

Lisa M. Gordis. *Opening Scripture: Bible Reading and Interpretive Authority in Puritan New England*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2003. xi + 309 pp. \$39.00. Review by IRA CLARK, UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA.

Opening Scripture puns. As we anticipate in *Puritan New England*, Lisa M. Gordis' subtitle first suggests that *Opening Scripture* refers to *Bible Reading*, an activity that characterized Reformed faith in *scriptura sola*. But contrary to any anticipation of one literal sense, a transparent Scripture necessary for saving faith, and *Interpretive Authority* links a contrary referent. *Opening Scripture* can mean "opening up" Scripture to individualistic, even idiosyncratic interpretations guided by the Spirit, collection of biblical passages, contexts, and applications. Gordis' pun requires attention to interpreters, presenters and auditors. So Gordis' interpretation of biblical exegesis in Puritan New England scrutinizes the activities and consequences of ministers and lay congregants interpreting Scripture. Her attentiveness to Reformed theories of understanding and preaching the Bible, to New England preachers, church members, and church disputes allows her to counter the dominant paradigm from Vernon Louis Parrington through Darren Staloff—that Puritan interpretation of the Bible was closed, uniform. She extends the more complex, adaptable notion of Puritan understandings of the Bible proposed by Perry Miller and expanded by Nathan O. Hatch and Mark A. Noll—that Puritan interpretations of the Bible could allow complexity, openness. She thereby contributes to an understanding of Puritan New England that includes dissidence and change.

Gordis lays out *Opening Scripture* in two parts, each beginning with a theoretical grounding. Chapter one presents the founding theoretical principles of Puritan biblical exegesis; then chapters two through four follow practice, exegetical sermons by three prominent Puritan preachers. Chapter five delineates lay reactions to sermon exegeses; then chapters six through eight treat three notorious disputes between the 1630s and the 1660s.

“Humane Skill” and “The Arte of Prophecyng” establishes Reformed principles for the allied arts of exegesis and preaching that supply foundation for Gordis’ study. She tracks the implications in two dominant Puritan guides to preaching, William Perkins’ *The Arte of Prophecyng* (1592) and Richard Bernard’s *The Faithfull Shepheard* (1607). These include the belief in the saving clarity of literal scripture with recognition that the literal includes the figurative and that exegetes disagree about passages, the belief that clarity is achieved when the holy spirit illuminates obscure passages (with the employment of such techniques as comparing similar Bible passages, examining multiple translations and lexical, grammatical, and rhetorical handbooks), the belief that clarity can be aided by geographical, political, and theological historical accounts, and the belief that clarity can be promoted by applications to a congregation’s situation. All can lead to interpretive freedom. Preaching manuals risked compounding the problems of interpretive ambiguity when they advised that plain style sermons minimize the difficulties through the art of artless explication and that the sermons exhort the congregation to imitate their minister by opening Scripture for themselves, albeit without knowledge of the multitude of conflicting, “opening” guides the preachers employed. Thus, what could restrict interpretation enabled it.

John Cotton, the most popular early New England Puritan preacher, provides an exemplum of practices. His sermons present seemingly transparent readings of Bible passages; he is a vehicle to transmit the Spirit through the Word to his congregation. But by bringing to bear on a passage the collation of many passages with their situations, and by exhorting his auditors to interpret and judge the passage for themselves, without taking into account his rhetorical skill, exegetical art, and disciplined learning in the construction of his interpretations, he opened up Scripture more than he seems to have recognized. Thomas Shepard employed collage to construct sermons dense with Bible quotations, loose translations, echoes, and allusions freed of context so that the Word would enter the ears and plumb the hearts of his congregation so as to comfort anxious doubts and foster exalted joy. In view of

Shepard's proclivity to employ the fourth gospel, Gordis might have called him the kerygmatic preacher celebrating the poetry of Scripture. The power of Thomas Hooker's sermons issues from his use of dramatic techniques to emphasize application, even adaptation, of biblical passages to individual congregants and their situations. His sermons stress his auditors' identification with Scripture, their emotional dialogues with Scripture as they play both sinners convicted of sin and prophets hopeful of salvation, another opening of Scripture.

In "Goe Home and Consider': Lay Responses to the Preached Texts" Gordis shifts focus from the preacher to the congregant, from promulgation to reception opening Scripture—though all along Anne Hutchinson has been foreshadowed as the individualistic, perhaps wayward auditor. Drawing on manuals about employing Scripture to gain literacy and self-knowledge (especially Lewis Bayley's popular *The Practise of Pietie*), on accounts of auditors taking notes on sermons, meditating on and discussing Bible passages, on conversion narratives Shepard recorded, and on writings wherein authors such as William Bradford and Anne Bradstreet placed themselves in biblical contexts, Gordis evokes the pervasiveness of Puritan New England's biblical culture and the joy individual laity took in the very language as well as the complexity and potential that lay in opening Scriptures.

In elaboration Gordis offers accounts of three prominent controversies determined by political, economic, social, theological, and gender issues as well by differences over biblical exegesis. Chapter six looks at the controversies roused by Roger Williams over the separation of church and state governance and summed up in his *The Bloody Tenent* and John Cotton's polemical response. The Puritan establishment anticipated consensus over reading Scripture and applying it to New England/Israel; they pronounced that Williams misread. But Williams countered that their reading erred by failing to segregate the spiritual from the physical in Scripture and by misapplying references to Paradise to the fallen Wilderness; moreover, misinterpretation is an inevitable consequence of the fall and the history of exegesis is one of dispute. Chapter

seven revisits the Antinomian Controversy of 1636-38, particularly the trials and testimony that led to the civil banishment and church excommunication of Anne Hutchinson. By examination and refutation of the charges Gordis demonstrates that Hutchinson's errors were no aberration but rather representative of the widespread slippery-slope consequences built into the very system that extolled the clear unity of Scripture read by way of the spirit's guidance of clerics and lay alike. Finally Gordis employs the debates about infant baptism, those surrounding the *Propositions* of the Synod that affirmed the Halfway Covenant of 1662, and the 1680 Confession of Faith to review her history. She analyzes how a later generation of Puritan ministers, chastened by the elusiveness of interpretive consensus, tried to curb the laity by emphasizing their own expert authority earned by rigorous training without denying the premises and values of Reformation exegesis that open up Scripture to lay interpretations.

All along Lisa M. Gordis offers persuasive close readings of her subjects' manuals, sermons, responses, and the histories of religious disputes that characterize Puritan New England. In addition she provides an informative annotated bibliography of scholarship. While she may attribute more to self-conscious unity and design than her texts may warrant, she takes care to explain. Her greatest strength is demonstration of her thesis. *Opening Scripture: Bible Reading and Interpretive Authority in Puritan New England* provides a salutary reminder that reformers and revolutionaries open societies, activities, knowledge up to more mutability, more enjoyment, more wonder than the parents could possibly envision. It is indeed a wise father who knows his own children—in the earlier sexist but more far more vulnerable, and significant, sense than DNA identification allows. Nowhere is it more important to recognize this proverbial contribution to our understanding than in systems of belief.