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# Michael C. Legaspi, *The Death of Scripture and the Rise of Biblical Studies*

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What happened to the Bible in the Enlightenment? Short and long answers to that question have been given, with a variety of morals. Any seminarian could tell you it had something to do with developments in Germany. Precisely which developments, though, and how so? For twentieth century theology in North America the most important answer was the one in Hans Frei's *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* (Yale, 1974). Frei gave a report of hermeneutical shifts in eighteenth and nineteenth century Europe, linked in subtle ways with his own narratological proposal for theological renewal. Part of what made Frei so suggestive was his deep reading of thinkers in the German religious *Aufklärung*, people whose ideas set an important counterpoint to the scene in England.

A handful of newer studies relate the Bible's fate in and after the Enlightenment with varied emphases. David Katz's detail-rich *God's Last Words: Reading the English Bible from the Reformation to Fundamentalism* (Yale, 2004) does not avoid the Continent, but the main story arc runs from Tyndale to Scofield. Equally ambitious, Jonathan Sheehan's masterful *The Enlightenment Bible: Translation, Scholarship, Culture* (Princeton, 2005) covers the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in more detail. By beginning and ending with sets of parallel chapters on England and Germany, it attends to closely related dynamics that played out differently across the republic of letters. Most recently, those interested in the history of biblical scholarship can welcome the appearance of Michael Legaspi's *The Death of Scripture and the Rise of Biblical Studies* (Oxford, 2010). Though the author includes a fine discussion of, for example, Oxford professor of poetry Robert Lowth's invention of the idea of biblical poetry, he concerns himself above all with a unique moment at a single German university, the Georg-August-Universität in Göttingen. More than that, Legaspi contextualizes the work of a single scholar, Johann David Michaelis (1717–1791), surely the eighteenth century's greatest Orientalist. This latest study's focus plays no small part in making it the most accessible of recent titles.

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Founded by King George II in 1737, Georgia Augusta strove to become a premier Enlightenment university, and in many respects it succeeded. But its founding *Aufklärer* differ from the more familiar portrait of austere academics (scientists, *Wissenschaftler*) known from the nineteenth century. The forerunners were rather "worldly, sociable, pragmatic, and polymathic" (p. 31). Their outlook was cultural, civic, and holistic. University was about *Bildung*—it served the formation of ideal citizens—and Georgia Augusta quickly earned a reputation as a center of rank and nobility. Michaelis, a dynamic teacher and enterprising scholar, fit into this world well enough. He had the ear of kings (he had in fact been knighted), and there are reports that he strode into lectures dressed in riding gear.

Legaspi addresses the background for Michaelis's work in the first three of six chapters. First, with Sheehan, he understands the emergence of a "cultural Bible" to be a consequence of more than two centuries of religious discord and schism following the Reformation. Necessary for the rise of biblical studies is what he calls the "death of scripture." As the "text" became a battleground, it no longer seemed "scripture" sufficient to contain and order the world. Precisely because polemicists waged war in its contested margins, the Bible was divested of its formerly catholic character. John Dryden captures something of the crisis in "Religio Laici" (1682):

> The tender page with horny fists was gall'd,
> And he was gifted most that loudest bawl'd:
> The Spirit gave the doctoral degree;
> And every member of a company
> Was of his trade, and of the Bible free.
> Plain truths enough for needful use they found,
> But men would still be itching to expound:
> Each was ambitious of th'obscurest place,
> No measure ta'en from knowledge, all from grace.
> Study and pains were now no more their care;
> Texts were explained by fasting and by prayer:
> This was the fruit the private spirit brought,
> Occasion'd by great zeal and little thought.

Scholars, too, proved "ambitious of th'obscurest place." The great polyglot Bibles of Antwerp, Paris and London, although having pre-Reformation roots, became the venue for a more learned outworking of Dryden's anxiety. All too soon it became apparent that such projects could not stem the tide of discord.

Irenicism had to find a new strategy. Legaspi next describes how a religious shift took place in the context of educational reform. "The point here is that it was in the eighteenth century that biblical scholars turned decisively to the *university* to recover not just an Enlightenment Bible or a cultural Bible but a *universal* or catholic Bible, one capable of fostering the unity once associated with the scriptural Bible" (pp. 32–33). Professors approached the Bible not so much out of antiquarian interest as for an utterly pragmatic end, for the sake of the state

and its peace. Michaelis's own philosophy of education bears out the point. His study of ancient history ultimately stands in the service of pressing civic matters: morals, taste, aesthetics, culture, jurisprudence.

Third, in an apparent excursus, Legaspi turns to the early study of classics at Göttingen. Not by accident did a poet at the school's inauguration proclaim Georgia Augusta the "new Athens." The philhellenism that informed Romantics like Goethe and Schiller also had a scholarly face, manifest less in poems than in (believe it or not) text criticism and philology. Text criticism was not a strong suit at first, truth be told. Johann Gesner (1691–1761), called to Göttingen to be its first Professor of Poetry and Eloquence, founded the school's Philological Seminar for the purpose of training schoolteachers. Candidates studied Greek and Latin grammar, practiced rhetoric, and undertook deliberately "cursory" readings of classical literature in original languages. *Bildung* took priority over textual exactitude. Christian Heyne (1729–1812), who succeeded Gesner, shared much of his predecessor's enthusiasm for a broad or even totalizing view of antiquity's place in the present. Yet under his guidance the seminar became what he called a "nursery for humanists" (p. 73). Heyne made classics at the new Athens a discipline in its own right.

Michaelis's career falls right between Gesner and Heyne. More than that, Michaelis gave Gesner's eulogy in 1761, and Heyne gave Michaelis's in 1791. Given that Michaelis took on some of Gesner's duties temporarily, including the Philological Seminar, the relationship with Heyne is more complicated. But their connection makes it clear enough that the thrust of Michaelis's contribution to biblical scholarship lies outside the bounds of traditional theology, in the developing science of philology.

Part of the Hebraist's strategy, then, was to apply himself to a classical, "dead" language. "The language died out roughly two thousand years ago," he wrote, "and we have nothing more of it from the period in which it was alive than a single book, or actually, a very modest collection of books" (p. 87). His attitude to Hebrew brought with it some troubling consequences, starting with the radical separation of Israelite history from Jewish history. The Golden Age of antique Hebrew, where the classicist seeks its true *Geist*, survives not in rabbinic Hebrew, or even post-exilic Hebrew, nor in Samaritan, Aramaic, Syriac or Ethopic, but in Arabic, the only cognate language that Michaelis judged still to be meaningfully alive. (Here begins a tradition of scholarly fascination with Bedouin customs.) As Legaspi details, this transposition was "not politically innocent" (p. 97). On the other hand, Michaelis did much to stimulate the growth of comparative semitics. He also helped bring Christian etymologies of Hebrew words down to earth. If the outcome was an ecumenical, cultural and academic Bible, however, Legaspi is clear about the result for the old scriptural Bible: "To emphasize 'deadness' in this way was to deny that Hebrew was a vital linguistic medium for any living community" (p. 87). Such a death impinged on the church as well as the synagogue.

Michaelis had a means of revivifying the Bible, to be sure. He sought the Muse—not of Greece like Gesner and Heyne but of the Near East. Just so he did his part for the discovery of biblical poetry, though again traditional views

of Moses, David, Solomon, and the prophets changed places with an aestheticized classical text. Moses had a particularly important place in this vision. The lawgiver received a six-volume treatment (*Mosaisches Recht*) through which, according to Legaspi, the exemplar that emerges "resembles precisely the kind of leader that Georgia Augusta, in a context far removed from ancient Israel, aimed to produce" (p. 141). Social ideals that took hold under particular conditions had a much shorter life than the methods that supported them, however. "As the foundation of Jewish and Christian scriptural canons, the Old Testament held sway over vast cultures and territories for millennia. But as the remnant of a classic Eastern civilization, it held the interest of scholars for only a few decades. Michaelis's Israel was an unstable scholarly creation" (p. 159). Enthusiasm for the Near East moved further east, and in any case could not long sustain the pitch of an instigator.

And yet Michaelis forged a place for a post-confessional Bible at the state university, where it flourished for almost two hundred years. Lately that space has fragmented and dwindled. Legaspi's conclusion for our moment, in view of the origins of the academic Bible, calls for a careful reassessment of "historical criticism." Where it survives, the project may still have less to do with history *per se* than with "a cultural-political project shaped by the realities of the university" (p. 7). One wishes that the author, whose sympathies are clearly on the side of the scriptural Bible, had pressed further in the final pages of his otherwise excellent study. For academic theologians who confess a Bible that never died, the urgent question now is how to let our vast knowledge about the Bible and its history feed the life of the church and its teachers.