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In 2011 the celebrations of the four hundredth anniversary of the King James Bible frequently enjoined us to consider the many ways in which the bible (and the “Authorized Version” in particular) had shaped English (and British) culture. Sheehan’s book suggests that this flow of influence might be traced in reverse, and instead we should consider how our culture has shaped and constructed the identity of the bible itself.

He begins his account in the aftermath of the Reformation. As Protestants put the bible at the centre of theological controversy, the need to produce vernacular translations became paramount. But no sooner are translation projects plentiful than it becomes apparent that the very act of translating has destabilised the text, and shaken the firm ground upon which theological disputation can be set. Sheehan’s story has two locations—England and Germany—and we see how Reformation drivers and then Enlightenment tools come to exercise contrasting pressures on developments, and how the two emerging scholarly contexts influence one another. At first in England scholarship takes an apologetic role, defending the text of Scripture against deists and free thinkers. In Germany, Pietists and others are more concerned to define the true Word in confessional disputes. Thus, the “Enlightenment Bible” is a bible shaped by philology, historical enquiry, an awareness of genre (such as poetry), a sense of national literature, and an interest in morals and politics. These various Enlightenment disciplines and practices take the bible away from theologians as such, and disperse its meaning among a range of scholarships, which in turn allow the bible to be re-construed as document rather than sacred text, and, though Sheehan resists the claim that this process amounts to secularization, his description certainly seems uncomfortably close to it. Then, when the Enlightenment Bible becomes a Cultural Bible in the nineteenth century, Sheehan argues, this move away from theology is complete: the re-shaping of the bible’s significance and meaning by Enlightenment scholarship fed into
the sense that the vernacular bible (the Authorized Version in England and Luther’s Bible in Germany) are at the heart of national culture.

Sheehan’s own scholarship is considerable, and he tells his story and presses his thesis with clarity and wit, exhibiting a delightful turn of phrase and impressive research. As far as he is concerned this story is of the eclipse of theology, though in making such a claim we might suspect that he has claimed more than his argument or evidence strictly allow. Contemporary theology in many guises resists (as previous theologies have also resisted) a dissolution of biblical texts into linguistics or literary criticism, and the study of theology’s sometimes problematic relationship to culture has been spiced by such twentieth century writers as Bonhoeffer and the liberation theologians.

But, while the identifying contours of the Cultural Bible are perhaps a little less clear than its Enlightenment prototype in Sheehan’s argument, there is something here for students of implicit religion to ponder. The bible shapes culture and culture shapes the bible: there is certainly something circular here, but not necessarily vicious, when approached with due critical awareness. It does raise chicken-and-egg type questions about the cultural springs of implicit religion. Thus, in Sheehan’s discussion of the development of cultural theology in nineteenth century Germany we hear (e.g.) of Feuerbach defining religion as our “earliest and also indirect form of self-knowledge,” both for the individual person and for the whole human race (232). But the extent to which Feuerbach is himself reflecting the culture into which the bible is becoming embedded, is open to question. This is one of the questions raised by the book’s argument about the extent to which we are shaped by, and yet also construct, the Bible as a cultural artefact, and the related question of projecting our (culture’s) meaning on to Scripture. Another example of this projection in Sheehan’s study is the toe-curling re-hash of the Lord’s Prayer offered by a liberal eighteenth century dissenter, which Sheehan describes as transforming the Lord’s Prayer’s “memorable brevity into a windy eulogism to a rational deity and his ever-improving subjects” (118). Enlightenment biblical scholars, despite all their attempts at objective readings (whether philological or historical, etc.) were also situated and contextual, and so reflected their own concerns and values.

This book will inform and stimulate in equal measure, and it comes highly recommended.