The Spenser Review

Alison Knight. *The Dark Bible: Cultures of Interpretation in Early Modern England.* **Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022. 338 pp. ISBN: 9780192896322. $105.00 hardback.**

In his first letter to the Corinthians, the Apostle Paul describes an obscured understanding about the nature and ways of God as inherent to the earthly human condition, even for the believer: "For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known" (1 Cor. 12:13 KJV). It is perhaps overly obvious to say that understanding God via the Bible has never been a simple issue. Based on the words of Paul himself, difficulties in understanding should not surprise us, though many throughout Christian history have balked at obscurity when it stares them in the face. In the early modern period, as the Protestant principle of *sola scriptura* took greater hold, the stakes of clarity versus obscurity in scripture were raised even higher, as the clarifying capacity of the Bible butted up against its numerous complexities, its "dark places," as pastors, theologians, and even lay worshipers (often hesitantly) referred to them (1).

In her monograph, *The Dark Bible: Cultures of Interpretation in Early Modern England*, Alison Knight leverages the contradiction—frequently displayed but rarely acknowledged in the copious translations, commentaries, and sermons of the period—that scriptures both shed "light" for the Christian believer and remained stubbornly "dark," even inaccessible, in the linguistic and cultural contexts of early modern England. It is her goal to "reconstruct Protestant grappling with a Bible that could be confusing, ambiguous, and contrary" in the particular milieu of early modern England, a compelling site for exploration given its turbulent confessional alignments and realignments as well as the plethora of clerical and vernacular religious literature that emerged (3). Grappling with scriptural obscurity is not by any means restricted to the Reformation; in fact, it is the Enlightenment that has received the most scholarly attention in this regard. Knight, an early modernist, builds off of a scholarly current beginning in the 1990s and gaining further traction in the 2000s and 2010s that includes early modern religious, literary, and intellectual historians such as Scott Mandelbrote, Dmitri Levitin, Anthony Grafton, Nicholas Hardy, Debora Shuger, and Brian Cummings. These scholars push back against the notion that Enlightenment philosophers and theologians "discovered" interpretive problems in the Bible that prior periods had stubbornly denied by uncovering and focalizing biblical criticism from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Rather than imply that Reformation concerns somehow anticipated or bled over in the Enlightenment, Knight delineates a uniquely Reformation ethos to approaching obscurity, rooted in the necessity to reconcile biblical darkness with biblical "inerrancy and perfection" (277). Knight suggests that it is this friction between acknowledging seemingly unsolvable problems and maintaining biblical perfection that led to such a lively and often creative outpouring of religious literature, particularly in the vernacular literature she takes as the heart of her investigation in the book (11). She structures her exploration of both church and lay texts by taking her cue straight from the discourse of the period. Each chapter attends to the textual, interpretive, and linguistic difficulties that Cardinal Robert Bellarmine lists as six key barriers to understanding the biblical text (as recorded in his *Disputationes* [1586]). Bellarmine's focus, similar to Knight's, was how the text itself, rather than complex theologies or "mysteries" of God, obscures understanding.

Chapter 1 delivers the first textual difficulty, that of textual contradiction: where the Bible says one thing in one place but then says something ostensibly different in

another. As in her other chapters, Knight follows a pattern in which she outlines the theological nature of the challenge and the contemporary religious, political, and social discourses surrounding it. She then pivots to case studies to detail how different people or groups of people dealt with this specific manner of darkness. For the matter of biblical contradiction, she defines the stakes of the argument by citing the Protestant practice of the *conference of places* or *collation*, whereby believers are to compare related passages to ascertain proper, clear belief. In theory, this practice would help deal with complicated moments in scripture by comparing them with "clearer" passages on a similar topic. This practice was a real-world application of the Protestant belief that scripture was self-interpretive, and looking to moments of clarity could make concord out of discordant passages. For her first case study, Knight masterfully explores the interpretive claims on both sides of Henry VIII's contentious divorce, as they wielded contrasting scriptural commands about marrying a brother's widow in Leviticus 18:16 and Deuteronomy 25:5 to make religio-political cases for or against the legitimacy of his claims. Despite intense and drawn-out exegetical debates, often involving the *conference of places* method, Knight concludes that "from an interpretive point of view, nobody 'won'" (71). Knight then turns to the example of John Donne's *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions* (1624), which she argues is "often perturbed by moments in which scripture seems to lack internal connection, moments that destabilize his attempts to read himself" (75). She claims that Donne often finds contradiction as he collates biblical catchwords but that, ultimately, he leaves contradiction unreconciled as he looks to the promise of unity in God through Christ. In these case studies, Knight provides differing attempts at solving the problem of this particular darkness, both resulting in a perhaps uneasy closure, with Donne's creative and personal approach providing more hope.

Chapters 2–6 follow a similar pattern, with the given case studies exploring divergent ways to make light out of dark places, to varying degrees of satisfaction. Chapter 2 is concerned with ambiguity, or "verbal polysemy," where words of the Bible in the original Hebrew and Greek had multiple irreconcilable semantic possibilities (83). Knight sets the stage by describing the contemporary conflict around Jesuit verbal ambiguity (where it was acceptable to use words with multiple senses to convey multiple possible meanings). Her case studies treat Jesuit martyr Robert Southwell's poem *St. Peter's Complaint* (1595) and John Donne's translation of the Book of Lamentations. For Knight,

Southwell reflects biblical ambiguity by employing linguistic opposites (e.g., death versus life and hard versus soft) that are ultimately only resolvable in the person/divinity of Jesus. Donne takes another creative approach to acknowledge the multivalence in Hebrew through creative play with similarly polysemous English words in his translation.

Knight's focus in Chapter 3 is that of defects, places where the inequivalence of the source and target language inhibits meaning by leaving linguistic information missing. Because several verses in the Bible itself forbade adding anything to scripture, the Reformation-era tension centered around whether additions were allowed to facilitate understanding, in what contexts, and how they were to be marked (often with italics, but not always). In this chapter, rather than the dual case study method Knight has previously employed, she highlights early modern methods of reconciling defects generally—namely surrounding context and paraphrase—while providing examples from Job and Romans that seem to persistently defy these theoretical resolutions. She ends the chapter with the interesting counter-example of Daniel Featley, who does not attempt to resolve so-called defects, asserting in his *Clavis Mystica* (1636) that linguistic gaps encouraged believers to engage with God in "super-lexical" ways (139).

Chapter 4 treats biblical disorder, where scripture resists chronological reading or even chronological sense. At its core, this was an issue of unity, as Protestants in particular believed that unity was essential to understanding the fullness of scripture. Knight describes how, to maintain a sense of unity, theologians and commentators reconciled divergent ideas of historical versus narrative genres, with many (particularly Protestants) concluding that rather than biblical authors producing a linear narrative, they produced a composite narrative from their contributions. Knight's case studies in this chapter explore how others made sense of contradictory arrangements of events through literally rearranging the text in the form of biblical harmonies, particularly those of Johan Hiud, Henry Garthwait, and the Ferrars family, and also through an ambitious paraphrase of the Book of Job in Richard Humfrey's *Conflict of Job* (1607).

Chapter 5 takes as its focus translation methodology as it treats the issue of what to do with biblical idiom. Knight provides an overview of the perennial debate over word-for-word versus sense-for-sense translation, wherein translators must decide, particularly for idiomatic phrases, if they are to preserve the original word order and closest literal meaning (even if it is not accessible for an early modern audience) or to alter

the idiom into similar vernacular idiom. Her case studies here provide an overview of what the English vernacular translations of the period claimed to do with idiom versus what they actually did, whether that was in-line translation choices, marginal notes, or omitting any acknowledgement of idiom entirely. Knight provides brief but revealing comparisons of translators' prefaces, letters, and other explanatory paratexts against individual idiomatic verses to conclude that, while translators often made general statements about idiom in their prefatory material, their individual treatments of words did not tend to follow their general stance but were conditioned by the "philological, editorial, and exegetical intricacies of each verse" (226).

Finally, Chapter 6 treats the thorny issue of figures, or the issue of whether biblical language should be interpreted literally or metaphorically. Knight delineates two key issues in this area of darkness, those of recognizing when figurative language is being used and of determining how to interpret it. She uses the confessional debate over the Eucharist as the grounds to explore the former difficulty, outlining how Catholics and Protestants approached figurative language theologically and how that theology applied (or did not) to the Eucharist debacle. For the latter issue, she takes the bewildering issue of "manna" from the Hebrew and how a range of exegetes from Charles I to Richard Crashaw to George Herbert interpret the ambiguous term in their theological and creative works. Knight concludes her volume with a brief but effective epilogue detailing French theologian Sebastian Castellio's disagreement with Jean Calvin over the consequences of interpretive disagreements, or what Calvin would label "heresy." Castellio's insistence on tolerance for interpretive obscurity encapsulates the generative potential Knight sees in Reformation writers willing to sit with what for them would have been an incredibly uncomfortable position between obscurity and certainty, "to find forms of truth that will let the Bible's darkness sit alongside its light," as she so beautifully puts it (278).

Knight's monograph is a fascinating, well-researched, and eminently readable volume. She attends expertly to the complexity and nuance that characterize the fraught world of biblical interpretation. She provides a clear history on the scholarship of each of the multitude of related yet distinct topics she examines while clearly articulating her particular intervention into each conversation, giving readers the sense that they truly are experiencing a new take on the matters at hand. Her incorporation of numerous voices via primary texts in each discourse is remarkable, enacting the complexity of the

interpretive culture of early modern England and demonstrating her scholarly rigor. I should also emphasize that this text is incredibly enjoyable to read. Her prose is as lovely as it is informative, and I also found myself enjoying her lively interactions with the materials discussed, including some jabs at Henry VIII. Any scholar of biblical history (or really, anyone interested in the topic) will find this a tremendously thought-provoking and at times poignant exploration of this particular historical moment in the vast human struggle with spiritual uncertainty.

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