[Review of:] Jonathan Edwards and the Bible / Robert E. Brown

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In this study of Jonathan Edwards, Robert Brown focuses upon Edwards's biblical interpretation as a way of unifying the body of his writings and as a way of representing Edwards's engagement with the critical thinking of his time. At the outset, Brown poses the question: "of when and in what ways critical historical thought began to affect the self-consciously precedential nature of colonial American biblical interpretation" (xiii). The book is a learned response to this important question.

In a series of chapters, Brown shows how contemporary debates over the nature of biblical interpretation informed every aspect of Edwards's thought and writing. The book is divided into seven sections: "Bibliophile," "Knowing and the Historical Mode," "Sacred History and the Common Sense," "Plain Obvious Sensible Facts," "Sacred History and the 'History' of Religions," "Theology in the Historical Mode," and "Denouement." Brown begins with the issue of Edwards's reading of the Bible and then moves to issues of epistemology, the critique of historical knowledge and the relation between tradition and "true" religion. He then addresses the notion of experiential knowledge, the conceptualization of "reason" and compares Edwards with Locke on the Bible. From epistemology and historiography, Brown goes on to show how Edwards's thinking about matters of natural theology, typology, natural science, comparative religion, constructive theology and public discourse was profoundly affected by and engaged with contemporary debates over critical historical methods of interpretation. Brown shows how Edwards engaged with issues of critical method, of textual authenticity, and of authorial history; he discusses Edwards's thought on "rational" religion and natural theology; and he illuminates Edwards's treatment of the ways in which religion and reason, scriptural language and philosophical truth, faith and history, can be brought together through the method of biblical interpretation.

Brown's contribution to the study of Jonathan Edwards lies in the prominence he grants to Edwards's thinking about Biblical interpretation, an aspect of Edwards's work that has been largely neglected. In addition, Brown offers a refreshing new perspective on transatlantic religious influences, showing that the impact of European, and specifically British, thinking about church-state issues and the role of critical historical interpretation of the Bible actually began much earlier than is generally accepted by scholars who have dated this influence in the late nineteenth century. Instead, Brown shows how Edwards's work formed an influence upon later American debate over the relation of biblical narratives, and biblical interpretation, to new scientific modes of inquiry. Edwards's conservative conclusions about the historicity of the Bible, the historical reliability of the biblical narratives, and the status of historical revelation as a source of divine truth emerge from Brown's treatment as a learned and well-informed position. Indeed, Brown's study is itself learned and very well informed. The book deservedly won the 1999 Brewer Prize of the American Society of Church History. Jonathan Edwards and the Bible is a major contribution to the study of religion in the eighteenth century generally, as well as in eighteenth-century America.

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