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978-0-521-85823-6 - The New Cambridge History of the Bible: Volume 4: From 1750 to the Present

Edited by John Riches

Excerpt

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Introduction

JOHN RICHES

The period encompassed by this volume, from 1750 to the end of the twentieth century, is marked by rapid political, economic, cultural and social change. Politically, it sees the end of the *ancien régime* and the enormous constitutional changes which spread from the French Revolution, the growth of European empires and their fall in the aftermath of two world wars, and the emergence of global political institutions. There are similarly far-reaching economic and technological changes. The Industrial Revolution changed the face not only of European cities and their hinterlands but also of the colonies from which they extracted the raw materials and the luxury goods which they required to fuel their growth and patterns of consumption. The gold and copper mines as well as the tobacco, sugar, tea, cotton, rubber and coffee plantations of the New World and the East are striking evidence of this. But all this is only a precursor of the extraordinary developments in technology, including the recent emergence of information technology, which would make the present world wonderfully mysterious to those who were born into the first decades of our period. Such technological changes have made possible the emergence of a new world economy, of international concerns with immense economic power and reach, and of the new global cities with their hugely diverse and rapidly changing populations.

Alongside and, indeed, in conjunction with such dramatic political and economic changes go profound changes in the social and cultural life of peoples the world over. The cultural changes which spread across Europe in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, broadly grouped under the heading of the Enlightenment, challenged the old order not only politically and socially but also intellectually, questioning the basis of knowledge and morals in inherited belief and authority, and seeking new foundations for human understanding. It was an age of rationalism, of the criticism of all inherited authorities, and of a growing awareness of the historically conditioned nature of human existence. All forms of human culture – moral, intellectual, artistic,

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religious – were subject to change and needed to be seen in the context of their historical development.

While such cultural changes have their roots in Europe, over the next two centuries they would spread across the globe, carried by advances in trade and technology, a not always welcome companion of new forms of prosperity and health and opportunity for some and of oppression and dispossession for others.

Giving an account of the place of the Bible within such changes is at least as complicated a matter as that of accounting for the political, economic and cultural changes so lightly sketched in the previous paragraph. If there might be some justification for the very Eurocentric view taken there, not least because it was in Europe – and North America – that lay the major concentrations of political and economic power for most of the period, there can be no such justification for a similarly unifocal view of the history of the Bible over the last two and a half centuries.

Were one to focus attention largely on European and North American developments in the understanding and use of the Bible during the period, one might well present a picture of waning influence, of a gradual retreat in the face of an increasingly confident secular culture which sought to outlaw the Bible and its advocates from the spheres of international and national politics and of personal and social ethics. Even such a picture would of course need qualification, not least in the light of the powerful influence of the Christian Right in US American politics of the last generations but also of the power of apocalyptic rhetoric to inspire reformatory and revolutionary zeal.

Such an account, however, would give little or no sense of the social and cultural struggles which have centred round the Bible in other parts of the world. We need only think of the very different positions occupied by the Bible in various African countries, in Latin America and in the Indian sub-continent to realise how inescapably distorted any unifocal account of the development of the Bible globally would be. A global account will need to do justice to the great diversity of particular cultural histories in which the Bible has become embedded and to its role in their development.

This represents a significant change from the previous *Cambridge History of the Bible* (CHB).

The scope of the CHB was deliberately limited to the ‘West’, understood as ‘western Europe and America [*sic*]’ and looked only very tentatively at the ‘impact of the Bible on the world’.¹ There seems indeed to have been some

¹ CHB, vol. 3, p. ix.

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hope that the first two volumes might be followed by others which would look at other parts of the world. But while the two volumes envisaged in 1963 had become three by the time of their publication, the geographical scope of the later volume was not enlarged. When the editors of the present *NCHB* met some forty years later to plan the present work, there was widespread agreement that this fourth volume must address the history of the Bible in the world outside western Europe and North America over the last 250 years as fully as possible.

One might say that the central task for this volume is to allow the diverse histories of the Bible in different part of the world over the last 250 years to come more sharply into focus, in such a way that historians of the Bible and of world history may come to recognise its continuing contribution to cultural and social developments.

How then is a composite volume such as this to reflect the diversity of histories which are associated with the Bible over the last two and a half centuries? How can we do justice to the fact that the centres of world power – or rather the politically, economically and militarily most successful centres of world power – were for much of the period located in Europe and North America and that developments in such centres which bore on the Bible were rapidly transmitted round the world, leaving their immediate impact, while recognising that other centres also had their own histories which involved the Bible in ways whose influence on future developments in world culture and politics may not have been so immediately evident but which may well yet be of even greater importance in the longer run? And who can yet say which is historically more important?

The structure of the volume attempts to address such questions. It starts as pragmatically as may be by asking how the Bible *as book* was produced and distributed throughout the period. This in turn breaks down into three discrete questions, about the production of the text of the Bible, about the production and distribution of bibles, and about the translation of the Bible into languages other than Greek and Hebrew. It is evident that this is a history which has roots which run back long beyond our particular period. Eldon Epp's chapter of text criticism started life as a discussion of our period alone, but was soon extended to cover developments in the period stretching back to the Reformation covered by volume 3. Again, it is widely acknowledged that the development of the printing press in the fifteenth century made possible the rapid spread of the Reformers' ideas and above all the distribution of affordable bibles. This process accelerates during our period and, with the rise of the Bible societies, extends its reach over the world. And, finally, the process of translating the

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biblical text into different languages is integral to the production of the Bible itself. The Greek version of the Hebrew Scriptures, the Septuagint, is not just a translation of a Hebrew original; it also has a life of its own and, at the least, contains material not to be found in the Hebrew texts, just as its language exerts a formative influence on much of the New Testament. Indeed, the process of translation is continuous as ever new versions are produced in Syriac, Aramaic, Ethiopic, Coptic, Latin, Armenian and more.

In our period this process of bible production has clearly identifiable origins in Europe and North America. Without the work of the European and North American Bible Societies, the rapid spread of the Bible across the world is unthinkable. At the same time, the massive and continuing undertaking of the Bible societies and of many churches in providing translations of the Bible into the languages of every continent required the involvement of indigenous linguists and of those expert in their own local cultures. The question how to translate the various biblical words for 'God' into, say, African languages immediately raises much wider issues about the inculturation of the Bible into the world of African traditional religion. The process of production, translation and distribution of bibles by European Bible societies in Africa is far from being one of a simple imposition of an alien cultural artefact onto passively receptive peoples. In the first place, it requires their participation and cooperation in the production and translation process; but, secondly, the process itself transforms the Bible which now appears in the printed, translated version. It is a Bible mediated through another language which belongs to, shapes, and is shaped by another culture with its own beliefs and practices. And this new Bible in turn now shapes and rejuvenates the language and the culture into which it has been rendered. The distribution of the Bible across the globe marks the beginning of a new history which will have its own dynamic and independence of its Western sponsors, so much so that one day it may return to challenge and unsettle them.

The second part looks more closely at the development of new methods of study of the Bible and at the theological debates which grew up over our period around its interpretation. Again this is in origin largely a western European and North American phenomenon. Even today these are topics whose principal fora will be found in the West, notably in the large annual gatherings of the American Academy of Religion and the Society of Biblical Literature. What the first part of this section documents, the rise and development of historical critical methods of study of the Bible, has undisputed origins in the emergence of a raised historical consciousness in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe. The methods described here were developed

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by scholars who saw the need to give an account of the biblical texts which would meet the criticisms of religion's cultured despisers. They needed to give an account of how the religious beliefs and practices which are documented in the Bible emerged out of their particular historical contexts. This would require close study of other contemporary religious cultures, of the material evidence contemporary to the documents, and of the historical formation of the documents themselves. Later developments in scholarship would consider the social character of such developments and look to sociological studies for illumination. More recent work still would seek to understand the history of the reception of the documents themselves. It might be said that this present volume is itself an example of such work, as it looks to understand the impact the Bible has had on the world over its period.

Such methods, when applied with a radical historical thoroughness, posed formidable questions to those who looked to the Bible as a source of transcendent truth and enlightenment. The second half of this part attempts to document some of the debates and controversies which emerged as a result of the production of such historical accounts of the Bible.

The issues were sharply posed in the first half of the nineteenth century by scholars in Germany who drew on the thought of Hegel and who were closely associated with the Theological Faculty in Tübingen, notably F. C. Baur and D. F. Strauss. This led to the wider development of forms of liberal theology, which in turn met with fierce opposition from more conservative theologians. These debates took a sharp turn after the First World War with the development of Dialectical theology in a group of theologians around Karl Barth. A different direction, deriving in part from his close dialogue with Martin Heidegger, was taken by Rudolf Bultmann with his phenomenologically informed analysis of biblical faith. Such debates centre round the quest for a link between the religious ideas and expressions of the biblical text and forms of thought and expression contemporary to the theologian. While some may wish to argue for a view of the Bible as transcending the barriers of time and space, others will continue to search for contemporary dialogue partners who can provide keys to unlock the meaning of these ancient texts. The study of such attempts at interpretation, hermeneutics, has become an art in itself and is itself the topic of one of our chapters.

Most of what is discussed in this part is located within the Christian tradition, even though some of its practitioners may have been seen as deeply opposed to it. Historical studies of the Bible also make themselves felt within the Jewish communities of Europe, North America and Israel. Here the story is complicated both by the exclusion of Jewish scholars from the main European

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and North American educational institutions for much of the period and by Jewish perceptions of the anti-Semitic nature of much higher criticism, in particular of Wellhausen's Pentateuchal criticism.

Alongside these attempts at opening up the contemporary meaning of texts from very different cultures and contexts, there are approaches to the Bible which take their starting point in contemporary cultural, social, economic and political issues, where the language and religion of the Bible has its own particular history and effect: issues around global poverty, discrimination against women, colonialism. Here the starting point lies in reading the biblical texts alongside and through the experience of exploitation and oppression to which the Bible has itself contributed.

It is here that the study of the Bible begins to break out of its Western confines, is taken up and developed by those outside European and North American universities and seminaries, and becomes rooted in the struggles of peoples across the globe for freedom and dignity. Liberation theology certainly draws on Western academic study of the Bible as well as on the political writings of Marx and others, but what gives it its innovative force is the dialogue between the poor of Latin America and theologians trained in Western methods. What they articulate in their writings is the outcome of reading the Bible through the eyes of the poor and the marginalised, or, as it is sometimes put, of reading with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. In this context the Bible emerges as a deeply ambiguous book, one that can provide ideological support to the powerful in their oppression of the poor, but also one which can lend strength and encouragement to the poor in their struggle for liberation.

If liberation theology has its origins in Latin America, feminist theology has its roots partly in the Western Enlightenment tradition and partly in the experience of women in North America and Europe campaigning for greater freedom and justice in all walks of life. The Bible is measured by this particular experience of struggle, and in the process its contribution to women's subjugation as well as, at least for some, its resources for liberation are sighted. And if this begins as a process in North American campuses, it is one which will be taken up by women across the world, reflecting their different experiences of oppression.

Post-colonial studies, somewhat by contrast, have their origins in the work of scholars from formerly colonised countries who have taken up positions in North American universities. They in turn have influenced the way that scholars across the globe, both from the colonised and the colonisers, have come to read the Bible historically and as a guide for contemporary practice.

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Our period is, we have said, one which sees dramatic change in the religious map of the world. The real surprises for readers of this volume of the *NCHB* may well come more from the sections on the place and role of the Bible in the confessions and in different areas of the world than in the earlier sections, concerned with the intellectual struggle for the understanding of the Bible, springing from the Enlightenment. At its most simple, it might appear that in the heartlands of the Reformation the Bible is being gradually wrested from the control of those who claimed it as their own and built their communities upon it, while in other parts of the world, and indeed in other confessional communities, the Bible is being rediscovered, bringing new communities to life, inspiring people to seek new freedoms, to find strength, succour and hope around this remarkable collection of texts. The true picture is more complex, more complex indeed than a volume of this size can convey.

The time to reflect on this history will be at the end of this volume, when all is gathered in. In part this will occur in the final thematic section, which will allow for a cross-cutting approach, looking at particular topics as they are dealt with in different geographical areas and faith communities, in part in the volume's epilogue. What is perhaps most intriguing about this enquiry is the opportunity it offers to consider how control of the biblical texts is constantly changing hands. If at the beginning of the period the Bible is a text regarded, say, within the Roman Catholic Church as potentially subversive and therefore to be controlled firmly by the teaching of the magisterium, with biblical scholars finely constrained and, as in the Modernist crisis, disciplined, the later part of the period sees remarkable developments, with Roman Catholic biblical scholars playing a leading role in the development of critical Johannine scholarship and in the development of biblical studies with an inculturationist stance in Africa. But it is not just at the scholarly level that such changes occur: the resurgence of biblical study, the placing of biblical exposition at the centre of the life of congregations, the role of the Bible in base ecclesial communities in Catholic churches in Latin America, all these are matters which show how dramatic the change has been. How far this has been steered and encouraged by the leadership of the Roman Catholic Church itself, not least through the Second Vatican Council, how far even the Council was itself acknowledging developments with deep roots within the life of the church itself is a matter for discussion. Similar changes in direction and focus can be observed in most churches. Perhaps only within Orthodoxy, with its history of living under Ottoman and communist rule, has biblical study been restricted almost entirely to the task of translation and dissemination of Scripture. More remarkable is the extraordinarily rapid growth of new churches which

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find in the Bible inspiration and support for their communities, as with the burgeoning Pentecostalist churches, whose members are now said to number one in twenty-five people in the world. It is clear that those who find support and hope in such churches, where the study of the Bible plays a central and empowering role, find something that they have not found elsewhere – often not in the more traditional churches. It is also clear that the extreme mobility of our current world makes it possible for such movements to spread rapidly from one country to another, so that people round the world are faced with a bewildering variety of religious choice which in turn restricts the power of church leadership to control their people.

If there is a struggle for control within and between confessional groups, there has also been – and continues to be – a similar struggle between the churches in the West, which were in large measure those who brought the Bible, and the peoples in Africa, America and Asia to whom they brought it. It was widely thought that, with the end of colonialism in Africa, Christianity, with its strong associations with the former colonial powers, would become a discredited, declining force. Instead, Christianity in Africa grew dramatically to the point where, say, Anglican Christians in Africa (in Nigeria alone) far outnumber those in the UK and the USA. This shifting of numerical preponderance to other parts of the world poses massive problems for such confessional bodies, particularly for one with the episcopal polity of the Anglican communion. And again, the Bible plays a significant role both in the day-to-day life of Anglicans in Africa and other parts of the world and in the bitter disputes between ‘liberal’ and ‘traditionalist’ provinces within Anglicanism over the ordination of women and those living in same-sex relationships. This is only one example of the ways in which the Bible both influences and is fought over in the struggle for the future of world Christianity. More interesting, perhaps, is the way in which within each continent the Bible assumes new forms and new meanings. If in Africa it will assume a place as one of the most powerful of all literary and religious texts, the same is clearly not true in Asia, where it needs to claim a place among the rich library of religious texts with deep historical roots in the existing cultures. Such changes in the Bible’s cultural environment will have a long-term impact on the understanding of the Bible across the world, and will in all likelihood reshape its relationship to other religions and cultures. If to this point the Bible has played a perhaps muted role in dialogue between the religions of the world, this may now begin to change.

A final part will look at the different ways in which the Bible has been received in different spheres of cultural and social life. The social, literary, cultural and political history of texts provides remarkable examples of the

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ways in which texts can affect and influence the worlds which come after them. Among such histories, the history of the biblical texts can certainly lay claim to be among the richest, to have inspired some of the finest literature, poetry, music, art, hymnody, films, to have been caught up in many of the political, social and intellectual debates in each generation. The final part will document some of these cultural flowerings of the Bible, while an epilogue will attempt to draw out some the major changes which have occurred in the understanding and status of the Bible during our period.

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