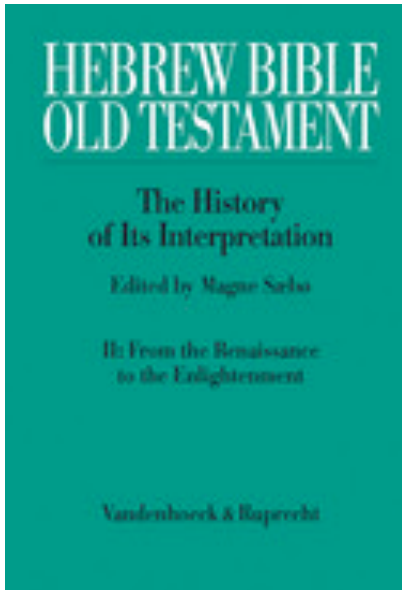


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Sæbø, Magne, ed.

Hebrew Bible/Old Testament: The History of Its Interpretation, Vol. 2: From the Renaissance to the Enlightenment

Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008. Pp. 1248.
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In the preface to this volume, Magne Sæbø acknowledges that, when the planning began for the larger series in 1980, there was only minimal interest in reception history of the Bible, but now, nearly three decades later, there has been an “awakening” of interest, as evidenced by the proliferation of published literature in this area. The present volume, subtitled *From Renaissance to the Enlightenment*, is actually the third in the Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht series entitled *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament: The History of Interpretation*. Volume 1 was divided into parts: 1.1, *Antiquity* (1996); 1.2, *The Middle Ages* (2000). The third volume, *From Modernism to Post-modernism*, is projected to be in two parts, similar to volume 1, with attention devoted to developments in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

From Renaissance to the Enlightenment proves encyclopedic in its coverage of writers, movements, and publications as well as the corresponding influences on each. Although the range of topics addressed (see below) is stunning, there are a number of common investigative questions that appear to drive the research and, in turn, provide consistency across the forty-four chapters. Chief among the themes, however, appears to be the relationship between text, context, and interpretative communities. Such an assessment may unduly suggest a simplistic approach to the topic, but the research produced in this volume yields more than a cursory overview and instead attempts to provide “thick

descriptions” of interpretive communities and their contexts, which in turn shapes the reading, interpretation, and appropriation of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament. The introductory essay by Magne Sæbø, “From the Renaissance to the Enlightenment—Aspects of Cultural and Ideological Framework of Scriptural Interpretation,” signals the scope and direction of the volume, tracing the influences of Renaissance thought, Humanism, and Enlightenment tendencies. Sæbø writes, “In the cultural and ideological framework of the multi-faceted and complex period of time, traditional biblical interpretation, facing numerous challenges, became to some extent transformed and the foundations of modern biblical interpretation were established” (45).

It is perhaps the significant attention given to such “thick descriptions” of this “multi-faceted” period of time that makes this volume so unique. Research into the history of interpretation has traditionally “traced” key interpreters from one period to the next, with the focus often remaining on the interpreter and his or her body of work. Cultural and ideological matters frequently remain at the periphery. The view provided in this volume, however, is much more expansive. For example, Jeremy Catto considers “The Philosophical Context of the Renaissance Interpretation of the Bible” (106–22), and Ulrich Köpf provides an overview of theological education during the Late Middle Ages (123–53), with particular attention to the influence of humanism upon the educational philosophy of the day. Euan Cameron provides an incisive analysis of the cultural and sociopolitical context surrounding the Reformation (329–46), suggesting in particular that the slow dissolution of notions of authority had both a sociopolitical impact as well as a theological impact on the exegetical work of biblical interpreters.

The book is divided into three divisions, representing the main periods under consideration in the volume. Rather than providing an exhaustive list of all material in each division, this reviewer is opting to be necessarily selective in hopes of being representative of the intent of the volume in its entirety.

The first division is labeled “Scriptural Interpretation in the Context of the Renaissance.” Lesley Smith and Seymour Feldman explore the “Exegetical and Hermeneutical Legacy of the Middle Ages,” with particular attention focused on the work of Nicholas of Lyra and Levi ben Gershom. In “*Ad fontes!* The Early Humanist Concern for the *Hebraica Veritas*,” Arjo Vanderjagt explores the renewal of interest in acquiring Hebrew skills that developed among interpreters influenced early in the humanist movement. Other chapters in this section include: “The Textual and Hermeneutic Work of Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam” (Erika Rummel); “Isaac Abarbanel: From Medieval to Renaissance Jewish Biblical Scholarship” (Eric Lawee); “Scriptural Interpretation in Renaissance Spain” (Emilia Fernández Tejero and Natalio Fernández Marcos); and “The Early Christian Hebraists” (Sophie Kessler Mesguich).

The second section addresses “Scriptural Interpretation in Church Reforms and in the Reformation.” Siegfried Raeder provides a thorough analysis of Luther’s exegetical and hermeneutical work (42 pages!). In particular, Raeder evaluates Luther’s work within the larger context of the humanist movement. Raeder attempts to move the reader beyond the standard assessments of Luther’s work and includes, among other things, Luther’s work as translator, thereby raising the question of how translation and interpretation co-mingled in the work of Luther and, concomitantly, its resulting effect upon Reformation thought. Unsurprisingly, similar treatment is given to John Calvin, along with Ulrich Zwingli and John Oecolampadius, in the chapter by Peter Opfitz. Other Reformation or Counter-Reformation movements are treated as well. For example, R. Gerald Hobbs explores the “Pluriformity of Early Reformation Scriptural Interpretation,” and Hans-Jürgen Goertz considers “Scriptural Interpretation among Radical Reformers,” noting their varied emphases “between biblicism, spiritualism and numerous mixtures of spirit, letter and early modern reason” (601).

The third section, “Scriptural Interpretation between Orthodoxy and Rationalism and the Establishing of a Historical-Critical Study of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries,” traces the cultural, philosophical, and educational contexts that emerged during this period and the consequent implications of such contexts as they pertain to biblical interpretation. The first chapter in the section, “On the Threshold of a New Age: Expanding Horizons as the Broader Context of Scriptural Interpretation” (Charlotte Methuen), actually spends more time on the influences of Copernicus, Kepler, Boyle, and Newton, among others, than on biblical interpretation proper. Not surprisingly, Methuen argues that the advancements and discoveries in other disciplines led to the redefining of methodologies and presuppositions surrounding the study of Scripture and religion in general (690). Such changes no doubt led to a diversity of approaches. Moshe Idel considers “Hermeneutics in Hasidism,” while Christopher Bultmann addresses the influence of early rationalism on biblical criticism on the Continent, in an effort to demonstrate the pluriformity of approaches in this period.

Several chapters attempt to trace the tension between emerging “critical” approaches to Scripture and traditional theological views related to Scripture. H. J. M. Nellen traces the “Growing Tension between Church Doctrines and Critical Exegesis of the Old Testament,” concluding that “the conviction that the Word of God had been preserved in one sacral, perfect source gave way to the awareness of a complicated transmission in a plurality of texts each of which had their own value” (826). As he suggests, “A new age dawned.” Other chapters in this section address similar concerns: “Early Old Testament Critics in the Roman Catholic Church” (John W. Rogerson); and “Scriptural Understanding and Interpretation in Pietism” (Johannes Wallman).

An often overlooked but no doubt important contribution to the history of interpretation is attention to the development and translation of Bibles. Surprisingly, however, this topic is frequently omitted in other treatments. The editors of the series are to be commended for their inclusion of such research. Adrian Schenker considers the first Hebrew, Greek, and Latin Bibles as well as the Polyglot Bible of Alcalá, then in a separate chapter considers the Polyglot Bibles of Antwerp, Paris, and London. Henry Wansbrough discusses the “History and Impact of English Bible Translation,” noting well that such efforts are “intimately interwoven with English political and social history” (536), and Bertram Eugene Schwarzbach considers three French Bible translations from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Obviously the scope of coverage across the chapters and the level of argumentation within each prevent a critical evaluation of each chapter. A few comments regarding the volume overall, however, deserve mention. For those looking for a tightly conceived, discipline-specific history of interpretation such as Ronald E. Clements’s *One Hundred Years of Old Testament Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976), this volume will fail to meet expectations. Volumes such as Clements’s and introductory essays in most critical commentaries (see, e.g., the extensive treatment in John J. Collins, *Daniel* [Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993]) trace key interpreters, along with significant contributions for each biblical book or section of the canon. The scope and intended purpose of *From the Renaissance to the Enlightenment* prevents this type of treatment. The extensive, and at times nearly exhaustive (see Sæbø’s introductory essay), bibliographies at the beginning of each essay, however, will prove beneficial for the researcher attempting work more akin to that of Clements or Collins.

The chapters in this volume demonstrate well the way in which sociopolitical and cultural movements have often influenced the methodological underpinnings of interpretive theory. This is not to suggest that biblical interpretation has merely been a tool in the hand of Western culture as it has developed but instead that the two cannot be severed from one another as neatly as interpreters may be inclined to think. In some ways, *From Renaissance to the Enlightenment* is a history of Western culture with a narrowed focus on theological, ecclesiological, and hermeneutical concerns. One cannot read Steven Nadler’s essay on the “Bible Hermeneutics of Baruch de Spinoza” or Stephen Prickett’s work on “Scriptural Interpretation in English Literary Tradition” without being keenly aware of the way in which Western culture and biblical studies intersect effortlessly in the history of interpretation. The point of this volume, however, does not appear to be a retrieval or revival of such cultural associations, nor does it seek to privilege Western culture. The volume is interested in the impact of culture upon interpretation and the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of Scripture upon culture.

The chapter titles in this volume may lead some to think erroneously that it is a diverse collection of writings with little or no cohesion. To the contrary, such a diversity of topics actually reflects the complex “cultural and ideological framework” present during this time. As a result, this volume does not appear to function simply as a collection of essays nor as an encyclopedia of sorts where a researcher can “jump” in and out of the text, but is instead a *tour de force* best appreciated for the “thick descriptions” provided, but more importantly, better understood as a result by a sustained reading across the chapters. It is only through such a sustained reading that the overall thrust of the book can best be appreciated.