

## CRITICAL HISTORY, SUBVERSION AND SELF-SUBVERSION: THE CURIOUS CASES OF JEAN MABILLON AND RICHARD SIMON (II/II)

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**ABSTRACT.** Jean Mabillon and Richard Simon were both eminent seventeenth-century scholars who practiced contextualizing critical philology in order to forge unbeatable scientific instruments against the skeptics and reinforce the authority of historical documents. But Simon's work produced a mutation of the meaning of authenticity that would prove subversive and would generate outrage. His sociological and institutionalist understanding of the history of sacred texts not only merged both their production and their transmission into a common, ontologically homogenous historical process, but also included a survey of the sociological and cultural circumstances that transformed the text into a real authority. Furthermore, this anti-essentialist understanding of the gradual formation of the text allowed a positive reevaluation of the tradition as a continuous practice aiming at keeping alive an already historical truth.

**Key words:** *historical criticism, biblical hermeneutics, Richard Simon, Jean Mabillon, Spinoza*

### 3. Richard Simon and the sociology of the revelation

A Catholic scholar with a serious – and rather uncommon - knowledge of the Hebraic language and Hebraic philological tradition, and certainly a person less prone to those violent anti-Judaic prejudices so common among his contemporaries<sup>1</sup>, even or

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<sup>1</sup> Simon had a few friends among Jewish scholars, among whom Jona Salvador, businessman and theologian, who proposed Simon to translate together the Talmud. Moreover, in 1670 Simon made a successful public plea in favor of the Jews from Metz accused of ritual murder, invoking juridical reasons against their prosecution; significantly, he argued that the anti-Jewish hatred itself had taken various shapes from one age to another, compared the modern Jews with the early Christian

especially among theologians, Richard Simon (1638–1712) was a member of the Oratorian order and considered himself a follower of a so-called critical tradition of Origen and Saint Jerome. A tradition that he knew well and to which he dedicated two important studies, the third book of his *Histoire critique du Vieux Testament* and a *Histoire critique des principaux commentateurs*.<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, not only had Simon intellectual friends and collaborators among Huguenots, he also envisioned a new translation of the Scriptures able to do justice to the original text and, thereby, build a foundation for interconfessional consensus. In 1676, he was invited to participate in a collective translation initiated by several protestant scholars, but the collaboration failed due to some obscure disagreements.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, Simon did not abandon the project and envisaged to translate the New Testament in the vernacular. But his plans were delayed, because before finishing his own version of it, Simon decided to publish a historico-philological critical commentary of the Old Testament<sup>4</sup>. Furthermore, he composed this critical work in French.

His explicit intentions were to produce a critical translation able to restore and recover the original text of the Scriptures and, therefore, to revive its authority on a basis more abiding than the historical tradition appropriated by the Catholic Church, whose monopoly over interpretations had been continuously disputed<sup>5</sup>. For theological conflicts, according to Simon, were most of all intellectual dissensions that could be resolved by means of shared critical instruments.

Simon's restitutive translation needed, therefore, a prolegomenon and a theoretical complement designed to explain the translator's choices based on

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martyrs, praised the Jewish theological, philosophical and scientific accomplishments and examined the liturgy and religious customs of Jews and Christians. From Simon's passionate interest for Judaism arose his *Cérémonies et coutumes qui s'observent aujourd'hui parmi les juifs* (1681), although the admiration was toned down by Simon's discontent with Jewish alleged superstitions, religious formalism, hatred for the Christians and other bothersome vices. (See Henri Margival, *Essai sur Richard Simon et la critique biblique au XVIIe siècle*, Maillet, 1900. Rééd. Genève: Slatkine Reprints, 1970, 49-59.)

<sup>2</sup> *Histoire critique des principaux commentateurs du Nouveau Testament depuis le commencement du Christianisme jusques à notre temps* (1693) was the last part of the *Histoire critique du Nouveau Testament* trilogy and a sequel to the *Histoire critique du Vieux Testament*.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Auvray, *Richard Simon (1638-1712). Étude bio-bibliographique avec des textes inédites*, Paris: PUF, 1974, 36-38.

<sup>4</sup> *Histoire critique du Vieux Testament*. The 1685 edition is, according to Auvray, the most conforming to the original. It is the one I use for the present article (*Histoire critique du Vieux Testament*, Rotterdam, 1685, reprinted: Frankfurt, 1967).

<sup>5</sup> One of the great aims of this work was to 'résoudre les plus grandes difficultés de la Bible et pour satisfaire en même temps aux objections qu'on a accoutumé de faire contre l'autorité des Livres sacrés' (« Préface de l'auteur »). Spinoza was one of these main denigrators.

historico-philological principles; these principles had to allow for a true comprehension of the Bible and illuminate, accordingly, the Bible's original writing and production, its transmission and, implicitly, the relation between its reconsidered authenticity and the immutable authority of the Catholic Church.<sup>6</sup>

Moreover, Simon discovered Spinoza's *Theological-Political Treatise* while he was working on his *Histoire critique du Vieux Testament*<sup>7</sup> and attempted, in a gesture of touching naiveté and benevolence, to integrate part of Spinoza's objections and critical principles into his work, without willing to concede anything to his impious theological or metaphysical conclusions or even to Spinoza's "mistakes" – often deriving from Spinoza's metaphysical ideas.<sup>8</sup>

Simon took on to resolve the riddle of the authorship of some of the Scripture's books – for example, to solve the by then notorious and uncomfortable case of Moses's Pentateuch – in order to reconfirm the authority of a contested tradition.

In 1678, Richard Simon was granted the privilege of publication for his *Histoire critique*. He printed it in the then substantial circulation of 1300 copies. But, although it passed by both official censorship and the superior of his order, his work drew the rage of the future bishop Bossuet. Bossuet ordered the destruction of every copy – but, as it happens, some of them made their way to England and Amsterdam, were translated and reprinted there in several languages and disseminated with speed. To Bossuet's horror, Simon's book came back to France as smuggled goods and *livre scandaleux*, while the rumors of its suppression only nourished its popularity. – Simon was immediately expelled from the Oratorian order and, despite his further substantial contributions to the biblical studies, and despite his later efforts to reintegrate in his ancient intellectual and religious environment, he ended his days in poverty and neglect, after burning almost all his working papers and manuscripts.

What happened? Why did Bossuet find the *Histoire critique du Vieux Testament* so deeply disturbing?

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<sup>6</sup> As he stated in the *Préface*, "Premièrement, il est impossible d'entendre parfaitement les Livres sacrés, à moins qu'on ne sache auparavant les différents états où le texte de ces livres s'est trouvé selon les différents temps et les différents lieux, et si l'on n'est instruit exactement de tous les changements qui lui sont survenus."

<sup>7</sup> According to Auvray, at the time Simon read Spinoza's *Treatise*, his critical ideas had already been crystalized. Pierre Gibert downplays as well Spinoza's influence on the *Histoire critique* (Pierre Gibert, *L'invention critique de la Bible – XV<sup>e</sup>-XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Paris: Gallimard, 2010).

<sup>8</sup> Pierre Gibert noted that Simon's later *Lettre sur l'inspiration* (1686-1687) would treat Spinoza in a more attentive and nuanced manner (Pierre Gibert, 179).

Simon certainly did not consider himself to be a skeptic<sup>9</sup>, and he opposed the libertine consequences of Spinoza's and La Peyrère's positions. Like Mabillon, what he intended was, explicitly, to forge unbeatable instruments against the skeptics and against the usual objections that undermined the authority and the authenticity of the Scriptures. The wriggle itself was not too great, since, as already noted, the term *critique* was, at the time, even in the research developed by theologians, often understood in relation to a positive intellectual practice that aimed at reconstructing the letter or the meaning of ancient texts (either by direct confrontation of proofs, or by conjectures). *Critique* was seen as a very useful instrument against skepticism, error, false appearances, not as an intrinsically destructive or uncontrollable device – and Jean Mabillon's work, his good intentions and good results are proofs that such a critical practice could indeed still be theologically and socially successful in Simon's times. As such, it was not to be received automatically with mistrust.<sup>10</sup>

On the other hand, in France the historico-philological examination of the Bible was either known as a Protestant endeavor, or through the works of philosophers who often had the ill reputation of being dangerous libertines - Hobbes, La Peyrère or Spinoza - and rather less through some consistent contributions of local catholic scholars. The fact that Simon's critical commentary was in French and not in Latin did not help him much with his cause. It only signaled for the defenders of orthodoxy like Bossuet a license made public, impiety made available to women and to the less educated.<sup>11</sup> Nor did help his assumption that a correct understanding of Scriptures depended on the deep historico-philological knowledge, or the implication that a correct rendering of the text of the Scriptures was obliquely necessary to the pious practice of the good Christian.

Nevertheless, as for the method, Spinoza himself had not invented something radically new with his analysis of the Scriptures. Perfect knowledge of the language – Hebrew – with its history and with its successive historical alterations, the examination

<sup>9</sup> Patrick J. Lambe, "Biblical Criticism and Censorship in Ancien Régime France: The Case of Richard Simon," *Harvard Theological Review* 78 (1985): 149–77.

<sup>10</sup> At worst, it was regarded with condescendence, as a part of the tedious work of the *erudites*, as in La Bruyère: "La critique souvent n'est pas une science, c'est un métier où il faut plus de santé que d'esprit, plus de travail que de capacité, plus d'habitude que de génie. Si elle vient d'un homme qui ait moins de discernement que de lecture, et qu'elle s'exerce sur de certains chapitres, elle corrompt et les lecteurs et l'écrivain." (« Des ouvrages de l'esprit », *Les Caractères*, 63. VII).

<sup>11</sup> For an enraged Bossuet, Simon's erudition serves only "à éblouir l'esprit et à le rendre vain et présomptueux" (quoted in Margival, 10). This deficit of humbleness was certainly aggravated by Simon's vicious idea of bringing his impieties out from the small and controlled circle of scholars to the simple-in-spirit general audience.

of the internal coherence of the text, and awareness of its external history and circumstances were the three main conditions and principles of his critical reading, but each of them was already an exercised practice among biblical scholars.

Instead, it was the link Spinoza had established and the ruptures he intended to produce between faith, politics and theology that were perceived as (and were genuinely) dangerous for the theological tradition. Secondly, it was indeed Spinoza the philosopher who transformed the sacred text into a natural object, an object created by men and knowable like any other thing of nature. Contrary to the old principles of the protestant critical philology, Spinoza's analysis did suppress the opposition between the essential origin – the divine revelation – and the history of the text. Origin and history conspicuously melded into one and the same earthly substance – and, thence, the door to a future transformation of the natural object of the Scriptures into a cultural object (a shift that would effectively be accomplished during the Enlightenment) was opened.

Unlike Spinoza's, Simon's intention was neither to break down this foundation of religious authority, nor to conflate the human and the divine. But in his *Histoire critique* he produced a mutation of the meaning of authenticity that, eventually, would reinforce and radicalize Spinoza's subversive point that both dimensions of the Scriptures were substantially human and historical.

For Simon as well, Scripture must indeed be studied in both its dimensions, in order to recompose its truly authentic core: its writing-up, on the one hand, and its transmission, on the other – so all kind of alterations, essentially contingent, should be identified and named as such, from vowel-points to errors in transcriptions and translations. Although in theory a good catholic, Simon indirectly accepted the Lutheran principle that there is a truth of the text to be discovered in its letter proper, rather than in the patristic interpretative tradition or in some decisions taken much later by catholic synods. However, understanding what this "letter" meant was mediated, in practice, by a thorough inquiry into the history of the text that not only merged the writing with the transmission into a common and epistemically homogenous historical process, but also included a survey of the historical and cultural circumstances that transformed the text into a real authority. Furthermore, this anti-essentialist understanding of the gradual formation of the text allowed a positive reevaluation of the tradition as a continuous practice aiming at keeping alive an already historical truth.<sup>12</sup>

The tripartite structure of the *Histoire critique* is in itself an indication: while the first part deals with the successive transformations suffered by the Hebraic text

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<sup>12</sup> Whence his almost dialectic relation with both protestant hermeneutics and catholic tradition, that eventually satisfied neither the Catholics, nor the protestants.

from the Mosaic era onwards (including the scandalmonger chapter on the authorship of the Pentateuch and the inquiry into the obstacles that might give birth to ambiguities in deciphering the Hebrew Scriptures), and the second with the Vulgate, the Septuagint and several vernacular or oriental translations of the Scriptures, the last part is a complex critical and historical assessment of the Bible's commentaries and an evaluation of the historical accuracy of various opinions professed by reputed theologians.

Significantly, the main assumption underlying Simon's equal attention to the history of the writing and reception of Scriptures is that revelation itself was brought to men via historical and cultural textual forms. The historical time that supported this transmission was, moreover, not an intra-Judaic time, but an open temporal framework, which allowed a confrontation with the secular history of other ancient nations.<sup>13</sup>

Although his work is not meant to be a theological reflection on the Bible, its implications are that religious ideas were always proportioned to the human spirit, that theology is a science, and, accordingly, that it cannot deprive itself of the erudite means of understanding the historical circumstances of the human reception of revelation.<sup>14</sup> The result is not only a radical historicizing of the original text, but also a historicizing of the text's posterity and of the *Tradition* itself.<sup>15</sup>

Nevertheless, if Simon's analysis might be close to some of the boldest insights from Spinoza's *Treatise*, there is a way in which Simon's historical interest in the Scriptures put a limit to historical relativism. As a good historian of biblical interpretations and translations, Simon thought to be his mission to discriminate between good translations of the Scriptures – like the Vulgata – and inappropriate versions – like the silly French translation that employed an anachronically gallant language to render the love verses of the Song of Songs<sup>16</sup>, or the innumerable fallacious versions of those translators that ignored ancient languages, historical insight and grammar.

From another point of view, though, his analysis of scriptural authorship proper went even further than Spinoza's.

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<sup>13</sup> François Laplanche, *La Bible en France entre mythe et critique : XVIe – XIXe siècle*, Paris: Albin Michel, 1994, 16.

<sup>14</sup> Margival, 75-76.

<sup>15</sup> The infamous fifth chapter of the first book that provoked Bossuet's ire asserts that a holy father of the Church like Saint Jerome did not assume the complete Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch, and that Moses himself could not have written about his own death in the third person. Instead, according to Simon, this belief in the absolute authorship that Catholics were nowadays imposing as a dogma had been borrowed from the rabbinic tradition, together with other exegetic rabbinic principles.

<sup>16</sup> *Histoire Critique*, II, 21, 325.

The historical research would, of course, according to Simon, acknowledge that all the books in the Scriptures had been written by prophets – and only a malicious spirit like Spinoza was capable to use the benign principles of critical hermeneutics in order to deny this elementary fact -, but not necessarily by the prophets who gave their names to those books. The “Hebrew republic”, as Simon called it, never went short of prophets. But we can call those prophets *public scribes*<sup>17</sup>, he suggested, in order to distinguish them from private authors, for they belonged to a professional class. The prophetic writing, then, was collective, institutionally organized, based on a division of labor and, importantly, relying on public archives. Therefore, Moses himself was one among many legitimate authors.

Moreover, the public scribes were being officially allowed to intervene over the written text in order to harmonize it with the older archive sources, and their job was then similar to the task of the modern critical historian, without hereby diminishing the sanctity of its result. Their corrections needed to be respectful first of all to the old manuscripts, not to something identified as revelation. – This could also explain, argues Simon, some of the factual errors to be found in the Old Testament, which might be due to the national perspective embraced, presumably, by some Jewish scribes-historians updating the narratives.

Furthermore, given the known fact that no original manuscripts of the Scriptures survived until the modern age, the meaning of the “original” and “authentic” defining sacred manuscripts should be, holds Simon, implicitly de-essentialized and disconnected from that image of the stone or parchment touched directly by the hand of God – at least if the faith in the divine inspiration of the text is to outlive critical intelligence. The surviving manuscripts are in themselves, as in the case of the secular archives, summaries and adaptations operated by professional scribes and only the awareness and serene acceptance of this trivial fact can save theology from the dissolutive conclusions that Spinoza had turned into libertine unfaithfulness.<sup>18</sup> The Scripture has survived its own history – and cannot be left now to be dissolved by historians.

A first consequence of this proto-sociological mutation in the historical explanation is that, in the terms that Jonathan Sheehan’s employed to describe the philological philosophy of the Lutheran biblical scholar Johann Albrecht Bengel, instead of depicting public scribes as imperfect Xerox machines, the critical historian assigned a general rationale to their practices<sup>19</sup>. This rationale was completely dependent on

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<sup>17</sup> *Histoire Critique*, ch. viii. Simon’s argument was probably based on an implicit analogy with the Babylonian and Chinese civilizations and their use of public clerks.

<sup>18</sup> Gibert, 180-181.

<sup>19</sup> Sheehan, 97.

historical circumstances, and moreover, even some of the historical errors could be deduced from it<sup>20</sup>. – But, if for Bengel the Lutheran, or even for Erasmus, once reconstructed, the circumstances could be expurgated and could therefore make place for the resurrection of the original text, ready to be revered as a divinely inspired message, an unexpected and undesired consequence of Simon's method was that the text was no longer there as a revealed essence waiting to be discovered and worshipped. Instead, it tended to convert into an open-ended collective practice of inspired writing.

A second major consequence is that, according to the solution Simon opposed to the critical threat, authenticity proper should no longer be a challenge to the modern theologian; on the contrary, the historian can attest that authenticity is equally distributed between all the books of Scriptures, in spite of their distinct lineages, as equally distributed is their sanctity as well. The sanctity and the divine inspiration were then disjoined from the nominal authenticity. Moreover, as Simon understood the authentication as a legitimate stamp emanating from the social function of the scribe, a procedure reminding of a notary seal, later reformers and later interventions on the biblical text could have only been rejected from the professional club of prophet-scribes, and their work could correctly be regarded as apocrypha.

Consequently, the source of sacredness and authenticity in the writing of Scriptures is purely bureaucratic and no longer linked to specific extraordinary individuals, let alone to an individual privileged revelation. The only crucial distinction in this social and institutional history of the Scriptures is not the one between the divinely inspired prophet and all the other authors, but the one between the member of the licensed guild and the unprofessional.

Moreover, the argument for the tradition is no longer a reassertion of the sacred ecclesiastical mission of authenticating and preserving the eternal truth in its trans-historical immutability, but the acknowledgement of a sustained collective practice of keeping alive and permanently adapting the revealed word of God. A continuum brings together the writing and the rewriting, and a continuum connects Moses' original books with the other prophetic books of Scripture

But, most importantly, as a third consequence, the human origin of Scriptures and the reinterpretation of prophecy as a professional activity opens the path to a

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<sup>20</sup> In Simon's case, the materialist reading of the text AND of the social circumstances of its elaboration did not assume that errors in the apocrypha were due to bad faith – as it would later happen with those Enlightenment authors recasting the old theme of religious imposture. Errors emanated rather from common human mistakes and trivial misinterpretations, or even from cultural biases and chauvinism, not from conspiracies.

materialism even more radical than the Spinozist historical naturalism: instead of depicting the human dimension of prophecy as a sort of religious enthusiasm, exaltation, emotion, drunkenness stemming from the pathologies or emotional idiosyncrasies of the so called prophets, as Spinoza and other libertines had done and would do during the Enlightenment, Simon defines the humanness as institutional and social and, again, smooths the way to the understanding of the Bible as a cultural product.

No wonder then that his critical method was perceived to be offensive and dangerous by both Catholics and protestants.<sup>21</sup>

The particular cultural circumstances of France, though, made his story a very special one. Historical scholarship had suffered here a severe receding, especially after the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes, and a relative separation from other intellectual fields. Even later, notoriously, the *philosophes'* contemptuous rhetoric about the so-called pedantry and sterility of erudition would tend to obscure their substantial indebtedness to those great scholarly works. Spinoza's penetration in France<sup>22</sup> and unintended catastrophes like the reception of Simon's *Histoire critique* would contribute further to the marginalization of the erudition and the erudites, this time not only for reason of good taste and literary mondenity, but also thanks to the frightened public authorities, both civil and ecclesiastic.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Conservative defenders of Catholicism aside, this is not necessarily the common reading of Simon and of the possible outcome of his critical work. For René Pintard, Simon was one the libertine erudites. And, from the evaluation of Ernst Renan (*Revue des deux Mondes*, LX, 1865, 254) that Bossuet's victory over Simon, far from protecting the Church in the long run, would have opened the way to Voltaire's irresponsible and buffoonish antireligious satire, to more traditional commentators of Simon's work (Auvray deplores Bossuet's censorship and the suppression of the *HCVT* as having indirectly quicken the eighteenth-century anti-religious revolt – Auvray, 140-141), for a long time scholars tended to assume that the Simon episode would rather be harmful to the interests of the French Catholic Church. We can add to that the complain that the decay of historical erudition in France would have contributed to the obstruction of the development of French historical thinking in general and to the rupture between *histoire* and *philosophie* (Blandine Barret Kriegel, Chantal Grell).

I do not consider that Simon was a true unbeliever and a libertine, but that he mistook his own proto-sociological explanation of the origins of the Bible, his depersonalization and socialization of prophecy, for a restitutive historical argument, similar to a traditionally humanist or protestant philological endeavor meant to essentially bring the moderns back *ad fontes*.

<sup>22</sup> See Blandine Barret-Kriegel, *op. cit.*

<sup>23</sup> Should we compare the consequences of a hypothetical development of biblical criticism in France with its actual development in Germany and England, we could conclude with Jonathan Sheehan that the former need not lead in principle to an anti-religious sentiment or to a devaluation of the Scriptures. In Germany and England, critical attention to the Bible was indeed able to integrate philosophy, criticism and theology into a vast inquiry, without generating any irreparable divorce between them. But the situation of the institutional theology was different in France, where the authority of the Church depended directly on the sanctity of the tradition and on the dogma of

This might shed some light on one of the reasons why the unification of the French field of history into a discipline with common rules and with a homogeneous epistemology never happened until late in the eighteenth-century or even in the nineteenth-century. The sacred and the profane history did not converge under the same methodological roof. And, while in spite of the marginalization of professional scholars, the Mabillon-type of critical research went on – although in very specialized and rather insulated institutions like the *Académie des Inscriptions et des belles lettres* –, the singular work of Richard Simon had no immediate followers.

As I understand it, paradoxically, it was mainly because in the case of biblical hermeneutics, the connection with philosophy – with impious philosophy – had already been established and made obvious, through the libertine critique of Hobbes, La Peyrère and Spinoza. Ironically, historical pyrrhonism too brought to light and reinforced a connection between history and philosophy – for the bold and provoking rejection of history – associated with Cartesianism – as uncertain knowledge and, therefore, unscientific only stimulated countless reactions and reformulations, and drove philosophers, from Arnaud and Nicole to Fontenelle, to explore degrees of certainty, types of probability and verisimilitude, to revisit the Aristotelian classifications of knowledge and to invent new philosophical legitimations for history as well as ways of rendering the contingent knowable.

In Mabillon's case, this relationship was less obvious. In spite of its demystifying potential, Mabillon's work was serving, on the one hand, the direct interests of the Benedictine order and of the monarchy, and, on the other, as it was

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individual prophetic revelation. Hence an advancement of biblical criticism might have been more pernicious in France than it actually was in the protestant countries. On the other hand, the *largesse* the protestant countries manifested towards biblical interpretation led to a significant hermeneutical pluralism and, eventually, to a profound transformation in the substance of biblical authority. As Sheehan again writes, 'If the old answer to the old question "What is the ultimate source of biblical authority?" was "theological truth," the new answers were distributed across a variety of humanistic and historical disciplines. This distribution of the Bible—the fact that the Enlightenment Bible was ineluctably *plural* in character—was a symptom of the media effects of Enlightenment. Just as political discussion in the period was distributed across a variety of new outlets—newspapers, coffee houses, or what have you—so too was the Bible distributed across a variety of genres, scholarly practices, and disciplines. It was not an accident that the Enlightenment Bible had no single center, that it was not an object as much as a project. If the Bible had always functioned in Christian Europe as an essentially unified text—indeed, its theological importance depended on this unity—the post-theological Enlightenment Bible would build its authority across a diverse set of domains and disciplines. Its authority had no essential center, but instead coalesced around four fundamental nuclei. Philology, pedagogy, poetry, and history: each offered its own answer to the question of biblical authority, answers that were given literary form in the guise of new translations.' (Sheehan, 91)

too sophisticated and specialized to be appropriated by amateur philosophers, it did not lend itself to vulgarizations.

At another level, if sacred and profane history never truly converged in France until the end of the Enlightenment, Mabillon's work also provided an obstacle to the integration of ancient history and modern history into a common epistemic field: although Mabillon's and Simon's methods were similar in their basic critical principles, they could not apply to the same objects, as Mabillon's research was founded mostly on medieval diplomas and charts, in other words on types of sources that could not have survived in great number from the Antiquity and were then relatively more modern. Unwillingly, Mabillon would contribute therefore to the survival in the eighteenth-century of some remnants of historical pyrrhonism: Voltaire's conviction that the ancient times are beyond our reach and hence don't deserve the historian's attention might be an interesting sign of this indirect penetration.

#### 4. Spinoza and Spinozist critical history against history

A few more words about Spinoza's stakes when developing his critical hermeneutic in the *Theological-Political Treatise* before getting to the conclusions.

I mentioned Spinoza's argument on the homogeneity or consubstantiality of the *origins* of Scriptures and their *history* or transmission: both were material, human, knowable like any other object of nature. But two other things should be pointed out. Firstly, that, although the two are made of the same "natural" fabric, for Spinoza the remoteness in time between ancient text and modern inquiry generates an epistemic break between them: in principle, as mere documents, the Scriptures should be accessible to us, but in practice, the Hebrew language has changed, meanings of words were lost, and entire texts were probably lost too; thence, some of them cannot be understood unambiguously.

Secondly, from the beginning of the *Theological-Political Treatise*, Spinoza highlighted an important distinction between the *reference* of the sacred text – its historical truth, which could be, at least partially, uncovered -, and its so-called *true meaning* – the doctrine. It follows that the historical knowledge and the religious or moral learning are two completely independent things, and that history cannot be a source for the legitimation of anything – neither authority nor dogma -, nor can religious ideas interfere with the uncovering of a *true fact*.

Spinoza deserted the traditional understanding of history as a source of legitimation and came closer to the pyrrhonist separation of history from anything else. After being cleverly used for a demystifying purpose, history is no longer relevant in

itself, nor for life, nor for politics, and therefore Spinoza's efforts in the *Treatise* – which would become, paradoxically, an enormously important source for historical thinking in the Enlightenment – are mainly driven towards the demonstration of history's irrelevance. In other words, the main function of his own historical inquiry is, as Spinoza understands it, deconstructing the theologico-political pretensions allegedly founded on the Scriptures, not reinforcing a positive and specific form of authority (royal dynasties, political entitlements of the parliaments or crown, supremacy of the church over secular powers etc.), nor, as it would happen later in modernity, being a fundamental resource for the explanation of the social facts, of the new, of the substantial differences between historical ages or between forms of social organization. And after such a deconstruction, history can only dissolve itself.

## 5. Epilogue

Historical criticism took different shapes in the late seventeenth-century. Works with similar methodological views and purposes could have various intellectual and political outcomes. Spinoza's biblical criticism was generally perceived as unacceptable, as a dissolution through history of any textual legitimation of the dogma – and also as a radical subversion of the historical legitimation device itself, suggesting, eventually, that history as such was irrelevant for religion as well as for morals, politics and philosophy. Mabillon's source criticism and principles of the diplomatics, in turn, were delivered and received by the most significant (or advanced) faction of the scientific community as a respectable positive and reconstructive method, while Richard Simon's critical history of the Old Testament and of its successive material and ideological transformations, although equally reconstructive in intent and reclaiming for itself a respectable historical tradition originating in Saint Jerome and Origen, was, contrariwise, understood to be destructive in its theological effects and was therefore censored by the religious authorities.

Nevertheless, Mabillon's and Simon's respective objects of inquiry were significantly different: although the purpose of both was to loyally defend the textual foundations of their religious communities, Mabillon's diplomatics targeted mainly medieval charts and titles – which were, everything else left aside, created beyond doubt by human beings. As for Simon, his *Histoire critique* was an attempt to reassert the authority of the interpretative tradition of the Catholic Church while proving that the authoritative interpretation of the Scriptures cannot legitimately be based on ignorance and, even less, cannot be guided by theology itself, but only by the erudite critical knowledge of the Scriptures and of their convoluted history.

If this discrepancy in aims and objects was certainly a crucial factor that led to the radically different receptions of Mabillon's and Simon's critical history, it is equally important to acknowledge the shaping influence of the French historical context that led to a further marginalization of the critical study of the Bible in particular. In France, where biblical history was mediocly developed at the end of the *Grand Siècle*, and where profane critical history never managed to infiltrate substantially into other intellectual domains, the absence of their intellectual mediation was one of the circumstances allowing later, especially in the second half of the eighteenth-century, a burst of anti-ecclesiastic raids in the writings of the *philosophes*. Moreover, it will be mainly during the Enlightenment that the meaning of *criticism* will shift towards a more negative, suspicious-like, deconstructive understanding,

In the protestant countries, conversely, the biblical criticism led to a dissolution of the canonic authority of the Bible, but also to the birth of another type of biblical authority: the cultural authority. In England and Germany, as well as in the Low Countries, responses to Toland and Spinoza stimulated a development of erudite scholarship and a return to the microscopical study of the biblical texts. Scholarship, then, was developed there as a theological defense weapon against the uncertainties of the Bible. As a result, in the protestant countries, the Enlightenment Bible became plural: as an object of study for different human sciences, it supported different versions and transformed itself, little by little, into a cultural universal patrimony of the humankind. As such, it integrated both religion and culture into the same spiritual heritage unaffected by the old divisions between faith and absence of faith. By making possible the separation of the Bible from theology, the historical scholarship essentially contributed to the birth of a new realm, that we name today culture.