Introduction

The essays in this volume were written for the Second International Colloquy on the History of Biblical Exegesis in the Sixteenth Century held at Duke University on September 23–25, 1982. The colloquy was sponsored by the Duke Divinity School in cooperation with the Institut d'histoire de la Réformation of the University of Geneva, which sponsored the first (1976) and third colloquies (1988).

The colloquies themselves grew out of the recognition that the intellectual and religious life of the sixteenth century cannot be understood without comprehending the preoccupation of sixteenth-century humanists and theologians with the interpretation of the Bible. Commentaries on Paul's Epistle to the Romans may serve as a case in point. In the fifteenth century relatively few commentaries on this epistle were written, and many of those that were circulated were reissues of earlier works. In the sixteenth century, however, well over seventy new commentaries on Romans were published, excluding fresh editions of older commentaries by patristic and medieval authors. The list of commentators on Romans includes not only such important and obvious scholars as Erasmus, Luther, and Calvin, but also such lesser figures as Alesius, Guilliaud, Grimani, and Brucioli.

This burst of commentary writing has been largely ignored by older scholarship, which regarded biblical commentaries as theological essays in unsystematic form, and therefore less accessible to historians than more systematic theological treatises. Little effort was made to treat the commentaries as a distinct genre of religious literature, different in scope and form from systematic theological treatises. Historians felt, for example, that everything worth knowing about Calvin's religious thought could be found in his *Institutes of the Christian*

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/605438/9780822382713-001.pdf by guest on 18 April 2024

Religion. His commentaries, structured by the unfolding details of the biblical text rather than by the great themes of Calvin's theology, were ancillary to his principal systematic writings.

The fact remains, however, that the bulk of Calvin's writings consists of biblical commentaries and sermons. Even Cardinal Cajetan, whose earlier career was devoted to the interpretation and promotion of the writings of Thomas Aquinas, spent his later years commenting on the literal sense of the Bible. Secular priests like Jean de Gagny, Franciscans like Nicholas le Grand, Dominicans like Ambrosius Catherinus Politus, Jesuits like Alfonso Salmeron, Augustinians like Girolamo Seripando, and Capuchins like Francis Titelmans joined Protestants like Martin Bucer, Philip Melanchthon, Peter Martyr Vermigli, and Konrad Pellican to make the sixteenth century a golden age of biblical interpretation.

While not an introduction to the study of the Bible in the sixteenth century in the strict sense of the term, the essays in this book nevertheless illuminate a broad spectrum of themes and problems in the history of biblical interpretation. The first three essays deal with the relationship between the Bible and social, political, and institutional history. H. C. Erik Midelfort reexamines a thesis from his 1972 study *Witch Hunting in Southwestern Germany, 1572–1684,* in which he argued that witchcraft reflected tensions in the community and in the family. Later study convinced him that sixteenth-century Germans would not have understood such a formulation, "for they had no clear notion of community, family, or witchcraft as we conventionally use the terms. . . . We might get further by looking at changes in household (*Haus*) and congregation (*Gemeinde*) in order to understand the fear of hidden evildoing, of pollution, that witchcraft seems to have become." Johann Weyer, physician to the duke of Jülich-Cleves, provides Midelfort with a particularly good illustration of the use of the Bible, especially Exodus 22:8, to redefine the crime of witchcraft and defend people who had been wrongfully accused of committing it.

Guy Bedouelle devotes his attention to the role played by biblical exegesis in the divorce of Henry VIII from Catherine of Aragon. Henry had appealed to Leviticus 18:16 and 20:21 to support his contention that he should never have married his brother's widow, even though Deuteronomy 25:5 and Matthew 22:24 appear to sanction the marriage of widow and brother-in-law. Bedouelle demonstrates

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/605438/9780822382713-001.pdf by guest on 18 April 2024

how issues of biblical exegesis, canon law, and political necessity were intertwined in the decisions of the English, French, and Italian universities Henry consulted for an endorsement of his position.

Scott H. Hendrix examines the role the Bible played in the institutionalization of the Reformation in northern Germany by focusing on the career of Urbanus Rhegius, superintendent of the Lutheran church in Lüneburg from 1530 to 1541. While Rhegius used the Bible polemically to defend Lutheran teaching against its Catholic detractors, he stressed as well the catechetical use of the Bible in the education of laity and clergy alike. Because he was concerned that Lutheranism in Lower Saxony present a consistent message from its pulpits, he could not support the sole authority of Scripture for the catechetical activity of the church, if the principle of *sola scriptura* were understood to mean that the Bible should be interpreted apart from the hermeneutical structure provided by church doctrine and the testimony of the early Fathers.

The essay by Kalman P. Bland provides a counterpoint to the other ten by exploring issues in sixteenth-century Jewish exegesis. Bland selects three commentators: Rabbi Isaac Karo, who "demonstrated the Bible's high density of philosophic, scientific, and religious enlightenment and guidance," Rabbi Moses Alsheikh, who "unraveled the keen machinations that motivate and serve human behavior," and Rabbi Moses Cordovero, who embraced a transcognitive mysticism that interpreted "biblical allusions as constituting the hierarchical unfolding of God Himself," transcending "the limitations of ordinary language." Bland illustrates the method of each rabbi by providing citations from Karo's exegesis of Genesis 28, Alsheikh's exegesis of 1 Samuel 15, and Cordovero's systematic treatise entitled *Paradise of Pomegranates.*

Protestant theologians like Hans Joachim Kraus have attempted to distinguish Calvin's interpretation of the Bible from medieval exegesis by stressing his interest in the grammatical meaning of a text, its historical context, and the intention of its human author. Richard A. Muller attempts to correct the misconceptions created by such characterizations by arguing that they do justice neither to medieval exegesis nor to Calvin's working hermeneutic. By examining Calvin's exegesis of selected passages from the prophets, Muller shows that while "Calvin's exegesis does represent a more textually, grammatically, and

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/605438/9780822382713-001.pdf by guest on 18 April 2024

historically ordered hermeneutic" than the exegesis of his medieval predecessors, his exegesis, like theirs, nevertheless "remains within the bounds of a hermeneutical approach in which the final implication of any text is determined by the broader context of promise, fulfillment, and the ongoing history of God's people."

R. Gerald Hobbs's essay deals with a problem that was by no means new in the sixteenth century but was sharpened for the church by the growing number of Christian Hebraists: namely, how should one account for the disquieting discrepancy when the New Testament gives a reading of an Old Testament passage that is not the reading most readily suggested by the Hebrew text itself. Hobbs focuses on Paul's use of the Psalms and the treatment of the issues raised by his use in the commentaries, translations, and paraphrases written between 1500 and 1560.

David C. Steinmetz attempts to clarify Calvin's relationship to the Pauline interpretation of the early church by comparing his exegesis of Romans 8:1–11 with the exegesis of the same passage by Ambrosiaster and Chrysostom. In this passage Paul raised four interrelated issues—law, anthropology, Christology, and ethics—that are explicitly discussed by all three commentators. While Calvin accepted Chrysostom and Ambrosiaster as interpreters of Paul whose views must be taken into account, and while he used them as exegetical partners and guides with whom he frequently agreed, he did not feel himself obligated to accept their conclusions and often pursued a different exegetical agenda.

John B. Payne examines Erasmus's interpretation of Romans 9:6–24 before and after his debate with Luther. In his early exegesis Erasmus argued that Paul in Romans 9 was not so much interested in the salvation and damnation of individuals as in the rejection of the Jews as God's people and the election of the Gentiles as the new people of God. Insofar as Erasmus was interested in the doctrine of predestination at all, he based it on foreseen merit: "salvation is granted only to those who deserve it by the merit of faith." In his later revision of the *Paraphrases,* however, Erasmus accepted a more Augustinian reading of Paul.

Jean-Claude Margolin offers a detailed and nuanced analysis of the exegetical work of Valla, Colet, Lefèvre, and Erasmus on Romans 11. All four attempted to disentangle the Pauline text from philological

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/605438/9780822382713-001.pdf by guest on 18 April 2024

corruptions and to provide more adequate texts and better translations. Valla was the most detached of the four commentators, the one most devoted to purely philological and grammatical questions. Colet and Erasmus were intensely interested in the religious and theological issues raised by Paul and their relevance for the reform of European society in the sixteenth century. Lefèvre, who shared with Colet and Erasmus an appreciation of the normative role of Paul's letters, was more mystical and philosophical in his exegesis, and less interested in "sociohistorical contingencies."

Martin Bucer's commentary on John went through three editions (1528, 1530, 1536) before the author's death in 1551. Because the exegesis of John 6 is crucial for the intra-Protestant controversy over the Lord's Supper, and because the second and third editions of Bucer's commentary appeared after two crucial moments in that controversy—the Marburg Colloquy of 1529 and the conclusion of the Wittenberg Concord in May 1536—Irena Backus attempts "to trace the textual changes introduced by Bucer between 1528 and 1536 into his exegesis of John 6:52, 53, and 64." After careful and sustained analysis, she concludes that by 1536 Bucer had abandoned his earlier polemic against the Lutherans but did not alter his fundamental exegetical position, especially on the question of the distinction of the two natures in Christ. Bucer refused in his last revision, as in his first edition, to accept the doctrine of the ubiquity of Christ's body so crucial to Luther's eucharistic theology.

Kenneth G. Hagen explores the exegetical method of the Danish Lutheran theologian Niels Hemmingsen in the context of the discussion of theological method by his contemporaries. He attempts to demonstrate Hemmingsen's independence from his teacher, Philip Melanchthon, who was also concerned with questions of theological and exegetical method, and argues for the importance of Hemmingsen's contribution to the development of historical criticism. Throughout his essay Hagen is concerned to guard against an anachronistic reading of Hemmingsen and his contemporaries that ascribes twentieth-century meanings to sixteenth-century texts and technical terms.

Special thanks are due to the Divinity School of Duke University and to Dean Thomas A. Langford and the late Dean Jameson Jones, who underwrote the costs of the colloquy. John L. Farthing of Hendrix College translated the essay by Margolin and revised the translation of

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/605438/9780822382713-001.pdf by guest on 18 April 2024

the essay by Bedouelle. Edward P. Mahoney, the editor of this series, enthusiastically attended the sessions of the colloquy and encouraged the publication of the papers by Duke University Press. Eugene F. Rice, Jr., of Columbia University and Heiko A. Oberman of the University of Arizona also spoke at the colloquy, though their contributions could not be included in this volume. Without the assistance and encouragement of these colleagues and the patient perseverance of the contributors, the present volume could not have been completed.

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/605438/9780822382713-001.pdf by guest on 18 April 2024