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THE ACID OF HISTORY: LA PEYRÈRE, HOBBES, SPINOZA, AND THE SEPARATION OF FAITH AND REASON IN MODERN BIBLICAL STUDIES

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Isaac La Peyrère, Thomas Hobbes, and Baruch Spinoza are increasingly identified with the foundation of modern historical biblical criticism in the seventeenth century. Although these figures have late medieval and early modern precursors who aided the development of modern biblical criticism, their work contrasts significantly with prior exegesis, especially regarding the distance they placed between themselves and the biblical texts. They approached the texts of Scripture from a modern position of skepticism much more so than had most of their predecessors (with the exception of Machiavelli). Moreover, many of the exegetical moves these figures made in the middle part and in the second half of the seventeenth century were developed further in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, finally solidifying an exegesis recognizable as the historical criticism of the Bible still found in contemporary university settings.

The work of these three was foundational and even indispensable to the Enlightenment project. This is especially the case of Spinoza who created the methodological blueprint later biblical critics would follow. An examination of the social and political background of these three biblical interpreters reveals the ways in which they utilized the then newly developing modern discipline of history as an acid to dissolve traditional theological interpretations of Scripture. They then redeployed what remained of the Bible for their own political projects. These projects were inextricably bound up with the theo-political goals of the newly formed modern European states which had emerged after the violent sixteenth and seventeenth century ‘wars of religion.’ The foundations these three figures laid would be built upon by Enlightenment exegetes from their academic chairs in eighteenth and nineteenth century German universities. Those who continue to inherit this form of biblical interpretation generally accept the fundamental assumptions of this exegesis without appreciating that these assumptions originate in the political exegesis of the seventeenth century.

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La Peyrère was born in Bordeaux, France about 1596. The son of an affluent Huguenot family, La Peyrère took up employment in the service of the Prince of Condé (first, in 1640, Henry II de Bourbon, and then, after 1646, his immediate successor, Louis II de Bourbon). La Peyrère officially served as Condé’s personal secretary, but his duties involved numerous diplomatic missions in the years before La Peyrère’s conversion to Catholicism and entrance into the Oratorians as a lay member. La Peyrère’s work reveals the inextricable connection with Condé’s varied political exploits; this is perhaps best exemplified by La Peyrère’s Prae-Adamitae (PA). Written at the urging of Descartes’ patroness, Queen Christina of Sweden, the book in its