

JAN STIEVERMANN, *Prophecy, Piety, and the Problem of Historicity: Interpreting the Hebrew Scriptures in Cotton Mather's "Biblia Americana"* (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016), 493 pp.

*Prophecy, Piety, and the Problem of Historicity* is a rarity in this day of ideologically inflected cultural history, a lucid fusion of textual, intellectual, theological, and literary history that confirms Jan Stievermann's place among the very best historians of early America on both sides of the Atlantic. In the hands of someone less talented than Stievermann, a description of how Cotton Mather developed his commentaries on the books of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Canticles (Song of Solomon), Isaiah, and Jeremiah for the "Biblia Americana" he spent so much of his life preparing could easily become unreadable. Here, instead, we have a book that is informative, interesting, and astute at every turn.

Stievermann's purpose in this book is three-fold: first, to identify the writers on whom Cotton Mather drew in developing his commentary; second, to identify the challenges—exegetical, historical, theological, and the like—Mather was facing and how, in the context of those challenges, he juggled his sources; and third, to place Mather in the "evidentialist" turn of the seventeenth century, that is, the moment when orthodox Protestants began to rely on external (historical) evidence to validate the singularity of the Bible as divine revelation. Not that Mather ever doubted the principle that the Bible was perceived and understood through a spiritual sense or that he questioned the orthodoxy he inherited from the Reformed tradition. But the times demanded something else by way of proof, a transition Stievermann sees through the lens of Hans Frei's *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* (1974). Each of these tasks required not only close attention to the manuscript commentaries, which Stievermann has published separately, but also to the many writers on whom Mather depended—some more than others, for like Calvin before him, he borrowed source material from compilations or commentaries that his contemporaries had assembled. What emerges from all this work is an excitingly astute survey of pan-European exegetical and historical scholarship on ancient Israel, biblical geography, philology (before there was such a field), natural history, and the like, scholarship in the service of reaf-

firming or, as in the case of Grotius, challenging the singular authority of Scripture.

But for Stievermann, all of this information is prolegomena to his real purpose, namely, to establish Cotton Mather's modernity—or proto-modernity—as someone who began to practice a "representational-factualist model of biblical realism" even as he remained a thoroughly traditional exegete who took for granted "the absolute veracity and infallibility of biblical narratives" and a Christianized reading of the Hebrew Bible (7). Moreover, Mather continued to affirm and practice a "mystical" or "spiritual" hermeneutics. Stievermann is quite honest about the "tensions" that Mather experienced as exegete, and honest, too, about Mather's conservatism. It may seem paradoxical that the emphasis ultimately falls on Mather as a link between the old and the new, the Puritanism of his forbearers and the Enlightenment that was beginning to emerge. Confusing may be the *mot juste*, for our grand narratives of continuity and change do not allocate much space for those who are neither one nor the other—and from my vantage, Mather seems more old than new in his thinking and, as Stievermann and others show, someone astonishingly deaf to what he was encountering by way of the new. The speed with which he worked as a compiler and the manner in which he assembled a mélange of quotations and evidence in the commentaries challenges our picture of intellectual work—nothing here comes close to matching the quality of Jonathan Edwards's "Miscellanies," to cite one obvious example. And, as I remarked in the context of a conference session some years ago celebrating the publication of the *Genesis* commentary (a feat of scholarship by Reiner Smolinski), Mather had no direct heirs: never cited by Edwards, ignored in the 1740s when booksellers were reprinting older spiritual narratives, and excluded from all of the major twentieth-century histories of the "American" Enlightenment. Hence Stievermann's insistence (despite his yielding to the language of "firsts") that Mather must properly be located within a European context if he is to be appreciated as someone alert to new developments in the understanding of biblical texts.

I also recommend this book for another reason. It includes an exquisite review of the arguments and errors of the "early Americanist" scholarship of the 1970s as these were used to validate the existence of a singularly

“American” literary tradition. It has not been easy for early Americanists to renounce that framework, which continues to figure in recent monographs and in misconceptions of a Puritan “plain style.” No antidote has the aura of the “plain style” and its typological adjuncts, much less the aura of the wholly misplaced “millennialism” that became embedded in readings of so many early American texts. Aura notwithstanding, Stievermann provides a truly remarkable account of what

went wrong and what should be said about Puritan stylistics.

This review leaves out other achievements that, for a lesser scholar, would suffice. Exemplary in its command of the secondary literature and astonishingly comprehensive in its coverage of Mather’s own sources, *Prophecy, Piety, and the Problem of Historicity* is a genuine masterpiece.

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