

REINER SMOLINSKI and JAN STIEVERMANN, eds., *Cotton Mather and Biblia Americana – America's First Bible Commentary: Essays in Reappraisal* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck and Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic 2010), 593 pp.

Written between 1693 and 1728, *Biblia Americana*, the longest book of the most prolific American Puritan Cotton Mather (1663-1728), had to wait for more than three hundred years until its publication was realized thanks to the scholarly perseverance and accurate scholarship of its editors: Reiner Smolinski of Georgia State University, USA, and Jan Stievermann of the University of Tübingen (now at the University of Heidelberg). Six huge folio-sized holograph manuscripts, though not undamaged, were preserved in the archives of the Massachusetts Historical Society of Boston. The editorial plan is to publish this huge work, the oldest comprehensive commentary on the Bible composed in British North America, in ten volumes as a transatlantic joint venture of the prestigious theological publishers of Mohr Siebeck and Baker Academic.

In 2008, an international conference was held in Tübingen. The twenty “essays in reappraisal” are the tangible fruits of this conference. This book is a proper companion to the series and powerfully offers a revisionist image of this New England polymath, a ‘New Mather’ whose intellectual heritage has unfortunately been grossly misinterpreted. Impressive current scholarship uncovers the hidden scholarship of this eighteenth-century intellectual giant. The earlier disrespect came mainly from the one-sided interpretation of Mather’s participation in the notorious Salem witchcraft hysteria of 1692 but, as Harry Stout remarks in the Preface, “[t]he Mather revealed in the unpublished ‘Biblia Americana’ is not your grandfather’s Mather of witches and hysteria, but an incredibly erudite interlocutor of Enlightenment learning” (x). The publishing of the ten volumes, also in digitalized form, can only be compared to the edition of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* of the Jonathan Edwards Center at Yale University.

The first, as well as the last, essay in the collection is by Jan Stievermann, the co-editor of both the text and the twenty papers and it serves a general introduction to Cotton Mather and his *Biblia Americana*. We learn from this erudite and carefully written study

that Mather published over four hundred works in his lifetime, of which he considered his unpublished *Biblia Americana* the most important of his works. His interdisciplinary commentary marks the beginning of historical criticism, well before the advent of German high criticism. Mather used several Bible translations simultaneously, including, of course, the original Hebrew and Greek texts, the Septuagint, Jerome’s Vulgate, and the Aramaic Targums. He had to face the emerging rationalism of the mid-seventeenth century represented by influential works such as Hobbes’s *Leviathan* (1651) and Spinoza’s *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (1670), both fundamentally challenging the traditional ideas of divine revelation.

According to Stievermann, *Biblia Americana* has been overlooked for so long especially due to the size and the format of the commentary—the printed edition comprised some 15.000 pages packed with quotations from the ancient languages. Also, the market was well supplied by the annotated commentaries of Matthew Poole (London, 1683-85) and Matthew Henry (London 1708-10). The third and final reason is Mather’s negative and unpopular reputation; for example, in his *Main Currents in American Thought* (1927), Vernon Parrington portrayed him as a “crooked and diseased mind,” “oversexed and overwrought” (16). Even Kenning Silvermann’s Pulitzer-winning *The Life and Times of Cotton Mather* (1984) gave him the dubious title of “America’s national gargoyle” (61).

A re-evaluation of Mather began with Robert Middlekauff’s *The Mathers* (1977), Richard L. Lovelace’s *The American Pietism of Cotton Mather* (1979), and the gradually appearing critical editions of Mather’s individual works such as his rightly celebrated *Magnalia Christi Americana: Or, the Ecclesiastical History of New England*, edited by Kenneth B. Murdock in 1977, *The Christian Philosopher* by Winton U. Solberg (1994), and *The Threefold Paradise* by Reiner Smolinski (1995). All these editions point towards the necessity of an image of a ‘New Mather,’ as powerfully claimed by Stievermann and epitomized by the authors of the remaining essays of the volume.

There are six sections in the volume; section one, “The Vicissitudes of Mather’s Reputation,” is represented by two essays. William Van Arragon’s “The Glorious Translation of an American Elijah: Mourning Cotton Mather

in 1728” (unfortunately preserving a typo in the head-title throughout pp. 63-81) is to reflect that contrary to his later debunking and unsympathetic readings, the funeral sermons, biographies, and diary accounts composed at the time of his death testify to Mather’s image not only as a typological ‘Enoch,’ ‘Elijah,’ or ‘Aaron’ but as a public father, a ‘communal pater familias” (73).

E. Brooks Holifield’s metaphorically titled “The Abridging of Cotton Mather” investigates with minute scholarship (based on 328 books, sermons, journal articles, etc., all composed between 1728-1870) the process of how and why Mather’s glorious reputation had turned to its contrary by the nineteenth century. Holifield suggests that it is not due to Mather’s personal involvement in the Salem witch trials but rather due to his views on church government, which were picked up by the nineteenth-century liberal Unitarians in their debates with Calvinist Congregationalists. In this debate, the liberals exposed and caricatured Mather’s supernaturalism and thus damaged his reputation, which survived long after the debate and consequently, for all his prolific intellectual output, “he was trapped in Salem” (99). Thus, through the literary works of Nathaniel Hawthorne, Washington Irving, or Harriet Beecher Stowe, he became an emblem of dogmatism, intolerance, and superstition. According to the Holifield, it is ultimately anachronistic and thus mistaken when a retrospective generalization selectively imposes later values upon an earlier age or author.

Section two opens the horizon on “Mather in the Context of International Protestantism.” Francis J. Bremer is concerned with the international and ecumenical background of *Biblia Americana*. He provides a wide survey of the history of the contacts between the Puritans and Continental Europe prior to the times of Cotton Mather. Bremer concentrates on the activities of Samuel Hartlieb and his circle, which included John Dury, who had close ties with the Moravian Calvinist Jan Amos Comenius and the American John Davenport and John Winthrop, Jr. The Hartlieb-circle had millennial expectations that led them to suppose that the native Americans were the descendants of the lost tribes of Israel. This view was endorsed by Menasseh ben Israel’s *The Hope of Israel* (1650).

Oliver Scheiding’s “The World as Parish: Cotton Mather, August Hermann Francke,

and the Transatlantic Religious Network” is one of the most brilliant articles in the collection. Critically surveying earlier scholarship on the links between Boston Puritanism (Cotton Mather) and German Pietism (Johann August Francke), Scheiding reassesses this relationship by thoroughly examining a so far unpublished *Narratio Epistola*, partly written by Francke and his close associate Heinrich Callenberg (1694-1760). Both Francke and Callenberg considered the bond with Cotton Mather “a highly pleasant friendship [...] because of their similarity of intentions and undertakings” (133). The *Narratio* was forwarded to Wilhelm Böhme, a German chaplain at the English court, who was meant to dispatch it to Mather. Scheiding provides a twelve-page English translation of the fifty-page Latin *Narratio* in the appendix that not only sheds light on Francke’s knowledge of Mather’s works but also on his activity as a missionary. Francke succeeded to reconvert Duke Moritz Wilhelm of Saxony (1664-1718), shortly before his death, from his adopted Catholicism to the evangelical faith of Lutheranism (153-62). Scheiding’s conclusion is that the ecumenically open-minded Mather “did not only incorporate science and natural philosophy, but also an experimental practice-oriented approach to religion that can be found in the Pietist works of Spener and Francke” (148). The last essay in this section by Adriaan Neele on “Peter van Mastricht’s Theoretico-practica: Theologica as an Interpretative Frameworks for Cotton Mather’s Work” is only indirectly related to the *Biblia Americana*.

Section three, “Enlightenment Rationalism, Biblical Literalism and the Supernatural,” contains three essays. The first one, “Cotton Mather, The ‘Biblia Americana’ and the Enlightenment” by Winton U. Solberg, is a well-written, though somewhat textbook-like survey of the works of Enlightenment philosophers and theologians, most of whom were well known to Mather. Though Mather was a pioneer in embracing the new sciences, he shared, for example, William Lowth’s hostility to the works of Spinoza and the radical form of enlightenment that denied the idea of divine inspiration. While open to new ideas and methods of the age, the author of *Biblia Americana* remained orthodox in his faith.

Michael Dopffel’s “Between Literalism and Scientific Inquiry” is a case study of Mather’s interpretation of Jeremiah 8:7 “Yea, the stork in the heaven knoweth her appointed times;

and the turtle and the crane and the swallow observe the time of their coming; but my people know not the judgment of the LORD." This is one of the "Curiosa" (204) of the *Biblia Americana* in which Mather, with ample scientific evidence on migratory birds, tries to reconcile biblical literalism with empirical science. The third study, "Cotton Mather and the Invisible World," is by Paul Wise, who is currently editing Mather's controversial *Wonders of the Invisible World* (1693). In the article he provides us with an extensive survey on demonology and witchcraft from the Middle Ages through to the eighteenth century. In a useful chart, Wise enumerates on the one hand works credulous of witchcraft (sixty-seven) and on the other hand works skeptical of it altogether (twenty-one), all published between 1688 and 1750 (cf. 247-63). Mather, as Wise demonstrates, shared his contemporaries' beliefs, including the beliefs of some prominent members of the Royal Society, namely in the existence of demons and witches. Mather even claimed that his senses had been convinced of the existence of this invisible world. For Mather and his intellectual fellow-believers in the invisible world, the existence of spirits was closely tied to their belief in God.

Section four is entitled "Mather's Historical Method and His Approach to the History of Religion." The first article, written by Rick Kennedy, compares Mather's historical approach to the tradition of commonplace books and exploits the rich potentials of metaphors such as "flower-picker" or "honey-bee" (263) in order to describe the activity of the historian. No wonder anthologies of classical writers were called *florilegia* just as theological commentaries were *catena* or *loci communes* during the Middle Ages and the time of the Reformation. Mather saw his task as a historian in *Biblia Americana* as "gathering" (263); just as a bee collects honey for its hive, *Biblia* is the "Common Hive" (262). Moreover, Kennedy argues, the tradition of the commonplace book tradition as well as Mather's commentary method of 'Question' and 'Answer' owes a lot to the Aristotelian tradition.

Kenneth P. Minkema, the executive director of the Jonathan Edwards Center at Yale University, is also involved in the Mather-project. He is editing Mather's "Historical Books" beginning with Joshua and ending with the Chronicles. Minkema argues that Mather exploits the minute historical details of events and accounts of these books to be acceptable

for the history-oriented rational criticism of his contemporaries. However, having established that context, Mather built typological and prophetic readings of his material. When writing about the idols and the false gods of Israel's contemporaries, he approached them in a comparative way that was not without risk in regard to the unanimously accepted sacred nature of the biblical texts.

Another challenge to traditional biblical scholarship was Mather's engagement with John Spencer (1630-1693) and the debate about the pagan origins of the Mosaic laws, rites, and customs. This is the subject of Reiner Smolinski's contribution to this collection. John Spencer was a most erudite Christian Hebraist of Corpus Christi College Cambridge, whose massive *De Legibus Hebraeorum Ritualibus Earumque Rationibus* was first published in 1685. Spencer powerfully argues that the ceremonial laws were not given by Moses but were adapted from Israel's Egyptian, Canaanite, and other neighbors who Israel assimilated during its long captivity. This evolutionary and comparative view undermined the traditional typological readings of Leviticus. Choosing, among others, the case example of the golden calf, Smolinski shows how far Mather complies with Spencer's insights and when he departs from them. While praising Spencer's deep erudition, Mather parts company with Spencer when his insights contradict divine inspiration and revelation of Scripture. However, unlike within the closed providentialist perspective of the *Magnalia*, Mather, in the *Biblia Americana*, "carved out an intellectual space in which he could converse with his European colleagues on their terms" (330).

Harry Clark Maddux's article shows how Mather used the ideas of *prisca theologia* (ancient theology) as well as Euhemerism, a name suggesting the interpretation of mythological figures on the basis of biblical figures supposedly real and historical. The name is given in reference to the Greek historian Euhemerus and has to do with the idea of *preparatio evangelica* of the church father Eusebius. The underlying belief is that figures of both Jewish and pagan religion come from the common patriarch Noah, whose three sons carried religion to all quarters of the world. In *prisca theologia*, the created world with all its mythology and literature point to the revelation in the Bible. Thus it is claimed, among others, that Nimrod is identical with Orion and all

classical literature is ultimately of Hebrew origin. With the interpretative method, Mather could undermine Spencer's thesis concerning the Egyptian origins of the Mosaic law.

Section five on "Aspects of Scriptural Exegesis" contains four essays. The first one is by the well-known Edwards scholar Stephen S. Stein. In his essay, he compares Mather's and Edwards's readings of the Epistle of James in the *Biblia Americana* and the *Blank Bible*, respectively. For all the theological similarities, Stein notices the difference, namely, that Mather is more interested in historical, textual issues than the more spiritual-minded Edwards. Mather even mentions the possibility that this letter, the Epistle of James, had originally been written by Jews and for Jews and that it was given a Christian coloring only at a later stage when it was canonized among Christian texts (372).

The next essay is by Paul Silas Peterson, who explores Mather's christological interpretation of the "Shechinac Glory" (383), i.e., God's visible manifestations in history. Peterson points out that Mather was familiar both with Rabbinical interpretations of divine theophanies as well as with the works of contemporary Christian Hebraists. Peterson argues that with the Christological interpretation of the shechinac, Mather could uphold not only the organic unity of the Old and the New Testaments against the disintegrating tendencies of historical criticism, but it also helped him develop a theological aesthetics comparable only to that of Jonathan Edwards.

Finally, two essays are devoted to eschatology in this biblical section. According to Michael P. Clark, Mather developed an "eschatological semiotics" (420) in *Biblia Americana*. He believed that the full meaning of signs will be revealed only in the eschaton. David Komline shows that later in his life, Mather

adopted a preterit view of the millennium abandoning his earlier millennialist expectations that the conversion of the Jews would usher in the second coming. The reason for this change, Komline argues, arose from the contemporary debates on Arianism. Mather's earlier millenarian views were inspired by the views of the well-known millennialist William Whiston. However, when Whiston's Arian views came to be known, Mather abandoned his earlier enthusiasm concerning the impending eschatological events in the early eighteenth century.

Section six (the last in the volume) is entitled "Gender, Race and Slavery in the 'Biblia Americana.'" The first essay, written by Helen K. Gilenas, is on the daughters of Eve in *Biblia Americana*, in which the author demonstrates that Mather was both a traditionalist and an innovator. Robert E. Brown's essay is a meticulous study on the role and the gender significance of long hair, based on 1 Corinthians 11, touching on questions such as why Cotton Mather wore a wig. In the last essay of the collection, Jan Stievermann argues that modern concepts such as racism or slavery cannot be imposed on earlier ages in retrospect.

All in all, the publishing of this eye-opening series of essays, proposing an image of an entirely 'New Mather,' is an important milestone in the history of Early American studies. The essays radically change the populist image of Mather as well as that of the eighteenth century. The distorted view of the past was ill-motivated and biased as it lacked evidence. With primary sources now unpacked, the historical evidence suggests that we must work on the correction of the mistaken, caricature-like image of Cotton Mather, probably the greatest ever Puritan thinker.

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