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Hannah Crawforth and Russ Leo
Scholarship, Sacrifice and Subjectivity: *The Renaissance Bible* Today

In 1994, Debora K. Shuger published *The Renaissance Bible*, the twenty-ninth volume in California University Press's series, "The New Historicism: Studies in Cultural Poetics". Shuger's subtitle, *Scholarship, Sacrifice and Subjectivity*, reveals the scope of the work – at once a study of biblical poetics in early modern Europe and something far more than that. The book offers a wide-reaching and intellectually ambitious exploration of the centrality of the inter-connected discourses of literature and theology in the period. Writing in 2004, a decade after its publication, Ken Jackson and Arthur F. Marotti already recognized the fundamental importance of *The Renaissance Bible* for the "turn to religion" in early modern studies, observing that Shuger, "more than anyone else, has forced professionals in the field to take seriously religious beliefs, ideas, and history," and acknowledging the exemplary degree to which her oeuvre exposes the intimate relationship between "religion" and literature or poetics across diverse milieu in early modernity.¹

But *The Renaissance Bible* also asks its readers to reconsider the genres and histories of what we think of as "religion." Shuger troubles prevailing assumptions about religion and its purview by expanding the archive of "religious writing" far beyond the devotional poetry and prose that had so long been the province of literary history. As *The Renaissance Bible* begins with a path-breaking and original study of early modern biblical scholarship, Shuger foregrounds the creative faculties of the *critica sacra*, illustrating not only how biblical languages and landscapes mediate between classical antiquity and its Renaissance devotees but also how new poetic and historical resources emerged from the philological study of Scripture. She uncovers a vast *Respublica Litterarum Sacrarum*, irreducible to any national or confessional sphere, renewing attention to Erasmian humanism and its diverse afterlives—from Grotius' studies of law and salvation to daring investigations of tragedy and gender in biblical antiquity. Shuger deftly traces the connections between biblical scholarship and the histories of politics, nations and peoples, languages, and law as well as to the most important literary forms of the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance: tragedy (ancient and modern), "mythology," and the genres of affective devotion that depict Christ's inestimable suffering. *The Renaissance Bible* is not a book about any particular edition of the Bible, nor is it a study of Scripture and its "uses" or "interpretations." *The Renaissance Bible*, rather, discovers how early modern readers rendered the worlds of Scripture intelligible, even palpable, and how they located themselves and their endeavors in a history they shared with classical and biblical antecedents alike.

The essays collected here lay bare the extraordinary powers and resources of *The Renaissance Bible*. In "Some Early Citizens of the *Respublica Litterarum Sacrarum*: Christian Scholars and the Masorah Before 1550," for instance, Anthony Grafton revisits Shuger's contributions to the history of scholarship on the Hebrew Bible. *The Renaissance Bible* illustrates how historical approaches to Scripture in Hebrew complicate and challenge more familiar visions of the classical world. Turning our attention to the Masorah, Grafton demonstrates how Scaliger and Casaubon drew on a long history of scholarship on Hebrew in Hebrew in their efforts to reconstruct ancient arts of criticism in the service of philology. Here, as in *The Renaissance Bible*,

scholarship itself emerges as a dynamic and creative activity that warrants study in its own right. The Masorah points its Humanist readers far beyond typological interpretations of Scripture. It establishes and unsettles the history and integrity of the Hebrew text, asking Christian readers to reimagine the Bible as a shared work in which traditions converge and diverge and as the result of centuries of curation and labor. Shuger and Grafton track how Humanist scholars increasingly employed the critical tools that they honed in the study of Latin and Greek to understand Hebrew, to uncover heretofore neglected texts and histories. Both Shuger and Grafton, in turn, reorient the history of “religion” in early modernity according to the local vicissitudes of scholarship rather than more familiar divisions across regions and confessions. Terms such as “Protestant” and “Catholic,” “Reformation” and “Counter-Reformation” often fail to describe the complex and conflicted endeavors to which they attend.

So too do these familiar terms fail to describe how or why “Reformers” read Scripture. Thus Brian Cummings, in “Tyndale, Erasmus, & How to Read the Bible,” delivers a detailed study of Erasmus and his influence among some of the earliest reformers—namely, Luther and Tyndale. Following Shuger in eschewing reductive and anachronistic assumptions about doctrine and confession, Cummings instead trains our attention to method and style, uncovering the authority and the appeal of Erasmus’ biblical scholarship. Here, as in *The Renaissance Bible*, Erasmus takes his place among the *critici sacri* as Cummings at once underlines Erasmus’ innovative approach to “literature” and demonstrates its foundational connections to commentary and exegesis. Classical rhetorical theories of *imitatio* are here shown to be equally instrumental to poetic and theological discourses. In this sense both Cummings and Shuger affirm the degree to which methods usually associated with “literature” and poetics are inextricable from biblical scholarship.

Much of *The Renaissance Bible* is devoted to theses on Christ’s suffering and satisfaction, and Shuger’s claims on sacrifice and subjectivity rank among the work’s most enduring contributions. Indeed, Shuger insists on the affective dimensions of poetry and scholarship alike, exploring the biblical relevance of *katharsis* and its import to Christian tragedy, recovering lost senses of sacred eroticism and devotional sexuality that complicate familiar claims concerning Reformation piety and the care of the self. At the center of *The Renaissance Bible*, moreover, Shuger attends to the conflicted subjectivities that take shape in the proper and pious contemplation of Christ’s suffering—a suffering that the faithful are compelled to imitate even as they consider their complicity in God’s death. In “Jean Calvin, Christ’s Despair, and the Reformation *Descensus ad Inferos*,” Russ Leo revisits Shuger’s investigations of *Christus patiens* in a detailed exploration of the *descensus* and its importance in period debates on Christ’s despair, demonstrating how Reformation theses on satisfaction depended not only on what Christ did on the cross but also what he felt. As in *The Renaissance Bible*, theology and exegesis here involve acute attention to affect, recovering the passions at work in the Passion.

Beth Quitslund’s essay, “‘A Second Bible’: Liturgy and Interpretation in the *Expositions* of John Boys,” extends Shuger’s insights about the *critica sacra* to the liturgy itself, showing the creative life of this fluctuating and evolving text. Boys’ version of the liturgy is imitative of scripture in both a theological and a literary sense, reflecting the light of early Christian devotion, in Quitslund’s evocative formulation, “a kind of scriptural afterimage” (p.20). Quitslund’s study of the early seventeenth-century

theological writings of John Boys reveals how the liturgy engages with – without being reducible to – the philological debates of his time. In this regard Boys is an inhabitant of precisely the world that *The Renaissance Bible* draws us into, despite his ongoing absence from other histories of religion, politics and literature. Quitslund shares Shuger's concern with thinking seriously about how the liturgy shapes that world, as well as her emphasis upon restoring figures such as Boys to their deserved place in our literary and theological canons.

Finally, Achsah Guibbory traces the connections between the world so vividly evoked by *The Renaissance Bible* and our own political moment, in her essay 'The Reformation of Hebrew Scripture: Chosen People, Chosen Nations, and Exceptionalism'. Taking up Shuger's provocation to ask shamelessly uninhibited intellectual questions with wide-ranging implications, Guibbory considers how the narrative of American exceptionalism that holds such (potentially dangerous) power today derives from the Reformation. Examining both early modern scholarship on religion and the interpretive traditions it gives rise to, Guibbory crucially resituates an evolving Christian Hebraism at the heart of this discourse. By taking forward this aspect of *The Renaissance Bible* – both critically and politically – Guibbory renews the urgency of Shuger's book for our own post-secular moment.²

¹ Ken Jackson and Arthur F. Marotti, "The Turn to Religion in Early Modern English Studies," *Criticism* 46.1 (2004): 167-90, 168.

² On the post-secularity of our present moment see especially Feisal G. Mohamed, *Milton and the Post-Secular Present: Ethics, Politics, Terrorism* (Berkeley, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011), 1-18.