Samuel Reimarus in the key role in the development of the eighteenth-century ‘quest of the historical Jesus’.


18 Kippenberg, *Discovering religious history*; Sharpe, *Comparative religion*; an important milestone in the creation of this myth was Ernest Renan, ‘L’Exégèse biblique et l’esprit français’, *Revue des Deux Mondes*, 35, seconde période, 60 (1865), pp. 235–45.

19 See e.g. the comments in Eric Cochrane, *Historians and historiography in the Italian Renaissance* (Chicago, IL, and London, 1981), p. 463, a work which nonetheless remains extremely useful.


21 Trevor-Roper, ‘Middleton’.

Why might this historiographical tradition be coming under attack? There are several reasons. One is the gradual (albeit very incomplete) realization by early modern intellectual historians that the figures they study for the most part eschewed abstract philosophical reasoning in favour of historical modes of discourse: narratives which privilege the supposed rise of philosophical rationalism as a ubiquitous explanatory mechanism, while still prevalent (as discussed below), are being challenged. But even more important is the rise of the history of scholarship as a discipline in its own right over the last three decades. The field had until recently been the preserve of scholars writing the prehistories of their own disciplines. But, stimulated in part by the legacy of Arnaldo Momigliano, and especially by the numerous works of Anthony Grafton (particularly his two-volume biography of Joseph Scaliger (1983–93)) the discipline has found its own professional identity. Of particular importance for us is that with the solidification of the discipline, the disciplines of biblical criticism and patristics – neglected while the history of scholarship was being practised by classicists who adopted a rather narrow modern definition of ‘classical scholarship’ – have finally started to receive systematic attention. For the most part, this development has been conducted primarily in the field of scholarly biography: Grafton on Scaliger is now supplemented by G. J. Toomer’s astoundingly erudite biography of John Selden (2009). This has perhaps served to maintain an unwarranted distance between historians of scholarship and intellectual historians interested in broader patterns of change. However, Jean-Louis Quantin’s recent (2009) study of seventeenth-century Anglican patristics – which will make several appearances in what follows – has set a new benchmark for how the history of scholarship can make a major contribution to histories of intellectual change. What follows is a brief overview of how the recent historiography is contributing the pieces to such a narrative, shifting attention away from late seventeenth and early eighteenth-century deism and heterodoxy to a broader range of scholarly developments. Section II

23 For a landmark study concerned with legal historiography, see J. G. A. Pocock, The ancient constitution and the feudal law: a study of English historical thought in the seventeenth century (Cambridge, 1957; reissued with a retrospect in 1987); for the pioneering study emphasizing the historical dimension to anticlerical thought, see Champion, Pillars, which nonetheless retains the connections between anticlerical politics and ‘new’ history. See now also H. Zedelmaier and M. Mulsow, eds., Die Praktiken der Gelehrsamkeit in der frühen Neuzeit (Tübingen, 2001).


25 For Momigliano’s legacy, see Michael Crawford and C. R. Ligota, eds., Ancient history and the antiquarian: essays in memory of Arnaldo Momigliano (London, 1995); and Peter Miller, ed., Momigliano and antiquarianism: foundations of the modern cultural sciences (Toronto, 2007).

26 For Grafton’s early insistence on the importance of the late antique period to early modern scholars, see A. Grafton, Joseph Scaliger (2 vols., Oxford, 1983–93), i, pp. 134–60.
will focus on the historicization of the Old Testament and of ancient religion; Section III on histories of early Christianity. Section IV will conclude by considering how these narratives might contribute more broadly to models of intellectual change.

II

The sacred history of the period before Christ’s birth was the history of the biblical Jews as told in the Hebrew bible. We are well aware that the mid- to late sixteenth century saw major developments in what we might anachronistically label the textual criticism of the bible; although this moment requires further investigation it is becoming clear that Protestant emphasis on the literal sense was far from the only stimulus, for it was preceded and accompanied by the earlier humanist philological turn of which Erasmus and Lorenzo Valla were the main exponents, and by the dramatic rise in Greek and Hebrew learning, the latter stimulated by interest in Jewish mysticism (one thinks here of Giovanni Pico della Mirandola and Johannes Reuchlin) before it was spurred on by rejection of the Vulgate. By the late sixteenth century, pure philology had mutated into historical criticism of the bible. Fundamental questions remain, which require extensive further research. How did the philological tasks of the grammarian mutate into what we call ‘historical criticism’? And what was the relationship between the exegetical practices of the divines in the theology faculties and their colleagues in arts faculties?


De Jonge, ‘Study of the New Testament’, claims a sharp distinction between the exegesis being done in the arts and divinity faculties, but is challenged in this regard by Richard
For now, we can point out that it was in Old Testament exegesis that this historicist turn had perhaps its greatest impact, which some now speak of as the ‘antiquarianization’ of the bible. Two preconditions had to be met before this antiquarianization could fully blossom: first, the philological-historical realization that the biblical text had a history, and its corollary that there might thus be a history to be written of that text’s authors and their intentions; second, the establishment of a stable chronology in which the new historicization of sacred history could be inserted. Grafton’s *Scaliger* taught us how the Frenchman’s *De emendatione temporum* (1583) and *Thesaurus temporum* (1606) transformed the field of ancient chronology (even if Scaliger sometimes advertised his novelty where he should have advertised his intellectual debts), demolishing the famous old forgeries of the pseudo-Berosus of Annius of Viterbo, and, even more importantly, establishing as a methodological principle that Old Testament history could only be understood within a contextual scaffolding constructed from pagan narratives._scaliger settled few debates for certain, but his programmatic influence was vast, the historical thesis of the *Thesaurus* serving as a model to be emulated, almost as a test of any budding scholar’s capacity._

Scaliger’s chronological research led him to stumble upon historical puzzles, contradictions, and even downright mistakes in the biblical narrative, which could only be solved by suggesting that the text itself had a history. Some of these he wisely abstained from sharing with even the scholarly reading public, such as his conclusion, reached late in life, that the lack of concordance between the various Gospels (why does the Gospel of Mark say Christ was crucified at three o’clock and the Gospel of John at six?) and between the Gospels and non-biblical historical sources was the result of the very early textual corruption of the New Testament by the primitive Christians themselves (e.g. since the reliable Josephus did not report the claim at Matt. 2.16 that Herod had all the boys in Bethlehem aged two or under put to death, the latter must be a later interpolation, designed by the early Christians to ‘fulfil’ the prophecy at Jer. 31.15). _Other conclusions, though, were made public and proved hugely influential. One was his interjection into the debate over the age_

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of the vowel points of the Masoretic Hebrew bible, which Scaliger not only affirmed to have been late and human rather than Mosaic and divine, but also subsumed into an elaborate narrative of the history of the Hebrew language, suggesting that it was Samaritan letters which had been used in Israel from Moses to the fall of the Temple.33

Here, Scaliger was operating within a debate that was already decades old. Where older scholarship once again looked towards the Spinoza–Simon nexus for the birth of the idea of textual historicity, newer narratives are shifting the focus back. The text’s historicity was a commonplace as a methodological principle by the mid-seventeenth century: in his famous ‘Prologomena’ to the London Polyglot (1657) Brian Walton offered a contextual textual history for each of the nine versions (Hebrew, Chaldee, Samaritan, Syriac, Arabic, Persian, Ethiopian, Greek, and Latin) of this beautiful textual monument: ‘for him, and those whose work he discusses, the history of the text cannot be separated from the history in which the text was produced’.34 And, as Peter Miller has charted, the even more beautiful Paris Polyglot of 1645—the preparation of which ultimately ruined its publisher Guy Michael de Jay—also found its roots in the antiquarian interests of early seventeenth-century scholars in Rome, Paris, and beyond, from the former French ambassador in Constantinople, François Savary de Brèves, to the president of the parlement of Paris, Jacques-Auguste de Thou.35 Of course, the very idea of a polyglot implied that the existing biblical texts were by themselves insufficient, and that a critical-philological approach was necessary to get closer to an original version. This contradicted the exegetical rules set out in the sixteenth century on both Protestant and Catholic sides: the Protestant view that scripture was self-authenticating and that the Masoretic Hebrew version (first printed in Venice in 1525) was the directly inspired word of God,36 and the post-Tridentine Catholic position that the Vulgate (St Jerome’s translation from the Hebrew) held ultimate authority, defended on the basis that it represented a translation from a better Hebrew version than the Masoretic, and, of course, on the authority of the church.

Both confessional polemic and subsequent scholarly discoveries rendered these positions precarious. The obvious anti-Protestant argument was that the Masoretic bible was corrupt, and this immediately involved Catholic scholars in a process of historical text criticism. They drew on the Masoret ha-Masoret (1538) of the much-travelled Jewish scholar, Elijah Levita, which argued that far from being given to Moses at Sinai, or even added by Ezra the Scribe after the return

from the Babylonian exile, the vowel points which made much of the Hebrew scripture intelligible were only added after the composition of the Talmud (c. 200 AD). These findings were initially ignored by Protestants, but Catholics quickly recognized that Levita’s work could be a powerful new weapon for their debates with Protestants... By arguing for the post-canonical origin of the vowel points, Catholic polemics could contend that the Hebrew Old Testament was not perspicuous and interpreters were almost entirely dependent upon human tradition in the form of the vowel points to understand it at all.

This allowed Catholic scholars both to defend the superiority of Jerome’s translation (supposedly based on an earlier non-corrupt Hebrew version) and to insist – given all these textual difficulties – on the necessity of the authority of the church in interpretation. Some Protestants, most notably the Basel Hebraist Johannes Buxtorf, in his Tiberias (1620), argued that the Hebrew bible in its modern (i.e. Masoretic) form had existed since the time of Ezra, but scholarly consensus made this position untenable, especially after the recovery in 1616 (by Pietro della Valle) and publication (by Jean Morin, in Le Jay’s Polyglot) of the Samaritan Pentateuch, which differs from the Masoretic text in around 6,000 instances. An internal division within Protestantism was sealed when Louis Cappel, a professor of Hebrew at Saumur, published in 1624 and again in 1650 in favour of the late imposition of the vowel points (to the dismay of Buxtorf and his son); unlike the Catholics, he stressed the capacity of historical-philological scholarship to recover the original scriptural meaning. Cappel’s work may not have pleased all Protestants, but it was part of a mainstream debate about ‘how to reconcile the text’s authority, which was divine, with its history, which was more and more evidently human’. So, by the first half of the seventeenth century we have witnessed the exegetical revolution previously ascribed to Hobbes, Spinoza, or Richard Simon, as both erudition and apologetics shifted from viewing the bible as a miraculously perfect whole,
authenticated either by itself or by the church, to the view that ‘the veracity of the historical parts of the text could be defended (not weakened) by treating them as eye-witness reports, on the same basis as any other direct account of human experience’.\textsuperscript{48} It is worth noting that although these developments were undoubtedly stimulated by confessional polemic, the recent historiography has emphasized that a narrative which reduces scholarship to politics does little to explain the cross-confessional appeal of these conclusions, or their intense contestation on both Protestant\textsuperscript{44} and Catholic\textsuperscript{45} sides.

The establishment of a stable chronology and of a consensus that the Old Testament text had a history opened the door for contextual study of biblical Judaism. Here, we might be tempted to say that we are approaching the margins of orthodoxy, but we need to pause and ask what this ‘orthodoxy’ was and who was establishing it, for we have already seen that theologians on both sides of the confessional divide often welcomed historical criticism. Tension between theology and erudition arose not from historicization per se, but when historicization took a route outside the limits established by theological exegesis, limits which were in fact quite minimal. One limit was chronological. As part of Scaliger’s reconstruction of the lost \textit{Chronicon} of Eusebius, he included the list of Egyptian dynasties compiled by the priest Manetho of Sebennytus in the third century BC, a precious source for ancient Egyptian history, with the one inconvenience that the listed dynasties stretched back not only before the Flood, but also before any accepted date for the Creation.\textsuperscript{46} Scaliger’s proposal of a period of ‘proleptic time’ convinced few (if any), and the most eminent seventeenth-century chronologists produced solutions which usually proposed that some of the dynasties were simultaneous rather than successive.\textsuperscript{47} A few, however, went in the other direction, of whom the most famous by far is Isaac La Peyrère, the Huguenot who combined chronological scholarship, scepticism about the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch, and millenarian speculation to arrive at his famous pre-Adamite hypothesis.\textsuperscript{48}

\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., p. 422.
\textsuperscript{45} As well as the Buxtorf–Cappel dispute, see the important piece on the reaction to the English polyglot (especially by the congregationalist leader John Owen): Scott Mandelbrote, ‘The authority of the Word: manuscript, print and the text of the bible in seventeenth-century England’, in Julia C. Crick and Alexandra Walsham, eds., \textit{The uses of script and print, 1300–1700} (Cambridge, 2004), pp. 135–56.
\textsuperscript{46} Peter Rietbergen, \textit{Power and religion in Baroque Rome: Barberini cultural policies} (Leiden, 2006), pp. 318–19; Laplanche, \textit{L’écriture}, pp. 228, 874 n. 134. For a more general emphasis on the importance of intra-confessional disputes, see Ditchfield, ‘What was sacred history?’.
\textsuperscript{47} Grafton, \textit{Scaliger}, ii, pp. 491–792.
\textsuperscript{49} On La Peyrère, see R. Popkin, \textit{Isaac La Peyrère (1596–1676): his life, work and influence} (Leiden, 1987); A. Grafton, \textit{Defenders of the text: traditions of scholarship in an age of science
As fascinating a figure as La Peyrère is, we now know that his theories had little sway in any serious intellectual circles in either the seventeenth or the eighteenth centuries, beyond such deliberate provocateurs as Voltaire, with his own theory of polygenesis. Far more important were debates within the mainstream, such as the argument that the Flood was a local phenomenon, or preference for the Septuagint chronology, both of which could be found in the well-known works of Isaac Vossius.

It is at the second theological limit—still far less familiar to modern historians—that we encounter a possible friction between the new approach and something we might choose to label ‘orthodoxy’. In the Protestant world, the relationship between the Mosaic Law and the Law of Nature, between the moral and ceremonial Law, and between Law and Gospel had all engendered much debate. The problem was the connection between the Old Testament and the New: one answer was typological exegesis. While rejecting the allegorizing of the quadriga, from an early stage the Reformers insisted that the literal historical sense of scripture included typological meanings, where both type and antitype retain their historicity. History, supposedly still literal, becomes prophetic; the role of the exegete becomes, as it did in the Gospel of John, to find Christ prefigured in the brazen serpent. The historical dimension of typology rendered it attractive even to the humanists like Casaubon who were otherwise suspicious of anything that smacked overly of forced apologetic readings. Tension thus arose not when contextual

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history encountered theology, but when contextual history seemed to become Jewish, to abandon typology, and to explain the Old Testament as not only about the Jews, but solely for them as well. That boundary was sometimes crossed by Scaliger and by the circle at Saumur of which Cappel was a part. But it appeared most precarious in the works of Scaliger’s student Hugo Grotius, who sent strong signals that contextualism was almost always enough for the Christian exegete: Christological types were there, but all forms of Old Testament prophecy more often referred to near-contemporary events, and Christians should content themselves with the knowledge that the New Covenant was clearer than the Old. What pushed this narrative beyond the bounds of acceptability for some was Grotius’s concomitant historicization of the typological method: both the evangelists and the church fathers who cited the Old Testament for Christian apologetics followed an ancient Jewish allegorical custom: the allusion in the form of citation; when this was misunderstood, over-enthusiastic typology was born. In arguing this, Grotius was, as we shall see, treading in the footsteps of the latest patristic scholarship, but one is not surprised to find him being accused both of Judaizing and of Socinianism. These accusations were wrong, but when Grotius’s method was further developed by Jean le Clerc it could be welcomed with open arms by a self-proclaimed freethinker like Anthony Collins to deny openly all prophetical readings of the Old Testament. But if the old historiography portrayed this as a characteristically ‘deist’ move, Sébastien Drouin has now taught us that we are dealing with the long reception of a debate about allegorical/typological exegesis that depended neither on heterodoxy nor on some sort of inevitable


logic within Protestantism, but on a specific scholarly shift towards philological-historical exegesis.55

The accusation of Judaizing—although unfounded in any narrow sense-contained a shred of truth, for Grotius was operating at the apex of a tradition of Old Testament scholarship which combined its contextualizing tendencies with rabbinic justification for them, especially those developed by the great twelfth-century codifier of Talmudic Law, Moses Maimonides. It was partially because of his systematization of the arcane threads of the Talmud that Christian scholars so revered Maimonides—typical of the ‘use and abuse’ approach to rabbinica, Scaliger intoned that ‘he alone among the Jews has given up talking nonsense’.56 And, as charted in an essential monograph by Aaron Katchen, the publication and study of Maimonides’s works erupted in the Dutch Republic in the first half of the seventeenth century. Maimonides offered two tools to the historian of Old Testament Judaism. In his Mishneh Torah, he drew attention to the Seven Precepts of Noah, which the Talmud briefly mentions as commands given to the patriarch and to his descendants, who of course fathered all mankind.57 Post-Katchen scholarship has taught us much about how the Noachic Precepts became a staple of early modern sacred history by the mid-seventeenth century, especially in the hands of Grotius, Selden, and their many followers.58 The uses of the Precepts could be numerous—the jurist Selden used them both for a wholesale re-interpretation of English common law deployed against Charles I59 and for an anti-sacerdotal history of excommunication by the Sanhedrin60—but their greatest import was in making the Mosaic

55 Drouin, Théologie. Although very useful and important, this work does not cover the scholarly dimension of Grotius’s theology. For an example of the old deist-centred narrative, see Manuel, Broken staff, pp. 181–3.
56 Aaron Katchen, Christian Hebraists and Dutch Rabbis (Cambridge, MA, 1984), p. 35; for examples of similar declamations by others, see also pp. 39, 95–6, 180, 248. D. Sorkin, The religious enlightenment: Protestants, Jews, and Catholics from London to Vienna (Princeton, NJ, 2008), p. 171, attempting to appropriate Maimonides for an ‘enlightenment’, mistakenly claims that the early eighteenth-century German editions were the first ‘in almost two centuries’.
57 Katchen, Rabbis, pp. 161–260, for the printing of the Mishneh Torah. As listed in Talmud Sanhedrin 56a–b the seven precepts are: the forbidding of idolatry, incestuous and adulterous relations, murder, blasphemy, theft, and eating the flesh of a living animal, and the positive command to establish courts of justice. For the difficult epistemic status of these laws, see Steven S. Schwarzchild, ‘Do Noachites have to believe in Revelation?’, Jewish Quarterly Review, 52 (1962), pp. 297–308, and 53 (1962), pp. 30–65; for Selden’s solution, see Toomer, Selden, pp. 490–503. A previously unknown manuscript by Isaac Newton on the Seven Precepts was recently sold at auction; for an unverified transcription see www.bonhams.com/eur/auction/19586/lot/371/ (consulted 26 Dec. 2011).
58 The fullest general study is K. Müller, Tora für die Völker: Die noachidischen Gebote und Ansätze zu ihrer Rezeption im Christentum (Berlin, 1994) (most relevant for our purposes are pp. 26–77 (on Sanhedrin 56a–b) 200–9 (on the early Christian reception) and 210–31 (on the Christian rediscovery of Maimonides and on Luther, Grotius, Selden and Toland)).
60 De Synedriis (1650–5), on which, see Toomer, Selden, pp. 692–788.
dispensation more contingent and stripping it of any universalist elements, that universalism now being reserved for the Noachic Precepts.

The notion that that Mosaic dispensation was historically contingent was enhanced through another Maimonidean inheritance. In the third book of his More Nevukhim (Guide for the Perplexed) – published in a very popular Latin translation by Buxtorf Jnr in 1629 – Maimonides asked the philosophical question of why a rational God had given the seemingly irrational commands that constituted the Hebrew ritual law, offered the philosophical reasoning that the answer could not simply emphasize God’s omnipotent will, but then delivered a historical answer to defend the Creator’s rationality: the ritual law was given to the mentally-backwards Hebrew nation to wean them off the pagan idolatry which had surrounded them and to which they had become addicted. Maimonides ascribed this idolatry to a mysterious people called the ‘Sabians’, a ‘fact’ he obtained from an Arabic agronomic text, the Fila¯h at al-Nabat iyyah (The Nabatean Agriculture) by Ibn Wahshiyya (d. 931), which is now suspected to be a compilation of texts produced mainly in sixth-century northern Iraq, but which Maimonides believed to be an ancient Sabian work. Here, we have a double historicization: the specific historical explanation for the Mosaic Ritual Law, but also the idea that God operates in history through second causes, including the minds of men. This accommodationist hermeneutic, familiar to Christians from Augustine, but given a new impetus by the quick integration of the Maimonidean narrative into mainstream sacred history and apologetics, would prove to have a phenomenally long afterlife, not only because many major scholars attempted to identify the Sabians, but because the idea that God operated in history through second causes meshed with the contemporary emphasis on God’s general over His special providence.

61 Jaakko Hameen-Anttila, The last pagans of Iraq: Ibn Washiyya and his Nabatean agriculture (Leiden, 2006). The Nabatean agriculture was unavailable to early modern scholars – it was only rediscovered in the nineteenth century.


Within the framework established by Scaligerian chronology and Maimonidean rationalism, there was a wave of new investigation into the history of the relationship between biblical Judaism and ancient paganism. Some of the grandest names of European scholarship developed a new genre, the history of idolatry, tracking how the post-Noachic diffusion of the world’s peoples had gradually led to the establishment of the various idolatrous religions of paganism, either from nature worship, Euhemerist deification of rulers, or priestly imposture.64 The three key texts of this tradition were John Selden’s *De Diis Syris* (1617), which contextualized all the pagan deities mentioned in the Old Testament;65 G. J. Vossius’s *De theologia gentili* (1641), which ascribed the errors of the pagans to a misunderstanding of God’s operation in the natural world (it was thus keenly taken up by natural philosophers to defend the mechanistic worldview as anti-idolatrous); and Samuel Bochart’s *Geographica sacra* (1646), which drew on an attempted reconstruction of Phoenician to ascribe particular importance in the diffusionist process to the Phoenicians.66 Future criticism by the likes of Richard Simon and Voltaire has led to the


67 See now Zur Shalev, *Sacred words and worlds: geography, religion, and scholarship, 1550–1700* (Leiden, 2012), pp. 141–204. For contemporary ideas about the relationship between Hebrew
modern characterization of this scholarship as just another form of Renaissance syncretism, but, as Zur Shalev has astutely pointed out, this is a fundamental mischaracterization, for their syncretism was very restricted… That Saturn hid the truth of Noah did not mean that they were equally valid narrations of the same story. It is therefore problematic to see in [Bochart] a promoter of syncretism, or even cabalism and ‘ancient theology’, as some scholars do… Bochart approached the bible mainly as a source for ancient history, not theology.68

Historians are now recognizing the central importance of these histories of idolatry to the humanization of the biblical narrative and in establishing a new approach to paganism.69

As historians have begun to explore this world of antiquarian/contextual Old Testament exegesis and historia sacra, they have begun to emphasize that mid-seventeenth-century ‘orthodox’ approaches were neither stale nor defensive, and some fascinating (and often important) figures have been rediscovered or rehabilitated. Jan Loop has discussed how the much-read Zurich-based orientalist Johann Heinrich Hottinger introduced important new Arabic sources, such as a partial manuscript of the Kitāb al-Fihrist (938), a book catalogue by Ibn al-Nadīm that Hottinger had discovered amongst the papers of his teacher Jacobus Golius, as part of the continued effort to explore the pre-Islamic Arabs, adding another textual layer to the contextualization of the biblical near east.70 Dietrich Klein has taken a first step into what he rightly calls the terra incognita of Lutheran Arabic studies, with a fascinating account of and Phoenician more generally see Daniel Droixhe, ‘La crise de l’hébreu langue-mère au XVIIe siècle’, in Grell and Laplanche, eds., La république des lettres et l’histoire du judaïsme antique, XVIe–XVIIe siècles (Paris, 1992), pp. 65–99, esp. p. 76. In another important article, Dr Shalev has shown that the new geographia sacra was not just a product of Protestant literalism, but of a pan-confessional ‘antiquarian turn’: Zur Shalev, ‘Sacred geography: antiquarianism and visual erudition: Bento Arias Montano and the maps in the Antwerp polyglot bible’, Imago Mundi, 55 (2003), pp. 56–80, modifying the emphasis on biblical cartography as a uniquely Protestant phenomenon in Catherine Delano-Smith and Elizabeth M. Ingram, Maps in bibles, 1500–1600: an illustrated catalogue (Geneva, 1991).


69 At the most theoretical level, see Sheehan, ‘Sacred and profane’, p. 63. For the incorporation of this kind of research into the very influential commentaries on the Old Testament by Hugo Grotius, see F. Laplanche, ‘Grotius et les religions du paganisme dans les Annotationes in Vetus Testamentum’, in Nellen and Rabbie, eds., Hugo Grotius, theologian, pp. 53–64.

Theodor Hackspan, a professor at Altdorf who in the 1640s used both a Jewish manuscript – the Liber Nizzachon – that his students had stolen from a local rabbi while Hackspan distracted him, and two suras from the Quran which praise the undistorted faith of Abraham, to argue that the patriarch was ‘some kind of proto-Christian living long before the birth of Jesus Christ’ and that Judaism was only a temporary accommodation to the Hebrews. Noel Malcolm has excavated the remarkable figure of Jacques Boulduc, a Parisian Capuchin, who, in a series of works published between 1626 and 1640, not only gave early versions of the diffusionist histories of idolatry that would become so influential through the works of Vossius and Bochart, but also argued that alongside reintroducing the Seven Precepts of Noah, Jesus had re-promulgated the original ceremonies which had formed part of the natural-law religion of the early patriarchs – this made Boulduc not only ‘the only modern author before Selden to structure an entire account of natural law around the “praecepta Noachidarum”’, but also a serious contributor to the task of reconciling the ur-religion with Christianity which became so prominent later in the century (moreover, it was Boulduc’s exposition of the Book of Job which inspired Thomas Hobbes to use the biblical Leviathan as a symbol of the relationship between ruler and people). Perhaps even more striking has been the rehabilitation of that most derided of seventeenth-century polymaths, Athanasius Kircher. Kircher’s sacred history was certainly idiosyncratic: he believed in an original Adamic revelation which was preserved through Noah and his sons to all the world’s nations, which, although it descended into idolatry when its esoteric truths were misunderstood by the common people, could still be identified in the wisdom of the Egyptian priests (whose hieroglyphs Kircher thought he had translated via studying Coptic) and Jewish Cabbalists. His scholarly practices – such as his continued citation of Annii’s pseudo-Berorus – left him open to ridicule. But Daniel Stolzenberg has resuscitated serious investigation of Kircher as a sacred historian, showing how pioneering (and influential) some of Kircher’s ideas about Egyptian–Hebraic


73 See Daniel Stolzenberg, ed., The great art of knowing: the Baroque encyclopedia of Athanasius Kircher (Stanford, CA, 2001), and the essays in the excellent volume edited by Paula Findlen, Athanasius Kircher: the last man who knew everything (New York, NY, and London, 2004), especially the chapters by Daniel Stolzenberg (pp. 149–70) and Noel Malcolm (pp. 297–310).

contact were, and, more fundamentally, how we need to read Kircher not as an example of an out-of-date Renaissance syncretism, but as a contributor to ‘developing an original interpretation of Egypt that transcended the binary opposition of Egypt as the font of truth and Egypt as the nursery of superstition by regarding it as both’.  

An even more fundamental consequence has been a re-evaluation of the old narrative where a historicist revolution in biblical scholarship is said to begin with one of those three ‘radical’ deniers of the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch, Hobbes, Spinoza, or La Peyrère, whose ideas are then said to filter into the ‘modern’ approaches of figures like Richard Simon, Jean le Clerc, Anton van Dale, and the English deists. Noel Malcolm’s landmark essay on the sources of Hobbes’s, Spinoza’s and La Peyrère’s attitude to Moses concludes, ‘the most significant developments in biblical-critical thinking took place not at these extremes, but, so to speak, in the middle’.  

Into this middle-ground he places Simon, whose famous theory, in his Histoire critique du Vieux Testament (1678), that the Pentateuch was compiled by ‘public scribes’ mainly working under Mosaic direction, has previously been cited as the birth of a ‘modern’ approach. Dr Malcolm is accompanied in this revisionist judgement by Dr Shalev, who shows that Simon should be incorporated into ‘what may be called the “Cappel” turn – accepting the historical malleability of the Hebrew and Greek scriptures, and applying this notion to defend their respective orthodoxies’. Much of Simon’s reputation as a radically ‘modern’ figure came from the unexpectedly extreme reaction by Bishop Bossuet upon seeing the contents and the preface, leading to the almost total destruction of the French edition and to its glamorously exciting pirating, translating, and re-editing in various foreign editions. Just as pioneering as Simon was John Spencer,


77 Shalev, Sacred words, p. 201.

Master of Corpus Christi College in Cambridge, who inverted the narrative of Maimonides’s *Guide* where the rabbi suggested that God had given the Jews rites which directly opposed those of the ‘Sabians’, Spencer’s *De legibus Hebraeorum* (1685) instead argued that God transferred pagan (specifically Egyptian) rites into Jewish worship. Spencer’s work laid the foundations for the attitude to the biblical Hebrews of Toland, Voltaire, Rousseau, Giannone, and a host of ‘enlightened’ figures; indeed, until the rediscovery of Spencer’s work in the last two decades, it was assumed that such a marginalization of Jewish importance was a product solely of the eighteenth century.\(^7\) Subsequent historiography thus tried to explain how the Anglican cleric-scholar Spencer fitted within this narrative; it explained his conclusions as either the product of his idiosyncratic genius or of a closet rationalizing heterodoxy.\(^8\) But the most recent scholarship has disputed this interpretation, emphasizing Spencer’s debt to long-term intellectual traditions—including the work of Kircher and other Catholic historians—and contextualizing him amongst a group of Anglican scholars whose political-ecclesiastical ambitions were neither liberal nor ‘enlightened’ but aimed at shoring up Anglican intellectual and ecclesiastical authority.\(^9\)

It should be clear by now that the old narrative of a turgid anti-pagan ‘orthodoxy’ being bulldozed away by the deist invention of comparative religion is coming under sustained pressure. Recent works which continue to espouse deist-centred interpretations do so only by ignoring the fruits of the recent history of scholarship.\(^10\) Those interpretations depend on the notion that there was some kind of semi-inevitable shift from an interest in the worldwide

\(^7\) The first major study to draw attention to Spencer was Gascoigne, “Wisdom”, which focuses less on his scholarship but usefully puts him in the context of the shift of emphasis from God’s special to his general providence in contemporaneous natural philosophy. Paolo Rossi had also previously drawn attention to Spencer in his still useful *Dark abyss of time*, pp. 125–6.


\(^9\) Dmitri Levitin, ‘John Spencer’s *De legibus Hebraeorum* (1685) and the nature of “enlightened” sacred history: a new interpretation’ (forthcoming).

\(^10\) Lynn Hunt, Margaret C. Jacob and Wijnand Mijnhardt, *The book that changed Europe: Picart & Bernard’s religious ceremonies of the world* (Cambridge, MA, 2010) – see e.g. the disastrously teleological discussion of changing modes of the study of religion at p. 287. For a study with similar focus see Silvia Berti, ‘Bernard Picart e Jean-Frédéric Bernard dalla religione riformata al deismo: un incontro con il mondo ebraico nell’Amsterdam del primo settecento’, *Rivista Storica Italiana*, 117 (2005), pp. 974–1001. For Picart’s famous engravings, the key study

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diffusion and later corruption of a primitive ur-religion to a belief in natural religion only. This narrative was followed in Peter Harrison’s influential survey, which mapped these developments on to a putative shift from Cambridge Platonism to Toland’s deism; others have claimed such a natural shift from Matteo Ricci’s belief that the Chinese classics of the Late Chou and Warring States periods recognized the existence of a personal single God to the deism of Voltaire. This is to confuse *prisca theologia*—a phrase used by Renaissance Neoplatonists and almost entirely useless for the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries—with the diffusionism that became standard in early modern historiography. In this respect, Christian scholars were not the self-defeating simpletons they can be presented as: there was no incompatibility between diffusionism and narratives of Christian revelation, because diffusionism implied nothing about the epistemological or theological status of the primitive (usually Noachic) revelation. The diffusionist approach was versatile, adaptable, and productive, able to incorporate both new evidence (like that on Chinese (usually Noachic) revelation. The diffusionist approach was versatile, adaptable, and productive, able to incorporate both new evidence (like that on Chinese religion) and new historical techniques (especially the conjectural histories of civil society developed in post-Pufendorfian German jurisprudence). Gibbon may have smirked at the Noachic genealogies, but even his smirk was directed only at their more far-fetched nationalistic proponents, and he relied heavily

remains Paola von Wyss-Giacosa, *Religionsbilder der frühen Aufklärung: Bernard Picarts Tafeln für die Cérémonies et coutumes religieuses de tous les peuples du monde* (Bern, 2006).


on the scholarship of those inheritors of Bochart who offered more reliable narratives, such as Antoine-Yves Goguet, whose De l’origine des loix, des arts, et des sciences (1758) happily inserted its subject matter into a Noachic-diffusionist framework. Although geological arguments had been introduced into the debate in the mid-seventeenth century, most famously in Nicolaus Steno’s development of a theory of stratification in his Prodromus (1669), it was not until the nineteenth century that they offered a comprehensive and convincing challenge to the chronological underpinnings of biblically grounded historia sacra.

Some early modern scholars did follow Eusebius and argue for a Mosaic source for most of pagan culture: most prominent here are the names of Pierre-Daniel Huet in France and Theophilus Gale in England. There has been a tendency to read too much into these examples, and to claim that anyone who charted the post-Noachic spread of religions in the eighteenth century and did not suggest that they were all derivations from Mosaic truth was in some sense ‘heterodox’ or espousing a ‘Christianized deism’: recent years have seen such claims made about Abraham Hyacinthe Anquetil-Duperron, the discoverer of the Avesta, and about Sir William Jones, the famous ‘father’ of comparative philology (via his work on Sanskrit’s relationship to classical Greek and Latin).

Sweden became the most advanced nation after the Flood and that Greek and Latin were derived from Swedish. For other patriotic appropriations of Noachic diffusionism see Colin Kidd, British identities before nationalism: ethnicity and nationhood in the Atlantic World, 1600–1800 (Cambridge, 1999), pp. 29–30.


See Siep Stuurman, ‘Cosmopolitan egalitarianism in the enlightenment: Anquetil Duperron on India and America’, Journal of the History of Ideas, 68 (2007), p. 266; ‘Anquetil’s recognition of the Asiatic sources as authorities in their own right destabilizes all future attempts to safeguard the global primacy of Christian sacred history’. Bruce Lincoln, ‘Isaac Newton and Oriental Jones on myth, ancient history, and the relative prestige of peoples’, History of Religions, 42 (2002), pp. 1–18 is superior, but still somewhat conflates Jones’s novel specific conclusions (he argued, on the basis of the Dabstān-i Mazāhib, a Persian text from the seventeenth century, that the Mahābādians (a supposed Iranian dynasty), rather than more standard candidates like the Egyptians or the Chaldeans, were the world’s first kings and inherited the primordial religion) with his supposed methodological novelty: ‘While he still
Here, there is the assumption that ‘orthodoxy’ was about ‘upgrading’ the Jews and ‘downgrading’ other civilizations, but, as we have seen, post-Maimonidean ‘orthodoxy’ was more than happy to emphasize the backwardness of the chosen people, and thus God’s need to operate in historical time through divine condescension. Seventeenth- and eighteenth-century orientalism was the home of huge innovations, but a widespread emphasis on ‘natural religion’ was not, for the most part, one of them.

Of course, some truly radical thinkers did use this type of scholarship to attack biblical miracles as Ezran fabrications, or to defend the putatively Spinozan monism of Confucian religious philosophy. But the most popular irreligious texts, we are now realizing, offered little more than anticlerical readings of established narratives. The best recent work has focused on the importance of the creative reception of humanist scholarship as central to late seventeenth-century freethought, from the Anglican schoolmaster Thomas Burnet, whose desire to defend a Cartesian Creation theory led him to misunderstand Spencer and to stumble into claiming that Moses was a lawgiver who told tactical untruths to the primitive Jews (deists from Toland to Voltaire jumped on this narrative, leading to its fervent opposition by Vico); to Isaac Newton, whose dog-eared pages of the early seventeenth-century scholarship of Selden and Vossius testify to his creative use in adapting them for his own clandestine antitrinitarian purposes; to the use of Grotius’s historicization of privileged Israel and the line of Shem with regard to religion, he reduced that privilege to the bare minimum possible without mounting a direct challenge to Christian orthodoxy.

92 This is the language of Stuurman, ‘Cosmopolitan egalitarianism’, pp. 260–7. See also e.g. Manuel, Broken staff, p. 177, and for a particularly forceful assertion, Trevor-Roper, ‘Historical philosophy’, p. 3.


95 For a general summary, see Sutcliffe, Judaism and enlightenment. Excellent on the Italian contributions to the debate, especially that by Pietro Giannone, is Lia Mannarino, Le mille favole degli antichi: ebraismo e cultura europea nel pensiero religioso di Pietro Giannone (Florence, 1999).

allegorical interpretation in the *querelle des anciens et modernes*; and even to David Hume, whose *Natural history of religion* (1757) has recently been shown to have been in part an outgrowth of the seventeenth-century debates.

The famous conclusions of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries are, in short, being demonstrated to have been the product less of a self-contained ‘early enlightenment’, applying post-Cartesian scepticism to the field of ancient religious history, and more the gradual outgrowths of the contextualization of the Old Testament from the late sixteenth century onwards. This is reflected in a recent monograph by the prominent historian of late antiquity Guy Stroumsa, which argues that the modern science of religion was not born, as is usually thought, in the second half of the nineteenth century, when the first Chairs dedicated to the general and comparative study of religious phenomena were established in Western European universities . . . [but in] the age of reason, broadly defined (the long Enlightenment, from 1600 to 1800).

Professor Stroumsa’s discussions of important figures like the Oxford orientalist and historian of Zoroastrianism Thomas Hyde are by far the best available. But Professor Stroumsa has ultimately written as a scholar writing the prehistory of his own discipline, and this is reflected in his work’s lack of engagement with the theological underpinnings of much of his subject matter; we await a truly historical treatment of how the writing of ancient religious history developed in our period.

More work still needs to be done here, for example on popularizing texts such as Bernard Fontenelle’s *De l’origine des fables* (published 1724, but probably written some time in the 1680s); Fontenelle’s self-conscious desire to please his genteel reading public led him to shift emphasis to what one might call the anthropology of primitive mythology, and although some work has charted the debts of this approach both to travel literature and to Epicurean psychological theories, a narrative remains to be written which connects such a text (which undoubtedly also informed Hume’s *Natural history*) to the world of previous historical scholarship. But the historical challenge of the deists and the

98 Serjeantson, ‘Eusebianism’.
100 Stroumsa, *New science*, p. viii. The monograph in fact consists of condensed versions of several articles (listed at p. 215) – those in search of detail are recommended to turn to the articles.
philosophes now appears less like the culmination of a late seventeenth-century Hazardian crise and more as a polemical and popularizing interlude in the gradual scholarly recognition that studying the Old Testament involved studying the history of ancient paganism, and concomitantly the rise of the study of oriental religion. Of course, the eighteenth century witnessed major new developments. A rather obvious one was the increased access to the east offered by periods of peace with the Ottomans. A second was the rise of more advanced philological-historical apologetics: particularly important here were the researches of Albert Schultens, who argued first that Arabic was a form of a purer Hebrew preserved by Abraham’s son Ishmael, and later that Hebrew and Arabic were both descended from a now lost Semitic mother language; both theses allowed him to use Arabic to defend the comprehensibility of biblical Hebrew. Finally, there was a scholarly shift from grand historical to micro-textual philological defences of the bible, inspired initially by the manuscript-based emendations suggested in Richard Bentley and John Mill’s New Testament (1710), but then most forcefully developed in Germany in the researches of Johann Albrecht Bengel, Johann Semler, and Johann David Michaelis, as the bible was increasingly defended as a literary and cultural artefact. Although deism might have been on the agenda for these figures, they were inspired as much by the orthodox criticism developed in eighteenth-century Oxford, especially by Robert Lowth and Benjamin Kennicott. These approaches, with their stress on literary form and their use of anthropological conjecture, were certainly different from the humanist approaches discussed above, but even Michaelis’s approach to the bible depended on the fundamental realization of the ‘cultural particularity of the Ancient Israelites’ that undoubtedly had its roots in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. That moment, rather than any of its later ‘radical’ manifestations, had the longest afterlife.


105 The quotation is from Michael C. Legaspi, The death of scripture and the rise of biblical studies (Oxford, 2010), p. 51. For some comments on the debt of German criticism (especially that of Herder) to earlier humanists, see Christoph Bultmann, Die biblische Urgeschichte in der Aufklärung Johann Gottfried Herders Interpretation der Genesis als Antwort auf die Religionskritik David Humes (Tübingen, 1999), e.g. p. 49.
As Suzanne Marchand has written in her epic study of nineteenth-century German orientalism:

European, and especially German scholarly orientalism in the nineteenth and even early twentieth centuries remained powerfully rooted in humanistic traditions that reach back into the early modern or even the Hellenistic world and are rooted in the interpretation of Jewish and Christian scripture ... For the most part, my research brought me face to face not with policy makers but with the descendants of those often rebarbative and iconoclastic theologians and philologists [of] early modern intellectual history.106

III

We saw briefly that new narratives of pre-Christian religion might involve a critical attitude towards the textual *auctoritas* of the church fathers and even the evangelists, and we need now to turn to the early modern study of primitive Christianity. One need hardly be reminded that here the Reformation was a key incentive to scholarship,107 although we should not forget that Italian humanists had been producing editions of the Greek fathers since the mid-fifteenth century, especially in the wake of the attempts at reconciliation between Rome and Greek Christians at the Council of Florence.108 Following some pioneering mid-twentieth-century research,109 a small industry devoted itself to charting both Reformed and Counter-Reformed recourse to patristic authority.110 But the use of the church fathers as *testimonia* for doctrinal

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positions begs the obvious question of the relationship between ideology and scholarship. Here, the literature lay for some time under the shadow of Pontien Polman’s 1932 thesis that after the Reformation, history was almost entirely subsumed to confessional ideology; so much so that its use by Protestants was only a doctrinal betrayal of the principle of *sola scriptura*.

Polman’s work remains a mine of important information. But its central arguments have been disputed. Starting with the latter claim, the recent scholarship has shown that when, say, Cranmer relied on the ‘authorities of doctors’ first to defend and then to deny the notion of a Eucharistic Real Presence, or when Melanchthon argued for the reintegration of patristics into the Protestant university curriculum, neither felt any tension between the notion of *sola scriptura* and their historically grounded apologetics: for both, the consent of the fathers was not meant to establish doctrine but only to confirm the correct interpretation of scripture. Lutherans and Reformed could disagree whether the canon of scripture was known through the unchanging authority of the church (a position difficult to sustain from the start) or from the inner witness of the Holy Spirit, but even Lutherans ‘insisted that the reception of scripture as having been transmitted by the Church by no means pledged them to accept traditions other than the Bible’. These were no concessions to the Tridentine insistence that truth was to be found in the written and unwritten tradition preserved by the Holy Ghost within the church.

More fundamentally, Polman’s first claim – that scholarship was subsumed to confession – is being heavily revised. Let us first remind ourselves that an early

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111 Pontien Polman, *L’élément historique dans la controverse religieuse du 16e siècle* (Gembloux, 1932).
113 For Melanchthonian patristics, see Frankel, *Testimonia Patrum*; E. P. Meijering, *Melanchthon and patristic thought: the doctrines of Christ and Grace, the Trinity and the Creation* (Leiden, 1983), which is fiercely criticized in Timothy J. Wengert, ‘“Qui vigilantissimis oculis veterum omnium commentarios excusserit”: Philip Melanchthon’s patristic exegesis’, in Steinmetz and Kolb, eds., *Die Patristik*, pp. 115–34.
115 Muller, *Holy scripture.*
modern ecclesiastical historian was defined as such not by his adherence to a denomination but by his subscription to certain ancient methodological principles: for all the ideological appropriations that this tradition endured, ‘ecclesiastical history remained large in scale and tightly connected to the compiling and the study of documents’. Bearing this in mind, some of the most vibrant recent literature has charted the fruitful interplay between history and ideology, the most important of which is Irena Backus’s work on historical method and confessional identity, which argues that ‘the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries were characterized by an interest in history first and foremost and the very omnipresence of history made it the obvious means whereby theologians of all religious parties could confirm their confessional identity’. Although Backus includes Cardinal Baronio’s Annales in her account, her strengths undoubtedly lie in the Protestant world, and she offers an important discussion of the Magdeburg centuries (1559–74), that remarkable undertaking of collaborative Protestant sacred history, brought together by Matthias Flacius Illyricus, a scholar and theologian who in our time has become associated, through the bizarre vicissitudes of intellectual history, with Gadamer’s hermeneutics. The methodological revolution enacted by the Centuriators is well known: condemning their predecessors – Socrates, Theodoret, Nicephorus, and above all Eusebius – the Centuriators proposed that the subject matter of ecclesiastical history was not the acts of individuals or the church as an institution, but doctrine. One need not deny that there was an ideological component to this – emphasizing doctrine allowed one easily to chart the shifting locale of the ‘true’ (i.e. proto-Lutheran) church, rather than the institutional history of the Church of Rome – but this focus on the history of thought posed new methodological problems, and we might not be entirely foolish to see here an important step in what would become the history of ideas. It is perhaps no coincidence that the latest research is suggesting that the Centuriators’ methodology was inspired partly by the same modes of

118 I. Backus, Historical method and confessional identity in the era of the Reformation (1378–1615) (Leiden, 2003), p. 3, and the important corollary: ‘This hypothesis does not deny that there was religious controversy in the 16th and early 17th century. It does, however, aim to do away with the notion that theologians of the period were polemicists first and foremost’.
120 Backus, Historical method, pp. 361–2.
legal historiography that informed Scaliger’s contextual approach to the bible.\footnote{122}

On the Roman side, that Baronio intended his Annales (1588–1607) as a reply to the Centuries is well known,\footnote{123} and we are unsurprised to find him returning to institutional history.\footnote{124} In part the unwitting inheritors of Protestant propaganda, some modern historians continue to scoff at the cardinal’s enterprise as little more than the accretion of papal commonplaces; while we can hardly deny the polemical intent of the work, deeper research has explored the complex culture of post-Tridentine antiquarianism and metropolitan sacred history which informed it (where energetic bishops like Carlo Bascapè in Novara all ‘agreed that the cause of holiness in the various churches of their own day could best be promoted by proving the existence of holiness in the same churches in the past’)\footnote{125} and into the continent-wide research network of which Baronio was but one member (notwithstanding his efforts to suppress the fact), itself stimulated by the new and reformed religious orders of the Counter-Reformation, most importantly the Roman Oratorio established by Filippo Neri, who would conduct tours of the newly excavated Roman catacombs.\footnote{126} It was this combination of antiquarian and local history which marked Italian historia sacra and produced such monuments of large-scale scholarship as the Roman martyrology (1583) commissioned by Gregory XIII.\footnote{127} And like the Centuriators, Baronio’s methodological choice to focus on institutional history involved him in a project that eclipsed his ideological ambitions, leading him to mine the Vatican archive to showcase the annals

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  \bibitem{123} For earlier attempts at an official response by Onofrio Panvinio, see Cochrane, Historians and historiography, p. 458; for the first suggestion of using sacred history to combat the new heresy (in 1522 by Gregorio Cortesi), see ibid., p. 457.
  \bibitem{124} For the latest work on Baronio, see the essays in Luigi Gulia, ed., Baronio e le sue fonti: Atti del Convegno Internazionale di Studi Sora 10–13 Ottobre 2007 (Sora, 2009). The fullest monograph study is now S. Zen, Baronio storico: controriforma e crisi del metodoumanistico (Naples, 1994), replacing the outdated Cyriac K. Pullapilly, Caesar Baronius, Counter-Reformation historian (London, 1975).
  \bibitem{125} Cochrane, Historians and historiography, p. 449. See also Ditchfield, ‘What was sacred history?’.
  \bibitem{127} Ditchfield, Liturgy, sanctity and history, pp. 43–4, and the still essential source study, H. Lämmer, De Martyrologio Romano: Parergon historico-criticum (Ratisbon, 1878), pp. 29–36, as well as the essays by Manlio Sodi, Silvia Ronchey, John Howe, Stefania Mezzazappa, and Angelo Rusconi in Gulia, ed., Baronio, pp. 289–386.
\end{thebibliography}

For all his archival diligence, however, Baronio had one great fault: it quickly emerged that he was barely competent in Greek, never mind in Hebrew.\footnote{A. Grafton and J. Weinberg, ‘I have always loved the Holy Tongue’: Isaac Casaubon, the Jews, and a forgotten chapter in Renaissance scholarship (Cambridge, MA, 2011), p. 182.} For one of the great findings of the recent historiography is that it was when the Hellenistic and the Semitic met (and sometimes clashed) with the patristic that early modern visions of primitive Christianity appeared at their most novel and their most suggestive. Eusebius and his antique counterparts had treated the church as a self-contained institution that had appeared – like the animals of Creation – fully formed. But already the Centuriators ‘adopted a radically different approach . . . From the start of their work, they insisted that one could not hope to understand the church that Jesus had created without first surveying the Jewish beliefs and institutions he had known and worked with’.\footnote{Ibid., p. 189.}

We have already encountered the importance of such narratives of cultural translatability, but in discussions of early Christianity they took on a new urgency: more work is undoubtedly needed on those Christian Hebraist pioneers who explored the Jewish background of early Christianity, such as the German scholar and cosmographer Sebastian Münster, whose Latin notes to his Hebrew edition of Matthew’s Gospel (1537) offered a ‘cultural discussion of the Gospel’ which focused ‘upon the Jewish background to the apostolic age’, and Paul Fagius, whose Hebrew prayers (1542) recognized the Lord’s Supper as a Passover Seder.\footnote{Ibid., p. 199.} More generally, a full treatment of the early modern reception of Josephus remains a desideratum, for his work served as the premier
ancient model for treating God’s chosen people both as divinely elect but also part of ordinary human history.  

If the early history of these revolutionary conclusions remains hazy, it is only recently that the historiography has begun to come to terms with their consequences. The painstaking scholarship of Joanna Weinberg has thrown light on the central place in this narrative of the remarkable Italian-Jewish scholar Azariah de’ Rossi, and his reassessment of that most important product of Alexandrian intellectual-religious syncretism, the Jewish biblical philosopher Philo Judaeus (20 BC–AD 50). Eusebius had identified the ‘Therapeutae’ described by Philo in his De vita contemplativa as the first Christian monastic order, and had portrayed Philo as a sort of proto-Christian – this story was then embellished and the Christian Philo reappeared when the first translations and editions of his works were printed in the middle of the sixteenth century. Using a combination of Christian and rabbinic sources, De’ Rossi redefined Philo as a strange type of Hellenistic Jew, who knew no Hebrew and whose Platonic inclinations led him to allegorize the bible. Several years later, Scaliger – motivated perhaps by the criticisms directed at his work by Theodore Beza – reconsidered the ἑλληνισται (Hellenists) mentioned in Acts 6.1, identified since Erasmus as Jews who lived in the Greek and Roman lands of the empire. Scaliger, as Anthony Grafton has documented, made a crucial new suggestion: the verb ‘to Hellenize’ did not simply mean ‘live among the Greeks’, but ‘to speak Greek’, and so the Hellenists of Acts were Jews who spoke Greek and read the bible in Greek, in the Septuagint version. Moreover, Scaliger followed De’ Rossi in classifying Philo as a Hellenistic Jew.  

This scholarship had two fundamental consequences. It served to historicize the text of the Septuagint, showing that it was produced not, as the famous Letter of Aristeas affirmed, by seventy inspired scribes, but by one linguistically limited person addressing the specific needs of a community of Hellenistic Jews: in other words, in a specific time and place and for a specific reason. This philological historicization of scripture was thrust into the spotlight in the early seventeenth century in an ill-tempered debate between two professors at the University of Leiden, Daniel Heinsius and Claude Saumaise. But just as important were the consequences for the understanding of early Christianity. De’ Rossi suggested that far from being an early example of Christian

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133 A starting point is the bibliography of printed editions: Heinz Schreckenberg, Bibliographie zu Flavius Josephus (Leiden, 1968). See also the thorough recent study of the reception of the famous Testimonium Flavianum: Alice Whealey, Josephus on Jesus: the Testimonium Flavianum controversy from late antiquity to modern times (New York, NY, 2003), esp. pp. 73–168.


monasticism, the Essene sect (aligned by him with the Therapeutae) was a branch of Hellenistic Judaism which in turn became Christian monasticism: ‘The origins of Christian monastic institutions were Jewish: Philo’s Essenes were a Jewish, not a Christian, sect.’

Protestants had long complained about the intrusion of monasticism into the primitive church, but had tended to date that intrusion far later, sometime in the fourth or fifth century. Not only did the new historicization shift the corruption back, it also suggested that the world of early Christianity was pregnant with intellectual traditions—Jewish and Hellenistic—very alien to those used to the standard patristic narratives. Just as fundamentally, reconstructing the Jewish context of early Christianity could destabilize the historical authority of the church fathers, who could now be castigated for their lack of knowledge of Hebrew.

The evangelists and the church fathers could now be seen not as conveyors of blindly trustable testimonia, but as humans with their own contingent intentions. It was this late sixteenth-century finding that informed Grotius’s historicization of allegorical exegesis of the Old Testament (see above), and would inform Jean le Clerc’s ‘enlightened’ attitude to early Christianity (see below). But we can already see it being repeatedly deployed by the great Casaubon. Long ago, Mark Pattison somewhat regretfully noted that ‘what stirs his soul is Christian Greek’; Casaubon’s devotion to primitive Christianity has finally received the treatment it deserves at the hands of Joanna Weinberg and Anthony Grafton. And here, we find that if many of Casaubon’s investigations began with the ideological desire to refute Baronio, they quickly alighted from that path to investigate the consequences of this ‘enculturation’ of early Christianity. Not only did Casaubon launch a deeper investigation into the relationship between early Christians and Jewish ascetic sets like the Essenes, but the intentions of the early believers—and their possibly unforeseen consequences—now came under the historical spotlight. Just as for his friend Scaliger, the Letter of Aristeas could be dismissed, and the Septuagint shown to be the product of a local culture. It emerged that Paul and the apostles, in their attempts to convert the gentiles, perhaps unwisely incorporated elements of pagan mystagogic vocabulary into the primitive faith. And even more profoundly, the realization of cultural malleability taught both

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138 As was done by Thomas Erpenius, Professor of Oriental Languages at Leiden University, in an oration in 1620: P. T. van Rooden, Theology, biblical scholarship and rabbinical studies in the seventeenth century: Constantijn l’empereur (1591–1648), Professor of Hebrew and Theology at Leiden (Leiden, 1989), p. 58.
140 Grafton and Weinberg, Casaubon. See also H. Parenty, Isaac Casaubon, helléniste: des studia humanitatis à la philologie (Geneva, 2009), esp. pp. 93–6, 271–81, on his Greek patristic interests.
141 Grafton and Weinberg, Casaubon, pp. 156, 190, 213–14.
142 Ibid., pp. 122–9.
143 Levitin, ‘Spencer’, on chapter 43 of the Exercitationes.
Scaliger and Casaubon that the early Christians had, in a spirit of syncretizing enthusiasm, produced ‘pious forgeries’ designed to appeal to the Hellenistic pagans and Jews – the *Hermetic corpus*, the *Sibylline oracles*, and the *Testimonium Flavianum* – and they were wrong to do so, not only because falsehood does not beget truth, but because the unforeseen consequences of these forgeries were the rise of ascetism and monkishness.¹⁴⁴ There is a deep irony here, in that it was Casaubon’s conclusions which had the unforeseen consequences of destabilizing patristic auctoritas. Frances Yates considered Casaubon’s redating of Hermes the birth of a modern mind because it signalled the end of Renaissance illuminationist-magical Hermeticism;¹⁴⁵ we now find that she may have been correct but for entirely the wrong reason, for the real significance was that the history of primitive Christianity could now be the history of error, or at least of religious, philosophical, and cultural intermingling and confusion.¹⁴⁶

We are here at one defining point when patristics becomes ‘critical’, for if the early church is pregnant with Judaism, yet that Judaism is itself infused with Hellenistic intellectual culture, we have an encounter between Christianity and paganism that can explain but also goes beyond Paul’s sermon to the Athenians. The evangelists and church fathers now have their own contextually determined intentions and the theology that they produce now has a clear human history. One might think that here we have the end of notions of patristic orthodoxy, but it would be a mistake to jump to this conclusion. Theological (and political) leaders on both sides scrambled to ally this criticism to confessionalism, and we find a poignant tug of war over Casaubon’s allegiances between the ultramontane Cardinal Du Perron (who would invite him to breakfast to attempt to convert him through patristic citation), the French Calvinists whose rejection of the fathers he had come to deplore, and, belatedly, the English church of the scholar-king James I and the polyglot Bishop Lancelot Andrewes.¹⁴⁷ That French Catholicism had tempted him should not surprise, for under Du Perron’s leadership it was itself undergoing


a critical turn: the cardinal’s contact with Casaubon was just one of many signs that a shared method could transcend confessional boundaries. The decree of the fourth session of the Council of Trent (1546) that the traditions of the church were equal in status to scripture, which should not be interpreted without the ‘unanimous consent of the fathers’, had raised as many question as it answered: who qualified as a father, and how many were required for unanimity? Anti-scholastic sentiment may have encouraged the idea that St Bernard was the ‘last of the fathers’, but this sat rather uneasily with the principle of unanimity: ‘Taken in isolation, each one of [the fathers] is liable to make a mistake and thus can only provide the theologian with a probable argument; considered together, they cannot err and their consensus is certain proof of the truth of a doctrine’. In the battle between unanimity and history Du Perron favoured the latter, and ‘shifted the debate from doctrine to history, from the Fathers “as Doctors” to the Fathers “as witnesses of the Customes and practice of the Church of their times”’. Jean-Louis Quantin has charted the great influence in France of this historicizing turn: it led to the development of what became known as ‘positive theology’ (especially popular with the Benedictine Maurists and the Jesuit Bollandists): self-consciously anti-scholastic and patristic. Here we have the direct prehistory of the ‘golden age for the study of Christian antiquity’ in France, of which the most prominent product was the Jansenist...

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150 Quantin, ‘Fathers in Roman Catholic theology’, p. 960.

151 Quantin, Christian antiquity, p. 216, quoting The reply of... Cardinall of Perron (1630), Lady Falkland’s translation of Du Perron’s Lettre envoyée au Sieur Casaubon en Angleterre (1612).


Louis-Sébastien Le Nain de Tillemont; but here we also have the potential clash of criticism and ‘orthodoxy’ well before ‘heterodoxy’ has become a major component of the narrative. For the critical method was liable to being turned against itself: in his *Traité de l’emploi des saints pères* (1631), probably the most important anti-patristic text of the seventeenth century, the French Calvinist Jean Daillé ‘aimed specifically at Du Perron’s new care for the authenticity of the Fathers’; the paucity of sources made the fathers unreliable as witnesses, whereas Du Perron’s own critical approach had demonstrated their shortcomings as doctors, for had not the cardinal himself pointed out that before the Arian controversy the language of the fathers was hardly reconcilable with Nicene dogma? And had Casaubon not taught the world that the early Christians resorted to forgeries? But not even inter-confessional polemic was necessary for theological trouble, for the Casaubonian inheritance could inspire a devout Jesuit, Denis Petau, a friend of the Genevan while the latter was in Paris but an able opponent of Scaliger in matters chronological (and perhaps the foremost exponent of ‘positive theology’) to argue, in his *Theologica dogmata* (1644–50), that the Christological speculations of the ante-Nicenes – infected as they were by Hellenistic Platonism – were indistinguishable from those of the Arians. Petau was even suspected of Socinianism: these suspicions were undoubtedly misplaced, but they were signs of the possible tension in theology’s marriage to criticism, not least because Petau’s conclusions were soon taken up by real antitrinitarians, from Christoph Sand and Daniel Zwicker in Germany (both ended up in the Dutch Republic) to John Biddle and Isaac Newton in England. In the second half of the seventeenth century, the Jansenists’

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\(^{155}\) Quantin, *Christian antiquity*, p. 234.


\(^{157}\) Quantin, *Christian antiquity*, p. 236.


continuous citation of Augustine perturbed Rome enough that the optimism of the early seventeenth century was replaced by ‘a growing rift between the attempt to return to the sources based on the works of the Fathers, on the one hand, and on the other, a theological and disciplinarian movement approved by the Church’.

By the time of Unigenitus, the vast investment in patristics could be seen to have failed, not because of a radical heterodox challenge but because of the quality of its own scholarship, and we may note in passing here that it was this scholarship – rather than any Spinozan iconoclasm – that informed Bayle’s articles on the fathers in the Dictionnaire (1697).

English theologians meanwhile, buoyed by Casaubon’s declaration that it was their church which best preserved primitive purity, developed their own critical turn. Since the Oxford Movement at least, Casaubon’s welcome into the fold had consistently been portrayed as yet another step in the continuous journey that was ‘Anglicanism’s’ unchanging marriage to Christian antiquity: as old as Hooker and Jewel and permanently opposed to the pincer-like challenge of popery and puritanism. This narrative has been swept aside by Professor Quantin’s remarkable aforementioned monograph. Neither Jewel nor Hooker nor any of their contemporaries ‘ascribe[d] special authority to any period of the history of the church’, for just like their Reformed counterparts on the continent, Elizabethan divines could resort to anti-papal patristic citations without investing historical tradition with any intrinsic theological authority. It was the contribution primarily of continental émigré scholars, whether Casaubon himself or Marcantonio De Dominis, the Roman Catholic archbishop of Spalato who temporarily joined the English church, to begin to ascribe to that church a definitively ‘patristic’ identity, and ‘only after the Restoration did the reference to antiquity become essential to the new synthesis which, by that time, can fairly be called Anglicanism’. Once again, it was the alliance of ‘orthodoxy’ and criticism that produced the most spectacular results. Nowhere is this more evident than in the defence of the English church by the Anglo-Irish scholar Henry Dodwell, in an argument whose learning was matched only by its inventiveness and idiosyncrasy. Under the Jewish Covenant, sacrifices enacted a mystical union with God, and the Christian bishops continued the

 Quantin, eds., History of scholarship, pp. 357–85; Mortimer, Socinianism, pp. 147–76. On Newton, see S. Mandelbrote, “Then this nothing can be plainer”: Isaac Newton reads the fathers’, in Frank, Leinkauf, and Wriedt, eds., Patristik, pp. 277–97.

150 Quantin, ‘Fathers in Roman Catholic theology’, p. 984.


152 Quantin, Christian antiquity, p. 396.


functions of the Jewish High Priest in preserving this union (traceable through the Neoplatonic vocabulary of the apostles and the ante-Nicene fathers): communion with the bishop was thus necessary for communion with God. Even if this narrative was deployed to buttress the church Dodwell adored, it can hardly be explained by simple ideological mapping: Professor Quantin has demonstrated beyond doubt that Dodwell’s refusal to take up clerical orders stemmed not, as all his subsequent biographers claimed, from a desire to maintain a façade of neutrality, but from a covert scepticism, born from his research, about the apostolic purity of the Athanasian Creed. The same critical acumen led him later to deny that the primitive church held belief in the natural immortality of the soul: a remarkable claim which shocked his Anglican (and by then nonjuring) friends and served as ammunition for gleeful freethinkers.165

We have reached a point where historians start talking about ‘enlightenment’, but it is unclear what is being signified.166 Dodwell was working with the world of a Hellenistic-Judaic Christianity which we found being erected by early seventeenth-century scholarship. The subsequent century saw the Second Temple Jewish background to Christianity explored in painstaking scholarly detail, especially by John Selden, now the subject of G.J. Toomer’s aforementioned biography.167 We have encountered Selden already as a contextualizer of the Old Testament, but perhaps his greatest contribution was to paint the fullest picture yet of the Jewish background to the apostolic age, and Professor Toomer charts for us how these conclusions rested on new Jewish sources, such as the Karaite texts deposited in England by a professor of oriental languages at Königsberg University, J.S. Rittangl, after his ship had been attacked by Dunkirker privateers on its way to Holland,168 on newly recovered Arabic texts like the world chronicle *Nāẓm al-Jawhar* (*String of pearls*) by Eutychius (Said ibn Batriq), a tenth-century patriarch of Alexandria, fragments of which contained

167 Toomer, Selden. Additionally, Professor Toomer has extremely generously placed online his transcriptions of the Selden Correspondence, available at the Oxford Cultures of Knowledge Project: www.history.ox.ac.uk/cofk/archives/5354.
anti-episcopalian readings of early ecclesiology, and on Selden’s deployment of his scholarship for religio-political ends, not least in the Westminster assembly. The monumental forthcoming edition of the minutes of that assembly will be an essential source for those wishing to chart the role of scholarship in early modern political life, when John Lightfoot could pontificate for an afternoon on Homeric philology so as to explain the third article of the Apostle’s Creed (Christ’s descent into Hell), because ‘The Greek Phrase is a Phrase used among the Heathen originally.’ It was Selden’s (and to a far lesser extent Hobbes’s) Erastian readings of Christianity’s Jewish inheritance that forced both Catholics like Simon and Anglicans like Henry Hammond, Herbert Thorndike, and Dodwell into elaborate counter-narratives. And here we come to the crux of the matter, for it was the church’s investment in scholarship (only accentuated by the catastrophe of the Civil War), and in an ever-more historically defined Christianity, that led patristics into the troubles of which Dodwell’s intellectual career is only one manifestation. While in France patristic ‘orthodoxy’ smashed against Jansenist citations of Augustine on predestination, in England (where the focus on the ante-Nicenes circumnavigated any Augustinian embarrassment) defenders of the post-1689 ecclesiological settlement could throw Dodwell back at his high


173 But for the importance of Augustine to Restoration defences of persecution, see M. Goldie, ‘The theory of religious intolerance in Restoration England’, in O. P. Grell,
church and nonjuror friends: why must one accept the authority of Cyprian on episcopacy (which Dodwell had defended in a timeless edition produced at John Fell’s famous Oxford press), yet reject the early church on the immortality of the soul?

All this brings us to the fifth instalment in John Pocock’s magisterial series on Edward Gibbon as a historian and as a participant in plural ‘enlightenments’. This volume deals with Gibbon as a church historian, in the infamous chapters 15 and 16 of the Decline and Fall, where Gibbon began by telling his readers that he would chart the secondary causes behind the rise of Christianity and finished by pointedly noting that the darkness that followed the death of Christ, as recorded in the Synoptic Gospels, went unrecorded in other ancient sources. As in the other volumes in this series, the great value of Professor Pocock’s work lies in his willingness to explore in depth texts other than Gibbon’s, in this case a set of late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century ecclesiastical historians: the Amsterdam-based Swiss journal editor Jean le Clerc, the pastor of the French church in Berlin and historian of Manichaeism Isaac de Beausobre, and the Lutheran chancellor of the University of Gottingen Johann Lorenz von Mosheim. Labelling their histories of Christianity a ‘Protestant enlightenment’, Professor Pocock goes on to detail how Gibbon replaced them with a history of early Christianity’s encounter with Roman civil philosophy. This contrast gives a double cadence


175 For precisely this line of attack in a widely read defence of toleration and parliamentary supremacy over the church, see D. Levitin, ‘Matthew Tindal’s Rights of the Christian Church (1706) and the church-state relationship’, Historical Journal, 54 (2011), pp. 717–40.

176 The best total treatment remains A. Barnes, Jean Le Clerc, 1657–1736, et la République des Lettres (Paris, 1998); for his historical method, see M. C. Pitassi, Entre croire et savoir: le problème de la méthode critique chez Jean le Clerc (Leiden, 1987).


179 E.g. Pocock, Barbarism, v, pp. 9, 371.

to the book, and one sometimes senses that the real hero is less Gibbon and more le Clerc, whose linguistic-contextual approach to early Christianity Professor Pocock ingeniously labels ‘proto-Skinnerian’. ¹⁸¹ For le Clerc, so confused and confusing was the Platonic speculation employed by the primitive Christians to explain St John’s *logos*—itself developed against Philo’s Hellenism and to be translated as *ratio* rather than *verbum*—that the historian must resign themselves to describing but not understanding the mindset of intellectual hybridity that had produced it. ¹⁸²

This, in Professor Pocock’s discussion of the ensuing debate through Beausobre and Mosheim, is what constituted one branch of the ‘Protestant enlightenment’, when theology is ‘replac[ed] with the history of theology’. ¹⁸³ But here, the astute reader will have noted, is where we encounter the problem of periodization that has been hanging over us from the start. To become an ‘enlightenment’ this story must begin c. 1680, and so in Professor Pocock’s hands le Clerc’s linguistic turn is informed by two 1680s intellectual movements: first, Richard Simon’s defence of Catholic tradition through contextualization, and concomitant demonstration of the fallibility of both the fathers and the texts of scripture; second, by Locke’s theory of knowledge, ‘which insisted that we could know only our thoughts concerning an object of knowledge, but that the object could never be known directly’. ¹⁸⁴ But we have seen already that the key contexts for understanding le Clerc did not emerge in the 1680s, but around the 1580s, to which we can trace both the direct prehistory of Simon’s historical-philological method and the recognition of the cultural hybridity of early Christianity. While le Clerc certainly resorted to fashionably Lockean language, he hardly needed it when the historical-philological researches of Petau were available to him. ¹⁸⁵ Yet, if our story begins in 1580 (or before), are we then still talking of ‘enlightenment’? Undoubtedly, le Clerc was in touch with real antitrinitarians—the most important name here is that of the author of *Le Platonisme dévoilé* (1700), the Huguenot Jacques Souverain—but one must associate Socinianism with both vast influence and with an overly vague ‘rationalism’ before one can equate it with ‘enlightenment’, moves which Professor Pocock resists, in line with other recent historiography on the movement. ¹⁸⁶ It is similarly unclear whether the category of ‘enlightenment’ helps explain developments later in the century.

¹⁸⁵ Professor Pocock knows of Gibbon’s reading of Petau, but where Gibbon added them to the three Protestants, Professor Pocock subtracts: *Barbarism*, v, p. 91.
¹⁸⁶ But Professor Pocock connects Socinianism to anti-sacerdotal politics (‘Wherever there was reaction against the devastating effects of religious war upon civil society, there was an impulse to show that the Gospels contained nothing incompatible with the rule of the magistrate; but if Christ had added nothing to the reign of law...what need was there to suppose him the equal of his Father?’ (p. 14, see also p. 32)). But as is conclusively shown in Mortimer, *Socinianism*, the legalistic basis of Socinianism was the claim that Christ *had* brought...
Where Schweitzer had emphasized the influence of the deist Reimarus in progressing the study of Christianity’s earliest days by stressing Jesus’s supposedly political motivations, more recent scholarship has emphasized that the debate was ‘won’ by Reimarus’s orthodox critic Johann Salomo Semler, who used his knowledge of Philo and rabbincis ‘to show that the idea of a spiritual religion superseding Judaism was not something invented by the apostles’. Scepticism built on philology could always give way to optimism built on better philology: for Semler, ‘it was not necessary to deploy an argument from miracles to defend the authenticity of the Gospel witnesses to Christ: the texts themselves made clear in a historical manner both the expectations of a special figure by the Jews and Christ’s fulfilment of that expectation’.

IV

Gibbon himself drew a line back to the late sixteenth century when he chastised the *encyclopédistes* for ‘contemptuously’ tarring the ‘successors of Lipsius and Casaubon’ with the ‘new appellation of *Erudits*’. D’Alembert and his colleagues, he pointed out, had accused the humanist scholars of forsaking the faculties of imagination and judgement in favour of memory. We are introduced here to the relationship between history, philosophy, and politics, and this is apt, because the historiography has tended to over-determine that relationship. Gibbon was correct: the *encyclopédistes* did indeed condemn erudition as the bare exercise of memory over imagination or reason. But, it is being suggested, we should believe neither them, nor Gibbon’s judgement of them. Late sixteenth- and seventeenth-century humanists ascribed to a complex (and often implied) epistemology, but one which was undoubtedly ‘critical’ (i.e. not simply reliant on the faculty of memory) in the most historically precise sense that we can say this. The matrix through which the accusation of pedantry

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188 Mandelbrote, ‘Biblical hermeneutics’, p. 27.
191 See Benedetto Bravo, ‘Critice’ in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and the rise of the notion of historical criticism’, in Ligota and Quantin, eds., *History of scholarship*, pp. 135–96;
became a literary commonplace was the *querelle des anciens et modernes*, the artificial product of Louis XIV’s programme of cultural aggrandizement which pitted those who claimed that the achievements of the ancients could only be imitated against those who claimed that they could be outdone by French neoclassicism and, perhaps more importantly, understood on their own terms.192 Having inherited and accentuated the anti-erudition rhetoric of the *querelle*, the *philosophes* were perennially embarrassed by the fact that they then ‘proceeded to write history, and could neither do without erudition nor acknowledge their debt to it’.193 Recognizing this, a recent narrative has deviated from Gibbon and suggested that even the ‘enlightenment’ of the *encyclopédistes* was often little more than humanism bifurcated through the *querelle*.194 Specifically for our topic, we might recognize that while Scaliger famously called for his students to read pagan authors to understand the bible, by the late eighteenth century classicists were calling for the methods of sacred philology to be applied to classical antiquity more generally.195

The history of scholarship, it seems to me, is central to this revisionism. Attempts to chart an ‘enlightenment’ in the writing of the history of religion have floundered on two variants of the anti-humanist reductionism inherited from the *philosophes*. One reduces all change to change in philosophy: new history depended on new metaphysics. Of course, in some extreme cases, metaphysical baggage did shape exegetical conclusions (Spinoza being perhaps the most prominent example). But, as we have already seen, the recent historiography has found the most long-lasting changes occurring not at the philosophical extremes, but in the historical-critical mainstream. Reducing history to philosophy probably tells us more about our intellectual preoccupations that those of whom we study.

The second reductionism is when an ‘enlightenment’ in historiography is fixed to a politico-ecclesiological movement. In its late seventeenth-century Huguenot variety, the erudite *republique des lettres*, we are told, became a movement for political reform, with Bayle and le Clerc as its two leaders.196

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196 For a prominent recent narrative of this type, see John Marshall, *John Locke, toleration and early enlightenment culture* (Cambridge, 2006), e.g. pp. 504–5.
New or ‘progressive’ history, it follows, was written by those who were theologically ‘liberal’. But this sociological model does not fit the facts. First, it leads to the awkward shoe-horning of those who seem embarrassingly ‘orthodox’ into ‘enlightened’ categories: so the Anglican John Spencer becomes a closet Socinian, the scholar le Clerc becomes Locke’s partner in an all-encompassing reform movement, and Richard Simon is disconnected from every possible influence that is not Spinoza. More fundamentally, the best recent work on the Republic of Letters has demonstrated that it did not possess an ideology of political reform, but, if anything, an ‘ideology of the non-political’. This was a respublica which was elitist, inward looking, and concerned above all with its own scholarship.

The history of scholarship is proving to be a corrective to this search for unifying explanations: history is being explained not solely as a function of the underlying categories of philosophy or politics, but as the result of actual historical practice. This leaves us with the fundamental question of why such major changes in the writing of historia sacra happened at all. Here, I would like to propose a tentative avenue for future research which can account for change without reducing it to a Hazardian crise stimulated by politics or philosophy. We have seen that as the period of confessionalization set in, the various churches scrambled to mobilize scholarship to their side. Consequently, the confessiona- lized clergy came together with the humanist respublica litteraria and opened the door for the tools of humanist critical historiography to be applied to the sacred past, and for this to be done not from the outside, but in defence of religion. The history of this moment is as much an institutional as an intellectual history: Peter van Rooden has hinted at it in his essential study of Constantijn L’Empereur and the world of Dutch university Hebraism. But for the most

197 For the earlier period, see the important warning in I. Backus, ‘Introduction’, Reception of the church fathers, i, pp. xxi–xxii: ‘[The] critical attitude did not necessarily coexist with a more ecumenical theology’.


part, this moment—when an Oxford Regius Professor of Theology could happily endorse in a lecture Cappel’s historicist reading of the bible only two years after its first publication in print—has gone uncharted. It was the moment when various ‘orthodoxies’ sought to replace philosophy with history as the handmaiden to theology. This had obvious benefits, not least a way of maintaining the steadying sociological authority of the scholar-cleric in the wake of the Wars of Religion. But it also set up an institutional and intellectual culture where historical criticism was inescapable. The revolutionary moment was when this culture was established, not any of its later products (whether Spinoza, Simon or whoever). Note please that we are not dealing here with the category of ‘conservative enlightenment’, which is still predicated on political considerations (scholarly conclusions lead to ‘liberal’ churchmanship), but with the creation of a sociology of knowledge that transcended both politics and confessions. Paradoxically, it could be the case that what we treat as ‘enlightenment’ in the study of the history of religion in fact emerged far earlier than we thought, and stemmed from confessionalization, and the scholarly opportunities that if offered. Of course, to study this moment is difficult: it involves going beyond the well-known vernacular texts in which ‘enlightenment’ is usually said to have manifested itself, and it involves understanding the debates within ‘orthodoxy’ as much as the arguments directed against it: as Professor Pocock has written: ‘Criticism is unintelligible unless we know what is being criticized; and irreligion is unintelligible unless we know the possibly complex and sophisticated religion that is being disbelieved’. There is of course another option: we can continue to believe the self-serving rhetoric of the philosophes, to reduce all the complexities of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century scholarship to a battle between philosophical rationalists and the ‘undiscriminating bigots of orthodoxy’, and to dismiss the traditions of humanist scholarship that do not fit out chronologically convenient schemes as ‘tied to a cultural system steeped in authority and credulity’. It appears that the history of scholarship has become too well established a field for this second approach to go uncriticized.

201 But see now Hardy, ‘British criticism’.
202 This sociological dimension of scholarship is brought out well in the English context by Mandelbrote, ‘Authority’, and Quantin, Christian antiquity, pp. 405–10.
203 The classic statement is Hugh Trevor-Roper, ‘The religious origins of the enlightenment’, in Religion, the Reformation and social change (London, 1967), pp. 193–236, on which, see now John Robertson, ‘Hugh Trevor-Roper, intellectual history and “The religious origins of the enlightenment”’, English Historical Review, 124 (2009), pp. 1389–421. As pointed out in Professor Robertson’s ‘Introduction’ (p. xviii) to Trevor-Roper, History and the enlightenment, it is interesting to note that these interests are absent from Trevor-Roper’s later work. For a possible context for the anticlerical turn, see A. Sisman, Hugh Trevor-Roper: the biography (London, 2010), pp. 454–74.
204 Pocock, Barbarism, v, p. 3.
206 Israel, Enlightenment contested, p. 419.