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Early Modern Biblical Criticism and the Role of Women: The Case of Emilie Du Châtelet

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Title: Bible critics

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Introduction: Biblical criticism is the result of the development of the philosophical rationalism that made its mark in the 18th century, particularly following the dissemination of the thought of Descartes, which had a profound effect on the early modern period. Inaugurated by the work of Spinoza, (*Tractatus theologico-politicus*, 1670) and the Oratorian Richard Simon (1638-1712), biblical criticism assumed a prominent position in the works of the libertines of the 17th century, and subsequently those of the authors of the Enlightenment. It consists, in essence, of subjecting the biblical writings to a strictly rational analysis, which requires the scriptures to be viewed as a document of purely historical value, studying them merely for what they tell us about themselves, while refusing any theological connotations and taking into account the languages in which they were written and plausibility of the facts that they describe.

Although it is advanced by certain theologians as a means of proving the superiority of the Christian religion through philosophy (as in the case of Malebranche), this approach has the same effect of desacralising the Bible, considered from now on to be a purely human, and therefore imperfect, work. Biblical criticism thus sustains the polemical writings against religion, whether by means of strategies of dissimulation (as seen in the works of Pierre Bayle and Fontenelle) or the texts that were distributed for the most part covertly throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, and which remained for many years one of the unrecognized sources of the thinking of the European Enlightenment.

Biblical criticism and women:

We have relatively little understanding of the role played by women in the production and diffusion of this critical literature. The *Examens de la Bible* by Madame du Châtelet nevertheless represents one of the most surprising examples of biblical criticism, not merely because it is the work of a female philosopher, but also, in particular, because of the rigour of the analysis to which the Bible is subjected and the violence of the conclusions emanating from this commentary. This text clearly belongs to the corpus of clandestine philosophical literature, a phrase now used in criticism to denote a more or less homogeneous body of polemical writings, inspired by the major philosophical systems (Descartes, Hobbes, Spinoza), and whose dissemination, mostly in manuscript form, is widely

documented throughout most of the 17th and 18th centuries. These writings, whose philosophical orientation ranges from deism, passing by way of scepticism and pantheism, to atheism, addresses essentially metaphysical or religious subjects from a critical, subversive or profane perspective, while combatting prejudice through an analysis grounded in reason (whether philosophical, historical or scientific). These are, therefore, for the most part heterodox writings, insofar as the ideas that they condemn deal mostly with the truths of the Christian faith: God himself (his existence, essence and relationship with the world); the human soul (its spirituality and immortality); revelation (authenticity and coherence of the biblical scriptures, validity of the prophecies and miracles, potency of exegesis); the historical religions in general (their origins, their relationship to the political world, the crimes committed in their name throughout history), and Christianity in particular, especially Catholicism, through its history, dogma, mysteries and morality (Wade, 1938; Benítez, 1996).

The majority of these texts were distributed anonymously, or occasionally concealed the identity of the author using false initials, or indeed false attributions, even though contemporary accounts, historical cross-checking and philological analysis have sometimes allowed reasonably plausible attributions to be made, at least for certain writings. This is true for the *Examens de la Bible*, which a tradition dating back to the 18th century attributes to Marquise Émilie du Châtelet (Schwarzbach, 1993), better known for her mathematical and philosophical investigations than for her critique of the Christian religion, but who has now emerged as the only identified female author of clandestine philosophical manuscripts and the sole representative of female biblical criticism.

It was Voltaire, the companion of the Marquise du Châtelet for about fifteen years until her death in 1749, who first mentioned a commentary on the Bible that Émilie du Châtelet was said to have written during her extended stay at the Château de Cirey, in Lorraine (Wade, 1941; Cotoni, 1984). This commentary, which the Marquise probably worked on between 1742 and 1745, the date on which Madame du Châtelet began her work of translating Newton's *Principia*, was apparently the result of daily readings undertaken by the two philosophers, not only of the text of the Bible but also of several exegetical works, including those of Dom Augustin Calmet, a friend of the Du Châtelet family, and a key author in the Catholic biblical criticism of the 18th century. The manuscript, which remained unpublished, was then distributed, anonymously, within philosophical circles, even though the manuscript continued to be associated with the name of the Marquise Du Châtelet, as attested, inter alia, by various items of private correspondence. The work is currently preserved in three manuscript copies, held at the city library in Troyes (MSS 2376-2377), in a private collection in Paris and at the Royal Library of Belgium (MSS 15188- 15189). The text has only recently been published for the first time (Schwarzbach, 2011).

The *Examens de l'Ancien et du Nouveau Testament* also fulfils the characteristic criteria of the clandestine philosophical manuscripts, both from a material perspective (due to its presentation in manuscript form and, until recently, anonymous nature) and due to its methodological and philosophical approach. The treatise thus offers a critical commentary of each of the books of the

Bible, subverting the apologetical method of the time, and especially that of the model of its kind, the *Commentaire de la Bible* by Augustin Calmet, who Voltaire would also later select as one of his favourite targets. In succinct terms, through the systematicity of the selected method, Madame du Châtelet conducts a formal trial of the Christian religion and Catholicism in particular while attacking the very foundations of its theology by means of a polemical reading of the Bible, and employing all of the angles of attack characteristic of clandestine philosophical literature: denunciation of alleged revelation, the absurdity of the prophecies and miracles, the immorality of the Old Testament, improbable historical events, contradictions between the two Testaments, and even within the Gospel texts, etc. The manuscript therefore subjects the Bible, book after book, to a rational reading that derives its arguments, not from earlier polemical works, but from the strict application of well-informed historical and scientific reason (in which we recognise the competencies of Émilie Du Châtelet in physics and mathematics), from the polemical use of apologetical exegesis itself, as well as from an internal analysis of the work, designed to demonstrate its human nature and imperfections, and therefore its absolute inability to communicate any kind of revealed word and to impose a universal morality in accordance with reason.

In many respects, the Marquise's commentaries go significantly further than the analyses undertaken by Richard Simon, author of the *Histoire critique de l'Ancien Testament*, in which the Oratorian subjects the biblical text to a critical historical and textual interpretation that ultimately questions the role of Moses as the presumed compiler of the Pentateuch. Émilie Du Châtelet also goes significantly further than the *Tractatus Theologico-politicus* of Spinoza, which does admittedly invoke natural science as the sole criterion capable of validating the historical reality of the facts reported in the two Testaments, but does not carry out a detailed examination in the manner of Madame du Châtelet. According to the Marquise, almost all of the Bible's contents contradict scientific rationality, which the physicist considers to be the sole means of verifying reality. More specifically, the author of the manuscript demonstrates a special interest in the women mentioned in the Bible, and dwells on questions related to pregnancy and childbirth, the education of children, sexuality, attraction and the power relationship between men and women. The absurdity of the narratives thus becomes apparent, once they are viewed through the prism of the ethical, philosophical and scientific standards of a female philosopher who considered the church to be a formidable instrument of coercion. This methodical work leads accordingly to a strident commentary aimed at the Bible, still a rare occurrence in the first half of the 18th century, even among the most daring authors. The *Examens de la Bible* are therefore a reflection of the burgeoning anticlericalism of 18th century France, evident even before Voltaire had launched his systematic campaign against the church.

Conclusion:

Through its choice of methodology (an attack on the founding texts of the Christian religion) and the strength of the critique put forward, the *Examens* of Madame du Châtelet constitutes one of the most systematic and effective clandestine philosophical manuscripts produced in the first half of the

18th century, and would appear to complete the intellectual output of this exceptional woman by adding a new dimension to a body of work that has already proved to be rich and influential. This also allows us to explain the cloak of anonymity under which the manuscript was circulated, and the scandalous narrative that developed over time regarding the author and his (or her) philosophical intentions.

Cross-references: Clandestine philosophy; Du Châtelet; Du Châtelet and Newton

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