Three Skeptics and the Bible: La Peyrère, Hobbes, Spinoza, and the Reception of Modern Biblical Criticism

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PICKWICK Publications • Eugene, Oregon
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Introduction

The complex history of the interpretation of the Bible has often been narrated as a wrestling from the magisterial domination of the Catholic Church’s authoritative interpretation in order to place Scripture into the realm of scientific objectivity. In this conventional narrative, the supposed objectivity allows for an analysis of Scripture in its historical context in order to propose numerous authors for single books, identifiable editorial processes, and underlying intentions of the community from which these texts come. The easy acceptance of this conventional narrative has led to the hegemony of a particular biblical criticism within the academy. Biblical studies must be carried out using the provided framework in order to be acceptable to the scholars who have long been trained in the method of historical criticism and its related post-critical counterparts (feminist criticism, queer criticism).

In this present book I do not seek to debate the positive or negative significance of historical criticism on the overall field of biblical studies. Along with the founders of the historical critical method, I assume that there is indeed value in examining texts in their historical context. Historical criticism and its corollary criticisms have undoubtedly secured many gains for the field of biblical studies, for example, in detailing the understanding and significance of Jesus’ Jewish background. This book does not seek to undermine the contributions of biblical criticism but rather to consider its origins in detail.

Hence the task of this project is to reexamine a conventional narrative through the close study of three figures of the seventeenth century who were instrumental in the beginnings of the historical critical method: Isaac La Peyrère, Thomas Hobbes, and Baruch Spinoza.

The many biblical scholars who have built upon the work of these three claim scientific objectivity in their embrace of the historical critical method. However, this method of criticism, like any form of interpretation,