

Reading the Bible with Richard Hooker. Daniel Eppley.
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Hooker's "reflections," Eppley writes, on discerning "God's will revealed in Scripture," make him "a valuable resource for modern Christians" (xxi). Eppley, that is to say, makes his extradisciplinary commitments more overt than most contemporary scholars choose to do. Yet if the book seeks to foster ecumenical understanding across Christianity's liberal-fundamentalist divide, it also offers itself as a rather more plausible rewrite of James Simpson's *Burning to Read*, with Hooker rather than Sir Thomas More cast as the champion of reason, dialogue, and civility. For Eppley, as for Simpson, their antagonist is the "excess of certitude" fostered by a God-on-my-side hermeneutics: the conviction Eppley attributes to the arch-Puritan Thomas Cartwright that the Spirit opens the eyes of the elect to behold the true sense of scripture, and since, as a good Calvinist, Cartwright was certain of his election, he also knew that his readings of scripture were right. Hooker, conversely, argues that the light of reason wherewith God illuminates all persons enables them to know good from evil, truth from falsehood. The Spirit does not override reason but empowers it "to grasp [scripture's] meaning" (xxxv), albeit only in part and imperfectly. For Hooker, reason is fallible but not, therefore, untrustworthy; indeed, some "elements of Christian truth can be known with a very high degree of certainty," although for others "the evidence is more ambiguous," and one's assurance "correspondingly attenuated" (134).

Since many things are true that cannot be proved by logical deduction from irrefragable premises, Hooker proposes two criteria for judging the reasonableness of one or another interpretation of scripture: first, if it accords with what "the learnedest divines in the world have ever thought," and second, "if the general persuasion of all men do so account it" (*Laws* 2.7.5, 1.8.3). Eppley links these criteria to Hooker's subsequent account of the Elizabethan state church in *Laws* 8.6.1–12, associating the first, the judgment of the wise and learned, with the bishops and lower clergy meeting in Convocation; the second, "communal assent," with the lords and commons meeting concurrently in Parliament. As the relevant experts, the members of Convocation devise articles, liturgies, rubrics, and canons, but before these acquire "constraining force, their rationality must be certified by the entire community over which they are to be enforced" (140). Hence, on Eppley's reading of Hooker, if the individual conscience is to have solid grounds for accepting the laws of the land as conformable to God's law, then Parliament, as representative of "the entire community of English Christians," must have the opportunity "to thoroughly consider and debate" not only what Convocation proposes but also the objections and counterproposals of its critics (184).

Eppley, however, also notes that Hooker's account scarcely corresponds to actuality, given that after 1559 Elizabeth consistently forbade Parliament to discuss matters of religion—a disparity that Eppley suspects should be read as tacit criticism of royal authoritarianism (211). Here, however, he seems on weaker ground. Hooker's account of the Elizabethan state church in *Laws* 8.6 is notoriously slippery, but the central issue is not balancing parliamentary participation with royal prerogative but lay participation with clerical autonomy. The chapter does start by affirming Parliament's role in determining ecclesiastical policy, but then points out that by the 1559 Act of Supremacy "the whole realm and church of England," acting through Parliament, by "free and deliberate assent derived" its power of making laws concerning religion "unto him that ruleth over them"—that is, to the Crown (8.6.11). Matters of religion continue to be debated with "much exactness of judgment," but in Convocation rather than Parliament, the clergy being "in those affairs most skillful." However, their determinations only obtain "the force of laws" if the prince, as temporal sovereign, approves (8.6.12).

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