



**BIBLIA AMERICANA**  
Cotton Mather

**Volume 9: Romans – Philemon**

*Edited, with an Introduction and Annotations, by Robert E. Brown*

*Cotton Mather, Sr.*

# BIBLIA AMERICANA

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Volume 9



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Cotton Mather

# BIBLIA AMERICANA

America's First Bible Commentary

A Synoptic Commentary on the  
Old and New Testaments

Volume 9  
ROMANS – PHILEMON

Edited, with an Introduction and Annotations,

by

Robert E. Brown

Mohr Siebeck

ROBERT E. BROWN, born 1958, PhD University of Iowa 1999; Associate Professor of Religious Studies, James Madison University.

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*For Paul and Cathy Gutjahr,  
who together embody the grace  
and mystery of friendship*

*In Loving Memory  
Marilynn J. Graham  
William L. Graham  
Robert D. Brown*



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## List of Abbreviations

<i>ADB</i>	<i>Allgemeine Deutsche Biographie</i>
<i>ANF</i>	<i>Ante-Nicene Fathers</i>
<i>BA</i>	<i>Biblia Americana</i>
<i>CDSB</i>	<i>Complete Dictionary of Scientific Biography</i>
<i>CE</i>	<i>Catholic Encyclopedia</i>
<i>DBE</i>	<i>Dictionary of Biographical Reference</i>
<i>DGRBM</i>	<i>Dictionary of Greek and Roman Biography and Mythology</i>
<i>DNB</i>	<i>Dictionary of National Biography</i>
<i>EAG</i>	<i>Encyclopedia of Ancient Greece</i>
<i>EB</i>	<i>Encyclopedia Britannica</i>
<i>EGHT</i>	<i>Encyclopedia of Greece and the Hellenic Tradition</i>
<i>EJ</i>	<i>Encyclopedia Judaica</i>
<i>EP</i>	<i>Encyclopedia of Protestantism</i>
<i>ERE</i>	<i>Encyclopedia of the Roman Empire</i>
<i>GBD</i>	<i>General Biographical Dictionary</i>
<i>GND</i>	<i>Gemeinsame Normdatei</i>
<i>HDRC</i>	<i>Historical Dictionary of the Reformed Churches</i>
<i>IEP</i>	<i>Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy</i>
<i>JE</i>	<i>Jewish Encyclopedia</i>
<i>NCE</i>	<i>New Catholic Encyclopedia</i>
<i>NeDB</i>	<i>Neue Deutsche Biographie</i>
<i>NNbw</i>	<i>Nieuw Nederlandsch biografisch woordenboek</i>
<i>NPNF</i>	<i>Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers</i>
<i>NSHERK</i>	<i>New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge</i>
<i>OCCL</i>	<i>Oxford Companion to Classical Literature</i>
<i>ODNB</i>	<i>Oxford Dictionary of National Biography</i>
<i>ODP</i>	<i>Oxford Dictionary of Popes</i>
<i>SEP</i>	<i>Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy</i>





## Part 1

### Editor's Introduction



## Preface

The Pauline epistles have always held a central place in the theology of Protestantism. Beginning with Martin Luther's rediscovery of the doctrine of justification by grace in his 1515 lectures on the book of Romans, Protestants have used Paul's understanding of the gospel as the focal lens for reading out the Bible's teaching on salvation. Thus it comes as no surprise that Paul's writings should be of critical importance in Cotton Mather's biblical interpretation as well, although as we will see, they were important to Mather in ways that departed from the central soteriological orientation of the Reformation.

Mather approached the *Biblia Americana* in a way very different from his contemporaries in the world of biblical interpretation. Whereas they were given to schemes aimed at a comprehensive exposition of the texts before them, Mather sought to provide his anticipated readers with a resource for addressing what he saw as the more problematic passages in Scripture, or those offering particularly enlightening insights for Christian faith. In that sense the *Biblia* should be thought of as an encyclopedia of biblical interpretation more so than as a commentary proper. Mather leaves the easy or "obvious" passages to other commentaries and burrows in on those he believes are the more difficult to divine.

In this sense Mather's interpretive method has notable formal similarities to Jewish midrash, and perhaps can be appreciated as a kind of Christian midrash. Like Jewish rabbinic interpretation, Mather's selection process for the passages he elucidates is decidedly eclectic, determined by the interests of the interpreter and the present context, rather than by the desire for systematic exposition. Mather's method is also highly inter-textual: like midrash, it is often self-contained, even "circular" (from a modern critical perspective) in its argumentation. Mather understands the Bible as a collection of univocal texts, which transcend their respective historical contexts. Cross references can be free and far-ranging. Mather displays a keen interest in letting the parts of the canon illuminate each other, and the whole, often at the merely linguistic or symbolic level. Like midrash, Mather's method relies heavily on the appeal to authorities to substantiate interpretive conclusions, with little concern for a thorough and substantive investigation of the reasoning employed by those authoritative voices. True, Mather substitutes patristic and classical (and modern) voices in the place of rabbinic authorities, but the method still emulates the staccato pil-

ing up of short references in order to create the impression of a settled tradition of meaning.<sup>1</sup>

There were plenty of interpretive issues for Mather to tackle. The early modern interpretation of the Bible, including the Pauline epistles, was fraught with controversy. Doctrinal disputes flew throughout every corner of Christendom; any sense of a settled orthodoxy even within the most orthodox bastions of the Church had disappeared by the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and only grew more intense during Mather's lifetime. Even more pressing was the growing chorus of critical skepticism about the origins and transmission of the text: about its rootedness in the world of fact, the authenticity of the received text, as well as the divine nature and authority of its theological and moral pronouncements. Mather's era was also a time of immense religious creativity and experimentation. An ever growing number of sects challenged the magisterial churches on the vitality of their religious practices, offering alternative ways of religious life that seemed to many to offer more direct experiences of God's presence. All of these issues – doctrinal, critical, and practical – called forth new and contested interpretations of the Bible for their adjudication. Mather's task was a full one indeed.

In many ways he rose to the challenge, though from the distance of three centuries, his choices of passages for commentary often appear idiosyncratic, or at least overly eclectic. Only as scholars become more familiar with the interpretive context in which he operated will the rationale for his choices become clear. But it is safe to say that, unlike the work of his many Reformed predecessors, Mather's *Biblia* – perhaps especially the Pauline commentary found in this volume – was no longer simply a platform for elaborating the finer points of Reformed theology. Rather, it was a venue for addressing the intellectual crises of early modernity, many of which were incapable of resolution within the parameters of post-Reformation Protestant scholasticism.

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1 Recognizing these features as such helps to explain another feature of Mather's interpretation: its highly derivative nature. Contemporary readers of the *Biblia* may be tempted to think of Mather's commentary as superficial and uninventive, even plagiaristic, because of its copious and straightforward (and often unattributed) copying of sources. In reality Mather was participating in the establishment of a stable body of "received" Protestant tradition. Any survey of Protestant commentary from the early 17<sup>th</sup> to mid-19<sup>th</sup> centuries will readily reveal that the sources and citations employed by Mather were widely shared and largely unchanged during that period. Even a century and a half after Mather, Protestant commentaries were using exactly the same materials for exactly the same purposes. In the early modern period, when so much about the Bible's meaning and authority was being revisited and called into question, one way of understanding Mather's apparent lack of innovation is to see it as an attempt to create a new source of stable meaning, in much the same way that rabbinic interpretive method in the Talmud created a stable tradition of meaning for Judaism in the wake of the Diaspora.

## Section 1

### The Early Modern Interpretation of the Bible

Mather's career as a biblical interpreter coincided with the early phase of the intellectual revolution called modernity, a revolution which in many ways was premised upon skepticism about Christendom: about the union of the state with religion, about the hegemony of the Church over society, and about the sacred text invoked to substantiate these arrangements. In many ways the displacement of the Bible as a source of authoritative knowledge about the world, as well as a moral and societal authority, represents one of the most radical and fundamental changes that occurred in this period, without which 'modernity' as such is almost unimaginable. At its heart this intellectual transformation was spurred by a growing distrust of the authoritative past, a corresponding confidence in the achievements of the present, and the resulting desire to revisit every claim to know, to question everything.

The critical interpretation of the Bible was rooted in the kind of textual criticism emanating from the Renaissance quest to discover the intellectual foundations of Western culture. Great effort was made to determine the most reliable textual sources for classical thought. This desire to recover original sources extended to the Bible as well, most notably in Erasmus' new edition of the Greek New Testament (1516). Perhaps the most troubling and controversial development in biblical textual criticism was Elias Levita's conclusion (*Massoreth hamassoreth*, 1538) that the Hebrew vowel points in the Old Testament were not original to the text, but were inserted there by fifth-century rabbinic scholars in Palestine.<sup>1</sup> These sorts of developments in textual criticism alerted scholars (and

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<sup>1</sup> See Reventlow, *History of Biblical Interpretation* (4:73–7). The matter of the vowel points became the locus of debate between Catholics and Protestants and among Protestants themselves. For example, the great Reformed Hebraist at Basel, Johannes Buxtorf, whose Hebrew lexicon and concordance would become standard works for centuries, took issue with Levita's conclusions in his *Tiberias, si de commentarius masoreticus* (1620). Louis Cappel, Buxtorf's theological opponent at Saumur, supported Levita's views in his anonymous (though hardly unattributed) *Arcanum punctuationis revelatum* (1624). Cappel defended his views in his *Diatribes de veris et antiquis ebraeorum literis* (1645) and *Critica sacra* (written in 1634 but published in 1650), in which he further argued that the consonantal Hebrew text had also become susceptible to corruption in transmission. Buxtorf's son and successor at Basel, the younger Johannes, responded to Cappel in his *Tractatus de punctorum origine, antiquitate, et autoritate* (1648) –

others) to the fact that the Bible had a history of its own, one that suggested its form and contents were not pristine reproductions of the originals. This was a particularly alarming realization for many, one intensified by the theological contests of the Reformation and the subsequent ideological contests of the Enlightenment.<sup>2</sup> It raised questions regarding the authenticity and infallibility of Christian scripture and of the ecclesial and doctrinal authority premised upon it.

The idea of “criticism” during this period was a relatively benign or innocent concept, and significantly different than its later technical usage in biblical studies in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>3</sup> In Mather’s era, to be “critical” was akin to being judicious in one’s intellectual judgments; in the interpretation of the Bible, it was closely allied with standards of historical erudition. Its antithesis was credulity about assertions that could not be corroborated by evidence. It was not, as it would later become, a term that excluded traditional theological beliefs: nearly all of the great “Criticks” of the early modern period were figures with decided religious and theological commitments.<sup>4</sup>

This modest notion of criticism is illustrated in two works that significantly influenced Mather’s own biblical interpretation. The nine-volume *Critici sacri* was the collaborative work of several scholarly Anglican clerics, first published in 1660. It consisted of the collected biblical commentary of some 100 Catholic and Protestant interpreters from the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, along with many rabbinic sources.<sup>5</sup> Its expressed goal was to collate the insights of ingenious and judicious men in a way that combined piety and erudition. As such it focused on historical-grammatical exposition: to illuminate the times, persons, actions, issues, locations, manners, rites and laws that would help to explain the mysterious types, prophecies, and enigmatic parables of Scripture. The *Critici sacri* was subsumed by Matthew Poole’s *Synopsis criticorum* (1669–1676), which expanded the offerings of the *Critici sacri* to some 150 authors, mostly by adding more recent scholars.<sup>6</sup> Poole’s design to capture the new critical interpretations had

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but here the younger Buxtorf took a mediating position, arguing only for their early origin in the work of the post-exilic (and presumptively inspired) priest Ezra. See Saebø, *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament* (785–801). On Mather’s engagement with this issue, see n. 3–4 below, pp. 15–16.

2 See Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics* (4:63–119).

3 Modern biblical scholarship assumes a strong dichotomy between ‘critical’ and ‘pre-critical’ interpretations of the Bible, with critical interpretation premised upon a skepticism towards the surface narratives in the Bible. See Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* (1–66).

4 On the meanings of ‘criticism’ in the early modern period, see Koselleck, *Critique and Crisis* (103–23); Bietenholz, *Historia and Fabula* (222–47); and Brown, *Jonathan Edwards and the Bible* (89–92).

5 These include the likes of Erasmus, Hugo Grotius, Louis Cappel, Joseph Scaliger, Johannes van den Driesche (Drusius), Sebastian Munster, Isaac Casaubon, David Kimchi, and Abraham ibn Ezra.

6 Including figures such as Johannes Buxtorf, John Lightfoot, Cornelius à Lapide, Samuel Bochart, Abraham Calov, and Franciscus Junius. Poole was essentially sued by the publisher of the *Critici sacri* for plagiarism, a charge which was resolved by Poole’s acknowledgement of the publisher in his *Synopsis*.

a decided advantage over its predecessor. Instead of simply collating excerpts from various exegetical and theological treatises, Poole structured his *Synopsis* as a close, verse-by-verse exposition, in which interpretations of relevant scholars were cited in a very specific and limited manner, relevant to specific passages. This gave the work a decidedly more even exposition, as well as a comprehensive and thorough treatment of each book in the Bible.

Criticism of this nature had a wide international following in the late 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. In Germany, the intensive biblicism of the Pietist movement fostered a tradition of the close reading of Scripture. This meant that questions regarding the reliability of the text were of keen interest. August Hermann Francke, a founder of the movement (and a correspondent of Mather's), promoted a rigorous historical-grammatical method in his *Manuductio ad lectionem scripturae sacrae* (1693), arguing that a rational knowledge of the Bible's contents preceded the spiritual understanding so prized by Pietists. Johann Albrecht Bengel produced a new, authoritative edition of the New Testament (1734), marked by its innovative critical apparatus assessing the strength of variant readings.<sup>7</sup> In France, Pierre-Daniel Huet (*Demonstratio evangelica*, 1679) and Augustin Calmet (*Commentaire littéral sur tous les livres de l'Ancien et du Nouveau Testament*, 1707–16; and *Dictionnaire historique, critique ... de la Bible*, 1720–21) engaged the broad range of critical issues for polemical purposes, as did figures such as Johann Hoornbeeck (*Summa controversiarum religionis*, 1653) and Johann Cloppenburg (*Disputationes theologicae*, 1684) in the Netherlands.<sup>8</sup>

Mediated or moderate criticism of this kind was vigorously developed in England. Cambridge professor John Lightfoot was arguably its most erudite practitioner. Lightfoot was probably the preeminent Hebraist of the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century, committed to allowing historical context and language to determine textual meaning. On critical issues such as authorship, historical reliability, and inspiration, Lightfoot followed a decidedly traditional or conservative line. His major works centered on problems of critical interpretation: his *Harmony of the Four Evangelists* (1644–50), followed by his *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles: Chronicall and Criticall* (1645), *The Harmony of the Old Testament* (1647), *The Harmony of the New Testament* (1655), and his magnum opus, the *Horae Hebraicae et Talmudicae* (1658–78), a work that sought to contextualize the New Testament within first-century Judaism.<sup>9</sup> A number of Anglican clerics were similarly involved in this apologetic project, including Edward Stillingfleet and Daniel Whitby. The latter, while doctrinally heterodox (Arminian, Arian), was one of the most conservative Anglican interpreters with regard to the integrity of

<sup>7</sup> Baird, *History of New Testament Research* (58–80); Reventlow, *History of Biblical Interpretation* (4:123–44); and Saebo, *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament* (902–25).

<sup>8</sup> See Saebo, *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament* (691–757); Baird, *New Testament Research* (155–65); Reventlow, *History of Biblical Interpretation* (4:110–22); and Muller, *Holy Scripture* (119–47).

<sup>9</sup> Baird, *New Testament Research* (11–17).



the biblical texts. He rejected, for example, even the propriety of criticism in his attack on John Mill's edition of the New Testament (1707). Whitby's chief work of biblical interpretation, *A Paraphrase and Commentary on the New Testament* (1702), was extremely popular in conservative circles.<sup>10</sup> John Locke's *Paraphrase and Notes on the Epistles of St. Paul* (1705–7) can also be considered as a part of this vein of mediating criticism. While garnering a somewhat deserved reputation as an unorthodox religious thinker, Locke is actually fairly unprovocative in his biblical commentary, and largely ignores critical issues of textual authenticity or authorship. Heavily reliant on Lightfoot's work, Locke strove to limit his interpretation to the historical and linguistic parameters of the first century, and not allow later theological debates to unduly direct his commentary.<sup>11</sup>

Alongside this tempered form of criticism emerged criticism of a more radical nature. Rooted in a skepticism about features of the texts themselves, it proved to be disruptive to the established church.<sup>12</sup> Hugo Grotius' *Annotationes in Novum Testamentum* (1641–1650) served a mixed role in this regard. It was a work dedicated to textual criticism and philological analysis, and was widely cited by many orthodox or conservative scholars (it was included, for example, in Poole's *Synopsis*). At the same time, Grotius took unorthodox positions on a number of interpretive issues, rejecting the apostolic authorship of Jude and 2 Peter, suggesting a Gnostic context for other epistles (e.g. Galatians), and concluding that some passages (e.g. John 21) were later insertions. He eschewed any appeal to verbal inspiration to safeguard the authority and authenticity of Scripture, preferring instead to root these in historical probability. Doing so allowed him to consider whether the compositional process of some books (e.g. the Gospels) did not involve a measure of freedom as to their arrangement, making them less a straightforward history and more a reflection of the author's religious interests.<sup>13</sup>

Much more controversial were Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan* (1651) and Benedict de Spinoza's *Theologico-Political Treatise* (1670). Although they were

<sup>10</sup> Preceded in 1700 by his *Paraphrase and Commentary upon all the Epistles of the New Testament*.

<sup>11</sup> On the character of Locke's interpretation, see Wainwright's Introduction to John Locke, *A Paraphrase and Notes on the Epistles of St. Paul* (28–59). On this vein of moderate Anglican biblical interpretation and Locke's part in it, see Spellman, *The Latitudinarians and the Church of England, 1660–1700* (72–88); Levine, "Deists and Anglicans: the Ancient Wisdom and the Idea of Progress," in Lund, *The Margins of Orthodoxy: Heterodox Writing and Cultural Response, 1660–1750* (219–39); Reventlow, *The Authority of the Bible and the Rise of the Modern World* (223–85).

<sup>12</sup> See Saebo, *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament* (802–50). Early instances of this sort of radical criticism emerged out of the ideological controversies between religious dissenters and the state church in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, notably epitomized in the Quaker Samuel Fisher's *Rustick's Alarm to the Rabbies* (1660); see Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down* (209–15).

<sup>13</sup> See Baird, *History of New Testament Research* (9–11); de Jonge, "Grotius' View of the Gospels and the Evangelists," in Nellen, *Hugo Grotius: Theologian* (65–74).

primarily works of political philosophy, both engaged in a serious critique of the Church that supported the state, and did so by calling into question the authenticity and authority of the sacred text that legitimated it. Both authors rejected the supernaturalism of the Bible as a form of irrationalism, particularly with regard to miracles, as well as the notion that the written text was a divine revelation (i. e. prophecy). They insisted instead that reason was the only reliable interpreter in matters of philosophy, nature, and history; given its supernaturalism, the Bible is generally unreliable in its natural and historical descriptions. Furthermore, the biblical authors wrote with political and religious agendas, and so cannot be trusted with their reportage, which must be subject to critique. They viewed the Old Testament as a largely post-exilic composition of editors, and so rejected the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch, as well as the prophetic authorship of the rest of the Old Testament. To the extent that Bible retained any authority, it was restricted to moral considerations.<sup>14</sup>

These two works were widely disparaged for their overt ideological agendas; far more influential in the immediate context of Mather's career was the work of the Oratorian priest Richard Simon. Simon's *Histoire critique du Vieux Testament* (1678) was the most thorough-going critical work of its kind, an erudite work of textual criticism, philology, and historicism, one that rejected the antiquity of the Hebrew vowel points and the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch. Simon also produced critical studies of the New Testament, an even more sensitive subject area. His *Histoire critique du texte du Nouveau Testament* (1689) dealt not only in textual criticism, but also in questions of provenance, authorship, and canonicity. The following year Simon published his study in textual criticism, the *Histoire critique des versions du Nouveau Testament*, and in 1693 his *Histoire critique des principaux commentateurs du Nouveau Testament*, a wide-ranging survey of patristic, medieval, and 16<sup>th</sup>-century interpreters.<sup>15</sup> In just a few short years Simon managed to articulate many of the fundamental problems pertaining to the modern study of the New Testament, even though in print he was committed to a mostly traditional understanding of the origins and textual integrity of the apostolic writings.<sup>16</sup>

14 Hobbes seems to have had a less critical view of the New Testament, accepting its authorship as apostolic; Spinoza was similarly circumspect in his critique of the New Testament, declining to raise critical questions as to its composition or authorship, on the grounds that he did not know Greek. But he did argue that epistolary literature was by nature a rational exercise; thus the apostolic epistles of the New Testament did not require inspiration to be written, and so their authors did not (necessarily) possess it. See Reventlow, *History of Biblical Interpretation* (4:32–44); Reventlow, *Biblical Authority* (196–222); Preus, *Spinoza and the Irrelevance of Biblical Authority* (154–202).

15 A decade later, in an attempt to bring this critical learning to bear on the text of Scripture, Simon would produce his own translation of the New Testament (1702).

16 Bietenholz observes that significant criticism of the New Testament lagged well behind that of the Old Testament, not beginning in earnest until the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. The reasons for this were partly rooted in European anti-Semitism: while the Old Testament could ostensibly

One of the intellectual conundrums that biblical criticism required early modern interpreters to resolve was how to reconcile their discovery that the Bible was subject to the vagaries of historical process, both in its composition and in its compilation, with assumptions that the biblical texts were the product of divine inspiration, and thus presumably immune to the limitations of their human authors. The operative principle behind the traditional theological understanding of inspiration was that it was something like ecstatic possession, in which the subject lost control of his personal will and faculties. Such a passive state meant that the prophet-author was wholly directed by the Spirit of God, insuring that the final written product was divinely authored, and so infallible. The model for this was found in the Old Testament prophets, whose fantastic visions and cryptic language seemed to support such an understanding of inspiration. However, early modern interpreters noted that much of the Bible was comprised of other types of literary genres that did not accord well with this theory of inspiration. The authors of historical narratives, wisdom literature, and epistolary texts, for example, seemed to be in full possession of their rational faculties during composition. Lacking an ecstatic state meant they were not inspired in the traditional sense, and made it conceivable that an author's fallible human character shaped the substance of the text in significant ways. Such an authorial process would help to explain the presence of textual features that seemed to be the product of historical conditions rather than divine superintendence. The challenge for modern interpreters was to construct a theory of inspiration that allowed for the fallibilities of the human authors and compilers.<sup>17</sup>

The most systematic development of such a theory is found in Jean Le Clerc's *Sentimens de quelques théologiens de Hollande sur l'histoire critique du Vieux Testament composée par le P. Richard Simon* (1685), which included Le Clerc's essays on inspiration. These were published in English in 1690 as *Five Letters concerning the Inspiration of the Holy Scriptures*. Le Clerc takes the position that only the prophets were inspired, in that they received direct communications from God. But their writings, which depended on their memories of those revelations, or the memories of their amanuenses in taking dictation, were not necessarily inspired, since memories are faulty. Furthermore, the role played by

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be subjected to criticism because of its Jewish origins, criticism of the New was a much more sensitive subject and unlikely to gain a sympathetic hearing. Simon for example raised far fewer serious critical issues in his works on the New Testament than he did in his *Histoire critique de Vieux Testament*, although he did acknowledge the last chapter of Mark to be a later (but still authentic) addition, and argued on textual grounds that John 8 was a later, spurious addition. See Bietenholz, *Historia and Fabula: Myths and Legends in Historical Thought from Antiquity to the Modern Age* (311–16); also Steinmann, *Richard Simon et les origines de l'exegese biblique* (257–69).

<sup>17</sup> For a full discussion of the debate over inspiration, see Smolinski's introduction to the first volume of the *Biblia Americana*, *BA* (1:149–57).

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