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The "Antiquarianization" of Biblical Scholarship and the London Polyglot Bible (1653-57)

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The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were the heroic age of the antiquaries. Roaming from text to context and back again, these scholars completed the revolution begun by the humanists who realized that Greek and Roman texts could never be understood isolated from the men and societies that made them. These scholars, from Petrarch to Poggio, from Panvinio to Peiresc to Perizonius, looked beyond the page and collected, described, and compared the material remains of the ancient world. That these investigations transformed the understanding of the past and effected a revolution in the method of historical inquiry was insisted upon by Arnaldo Momigliano beginning half a century ago.¹ In recent years these antiquaries have also attracted the attention of historians of early modern art, science, archaeology, politics, and scholarship.² **[End Page 463]**

This renewed focus on antiquaries as agents of late humanism has tended to concentrate on their contribution to understanding ancient Greece and Rome, but they were also responsible for the first generation of serious scholarship about the ancient and modern Near East. Drawing on the same methods to ask the same questions they had asked of classical antiquity these antiquaries directed their attention to the extra-European world. Like the study of the earlier Renaissance of Greece and Rome, that of Israel and Egypt was stimulated by a profusion of new materials, streaming back to scholars' studies from the missionaries, merchants, and diplomats traveling to the Ottoman East in greater and greater numbers. It is breadth of inquiry that characterizes this new approach—more texts in more languages—but also a much greater explanatory weight placed on objects as evidence and more confidence in using knowledge provided by people presently living in far-away places to shed light on those who lived there long ago. In this approach to a region and its culture as a whole early modern antiquaries created oriental studies.

Because so much of the contemporary interest in the Near East was driven by the ingrained association of these lands and their peoples with the history narrated in the Bible, early oriental studies is inseparable from biblical scholarship. Pietro della Valle's letters from the East were, after all, signed "Il Pellegrino," and Fabri de Peiresc's efforts to recover the Samaritans and their history were triggered by his desire to contribute to the publication of their Pentateuch. It is because oriental studies like these were shaped by the ways and means of antiquaries that so much seventeenth-century biblical scholarship can be described as having been "antiquarianized." Like the earlier humanists who had given Virgil and Horace a context, those fascinated and obsessed with understanding every jot and tittle of the sacred text turned to the Bible's context for help: the history of the ancient Near East as it could be reconstructed from texts, objects, and the long-lived traditions preserved by marginal groups like the Samaritans or in out of the way places like the Coptic monasteries of Wadi Natrûn. This antiquarianization reflects the move from the word to the world that had begun with Petrarch. Early modern sacred philologists—the Englishman Thomas Fuller called this figure "The True Church Antiquary"—set out to prove, by the most sophisticated methods available, that sacred history was historical.

At the heart of this inquiry lay a belief in *historia sacra*, understood as both a theory of providential history and a methodology of historical scholarship. The theory gave them the confidence to pursue with reason the truth of revelation because all had to reflect the plan of the One Creator. The practice encouraged scholars to recruit the evidence of history, philosophy, archaeology, and geography to the service of the sacred, all confirming the triumph of Christianity. They **[End Page 464]** were convinced that erudition could only amplify, and not undermine, the conclusions already reached by faith.³ It was this...

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A version of this paper was presented to a colloquium at the Internationales Forschungszentrum Kulturwissenschaften in Vienna on “Late Humanism and the Idea of Encyclopaedic Scholarship” and at the Center for Advanced Judaic Studies at the University of Pennsylvania. I am grateful especially to Silvia Berti, Ann Blair, Tom Cerbu, Paula Findlen, Anthony Grafton, Martin Mahow, David Ruderman, and Guy Stroumsa.

¹ Arnaldo Momigliano, “Ancient History and the Antiquarian,” *Contributo alla Storia degli Studi Classici* (Rome, 1955), 67-106; “L’eredità della filologia antica e il metodo storico,” *Secondo Contributo alla Storia degli Studi Classici* (Rome, 1960), 463-80; and “The Rise of Antiquarian Research,” *The Classical Foundations of Modern Historiography* (Berkeley, 1990), ch.3.

² Notable examples include Anthony Grafton, *Defenders of the Text: The Traditions of Scholarship in an Age of Science 1450-1800* (Cambridge, Mass., 1991) and Joseph Scaliger: *A Study in the History of Classical Scholarship* (2 vols.; Oxford, 1983-93); Alain Schnapp, *La conquête du passé: Aux origines de l’archéologie* (Paris, 1993); Bruno Neveu, *Erudition et religion aux XVII^e et XVIII^e siècles* (Paris, 1994); Ingo Herklotz, *Glossario dal 1620 and die Archäologie des 17. Jahrhunderts* (Munich, 1999); Anna Schreurs, *Antikenbild und Kunstschaunngen des Piro Ligorio (1513-1583)* (Cologne, 2000); *Documentary Culture: Florence and Rome from Grand-Duke Ferdinand I to Pope Alexander VII*, ed. Il. Cropper, G.



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