The *Philosophia S. Scripturae Interpres* between Humanist Scholarship and Cartesian Science

*Lodewijk Meyer and the Emancipatory Power of Philology*

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1 Introduction

1.1 Meyer’s *Interpres in the German Aufklärung*

In 1776, after more than a century, Johannes Salomo Semler prepared the *Philosophia Scripturae interpres* for the press.¹ The title leaves out the S. of the original title, which might well have been done with intent, because Semler was one of the first theologians who no longer considered the Biblical texts as such to be ‘holy’. In the preface the Halle professor outlined the motives for this remarkable reissue.² He considered the work a milestone in the history of hermeneutics³ and he put the *Interpres* on a par with the controversial works of Richard Simon, which he published in a heavily annotated German version.⁴ In 1781–3 Semler also wrote the preface to the German version of Bekker’s *Betooverde Wereld*, which he elaborately annotated as well.⁵ A recent

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¹ Meyer, *Philosophia Scripturae interpres, exercitatio paradoxa tertium edita et appendice I. Camerarii aucta cum notis variis et praefatione I.S. Semler*. Recent literature on Semler includes Bordoli, *L’Illuminismo di Dio*, which deals with this work and Semler’s comments (145–170), and Hornig, *Johann Salomo Semler*.

² Meyer, *Philosophia S. Scripturae Interpres* (*Eleutheropoli*, n. pr., 1666) *in quarto*. The second edition was *in octavo* and often printed as an appendix to Spinoza’s *TTP* with the general title *Tractatus theologico-politicus: cui adjunctus est Philosophia S. Scripturæ Interpres* (n.pl., n.pr., 1674). Its own title page gives the year 1673. Besides the Dutch translation Semler also mentions a French version, which Bordoli was unable to recover.

³ Meyer, “Praefatio”, *Philosophia Scripturae interpres*, 111: “peritos rei hermeneuticae*. Referring to the outrage the book caused, Semler asked the reader if it is really sensible to denounce and even burn heretical books such as those of Celsus, Julian or Porphyry, which like Meyer’s work a human pen wrote? Persecution of these books is not only in conflict with Christian tolerance, but their study is an incentive to theological self-reflection as well.


⁵ The translator was Semler’s pupil Johann Moritz Schwager. In an open letter preceding his *Beytrag zur Geschichte der Intoleranz, oder Leben, Meinungen und Schicksale Balthasar Becker’s*, 4–5, he compares Bekker’s and Van der Marck’s trials—the latter was a Groningen professor of natural law, in 1773 relieved from his office due to his radical opinions—with the legal proceedings of the Spanish inquisition, where ‘innocence is of no avail.’
commentator observed that his interest in the *Betooverde Wereld* was largely due to Bekker's scriptural hermeneutics and his liberty in applying the principle that “the Bible is to be examined philologically and without prejudices”. However Bekker left the work half-finished and he had only to proceed in the acknowledgment of the historicity of the Bible.

In the preface of his edition of the *Interpres*, Semler opposes the disciplines of hermeneutics and dogmatic theology. Denying the historicity of all human thought, dogmatic theology is harmful because it precludes the development of true religious knowledge. However, without the 'science of interpretation' no preacher is able to use the Bible in order to edify his audience. Semler strongly rejects the premise of Meyer's hermeneutical theory that the Bible is the word of God. In large parts of these texts “there is no divine teaching guiding us to faith and morality”. These parts are merely of historical interest and useless in order to acquire “a spiritual and more perfect knowledge of religion”. Among the pagans we find pious people and they create inspiring religious “poetry” too. The Bible is only one of the texts man uses to acquire religious knowledge. Semler's criticism shows that Meyer's answer to the complicated

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6 Nooijen, ‘*Unserm grossen Bekker ein Denkmal?*’, 414.
7 Nooijen, ‘*Unserm grossen Bekker ein Denkmal?*’, 422.
8 Meyer, *Philosophia Scripturae interpres*, VIII: “Ista species—i.e. cognition dogmatica—non parum nocuit successibus christianae cognitionis, quae continuis incrementis carere non debat, quia ex aeternis quasi fontibus promanabat, et homines semper alios, alii certe rerum et studiorum in opportunitatibus versantes occupat”. In view of the ever changing human reality dogmatic theology is of little value. Rhetorically Semler asks if Christians are really exempt from the historical law of “variety, which make human ideas change in accordance with different periods, places, characters and practices” (p. X).
11 Meyer, *Philosophia Scripturae interpres*, 181 (“Variae observationes et additiones”): “In multis autem scriptionibus aut earum partibus non est tradita institutio divina ad fidem et mores; itaque non omnes libri pariter idem beneficium lectoribus praestare possunt”.
12 Meyer, *Philosophia Scripturae interpres*, 181–182 (“Variae observationes et additiones”): “quod eum spirituali et perfectiore cognitione religionis conveniat. […] Aliae gentes per dei sapientem gubernationem alii utebantur adiumentis tam ad publicam et domesticam religionem, quam ad usum proprium facultatum animi; nec defuerunt alibi homines probi et pii, qui internam religionem et virtutem […] informarunt”.