

BOOK REVIEW FORUM

## Introduction: ASCH Panel on Mark A. Noll, *America's Book: The Rise and Decline of a Bible Civilization, 1794–1911* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 864 pp., \$39.95 hardcover

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If a random member of the American Society of Church History (ASCH) were asked to select four individuals to go on a new Mount Rushmore of “Most Influential American Religious Historians,” I would wager that Mark Noll would make the cut pretty easily. After many years of laboring in the deep trenches of undergraduate education at Wheaton College, and then the even deeper trenches of graduate education at the University of Notre Dame, he now brings us *America's Book: The Rise and Decline of a Bible Civilization, 1794–1911*, the second in a brace of massively researched studies of the Bible's role in American life.

The four commenters in this forum—Dennis Dickerson, Gary Dorrien, Amanda Porterfield, and Leigh Schmidt—bring to the table not only their own imposing academic credentials but also different sets of disciplinary lenses: history, theology, religion, and cultural studies. Their complementary perspectives give us complementary responses. But on one point they vigorously agree. The book looms as a landmark on the field. Encomia jump off the pages of their remarks—“magisterial,” “masterpiece,” “magnificent,” “nuanced,” “grand summation,” “seasoned synthesis,” “monumental erudition,” “prodigious learning,” “field-defining,” “customary acumen,” “lucid . . . astute . . . generous,” and “magisterial,” twice again.

In order not to spoil the adventure ahead, I will just say that Noll advances three simple arguments. First, across the “long” nineteenth century (1794–1911), the Bible remained a ubiquitous presence in American life. Second, partisans deployed it in different ways at different times, initially using it to build the republic, and then to sunder it, and then to illumine possible paths forward, albeit more and more dimly. And third, the Bible's toxic role in the bloodbath of the 1860s may have contributed more to its decline as a moral authority than the assaults of modernity ever did.

All of the commenters seem at ease with the broad strokes of these overarching theses. But the devil lies in the details, and that is where they raise questions. Does Noll claim too much for the Bible civilization's breadth? After all, a lot of people—atheists, occultists, mockers, dissident women, and transcendentalists, among others—stood stubbornly outside its boundaries. Then too, does Noll miss how often deep-running

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dispositions of emotion and attitude impacted the shape of Biblical civilization? Does he sufficiently show how enslaved blacks read the Bible through *African* eyes? Does he adequately limn the links that black prophets forged across the decades, among themselves, Bible in hand? The list goes on, not at great length, but enough to prompt us to pause and imagine the kinds of questions a second edition might usefully address.

In my institution, I am told, homiletics professors urge their students to remember one guideline: the Bible is more interesting than you are. This maxim applies to Noll's work, too. It is not as interesting as the Bible itself. But the commenters' words leave little doubt that *America's Book* comes as close to that benchmark as any work published in recent memory. The journey ahead promises both enlightenment and no small measure of pleasure.

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