Chapter vi, 'Figures' – figures of speech, tropes, metaphors, allegories, hyperbata, ironies and other things of this sort without number. The Bible's figurative language – over this range of types of figurative speech – questioned the Protestant emphasis on the 'literal sense' of Scripture as the primary meaning intended by the text's author. This chapter explores debates on how to tell if a verse should be interpreted figuratively or literally.

The fascinating complexities of these issues enable Knight's important book to expand the horizons of our understanding of biblical interpretation in this period in England. Her discussions point to the exercise of faith and to the challenges of finding biblical truths *through* the difficulties of the Bible's dark places. As Knight writes, 'The Bible's dark places were more than stumbling blocks, although they made it difficult to find a clear path. They represented the rich depths and the marvellous heights; they challenged and frustrated, but they also inspired and delighted' (p. 34). Can we 'find forms of truth that will let the Bible's darkness sit alongside its light, in chiaroscuro'? (p. 278).

GERMANTOWN, TENNESSEE

DONALD K. MCKIM

The power of Scripture. Political biblicism in the early Stuart monarchy between representation and subversion. By Andreas Pečar (trans. Jozef van der Voort and Jennifer Walcoff Neuheiser). (Studies in British and Imperial History, 8.) Pp. iv + 263. New York–Oxford: Berghahn, 2022. £99. 978 1 80073 320 6

JEH (75) 2024; doi:10.1017/S0022046924000654

This useful work identifies itself from the outset as falling 'under the purview of the cultural history of politics' (p. 3), and seeks to trace the use and development of 'biblicism', which the author defines as 'references to biblical maxims and exempla in political debate, as well as the justification of political statements and positions using passages from the bible', as a 'political language' in the first half of the sixteenth century, with a firm eye on its role in 'the run up to the English Civil War' (pp. 2–3). Pečar explicitly positions his work historiographically as drawing on the Cambridge school of political thought, particularly the work of Quentin Skinner and John Pocock, to describe forms of political discourse that draw on 'the collective body of knowledge available to a given society for the purposes of identifying and interpreting current problems' (p. 13). While previous scholars have used this approach to consider the political languages of the ancient constitution, republicanism and civic humanism, 'biblicism', Pečar argues, 'still huddles in the shadows of the Cambridge School' (p. 16). He attributes this to the whiggish efforts of previous historians, liberal and Marxist alike, to locate the origins of modern political thought and language in the seventeenth century, leading them to discount or ignore political languages such as biblicism which are less compatible with conventional notions of western modernity.

The first of the book's four chapters considers the role of biblicism in efforts to either justify rebellion or demand obedience to the monarch in the early 1640s, immediately before the outbreak of war, with particular emphasis on the fast sermons preached before parliament from 1640 to 1642. Pečar argues that since 'parliamentary speeches were not usually printed … these sermons were the most

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. 30 Sep 2024 at 22:11:13, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use.

easily accessible and regularly available source of political commentary at the time – and they were delivered almost exclusively in the political language of biblicism' (p. 31). Rejecting interpretations which understand these sermons as primarily spiritual appeals, Pečar demonstrates their political significance, stemming chiefly from the assertion that 'Obedience to God was not something to be carefully and deliberately balanced against other loyalties', such as loyalty to a monarch, but rather a special duty surpassing all others; this 'inevitably led to the conclusion that', if the king refused to act in a godly way, then 'religious reform and English salvation would need to be brought about against the will of the king, if necessary' (p. 46).

The second chapter, somewhat awkwardly, hurtles backwards in time to the scriptural exegesis of James VI & I during the period of his rule in Scotland from 1567 to 1603. Pečar stresses the unusual rate of James's publications during this period, arguing that 'James turned royal authorship into a personal trademark, treating it as the most important component of his public image' (p. 71), and that, in his theological works in particular, James framed himself 'as a theologian and a prophet', not only for religious reasons, but for political ones as well (p. 71). In these chiefly exegetical texts, James sought to undermine Scottish Presbyterians, while simultaneously shoring up his position as a staunch opponent of the pope, with the ultimate aim of appeasing Elizabeth I, and a firm eye on the ultimate possibility of accession to the English throne.

The third chapter shifts to debates concerning the divine right of kings, again especially foregrounding the thought of James VI & I. In Pečar's reading, James's *The true lawe of free monarchies* (1598) 'did not merely reiterate well-trodden arguments' but used scriptural precedent to develop the notion of the divine right of kings in a new way (p. 115). While previous advocates had pointed to the examples of Adam, Noah and Nimrod as the establishers of biblical monarchy, arguing that divinely authorised patriarchal rule of the family provides a natural model for the political community as well, James 'traced the origins of kingship not to the creation, but to the Israelites' plea to Samuel to install a king over them and grant him full and irrevocable sovereignty' (p. 115). This was a permanent surrender of their sovereign rights by the people, and Samuel's warning prophesied a new law of God endowing Christian monarchs with unrestricted authority. Royal authority was thus established not on debated legal principles, or questions of natural law or philosophy, but on a specific intervention of God in salvation history to establish a monarchy. The use of biblicism enabled advocates of the divine right to sacralise the monarchy, and 'elevate it above the swamp of political conflict and undermine the arguments deployed by critical voices who sought to present the monarchy as a product of the will of the people and thereby assign the latter a role in limiting the powers of the Crown' (p. 122). Pečar further traces these efforts through the production and promotion of the King James Bible, various elements of which are framed as part of political efforts to associate divine and royal rule. The 1616 production of a collected edition of royal works, designed to visually resemble the King James Bible, is emphasised as a central 'part of a deliberate strategy to present James' works as equivalent in status to Scripture and the king himself as a successor to the authors of the bible' (p. 140).

All this effort by James to argue that royal authority was founded on the *lex Dei* became more problematic, however, as his reign progressed, and this is the

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. 30 Sep 2024 at 22:11:13, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use.

subject of the fourth and final chapter. In particular, James's refusal to intervene in support of Protestants in Bohemia and the Palatinate during the Thirty Years' War led to growing conflicts between the monarchy and more staunchly Reformed Protestants, conflicts which only grew following the accession of Charles I in 1625. By basing his political authority on detailed scriptural exegesis, James had opened a Pandora's box that contained far more radical political theologies than he was prepared for. If royal rule derived not from the constitution, but from the will of God, surely a king deviating from that had to be opposed. The criticism of James developed during this time, Pečar argues, 'already contained nearly all of the biblical arguments and exempla that were used in the critical reckoning with Charles I's ecclesiastical policy twenty years later' (p. 157). Therefore, in seeking so strongly in his public presentation to base the authority of the monarch not on legal precedent or natural law, but on the text of Scripture, James contributed to the development of a political discourse which would later play a central role in justifying not only rebellion, but ultimately even the execution of his successor.

Pečar is surely right to argue that it is not possible 'to clearly separate politics from religion' in this period, though the insight is perhaps not quite as groundbreaking as he seems to imply, and he is equally right to question narratives of grand progress which seek to identify in the political discourse surrounding the Civil War the origins of 'modernity', and thereby erase the alterity of early modern thought (p. 12). Seventeenth-century people in England and Scotland interpreted everything, including and perhaps especially politics, through often apocalyptic readings of Scripture which are alien from modern British political discourse. Pečar comments insightfully on many individual cases of this, and his close readings of the fast sermons and the exegetical works of James VI & I are particularly insightful. That said, the work is hampered by an idiosyncratic structure which causes it to read more like a collection of essays on a common theme than a monograph. More fundamentally, Pečar omits almost entirely any consideration of varying theological approaches to the interpretation of Scripture from his account. Central to his story is the notion that the use of Scripture in political rhetoric during the early seventeenth century created a common political language that was weaponised against the monarchy in the 1630s and '40s. The Bible, in this account, is a double-edged sword forged by James I, but wielded by Puritans to decapitate his heir. The implication is that Scripture provided a neutral tool which could be used to justify and elevate any pre-conceived political disposition. However, the actors Pečar considers varied greatly not only in their use of Scripture, but in their understanding of its nature and purpose. This work would have profited greatly from further consideration of the varying interpretative strategies employed by readers, often based on differing theology. Disagreements over the political actions mandated by Scripture were not always cynical manoeuvres, but often arose from heartfelt and deep-rooted religious commitments; it is not credulity but the very sensitivity to the age which Pečar rightly advocates that leads historians to take such motivations seriously.

DURHAM UNIVERSITY COLIN DONNELLY

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. 30 Sep 2024 at 22:11:13, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use.