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French Apocalyptic Messianism: Isaac La Peyrère and Political Biblical Criticism in the Seventeenth Century

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Abstract: Isaac La Peyrère is one of the most important and yet little-known seventeenth-century intellectuals involved in developing modern biblical criticism. His work on the Bible resembles that of his later contemporaries Thomas Hobbes, Baruch Spinoza, and La Peyrère's friend Richard Simon, all of whom his writings may have influenced. Through his attempt to get behind the biblical texts and his use of comparative extra-biblical historical literature from across the globe, La Peyrère's methods attempted to mould biblical exegesis into historical criticism. His social and political context in seventeenth-century France during the reign of King Louis XIV provides an important glimpse into the historical background that shaped La Peyrère's thought and project. At its core, La Peyrère's work was not scholarship for its own sake, but was politically motivated. His exegesis entailed an elaborate theo-political messianic vision, which his historical method was an attempt to bolster. La Peyrère's biblical exegesis was in service of his French apocalyptic messianic vision, the heart of which supported the political designs of his employer, the Prince of Condé.

Keywords: La Peyrère, biblical criticism, politics, history of interpretation, France

Studies of the history of modern biblical criticism often look to the nineteenth century to such luminaries as Julius Wellhausen. The history of biblical exegesis, however, demonstrates that the recognition of textual difficulties in the Bible, which are often taken to be the novel observations of modern scholars, are quite at home among earlier exegetes in both the Jewish and Christian world of late antiquity and of the medieval period. Moreover, many of the tools modern scholars use, especially regarding philological and textual analyses, were in fact developed at least as early as the Renaissance.¹

Moshe Goshen-Gottstein has pointed out how pivotal the work of seventeenth-century biblical exegetes was in the development of modern historical biblical criticism; nevertheless, it is precisely these seventeenth-century developments in biblical hermeneutics that have been most neglected

in discussions concerning the origins of modern biblical criticism.² Within the seventeenth century, Goshen-Gottstein singles out Isaac La Peyrère as one of the most important pioneers steering biblical interpretation in a modern critical direction.³ In the nineteenth century, Wellhausen himself linked biblical criticism's origins with La Peyrère.⁴ It is thus surprising that in the history of biblical scholarship, La Peyrère's work would be so neglected.

In this article, I hope to shed a little light on the historical and political context to La Peyrère's important contributions to the development of modern biblical criticism. I begin with a brief biographical sketch, followed by a discussion of La Peyrère's biblical hermeneutics, and I conclude with a look at the political intrigue that gave shape and texture to his work. It was La Peyrère's political commitments that drove his textual and philological analyses, and thus shaped the methods of interpretation he began to construct. La Peyrère's biblical exegesis was in service of his French apocalyptic messianic vision, the heart of which supported the political designs of his employer, the Prince of Condé.

The Life of Isaac La Peyrère

Isaac La Peyrère was born in Bordeaux, France, around 1596. His family consisted of wealthy Calvinists and had a history of working with the Prince of Condé. Beginning in 1640, La Peyrère himself entered the prince's service as his personal secretary. It is through his work with the Prince of Condé that La Peyrère came into contact with an influential intellectual circle that included Pierre Gassendi, Gabriel Naudé, Blaise Pascal, and Hugo Grotius.⁵

La Peyrère's post with the Prince of Condé represents the most significant political and intellectual period of his life. When the then Prince of Condé, Henry II de Bourbon, died in 1646, La Peyrère continued serving his successor Louis II de Bourbon. La Peyrère's role as secretary included serving on diplomatic missions for the Prince of Condé throughout Europe. In this role La Peyrère became acquainted with Queen Christina of Sweden, the patron of René Descartes. Queen Christina encouraged La Peyrère in his important work on biblical criticism, entitled, *Prae-Adamitae*, and was his only patron for that work.⁶

In response to the publication of his *Prae-Adamitae*, La Peyrère was arrested and advised to recant and convert to Catholicism. He converted the year after Christina of Sweden did, and then he wrote a formal retraction to Pope Alexander VII and appeared in person before the Roman pontiff. Returning to Paris, La Peyrère resumed his service for the Prince of Condé, this time as librarian, where he eventually retired. In his retirement he resided with the French Oratorians as a lay member. This move helped La Peyrère's method of interpretation spread and develop, as modern biblical criticism continued to