AMERICAN REVELATIONS: BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION AND CRITICISM IN AMERICA, CIRCA 1700-1860

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by

Michael J. Lee

James Turner, Director

Graduate Program in History

Notre Dame, Indiana

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Abstract

By

Michael J. Lee

My dissertation examines the evolving methods of biblical interpretation and criticism in America from the beginning of the eighteenth through the first half of the nineteenth century. During this time, Protestant thinkers in the Anglo-American colonies faced unprecedented theological and epistemological challenges. The received understanding of the Bible as divine revelation and as a historically accurate account of the past faced challenges from deism in the eighteenth century and then from German “higher criticism” in the nineteenth century. I argue that the Bible’s theologically conservative defenders appropriated the interpretive tools of their opponents and adapted their conceptions of revelation to preserve their beliefs in light of changing philosophical standards.

The first three chapters examine Cotton Mather, Jonathan Dickinson, Jonathan Edwards, and the community of pastors around Harvard. They defended revelation by selectively appropriating aspects of the new empirical epistemology. However, the battles against skepticism altered the traditional understanding of the Bible. Protestants still affirmed that the Bible was accurate, but they transformed revelation into an object of scientific, historical, and empirical examination. By the beginning of the nineteenth
century, the Bible faced threats from German historical critics, who argued that the Bible must be interpreted as an amalgam of myth and history. Joseph Stevens Buckminster and Andrews Norton, two of the most erudite American biblical scholars, defended the traditional view that the New Testament was an accurate record of the past. However, they did so by appropriating the linguistic, historical, and empirical tools of the German critics. What becomes apparent in their defense is the scientific and naturalistic manner of their discussion. In the early eighteenth century, most Christians could not imagine that the Bible was anything other than supernatural revelation from God. By the early nineteenth century, American Protestants could most effectively defend Holy Writ by following Spinoza’s dictum to examine it almost ‘like any other book.”
To my dear wife Heidi
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INTRODUCTION

In early America, few people would have dared to dispute openly the authority of the Bible. However, Americans did not agree on its meaning or its nature as supernatural revelation. Only a few Americans, educated pastors and college professors located primarily in the Northeast and mostly in New England, were equipped to examine and debate the nature of the Bible and its meaning on a scientific, historical, or philological basis. Among them, biblical interpretation became the battleground on which competing communities utilized the most potent rhetorical weapons they could muster. By examining the development of Protestant biblical interpretation in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, one discovers an arena in which the best minds brought forth the most recent intellectual developments of their day and fought with passion and conviction, for they believed the fate of their nation and the souls of their fellow Americans were at stake. My work explains how leading American Protestant exegetes read, interpreted, discerned, and debated the “authentic” meaning and status of the Scriptures in an environment when the standards of interpretation were in flux. Protestants, of course, began to disagree over their interpretation of the Scriptures soon after their break with Rome. Reformation era disputes persisted and never went away. But all the various parties agreed that God supernaturally revealed himself through the Bible; they disagreed over what God was saying to them. Disagreements were profoundly troubling and certainly undermined religious interpretive authority, but all the rival
communities were committed to the notion that the Bible was an utterly unique revelation. However, in America, beginning in the late seventeenth century, the Bible faced new and different challenges. Skeptics and deists contested the received understanding of the Bible as divine revelation and as a historically accurate account of the past. Beginning in the late eighteenth century, German “lower” and “higher criticism” argued that the biblical record, especially the miracle accounts, were an amalgam of myth and history.

I argue that in responding to unorthodox challenges, the Bible’s theologically conservative defenders sometimes, ironically, appropriated the interpretive tools of their opponents. Furthermore, in response to the changing intellectual standards of what constituted valid knowledge, apologists for the Bible increasingly subjected revelation to the empirical scrutiny and examination of a variety of new fields of inquiry. Increasingly, the Bible’s nature and meaning became determined less by theology and more by disciplines such as natural science, philology, and history. This move was not so much the result of skeptics usurping the Bible and laying it under the harsh light of critical examination. Rather, my dissertation argues that the Bible’s most able and vigorous defenders played a key role in this transition. However, this dissertation is not necessarily charting a tale of secularization. Rather it is about the persistence of belief. The people whom this dissertation examines maintained their belief in the supernatural nature of revelation when the supporting assumptions that previously supported such belief eroded. Thus they adapted their beliefs in order to make their faith viable under new circumstances.
Beginning in the early eighteenth century, Protestant thinkers in the Anglo-American colonies faced unprecedented theological challenges that their ancestors could never have imagined. Briefly put, European critics, skeptics, and deists argued that the Bible must be examined by empirically verifiable and universally accessible criteria and interpreted by standards similar to those one would use with other ancient books. They excluded the category of spiritually granted knowledge. Traditionally, Protestants, Puritans in particular, believed that the Holy Spirit guided Christians’ reading of the Bible. They were heirs to much earlier and analogous claims made by virtually all Protestants in one way or another in the sixteenth century as described by Geoffrey F. Nuttall. God supernaturally allowed the faithful reader to recognize the Scriptures’ divine nature. This knowledge was privileged and available only to believers. However, Protestants also believed that the Bible could be affirmed by natural evidences such as the natural sciences, history, or reason. But they generally believed that the special knowledge granted by the Spirit was superior.1 Some Americans, addressing the skeptics’ challenges, tried to defend the Bible by increasingly empirical methods.

Cotton Mather, Jonathan Dickinson, and Jonathan Edwards were among the first Americans to respond to skepticism. At the heart of the skeptical assaults on the Bible lay an antisupernatural metaphysics. Skeptics and deists began with the presupposition that the Bible could not be a revelation and miracles were impossible. They did not so much conclude that the Bible was an ordinary book. Rather they utilized reason and evidence to confirm their presuppositions. In their defense of the Bible, Mather, Dickinson, and Edwards selectively appropriated aspects of the new empirical epistemology. They tried, to varying degrees, to defend the Bible by universally accessible standards. Though the Bible was a book unlike any other, since it was true, they thought, it would be verified by empirical examination. They sought to defeat the deists on rational grounds.2

The debates continued to rage throughout the century. The orthodox apologists never completely abandoned the notion that the Bible was a unique book, and knowledge of its true nature granted supernaturally, but as the century wore on, it increasingly became the object of empirical examination. References to spiritually granted knowledge gradually decreased. By the end of the eighteenth century, the Bible’s defenders rested comfortably and confidently in their belief that historical examination confirmed the Scriptures’ validity. History became a powerful ally.

2 Robert E. Brown argues that although Jonathan Edwards believed that knowledge of the divine nature of the Bible was ultimately a matter of being graced by God with “spiritual senses,” his understanding of Scripture took a surprisingly and strongly empirical bent as a result of his battles with the deists. My dissertation expands on Brown’s thesis. I argue that Mather, Dickinson, and many other defenders of the Bible were compelled to make their biblical interpretation increasingly empirical and less spiritual due to their encounters with deism. Robert E. Brown, Jonathan Edwards and the Bible (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002).
By the beginning of the nineteenth century, Americans faced threats from German historical critics, who argued that the Bible must be interpreted as an amalgam of myth and history. Joseph Stevens Buckminster and Andrews Norton, two of the most erudite American biblical scholars, continued to defend the New Testament as God’s Word. However, they did so by appropriating the linguistic, historical, and empirical tools of the German critics. In doing so, they sacrificed some older notions of a flawless text. What becomes apparent in their defense is the increasingly naturalistic nature of their discussion. In the early eighteenth century, American Protestants believed that as supernatural revelation, the Bible was a completely unique book. Unlike other ancient writings, it did not contain flaws or errors. By the early nineteenth century, America’s leading Protestant scholars could most effectively defend Holy Writ by following Spinoza’s dictum to examine it almost — like any other book.”

I. Historiography

The scholarly examination of the rise of biblical criticism usually focuses on Europe. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Europeans such as Thomas Hobbes, Benedict Spinoza, Jean Le Clerc, Richard Simon, and deists challenged the factual accuracy and historical reliability of the biblical text by raising issues of its authorship, transmission, canonical status, historical authenticity, and inspiration. They pointed out internal inconsistencies of the biblical text, questioned the claims of the fulfillment of prophecy, and challenged the possibility of miracles. In short, they interpreted the Bible
by the same rules they used for ordinary ancient texts. Historian Jonathan Sheehan observes that in Europe, the Bible’s readers, in response, altered the manner in which they understood Scripture. Interpreters increasingly relied on disciplines such as philology and history, rather than theology, to access the Bible’s meaning. Similarly, theologian Hans Frei notes that before the eighteenth century, “pre-critical” readers assumed that the Bible, as inspired revelation, accurately related historical events. In response to the critical attacks on the historical validity of the biblical narratives, he writes, some Christians conceded that the Bible did not accurately relate historical events but spiritual truths. Increasingly, some interpreted the Bible’s narratives as products of a primitive culture and therefore it ceased to be a historically reliable record. Historian Jonathan Israel places Spinoza’s ideas in the center of a European-wide “radical Enlightenment.” Spinoza’s materialism profoundly challenged traditional certainties and beliefs based on Christianity. Although Israel explores the far-reaching and radical effects

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of Spinoza’s philosophy, the displacement of the Bible as a source of authority is central to his argument.⁴

These scholars argue that the Bible’s authority on matters beyond theology proper, such as history and science, eroded. Many Christians previously assumed that cosmological or historical truths needed to conform to a fairly literal reading of the Bible. By the eighteenth century, the interpretations of the Bible began to need to conform to the conclusions of history and science. Revelation became subject to empirical and non-theological disciplines. As Frei argues, the order of authority and interpretation changed directions. People once interpreted the world through the Bible. By the eighteenth century, they interpreted the Bible through a diverse and growing body of new knowledge. Most could no longer assume that the “canopy of sacred narrative could adequately account for a presently informed understanding of the world.”⁵ Certainly, this change of direction was not absolute. Rather, these scholars describe shifting tendencies. Furthermore, this shift affected both the proponents and enemies of the Bible. For the

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⁵ Frei, Eclipse, 49-50.
skeptics, history and science repudiated the Bible, but the Bible’s defenders used those disciplines to vindicate the Scriptures.

Though the changes in the status and interpretation of the Bible in the European context received ample attention, historians have tended to neglect biblical criticism and interpretation in early America. My dissertation examines how learned Americans dealt with the new and often unsettling ideas. They predictably resisted some of the most radical claims. However, many demonstrate a remarkable and surprising degree of openness. They appropriated far more than one might have anticipated.

When historians have examined the understanding of the Bible in America, they have focused on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, giving the impression that until the nineteenth century, Americans simply did not deal with the critical problems regarding the Bible. For example, Jerry Wayne Brown’s *The Rise of Biblical Criticism in America* argues that American biblical criticism was the result of Harvard graduates going to study in Germany in the early nineteenth century. Thus, biblical criticism was a

6 The Society of Biblical Literature published several biographies of American biblical scholars. All deal with nineteenth- and twentieth-century figures. Mark Noll’s *Between Faith and Criticism* also focuses on the era after the Civil War.

7 There are a few exceptions. In *The Bible in America*, a collection of essays, Harry Stout deals with the use of the Bible in the eighteenth century. He argues that as Calvinists needed to establish political authority, they increasingly interpreted the Bible to justify their power. In the same book, Noll discusses the uses of the Bible in the period between the Revolutionary War and the Civil War. He argues that by and large, Christians used the Bible to sanctify convictions—whether nationalistic, political, social, or racial—which had little to do with biblical themes.” In *Opening Scripture* literary scholar Lisa Gordis examines American hermeneutics in an earlier period. She argues that Puritan interpretive strategies minimized the role of the human interpreter, relying on methods that in theory allowed the text to interpret itself.” She traces how this approach eventually collapsed. Her work covers the seventeenth century. My dissertation begins in the eighteenth century. Jerry Wayne Brown, *The Rise of Biblical Criticism in America, 1800-1870* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1969); Mark Noll, *Between Faith and Criticism: Evangelicals, Scholarship, and the Bible in America* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1986); Harry Stout, “The Word and Order in Colonial New England,” in *The Bible in America: Essays in Cultural History*, ed.
German tree planted in New England soil. However, the soil had been prepared in the previous century. My dissertation argues that the critical examination of the Bible in America began not in the nineteenth, but the eighteenth century.

Though most historians of early America have not addressed the issue of the interpretation of the Bible, several have noted that in the eighteenth century, American church leaders generally moved in more rationalist directions. For example, Michael Winship addresses the American Puritan reaction to enlightenment thought in Seers of God. As David Hall has noted in Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment, seventeenth-century New England Puritans inhabited an enchanted world in which God continually intervened in the world and spoke through visions and natural events. Winship contends that Cotton Mather’s, and by extension Puritan New England’s, understanding of providence underwent a dramatic shift in the late seventeenth century. Under pressure to adapt his understanding of providence to conform to the new standards of natural science, Mather, to varying degrees, adapted his beliefs to the image of a regular, predictable,


natural world. Winship discusses how Mather altered his interpretation of nature. I argue that similar pressures altered how Mather, and those who came after him, interpreted the Bible.

Robert Brown’s *Jonathan Edwards and the Bible*, a rare exception to the neglected history of early American biblical interpretation, notes that Edwards was keenly aware of the development of critical European biblical scholarship. Brown argues that in his battles against the deists, Edwards increasingly subjected the Bible to historical examination. In doing so, Edwards conceded that the Bible emerged from a historically distant and alien world and needed to be interpreted through historical interpretive tools. This dissertation generally agrees with Brown’s overall point. I extend Brown’s thesis about Edwards to several other eighteenth-century American figures. Many eighteenth-century biblical apologists increasingly subjected their interpretation of the Scriptures to empirical examination. Though they did so for conservative ends, they paved the path for the historical critical interpretation of the Bible of the nineteenth century.

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This dissertation contends that as the century wore on, biblical scholars generally became increasingly rationalist in their understanding of the Bible. Though they maintained a belief that the Bible was divine revelation, the supernatural oracle of God, and a book unlike any other, they continuously altered their conception of revelation to fit the prevailing intellectual standards. The Bible, they believed, needed to be defensible and plausible by contemporary standards. Its defenders continuously adapted the cutting-edge tools of the age to examine revelation to confirm its authenticity. However, in doing so, they were tacitly admitting that the interpretation of the Bible was accountable to outside authorities and needed to be reconciled with the conclusions of a variety of other fields of knowledge. Every new critique necessitated a new defense and adaptation. The Bible might be eternal and unchanging, but it became clear that its interpretation, like the intellectual currents of the ages, was far more fluid. It is this process of change which this dissertation seeks to trace.

II. Structure of the Dissertation

My first two chapters consider various ways in which American Protestants confronted the challenges to the Bible and how they appropriated rationalistic and empirical tools of biblical interpretation. In chapter one, I discuss Cotton Mather, who was one of the first Americans to address directly the deistic threat. He attempted to refute the deists and defend the Bible on empirical and rational terms. In trying to reconcile his understanding of revelation with advances in natural philosophy and history, his interpretation of the Bible evolved in some startling ways and he made some radical concessions, putting him at odds with his Puritan tradition. He concluded that Moses did
not write the bulk of the Pentateuch and that some of the miracles recorded in the Old Testament could have naturalistic explanations. Only decades earlier, such ideas were exclusively the purview of radical thinkers such as Thomas Hobbes.

The second chapter examines and compares how Edwards and Dickinson, both a generation younger than Mather, met the challenge of skeptical critiques of the Bible. Both attempted, to some degree, to defend a Reformed Protestant theological position on the basis of a historical, scientific, and empirical examination of Scriptures. In doing so, they tacitly acknowledged that the Bible should be subject to empirical examination. Dickinson attempted to “prove” the supernatural nature of the Bible on purely empirical grounds by demonstrating that the events it recorded could be verified by commonly accepted standards of historical examination. He acknowledged that historical evidence was probabilistic in nature, but he believed that the probability was sufficiently high to warrant assent to faith. Ultimately, he conceded that only God could grant certainty. Edwards also examined the historical evidence that confirmed that the Scriptures accurately recorded the events of the past. He too subjected the Bible to historical examination to buttress its authority and integrity against deist attacks. However, he understood that probabilistic evidence, though compelling and interesting, was insufficient. Faith, Edwards believed, required an “absolute sort of certainty.” This certainty could only come from “spiritual senses.” These spiritual senses and empirical evidence worked in conjunction. However, Edwards always believed that the spiritual senses were superior.

My third chapter examines the Dudleian Lectures at Harvard College during the second half of the eighteenth century. The annual endowed lectures were devoted to the
discussion of revealed and natural religion and defended the Bible against skeptical attacks. The lectures essentially argued that the Bible met the standards of rational examination. As with Edwards and Dickinson, history proved to be central to their apologetic task. The biblical narrative met the standards of any historical examination, they argued. Therefore, the lecturers reasoned, the Bible must be true. The lectures were by design conservative, but I trace subtle but profound shifts through five decades of lectures. The earlier lectures maintained the balance that Edwards articulated. Empirical proofs were useful and even necessary but ultimately, the Holy Spirit, in theory, granted knowledge of the Bible’s nature and meaning. However, as the century wore on, the role of the Spirit declined. In the later lectures, the speakers examined revelation almost exclusively on objective and empirical grounds.

American Protestant intellectuals had grown comfortable defending the Bible with history. However, since the seventeenth century, European critics and scholars, using a historicist hermeneutic, interpreted the Bible in a radically naturalized manner and attempted to undermined its traditional status. Americans confronted these challenges for the first time in the early nineteenth century. In chapter four, I examine Joseph Stevens Buckminster, who published the first American edition of Johann Jakob Griesbach’s Greek New Testament. By comparing a multitude of conflicting biblical manuscripts, Griesbach demonstrated that the very text of Holy Writ itself was subject to the degradations and corruptions of history. In the process of transcription, the text of the Bible had been altered. This assertion certainly undermined traditional notions of inspiration.
In the fifth chapter, I examine the thoughts of the Unitarian Andrews Norton. Like the Dudleian lecturers, Norton believed that history validated the authenticity of the Bible. Put simply, he argued that the New Testament writers met the standards of historical reliability; they testified to miracles; and therefore, the accounts of miracles authenticated the Bible’s divine authority. Norton built his confidence on the Bible’s authority almost exclusively on the evidence of history. Arguing against the Calvinists, he believed that any understanding of the Bible must be based on externally verifiable evidence rather than inner religious experience or Spirit-led intuitions, which were too subjective and above rational scrutiny. By interpreting certain passages of the Bible in their historical and cultural context, he argued that Calvinists had radically misinterpreted the biblical authors’ original intent. However, late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century German theologians, or Neologians as they came to be called, also historicized the Scriptures, but in ways that went far beyond what Norton found acceptable. They examined the Bible as a product of a particular historical and cultural environment. Primitives, they believed, erroneously saw miracles in natural phenomena. The factuality of the historical record could not be trusted, they concluded. Thus, the German critics, using the tools of history to support their own naturalist metaphysical views, radically undermined the foundation of the Unitarian apologetics. One should note that the Germans were not using history in any neutral sense. Rather, naturalism lay at the heart of their interpretation. History had once been the vital ally of the Bible. A metaphysically naturalistic history now became a threatening enemy.

In Norton’s attempts to defend the supernatural status of the Bible, he left the Bible vulnerable to the attacks of the Neologians. Unlike earlier thinkers such as
Edwards, Norton believed that the Bible needed to be subject to strict empirical and especially historical examination. He left no room for a Spirit-enlightened interpretation. He, and others, built their faith on the foundation of history. In the hands of the Neologians, that foundation would crumble beneath them.

When critics began to assault the supernatural status of the Bible, American Protestant intellectuals were forced to find new ways to defend their sacred text. They domesticated and adopted the hermeneutical tools of one generation of heretics and incorporated them into a new broadly accepted Protestant orthodoxy. In doing so, they transformed their own standards, altering their own notion that the Bible was a timeless and unchanging revelation.

One can only speculate as to why Americans so widely and readily embraced history as an interpretive tool in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Mark Noll and others have argued that America suffered severe social disruptions and upheavals in the era of the Revolution and early republic. In addition, the Great Awakening undermined traditional religious authorities by placing greater emphasis on the individual’s reception of God’s grace. By mid-century, Americans by and large were averse to submitting to established hierarchies, tradition, inherited governments, and the authority of state churches. The Second Great Awakening, which began in the 1790s, accelerated the erosion of traditional religious authority. New religious sects proliferated with seemingly endless variety, often led by charismatic figures who claimed a more authentic interpretation of Holy Writ. Americans were increasingly free to choose their
religious leaders and, in effect, choose their interpretation of the Bible. Hermeneutical options seemed to grow without limits.\textsuperscript{11}

During the societal upheaval, Noll argues, American clergy turned to Scottish Common Sense philosophy and moral philosophy. According to Norman Fiering, its proponents believed that "God's intentions for man, His expectations of human beings as moral creatures, could be discovered independently of the traditional sources of religious authority, through a close investigation of human nature."\textsuperscript{12} Ethics could be studied and taught like any objective physical science. Previously, Puritans taught that only the grace of God allowed one to understand the Scriptures truly and behave righteously. Common Sense however taught that one did not have to be among the elect to act virtuously. Fiering writes that moral philosophy was "uniquely suited to the needs of an era still strongly committed to traditional religious values and yet searching for alternative modes of justification for those values."\textsuperscript{13} With the multiplication of Christian sects and the erosion of traditional deference to ecclesiastical and social authorities, Common Sense became the convenient glue that held theologically diverse and independent-minded populations together. People naturally recognized the authority and authenticity of the

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Bible, leaders argued, by common and innate principles. Many believed that this common and minimal belief in the Bible was necessary for the functioning of society.\textsuperscript{14}

For similar reasons, American biblical interpreters turned to history. This dissertation argues that in an expanding, free market place of hermeneutics, American Christian leaders increasingly found in history a potential authoritative guide to regulate and bring order to ever-abounding interpretative options. Religious leaders could no longer base their power on the authority of a magisterium, the coercive power of the state, or even tradition. However, the universal accessibility of history became a means by which leaders hoped they could adjudicate between interpretive conflicts and discover an authentic interpretation of the Bible. Furthermore, as its proponents continually stated, historical arguments were accessible to the common senses of all intelligent, reasonable, and unbiased minds.

PROLOGUE

THE EUROPEAN BACKGROUND

In order to understand why American apologists of the Bible altered their conception of revelation, it is necessary to understand the skeptical assaults being leveled against the Bible in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This dissertation contends that Spinoza and Spinozist critiques lay at the heart of the attacks on the old certainties of Scripture. Both critics and defenders examined the Bible with the tools of history, philology, and natural science. In doing so, some of the Bible’s defenders began to test the Bible with the same standards they used for ordinary texts.

Although some of the impetus for change came from the need to answer the direct assaults of critics who hoped to dethrone the Bible, American Protestants also were prompted to modify their understanding of revelation by the influence of Anglican thinkers who sought not to undermine the Bible but rather to understand revelation through the lenses of what were regarded as recent philosophical advances. John Locke

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(1632-1704) cast an enormous shadow over the eighteenth century. He influenced both the latitudinarians, who advocated a religiosity characterized by balance, order, toleration, and reason, and the deists, who used his ideas to dismiss the Bible as a viable source of truth. Locke lived in a time of political conflict caused in large part by disagreements over a common understanding of reason and doctrine. Disgusted by the excesses of the Interregnum's clericalism, sectarianism, and enthusiasm, he sought religious tolerance. To this end, he attempted to establish definitive criteria to examine issues of fact and articulate a critical method of interpreting Scripture. In his Essay Concerning Human Understanding (1690), Locke argued that only empirical investigation, based on the senses, could yield trustworthy data. Therefore, he discounted the reliability of innate ideas, personal revelations, or enthusiasm, which had often been a source for assertions of religious certainty.


could not be examined in the public realm and therefore were the source of much intractable disagreement and conflict. Christopher Hill writes that Locke’s Christianity was shorn of everything that made Puritanism revolutionary” such as “direct contact with God” or “enthusiasm.”19 By applying these standards to faith, Locke sought to place belief on a secure and universally accessible foundation.

Locke believed reason was a procedure as opposed to a predetermined set of dogmatic truths. Thus, he tried to construct a method of inquiry that any reasonable person could employ independent of theological loyalties. The Bible, Locke believed, should not simply be accepted on faith or authority, but interpreted on the basis of universally accessible standards of reason and language. For Locke, that meant the meaning of a Scripture passage lay in the intent of the author and the historical circumstances. He ruled out typological or spiritual knowledge, which could not be examined or verified. However, Locke was no deist. Many parts of the Bible were “above reason,” but never contrary to reason. Some aspects of Christian revelation clearly required faith. Reason alone could not lead to the most important religious truths, but reason, he believed, should regulate faith.20


20 See Lucci, Scripture and Deism, 44-48.
Isaac Newton (1643-1722) also changed the way many people understood the Bible. The precise intellectual relationship between Locke and Newton is a matter of debate, but they were clearly in conversation. As Locke attempted to uncover and describe the precise ways in which the mind operates, Newton examined the laws that govern the physical world. The body of Newton’s scientific labors transformed the way in which educated Europeans (and their colonial American counterparts) understood their universe. Newton’s *Principia* (1687) demonstrated that the motion of physical objects and heavenly bodies was measurable, regular, and predictable. The laws of the universe were subject to precise mathematical treatment and discoverable through careful empirical observation. Although some of his followers viewed the world as an enormous machine, driven by a series of impersonal forces, Newton did not. His system required the constant activity of the deity. Newton also believed that God could suspend his laws

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21 Newton, though a believer in special revelation, was critical and challenged the traditional claims of the Bible. He recorded his concerns in his posthumously published *Observations upon the Prophecies of Daniel, and the Apocalypse of St. John* (1733). He wrote that the earliest copies of the Bible contain “marginal notes or other corruptions” made by transcribers. Errors “had crept into the text” and could not be corrected. Yet Newton did not dismiss the Bible. If God manifested his will for all times through his prophetic spirit encapsulated in the Scriptures, then the harmony of the prophetic books in the Old Testament when juxtaposed with those in the New might serve as an appropriate barometer. The prophecies of Daniel when compared with those of Revelation, for instance, could reliably measure the extent to which the revealed word of God remained unhampered by problems of textual transmission. Newton still held onto the authority of the Bible despite issues of transmission. Roy Porter, *The Creation of the Modern World* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2000), 133.

to allow for miracles. Deists, on the other hand, believed that miracles were impossible because they violated the laws of nature.

In Newton’s wake, some sought to find God’s fingerprints on the design of the elegant machine of the world. These physico-theologians, as they were commonly called, published numerous works in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. In 1692, Robert Boyle institutionalized the steady progress of physico-theology by endowing a series of lectures for the purpose of proving the truth of Christianity against “infidels” by using the principles of Newtonian science. For example, Newton wrote a series of letters to the Anglican philologist Richard Bentley explaining how his theories of the order of the universe could be used as evidence of a divine creator. Bentley turned the letters into the first series of Boyle Lectures, which he delivered in 1692. They were published under various titles, including *The Folly and Unreasonableness of Atheism* (1693). (Years later, Bentley was appointed Regius Professor of Divinity at Cambridge, in 1717.) Important physico-theological works that influenced American defenders of the Bible include Boyle’s *Christian Virtuoso* (1690); John Ray’s *Wisdom of God Manifested in the Works of the Creation* (1691); William Whiston’s *A New Theory of the Earth* (1696); and William Derham’s *Physico-Theology.*

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Similarly, Anglican latitudinarians, influenced by Locke, attempted to shore up the reliability of the Bible on the basis of history. Skeptical deists tried to challenge the historical reliability of biblical accounts. For example, Anthony Collins had the audacity to question whether Jesus truly fulfilled Old Testament prophecies. The skeptic Thomas Woolston argued that the Gospel accounts of miracles should be interpreted as allegories because he believed that miracles were preposterous. Leslie Stephen notes that Woolston’s arguments were crude and unconvincing and that he was possibly mentally unstable. In response, latitudinarians argued that the Gospels conformed to the standards of historical examination because reliable witnesses testified to the validity of miracles, which authenticated divine inspiration. Nathaniel Lardner wrote *The Credibility of Gospel History* (1724-1743) in an attempt to refute Collins and Woolston. The work sought to corroborate the New Testament from independent sources. Thomas Sherlock wrote one of the most elaborate defenses of the veracity of the Apostles’ testimony of Jesus’ resurrection in *Trial of the Witnesses* (1729). Archbishop John Tillotson was particularly influential in America. Barbara Shapiro and Gerard Reedy note that historical “proofs” could only rise to the level of high probability rather than absolute certainty. Nonetheless, the latitudinarians believed that highly probable evidence


warranted faith.  

Although latitudinarians and physico-theologians elevated the role of reason, they did not question or undermine the importance of faith. Most English rational Protestants believed reason could only “confirm” faith rather than discover new spiritual truths independently. Nonetheless, according to Frei, these men represented the beginnings of a new approach to understanding the Bible. Previous generations tended to believe that the truth of the Bible was guaranteed by the Bible itself. They assumed the authority of Scripture and then sought evidence that affirmed their belief. However, in response to skeptical attacks, latitudinarians subjected revelation to independent investigation to test its veracity.

I. La Peyrère, Hobbes, Spinoza, Simon, Le Clerc, and the Bible

Newton, Locke, and the latitudinarians believed that reason, the evidence of nature, and history affirmed the authenticity of Scripture. A few seventeenth century thinkers, such as Isaac La Peyrère (1596-1676), Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), and


27 Frederick C. Beiser, The Sovereignty of Reason: The Defense of Rationality in the Early English Enlightenment (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 15; Reedy, Bible and Reason; and Frei, Eclipse, 18, 80. Marcus Walsh argues that in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, a number of Anglican clerics, including William Sherlock, Robert South, and William Lowth, attempted to establish their interpretation of the Bible on the basis of their position as rational teachers who were professionally qualified by their possession of a special body of knowledge. In an era of theological debate, they attempted to ground their authority on reason and specialized knowledge rather than dogmatic assertions. Marcus Walsh, “Profession and Authority: The Interpretation of the Bible in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries,” Literature and Theology 9, no. 4 (1995): 383-98.
Benedict Spinoza (1632-1677) drew more radical conclusions. They challenged the common understanding of the Bible. Christians generally believed that God supernaturally inspired the writers of the Bible. Though there were various theories of inspiration, most agreed that Scripture presented an accurate record of historical events. Christians believed that God preserved the human writers from factual as well as spiritual error.  

La Peyrère challenged this conventional view. In his book, *Prae-Adamitae* (published in Latin in 1655 and in English as *Men Before Adam* in 1656), he argued that the creation account in Genesis was incorrect and incomplete. La Peyrère contended that people must have existed before Adam. There were, he believed, two creations. God first created the Gentiles and then he made Adam, the father of the Jewish people. This theory, he believed, cleared up inconsistencies. For example, this explained how Cain found a wife and built a city after he murdered his brother.

To support his contentions, La Peyrère attempted to overthrow the traditional understanding of the Old Testament. He was one of the first seventeenth-century critics openly to reject the Mosaic authorship of most of the Pentateuch. Much of the extant Old Testament, he believed, was not the original but copies and redactions compiled from various sources by several editors. He pointed out several anachronisms in the Pentateuch

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that would have made Mosaic authorship unlikely. Furthermore, he noted textual
evidence of truncations, repetitions, and omissions in the Pentateuch.

La Peyrère posited that Moses recorded the exodus out of Egypt, the giving of the
Law on Mount Sinai, and the forty years of the Exodus. Moses also must have written a
history of the Jews from the creation of Adam to his own time based on oral histories and
ancient manuscripts. In composing his histories, Moses emphasized material that was
relevant to contemporary Jews and dealt cursorily with the rest. Later compilers edited in
an even more cursory manner. La Peyrère believed that various editors introduced
corruptions, contradictions, flaws, and obscurities in the text.29

If spurious authorship were not disturbing enough, La Peyrère also attempted to
explain away miracles as natural events. For example, the author of Joshua 10:1-14 wrote
that God stopped the progress of the sun and moon after the Israelites defeated the
Amorites so that the Israelites could completely vanquish their enemy. La Peyrère
believed that the light was not due to the sun standing still in the sky. Rather a nearby
mountain reflected the rays of the sun.30

Furthermore, La Peyrère did not believe that the flood of Noah covered the earth
as most believed. He contended that the flood was only local to Palestine. His radical

29 Richard H. Popkin, Isaac La Peyrère (1596-1676): His Life, Work and Influence (Leiden: Brill
Academic Publishers, 1987); David Rice McKee, Isaac La Peyrère: A Precursor of Eighteenth-Century
Critical Deists,” Publication of the Modern Language Association 59, no. 2 (1944): 463; Anthony Grafton,
Isaac La Peyrère and the Old Testament,” in Defenders of the Text: The Traditions of Scholarship in an
Age of Science, 1450-1800 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 204-13; Leo Strauss, Spinoza’s
Critique of Religion (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997 [1982]), 77; and David N. Livingstone,
Adam’s Ancestors: Race, Religion, and the Politics of Human Origins (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins
University Press, 2008).

30 McKee, Isaac La Peyrère,” 466.
interpretation was in part influenced by the explosion of new knowledge emerging from the studies of the distant histories of pagan nations. Scholars such as Scaliger, Saumaize, and Bochart discussed historical accounts of the ancient world beyond the biblical record. Some were perplexed because civilizations in distant lands, such as America, China, and India, had historical records that predated the flood. Thus, La Peyrère concluded, they could not have been annihilated by a global deluge. Moreover, the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century explorers' discoveries of new lands and peoples challenged long-held views of the world based on the Bible. Historian David Livingstone writes that La Peyrère's whole project was rooted in his passion to find a persuasive account of the origin of the native people of America. Richard Popkin asserts that the existence of the New World and its inhabitants challenged the conventional view that the Bible contained a universal history and led some to question whether the Bible was adequate as an account of how the world developed.

Seventeenth-century British cartographer Robert Morden wrote regarding the recent flood of accounts of foreign


lands, “according to the more accurate observations and discoveries of more modern authors, all former geographies ... are greatly deficient and strangely erroneous.”

The wide dispersal of humanity and pagan historical annals that appread to predate the biblical record caused La Peyrère to question the prevailing interpretation of Genesis. La Peyrère believed that if the population of the entire world had been wiped out, Noah and his descendents could not have had time to repopulate the distant lands in the time allowed by the biblical chronology.

Understandably, most Protestants found such critiques of the Bible disturbing. When Protestants conceptualized how the Spirit of God inspired the writers of the Bible, they minimized the human element. Most generally believed that God inspired every word and detail of the Scriptures and the writers were practically taking dictation. Some believed that in some instances, the inspired writers became passive writers guided by the Spirit.

Likewise, the American Puritans heavily emphasized the role of God in

33 Robert Morden, Geography Rectified (London: Robert Morden and Thomas Cockerill, 1688), [n.p.].

34 La Peyrère argued that the Phoenicians, Scythians, Egytians, Chaldeans, Mexicans, Peruvians, Chinese, and Indians all had records far older than the Jews’. He used ancient writers, such as Herodotus, Diodorus, Siculus, Plato, Strabo, and Cicero as sources for his theory regarding the age of ancient civilizations. He also cited the travel accounts of Garcilaso, Gomara, and Semedo. Popkin, La Peyrère, 47-8 and McKee, —Schäfer’s Chronology: Philology, Astronomy and World History,” in Defenders of the Text, 104-44; idem, Joseph Scaliger: A Study in the History of Classical Scholarship (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983). On the discovery of new lands and its effects on biblical interpretation, see idem, New Worlds, Ancient Texts: The Power of Tradition and the Shock of Discovery (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992).

35 Bowe, —Inspiration,” 64 and Bromley —History of the Doctrine of Inspiration,” 849-54. John T. McNeill writes that Calvin never explicated a theory of inspiration. Calvin wrote that God placed ideas in the minds of the writers, but Calvin probably did not hold to a strict theory of dictation. However, he believed that the words of the writers corresponded directly to the mind of God. More recently, Randall C. Zachman notes that Calvin wrote of two authors of Genesis: the Holy Spirit and Moses. Some parts were indeed dictated by the Holy Spirit, but other passages were drawn from an oral tradition, stretching from Adam to Moses. John T. McNeill, —The Significance of the Word of God for Calvin,” Church History 28,
inspiration. Cotton Mather wrote that the Holy Spirit dictated the Sacred Scriptures.” Mather’s nephew, Thomas Walter, wrote that because the Scriptures were divinely inspired, they were INFALLIBLE.” Though the Modus or Manner varied, he held that all the Writers of the Old and New Testament wrote under the Direction & Conduct of the Spirit of GOD.” Some writers were swept up in uncontrollable rapturous Enthusiasm” and their bodies convulsed. Others, such as historians, maintained a sober spirit. Regarding historians, whose Inspiration is the most questioned,” Walter maintained that the Holy Spirit acted by first supervising & overruling their Pen, that no Error might be committed by them, securing them from the least Hallucination, or Mistake” and second by Keeping them under a Restraint from Writing what had not an immediate Concurrence & Tendency to the Design of the Holy Spirit in that History.”

The contention that the Bible’s inspired authors culled various sources and then later editors corrected and amended their work seemed incompatible with a Protestant conception of divine inspiration. How could a text be inspired (or possibly dictated by God) if it had been edited and rewritten several times, centuries after the death of the original writer? If the original writing was inspired, why would it need to be edited? Did not editing tamper with and corrupt the original inspired text? La Peyrère’s views challenged the understanding of the Bible as containing a universal history of human

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36 Cotton Mather, Manuductio ad Ministerium: Directions for a Candidate of the Ministry (Boston: Thomas Hancock, 1726), 83; Thomas Walter, The Scriptures the Only Rule of Faith & Practice (Boston: B. Green, 1723), 31.
origins. Not surprisingly, many responded to La Peyrère’s *Prae-Adamitae* with indignation. Historian Colin Kidd writes that La Peyrère’s work ignited one of the largest heresy hunts of the age.” Within a year of the publication of his book, more than a dozen refutations appeared. Popkin writes that La Peyrère was regarded as perhaps the greatest heretic of the age, even worse than Spinoza who took over some of his most challenging ideas.” According to Anthony Grafton, everyone, it seems, hated the book and many made a point of declaring their outrage in print. La Peyrère was imprisoned but was released after he supposedly recanted his views. However, La Peyrère’s recantation did not end such ideas. He was only one of many skeptical voices in the seventeenth century. Regarding his legacy, Livingstone writes, in his wake it became harder to accept the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch uncritically; it became harder to approach ancient sacred texts with unalloyed reverence; and it became harder to ignore extrabiblical data in scriptural hermeneutics.”

Hobbes’ *Leviathan* (1651) similarly charged that many of the books of the Bible could not have been written by their supposed authors. The Pentateuch, for example, could not have been written by Moses as both church tradition and the biblical text claimed. Hobbes asserted, like La Peyrère, that the books were not compiled in their received biblical form until long after the inspired, divine lawgiver had died. He

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concluded that the Pentateuch was compiled during the period after the Maccabean revolt, when the temple of Jerusalem and its holy books had been destroyed.38

Like La Peyrère, Hobbes utilized apparent contradictions in the Scriptures in his attempt to undermine the authority of the Bible. Deuteronomy described Moses’ death and burial. “It is therefore manifest, that those words were written after his interment. For it were a strange interpretation, to say Moses spake of his own sepulcher.” Hobbes also drew attention to geographical anachronisms. The Pentateuch made references to events and circumstances about which Moses could never have known. He observed that Genesis 12:6 states, “And Abraham passed through the land of the place of Sichem, unto the plain of Moreh, and the Canaanites was [sic] then in the land.” Hobbes concluded that the passage must have been written by someone who knew that the Canaanites were not in the land. Why else would he make note of such a detail? Hobbes believed that Moses could not have been the author because he died before the Jewish people came to the land of Moreh and expelled the Canaanites. Many of the books of the Old Testament must

38 Noel Malcolm examines the nature and origins of Hobbes’ biblical criticism, concentrating on what has always seemed his most radical attack — the argument that the Pentateuch was written not by Moses but by a much later figure, Ezra the Scribe. He argues that Hobbes, La Peyrère, and Spinoza did not invent the notion that the Pentateuch contained later interpolations. He traces the origins of this theory, showing how some key elements of Hobbes’ biblical criticism were already present among Christian writers. For example, Andreas Masius, a Catholic scholar of the sixteenth century, argued that Ezra, inspired by the Holy Spirit, either alone or with men of piety and erudition, compiled the books of Joshua, Judges, and Kings and other books of the Bible out of preserved annals. Thanks to Cornelius à Lapide, a Flemish Jesuit and exegete, the idea that there were post-Mosaic materials in the Pentateuch became widely diffused in early seventeenth-century Europe. Jacques Bonfrère, a Walloon Jesuit who taught Hebrew and theology at Douai, defended Mosaic authorship but admitted that some passages were later interpolations. Clearly, some Catholics accepted notions of interpolations into their understanding of sacred revelation. As Richard Simon would demonstrate, Catholics were less vulnerable than Protestants to questions of authorship. Noel Malcolm, Aspects of Hobbes (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 410-13 and John Van Seters, The Edited Bible: The Curious History of the “Editor” in Biblical Criticism (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2006), 187. See also Paul D. Cooke, Hobbes and Christianity: Reassessing the Bible in Leviathan (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1996). Thomas Hobbes, Leviathan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 265.
have been written long after the death of their supposed author, he argued. Hobbes believed that the Bible needed to be subject to―the Laws of Nature.” Then, all men who have the use of―natural reason” would be obligated to follow those parts of the Bible, which they find reasonable. However, this put the Bible on an equal level with―all other Morall Doctrine consonant to Reason; the Dictates whereof are Laws, not made, but Eternall.”39

After challenging the authorship and therefore the trustworthiness of the Scriptures, Hobbes asked, ―From whence the Scriptures derive their Authority … How we know them to be the Word of God … Why we belieeve them to be so[?]” He answered that the question itself was wrongheaded because it was couched in inappropriate terms. Christians believed that―the first and originall Author of them is God,” but Hobbes reasoned that no one could truly know that the Bible is God’s words―but those to whom God himself hath revealed it supernaturally.” Since Calvinists believed that only the elect by faith can know that the Bible is God’s word, Hobbes sought to ground the authority of the Bible on coercive authority. Rather than asking questions of the Bible’s divine authorship, Hobbes asserted that the more relevant question was―By what Authority they are made Law.” He concluded that the Bible was authoritative, not because it was written by God, but because―the Common-wealth of the Church” made it so for the people. He concluded, ―[H]t is not the Writer, but the authority of the Church, that maketh a Book Canonicall.” Hobbes did not necessarily dispute that some people knew by faith that the Bible was revelation and that their interpretations were accurate. However, because such

ideas were a matter of private revelation, there could be no way to discriminate between one interpretation and another. Like Locke, he discounted private intuitions and sought to ground revelation on universally accessible criteria such as history, textual analysis, and natural reason. Unlike Locke, Hobbes also grounded authority on state power.

Hobbes believed that the state established biblical authority. Spinoza sought to undermine the theological basis of political authority by attacking the trustworthiness of the Bible in his *Theological-Political Treatise* (1670). Spinoza disturbed almost everyone. Among the various epithets that greeted the publication of Spinoza’s work were —harmful and vile,” —most pernicious,” and —atheistic.” Historian Jonathan Israel writes that Spinoza was —the chief intellectual bogeyman and symbolic head of philosophical deism and atheism[.]” Leslie Stephen observed —the whole essence of the deist position may be found in Spinoza’s *Tractatus Theologico Politicus.*”

Spinoza observed that for most of Christian history, Christians vested the words of the Bible with supreme supernatural authority. Competing Protestant factions

40 Ibid., 266-68.


grounded their authority on their interpretation of the Scriptures. In order to preserve and justify their own cause, factions accommodated and manipulated biblical passages to fit their philosophical or theological system.

[A]ll men parade their own ideas as God’s Word, their chief aim being to compel others to think as they do, while using religion as a pretext. … [T]he chief concern of theologians on the whole has been to extort from Holy Scripture their own arbitrary invented ideas, for which they claim divine authority.43

Various groups merely replaced one interpretation with another. Other than by way of the sword, Spinoza claimed, no hermeneutic could trump another.

Spinoza believed theology lay at the heart of the endless battles of hermeneutics. Like Hobbes, Spinoza believed that most theological interpretations of the Bible were based on inner intuitions. Instead, interpreters needed an objective and universally accessible method independent of religious persuasions or revelation. It is necessary to establish at the outset that Spinoza’s claims to an objective and universal hermeneutic are highly suspect. He was in fact subjecting the Bible to his own naturalistic and rationalistic philosophy.44


44 Seymour Feldman states that Spinoza lambasted those who would distort the text to read into it their own philosophical, religious, or political prejudices. Spinoza believed he was doing for the Bible what Galileo, Descartes, or Boyle had done for nature. Just as nature was “out there” waiting to be studied objectively, so the biblical text was ready to be read scientifically. “The interpreter must determine the exact meaning of the text. Questions about the truth of the Bible needed to be postponed until he had succeeded in arriving at an accurate text and an understanding of what this text says. If one allowed questions of truth to enter too early in his inquiries, partisan conceptions of the truth of Scripture determined what the Scripture meant.” Samuel Preus argues that Spinoza sought to examine the Bible not only from the perspective of “pre” (i.e., seventeenth century) reason, but by reconceiving and exhaustively explaining the Bible itself and its religion in a radically new way: historically. Under Spinoza’s relentless critique, the Bible would become one ancient book among and comparable to others, irrelevant as an authority.” Israel writes, “Scripture is viewed by Spinoza as a purely human document[.]” The only meaningful Bible commentary is “a historical study of Scripture.” These scholars do not point out
I hold that the method of interpreting Scripture is no different from the method of interpreting Nature, and is in fact in complete accord with it. ... To study Scripture, you must compile data. ... [B]y allowing no other principle or data for the interpretation of Scripture and study of its contents except those that can be gathered only from Scripture itself and from a historical study of Scripture – steady progress can be made without any danger of error, and one can deal with matters that surpass our understanding with no less confidence than those matters which are known to us by the natural light of reason.\textsuperscript{45}

Spinoza violated his own dictum of interpreting Scripture only by those principles —that can be gathered only from Scripture itself” by imposing his own naturalistic philosophy. Nonetheless, he believed that the Bible had to be stripped of its privileged and supernatural status and read like any other book if one sought to recover its authentic meaning. He claimed that historical context, not theology or private intuitions, would elucidate the meaning of the text. He wrote, “I deliberately resolved to examine Scripture afresh, conscientiously and freely, and to admit nothing as its teaching which I did not most clearly derive from it.”\textsuperscript{46}

To ensure that the modern interpreter did not insert his own subjective or theological reading into the biblical text, Spinoza asserted that the tools for interpreting Scripture must be based on Scripture. “This,” he declared, “is the universal rule for the interpretation of Scripture, to ascribe no teaching to Scripture that is not clearly established from studying it closely.” Traditionally biblical interpreters, he argued, erroneously imported their modern anachronistic theology into the text, which was often

\textsuperscript{45} Spinoza, \textit{Theological-Political Treatise}, 87.

\textsuperscript{46} Ibid., 5.
alien to the world of the biblical writer. Instead points of ambiguity could be made clear by looking to Scripture. For example, if a word's interpretation was unclear, the interpreter should compile all the possible uses of the word from the Scriptures and apply the meaning closest in culture and most consistent to the spirit of the text.\(^\text{47}\) Only examination of the language in its historical context could shed light on the meaning and usage of words. Again, Spinoza seemed to be oblivious to the way in which he interpreted his own modern anachronistic philosophy into his reading.

Spinoza insisted that the Bible must be treated just like any other ancient text. However, this challenged many of Christianity's most sacred certitudes. When pressed to validate the authority of the Bible, Christians often assured themselves by looking to the supposed miracles recorded in the Bible. Spinoza asserted that the miracles never violated the ordinary processes of nature. By looking at the historical and cultural context of the ancient Jews, he noted that they attributed all natural events to the will of God.

This was the nature of their narrative style. Spinoza claimed,

\begin{quote}
Jews never make mention of intermediate or particular causes nor pay any heed to them, but to serve religion and piety or, as it is commonly called, devoutness, they refer everything to God. For example, if they make money by some transaction, they say it has come to them from God; if it happens that they desire something, they say that God has disposed their hearts; and if some thought enters their heads, they say that God has told them this.\(^\text{48}\)
\end{quote}

One also needed to take into account the linguistic style of the biblical writers as well as their historical context. He wrote,

\(^{47}\) Ibid., 66, 88.

\(^{48}\) Ibid., 10.
for the proper understanding of the reality of miracles, it is important to be acquainted with the diction and metaphors affected by the Hebrews. He who does not pay sufficient attention to this will ascribe to Scripture many miracles which Scriptural writers never intended as such, thus failing to understand not only events and miracles as they really happened but also the meaning of the writers of the Sacred Books.  

Only when the interpreter understood words and passages as the Hebrew mind and culture would have used them could he recover an authentic interpretation. Modern interpreters did not understand the style of the Old Testament. They believed that references to the actions of God were divine interventions that suspended the laws of nature. Because the writers of the Old Testament lived in a primitive culture, Spinoza asserted that whatever the Jews did not understand, being at that time ignorant of its natural causes, was referred to God. Thus a storm was called the chiding of God, thunder and lightning were called the arrows of God…[.] Because the biblical writers were limited by their primitive understanding of the world, their accounts of miracles should not be taken at face value. For example, like La Peyrère, Spinoza offered an alternative naturalistic explanation for the miracle of the sun standing still in the sky. Because Joshua was a soldier and not a man of science, he could not comprehend a modern cosmology and therefore he wrongly believed that the sun moved across the sky. The modern biblical interpreter needed to interpret the text from the perspective of the writer rather than try to reconcile the biblical text to modern cosmological understanding.

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49 Spinoza reinterpreted miracles in a naturalistic manner. For example, when Isaiah referred to water miraculously flowing from a rock, Spinoza believed the Jews simply found springs in the desert. These were simply modes of speech affected by the Jews. Hebrews used to employ this style of speech not merely for rhetorical effect but also from motives of piety. Ibid., 82-3.

50 Ibid., 16.
(Spinoza suggested that recent hail storms refracted the light of the sun. Thus, Joshua thought that the sun stood still in the sky.) Spinoza asserted, ―[T]he gift of prophecy did not render the prophet more learned, but left them with beliefs that they previously held[.]‖ Spinoza did not assert that biblical revelation was wrong, but rather that it was correct in the historical context. This nuance would be of little comfort to those who held a traditional view of revelation.\(^{51}\)

The interpreter of any ancient text needed to recover as much specific historical context as possible for a proper understanding. The Bible was no exception.

… as we have a better understanding of a person’s character and temperament, so we can more easily explain his words. … it is also important to know on what occasion, at what period, and for what nation or age all these teachings were written down.

Without knowledge of the author's personality and the historical situation of the writing, it will be vain for us to try to achieve a greater understanding of its true meaning."\(^{52}\) Of course the recovery of the historical context and circumstances was limited and varied. There would always be gaps in knowledge insofar as many of the records of history were lost. Spinoza was implicitly suggesting that a total recovery of the true meaning of the

\(^{51}\)Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, 27; Spinoza wrote, ―Again, the style of prophecy varied according to the manner of speaking of each prophet. The prophecies of Ezekiel and Amos were lacking in refinement, unlike those of Isaiah and Nahum, which were composed in a cultured style. Any Hebrew scholar, who cares to look into this matter more closely, if he compares certain chapters in the different prophets dealing with the same subject matter, will find a considerable stylistic difference. … These and other passages will readily show that God has no particular style of speech, but in accordance with the learning and capacity of the prophet the style was cultured, compressed, stern, unrefined, prolix or obscure.‖ Ibid., 24-6. See also Feldman, "Introduction," xxvii.

\(^{52}\)Ibid., 90, 97.
Bible remained beyond reach. This was clearly disconcerting for those who looked at the Bible as God’s special revelation.

Spinoza wanted to undermine the supernatural status of the biblical text. Reading Holy Writ naturalistically yanked it down from heaven, and, in the process, the words of God became smudged with the dirt of earth and seemingly less trustworthy. However, his claims to theological neutrality and objectivity need to be taken skeptically. He was hardly consistent. He applied his own modern perspective on the biblical narrative. He eliminated the possibility of supernatural events and assumed that accounts of miracles must have a naturalistic explanation.

La Peyrère’s, Hobbes’, and Spinoza’s challenges to the traditional understanding of the Bible were certainly disturbing. According to theologian John Woodbridge, these men were considered by many to be marginal scholars, outsiders, or heretics. Thus, they could be more easily dismissed. However, Richard Simon, a Catholic priest, and Jean Le Clerc, a Protestant scholar from a respected family, were harder to ignore. They attempted to preserve the authority of the Bible in light of recent criticism by incorporating Spinozist critiques. Although Simon and Le Clerc were making similar claims, they engaged in a lengthy debate (from 1685 to 1687), in which they mutually branded each other as Spinozists. Woodbridge observes that the debate between Simon and Le Clerc represents one of the culminating points in a complex movement away
from complete [biblical] infallibility.” Their ideas —shook the confidence of the leading members of the Republic of Letters in the complete infallibility of Holy Writ.”

Simon took seriously Spinoza’s allegations against Mosaic authorship while still protecting biblical authority. Simon answered the problem by offering his —public scribe hypothesis.” He agreed that Moses only wrote the commands and the ordinances. The rest of the Pentateuch was compiled by editors and scribes who gathered historical annals to compose the history of creation and the patriarchs. However, Simon believed that the editors were inspired. Though he offered his hypothesis to defend the authority of the Bible, most were disturbed by his claims.

Simon argued that the Scriptures were not perspicuous as Protestants contended. Rather, one needed to study the Church Fathers and other ancient writings approved by the Catholic Church to uncover the true meaning of Scripture. Thus Mosaic authorship was less essential. (Simon was drawing upon a longer tradition. Since the 1520s, Catholic writers had been criticizing Protestants for their inability to concur on the


meaning of Scripture.) Le Clerc, on the other hand, argued that only reason and historical evidence could uncover what he believed to be the “fundamental” doctrines contained in the Bible. He heavily criticized Simon’s public scribe hypothesis as a fiction that had no grounding in historical evidence. Instead, Le Clerc postulated that the real author might have been an honest Israelite, who collected all the writings of Moses and added to them some other facts, taken out of some ancient and credible books.[.]” Whereas Simon believed that the editors were authorized by Moses and inspired by the Holy Spirit, Le Clerc made no such concessions. The Bible was reliable to the extent that the writers were good recorders of history. Its accuracy and authority did not need to resort to unverifiable supernatural claims.55

Le Clerc defended the authority of the Scriptures by building an apologetic on reason and history. He denied the divine inspiration of all sections of the Bible except those passages where God spoke directly. Other parts of Scripture were trustworthy, not because the authors were supernaturally guided by God, but because they were historically reliable witnesses. Whereas the major ideas of the Bible were from God, the words and details were not necessarily true. Le Clerc believed that reason should evaluate Scripture to separate the essential tenets from the words and details that were negligible. Although Le Clerc challenged conventional views of inspiration, he was trying to protect biblical authority by incorporating modern criticism. Historian Jonathan Israel contends that in light of Spinoza’s attacks, Le Clerc carved out of the Bible a drastically

diminished but clear, proven, and … indisputable sphere” of truth — established beyond doubt by means of the new historico-critical method of Bible exegesis.”

II. Deists

Le Clerc and Simon believed that the only way to preserve the authority of the Bible in light of the modern critiques, apparent anachronisms, and evidence of later interpolations, was to abandon an older view of Scripture and inspiration. Most Christian contemporaries believed that in this bargain, they gained too little and sacrificed too much. Deist skeptics thought they did not go far enough. Deism is a problematic term. Robert Sullivan argues that the term deism is so elusive that it should be taken merely as a label of convenience rather than a reference to a precise system of thought. Indeed, the so-called deists held a variety of views, some contradictory. Nonetheless, these seventeenth- and eighteenth-century skeptics were united by some common beliefs or tendencies. Building on the work of critics such as Hobbes and Spinoza, deists claimed to analyze Scripture by autonomous reason in order to demonstrate that the Bible did not present unquestionable truth. It was a book like any other. Following a radicalized


57 Sullivan, Toland, 232.

version of Locke’s epistemology, they did not believe that there could be any truths above reason.” Accepting only empirically demonstrable or reasonable knowledge, deists rejected biblical revelation. They began with the presupposition that all miracles were impossible. When the Bible was examined like any other historical document and naturalistically, the deists believed the book revealed the same flaws, errors, and corruptions of any other ancient text. For Locke, reason regulated religious assent. For the deists, reason was revelation’s ultimate judge. They were united by their opposition to the privileged status of the Bible as special revelation.

Deists had two main critiques of Christianity. First, they questioned how a perfectly good God could limit for so long his special revelation to a tiny and isolated fraction of the race. They held instead that the Bible was only a specific instance of what God had made known universally. The Bible was simply one expression of the universal religion of nature. Secondly, they challenged the reliability of the testimony of historical events recorded in the Bible. In a world that was increasingly understood to be governed by natural law, accounts of miracles became less credible in the eyes of the deists.

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Lord Herbert of Cherbury, one of the earliest deists, opposed all supernatural claims to knowledge in his *De Veritate* (1624). He asserted that knowledge derived from the Bible was only probabilistic and unreliable. Only demonstrable truths were certain. The authority of written revelation depended on the trustworthiness of its author and therefore its validity could never be trusted with certainty. In *De Religione Gentilium* (1645), he advocated a natural religion, or a religion derived exclusively from reason and the observation of nature. Natural religion, he claimed, could affirm only five religious principles. These were a belief in the existence of the Deity, the obligation to reverence such a power, the identification of worship with practical morality, the obligation to repent of sin, and divine recompense in this world and the next.\(^6^1\) The deists generally believed that the Bible was true to the extent that it affirmed these universal principles found in almost all religions. These ideas were available to all cultures through natural reason and the observation of nature.\(^6^2\)

Skeptics, such as Charles Blount, John Toland, Anthony Collins, and Matthew Tindal, also dismissed much of the Bible as false. Blount, in *Religio Laici* (1683) and *Oracles of Reason* (1693), reduced biblical prophecies and pagan oracles to the same level by arguing that both were cryptic, required faith, and were beyond rational analysis. Accounts of miracles proved nothing, for pagan texts also recounted miracles and


primitive minds could easily mistake natural phenomena for miracles. He borrowed from La Peyrère and argued that Moses could not have written the Pentateuch. He only accepted natural religion. Toland, in *Christianity Not Mysterious* (1696), argued that miracles and biblical revelation were neither logical nor empirically defensible, for they were not consistent with experience, and revelation was beyond the reach of reason. In *Nazarenus* (1718), he argued that Judaism, Christianity, and Islam were merely products of cultural traditions. True Christianity was merely the religion of nature. Collins’ *Discourse on the Grounds and Reasons of the Christian Religion* (1724) attacked the biblical text and prophecies in particular as irrational and incomprehensible. If the prophecies of the Old Testament were interpreted by the same standards one used to interpret any other text, Collins argued, they could not refer to Jesus. Tindal, one of the most influential critics, attacked the credibility of the Bible by arguing that it was a historically unreliable document. Because the Bible was such an ancient book, argued Tindal, passages had been corrupted over time. As a result, some parts were obscure or incomprehensible. Since historical knowledge was less reliable than mathematical truths or knowledge derived from experience, the biblical stories should be judged against what one knew to be true. In other words, those passages that diverged from natural religion were to be dismissed as corruptions.63


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Against these challenges, American thinkers defended the very foundation of their faith. They did not retreat into past certainties or protect their belief in a private faith that hovered safely over skeptical attacks. Virtually all the critics of the Bible rejected a spiritually granted understanding of the Bible as a basis of its special status and authority. As Hobbes and others noted, this was only useful for private knowledge. They argued that it needed to conform to the same universally accepted standards of examination as other artifacts of history and ancient literature. Furthermore, they asserted that the Bible needed to be reconciled with the growing body of knowledge of natural philosophy and history. Many of the Bible’s defenders were happy to oblige, confident that revelation would stand up to any scrutiny. They would in varying degrees fight the battle head on. As Ezra Stiles wrote,

> Deism has got such Head in this Age of Licentious Liberty that it would be vain to try to stop it by hiding the Deistical Writings: and the only Way left to conquer & demolish it, is to come forth into the open Field & Dispute this matter on even footing – the evidences of Revelation in my opinion are nearly as demonstrative as Newton’s Principia, & these are the Weapons he used.\(^{64}\)

However, their battles would leave their understanding of the Bible transformed in ways they never anticipated.

\(^{64}\) Quoted from E. Brooks Holifield, *Theology in America: Christian Thought from the Age of the Puritans to the Civil War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 170.
CHAPTER 1

COTTON MATHER AND THE BIBLE

In the early eighteenth century, the American Puritan Cotton Mather (1663-1728) looked towards Europe from his side of the Atlantic and saw dangerous storms rumbling over the horizon. European skeptics and deists were questioning the unique status of the Bible as divinely inspired revelation. Until the late eighteenth century, deism was primarily a European matter. However, Cotton Mather, one of the most erudite and prolific American Puritans, kept abreast of the intellectual developments in Europe. He feared that before long, the European contagion would infect American souls. Well before most of his American contemporaries fully assessed the situation, Mather believed that the Bible needed to be defended. To this end, he marshaled new tools of analysis that would have been foreign and possibly even disturbing to his eminent Puritan grandfathers.

and father. By the last decades of his life, he selectively appropriated for the defense of the Bible methods and conclusions that had been associated with its heretical enemies.

For example, Mather interpreted some of the miracles recorded in the Bible in light of the so-called new learning in such a way that potentially challenged their supernatural character. When considering the authorship of the Old Testament books, Mather even utilized some of the interpretive tools associated with Benedict Spinoza (1632-1677) and concluded that Moses did not author some parts of the Pentateuch. His evolving biblical hermeneutic is evidenced in a variety of his writings but is most clearly and fully articulated in his massive and unpublished biblical commentary, the *Biblia Americana,* on which he continually worked from 1693 until his death in 1728.66

Mather was part of a broader trend. Historian E. Brooks Holifield observes that in response to both philosophical and scientific developments in Europe of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, as well as pressure to defend their beliefs against deist critics of the Bible, Puritans, like the latitudinarians, began to articulate an *evidential* defense of the authority and genuineness of the Bible.67 John Calvin, by way

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66 Cotton Mather began taking notes daily on the Bible for a future project after he was ordained in 1685. In 1693, he began formally to work on the *Biblia.* Though he claimed to be done in 1706, he continued to add to it for much of the remainder of his life. Winton U. Solberg, “Introduction,” in *The Christian Philosopher,* ed. Winton U. Solberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), xxxvi.

67 E. Brooks Holifield, *Theology in America: Christian Thought from the Age of the Puritans to the Civil War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 5. Traditionally, Christians believed that the Bible, or revealed religion, was the primary locus of spiritual truth. However, Christians also practiced natural theology as early as the second century. Natural theologians claimed that a person, reflecting on either the visible world or the workings of the human mind, could reasonably infer the existence of a purposeful creator from the evidence of the order and harmony of the universe apart from the revelation in Scripture. As an important proviso, natural theologians added that the evidence pointed towards and confirmed truths above the capacity of reason to discover. Complete truth could only be found in the Bible. However, in the eighteenth century, the use of and emphasis on evidence increased. Winton U. Solberg, “Science and Religion in Early America: Cotton Mather’s *Christian Philosopher,*” *Church History* 56, no.
of contrast, generally argued that "The highest proof of Scripture derives from the fact that God in person speaks in it.” The Christian should follow the model of the inspired writers who did not "dwell on rational proofs.” The Bible affirmed itself. Furthermore, Calvin believed that God confirmed the meaning and authority of the Bible by the inner witness of the Holy Spirit. (One should not oversimplify Calvin’s hermeneutic. True to his humanist training, Calvin was willing to draw upon all fields of endeavor, such as languages, classical studies, philosophy, and science, to explore the meaning of biblical texts.) Hans Frei notes that in the eighteenth century, most Protestants gradually moved away from an understanding of Scripture that rested on the direct influence of the Holy Spirit on the reader. Instead, the Bible, Protestant intellectuals believed, needed to be subject to the rules of interpretation and verification common to any text. Mather adapted his understanding of the Bible to keep up with the evidentiary temper of his age.

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70 Holifield notes that seventeenth-century Puritans, such as Thomas Hooker, Thomas Shepard, and John Cotton, generally believed that one could discern the nature of God through the natural world. The clergy invariably added, however, that this natural knowledge remained insufficient, even misleading, without the revelation of God in Scripture. Miller argues that Mather’s use of evidence and reason should not be seen as a radical break from the past. New England was not fanatical, crude, behind the times. It had always stood for scholarship, reasonableness, sobriety. The virtues of a rational disposition did not need to be grafted onto the native stock, they had always been there.” For example, Benjamin Colman, pastor of the liberal Brattle Street Church, preached in a style that emphasized reason and evidence,
Skeptics and critics challenged the Bible’s nature, but disputes over the interpretation of the Bible were nothing new in the history of Christianity. Although Christians bitterly and often violently disagreed over the Bible’s interpretation, few openly questioned its authority, accuracy, or authenticity. All believers shared broad assumptions about the nature of the Bible: it was a book unlike any other; God inspired his holy pen men to record revelation; and the Holy Spirit preserved the transmission of the Bible over hundreds of years. Christians also believed that the Bible was true in matters of salvation but also accurate in its record of geography, chronology, and history. It seemed unfitting for the inspired word of God to contain factual errors.  

Furthermore, Puritans believed that the Holy Spirit guided their reading of the Bible and enabled the believer to recognize that the Scriptures were the words of God. Puritans believed God graciously bestowed to his people what Jonathan Edwards called a spiritual sense.” Geoffrey Nuttall notes that the English Puritans believed that the Holy Spirit illuminated and enlightened their understanding as they read the Bible and allowed them to recognize the Bible’s divine origin. Similarly, literary scholar Lisa Gordis argues following the model of Tillotson. Colman believed that the Newtonian universe evidenced the nature of God. Holifield, *Theology in America*, 30-33; Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: From Colony to Province* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1953), 422; Theodore Hornberger, “Benjamin Colman and the Enlightenment,” *The New England Quarterly* 12, no. 2 (1939): 417; John Corrigan, *Prism of Piety: Catholic Congregational Clergy at the Beginning of the Enlightenment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); Benjamin Colman, *God Deals with us as Rational Creatures* (Boston: B. Green, 1723); and Experience Mayhew, *A Discourse Shewing that God Dealeth with Men as with Reasonable Creatures* (Boston: B. Green, 1720).

Calvin and Luther certainly had a high view of the Scriptures’ truth, but their successors, the Protestant Scholastics, defined a concept of inerrancy far more rigidly. According to Roy A. Harrisville and Walter Sundberg, “[Protestant] Scholasticism made the Bible an impregnable fortress defended by a theological theory in which every verse was the truth from God’s own mouth whispered into the ear of his scribes. In short, the Bible was inerrant.” Roy A. Harrisville and Walter Sundberg, *The Bible in Modern Culture: Baruch Spinoza to Brevard Childs* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002 [1995]), 23.
that Puritan leaders were uncomfortable with the notion that readers interpreted the Bible. Instead, they emphasized the Spirit’s operation on the hearts of the believers.

Theodore Dwight Bozeman, C. Leonard Allen, and Richard Hughes argue that the Puritans, as biblical primitivists, were wary of subjective human invention in the process of reading and interpreting the Bible. Thus, Puritans claimed that they tried to minimize the role of the human interpreter and emphasized the self-evident meaning of the Bible and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. They generally sought to exclude human authorities, artes, and institutions from their interpretations. Harry Stout observes that Puritan pastors gave the impression that God was speaking through the sermon. For

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example, Puritan pastor John Rayner warned, “If any minister will preach trash and toyes, traditions of men instead of the pure word of God, their works shall be burnt.” They played down the notion that the pastor was offering an interpretation of a biblical passage.

This is not to suggest that Puritans were irrational enthusiasts. There were radical tendencies which emphasized the direct inspiration of the Spirit and the authority of subjective experiences. However, most believed the Spirit’s work on the heart was always mediated through the biblical text and conformed to social hierarchy and reason. Furthermore, according to Perry Miller and others, reason and Ramist logic (discussed further below) disciplined their interpretations. However, Puritans did not consider Ramist logic to be one method of interpretation among others. Rather, Miller writes that Puritans believed that it was simply the method of uncovering God’s order of the universe. Thus, with the benefit of the combination of the Holy Spirit and their logic,

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74 Geoffrey Nuttall argues that there existed a wide variety of Puritan views on the role of the Spirit in interpretation. Quaker views, though radical in the eyes of most Puritans, were the natural and logical extension of Puritan hermeneutics, he argues. Lisa Gordis writes that American Puritans believed and hoped that Spirit-aided interpretations would lead to consensus. The history of strife, such as the Roger Williams affair and the Antinomian controversy, shows that this would not be the case. Michael P. Winship argues that Puritan biblical interpretive consensus was only a loosely held set of contingent compromises. However, he notes that Puritan leaders could not tolerate some of the more radical and spiritual interpretive claims of Anne Hutchinson and her followers. Ultimately, Puritan leaders could only achieve interpretive consensus through coercion. Nuttall, *Holy Spirit*, 1-61; Gordis, *Opening Scripture*; and Michael P. Winship, *Making Heretics: Militant Protestantism and Free Grace in Massachusetts, 1636-1641* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).
Puritans enjoyed a high degree of certainty that the Bible was the authentic revelation of God and they interpreted it correctly.\textsuperscript{75}

Beginning in the late seventeenth century, a number of European scholars challenged basic assumptions about the Bible’s supernatural and unique status. As discussed in the prologue, men like Thomas Hobbes, Benedict Spinoza, Isaac La Peyrère, and Richard Simon examined the text of the Old Testament and interpreted contradictions and anachronism as evidence of later interpolations.\textsuperscript{76} They also dismissed the biblical accounts of miracles as the expressions of “primitive” writers. Other skeptics or deists attempted to undermine Christian authority by pointing out the historical,

\textsuperscript{75} Gordis points out the subtle ways that Puritans and Conformists differed over their interpretation of the Bible. Richard Hooker, an English Conformist, attempted to codify the basic doctrines of the English church in his \textit{Lawes of Ecclesiasticall Politie} (1593). He argued that matters of salvation are clear and plain in the Bible, but some intricate and obscure issues should be left to interpretive experts and be judged according to the “awe of reason.” Not all matters were clearly spelled out in the Bible, Hooker believed. Some truths needed to be deduced by a long circuit of deduction.” He objected to the Puritan insistence that all actions needed to be bound by Scripture. Hooker accused the Puritans of being overly literal and insufficiently flexible in drawing practices from the biblical text. Gordis points out that Hooker’s characterization of the Puritans was overstated. Puritans used reason and deductions, but they insisted that reasoning on theological matters be more firmly rooted in the biblical text. Although their differences were real, they were a matter of degrees of flexibility. John Morgan agrees with Perry Miller’s assessment that the Puritans were eminently reasonable people, but he also argues that they more often wrote of the “limits and proper uses” and “dangers” of reason. They were conscious of the constant danger of placing too high a value on reason. The Spirit was always superior. George Marsden correctly points out that Miller overstated the role of reason and neglected to consider the influence of the Bible or Calvinism on the Puritan mind. Marsden writes that “[Miller’s] implication is that Puritans normally either read meanings into Scripture or derived from it principles that were controlled by current intellectual fashion. Accordingly, readers of the NEM are likely to come away with the impression that the most important characteristics of the Puritan intellect were reverence for reason and particularly Ramist logic.” In fact, many of their ideas are found in the Bible and Calvinism. George Marsden, “Perry Miller’s Rehabilitation of the Puritans: A Critique,” \textit{Church History} 39, no. 1 (1970): 94. Gordis, \textit{Opening Scripture}, 114-15. See also Bozeman, \textit{To Live Ancient Lives}, 56-65; John K. Louma, “Restitution or Reformation? Cartwright and Hooker on the Elizabethan Church,” \textit{Historical Magazine of the Protestant Episcopal Church} 46 (1977): 85-106; and idem, “Who Owns the Fathers? Hooker and Cartwright on the Authority of the Primitive Church,” \textit{Sixteenth Century Journal} 8, no. 3 (1977): 45-60. For Puritan uses of reason, see Perry Miller, \textit{The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century} (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1939), 181-206 and John Morgan, \textit{Godly Learning: Puritan Attitudes Towards Reason, Learning, and Education} (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 41-78.

\textsuperscript{76} See the Prologue to this dissertation for Hobbes, Spinoza, La Peyrère, Simon, and the deists.
anthropological, and human (as opposed to divine) origins of the Bible. Thus, by reading the text through naturalistic interpretive lenses, they tried to reduce the status of Holy Writ to merely one ancient religious text among many. According to the philosopher Diego Lucci, “biblical hermeneutics represents one of the most significant fields to which the eighteenth-century deists applied themselves.” In light of mounting skeptical attacks, Christians were compelled to defend, not only their particular interpretation of the Bible from other Christians, but the status of the Bible itself as sacred revelation.

I. Cotton Mather Responds to Deism

Between 1700 and 1712, Cotton Mather wrote three essays that attacked deism and defended the authority of biblical revelation. Over the span of twelve years, Mather’s answers to the same challenge evolved. His interests in the natural sciences and attempts to defend revelation against deists compelled him to place religion on increasingly evidentiary grounds. Several scholars have pointed out that over the decades of the early eighteenth century, Mather grew increasingly rationalistic and empirical.


78 Cotton Mather, Reasonable Religion or, The Truth of the Christian Religion, Demonstrated. The Wisdom of its Precepts Justified: and the Folly of Sinning Against Those Precepts, Reprehended. With Incontestable Proofs, that Men, Who Would Act Reasonably, Must Live Religiously (Boston: T. Green, 1700); idem, A Man of Reason (Boston: John Edwards, 1718); and idem, Reason Satisfied: and Faith Established (Boston: J. Allen, 1712). According to Perry Miller, Cotton Mather composed A Man of Reason in 1709. However, it was lost on its way to France. It was not recovered and published until 1718. Miller, New England Mind: Colony to Province, 426.

One should also note that between 1693 and 1697, Mather composed the *Magnalia Christi Americana*. In it, he continued the long Puritan tradition of reading the Scriptures typologically. Believing that the Bible and history needed to be interpreted theologically and spiritually, not just literally, he read the history of Puritans in New England as a New Israel. Typological interpretations required the reader to impose theological views and spiritual insights that could go beyond intention of the human author. Thus, Mather’s turn towards empirical and universally accessible modes of interpretation was important, but not totalizing.\(^{80}\)

In *Reasonable Religion* (1700), Cotton Mather attempted to defend Christian revelation with arguments that even a deist could accept. He neither presumed that skeptics believed that God revealed himself in the Bible nor that the Holy Spirit enlightened their minds. Instead, Mather made his appeal on the grounds of reason. Writing in the spirit of latitudinarians such as Tillotson, Mather argued that reason was common to all human beings regardless of their spiritual state.\(^{81}\) Like Locke (or even Le


\(^{81}\) Middlekauff, Winship, and Jeske argue that *Reasonable Religion* marks the beginning of Mather’s interest in reason and theology in the style of latitudinarians such as Tillotson. Middlekauff asserts that after an initial burst of enthusiasm, Mather grew concerned with the corrosive effects of latitudinarian reason on Puritan sensibilities. According to Middlekauff, in the last years of his life, Mather came close to suggesting that subjective experience was the only authentic test of religious truth. Winship believes that Mather never embraced the theology of latitudinarians. Rather, the apparent shift was merely tactical. He was responding to the growth of the Brattle Street Church in Boston which was leaning in decidedly Anglican and latitudinarian directions. Jeske argues that *Reasonable Religion* marks Mather’s “deistic turn.” This dissertation argues that his interest is evidence and reason was sincere, serious and
Clerc), he attempted to construct a foundation for revelation on the basis of universally accessible evidence rather than privileged spiritual knowledge.

On the first page of the treatise, Mather stated that he could write the piece as a traditional sermon or jeremiad and make a spiritual appeal. However, he noted that the form in which an exhortation could make a claim more Irresistible & Ungainsayable.” Cotton proposed that, instead of saying, Shew yourselves Regenerate Christians, we will only say, Shew yourselves Rational Creatures.” Mather would make a reasonable, rather than a spiritual appeal. By way of contrast, around the same time, Solomon Stoddard argued that rational arguments could not persuade, for they offered only probabilistic arguments. Instead, pastors should seek to convict by preaching about hell. Stoddard would rather have people flee to God in fear than go to Him by reason. Mather took a different road. He wrote, Let this One Great point be gained, and we shall go a great way to gain every point.” Man was essentially both Animal Rationale and Animal Religiosism [sic].” He pointed out that progressive deists proudly believed that persistent. However, he was decidedly not a deist. He was never fully able to reconcile the tensions between his Puritan heritage and latitudinarian approaches to theology. Robert Middlekauff, The Mathers: Three Generations of Puritan Intellectuals, 1596-1728 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971); Winship, The Seers of God, 77-79. Jeske, Cotton Mather: Physico-Theologian.”

82 Puritans traditionally understood conversion as primarily the act of God. The Holy Spirit transformed the will. However, Puritans believed that the Lord worked through the understanding as well. A person ignorant of Christ could not receive grace. But mere intellectual assent was insufficient. The Devil believed in Christ but did not accept him as savior. No amount of unaided human rational power could bring one to salvation. All people needed supernatural aid for salvation. At the same time, Puritans defended their creed from charges of irrationalism. Their doctrines and the Scriptures were not opposed to reason. Therefore, Perry Miller and Robert Middlekauff argue that Cotton Mather did not radically break from Puritan tradition in his enthusiasm for reason. However, he gave it an emphasis that decidedly broke with his Puritan heritage. Middlekauff, The Mathers, 296-97. Miller, The New England Mind, The Seventeenth Century, 181-206.

83 Solomon Stoddard, The Efficacy of Fear of Hell to Restrain Men from Sin (Boston: Thomas Fleet, 1713).
all truth claims, especially religious ones, should be based solely on reason and thus the Bible should be dismissed. Mather chose to appeal to the skeptics’ love of reason, arguing, “He that is not Religious, is not worthy to be counted Rational.” Unaided natural reason, Mather claimed, led one to believe beyond doubt in biblical revelation. Therefore, he who rejects the Bible is not rational and therefore not truly human but rather is a brute.” In sinning against God, the sinner does not act like a reasonable man.” Mather challenged the deist to be consistent with his own high standards of reason. “I summon you to the Bar of your own Reason; certain I am, that you will be dreadfully Condemned at that Bar.” Mather did not believe he needed the intervention of the Holy Spirit to convict the deists. Their own reason was sufficient for the job. “Scripture is Reason, in its highest elevation,” Mather claimed.84

To this end, Mather marshaled arguments for the authority of the Bible. He reasoned that the elegant order and balance of the universe required a creator. He pointed out how Christ perfectly fulfilled the prophecies of the Old Testament. Honest men of high moral standing, who had no incentive to deceive, recorded the miracles of Christ. Mankind universally believed that there is a God and shares a common moral sense. This demonstrated to Mather that God left his imprint on his creation. Winship observes that in Reasonable Religion, Mather, following latitudinarian trends, defended the reasonableness of belief on the historical evidence of public witnesses. In doing so, he shifted the grounds of argument from dogmatic certainty and private illumination to a

84 Mather, Reasonable Religion, 40.
moral, probabilistic certainty arrived at from weighing matters of public documentation.\(^{85}\)

Mather also appealed to natural religion or natural theology. According to historian A. Owen Aldridge, the two terms are vague and were often used interchangeably in early America and thus they defy easy definition. In general, natural theology held that unaided reason reflecting on nature could arrive at some general conclusions about God and point to divine revelation. Natural religion, the belief system of the deists, granted legitimacy only to the conclusions drawn from reason and evidence. Mather used natural religion for apologetical purposes.\(^{86}\) The “Works of Creation, are enough to satisfy the Reason of any man.” From creation, a reasonable person could infer the perfection and fear of God, who wrote his moral law in nature. God implanted in man the ability to read the law of God like “Hieroglyphics.” This basic natural religion was possible because Mather believed that God had blessed all people with reason as “an innate Faculty in the Mind of man.”\(^{87}\) Mather did not begin with the Bible and then move


\(^{87}\) Mather, *Reasonable Religion*, 40, 41. In Mather’s time, the concept of reason was in a state of flux. Norman Fiering notes that in Henry More’s argument and in the Stoic Natural Law tradition, “reason” meant intuitive or noetic reason or the mind’s inchoate or manifest possession of the great principles of divine law. Reason had content. God implanted knowledge in his creatures. In contrast, Hobbes and Locke believed that reason meant instrumental reason, or the ability of the mind to calculate towards an end. For them, and most modern people, reason referred not to substantive knowledge that God has given mankind,
to observe how nature or reason confirmed the Scriptures. Rather, like the deists, he started with reason and the observation of nature. He then made reference to the biblical verses as they confirmed what one could infer naturally.  

Two years later, Cotton’s father, Increase, published his own anti-deist essay, *A Discourse Proving that the Christian Religion is the Only True Religion*. Increase specifically cited Spinoza and Blount as the objects of his attack. He too discussed natural religion. Increase affirmed that natural religion could lead pagans to genuine knowledge of spiritual truths. All nations utilizing the “Light of Nature” consent to some religion or God, which demonstrated that there must be a God. The “light of natural reason,” or conscience, affirmed that the moral dictates of the Bible are agreeable to reason. Increase’s point in discussing natural religion was to argue that pagan religions were but a shadow of the Christian revelation. Natural knowledge affirmed the truth of the Bible and pointed to the need for divine revelation.  

The similarities between Increase’s and Cotton’s discourses are obvious. However, there are subtle differences. Increase emphasized that unaided reason could only arrive at *some* spiritual truths, and the incomplete nature of the pagan religions only

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89 Increase Mather, *A Discourse Proving that the Christian Religion is the only true religion: Wherein the necessity of divine revelation is evinced, in several sermons* (Boston: T. Green, 1702). Holifield notes that this work was one of the earliest American treatises directed solely against deists. Holifield, *Theology in America*, 70.
testified to the shortcomings of reason and the need for special revelation. Cotton of course believed this as well. In 1699, Cotton, in *The Everlasting Gospel*, affirmed much of what his father said. –Mere Natural Reason, without Revelation, both External and Internal Revelation, would never understand the Mysteries of a Sinners being made Righteous."90 However, a year later, in *Reasonable Religion*, Cotton elevated reason and devoted very little space to discussing its inadequacies.91 He argued that deists did not believe because they were not sufficiently reasonable. Of course Mather held that unbelief was an offense to God, but in his treatise, he described it as a violation against reason. In “Sin men offer violence” not unto God, but —unto the principles of Reason.”92 This is not to suggest that Cotton was flirting with deism, but as Perry Miller noted, Cotton seemed to experiment cautiously with and enlarge the traditional scope and power of reason in 1700.93

Nine years later, in 1709, Mather revisited the looming danger of deism in his treatise entitled *A Man of Reason*. According to Perry Miller, –the contrast between it and his first foray of 1700 [*Reasonable Religion*] indicates the deepening of his concern.”94


91 Miller observes that Increase pushed the boundaries of the Puritan use of reason. However, Cotton was even more at ease relying on reason than his father. Miller, *The New England Mind: From Colony to Province*, 421.

92 Mather, *Reasonable Religion*, 3, 4, 6, 7.

93 Miller notes that *Reasonable Religion* shows Cotton Mather using reason in –a new tone – not that he deviates from the founders, but that in his determination to prove” that if –men Act Reasonably, they would live Righteously,”” Mather gives reason –a fresh stress.” Miller, *The New England Mind: From Colony to Province*, 420.

Mather attacked skeptics more explicitly this time. Unlike his previous treatise, this work specifically singled out particular writers. Mather critiqued John Locke, Thomas Hobbes, and Charles Blount, though he refused to call them by name. Perhaps he was afraid that he would inadvertently direct weak and curious readers to dangerous texts. Three years later, in his 1712 tract, he apologized for having to repeat the heresies of the skeptics in his attempt to refute them, and he wrote that he would keep his summary of their ideas to a minimum.

Again, in *A Man of Reason*, he repeated the arguments from natural religion and praised the powers of reason. "There is a Reasonable Spirit in Man, and the Inspiration of the Almighty has given him an understanding; and there are certain Principles of Reason, which every Man does naturally and ordinarily bring with him into the world." He asserted, "GOD who has furnished us with Reason, has required us, to be obedient unto the Dictates of Reason. To Man, He says, Let Reason be thy Guide; Never go against well-enlightened Reason." Reason, a gift from God, would guide people to the knowledge of God. Incidentally, in *A Man of Reason*, Mather gave no sense of the problem posed by those who claimed reason as their guide yet came to a divergent

95 When he wrote, "It is an Irrational, as well as Unscriptural Opinion, that we have no Ideas in our minds, but what are introduced from abroad, by Observation," he was clearly refuting Locke. He was taking a swipe at Blount when he wrote, "Perhaps their brazen heads will publish pretended Oracles of Reason." He also referred to deists as "Wicked Sons of the Leviathan," an unmistakable reference to Hobbes. Mather, *Man of Reason*, 3, 5.


97 Mather, *Man of Reason*, 3, 7, 9, 26, 30-34.
conclusion than those who followed the Holy Spirit. He would claim that those who claimed to follow reason yet arrived at a heretical position utilized faulty reason.

Not only could reason, unaided by divine inspiration, teach man about the nature of God, but it could also show man how to live a relatively moral life. Some universal moral principles were, as Mather put it, mathematically certain.” He called these moral imperatives the MAXIMS of REASON.” For example, he pointed out The Golden Rule of Reason required Man do unto others, as he would own it reasonable for others to do unto him.” He wrote, You may easily bring a Man to own this Rule, as to own that Three and Four make Seven.” He also wrote

Reason Judges of what is Mathematically True or False. It judges as often, and as clearly, what is morally Good, or what is morally Evil… Indeed, there are very many, who do not actually discern, what is morally Good or Evil, Right or Wrong; But so there are many, who do not actually discern Mathematical Truth from Falsehood.

It is significant that Mather compared spiritual truths with mathematics. (Incidentally, Descartes, Hobbes, and Spinoza all took mathematics as their model of certainty.) Mathematics was universally true and accessible regardless of one’s culture or spiritual condition Mather believed. Intuitively apprehended mathematical truths (for example 2+2=4) had long been understood as a type of certain truth, as distinct from the merely

98 Fiering argues that seventeenth-century Harvard ethics texts taught that pagan ethics could be appropriate and useful for regulating external behavior. Some believed that Natural knowledge was suitable for guiding the outer man, but for inner guidance and reformation supernatural revelation was a necessity.” However, this was a matter of debate in New England. Fiering points to Theophilus Golius and Bartholomaeus Keckermann as sources for this perspective at seventeenth-century Harvard. Mather was in all likelihood influenced by these sources. Fiering, Moral Philosophy at Harvard, 16.

99 Mather, Man of Reason, 4.
probabilistic knowledge given by empirical evidence.\textsuperscript{100} It required neither the special revelation of the Bible nor spiritual insight granted by the Holy Spirit. It only required unbiased intelligence. Mather believed “it is a Rule engraven by the Hand of GOD, upon the Reason of Mankind.”\textsuperscript{101} These were “Common and Innate Principles.” Mather wrote, “There is an Eternal Difference between Good & Evil; between Right and Wrong. ‘Tis constituted by GOD: GOD has inwrought those Principles in the Reasonable Spirit of Man.”\textsuperscript{102}

In theory, the deist should be able to agree with Mather’s conclusions if he were sufficiently intelligent. For example, in the treatise Mather introduced every “MAXIM OF REASON” with the words “Hear now my Reasoning.” His phrasing echoed the distinctive voice of the Old Testament prophets who would typically begin with the phrase “Hear now …,” and the pronouncements of God would follow.\textsuperscript{103} Here, Mather


\textsuperscript{101} Mather, Man of Reason, 16, 17. One could reasonably conclude that Mather got the idea that certain theological principles could be mathematically proved from reading Samuel Clarke’s Boyle Lectures (1704-5) in which Clarke sought to prove the existence, omnipresence, omnipotence, omniscience, infinite wisdom, and beneficence of the Creator, precisely as in a proof in Euclidean geometry. Samuel Clarke, “A Demonstration of the Being and Attributes of God,” in A Demonstration of the Being and Attributes of God and Other Writings, ed. Ezio Vailati (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998 [1705]), 1-92.

\textsuperscript{102} Mather, Man of Reason, 5, 6.

\textsuperscript{103} Mather lifted the phrase “Hear now my reasoning” directly from Job 13:6. The phrase “Hear now …” followed by “reasoning” appears only once in the Bible. However, “Hear now …” followed by a prophetic pronouncement occurs much more frequently. See Numbers 12:6, Isaiah 47:8, Jeremiah 5:21, Zechariah 3:8, Ezekiel 18:25, and Isaiah 47:8. Mather’s use of the phrase “Hear now my reasoning” from the book of Job is most peculiar. In this context, Job used the phrase to declare that he would ask God to explain the cause of his suffering. At the end of the book, God severely rebuked Job for using his paltry, feeble, and ineffective human reasoning to question the ways of God.
equated the voice of God with reason. The two terms were virtually interchangeable in his essay. "If we do not keep Reason in the Throne, we go to Dethrone the Infinite GOD Himself. The voice of Reason is the Voice of GOD."\(^{104}\) Certainly, Mather never claimed that pagan religions could save. Nor did he believe that one could come to the grace of God by reason alone. And of course one could not come to specific knowledge of Christ without special revelation. However, his language gave much greater potency to natural knowledge and reason than earlier Puritans like his father.

In 1712, Cotton Mather, at the prompting of a fellow Christian (perhaps himself), felt compelled once again to lash out against deists in a treatise titled *Reason Satisfied: and Faith Established*. A fellow New Englander urged Mather to combat the deists before Deistical Notions grow Epidemical." Mather rehashed many of the same arguments. He again relied on evidence that was available to "all reasonable people."\(^{105}\)

Though he deliberately avoided rehearsing specific deist attacks, the nature of his defense suggests that he was responding to critics who challenged the long-cherished assumption that the Bible accurately recorded historical events. Deists argued that the

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\(^{104}\) Mather, *Man of Reason*, 7. Equating reason with the will of God was common among the rational theologians of England in the seventeenth century. For example, Nathaniel Culverwell, a Cambridge Platonist, wrote, "obey right reason is to be persuaded by God Himself" in his book *An Elegant and Learned Discourse of the Light of Nature* (1652). John Locke also asserted that God would make truth available to man by the power of his natural reason. Man would be able to ascertain by reason that those truths that were contained only in the Bible were written by authors inspired by God. Locke, *Essay*, 14; S. G. Hefelbower, *The Relation of John Locke to English Deism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1918), 70.

\(^{105}\) The anonymous and concerned New Englander wrote, "Some persons, that have Lived under the Ministry of those, whom I reckon some of the most Excellent Ministers in the World, yet quickly discover a Strange and strong disposition, to follow those, who deny the Lord that brought them, & are mighty Forward & zealous to draw others into their pernicious ways. I am astonished to hear some of their Discourses had I been to guess, by them, where they had been Educated, I should have rather thought of Turkey or China." Cotton Mather, *Reason Satisfied*, iii, iv, vi.
Bible was historically unreliable and the resurrection of Christ was an irrational fable. Cotton attempted to defend the authenticity of the Bible and the resurrection by arguing that the events could be historically verified. He did not rely on the presupposition of the sacred status of the biblical account in order to prove the empty tomb. In the earlier two essays, Mather suggested that historical arguments affirmed the validity of the Bible, but he was much more thorough in 1712. If he could offer "irrefutable proofs" for the resurrection of Jesus Christ, he believed all people would be compelled to conclude that the Bible was indeed revelation. —This will prove," he concluded, —That he has reason to be a Christian." 106 Again, Mather sought to defend and interpret the Bible on purely historical and empirical grounds that anyone could affirm regardless of his or her spiritual state or theological persuasion.

Mather began by arguing that sources with no sympathy for the cause of the Apostles, "Roman and Pagan Historians" and Jews, affirmed that Jesus was crucified as the Gospel recorded. 107

[The empty tomb] is a thing so unquestionable, that the Jews themselves make no Question of it. I take a Confession from these perpetual & implacable Adversaries, to carry an Irrefutable Conviction with it. It is very sure, The Body of our JESUS, was on the Third Day missing from the Sepulcher. 108

106 Mather, Reason Satisfied, 9. This type of historical apologetic was standard latitudinarian fare. Reedy, Bible and Reason.

107 Mather, Reason Satisfied, 9.

108 Ibid., 11.
Mather noted that he found it necessary to make sure that extrabiblical sources affirmed the biblical claims. Valid proofs, he believed, could not be self-referential. The testimony of the Bible alone was not sufficient proof.

The historical circumstances also made fabrication impossible.” Mather noted that Roman guards were placed around the tomb and the disciples would not have had the courage or the ability to overpower them and steal the body. The adversaries of Christianity, he observed, could have easily stopped the spread of the faith by producing the body of Jesus. Mather argued that the historical circumstances offer no other possible explanation, making the case for the resurrection Incontestable."109 He repeated his contention that all skeptics would affirm the validity of the biblical account if they were not — unreasonable.” Once again, he made the claim that if people did not believe in the historical accuracy of the biblical account, the fault lay with their intellect or irrational disposition rather than a shortage of evidence. The historical evidence for the resurrection of Christ was comparable to other commonly accepted historical events.

You Believe that there were Caesars at Rome, and that there are such Countreys & Persons as you never saw your selves, nor have seen any others that have seen them. … You have much greater proof of a Risen Savior, than you have of many, many other Things, which yet you Believe without the least scruple in the world.110

He did not resort to spiritual knowledge. Historical evidence alone affirmed the events of the Bible.

109 Ibid., 15.
110 Ibid., 27.
Mather likely picked up his historical defense of the New Testament from sources such as Hugo Grotius and Tillotson, who defended the historical accuracy of the biblical account by examining the credibility of the witnesses. The latitudinarian historical defense of the Bible was part of a growing trend towards probabilistic thinking. The Anglicans who defended the Bible by the use of historical evidence argued that the evidence could lead to high probability but not absolute certainty. Apparently, Mather never picked up this nuance. He maintained the language of certainty while using historical evidence.

Though in some passages he was confident that he could prove the validity of Christianity, in other writings, he was ambivalent. He seemed to retreat from or at least temper his praise of the role of reason and evidence in the understanding of the Bible and theology. He warned that those who attempt to refute deism solely on the basis of reason inadvertently aided the heretics by repeating and summarizing their points.

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112 Shapiro, *Probability and Certainty*. The issue of historical evidence is taken up in greater detail in chapter 2 of this dissertation.

113 Middlekauff compares *Reasonable Religion* with *Reason Satisfied* and argues that after reading skeptical and deistic authors, Mather backed away from his advocacy of reason in his 1712 piece. Middlekauff, *The Mathers*, 299.
—Blasphemies.” He feared that a purely reasonable examination of the evidence would not necessarily lead to faith in the Bible but to heresy. It rather Heartens and Hardens, rather than refutes the Blasphemies. And it will, if you, O Tempted Souls, pay them the Honour of too formal a Disputation.” Because belief was a spiritual matter, formal disputations alone were not necessarily effective. Here he blamed evil spirits, not defective reason, for unbelief. He advised that the deist (or the Devil, for the two were interchangeable in both Mather’s mind and prose) must be —Immediately Repel[led]” rather than engaged in an honest and lengthy debate.

The most proper thing you can do [to deists] is Immediately Repel them, with Direct and Formal Contradictions to them. A Quick Repute, with the most contrary Acknowledgement of a Risen Saviour, thereby Excited in you, will be the bravest way of Quenching these Fiery Darts of the Wicked One. Your Savior will bless this Method of Resisting the Devil, by causing him, in his own Time, & perhaps in a little Time, to Flee from you.115

The enemy was not only the deist but the Devil. In this passage, the skeptic could be saved not by rational arguments but by divine intervention.116 Here, much of Mather’s argument for the Bible rests on faith, spiritual senses, and experience. He wrote that one knew the Bible was true because of the comfort and joy provided by the experience of being a Christian. Furthermore, the Bible was so beautiful and lovely that it could only be written by God. God was truthful and honest, and he could not compose a false book.

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114 Mather, Reason Satisfied, 29, 30.

115 Ibid.

116 Middlekauff speculates that in the face of the challenges of deism, Mather crafted a pietistic faith that was immune from the challenges of rationalism. Middlekauff argues that Mather grounded the basis of faith in personal subjective experience. Though the interpretation has merit, it does not account for Mather’s continued use of reason and evidence throughout his life. Middlekauff, The Mathers, 305-19.
Mather wrote, “Perhaps we can’t see the Reason: But Reason says, The Scripture is a Revelation from GOD: And Reason says, what God has Revealed, must be Reasonable.” In this convoluted sentence, he stated that reason could only take one so far. The rest of the journey required faith. Yet he could not dispense with the language of reason.

Five years later, Mather in Icono-Clastes (1717) rebuked various forms of “Idolatry” commonly ignored by Christians. Reason is a gift from God, but he warned “Reason is Idolized, When Men will set Reason above Revelation. When Men will Receive nothing that is Reveal’d from GOD, Except they can fathom it by Reason.” He noted that Toland’s Christianity not Mysterious was a prime example of the idolatry of reason. In the face of deist challenges to revelation, Mather fought back with reason and evidence. However, he was not naively optimistic. He knew that unchastened reason was dangerous and could lead to skepticism. This should by no means be interpreted as a rejection of reason. He often restated Locke’s dictum that although Christians do not accept anything against reason, there are certainly many things above reason. At some points, Mather seemed to be enamored by reason. However, he was also aware of its dangers.

Puritans had always tried to strike a balance between reason and revelation.

Historian John Morgan, in his examination of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English

\[117\] Ibid., 16.

\[118\] Mather also cited rituals in worship, the will, and self-righteousness as other sources of idolatry. Cotton Mather, Icono-Clastes (Boston: John Allen, 1717), 15-20, 19. Mather, Reason Satisfied, 15.
Puritan attitudes towards reason and learning, concludes that although Puritans had a high view of the capacities of reason, in regard to its application to faith, they emphasized across the spectrum — first and foremost the distortions which reason would undoubtedly produce in reaching beyond its capacity.” They were concerned that “natural reason could not see through the gloom of its own corruption.” They did not denigrate reason, but they sought to ensure that reason did not stray from its appointed path.” People, Puritans feared, were constantly tempted to expand the role of reason beyond its appointed place. Reason must remain subservient to faith.\(^\text{119}\) Mather, while remaining rooted in his Puritan heritage, spoke of reason with greater confidence at times.

II. *Manuductio ad Ministerium*

A decade later, Mather showed little ambivalence about the role of reason and natural philosophy in the interpretation of the Bible in *Manuductio ad Ministerium* (1726), his guide for the education of young men preparing for the ministry. Historians have noted that one of the most notable features of the handbook is Mather’s rejection of both scholastic and Ramist logic.\(^\text{120}\) Through Ramist logic, New England Puritans understood the world and interpreted the Bible. It reigned in New England until the early

\(^{119}\) Morgan, *Godly Learning*, 41-78, quote on 51.

\(^{120}\) Miller calls the instruction manual a “peculiar balance.” On the other hand, it was a “solemn commendation of the venerable manuals of Puritan theology[.]” On the other hand the *Manuductio* rejected the intellectual discipline out of which they had been written.” Miller, *The New England Mind: From Colony to Province*, 418.
years of the eighteenth century. The scholarship on Ramist logic is extensive. In brief, the logic continually dichotomized an idea until it was broken down into its elemental parts, moving from the general to the specific. For Puritans, this logic was the design of God rather than a particular man-made method of interpretation. It allowed fallen man to recover the image of God to some degree and see the divine order in the universe. In following it, one’s mind conformed to God’s direction. Harvard College taught its young students the Ramist method to interpret all ideas in general, but particularly the Bible. Perry Miller wrote, “In New England, when the Word of God was ‘resolved logically,’ when a text was analyzed into its arguments, it was ‘sown asunder’ by the Ramist method of dichotomy.” Literary scholar Edward H. Davidson notes that in Puritan sermons,


122 Miller, The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century, 128. Lisa Gordis argues that seventeenth-century Puritan pastors tried to minimize the role of interpretation, which in their minds entailed too great a degree of human activity and subjectivity. Though they utilized various “artes” or hermeneutical tools such as Ramist logic, they generally conceived of their activity as “opening” Scripture. The pastor was, they believed, simply uncovering or revealing the clear meaning already present. By using logic, they were merely recovering God’s method. Furthermore, the Holy Spirit guided the reading of the faithful. Thus, they believed that the meaning of the Scriptures should be clear for all. They assumed that any deviation was the result of ignorance, sin, stubbornness, or heresy. Contrary to the accusations of Conformist Anglicans and the Puritans’ own rhetoric of simply adhering to the literal and self-evident meaning of Scripture, Puritan pastors did in fact engage in a hermeneutic consisting of syllogism, deductions, and reason. Thus, their interpretation of the Bible was actually fluid and flexible, though less so than their Conformist counterparts. Edward H. Davidson concurs. He argues that the first-generation of
which were based on Ramist logic, the interpreter typically began with an axiomatic starting point, which in all cases was a biblical text. In Ramist fashion, he separated the passage into component parts and he logically deduced God’s meaning.\textsuperscript{123}

Mather had nothing but “Contempt of the Vulgar Logic, learnt in our Colleges, as a sort of meer Morology (or foolish talking).”\textsuperscript{124} He scathingly wrote, “The most valuable thing in Logic, and the very Termination of it, is, The Doctrine of the Syllogism. And yet it is notorious that … all Syllogizing is only to confirm you in a Truth which you are already the owner of.” Mather asked why anyone would want — to wave any more cobwebs in your Brains, to what purpose is it?”\textsuperscript{125} He went on to argue that logicians merely — exhibit in the pompous Form of an Art, what everyone does by mere Nature and

Puritans in America confidently believed that they were granted an unmediated understanding of the Bible, enabled by the Holy Spirit and Ramist logic. Edward H. Davidson writes, “The colony had been given the Word restored in all its clarity and purity just as it had been completed by the Apostles. To them had been granted a ministry capable of teaching and preaching the truth contained in the Word in ways rarely opened to the children of Men.” Puritans believed they were living in a time of “the fullest enlightenment of the Word after centuries of concealment and fraud.” Historians Bozeman, Allen, and Hughes also argue that Puritans believed that they were returning to a primitive and therefore authentic understanding of the Bible. Gordis, *Opening Scripture*, 19-24, 113-119; Edward H. Davidson, “John Cotton’s Biblical Exegesis: Method and Purpose,” *Early American Literature* 17, no. 2 (1982): 128; Bozeman, *To Live Ancient Lives*; Allen and Hughes, — The Constraints of "True Antiquity."” See also John G. Rechtien, — Logic in Puritan Sermons in the Late Sixteenth Century and Plain Style,” *Style* 13 (1979): 237-58.

\textsuperscript{123} Edward H. Davidson examined how the Puritan pastor and Cotton Mather’s grandfather John Cotton used Ramist logic to interpret the Bible. Davidson, “John Cotton’s Biblical Exegesis,” 119-38.

\textsuperscript{124} Mather, *Manuductio*, 35.

\textsuperscript{125} Mather, *Manuductio*, 36, 37; Jeske, — Cotton Mather: Physico-Theologian,” 593. In a passage that Perry Miller believed made Mather “perhaps the great innovator of his time,” Mather wrote, — The Power and Process of Reason is Natural to the Soul of Man; And those Masters of Reason, who argue the most Rationally, and make the most Rational Researches into the true State of Things, and who make the most Reasonable Measures for their Conduct, and who in all things arrive at the most notable Discoveries, I pray, what sort of Logicians are they? Either they never once read a Page of any Burgesdicius [sic], or else they have unlearnt and forgot all their Vulgar Logic.” Mather, *Manuductio*, 35; Miller, *The New England Mind: From Colony to Province*, 419.
Custom." Mather complained that logic neither advanced nor clarified knowledge. It merely rephrased obvious truths into pretentious and elaborately complicated formulas. Mather complained that this logic brought nothing new to the Bible. Davidson observes in his examination of John Cotton’s sermons that the Ramist method avoided bringing other sources of information into the interpretation of the Bible. Because there was no authority higher than the Bible, Scripture interpreted itself, Puritans thought.127

Mather rejected Ramist logic. But what should take its place? Literary scholar Gustaaf Van Cromphout observes that Mather, in the Manuductio, abandoned Ramist logic in favor of "a clearly Cartesian outlook" or geometrical patterns of thought in its structure and its attitude towards authority, whether ancient or modern.128 A geometric argument makes its starting point a proposition having axiomatic validity. Subsequent propositions are based on the starting axiom. Unlike most Puritan thinkers, Van Cromphout notes, Mather did not make his axiomatic starting point the word of God.129

126 Mather, Manuductio, 35, 36.

127 Davidson, "John Cotton's Biblical Exegesis."


129 For example, the Frech Catholic Bishop Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet began with the axiomatic and certain principle that the Word of God was the source of certain knowledge. Thomas Brattle, in his
Rather, on the first page of the *Manuductio*, he started with a universally accepted and verifiable axiom of life: the inevitability of death. The Contemplation of DEATH shall be the FIRST Point of the Wisdom that my Advice must lead you to[.]

“Mather, through a chain of reason, deduced that if one contemplates one’s death, one would inevitably seek to “live unto God.” Mather certainly believed that the Bible was absolutely true. However, he chose not to use the Bible as his axiomatic starting point as did typical Puritan sermons. Equally Cartesian, according to Van Cromphout, was Mather’s substitution of reason for the ancients as the source of authority. Just as he did in his anti-deist essays, Mather sought to establish a basis for the authority of the Bible on evidence available to all reasonable individuals.

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130 *Manuductio*, 1-2; Mather, like many Christians such as Pascal, was possibly concerned about the mechanistic implications of Descartes’ philosophy. Middlekauff observes that “What distressed [Cotton] about the Cartesian hypothesis was its implication that the universe was self-governing.” However, Van Cromphout notes that rejection of Descartes’ metaphysics did not necessarily mean rejecting the Cartesian method. Van Cromphout, “Mather as Neoclassicist,” 367; Middlekauff, *Mathers*, 284.


132 Writing about the introduction of Cartesian philosophy at Harvard, Fiering writes, “Cartesianism stood for many things, obviously; at Harvard, as elsewhere, it meant rejecting mere textual erudition as the prime means of uncovering truth, and it encouraged the procedure of beginning with self-evident clear and distinct axioms. In metaphysics it meant abandoning the study of inherent qualities in nature and substituting mechanical explanations[.]” Fiering, *Moral Philosophy at Seventeenth-Century Harvard*, 241.
Perhaps one reason why Mather rejected Ramist logic and argued in a Cartesian mode in the *Manudctio* was his growing concern with the challenges of skepticism. Historian Rick Kennedy argues that leaders of late seventeenth-century Harvard adopted Cartesian logic in response to their growing fears of the threat of skepticism. Ramist logic emphasized logic as the basis of a dialectic. The ultimate purpose of logic was—simply discoursing well.” According to Ramist logic, a dialectic resolved itself when one side won the argument. Thus, all questions regarding truth could come to an end that was both certain and satisfying. As Walter Ong observes, “You knew you were right because no one could prove you wrong.” Ramist logic was quite useful to Puritans in a post-Reformation world. Protestants and Roman Catholics engaged in debates about the interpretation of the Bible and authority, but both sides accepted fundamental ground rules such as the inspiration and unique status of the Bible. However, Ramist logic had little effect on skeptics who denied the supernatural status of the Bible. Kennedy writes, “Ramist logic, like Aristotelian logic, had no epistemology capable of answering the increasingly prevalent skepticism of the seventeenth century and could not ‘win’ debates against the skeptics.” Perhaps Mather was preparing future pastors for a day when one could not take for granted that all assumed that the Bible was the word of God. The next

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135 Kennedy, “Puritanism and Cartesian Logic,” 563-64.
generation of students would need arguments that would begin with universally accessible axioms.

Perry Miller argues that Mather replaced the Ramist mode of thinking with a Newtonian understanding of the world. Mather declared in the *Manuductio*, Experimental Philosophy is that, in which *alone* your Mind can be at all established.¹³⁶ Mather wrote that the empirical examination of the world—if well pursued, would Compel you to come in to a Strong Faith, wherewith you would give Glory to Him, on all Occasions.¹³⁷ Of course Newtonian natural philosophy was not a method of interpretation analogous to Ramist logic. By a Newtonian method, he intended that the Bible should be empirically interpreted, examined, and verified by the light of independent fields of study such as natural philosophy.¹³⁸ By contrast, years earlier, in 1709, Mather, in his *Man of Reason*, argued that spiritual and moral truths were as intuitively certain as mathematical principles. In the *Manuductio*, he shifted and


¹³⁷ Mather, *Manuductio*, 51. Jeske argues that Mather was following the model of John Ray’s *Wisdom of God*. However, unlike Ray, who eliminated the providence of God, Mather still referred to God’s occasional intervention. Jeske, “Cotton Mather: Physico-Theologian.”

¹³⁸ According to Jeske, the Ramist view of the world held that the universe was a theophany and that man’s epistemological contact with nature was quasi-mystical. Jeske argues that Mather abandoned this numinous universe and replaced it with a universe of natural laws in which God was merely a distant figure. In Boyle’s *Wonderful Works of God Commemorated* (1690) and *Winter Meditations* (1693), Mather found a useful work on which to model his own scientific treatises. He also read Bentley’s *Confutations* and Whiston’s *New Theory* in the 1680s and 1690s. Jeske argues that through the natural theologians, Mather found a more positive stance towards nature than other Puritans had shown and these works inspired the *Biblia Americana.* Jeske, “Cotton Mather: Physico-Theologian,” 585-86, 592.
grounded the certainty of Christian revelation on the empirical evidence of the physical universe.\(^{139}\)

Cartesian and Newtonian modes of thought are clearly not entirely compatible. Cartesian philosophy generally valued pure abstract reason, while Newtonian thought trusted empirical evidence. However, Mather borrowed from both modes of thought without being entirely consistent. By turning to them, Mather seemed to be seeking a way to ground his interpretation of the Bible on a basis of knowledge independent of the Bible and spiritual experiences. He was seeking to understand Scripture by universally accessible standards.

In doing so, Mather was following a larger trend in the changing conception of the Bible. Historian Peter Harrison argues that the emergence of early modern science in the seventeenth century developed in conjunction with a positive reappraisal of the scientific value of the Bible. Protestant scientists read the Bible and the natural world in tandem as complementary texts. Furthermore, Harrison notes that early modern Protestant exegesis witnessed a marked retreat from symbolic and allegorical readings of Scripture towards a more literal treatment of the Bible. That is to say the Bible became understood more as storehouse of verifiable facts rather than mystical or spiritually

\(^{139}\) Mather’s shift from a Cartesian to a Newtonian or evidentialist mode of thought was consistent with similar trends occurring in England. Leslie Stephen notes that in the early decades of the eighteenth century, the terms of the debate between the deists and Christian apologists changed from "internal" to "external" evidence. By internal, Stephen meant abstract arguments based on universal absolutes such as geometry. By external, he was referring to arguments based on empirical evidence such as history or the observations of natural philosophy. Stephen writes that by the 1730s, the controversy tended to "pass from abstract reasoning to more definite issues of fact." He goes on to write that the "external evidences gradually assumed more prominence than the internal, and in the next generation the argument became almost exclusively historical." Leslie Stephen, *History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Harbinger Books, 1962 [1876]), 1: 143.
granted insights. Likewise, Mather moved away from the spiritual, allegorical, and typological readings, which he wrote about in the *Magnalia Christi Americana*.

Several historians have noted that beginning in the late seventeenth century, Mather became increasingly interested in and influenced by the methods of natural philosophy. His interest in reason and evidentiary apologetics is clear in his three anti-deist essays. Scholars Raymond Stearns, Michael Winship, and Jeffery Jeske note that as Mather explored the new sciences, he increasingly understood the universe as mechanical, empirical, and less mysterious. Otho T. Beall, Jr. claims that by 1712, “the supernatural explanation of various phenomena was not always satisfactory to him, and he was moving toward a greater objectivity.” Jeske argues that Mather’s interest in science was essentially secularizing and leading to a mechanistic view of the world and deism. Mather’s positive reception of the physico-theologians unintentionally facilitated Puritan orthodoxy’s evolution towards mechanism and Deism.”

However, the extent to which Mather’s newfound rationalism challenged and threatened his more traditional view has been a matter of some dispute. Winston Solberg and Pershing Vartanian believe

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140 Peter Harrison, *The Bible, Protestantism, and the Rise of Natural Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). Similarly, George Marsden observes that the rise of early modern science strengthened Protestant confidence in the perspicuity of Scriptures. He writes, “To Protestants it seemed evident that the principles for knowing truth in one area of God’s revelation should parallel those of another area. Nature and Scripture were analogous, as Bishop Butler had argued so persuasively in his *The Analogy of Religion, Natural and Revealed* (1736). Neither our view of nature nor our view of Scripture is complete or perfect but in each we can be assured that we know clearly something of the truth. Nature and Scripture were equally perspicuous.” George Marsden, “The Bible, Science, and Authority,” in *The Bible in America: Essays in Cultural History*, ed. Nathan O. Hatch and Mark A. Noll (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 80.

that rationalism and piety complemented one another in Mather’s thought. Vartanian writes, “Piety and rationalism never competed for dominance in Mather’s thought. They emerged together and matured together and each was rooted in the other, thereby exerting a reciprocal influence upon the other.”

Not coincidentally, just as Mather examined the Bible rationally and scientifically, he also examined the natural world though the Bible. In *The Christian Philosopher* (1721) Mather published arguably the first work of natural philosophy written in America. He attempted to consolidate and digest the recent discoveries of natural philosophy and show how it glorified God and confirmed the Bible’s authority. In the introduction, he declared that the book “will demonstrate that [natural] Philosophy is no enemy, but a mighty and wondrous incentive to religion.” He wanted to exhibit —the

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142 Some have argued that Mather was moving towards a rational and deist understanding of the world. Others have argued that Mather felt deep anxiety about the theological implications of a mechanical universe, while some scholars have argued that Mather’s piety and scientific explorations were mutually reinforcing. Miller and Middlekauff believe that Mather was frightened by the implications of blind mechanism. They argue that Mather countered the threat of mechanism with a properly understood science. Newton after all believed that God was necessary in his model of the world. According to Middlekauff, Mather cultivated an emotional religious sensibility safely beyond scientific evaluation. Winship argues that Mather never made peace with Newtonian cosmology. Rather, he wrote in the objective mode of the new sciences to maintain the respect of the Royal Society. John E. Van De Wetering writes about the scientific writings of Mather’s American Puritan peer Thomas Prince. Prince attempted to integrate a Newtonian mechanical model with a traditional Puritan idea of an active God. Ultimately, Prince’s synthesis failed, for he reduced God to the limitations of narrow physical laws. Van Cromphout, like Solberg and Vartanian, argues that Mather remained essentially orthodox despite his exploration of the new sciences. Miller, *The New England Mind: From Colony to Province*, 440; Middlekauff, *The Mathers*, 279-304; Jeske, *Cotton Mather: Physico-Theologian”; John E. Van De Wetering, *God, Science, and the Puritan Dilemma,”* *The New England Quarterly* 38, no. 4 (1965): 494-507; Winship, *Prodigies, Puritanism, and the Perils of Natural Philosophy”; Van Cromphout, *On Mather as Neoclassicist”; and Pershing Vartanian, *Cotton Mather and the Puritan Transition into the Enlightenment,”* *Early American Literature* 7, no. 3 (1973): 217.

143 According to Solberg, Mather was the first American to write a book of natural philosophy with the design argument as its thesis. As such, he was the primary conduit by which American colonists learned about the new sciences. Solberg, *Introduction,”* xxi, xxxvi.
works of the Glorious GOD in the Creation of the World.”144 As he stated in the
Manuductio, natural philosophy would strengthen faith by verifying revealed religion. In
the Philosopher, Mather explained the natural world from a Christian perspective.
However, his interest in natural philosophy had a reciprocal effect. Science altered the
way Mather interpreted the Bible in the "Biblia Americana."145 He also drew upon other
sources of knowledge such as philology, geography, and history to ground his
interpretation.

III. "Biblia Americana"

In 1693, after concluding that none of the available biblical commentaries offered
sufficient illustrations or explanations, Cotton Mather resolved to write his own and
dedicated himself to writing at least a few lines every morning. He tried to gather the best
illustrations of sacred texts from "the scattered Books of learned Men” by keeping
current with European scholarship. By plodding along at his gargantuan task, he hoped to
compose "one of the greatest Works that ever I undertook in my Life.” In several large

144 Mather, Christian Philosopher, 7, 17.
145 Miller, The New England Mind: Colony to Province, 441; Otho T. Beall, Jr. and Richard
Shryock, Cotton Mather: First Significant Figure in American Medicine (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins
University Press, 1954), 50. Solberg, "Introduction,” xxxvi. The "Biblia’s” observations were so steeped in
natural philosophy that Mather sent portions of his "Biblia” commentaries as part of his early
correspondence with the Royal Society. These letters were later published and collectively titled the
"Ciosa Americana” (1712-1724). Mather’s approximately 82 letters to the Society demonstrate his wide
ranging interest in modern natural philosophy. He reported on issues ranging from medicine to zoology to
meteorology. George Lyman Kittredge, "Cotton Mather’s Scientific Communications to the Royal
Society,” Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society 26 (1916): 18-57. See also David Levin,
"Giants in the Earth: Science and the Occult in Cotton Mather’s Letters to the Royal Society,” William and
Mary Quarterly, Third Series 45, no. 4 (1988): 751-70 and Theodore Hornberger, "The Date, the Source,
bound volumes of blank books, he wrote his dense script in double columns to maximize his use of space, often leaving blank pages so that he could elaborate and update his entries at a later date. As he came across new material, he inserted glosses in the margins and pages of various sizes into the bound books.

Beginning in 1706, he made several failed attempts to try to find a publisher. Part of the problem was that Matthew Poole and Matthew Henry had already published biblical commentaries in England in 1676 and 1708, respectively. But the manuscript suffered from a more serious problem: its monstrous size — six volumes of more than a thousand pages each. Publishing such a work would have been an enormously expensive venture, and Mather could not find a publisher willing to invest in the project. Though deeply discouraged, Mather never gave up entirely on the project. He continually revisited and revised his manuscript, adding to its size, updating it as he encountered new discoveries and philosophies from Europe. His son, Samuel Mather, recorded that Cotton continued to labor over his biblical commentary until his death in 1728.

Even in his biblical commentary, Mather was haunted by the challenges of skepticism. As in the anti-deistic essays, Mather addressed on evidentiary grounds recent skeptical questions about the Bible’s authenticity. Though in some writings, such as

146 Mather promoted his “Biblia” in his Magnalia Christi Americana (1702), Bonifacius (1710), and A New Offer to the Lovers of Religion and Learning (Boston: Thomas Fleet, 1714).

147 Solberg, “Introduction,” xxxix.

Icono-Clastes and Reason Satisfied, Mather related some caution and ambivalence over the use of reason and evidence, at other times, he was quite certain that disciplines such as natural science and history could both affirm the divine nature of the Bible and aid in its proper interpretation. One can see the same tension in the “Biblia.” Interpreting the Bible through these fields of knowledge yielded mixed results. In his mind, empirical evidence strengthened traditional views of the Bible. Any reasonable person would be compelled to admit the Bible’s true nature. However, at times, the evidence of history and natural science forced Mather to abandon some older certainties about Scripture and adopt new interpretations that skirted close to the claims of the skeptics he was fighting.

IV. The Bible and Natural Philosophy

Mather’s commentary on Genesis was one of the largest. It is nearly 430 folio pages. Mather devoted so much space to Genesis possibly because the Mosaic creation account (Hexaemeron) became the locus of much debate as the new cosmologies potentially challenged a literal interpretation of the creation narrative.149 Mather’s skeptical interlocutor asked whether “the first chapter off [sic] Genesis [is] agreeable to the modern discoveries?” Mather answered, “Fake what Mr. [Thomas] Pyle has given

149 Hornberger argues that in his commentary on Genesis, Mather’s corpuscularian (atomistic) creation account, which he had inherited from Edmund Dickinson, gave way to the Newtonian cosmologies of William Whiston, Thomas Burnet, Richard Bentley, and Thomas Pyle. In contextualizing Mather’s commentary on Genesis, Hornberger illustrates how the scientific debate then raging in Europe increasingly influenced Mather’s biblical hermeneutic. Theodore Hornberger, “Cotton Mather’s Annotations on the First Chapter of Genesis,” University of Texas Publications 26 (1938): 113-21.
us.” Thomas Pyle, in his *Paraphrase with Short and Useful Notes on the Books of the Old Testament*, argued that Moses’ account of creation was consistent with Newtonian cosmology. According to Mather the opening verses of the Genesis creation account actually anticipated recent discoveries. Genesis 1:6-8 briefly describes the separation of land from water and the creation of the heavens. Pyle’s interpretation of the opening verses of Genesis, which Mather copied for his manuscript, reads as follows:

Within the Space of one Natural Day more, this Separation was brought to such a Degree of Perfection, that the main Bulk of the heavier Fluids were sunk down towards a Center; while a considerable Number of their lighter Parts remaine’d suspended above at some distance from the Earth, in Clouds or Vapours, kept up there, and continually supplied by Exhalations form the waters of the Earth; so that there appeared between these Clouds above, and the great Collection of water below, a free, lightsome and open Space, stretched, as it were, over the whole Surface of the Earth. And this is what we call the Firmament, or Air, or Atmosphere, or Heaven.

Pyle liberally read Aristotelian and Newtonian science into the creation account. Heavy matter sunk while lighter material such as water and air rose. Although God was still the omnipotent creator, He utilized secondary causes. His act of creation adhered to the known laws of physics, even while utilizing His supernatural powers.

Making a typical physico-theological argument, Pyle also argued that the celestial motions testified to the evidence of God. He stated that the world was too perfectly


designed not to have a benevolent and omnipotent creator. The "power of gravity" and the "system of the universe" were an invincible argument for the design of a God.” Regarding the planets, he believed the gravitating power in each of those is exactly proportional to their matter.” No one could believe that the world was nothing but accidental concretion of Atoms, that [had] happily fallen together.”

Pyle maintained that the creation took place in six literal days. He elaborated on the means God utilized according to the standards of modern science and never challenged the Genesis account. Mather could easily embrace Pyle’s ideas. However, in the minds of some physico-theologians, interpreting the Hexaemeron through the lens of Newtonian science raised some serious problems with a six-day creation account.

Mather found William Whiston, an Arian and successor to Newton in the Lucasian Chair of Mathematics, both compelling and troubling. In his New Theory of the Earth (1696), Whiston also attempted to reconcile the biblical creation with natural philosophy. However, his analysis challenged the accuracy of the biblical account. Mather summarized Whiston and prefaced the section with the evasive disclaimer, “You must not expect, that I declare myself, how far I concur, with every Point, that shall be

152 Cotton Mather knew that a mechanical view of the universe could lead one to dismiss the necessity of God altogether. If one could explain the workings of the world through secondary causes, why should one need a primary one at all? He summarized Pyle. “THE World did not exist from all Eternity, by necessity of nature, nor did it or any part of it come into being by chance and fortune, but all things whatever, whether visible or invisible material or immaterial were in the beginning created by the power of that infinitely wise God and all sufficient being whom we call God.” In the commentary, Mather attempted to refute those who would use the Newtonian view of the world to deny the presence of God. He anticipated such dangers and argued that God was still the ultimate cause. Mather, “Biblia Americana,” Reel 10, vol. 1, 55.

153 Ibid.
offered. And I will also leave you, to the same Liberty that I take for myself.” Mather protected himself from orthodox critics who might accuse him of endorsing heterodox interpretations. However, he carefully did not reject Whiston’s interpretation.

Whiston suggested that the chaos of the first day of creation referred to the Earth alone. The rest of the cosmos beyond the moon was created earlier, in an event not covered by Moses. If the heavens were created on the first day, Mather wondered (along with Whiston) how celestial bodies such as stars and planets could travel such immense distances in a few hours on the first day. Mather also noted that the creation account implied a Ptolemaic model of the universe, which Mather noted was no longer current.

The chronology of the creation account also seemed, to Mather, to lack structure and balance. God allocated five days for the creation of the Earth. However, he created the entire cosmos, which was considerably larger, in only one day. Mather, with the physico-theologians, argued that the order and elegance of the universe testified to an intelligent and purposeful creator. But Mather argued that the chronology of creation, if interpreted literally, would “bee look’d on as Marks of Unskillfulness, Foolishness, & Imprudence, in parallel cases; & for which Meer Men, could not escape the most severe and Indecorous Imputations.” Though creation seemed to lack organization and proportion, Mather was willing to concede that God’s power was not limited to time constraints.  

154 Ibid., 69.

155 Ibid., 71.
However, Adam’s work posed more difficult and intractable challenges for both Whiston and Mather. There seemed to be too much activity on the sixth day for one man. On that day, God created all the terrestrial animals and Adam, commanded Adam to name all the animals, put Adam into a deep sleep, and formed Eve from a rib. The serpent tempted Eve, who then tempted Adam, and the two were expelled from the Garden. According to the Bible, all this occurred in one day. Mather wrote

> Now, tho’ God almighty can do all things in what Portions of Time Hee pleases, Man cannot. Hee must have Time allow’d him, in Proportions to the Business, that is to bee done. But behold here, Business enough allotted into the Sixth Day, to require no small part of a Year, for the dispatch of it.\(^\text{156}\)

Even if God created Adam in full maturity and knowledge of his assigned tasks, the number of duties would take years, not a day. God could make the cosmos in one day, even if it challenged the conventions of Newtonian science and appeared to lack proportion. However, Adam was just a man. Mather reasoned that this problem offered a serious challenge to the Hexaemeron. Mather wrote, “It is an Indecent Thing to Recur unto Pure Miracle, for the Acceleration for them, into the space of Twenty Four Hours … now already Stated and Fixed in the World.”\(^\text{157}\) Whiston concluded that creation could not take place in six literal days. He speculated that the Earth had not set into its current rotation until after the fall of man on the sixth day. Thus, there was no need to understand a day of creation as lasting twenty-four hours. Interestingly, Whiston and Mather were following the idea earlier put forth by La Peyrère, who argued that —— those things

\(^{156}\) Ibid., 72.

\(^{157}\) Ibid., 72.
which are set down in the second chapter” could not have been completed in one day —much less in the second half of the sixth day.” (It seems likely that Whiston used La Peyrère as a source.) Such notions got La Peyrère thrown in jail and his books burned.\textsuperscript{158}

Yet years later, Mather was considering them positively.

Whiston attempted to preserve a Protestant understanding of the integrity of the Bible while adhering to natural philosophy. He was disturbed by those who prioritized zeal, faith, and piety rather than sober reason in their interpretation of Scripture. Whiston wrote with disgust, —So far can Ignorance, Prejudice, and a misunderstanding of the Sacred Volume carry the faith, nay, the zeal of Men!”\textsuperscript{159} Mather did not include this section in his paraphrase. Did Mather squirm with embarrassment when he read those words? Historians have argued that Mather yearned to be accepted by the intellectual elite of London and would not want to be accused of backwards ignorance.\textsuperscript{160}

Yet Whiston’s interpretations skirted very close to heterodoxy.

Whiston did not believe that the Bible was necessarily wrong. Rather he believed that Scripture was misinterpreted by modern readers. The writers of the Bible were inspired, argued Whiston, but they were men of their times. As such, they inherited the limitations and ignorance of their culture. They were not versed in the recent advances of


\textsuperscript{159} Whiston, William. \textit{A New Theory of the Earth: From Its Original, to the Consummation of All Things} (London: Fleet-Street, 1737 [1696]), 64.

\textsuperscript{160} Kittredge, —Scientific Communications to the Royal Society” and Winship, —Perils of Natural Philosophy.”
natural philosophy. He argued that the Bible "accommodates itself to the vulgar apprehensions of men." They wrote about phenomena as they perceived it and could best describe to their immediate audience. "Unless overruled by that Spirit," their descriptions "accommodated their expression to the notions and apprehensions of the generality of mankind." Whiston of course believed that the Spirit did not teach the inspired writers modern physics. Ancient writers wrote from a perspective of ignorance. One can imagine that Mather saw glimpses of Spinoza in the writings of Whiston.  

Mather's concluding comments on Whiston reveal deep ambivalence. "I leave it unto men of Judgment." However, he went on to caution that Whiston's interpretations of creation "do certainly make too bold with the Mosaic, and inspired history thereof."

Slight censure then immediately became moderate praise. "It were a Noble, and a Worthy Work; to illustrate that History, and rescue it from the praemumoous Glossses, that many Neotericks have made upon it." Whiston advocated an interpretation at odds with tradition. Mather could neither bring himself to condemn it, nor fully embrace it.

Mather slid, with slightly less ambivalence, towards a naturalistic and historical explanation of the miracle of the sun standing still in the sky in his discussion of Joshua. John Calvin and most English authorities argued that the passage could only be interpreted literally. But skeptics such as Spinoza and La Peyrère denied that the

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162 Mather, Biblia Americana,” Reel 10, vol. 1, 76. The term "Neoterick" refers to someone who studies modern things and disparages traditional ideas.

163 Other Protestant English authorities also supported a literal interpretation. Archbishop James Ussher, Matthew Poole, Matthew Henry, Simon Patrick, and William Durham insisted that the passage
recorded event described an actual miracle. Hugo Grotius argued that the miracle should be interpreted as a metaphor. The sun did not stand still, he submitted, because the Hebrew expression used in the passage denotes the longest day of the summer or the summer solstice. Mather called Grotius’ opinions “scandalous.” However, Mather did not simply adhere to a miraculous interpretation. Mather noted that he was intrigued by the solution offered by Stephen Nye, who in his Discourse concerning Natural and Revealed Religion (1696) argued that the account of the miracle referred to a poem rather than a literal account. Summarizing Nye, Mather wrote, “It is not said by the Historian, that Joshua commanded the Sun and Moon to stand still, but hee recites the Words of a certain book (supposed to bee a Poem) written by one Jasher; in which the Poet … introduces Joshua, as requiring the Sun and Moon to stand still.” Agreeing with Nye, Mather wrote that the poetry “should not bee strained further than it will naturally bear; that is, not be understood as a real matter of fact.” Poetry, being a different genre than history, needed to be interpreted by different standards, argued Mather. Thus the poetic genre of the record liberated Mather from the burden of reconciling the biblical account with modern cosmology.

On an earlier page, in his attempt to explain the issue of the sun, Mather referred positively to Robert Jenkins. Summarizing Jenkins, Mather wrote the “scriptures were not written with a design to teach us natural philosophy but to show the way how to live

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164 See introduction.

and be well.” The biblical writers used popular forms of speech, neither affirming nor denying the philosophical truth of them.” They were written for the vulgar conceptions of men.” Explaining Copernicus and Kepler to the ancients would have been impossible. Mather believed that biblical interpretation needed to take into account the culture of the writer. Doing so sometimes sacrificed miraculous accounts.

Yet Mather was neither consistent nor comfortable with this conclusion. Though Mather agreed with this historical hermeneutic on some pages, at other points, he broke with this view. On the same page, he also defended an interpretation of the event as a miracle. Mather cited pagan sources such as the Greek poet Callimachus and Herodotus who recorded instances when the sun stopped. He also noted that Archbishop James Ussher thinks he can demonstrate” that a number of pagan sources independently testify that the sun stopped in the sky in the year, 2555.” These records, Mather believed, referred to the same instance of the miracle recorded in Joshua. Although in this section Mather defended the miracle, interestingly, he sought to ground it in extra-biblical, historical corroborating evidence. However, this small section was written upside down on the lower right hand section of the page suggesting that it was written at an earlier time. It seems that Mather wanted this section to be physically and intellectually distinct from the rest of the page. However, he did not cross it out as he did with many other sections of the Biblia.” Even if new ideas persuaded him to abandon


older interpretations, he seemed to be unwilling to delete it from both the pages and his mind.

On the following page, Mather again defended miracles. He noted that the biblical account presciently implies a heliocentric model of the universe. In reality, the sun does not move across the sky but the orbit of the Earth makes the sun appear to move. Whiston and Spinoza argued that the biblical writers naturally perceived the events within their own primitive perspective. Similar to the argument made by Pyle, Mather argued that the description of the sun standing still in the sky anticipated and contained the heliocentric conception of the universe. If the writer had a geocentric view, explained Mather, then Joshua would have only commanded the sun to stand still. But he commands the moon to halt as well. —Why did he command the moon to stand still as well as the sun?" Mather asserted that if the Earth ceased to rotate, the sun as well as the moon would appear to stand still. Thus, Mather argued that the motion of the Earth was implied in the biblical passage and proved the inspiration of the Bible.\textsuperscript{168}

Mather seemed both indecisive and tortured. In order to reconcile some biblical passages to modern cosmology, he had to argue that they were written in a historical context that was ignorant of modern science. Thus they were not lies, but they were true from the perspective of the writers. However, this seemed to erode the veracity and dignity of the biblical account. Furthermore, such interpretations leaned uncomfortably close to heretics such as La Peyrère, Spinoza, and Hobbes. Mather was never at ease with

\textsuperscript{168} Ibid., 284.
such views and he kept affirming the literal and miraculous nature of the biblical events as well.169

V. Prisca Theologia, the Bible, and Pagan Mythologies

Just as Mather used history to explain away apparent discrepancies between the Bible and modern science, he also used historical evidence to affirm the authenticity of the Bible. In *Reason Satisfied*, he briefly argued that pagan religions contain some truths that are Christian in origin.

Radiant jewels in the cabinet of the Christian Religion, all of these! There is indeed nothing Excellent in any Religion, but it was Borrow‘d from the Christian Religion and is an Ingredient of it. These doctrines have a native Evidence. And their being Ours, may much Endear our Glorious Religion unto us.170

Mather was drawing on a long tradition that the best pagan writings were influenced by "ancient theology” or *prisca theologia*. *Prisca theologia* was developed first by Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Lactantius, and Eusebius to show that ancient religions and

169 Early modern Reformed Protestants were not all necessarily opposed to the notion that God accommodated his message to the cultural limitation of the audience in matters of science. For example, historian R. Hooykaas notes that John Calvin did not adhere to a strict literalist interpretation. Calvin recognized the discrepancy between the Bible and current astronomical belief. Because Moses wrote for common people, Calvin argued, Moses and many of his followers were willing to believe that God spoke in a way that accommodated to the common perception of the people. Therefore, the Bible described the Sun and Moon as moving across the sky when in fact the Earth rotated around the Sun. The Sun and Moon were described as the two great lights. However, astronomers had proven that Jupiter was greater than the Moon. The Puritan-leaning virtuoso John Wilkins, influenced by Calvin, discarded the Bible as a source of factual scientific information and directive for scientific research. Puritan clergymen Nathanael Carpenter defended the “philosophical liberty” against those “precise men” who “will condemne” other points of view without examination, and stick to the plaine letter, notwithstanding all absurdities.” Others, however, adhered to a more literal approach. For example, John Owen, like many, opposed Copernican astronomy on biblical grounds. Though some were open to God’s accommodation, they did not question the validity of the recorded miracles. R. Hooykaas, *Religion and the Rise of Modern Science* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 114-19, 132, 137, 143.

170 Mather, *Man of Reason*, 34.
philosophers borrowed from God’s revelation. Subsequently, others such as Hugo
Grotius and Theophilus Gale continued to carry on this argument. Proponents of prísca
theologia claimed that non-Christian traditions taught vestiges of true religion. Typically,
they alleged that that all human beings were originally given knowledge of true religion
by the Jews or oral traditions going back to patriarchs such as Adam, Enoch, or Noah and
his children. This knowledge was subsequently passed down to Zoroaster, Hermes
Trismegistus, Brahmins and Druids, Orpheus, Pythagoras, Plato, and the Sybils. Over the
ages, they claimed that God’s pure revelation had been corrupted, distorted, and
degraded. 171

Mather wrote that the source of many pagan creation accounts was “originally
from the Scriptures and so those notions will much help to confirm the divinitie of those
glorious writings” and a “collection of passages … illustrate this matter.” 172 The “general
opinion of the ancient gentiles was that the world was made out of chaos, a disordered
and disorganized mass of matter, without form and void.” He discussed ancient historians
and poets such as Phoenician historians, Orpheus, Hesiod, Philo, Thalos, and Homer who
believed that the world began as chaos. To buttress his claim of a common origin, he
examined language. “The Phoenicians expression is by the words Thoth and Bau, which


172 Mather, “Biblia Americana,” Reel 10, vol. 1, 97. Mather was possibly influenced by Theophilus Gale’s Court of the Gentiles (1669-1667) which was in part devoted to proving this thesis. Athanasius Kircher was another possible source of these ideas for Mather. Regarding prísca theologia in America, see Fiering, Moral Philosophy at Seventeenth-Century Harvard, 14-15.
are but a small variation from Tou and Bolu, in the Hebrew text.” “Tou” and “Bolu” were translated in English respectively as “void” and “without form.” These words were used to describe the early Earth in the first sentence of Genesis. Mather believed that the Phoenicians’ use of related words confirmed the historical accuracy and antiquity of the Genesis account.\textsuperscript{173}

Not only did several ancient near eastern civilizations believe the world was formed from chaos, but they also noted that the world began as “night,” according to Mather.

To the Chaos and water the Ancients added another … principle, namely night. That the world had its beginning from night (or erebus) and chaos was an Universal tradition both of such poets as Orpheus, Livy, Hesiod, Homer and others. And such philosophers as Epicurus, Thalos, Plato, and all the Grecians. … Aristotle relates that persons who were skilled in the ancient theology believed all things were made of night.\textsuperscript{174}

Mather believed that ancient references to night were merely a variation of the Hebrew creation story. “What is this but a testimony to that passage in Gen. 1.2 Darkness was on the face over the deep.” He wrote, “The deep is their chaos and the darkness is their night.”\textsuperscript{175}

Mather also noted that many ancient cultures had similar notions regarding the resurrection of the soul. In his commentary on the Book of Job, Mather wrote, “It was a common opinion among the gentiles in old times & so it is at this day through the whole

\textsuperscript{173} Mather, “Biblia Americana,” Reel 10, vol. 1, 97.

\textsuperscript{174} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{175} Ibid.
pagan world that the soul … remains after death.” Mather described several classical references to death and the afterlife.

Another Opinion … among the gentiles was … the transmigration of the soul from one body with another. This was examined not only by the Pythagoreans and Platonists and some of the Stoicks among the Greeks, but so many whole nations and it still is the perswasion among the great parts of the eastern pagans and many other countries.176

The transmigration of the soul was clearly a corruption of the original Jewish belief in the resurrection of the soul. He wrote, “One can not but think this [has] been founded on a tradition among the descendents of Noah.”177 Mather looked beyond self-referential biblical proofs and turned to ancient pagan and historical accounts to affirm the authority of the Bible.

Though Mather saw similarity as evidence of a common origin and proof of the Bible’s authenticity, others drew conclusions that challenged the Bible’s unique status. In his commentary on Leviticus, Mather wrote,

There has been an opinion very plausibly maintained and with a vast variety of learning laboriously defended by such learned men as [John] Marsham, and [Athanasius] Kircher, and [John] Spencer, that the Egyptians were they who had the first rules and rites of religion among them; and that not only the religious rites of other nations, but of the Israelites themselves were derived from the Egyptians.178


177 Ibid., 52.

John Marsham in his *Canon Chronicus* (1672) noted that eight or nine centuries before Moses wrote the Pentateuch, Egyptians established religious rituals and rites similar to those of Israel. Thus, he concluded that Moses derived his laws from the Egyptians. John Spencer in *De Legibus Hebraeorum Ritualibus* (1685) argued that Moses constructed the rites recorded in the Pentateuch to break the primitive Israelites of the polytheism, idolatry, and superstitions that they had acquired from living in Egypt. Lamb and oxen, for example, were sacrificed during rituals because these animals were deemed sacred by the Egyptians. Moses was trying to teach the Israelites that these were no divinities since they could be treated so contumaciously. Furthermore, the fests were instituted as counter attractions to similar ones among the gentiles, not because they were pleasing to God or suited to his worship, but because they were adapted to the childish tastes of the Israelites, argued Spencer.\(^\text{179}\)

Mather could not accept such views. The implications were far too troubling. The deists Toland and Tindale used Marsham’s and Spencer’s reconstructed history to argue that there existed a natural religion above and beyond its particular manifestations in different cultures. Christian revelation was merely a corruption of the original religion.\(^\text{180}\) The notion that Moses borrowed his ideas from pagans rather than the reverse Mather called “a monstrous distortion.”\(^\text{181}\) To counter this view, Mather summarized the work of

\(^{179}\) A century later, F.C. Baur (1792-1860) of the Tübingen school would compare Israel with its neighbors and come to more radical conclusions. See also Paula Findlen, *Athanasius Kircher: The Last Man Who Knew Everything* (New York: Routledge, 2004).


Hermann Witsius, an orthodox Calvinist professor at Leiden and Hebraist of considerable learning whom Mather called an “Excellent man of God.” Witsius, in Aegyptica (1683), agreed that the Israelites repeatedly fell into the superstitions and idolatries of surrounding nations, yet he claimed that the Egyptian and Hebrew rites were in fact different. When they did agree, it was likely based on reason which was universal to man or tradition based on corrupted memories of God’s original institution.182

Mather believed that he used the tools of history to defeat successfully the threatening notion that the Pentateuch was derived from pagan sources rather than the revelation of God. However, the nature of Witsius’ arguments introduced possible cracks in Mather’s defensive wall. Mather called the historical arguments of Marsham and Spencer “plausible.” Witsius (and by extension Mather) argued that the Egyptians in all “likelihood” borrowed from the Hebrews rather than the reverse. Mather could offer no overwhelming or definitive reason why Witsius’ interpretation was better than the alternative. By opening the Bible to historical examination, comparing it alongside other ancient traditions, Mather was treating it like any ancient historical document. This is not to say that he was turning into a follower of Spinoza. He clearly believed the Bible was a unique book. Also, historical arguments could only make probabilistic claims. There is little evidence that Mather embraced or fully understood the nature and limitations of

probabilistic thinking that would become more prevalent in Europe. However, in arguing against Spencer and Marsham and utilizing Witsius, these elements were sneaking into his arguments.

VI. Chronology and the Problem of China

In his commentary on Genesis, Mather also addressed concerns that the historical account might not be true or the chronology inaccurate. During the seventeenth century, the writings of various scholars such as Marino Martini, Athanasius Kircher, and Isaac Vossius brought to light evidence that the ancient Chinese and Egyptians had historical records that predated the biblical account. Credible pagan histories seriously challenged the Bible’s chronology and the belief that it related an encompassing and universal history. Historian Colin Kidd observes that the study of universal history chronology became one of the foremost disciplines of the early modern period. It tackled questions of fundamental importance to the identity of Christendom, and it attracted some of Europe's foremost minds.” It also attracted one of America’s best minds as well.183 Mather confidently wrote, “It may prove a good preparatory unto the illustrations upon the Bible to have the CHRONOLOGY of the Old Testament briefly secured and explained, and exposed unto us.” When writing about the chronology of Genesis, Mather cribbed from Whiston’s A Short View of the Chronology of the Old Testament.184 Whiston confirmed,


with pagan sources, the events recorded in the Bible. The affirmation of the secular and extra-biblical accounts Mather considered proof of the authority and accuracy of the Bible. For example, when discussing the Babylonian Captivity, Mather wrote,

The mathematical canon composed by Ptolemy, the most learned astronomer of all the ancients, who has all along apply’d his accounts unto the … era of Nabonassar, confirmed them … from the eclipses mentioned by the ancient astronomers before him…

Mather noted that the works of Ptolemy and Xenophon confirmed one another.

By the comparison of [Ptolemy’s] canon with Xenophon, and with the sacred writers, we have an exact account of the space during the 70 years captivity of the Jews in Babylon, and the time of its solution under the crown of Persia; which otherwise we had been but very imperfectly acquainted withal. This canon does exactly agree in every thing with the chronology of the Old Testament. It is an authentic record always to be relied upon.185

They both supported the accuracy of the Bible, affirming the traditional belief that the history of the Bible encompassed the history of the entire world.186

Mather took his explorations for chronological evidence as far as China. Possibly influenced by the works of Joseph Scaliger and Samuel Bochart, he attempted to reconcile biblical and pagan history. In 1658, Martino Martini, a Jesuit missionary in

185 Mather, “Biblia Americana,” Reel 10, vol. 1, 47. See John Marsham, Chronicus Canon Aegyptiacus Ebraicus Graecus 8 vols., vol 4. (Londini: Excudebat Thomas Roycroft 1672), 473-76. The “canon” referred to Ptolemy’s Amalgest (AD 136-161). Second century astronomer Ptolemy of Alexandria devised tables to locate the position of the sun, the moon, and the planets. He used the reign of kings to mark his dates. John Marsham, to whom Mather made reference, asserted that without Ptolemy’s canon, historians would not be able to align the various calendars of Babylon, Egypt, Greece, and Rome with Jewish biblical history. In the seventeenth century, some attempted to reconcile biblical chronology with pagan sources. Scaliger’s New Work on the Rectification of the Epochs (1583) was one of the most famous and influential. Anthony Grafton, “Joseph Scaliger and Historical Chronology: The Rise and Fall of a Discipline,” History and Theory 14, no. 2 (1975): 156-85.

China, published an account of Chinese history. However, Martini’s history raised problems. He wrote that China’s first monarch, Fohi, began his rule in 2952 BC. However, in 1654, Archbishop James Ussher (1581-1656) published a chronology of the Bible that dated the creation of the world in 4404 BC and Noah’s flood in 2349 BC. If the dates were correct, the Chinese appeared to have had a continuous history that preceded the flood by several centuries. Isaac Vossius solved this dilemma by using the Septuagint, which allowed for an earlier date for the flood, and thus biblical and pagan history could be reconciled. (Ussher based his dates on the Vulgate.) The challenges of the Chinese chronology seemed to affirm the skepticism of La Peyrère. He argued the flood was not universal and pointed to the Chinese who had a history that preceded the flood as evidence. Martini also doubted the universality of the flood based on his admiration of the Chinese historical records.187

Mather was well aware of the challenges posed by the discrepancy between the Chinese chronology and the biblical history. However, he believed that the Chinese chronology corroborated the authenticity of biblical history. The “Chinese Chronology when rightly understood, is exactly agreeable, to what we draw from the Hebrew Text of the Old Testament.” Mather noted that the astronomical calculations of Giovanni Domenico Cassini (1625-1712), an Italian mathematician and astronomer, showed the Chinese histories to be erroneously dated 500 years too early. Furthermore, Mather noted

that the recorded lives of the kings were unnaturally long. He suggested that the accounts of their lives were “collateral” and not “successive.” Mather confidently concluded,

[I]f the Chinese Annals be thus adjusted, the Length of the Reigns and the Lives of their Monarchs, will very exactly agree, with the Duration of the Lives of Men, in the same Ages recorded in the Sacred Scripture.

By reconciling the Chinese annals with the Bible, Mather concluded that Noah founded China.188 Fohi, the founder of the Chinese monarchy was the same with Noah.” He observed that the adjusted dates of Fohi aligned with the life of Noah.

Chinese histories affirm that Fohi settled in the Province of Xensi; which is the most North-West Province of China, and very near to Mount Caucasus, upon which the Ark rested, & from which Noah must descend, to go thence into China.189

Furthermore, Mather noted parallels between the Chinese accounts and the Bible. Chinese records noted that Fohi was surrounded by a rainbow and “carefully bred up seven sorts of Creatures, which he used to sacrifice, to the Supreme Spirit of Heaven & Earth.” Mather believed that the children of Noah passed these stories onto their children. Of course pagans corrupted the original stories, but the degraded mythologies still contained a kernel of the truth.190 To summarize his conclusion, Mather wrote, “Now

188 In the late seventeenth century, John Webb advanced the thesis that Noah landed in China. Umberto Eco notes that Webb argued that “the Chinese language is the purest version of Adamic Hebrew, and only the Chinese, having lived for millennia without suffering foreign invasion, preserved it in its original purity.” Umberto Eco, Serendipities: Language and Lunacy, trans. William Weaver (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1999), 64.

189 Regarding collateral and successive records of kings, Mather observed, “This made the Ancient Egyptian Chronology so extravagant, until Sir John Marsham found out the Mistake. And Martinius himself allows it in the Chinese History.” Mather, “Biblia Americana,” Reel 10, vol. 1, 48.

these principles of the pagans must need bee Traditional; and the foundation of the
traditions must bee the description which Moses has given of the creation.\textsuperscript{191}

Though the newly “discovered” Chinese history caused many like Martini to modify their
interpretation of the Bible to challenge the universality of the flood and biblical history,
Mather conserved a more typical Puritan interpretation. He was not guided by a purely
empirical spirit. At times, he interpreted the information in a way that supported his
theological loyalties. Nonetheless, Mather felt the need to reconcile the Bible with a
pagan history. Early and medieval Christians assumed the Bible recorded a complete
history of the world. They of course were aware of chronicles of pagan peoples that
recorded times older than the Bible. Augustine and the church fathers simply dismissed
them as liars or demonic creations. Their annals were fantasies and human stories and
thus could not pose a challenge to the divine revelation.\textsuperscript{192} However, by the eighteenth
century, not even Mather could so cavalierly dismiss the challenge of the Chinese history.
He had to contrive, however tortured, an explanation. The Bible and pagan history
needed to be reconciled.

\textsuperscript{191} Mather, “Biblia Americana,” Reel 10, vol. 1, 55. Mather used Whiston as a source for his ideas
regarding the Chinese chronology. Whiston, \textit{Short View}, 60-64. Maureen Farrell writes, “In the Epistle
Dedicatory, Whiston gives due praise to the work of Archbishop Ussher, \textit{Annales Veteri et Novi Testamenti
}(1650-1654). Ussher’s work on the New Testament chronology is based on Bishop Richardson’s \textit{Harmony
of the Four Evangelists}. Whiston claimed to have made further adjustments and improvements on Ussher’s
work so that his version of the Chronology and Harmony was not opposed to any authentic existing
evidence… The chronology, which forms the first part of the book, is an attempt to liken the biblical
timescale to that of sacred and profane authors. Whiston also claims that the Chinese chronology agrees
}(New York: Arno Press, 1981), 296. In order to preserve the authority of the Bible and the universality of
the flood, many in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries attempted to link the identity of Fohi with
Moses or his children. See Van Kley, “Europe’s ‘Discovery’ of China.”

\textsuperscript{192} Richard H. Popkin, \textit{The History of Scepticism: From Savonarola to Bayle} (New York: Oxford
VII. History and Philology

The chronology of the Old Testament contained other apparent contradictions, and Mather knew that the Bible was vulnerable to attacks from critics. He was confident that inconsistencies could be solved with rigorous reasoning and investigation. The chronology of Judah, the brother of Joseph and son of Jacob as recorded in Genesis, presented some particularly difficult challenges. The story appeared to present an impossible scenario. If so, then the biblical account was inaccurate. Mather wrote,

Tis commonly taken, that at the Time of the Selling of Joseph to the Midianites, that is to say, 22 Years before the Descent into Egypt, [Judah] took Shuah to Wife; who successively bare him Three Sons, Er, and Onan, and Shelah. …

In the biblical narrative, Judah’s oldest son, Er, married Tamar. Er died and then Onan, younger brother of Er, married Tamar in his brother’s place, but Onan also died. Rather than waiting for the youngest brother Shelah to come of age, Tamar seduced her father-in-law Judah and bore him Pharez and Zara. Pharez begat Herzon and Hamul. According to one reading of this biblical account, all these events – four generations – took place within a twenty-two year time frame. This was clearly impossible. Mather believed he could save the Bible from the appearance of absurd contradiction and error. The apparent contradiction was based on a linguistic misunderstanding, Mather submitted. The readers of the Bible misinterpreted the Hebrew phrase –at that time.” He explained,

But we must Remember, That tho’ the Words, At that Time, seem to refer unto the foregoing History of Joseph, yett the Expression is of a much larger Extent in the Language of the Scripture; and includes a great Space of Time. Some have observed, the Phrase used Seventeen times in the Bible, Sine determinatâ aliquá temporis notatione. It seems to be little more than a Particle of Transition, or a

common Way of introducing a New Branch of an History, like the English Particle, Now. I may add; It is enough, that a Part of the Occurrences in this History, (the latter Part of them,) fell out, after the Selling of Joseph, and while he was in Egypt. ¹⁹⁴

Under the new interpretation, the events describing the growth of Judah’s family were not restricted to twenty-two years. Throughout the manuscript, Mather looked to philology to come to a more accurate understanding of the ancient texts. By comparing the use of a term or phrase with other examples in the same genre, textual critics believed they were able to find a more precise meaning. The meaning of words needed to be derived from an examination of the text rather than imposed from the modern and therefore foreign culture.

Mather confronted other chronological challenges with biological and environmental explanations as well. Mather wrote,

Ahaz is no more than twenty years old, when he began to reign, he reigns not quite fifteen years before his son Hezekiah begins to reign. Yet Hezekiah himself was not more than twenty five years old. Whereas it will follow that Hezekiah was born when his father was hardly eleven years old.

This history appeared to describe a biological impossibility. Mather began by conceding that “[t]his would be thought strange in our age and climate.” To resolve the contradiction, he suggested a biological and environmental explanation. He wrote, “possibly the inhabitants of those hotter communities come to maturity sooner than in ours.” He speculated that the hot environment of the Middle East allowed its inhabitants to procreate sooner. To support his speculation, he offered an example from the region.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.; Whiston, Short View, 73-74. The Latin citation translates “without any particular reference of time,” and it is taken from James Ussher, Chronologia Sacra, x. 160-62, xi. 186.
Tis very certain that Mohomist in Arabia in the region bordering on Judah, married one of his wives when she was but six years old. And bedded her in two afterwards. But there have not been ... examples in the more northern regions, of as Early Ability for procreation, as that in Ahaz.  

Therefore, Mather concluded that Ahaz, and all people of the Middle East, physically matured sooner than modern people. Mather believed that, based on the evidence, Ahaz could father a child at the age of eleven. He argued that though the narrative initially defied all common sense and reason, the interpreter should be cautious of importing alien values into the interpretation of a text from a different time and people. By drawing an example from people living in Arabia, he assumed that neighboring ancient cultures could shed light on the marital practices and biology of Jews in the time of Ahaz.

Another example of his budding historical mindset is found in his analysis of the Babylonian captivity. He argued that the sacred history was probable because the events were consistent with reliable profane history. Regarding the Babylonian captivity, he wrote, “Moreover the subjection to the King of Babylon for seventy years, was not peculiar to the Jews only, but common with them with all other nations about them[.]” Mather then cited ancient textual evidence from a known fragment of Penosus” that confirmed “the famous expedition for Nebuchadnezzar, in which he conquered all those

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195 Mather, “Biblia Americana,” Reel 10, vol. 1, 52. The story of Ahaz is recorded in 2 Chronicles 28-29; Mather paraphrased the section about Ahaz from Whiston, Short View, 92-93.

196 Mather possibly drew upon a long history of environmental explanations for physical and cultural differences among various groups of people. One of the most important and oldest ancient texts addressing the relationship between man and his physical environment is the late fifth-century BCE treatise Airs, Waters, and Places, a work ascribed to Hippocrates. It had an enormous influence on Plato, Aristotle, Galen, and ultimately on Jean Bodin, John Arbuthnot, Montesquieu, Hume, and Herder. The book argued that differences between various people, animals, and plants could be explained by their physical climate. Benjamin Isaac, The Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 61, 62.
nations[.]” He concluded the matter by writing, “And certainly all these things together place the matter beyond all disputation.”197

Mather also used the tools of historical contextualization to bring light to parts of the Bible that seemed obscure and hard to understand due to historical and cultural distance. For example, Chronicles 4 refers to “his hair as a flock of goats.” This metaphor appeared to make little sense. Mather explained that the reference should have been read as “his hair is like the hair of a flock of goats.” Mather explained that “[t]he people of Judah brought goat hairs for the curtains of the Tabernacle” and made curtains of goat hairs for the Jews.198 Mather pointed to other instances in the Bible when people made fabric out of goat hair. He noted that in other neighboring Middle Eastern cultures, people commonly made cloth from goat hair and it was soft like silk.199 Mather also wrote that in Chronicles 4, there was a reference to “a flock of sheep in which every one bears twins and there is not one barren among them.” His imaginary interlocutor asks how this is possible since “[w]e have no such flocks in our countrys.” Mather answered by referencing the classical historian Pliny, who observed that writers from Egypt recorded that the flocks of Syria were extraordinarily fertile. Because these flocks of the ancient past were in the same region as Israel, Mather reasoned that the surprising fecundity of the sheep recorded in Chronicles was neither an exaggeration nor false. He concluded

that, based on the history of the region, many flocks in the ancient Middle East were more fertile than modern European ones.  

In this manner, Mather believed that physical evidence, natural history, and geography could enhance the interpretation of the Bible and affirm its accuracy. He relied on the scholarship of Samuel Bochart. Bochart, who wrote about animals and geography, Christianized Pliny’s natural history. For example, the book of Job made reference to a massive animal called the Behemoth. Mather wrote, “The Behemoth has commonly been taken to be the Elephant. But the admirable Bochart has demonstrated that it is the Hippopotamus, an amphibious Animal.” He went on at great length to argue that the geography and habitat of the Hippopotamus, on the Nile, made it the most likely candidate. In another work on biblical interpretation, Mather sought to confirm the authority of Moses by locating physical evidence. He referred to “Re liques and Ruines discovered in our Days.” He argued that the discovery of the bones of a mammoth at Calverack, New York, in 1705, were physical and empirical evidence of the giant nephilim living before the flood.

Though this part of Mather’s writing seems ponderous and unimportant, it is significant. Mather responded to the challenges of biblical authority with what he believed to be the incontrovertible and unquestionable foundation of truth: physical and

\[ \text{200} \]  Ibid.

\[ \text{201} \] Mather, “Biblia Americana,” Reel 10, vol. 1, 98.

\[ \text{202} \] See also Cotton Mather, Thoughts for the Day of Rain (Boston: B. Green, 1712), 9-14.

empirical evidence. He needed extra-biblical authorities to confirm the truth of the Bible. Mather believed the Bible was accountable to the standards of empirical authorities. Furthermore, his work implied that the full meaning of the Bible was not self evident to the average contemporary reader. The Bible was a strange book produced by an alien and distant culture very different from early eighteenth-century Europe or New England. History and knowledge of the surrounding cultures shed light on the Bible’s meaning. He was by no means historicizing the texts in the manner of Spinoza or Hobbes, who used the primitive culture of the Jews to dismiss claims of the miraculous in the narrative. However, Mather was arguing that the writers were informed by their cultural milieu. Thus the Bible must be read in their historical context.

VIII. Mosaic Authorship

However, Mather discovered that reading the Bible in its historical context raised as many problems as it solved. The Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch had been contested since antiquity, but it became one of the most troubling controversies of the age as critics, intentionally or not cast doubt on the authority of the Bible. As Mather was aware, men like La Peyrère, Hobbes, Spinoza, Le Clerc, and Simon questioned whether Moses wrote significant parts of the Pentateuch. Mather acknowledged that there were perplexing questions about the matter of authorship. As with other issues in the "Biblia,” his answers were not consistent, suggesting that he was conflicted or his ideas were evolving. When addressing apparent anachronisms, Mather, in some sections, adamantly rejected the notion of later editors or interpolations by resorting to intellectual contortions to defend Mosaic authorship. For example, Genesis 12:6 narrates an apparently historical
event when Abram passed through the Moreh. The author mentioned that, at the time, the Canaanites were still in the land. Hobbes, Spinoza, Le Clerc, and Simon all agreed that this section could not have been written by Moses because the Canaanites were expelled from the land after Moses' death. Mather defended the Mosaic authorship of this verse against “Spinosa” and “Simon, the author of Five Letters.” He escaped from this dilemma by referring to Walter Cross, a London preacher who wrote *The Thagmical Art* (1698). By reconfiguring the Masoretic accent points, Cross retranslated apparently anachronistic verses to support Mosaic authorship. He argued that the Canaanite in the verse actually referred to an individual person rather than the whole nation. Though exotic and farfetched, this solution satisfied Mather.  

Recall that Hobbes, Le Clerc, and Simon believed that Moses wrote only the laws and commandments, and public scribes or a later editor collected and edited his writings. La Peyrère, Simon, and Le Clerc believed that Moses cobbled his accounts together by drawing upon a variety of sources, some of which were pagan in origin. For example, Simon believed that Moses used Chaldean accounts of the Creation and the Flood to construct his account. Le Clerc believed that Moses used ancient memoirs as source material for his writings. These theories did not necessarily contradict inspiration, but in the minds of many, they undermined the Bible’s supernatural status. Some held onto a dictation theory of inspiration.  


Mather wrote that skeptical critics of the Bible would naturally wonder how Moses accurately recorded the most ancient events such as the creation of the world. Mather proposed an explanation. From “Adam to Moses, the course of Tradition in the families of the faithful, ran so easily and … along, as to render the truth of it unquestionable.” An accurate oral history of the events through the generations was plausible and granted the Christian a “greater assurance of Inspiration.” Thus, Moses cobbled together the history of the world through various sources. In trying to posit the means by which Moses could have written his ancient history, Mather seemed to be both arguing against and borrowing ideas from La Peyrère, Le Clerc and Simon. Mather still believed that as the editor and compiler of the oral histories of the people of God, Moses was inspired. He certainly did not imply that Moses used pagan sources. But this was not the dictation theory of inspiration.206

Elsewhere Mather relented and accepted that later interpolators edited the Pentateuch. In his commentary on the book of Numbers, Mather affirmed that for centuries, “Public Scribes” collected the works of Moses in public annals and then extracted, rewrote, and updated sections from these now lost sources to create the Pentateuch, all under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. He wrote that the Pentateuch “long after the death of Moses, underwent Interpolations from the Pens of Inspired Persons.


Ezra, Revising this Book, might add this, of what was done at the Red-Sea, & at the Brooks of Arnon.  

Elsewhere, he wrote that Moses probably only left an abridgement of Ancient History” and a “Naked Chronology of the first times.” He conceded, “There may be certain lesser Passages, or Sentences added at later ages to the Pentateuch, by some Inspired hand. The last chapter of Deuteronomy was evidently so.” However, Mather added that most of the Pentateuch was still written by Moses.

In the final section of the “Biblia,” Mather inserted an essay titled “Ezra, or the Things done by Ezra, for the Restoring and Preserving of the Sacred Scriptures.” Mather wrote that Ezra was the most likely editor of the Pentateuch and other parts of the Old Testament. This freed Mather to abandon his earlier appeals to grammatical acrobatics. In the essay, he conceded that Genesis 12:6 (the reference to the Canaanite) was not written by Moses. This was a radical statement for Mather to make. Mather was not only breaking with his own conservative community but his own claims elsewhere.

He also allowed that Ezra interpolated passages when necessary in order to render the Scriptures as intelligible as possible unto the People.” Mather reasoned that names, places, and customs had become incomprehensible to the post-exilic Jews. Furthermore, Ezra transcribed the Hebrew text into the Chaldee Character” and dropped the “old Samaritan Character, wherein Moses & the Prophets had recorded the Oracles of

207 Mather, “Biblia Americana,” (Numbers 21:14); Quoted from Smolinski, “Authority and Interpretation,” 185-86.

208 Mather, “Biblia Americana,” (Genesis 1:31); Quoted from Smolinski, “Authority and Interpretation,” 189.

209 Mather, “Biblia Americana,” (1 Chronicles 29: 29); Quoted from Smolinski, “Authority and Interpretation,” 190.
God,” because the Jews no longer understood the ancient script. In other words, the original revelation had been altered and edited. This was a radical reversal. One can imagine that he would have shocked conservative Puritans if the “Biblia” had ever been published. Perhaps Mather felt free to write these opinions down because he had given up hope of seeing his work in print.

IX. Conclusion

Mather probably believed that he and other Christians successfully answered skeptical challenges. For every question skeptics brought forth, Mather was able to provide an empirical and reasonable answer. But every defensive countermove also weakened the Bible. Mather did not believe that he and his contemporaries could, like previous generations, assume the sacred status of the Scriptures and then find evidence that confirmed the Bible’s excellence. Though these elements existed in his thought, he lived in a more complicated world. To defend the authority of the Bible against the attacks of skeptics, Mather attempted to buttress the Bible on evidence universally accessible to intelligent and reasonable individuals. In doing so, Mather made the Bible, to some degree, accountable to authorities beyond the Bible and personal spiritual convictions. Sometimes, these authorities forced him to yield older certainties such as

210 Mather, “Ezra, or the Things done by Ezra, for the Restoring and Preserving of the Sacred Scriptures” in “Biblia Americana.”

211 Frei argues that Calvin and the Reformers did not feel the need to defend or prove the authenticity of the Bible on empirical grounds. Rather, Calvin believed that “once we have accepted the authority of Scripture, our belief may be confirmed by discerning the excellence of God’s Word through its simplicity, testifying to a truth greater and more excellent than human art and knowledge can attain.” Calvin, Institutes, I, vii, 1 and Frei, Eclipse, 80.
Mosaic authorship and a literal interpretation of creation. By no means did he become a skeptic. He remained orthodox all his life and still believed that the Bible was God’s supernatural revelation. But his understanding of revelation changed. Mather warned New England Puritans, “Reason is idolized, when Men will set Reason above Revelation.” He did not make an idol of reason, but its influence was growing.

In general, attempts to combat infidelity and ground Christianity on rational and empirical grounds left a mixed legacy. Ralph Cudworth’s *The True Intellectual System of the Universe* (1678) supposedly produced more atheists than it saved from unbelief because most who read it saw that Cudworth’s arguments against atheism and for Christianity were weak and flawed. His description of atheism seemed stronger than those arguments he made for Christianity. In Samuel Clarke’s 1704 Boyle Lecture, he asserted that “no article of the Christian faith is opposed to reason.” He attempted to demonstrate the existence of God and morality by mathematical reasoning. To doubt such laws was as absurd as to question if a square is not double to a triangle of equal base and height.” Anthony Collins charged that no one doubted God’s existence until Clarke tried to prove it. Benjamin Franklin claimed that the Boyle Lectures persuaded him to become a deist. He wrote, “for the arguments of the deists, which were quoted to

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be refuted, appeared to me much stronger than the refutations.”

Perhaps the attempt to reconcile the Bible to the new standards of evidence necessitated that the Bible be either stripped of its mystery or that mystery be significantly reduced.

Cotton Mather (1663-1728) was one of the first Americans to recognize the threat of deism and skepticism. He attempted to defend the Bible’s authenticity by drawing upon recent European discussions of geography, history, chronology, philology, and natural philosophy. Others in America also felt compelled to defend revelation in subsequent years. Jonathan Dickinson (1688-1747) and Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758), twenty five and forty years younger than Mather respectively, to varying degrees selectively appropriated empirical and rational arguments for their cause against the deists. Both began to utilize newly developing notions of epistemology and verifiability, characteristic of their Anglican latitudinarian contemporaries across the ocean.

Barbara Shapiro argues that the idea of knowledge in seventeenth-century England changed, characterized by “an enormous expansion of the ‘factual,’ together with reduced expectations of the certain.” Englishmen across many disciplines began to believe that “in the realm of fact, there are degrees of probability or certainty rather than two sealed compartments, one for truth of demonstration and the other for opinion.” English thinkers concluded that only mathematics and a few logical and metaphysical principles were capable of demonstrable proof in the strictest sense. In the realm of
religion, latitudinarians, in their quest for tolerance and a broad interpretation of Christianity, grew comfortable describing beliefs in probabilistic terms. According to Shapiro, this did not lead to skepticism, but rather to an acceptance of the reality of the contingent nature of knowledge. Latitudinarians began to believe that though some truths, such as self-evident intuitions or mathematical proofs, were “certain” or above doubt, the vast majority of the propositions in the world were merely “probable.” These truths did not rise to the level of “certainty,” yet reason and evidence could be compelling enough to persuade an impartial and rational individual to be morally certain and thus assent to a proposition.  

Utilizing the new epistemology of probability and certainty, Dickinson claimed that he could defend the Bible and revelation on terms even a deist would find persuasive. However, his attempts to convince deists on the grounds of reason and evidence revealed certain inconsistencies and weaknesses in his epistemology. Jonathan Edwards also selectively appropriated and used certain strains of evidential and probabilistic arguments, particularly in historical accounts for the authority and accuracy of the Bible. Edwards, a more erudite, astute, and careful thinker than Dickinson, dealt with the challenges that deists posed to the Bible with greater consistency. His writings show that he was

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sensitive to the new challenges of rational and historical criticism and that he knew they needed to be answered. However, he was unwilling to fight the battle on deistic grounds, for he knew doing so would concede the argument.\footnote{George Marsden, Jonathan Edwards: A Life (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 480.} He did not ultimately place his faith on rationalistic, evidentiary, and probabilistic knowledge. Though he acknowledged the utility of evidential arguments defending the Bible, he placed his faith in the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit.

I. Jonathan Dickinson’s Empirical and Rational Defense of the Bible

In the early eighteenth century, Jonathan Dickinson was one of the most influential Presbyterians in America. He was the founding president of an institution that would eventually become Princeton University, though he only served for one year as he died prematurely. Nonetheless, he made a significant contribution to American and European thought before his untimely death. Jonathan Edwards described Jonathan Dickinson as —\textit{l}earned and very \textit{e}xcellent.” Some across the Atlantic took notice of his intellectual abilities as well. The Scot John Erskine compared the two American Jonathans when he wrote, —\textit{The British Isles have produced no such writers on divinity in the eighteenth century as Dickinson and Edwards.”\textit{218} Erskine’s comment could plausibly

\footnote{Quoted from Edwin F. Hatfield, History of Elizabeth, New Jersey (New York: Carlton and Lanahan, 1868), 352, and Bryan F. Le Beau, Jonathan Dickinson and the Formative Years of American Presbyterianism (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1997), 1; Le Beau argues that Dickinson was one of the most important and influential Presbyterians in the middle colonies in the eighteenth century. Relatively little has been published on him. David Harlan and Leigh Eric Schmidt focus on his role in the Great Awakening. Leslie Sloat writes on Dickinson’s role in the subscription controversy. Le Beau offers the most thorough and substantial treatment of the man and his role in history. The treatment of Dickinson in my chapter discusses how his ideas interacted with and responded to the threat of deism and skepticism.}
be true of Edwards, but such praise of Dickinson strikes the modern reader as polite hyperbole. Nonetheless, Dickinson was respected as a learned American, and he achieved a degree of reputation and influence in his time.

Like Cotton Mather before him, Dickinson sought to defend the authority of the Bible against deists. He aimed his attacks at Hobbs, Blount, Collins, or any of their admirers.219 Dickinson certainly could not rival Mather’s massive erudition or encyclopedic knowledge of the latest European advances. Few Americans could. But he was keenly aware of deistic and latitudinarian discussions. Also like Mather, he produced a series of anti-deistic publications. In 1732, he published The Reasonableness of Christianity in which he attempted to defend the authority of Scripture and the uniqueness of Christian revelation against the critique of rationalistic skeptics.220 Thirteen years later, in 1745, he revisited the theme and expanded his original arguments in Familiar Letters to a Gentleman.221 In both works, he offered a defense of revealed religion based on evidence and reason. Dickinson's works differed from Mather's in at least one important respect. In his two works, Dickinson divided knowledge into two


219 Jonathan Dickinson, The Reasonableness of Christianity in Four Sermons (Boston: S. Kneeland and T. Green, Cornhill, 1732), 83.

220 Le Beau offers a general summary of these two works. Le Beau, Jonathan Dickinson, 85-103.

221 Jonathan Dickinson, Familiar Letters to a Gentleman, upon a Variety of Seasonable and Important Subjects in Religion (Boston: Rogers and Fowle, 1745).
categories: probabilistic and certain. Some propositions, based on evidence and reason, were absolutely beyond any doubt. Other propositions, according to Dickinson, did not meet the threshold of absolute certainty. Instead, they were highly “probable” or very likely to be true. (Dickinson's understanding of the categories of absolute certainty and probability differed from the commonly held beliefs of his Anglican counterparts described by Shapiro. They held that all evidence, except for self-evident principles, was probabilistic rather than certain.)

II. Probability and Certainty

By discussing Christian revelation through the categories of certainty and probability, Dickinson was following European developments. For example, Hugo Grotius attempted to find a rational basis for Christianity in his *Truth of the Christian Religion* (1624, translated into English in 1680 by Simon Patrick). Grotius, following Aristotle's belief that different types of propositions required different standards of proof, concluded that religion required lower standards of proof than mathematical demonstrations or immediate sensations, both of which were the most reliable sources of knowledge. A reasonable person, free from passion or prejudice, should come to sound conclusions about Christianity, believed Grotius. Many of Grotius's arguments were based on the historical accuracy of the Bible, which was particularly important to Dickinson and Edwards. Grotius had such confidence in good history that he argued that the biblical authors who related historical events need not have been inspired by the Holy Spirit. For example, Luke, the author of the gospel bearing his name and the Book of Acts, did not need supernatural guidance. Grotius wrote that there was no need that the [biblical]
histories should be dictated by the Holy Spirit. It was sufficient that the writer had a good memory concerning the things he had seen or that he was careful in transcribing the ancient records.” Sound history, believed Grotius, could rise to the level of certainty of the Bible. Conversely, the Bible could be trusted because it was based on sound history.  

Grotius influenced many Englishmen, such as William Chillingworth, who also believed that religious knowledge, though not certain, warranted belief rather than skepticism. He divided all propositions into three categories: knowledge, faith, and opinion. Knowledge, he believed, was always and certainly true. It included mathematics or demonstrations based on axioms. Faith, less certain than knowledge, did not compel assent but depended on evidence. Opinion resembled faith, but it required less evidence. Chillingworth even attempted to argue that faith had greater certainty than opinion, but he had difficulty distinguishing between the two. Chillingworth claimed that man could never claim “absolute infallibility.” The best he could achieve was “conditional infallibility.” These included mathematical demonstrations. The vast majority of beliefs were in the category of “moral certainty.” “Moral certainty” included the everyday

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assumptions and the conclusions of an impartial mind examining data. Chillingworth believed that Christianity could achieve “moral certainty” at best. The possibility of error always existed in religion. Degrees of certainty depended on evidence, and he believed the evidence in favor of Christianity favored assent.\textsuperscript{223}

John Locke systematized and summarized many of the seventeenth-century intellectual moves towards probabilistic knowledge in religion. In his immensely influential \textit{Essay Concerning Human Understanding}, he argued that there existed three levels of truth. Intuitive knowledge directly perceived the agreement or disagreement between two ideas.\textsuperscript{224} The second kind of knowledge he called demonstrable. This was a strict and rigorous deduction based on intuitions such as mathematics. Demonstrable knowledge was less certain than intuitive knowledge. The third form of knowledge was knowledge derived from the senses. This was less certain than demonstrative knowledge, yet still worthy of assent.\textsuperscript{225}

Anything other than ideas that came by intuition, demonstration, or sensation was “Faith, or Opinion, but not Knowledge.” Thus, Locke believed faith was less reliable than

\textsuperscript{223} William Chillingworth: \textit{Religion of Protestants} (London: E. Coates, 1664 [1638]), 31-32, 33-34, 38; Robert R. Orr, \textit{Reason and Authority: The Thought of William Chillingworth} (London: Oxford University Press, 1967); see also Van Leeuwen, \textit{The Problem of Certainty in English Thought}, 15-32; Shapiro, \textit{Probability and Certainty}, 81. Tillotson similarly argued that faith can come by way of sense, experience, reason, and testimony. He rated each of these four types of arguments on a hierarchy of certainty. Arguments from sense caused the highest and firmest degree of faith. Arguments from experience were less certainty. Reason varied depending on the type of argument. Some types of reasoning were based on necessary first principles and others were based on probabilities. Reedy, \textit{The Bible and Reason}, 31.

\textsuperscript{224} For example, one knew intuitively that blue and green were not the same color.

knowledge. According to Locke’s criterion, ideas derived from historical testimony did not belong to the realm of knowledge but to that of belief or opinion. This of course made Locke look as if he questioned the accuracy of biblical revelation, as it was based on historical testimony and not on intuition or sensation. However, he believed that the biblical accounts were probably true. Locke did not intend to undermine revelation. He argued that the vast majority of ideas did not rise to the level of certain knowledge. Most ideas in the world were probabilistic, but probable information was capable of rising extremely close to the level of certainty. Belief in the Bible’s accuracy was a rational act according to Locke. Historical testimony could border so near upon Certainty, that we make no doubt at all about them; but assent to them as firmly, and act according to that Assent, as resolutely, as if they were infallibly demonstrated, and that our Knowledge of them was perfect and certain.” Intuitive, demonstrative, and sensible truths will always be certainer to us, than those conveyed to us by traditional revelation.” (By “traditional” revelation, he meant the Bible.) Of probabilistic knowledge, Locke believed we have no certainty but only some inducements.”

For example, one could trust in the probable truth of the Bible based on the credibility of the biblical reporters. But the probability of the truth of the Bible was less certain than truths conveyed by one’s own senses. Therefore, Locke concluded, Noah had a greater certainty of the Deluge because he witnessed it with his own senses than a person who read an account of it in the Bible. “So the assurance of its being a Revelation, is less still than the assurance of his Senses.” Locke believed that revelation, provided

226 Locke, Essay, 655-656.
that it did not violate reason (and he believed it did not), should be trusted because reason has determined that “such a Testimony … comes from one who cannot err, and will not deceive.” He concluded that the probability that the events recorded in the Bible were true was extremely high.\footnote{227}

Dickinson was one of the early Americans to move towards acceptance of probabilistic knowledge, though he appropriated the concepts selectively. He could have learned about the probabilistic turn from a number of sources, for it was a common idea among Anglicans in the seventeenth century. Dickinson’s reading of John Locke certainly would have introduced him to these concepts. It should escape no one’s attention that Dickinson’s \textit{Reasonableness of Christianity} shared the same name as Locke’s more famous book.\footnote{228}

As discussed in the introduction of my dissertation, Locke believed that reason affirmed Christianity. Deists were not convinced. Skeptics, such as John Toland, Anthony Collins, and Matthew Tindal dismissed much of the Bible as false. Toland, in his \textit{Christianity Not Mysterious} (1696), argued that miracles and biblical revelation were neither logical nor empirically defensible. Miracles were not consistent with experience, and revelation was beyond the reach of reason. Collins’ \textit{Discourse on the Grounds and

Reasons of the Christian Religion (1724) attacked the biblical text, and prophecies in particular, as irrational and incomprehensible. Tindal, one of the most influential critics, attacked the credibility of the Bible by arguing that it was a historically unreliable document. Because the Bible was such an ancient book, argued Tindal, passages had been corrupted over time. As a result, some parts were obscure or incomprehensible. Since historical knowledge was less reliable than mathematical truths or knowledge derived from experience, the biblical stories should be judged against what one knew to be true. In other words, those passages that diverged from natural religion were to be dismissed as corruptions.229 Behind these skeptics, hovered Spinoza, who attempted to shoot holes in the historical accuracy of the Old Testament.

In both of Dickinson's apologetical works, The Reasonableness of Christianity and Familiar Letters, he tried to encourage the faith of Christians and, especially in the Letters, he tried to appeal directly to the deists on terms they could understand. General truths about God and religion, most of which a deist could affirm, Dickinson categorized as absolute truths. The particular issues unique to Christian revelation he tended to describe as probable. For Dickinson, the subtle distinctions were intended to be encouraging, rather than discouraging. Following the Anglican trend to legitimate probabilistic knowledge as an adequate warrant for belief, Dickinson hoped to strengthen

and encourage the faithful. In theory, he believed probable truth was almost or functionally as trustworthy as absolute truth and therefore worthy of assent.

III. *The Reasonableness of Christianity*

Dickinson acknowledged that people took various paths to belief. However, he clearly privileged some paths as superior to others. According to Thomas Foxcroft’s introduction to *The Reasonableness of Christianity*, Dickinson was opposed to the many who believed out of “blind truth.” These ignorant and uncritical believers were, according to Foxcroft, “stupidly led by Education, popular Fashion, publick Establishment, [or] Antiquity.” In other words, many believed because they unreflectively followed what they were taught to believe. They passively accepted the common notions of their community without question. Dickinson concurred. He believed that man’s power of reason and intellect allowed him to transcend his community, environment, and history. Man was, by God’s design, a reasonable creature. Dickinson wrote, “He who has made us rational Creatures, expects from us a reasonable Service; and cannot be pleased with that faith, practice, or hope, that is grounded on education, or

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230 John Corrigan includes Thomas Foxcroft, pastor of Boston’s First Church, in what he identifies as the liberal or “Catholic” Congregationalists of the early eighteenth century. He notes that they were opposed by more conservative Congregationalists such as Cotton Mather for their more liberal theological views. In general, the “Catholicicks” were influenced by the works of latitudinarians, “physico-theologians,” and the Cambridge Platonists. However, divisions were not clear cut. Mather, for instance was also influenced by latitudinarians, “physico-theologians,” and the Cambridge Platonists. That Foxcroft wrote the introduction to Dickinson’s book and praised him suggests that Dickinson and the “Catholicicks” were sympathetic to each other. The “Catholic Congregationalists” are discussed in the next chapter. See John Corrigan, “Catholic Congregational Clergy and Public Piety,” *Church History* 60, no. 2 (1991): 210-222; idem, *The Prism of Piety: Catholic Congregational Clergy at the Beginning of the Enlightenment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); see also Conrad Wright, *Beginnings of Unitarianism in America* (Boston: Starr King Press, 1955).
common opinion; and not the result of rational reflection, or inquiry.” The belief that the Bible was the authoritative word of God could not be accepted on the basis of feeling or tradition. He wrote, “It must not take for granted, that the Scriptures are a Divine revelation; that is yet to be prov’d. But [one] must consider, whether we cannot by the light of nature” determine the accuracy and authority of the Bible.\(^{231}\) By the phrase “light of nature,” Dickinson meant the powers of unassisted human reason. He believed rational and evidentiary grounds could establish the truth of Christian revelation.

Dickinson’s attempt to establish by the “light of nature” that the Scriptures are Divine revelation” had roots in a Reformed tradition as well as latitudinarian influences. Reformed thinkers typically divided the evidences of the validity of the Bible between what they called internal and external evidences. Internal evidences were intuitive. The Christian, enlightened by the Holy Spirit, could perceive the Scripture’s majesty, purity, efficacy, wisdom, perfection, power, and harmony. In other sermons, Dickinson preached, in typical Calvinist fashion, that the Holy Spirit transformed the mind, taste, and perceptions of the believer. The Spirit opened the believer’s eyes, allowing the believer to perceive a new reality.\(^{232}\) By the external evidences, Reformed thinkers believed that reason, reflecting on the natural order of the visible world, pointed to the

\(^{231}\) Dickinson, The Reasonableness of Christianity, 1, 41, 42. My emphasis.

\(^{232}\) Jonathan Dickinson, Witness of the Spirit (Boston: S. Kneeland and T. Green, 1740), 5. Terrence Erdt notes that Jonathan Edwards also wrote a great deal on how the Holy Spirit transformed the Christian’s tastes. Both Dickinson and Edwards were probably following John Calvin on this matter. Terrence Erdt, Jonathan Edwards, Art and the Sense of the Heart (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980), 11, 32.
existence and general attributes of God. Advocates of external evidence also looked to miracles and fulfilled prophecies to defend the authority and uniqueness of Scripture revelation. Traditionally, Reformed thinkers believed that reason and evidence could never deduce Christian truths on their own, and ultimately they believed that internal evidences were superior and external evidences could never serve as a substitute.

However, within the context of *The Reasonableness*, Dickinson put greater emphasis on the external evidences. He generally avoided appeals to the internal witness of the Scriptures because they carried little weight with the skeptics he was trying to win over. (Recall that Spinoza and Hobbes argued that only those enlightened by God were convinced of the Bible’s divine nature and meaning.) In this regard, he showed affinity with latitudinarian trends. He was possibly influenced by Charles Leslie’s immensely

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234 According to E. Brooks Holifield, Christians attempted to find evidences to defend the uniqueness of the Scriptures as early as the second century, but the use of external evidence rose to unprecedented heights by the eighteenth century. During the early years of the Protestant Reformation, the use of evidence fell out of favor. Martin Luther believed attempting to demonstrate the rational probability of the biblical revelation was a form of self-righteousness. John Calvin allowed such proofs, but only to confirm the inner testimony of the Spirit, which he believed to be the most certain and trustworthy foundation for belief. By the seventeenth century, Lutherans and Calvinists used evidence to prove the infallibility of the biblical account. In 1656, the American Puritan John Cotton briefly argued that historical evidence indicated that the Gospels must be authentic. He wrote that the apostles were trustworthy reporters for they were eyewitnesses, writing only what was plain to their senses.” Also, he claimed that the apostles were simple men who could not have fabricated the Gospels. Cotton wrote, —Observe hence the certainty and undoubted truth of the Doctrine of the Apostles.” However, Cotton cautioned that faith wrought by the Spirit was higher than any Science gotten by demonstrations.” In the late seventeenth century, Samuel Willard also argued that the Bible was the unique revelation of God based on evidence. See E. Brooks Holifield, *Theology in America: Christian Thought from the Age of the Puritans to the Civil War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003) 5, 6, 32, 70; Avery Dulles, *A History of Apologetics* (New York: Corpus, 1971), 99-101, 113-130; and John Cotton, *A Practical Commentary or Exposition with Observations, Reasons, and Vses Upon the First Epistle General of John*, (London: Parkhurst, 1656), 16-17.
popular *Short Method with the Deists*, which utilized a similar approach. Leslie claimed that he intentionally did not argue on the basis of internal evidences because he was dealing with deists who were scoffers.” Leslie continued: “Some other topic must be found out for them to persuade them by the plain principles of reason, to which they only appealed, and of which indeed only they were capable.”

Dickinson wrote *The Reasonableness of Christianity* as a series of sermons in which he attempted systematically to refute deism. He started with general principles of religion and then delved into more specific arguments as he proceeded. For example, he began with the existence of a God. The first step in his extended argument was an exposition of a form of an Aristotelian or Thomistic argument for a first cause or an unmoved mover. This type of argument became popular among the latitudinarian natural theologians and physico-theologians. John Ray made such a move in his *Wisdom of God*, which was one of the lengthiest and most elaborate proofs of God based on the evidence from nature. Many other latitudinarians followed suit. Locke also expressed similar ideas about the evidence for God, found in nature, in his *Reasonableness of Christianity*.

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236 It seems peculiar that Dickinson would preach sermons against deism to a believing congregation. Presumably, he was trying to encourage Christians in their faith. Of course he would have been more than pleased if a skeptic or someone struggling with belief happened to hear or read his sermons.

Though it is difficult to ascertain exactly which natural theologians Dickinson read or how well he knew their work, he was clearly familiar with Locke.\textsuperscript{238}

Dickinson based his proof of the existence of God and His nature on evidence derived from the created world and attempted to use the evidence of natural history and cosmology. The evidence of the physical universe, believed Dickinson, pointed to the undeniable conclusion that there could only be one God. The perfect balance and beauty of the world also reflected the nature of this singular and supreme God. All evidence should lead one to conclude that He was \textit{–}Infinite in his Holiness, Justice, Goodness, and Truths and this God is worthy of honor and worship.”\textsuperscript{239} Describing the vastness and the perfect balance of the Newtonian universe machine, he marveled,

\begin{quote}
The prodigious magnitude and amazing extent of the Universe do loudly proclaim the Infinite nature of its glorious Author. … If we go no further from home than this globe of Earth upon which we dwell, we have here a \textit{vast body}, computed at near Eight Thousand Miles Diameter, and above Two Hundred Thousand Millions of Miles in its bulk of solid continent; which must appear to every eye a Mass worthy of an Infinite Creator.
\end{quote}

He then went on for several more pages to discuss the nature of planets, stars, and the expanse of the universe. He challenged the deist, \textit{–}How came the parts of the Earth to cohere together, and not separately fly in the boundless space?” Such a Newtonian model of creation pointed to a creator. \textit{–}For had not the whole plan of these amazing works,

\begin{footnotes}
\item\textsuperscript{238} Dickinson’s writing indicates that he was familiar with at least some of the work of Samuel Clarke, Henry Dodwell, and Anthony Collins. See note 230.
\item\textsuperscript{239} Dickinson, \textit{The Reasonableness of Christianity}, 3.
\end{footnotes}
been before the Architect, He could not have contriv’d and dispos’d all the innumerable parts with such admirable glory, and surprizing harmony.”

Dickinson also borrowed a proof from John Locke and Samuel Clarke (which he attributed) concerning the spiritual nature of the creator. The creator of the universe must be a spiritual being. Clearly, people are creatures capable of thought, reason, and reflection.” Whence, asked Dickinson, do people derive this power? Dead and unactive matter” could not produce a thinking being. However, if matter did contain life and thought, then all objects in creation would be thinking beings, and this notion was obviously absurd, he reasoned. He concluded that the consequence is therefore inevitable, that since all matter is from its own nature necessarily destitute of thought, our thinking rational souls must derive their Being from some immaterial Author.”

Dickinson claimed that this reflection proved the truth of John 4:24, “That GOD is a Spirit.”

Dickinson marshaled many more evidences from nature and reason typical of the ideas of the English natural theologians of the day. He used unequivocal language when

240 Ibid., 17, 27, 29.

241 Regarding the following proof, Dickinson wrote in the footnotes in The Reasonableness: “The curious Reader may see this more largely handled by Mr. Lock of Humane Understanding. Lib. IV. Cap X. and in Dr. CLARK’s Letters to Mr. Dodwell.” In 1706, Samuel Clarke attacked Henry Dodwell, who had claimed that the soul is naturally mortal and receives immortality by the supernatural efficacy of baptism. Anthony Collins, a materialist follower of Locke, replied to Clarke's criticism, and the two debated on whether matter can think. See Samuel Clarke, A Letter to Mr. Dodwell (London: James Knapton, 1707), A Defense of an Argument made use of in a Letter to Mr. Dodwell (London: James Knapton, 1707); A Second Defense of an Argument made use of in a Letter to Mr. Dodwell (London: James Knapton, 1707); Anthony Collins, A Reply to Mr. Samuel Clarke’s Defense of his Letter to Mr. Dodwell (London: [s.n.] 1707).

242 Dickinson, The Reasonableness of Christianity, 14, 15.

243 Ibid., 15.
describing the proofs for the existence of God and his nature. For example, regarding God’s immortality and eternal preexistence, he wrote, “[T]he Eternity of God is Ungainsayably evident from the works of Creation. We are not capable of a greater certainty of anything whatsoever.” Elsewhere, he wrote, “we have demonstrative evidence of His Eternal Power and Godhead.” He went on to say, “We may be infallibly certain, that there is a God, Infinite in Holiness, Justice, Goodness, and Truth…” Phrases such as “unquestionably evident” and “infallibly certain” were typical of the bold descriptions that garnished his treatise. Any contradiction to these points, he stated, would be “utterly impossible,” “altogether impossible,” “absolutely impossible,” and “the most palpable absurdity, and the boldest affront to common sense.”

244 The propositions of which he could confidently boast were those grounded on evidence, reason, and natural religion.

This is a truth so plainly legible in the law of Nature, that the most barbarous Heathen and salvage [sic] pagan have always assented to it and it’s even impossible for a rational mind to refuse an assent. Therefore, since God is the creator, should we not assent to worship him? 245

244 Ibid., 3, 5, 13; Familiar Letters, 26. My emphasis.

245 Dickinson, The Reasonableness of Christianity, 31. Dickinson did not quite grasp the epistemological categories of latitudinarian thought, or he appropriated them selectively. Dickinson granted “infallible certainty” to a broad range of religious propositions. In contrast, latitudinarians typically believed that all knowledge, with the exception of special categories such as mathematical axioms or intuitions, were at best high probabilities. For example, in 1736, four years after Dickinson wrote his Reasonableness, Bishop Butler wrote his famous apologetic against deism, The Analogy of Religion. Throughout the Analogy, Butler conceded that the arguments for the Bible were highly probable. He never claimed that the arguments for Scripture were absolutely certain, demonstrative, or conclusive. Joseph Butler, The Analogy of Religion, Natural and Revealed, To the Constitution and Course of Nature (London: Knapton, 1736).
These general principles were propositions accessible by common reason, independent of revelation. Not coincidentally, they were also the same general propositions that deists could affirm.

Interestingly, Dickinson’s language suddenly shifted as soon as the arguments progressed to address the particular issues of Christian revelation or the truth of the Bible. Gone were all the bold, strong words of absolute and unequivocal proof. They were replaced by the confident, yet nonetheless cautious and hedged language of probability. For example, he set out to argue the proposition that the human race was sinful and Christ, in particular, died for its deliverance. He wrote, “The method I propose to myself, in discoursing upon these Propositions, is to distinctly shew, that they are not only revealed truths, but also consistent and agreeable to the light of reason.” In Lockean fashion, Dickinson sought to demonstrate that revelation did not contradict reason. Reason and evidence did not pose an obstacle to the possibility that revelation could be true. However, the lack of contradiction did not necessarily imply to positive proof. It simply cleared obstacles and opened the way for possibility.

For example, when discussing man’s fall from grace, Dickinson wrote, “The state that we find ourselves in, makes the account of this matter in the third of Genesis very probable.” Interestingly, Dickinson was unwilling to argue or incapable of arguing from reason or evidence, and without resorting to internal evidence, that the Eden story in Genesis should be interpreted as literally true. “I shall not concern my self with that

246 Ibid., 40. My emphasis.
debate, whether this story be literally, or allegorically to be understood.”

(Like Cotton Mather before him, Dickinson had reservations about a literal interpretation of Genesis.) However, he could conjecture that it was reasonable to conclude that man was originally made holy and fell by his own volition. “It is a natural and rational supposition, that our first Parents, through the power of temptation, were guilty of disobedience against God; and thereby both for themselves and their posterity, lost the innocence and happiness of their first state.” He established with certainty that there is a God and he is holy, but there existed a strong probability, that man is sinful and fallen. He reasoned that Christ was the means of salvation because

[W]e can’t find a more probable reason for our lost miserable circumstances … Here let the Deist try his skill: Let him without the assistance of revelation, draw up a perfect system of the laws of nature. Let him consult the means of restoring our lost innocenc[e].

Dickinson argued that the alternative propositions put forward by the deists or other religions were less likely than the solution described in the Bible.

Dickinson challenged the skeptic, “Either assign some more probable cause of it; or forever ly [sic] under the just imputation of obstinacy and unreasonableness.”

However, when Dickinson came to the unique issues of Christian revelation, he could only claim —strong probabilities on the side of Christianity.” Christianity was merely more probable than the alternatives. He believed he offered —strong probabilities of the

247 Ibid., 57. Thomas Burnet argued that the Eden story should be interpreted allegorically to eliminate difficulties. However, the deist Blount exploited Burnet’s allegorical interpretation for his skeptical purposes. He quoted Burnet to undermine the credibility of the Bible. Without resorting to faith or internal evidence, Dickinson appeared unable to argue that the Eden account should be interpreted literally. Thomas Burnet, Archaeologiae philosophicae (Londini: Typis R.N., Impensis Gualt, Kettily, 1692); see Stephen, English Thought, 1: 171. My emphasis.
truth of Christianity; which cannot but reflect a convincing light, into the mind of every serious and impartial enquirer.” Though not certain these reasons were meant to be reassuring.

IV. History and the Bible

Dickinson also attempted to persuade skeptics of the veracity of the Bible on the basis of history. He believed that as historical documents, the gospels could rise to the level of verifiability of any other profane historical document. By the seventeenth century, Anglican scholars began to distinguish between various kinds of history. Dickinson wrote his defense of the Bible during a time when the canons of historical evidence were changing. Until the seventeenth century, history, meaning classical history, was primarily valued for its didactic uses. The examples from history could instruct its students in morality or literary style. These “exemplar” historians or “philosophical” historians tended to uncritically honor classical history texts. They were less concerned with accuracy. Arnaldo Momigliano writes,

When ancient history was studied for its own sake, independently of antiquarian research and universal history, it was meant either to provide materials for moral and political reflection or to help the understanding of texts read primarily for stylistic reasons. The truth and completeness of the traditional accounts was hardly questioned. To the best of my knowledge, the idea that one could write a history of Rome which should replace Livy and Tacitus was not yet born in the early seventeenth century.

Due in part to the influence of antiquarians (those who explored nonliterary evidence such as inscriptions, coins, and statues rather than literary texts), people writing about the

248 Dickinson, *The Reasonableness of Christianity*, 54, 57, 64, 72.
past began to place greater value on original sources and critically judged and evaluated original sources. Edward Gibbon’s applied the antiquarian’s devotion to evidence and critical evaluation of sources to his monumental Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire (1776-88) and initiated a lasting revolution in the historian’s craft. The Scottish scholar and historian William Robertson hailed him as the first of his kind” and immediately adopted Gibbon’s methods for his own History of America (1777). Subsequent historians also followed Gibbon’s example. Physical evidence from the past could be more objective than literary sources they came to believe. Testimonies could also be accepted, but historians developed various criteria by which they evaluated the bona fides of the witness. By the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, both historians and antiquarians sought the truth of the past by the best methods of research and the most reliable evidence. Their work was marked by deep erudition and new standards of evidence, which James Turner has called “philological antiquarianism.” By establishing various criteria of authenticity, probability, and reliability, certain kinds of history rose while less reputable accounts fell. These standards were eventually applied to biblical accounts.


In the seventeenth century, some argued that history validated the Bible’s authority. For example, the English mathematician and astronomer Seth Ward (1617-1689), in 1652, defended the historical accuracy of the Bible. He began by asserting that demonstration and proof were unnecessary and assent to historical matters was different from assent to mathematical propositions. He proposed that the Scriptures could be evaluated and verified by the same standards that one used to examine other histories. If one were to doubt the history related in the Bible, he reasoned, one would also have to reject all of secular history as well. By the standards of seventeenth-century historiography, Ward argued that no reasonable person could doubt the historical accuracy of the biblical report any more than one could doubt the accepted history of Rome or France.252

In 1680, Hugo Grotius attempted to prove the authority and accuracy of the biblical record by arguing in *The Truth of the Christian Revelation* that the New Testament accurately recorded miracles. Grotius believed that the gospels were an accurate historical record of God’s prophecies and miracles because they were based on the testimony of reliable witnesses. An objective and reasonable reader should be compelled to trust in a public record, even if it testified to something fantastic, provided

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252 Stillingfleet, another latitudinarian, also attempted to evaluate the Bible historically. He argued that evidence suggested that Moses was a reliable recorder of history. His eyewitness account was uncontested and thus rose to the level of plausible and reliable history. Like Ward, Stillingfleet too argued that the standards of absolute certainty were unnecessary in the evaluation of any history, including the Bible. Seth Ward, *A Philosophical Essay on the Being and Attributes of God, Immorality, and Scripture*, 4th ed., 8 vols. (Oxford: Lichfield, 1667 [1652]), 1: 84-85, 87-88, 90, 99-102; Stillingfleet, *Origines Sacrae, or a Rational Account of the Grounds of Natural and Revealed Religion* (London, Henry Mortlock, 1680); Shapiro, *Probability and Certainty*, 156-157.
that the account was — verified by a sufficient Witness, living in the time when they came to pass.”

Grotius believed that history could not rise to the level of certainty of mathematics, but if supported by sufficient evidence, it could be trustworthy.

By the late seventeenth century, the criteria for determining the credibility of historical reports (secular or sacred) were popularly known and commonly agreed upon. John Locke summed up much of the intellectual moves of the century. In his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, he argued that testimonies could achieve various degrees of probability. Knowledge derived from one’s own senses was most reliable of course, but at times, the testimony of others could achieve a high degree of reliability and probability. Historical knowledge of course depended on testimony, but not all testimonies were equally trustworthy. Obviously, reports should be free of internal contradictions. The trustworthiness of a historical report or testimony depended on the quality of the witness. Locke believed that one needed to weigh carefully several factors to determine the relative merit of testimony. For example, a historical testimony should ideally come from an eyewitness or someone with access to eyewitness accounts. A first-hand witness was more dependable than a second-hand report. Naturally, a report became less reliable with every step it was removed from the original testimony. Locke concluded —That any Testimony, the farther off it is from the original Truth, the less force and proof it has.”


One also needed to scrutinize the quality of a witness. An informed and knowledgeable reporter was more reliable than an ignorant one. He or she should demonstrate good judgment and integrity and be free from any obvious bias, deception, or motive to lie. Furthermore, empirical evidence, such as physical monuments, also added credibility to a testimony. The veracity of public events could be more easily confirmed than private events occurring in the presence of a few. If possible, independent and disinterested accounts should corroborate a testimony. In the best-case scenario, historical testimony could achieve a high degree of probability free from most doubt, but of course fell short of the absolute certainty of a mathematical equation. But assent to historical accounts could be reasonable.\textsuperscript{255} Lord Bolingbroke concurred with Locke. He argued that the reliability of historical testimonies should be measured by the testimony and number of proper witnesses. \texttextit{The degree of assent, which we give to history, may be settled, in proportion to the number, characters, and circumstances of the original witnesses.} \texttextsuperscript{255}

Charles Leslie’s \textit{Short and Easy Method with the Deists} (1697) argued that based on historical evidence, the Bible was clearly divine revelation whereas pagan myths and

\textsuperscript{255} On the quality of historical reports and witnesses, see John Locke, \textit{Essay}, 660-668.

the Qur’an were a mass of silly fables. Leslie was responding to Charles Blount, who implied that the miracles of Jesus were no more credible than were the miracles of Apollonius of Tyana. Leslie proposed four tests that could determine the historical validity of any historical text. First, senses should be able to judge the recorded events. Second, the events should be public. Third, public monuments should be kept up in memory of the events and some outward actions be performed to commemorate them. And fourth, Leslie argued that the monuments and actions or observances be instituted and commence from the time of the event. The first two rules insured that deception was impossible at the time of the event. The third and fourth rule made deception impossible afterwards. Leslie concluded that the Bible met these strict standards. In contrast, the Qur’an and pagan fables failed.

One should note that all involved in these debates lacked the modern concept of myth as developed by Eichhorn and his successors, which would have allowed them to see the Old Testament stories as something other than either historically accurate, deceitfully false, or idiotically primitive.

Dickinson, who in all likelihood read Leslie, also went to great lengths to prove that the New Testament should be accepted as historically reliable and therefore the miracles it recorded should authenticate the divinity of Christ. Like his English counterparts, he argued that the Bible met the empirical standards of any history. The character of the disciples made them trustworthy witnesses. —The Reporters of these Miracles have all the marks of honesty, integrity, and honour.” Also, —[T]he Doctrines

257 Momigliano, —Ancient History and the Antiquarian,” 13.

258 Charles Leslie, —A Short and Easy Method with the Deists,” 12, 31.
they taught, shew the innocence and divine excellencies of their Faith.” In conclusion, “these things therefore loudly proclaim the innocency and sanctity of their lives.” Furthermore, by examining the circumstances, Dickinson concluded that the authors of the Gospels had little reason to fabricate. They had little to gain, for they faced persecution for what they preached and wrote.\(^{259}\)

The gospels also met another essential standard of reliable history. The events were public. Dickinson wrote, “Nor were these things done before some few ignorant, and brain-sick persons; but in the face of the World, before multitudes of all sorts … who all acknowledge the facts; though they were not all converted by them.” Because the events were so public, forgery would be highly unlikely. The accounts were rapidly and widely disseminated. If a witness attempted to fabricate the history, he would quickly be called out as a liar, because the events were so well known.

’Twere easier to suppose, that a designing Knave could corrupt our Magna Charta, frame a new body of Laws for England, trump them upon us, and wheedle us into the belief, that these are and always have been the Statutes of the Nation; than to imagine the like corruption in these Statutes of Heaven.\(^{260}\)

Dickinson drew a parallel with the historical credibility of the Gospels and widely accepted events of English history.

The first-hand nature of the accounts also added to their validity. He argued that the disciples were eyewitnesses and did not report by hearsay. “Our Lord’s Miracles were not matters of speculation … but matters of fact, that came under the immediate

\(^{259}\) Dickinson, *The Reasonableness of Christianity*, 139, 140, 146.

\(^{260}\) Ibid., 142, 147, 155.
cognizance of their senses; such as they could see, hear, and feel; and be ascertained of, by all possible means of certainty.” He also emphasized that the miracles and events were performed “before their own eyes. Is it possible to have greater assurance of any thing we do[?]” As Locke would argue, accounts based on first hand physical senses increased credibility. 261 Furthermore, their testimony was confirmed by a number of other sources including adversaries or those who had no vested interest in the success of Christianity. He pointed out that Josephus and Tacitus attested to the factuality of certain parts of the gospels. 262 Thus he argued that the disciples were reliable and trustworthy witnesses by the prevailing standards of history.

Dickinson believed that Scripture needed to be subjected to the examination of reason, evidence, and history for the benefit of the true faith. If Christian revelation were not affirmed by rational and universal standards, but rather based primarily on unexamined faith in a written record, Dickinson feared that Christians would be little different than Muslims, who trusted in their written revelations. He, like Leslie, addressed the issue of the Qur’an in response to deist critics who argued that the Muslim revelation was a plausible competitor to the Bible as divine revelation. For example, in 1730, the deist Matthew Tindal wrote,

261 Ibid., 141, 143. Theodore Bozeman argues that Presbyterians in the early nineteenth century based their interpretation and defense of the Bible on Baconian science as opposed to what they perceived to be undisciplined and abstract speculations. In particular, the antebellum Presbyterians argued that the biblical record should be trusted as reliable history because the miracles of Christ appealed to the plain senses of the witnesses of history. Bozeman writes, “Trust in the senses was as much a keynote of biblical as of scientific proof.” Dickinson, particularly in his emphasis on the reliability of the senses, followed Locke and was a forerunner to the antebellum phenomena described by Bozeman. Theodore Dwight Bozeman, Protestants in an Age of Science: The Baconian Ideal and Antebellum American Religious Thought (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1977), 140.

262 Dickinson, The Reasonableness of Christianity, 148-149.
[Christians] do the greatest honor to the Scriptures who suppose it deals with men as rational creatures, and therefore admit not of any of its doctrines without a strict examination. Those who take a contrary method would, if they lived in Turkey, embrace Mahometanism, and believe in the Alcoran.

Matthew Tindal argued that most Muslims ignored the laws of nature in their interpretation of the Qur'an. Instead, they blindly submitted to their holy book. In doing so, Tindal claimed, they were little different than most Christians who also followed their holy book with unquestioning obedience and without submitting their interpretation to rigorous reason. Likewise, John Toland argued that Muslims were a sort of sect of Christians.” 

In response to perhaps Tindal’s or similar deistic critiques, Dickinson dismissed the Alcoran,” the holy text of the Mahometan religion.” In The Reasonableness of Christianity, he did not reject the book on theological or spiritual grounds, at least not in so many words. Rather, Dickinson, like Leslie, rejected the Muslim holy book because, as he put it, the Qur’an lacked evidence of its Divine authority.”

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263 Matthew Tindal, Christianity as Old as the Creation (Newburgh: David Denniston, 1798 [1730]), 202-203. For Tindal and his thoughts, see Stephen, English Thought, 1: 43-66. Historian Gerald R. McDermott notes that the Qur’an became a useful weapon in the deistic arsenal. The deists were, he writes, using Islam as a stick to shake at their opponents. For example, Thomas Chubb, whom Dickinson named as one of his principal opponents, wrote that the remarkable growth of Islam was comparable to the growth of Christianity, thereby undermining Christianity’s claim to uniqueness. Toland claimed that as revelation, the Qur’an and the Bible were comparable. Humphrey Prideaux noticed the use of the Qur’an by deistic skeptics as early as 1697. He wrote, —Mahomet caused Deists” to call Christianity a cheat and imposture.” By the last quarter of the century, deists often compared the Qur’an to the Bible to denigrate the Bible’s special status. Gerald R. McDermott, —The Deist Connection: Jonathan Edwards and Islam,” in Jonathan Edwards’s Writings: Text, Context, Interpretation, ed. Stephen J. Stein (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 39-51; Thomas Chubb, The Posthumous Works of Mr. Thomas Chubb (London: R. Baldwin, 1748), 2: 48; John Toland, Nazarens, or, a Jewish, Gentile and Mahometan Christianity. ed. Justin Champion (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1999 [1718]), Humphrey Prideaux, The History of the Great Impostor Mahomet (Philadelphia: Stewart & Cochran, 1796 [1697]), 2, 3.

264 Dickinson, The Reasonableness of Christianity, 60. Dickinson possibly read Prideaux’s —Letters to a Deist,” which was appended to a Life of Mahomet, or a similar work that made similar claims. Prideaux concluded that the Bible, unlike the Qur’an, was divine revelation given to man by God
texts could not be confirmed by contemporary standards of history and evidence that seventeenth- or eighteenth-century thinkers used to judge the veracity of any historical documents. The Qur’an and purported pagan divine revelations were “romantick and fabulous Histories.” Dickinson, in part, agreed with Tindal. Like the deist, he too asserted that Muslims believed out of “tyranny” and “superstition” rather than reason. If they would only dispassionately examine the evidence for their holy book, they surely would reject it on evidential grounds. Also like Tindal, Dickinson believed that Christians erroneously behaved like Muslims when they believed out of blind obedience. However, the Bible, unlike the Qur’an, Dickinson argued, could be amply affirmed by objective historical evidence. Otherwise, Dickinson reasoned, there would be little to distinguish the two purported claims to revelation. True, the evidence demonstrating the biblical revelation was superior to that supporting the Qur’an, he believed. Yet the biblical evidence, though strong in Dickinson’s mind, was still only probabilistic in nature.

and not a human fabrication and forgery. He came to this conclusion by examining the credibility of the witnesses. “I may give more or less credit to them, according to the different strengths of their testimonials.” He noted seven historical evidences that marked the Qur’an as a fabrication and a mass of silly fables. The Pentateuch and the Gospels, on the other hand, met the standards of historical evidence. Humphrey Prideaux, A Letter to the Deists (London: Whitehall, 1696), 8.

265 Dickinson distinguished between the Bible and other pagan texts by arguing that the Bible could measure up to the standards of other historical records. He wrote, “Let them search all the Histories of the pagan deities; let them call in the help of the Alcoran, or what other legendary fables they please. … what attestation have they to the truth of these Facts, and what to confirm our belief of them; but the bare reports of the unknown authors.” The Reasonableness of Christianity, 160; Dickinson rejected the Qur’an and pagan histories as being in his words, “romantick and fabulous Histories.” Interestingly, in the late seventeenth century, similar phrases were used by learned men who attempted to distinguish reliable profane histories (based on plausible accounts) from myths and fables. The legends of Arthur, Brutus, giants, and fairies which had peppered the histories of England were dismissed as “Romantic Fables” and “Scenes of Fairy Land.” As a corrective, men like Robert Brady sought to write histories of England based on reliable accounts and records. Thus, Dickinson dismissed the Qur’an for the same reason that historians were dismissing fantastic pseudo-histories. Dickinson rejected the Qur’an for the lack of empirical evidence and reliable testimonies. Robert Brady, Preface,” A Complete History of England, (Savoy: Newcomb, 1865); Shapiro, Probability and Certainty, 146.
Without intending to, Dickinson had in effect conceded that full certainty of biblical truth could exist only within the Christian community, grasping Christians only by faith. For the world at large, belief in biblical revelation depended on the force of fallible and contestable historical argument. However, the evidence that demonstrated that the biblical revelation was superior to the Qur’an, though strong in Dickinson’s mind, was only probabilistic in nature.266

Within the context of this document, Dickinson did not make a theological argument. Rather, his claims were primarily logical and evidential. When he wrote about the authority of the Bible and revelation in particular, he attempted to defend it on historical grounds.267 Implicit in his argument was the belief that the Bible could be examined like any profane historical document. Within the limits of his Reasonableness of Christianity, Dickinson believed he was trying to take on the deists on their own rationalistic terms. This is not to say that Dickinson way playing completely into the hands of the deists, but he was far more than he saw. Though confident that the battle for Christianity could be won on evidentiary and rational grounds, he also simultaneously held the Bible to be a unique and sacred book and work of God that was also supernatural.

266 Similarly, Jonathan Mayhew argued in his sermons, published in 1749, that since many religions claimed to be based on divine revelation, reason alone, employing “probable evidence” could determine which was genuine and determine its meaning. Jonathan Mayhew, Seven Sermons (Boston: Rogers and Fowle, 1749), 36, 47, 72. Holifield, Theology in America, 132-33.

267 When Dickinson used historical evidences, he often used the language of “certainty” as well as high “probability.” It is curious that Dickinson would use history as a source of “certain” proof for the authority and accuracy of Scripture. The major English trends which he was undoubtedly familiar with and drew upon clearly viewed history as probabilistic. However, Dickinson did not necessarily depart from his English counterparts. Men like Locke believed the historicity of the Bible was as probable as propositions could be given its nature. Though not certain, history could be “extremely probable.” On the matter of the certainty of history, Locke and Dickinson did not necessarily disagree with each other substantially. Rather, Locke was more precise in his language. Locke, Essay, 662.
and mysterious. After all, much of his evidence pointed to a divine author orchestrating the composition of the Bible.

V. The Familiar Letters

Thirteen years later, in 1745, Dickinson revisited the issues of skepticism and the truth of the Scriptures. He wrote a series of letters to a supposedly open-minded deist who sought to become a Christian and wanted to engage in an honest conversation. Dickinson collected the letters in a book entitled *Familiar Letters to a Gentleman, upon a Variety of Seasonable and Important Subjects in Religion*. Dickinson engaged in a philosophically sophisticated argument, yet he attempted to do so in a concise and comprehensible manner. Thus, it was suitable for a larger audience, and this possibly contributed to its popularity and longevity. Between 1745 and 1842, the *Letters* went through six editions in America and five in Scotland.

Unlike Cotton Mather’s anti-deistic tracts written decades earlier, Dickinson claimed that his *Letters* was not written primarily for a Christian audience. Dickinson wrote that he hoped to convince the deist of the validity of biblical revelation on terms that a skeptic could find convincing. As he did in the *Reasonableness of Christianity*, he attempted to argue that a thorough examination of the evidence demanded that a reasonable and impartial person conclude that Christianity was true. In the opening pages of the *Letters*, he proposed to enter upon a serious and impartial examination of the

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268 The book gives no clear indication if the deist is real or a literary invention. Either way, the letters represent how Dickinson responded to common skeptical objections to revealed religion.

Christian Religion.” Again, he limited the vast majority of his arguments to empirical evidences and reason in the first half of the book.

The Letters was not merely an epistolary restatement of the arguments presented in The Reasonableness of Christianity. Dickinson wrote the Letters under new challenges. During the years intervening between the two publications, what has become known as the First Great Awakening arrived on American shores. In the 1730s and 40s, revivalist preachers such as George Whitefield called American people to turn to God. Often, the revivalist preachers caused sensational and deeply emotional reactions.

Dickinson wrote and published Letters as a response to the skeptical criticism of the Awakening and offered what he believed to be a definitive and unimpeachable response to the deistic critics. For the sake of the skeptic, Dickinson once again claimed that he would eschew appeals to emotional and personal extraordinary experiences. He declared, “a pathetic Declamation cannot be received for argument.” Rather, he confidently declared to the deistic skeptic, “faith must be built upon Evidence, that will reach the Understanding, as well as the softer passions of the Soul.” Dickinson boldly challenged the skeptic, “Make you a demand as large, as you or they can contrive. And

270 Dickinson, Familiar Letters, 1.

whatever rational Evidence you are pleased to ask for, shall be at your Service.”

Though he appreciated the work of some of the reviver preachers as genuine works of God, he thought many were harming the reputation and stability of the Bible as revelation. Dickinson’s deistic debating opponent pointed out that the revivals created a climate of epistemic chaos that neutralized any claim to divine revelation or authoritative interpretation. Some advocates of the revivals argued that their intensely emotional experiences were divine in origin and signs of the reality of God. How could anyone, the deist asked, trust the testimony of numerous individuals who claimed to have direct contact with God and therefore authoritative knowledge? The deistic debate opponent pointed out that only those who experienced God directly could know with certainty that their experience was valid. Anyone else would have to trust by faith the word of the witness of God’s extraordinary internal works. Who then was one to trust? The deist’s answer was no one.

Dickinson acknowledged that the certainty of belief was challenging in the time of the revivals and agreed that the excesses of the Awakening could undermine the perceived authority of revelation.

Dickinson wrote,

The irregular Heats and Extravagancies of some late Pretenders to extraordinary Attainments in Religion, their imaginary divine Impulses, and extatick Raptures, with other Effects of their disorder’d Fancies, have cast such a Blemish upon the Christian Profession.


273 Schmidt writes that before the Awakening, in *The Reasonableness of Christianity*, Dickinson felt called upon to defend Christianity against a rationalism that would destroy it; in the wake of the Awakenings, he felt compelled to defend Christianity against a religion which would destroy rationalism.” Quoted from Le Beau, *Jonathan Dickinson*, 96.

274 Dickinson, *Familiar Letters*, i.
Though many professed Christian faith, Dickinson took issue with the basis of much popular faith in the time of revivals. He denounced those who professedly receive Gospel revelations.” They may in pretense preach CHRIST, but do miserably abuse, torture and pervert the Scriptures, to their own and others Destruction[.]” Their emotional, subjective, and undisciplined interpretations of their experiences and Scripture were harmful, he believed.

Interestingly, Dickinson’s deistic debate opponent (either intentionally or unintentionally) reiterated a version of the arguments made by Thomas Hobbes seventy-five years earlier. Recall that Hobbes argued that there was no way to discern the validity of one private revelation or revelation of one particular group over another. Therefore, he sought to ground revelation in universally accessible criteria such as history, textual analysis, natural reason, or coercive state power. Private revelation was only authoritative to the person who received the private revelation, reasoned Hobbes. Dickinson differed from Hobbes in that he did not ground the authority of revelation on state power, but he did believe that religious truths needed to be grounded in universally accessible and objective standards that transcended individual experience. Even when Dickinson affirmed the extraordinary experiences of Christians, he argued that those experiences should be subjected to the test of reason and evidence.

275 Ibid., xi.

In the early correspondence of the Letters, Dickinson repeated many arguments from his earlier work. For example, the historical record of the miracles should be trusted. Dickinson also argued that the entire Bible was unified and harmonious in theme and purpose. —Would you expect a consistent and harmonious Scheme of Religion, through all the Parts of divine Revelation? – And is it not wonderful to observe, how the New-Testament in every Way answers the Design of the Old.” The Bible was composed by people of disparate times and places and temperaments, and yet the message of the Bible was consistent. In the third letter, he also pointed out that the prophecies of the Old Testament accurately predicted the birth and the ministry of Christ.277 Dickinson was quite satisfied with the evidence. He confidently summarized, —Upon the whole, there is no Evidence wanting, to leave the Unbeliever inexcusable, — There is Evidence every Way sufficient, to satisfy the Mind of an impartial Enquirer after Truth.”278 Thus, the objective evidence pointed to the probabilistic conclusion that divine power guided the writing of the Bible.

In the fourth letter, Dickinson expressed frustration that even after laying out all the evidence, the deistic debate partner could only be, as the deist put it, —almost perswaded to be a Christian.” The deist expressed that he was willing to concede —


278 Dickinson, Familiar Letters, 20, 28.
strong Probability, that Jesus Christ was the Son of God, Savior of the World.” In response, Dickinson continued to elaborate on the evidences from prophecies and miracles. By the fifth letter, the deist still could not see how these Arguments … can admit of a rational and consistent Answer.” The deist asked Dickinson to help get rid of those Doubts” which still —hang upon his mind.”279 After exhausting all the evidentiary proofs Dickinson could muster, the deist still persisted in a state of doubt. He found the Bible to be plausible, but the evidence fell short of convincing him to believe.

The reaction of the deist interlocutor should not have been entirely surprising. After all, Dickinson believed his evidence was by its very nature highly probable rather than certain. The deist agreed, but he needed more. Dickinson wrote, apparently exasperated,

Do you deal thus with your self in other Cases, of infinitely less Importance? Do you harass your Mind with Doubts about other Things which are clearly evident to you, only because you meet with some Difficulties which you cannot readily solve? – This were the way to down-right Skepticism, in every Thing which falls under your own Being and all your rational Powers; as well as every Thing you see, hear or feel.280

One can conjecture that Dickinson read Pascal. Dickinson conceded that despite the best of his arguments and evidence, there might always be some persistent doubts in matters of faith that could never be entirely eliminated. All propositions, Dickinson warned the deist, were potentially subject to doubt if one approached life with this degree of skepticism. At this point, Dickinson argued along the same lines as thinkers such as

279 Ibid., 46, 47, 59.
280 Ibid., 60.
Locke. Most fields of accepted knowledge, including historical or religious knowledge, by their nature could not rise to the same level of certainty as mathematics or intuitions. Nonetheless, sufficient evidence should warrant assent. Rather than attempting to eliminate all doubt, Dickinson took a different tack.

This then should be the Method in the Case before you. … examine thoroughly, seriously and impartially, whether the Evidence for the Truth of Christianity be such, that you have Reason to believe it; and that it would be unreasonable, not to believe it true.\footnote{Ibid., 61.}

After examining the evidence, Dickinson believed that it would be more reasonable to believe in Christianity than the alternative.

Ultimately, Dickinson conceded that the light of nature could not bring the deist skeptic to a saving knowledge of God. The weighing of probabilities of various options was "not the principal Direction" the seeker of God should take. Rather, the deist must experience the Power of Christianity in [his] own heart.” He warned, "Reject this Advice; and it is impossible, that you should be rooted and built up in Christ, and established in the Faith.” Dickinson then went on for several letters to describe the "internal evidences” for the faith. By these he meant the transformations of one's appetites, feelings, affections, and desires.” He wrote, "By this you will have the Witness in your self, a Transcript of the Gospel upon your Heart."\footnote{Ibid., 62.} He argued that the unregenerate were like men born blind who have no notion of color. "But is it reasonable in a Man that was born blind, to conclude, that because he himself has no Idea of Light
and Colours, therefore no Man ever saw the Sun?" Unbelievers were incapable, in their present state, of seeing the light of the knowledge of the glory of God.”283 (Dickinson’s claims were similar to Edwards’ more systematic discussion of the illuminated knowledge that he called the “new sense” or “spiritual sense.”) Dickinson did not retreat from the language of evidence. Against those who would accuse him of advocating enthusiasm, he argued that the internal transformations of the soul should be interpreted as evidence to be examined to make an objective judgment. Pointing to the “comfort, peace, and joy of a religious life,” he submitted that “the Truth of Christianity is brought to be a matter of sensible Experience[.]”284

The manner in which Dickinson framed the issues in his two apologetical pieces reveals some tensions and unresolved inconsistencies. He started out both works by arguing that he would prove the truth of God’s supernatural revelation, the Bible, on entirely empirical and reasonable grounds. Dickinson argued, in the *Reasonableness of Christianity*, that there were two orders of reliability. By pointing out that those truths that even the deists acknowledged to be true were certain but the particularities of the Christian revelation were but merely “plausible,” he exposed Christian revelation to vulnerabilities — vulnerabilities that the deists exposed. These minimal truth claims were

283 Ibid., 69-70.

284 Ibid., 69; For Dickinson, rebirth was essential. It resulted from the “immediate” influence of the Spirit on the will and understanding. Bringing a new “view of divine things” and new volition. God changed the way the believer perceived reality. See Jonathan Dickinson, *Nature and Necessity of Regeneration* (New York: James Parker, 1743). Jonathan Edwards also described at length the internal transformation of the Christian as evidence of the genuine working of God. Locke claimed that he believed that God could “illuminate the Mind with supernatural Light.” He only denied that such illumination should be recognized as divine without its being conformable to reason or showing some indication that the knowledge was divine in source. Locke, *Essay*, 704-705; Brown, *Edwards and the Bible*, 83.
beyond doubt. Christianity, though extremely likely, was not beyond doubt. In the *Letters*, he began to frame the evidence for the nature of God in the language of certainty, but eventually conceded that biblical revelations were subject to question, but so were a great many things in the world. Ultimately, only the grace of God could dispel doubt. Grace and evidence worked in conjunction, he believed. Such arguments were ineffective against his deist. Dickinson may not have failed, but neither did he entirely succeed in his attempt to defend the faith on entirely empirical grounds. By engaging directly with the deist, Dickinson suggested that the evidence for the Bible fell short of certainty by the standards he set up earlier in his work. Only the Christian, whom the Holy Spirit granted a new mind, could embrace biblical revelation and Christianity free of doubt. By the end of the *Letters*, Dickinson admits that evidence cannot bring a skeptic to a saving knowledge of God. Plausible knowledge lacked the power to save.

Dickinson’s understanding of probabilistic knowledge extended to the interpretation of the Bible. He seemed to take to heart Hobbes’ and Spinoza’s critiques that most parties of Christians believed that their interpretation was granted by God and they based this certainty on some sort of inner testimony. Dickinson knew that his attempts to transcend the countless subjective intuitions on an evidentiary basis could only yield highly probabilistic results. He concluded that even his own biblical interpretations were highly likely at best.

In two publications pertaining to the so-called subscription controversy, Dickinson hinted at his belief that interpretations of Scripture were probabilistic. In 1721, a group of Presbyterians wanted to force the all Presbyterians pastors to subscribe to a set of doctrines and codes of behavior. Though the points of subscription were fairly
moderate, Dickinson objected that Christians should avoid granting undue authority to “humane invention” such as the Westminster Confession. He wrote that although the Scriptures were infallible, interpretations were not. Catholics, Protestants, Arminians, Calvinists, Arians, and Socinians all based their claims of truth on Scripture. According to Dickinson, they all have an equal claim to impose their interpretations.” Hundreds of contradictions” could be collected” out of various interpretations” of the Bible. Yet they cannot all be correct. He submitted that the Reformed and Presbyterian understanding of the Bible was highly probable. But Presbyterians had no right to impose their Opinions and Interpretation,” even on heretics, because interpretation was always probable. Interpretations of Scripture, must necessarily blend Light and Darkness, Truth and Falsehood together[.]” Absolute certainty of the meaning of the Bible lay just beyond human reach. This is not to suggest that Dickinson gave up and became a relativist. He still believed his convictions were likely truthful interpretations. However, his confidence fell short of demanding assent from others. Rhetorically, this was a far cry from the Puritan language of opening” the Scriptures which denied human artes.”

Dickinson, and most of his contemporaries, did not think of probabilistic arguments as necessarily weak. Many accepted that moral certainty or high probability

was an acceptable foundation for assent. However, historian Gerard Reedy notes that
even some latitudinarians had misgivings about defending the Bible with probabilistic
arguments. Unlike conclusions drawn from "sense or necessary reason" some knew that
"moral certainty" could not remove all doubt or "compel" assent like a geometrical
theorem. Rather, it could only persuade and ask a free response. "Moral arguments,"
wrote Tillotson, cannot be "of necessary and infallible efficacy, because they are always
propounded to a free Agent who may choose whether he will yield to them or not."
Though many latitudinarians used probabilistic arguments, Reedy suspects a pervasive
nervous anxiety lurking behind their writings.\textsuperscript{286}

Other American Christians were also opposed to the use of historical arguments to
prove the Bible. Solomon Stoddard, the venerable maternal grandfather of Jonathan
Edwards, hated them precisely because of their probabilistic nature.\textsuperscript{287} Stoddard was not
speaking out of ignorance. His writings demonstrate that he was well-versed in the
typical historical arguments such as the character of the authors, the testimony of
miracles, and the fulfillment of prophecies. He conceded that these "arguments are
preponderating and do outweigh all Objections that are brought against the Authority of
them." However, according to Stoddard, "Men cannot believe [the Bible] to be infallibly
ture upon \textit{probable} arguments; \textit{Probable} Arguments must be looked on but as \textit{probable}
and not \textit{convincing}." He wrote

\textsuperscript{286} Reedy, \textit{The Bible and Reason}, 52-55. Reedy's suspicions of anxiety are conjectural. However,
he is correct to point out that latitudinarians were fully aware that moral certainty was less compelling than
other forms of proof.

\textsuperscript{287} Perry Miller, \textit{The New England Mind: From Colony to Province} (Cambridge: Harvard
University Press, 1953), 281.
All that they judge by are but probable signs, and twenty Probabilities will not make a thing Certain. Probabilities may make a thing legally certain, but not infallibly so. Where there be but probabilities, there is a possibility of the Contrary. Many probabilities make a thing more Probable, but they do not amount to a demonstration.288

Rather, “it is only the certain Knowledge of their authority that can be the foundation of Faith or any other Grace.” Men must have infallible Arguments for loving God and believing His Word.” The foundation for the believer’s certainty in the Bible must be the self-evidencing light in the Word of God; there are such things Revealed there as can be made known by none but God.”289 According to Stoddard, certainty in the divine nature of the Bible can not come by natural means. "His truth can not be known but by faith, reason may argue something for it, but not conclusively. It will be a thing ‘probable‘ short of the grace of God.” Historical evidence could not satisfie the heart” or assured the soul.”290

Furthermore, Stoddard noted the dangers of building belief in the Bible on naturalistic foundations. The historical arguments for revelation’s validity made the Bible vulnerable to skeptical comparisons to the Qur’an. Stoddard noted that Muslims also claim that the Qur’an was true because of plausible historical evidence. “This is no more than a Turk will say for his religion … many profane men have this historical faith.” Therefore the conviction that the Bible was revelation could not be based on

288 Solomon Stoddard, The Efficacy of Fear of Hell to Restrain Men from Sin (Boston: Thomas Fleet, 1713), 5.


natural reason” or common illumination.” It needed a completely unique and supernatural foundation to be distinct from other claims of revelation. Stoddard’s aversion may have rubbed off on Jonathan Edwards. Though he employed historical argument in his defense of the Bible, he was certainly less optimistic about their efficacy than Dickinson.

VI. Jonathan Edwards

Jonathan Edwards, America’s greatest theological and philosophical mind of the colonial era, confronted many of the same intellectual challenges as Dickinson. Edwards addressed similar issues with, not surprisingly, greater consistency and depth. Recently, scholars such as Gerald R. McDermott, Michael J. McClymond, and Robert E. Brown have argued that Edwards was deeply concerned about the threat of deists, particularly their attack on the authority and accuracy of the Bible. They propose that deistic critiques affected his understanding of the nature of the Bible and revelation.

Douglas Sweeney

290 Solomon Stoddard, A Guide to Christ or, the Way of Directing Souls That Are under the Work of Conversion: Compiled for the Help of Young Ministers and May Be Serviceable to Private Christians, Who Are Enquiring the Way to Zion (Boston: J. Draper, 1735), 48-49; and idem, Fear of Hell, 5.

291 Gerald R. McDermott claims that most scholars have neglected to appreciate how deeply Edwards was concerned with the deistic threat. He writes, “Edwards considered Deism to be Christianity’s most formidable opponent, and the better part of his theological project was a direct or indirect response to it.” Most scholars of Edwards, he believes, have focused on Edwards’ debates within Christianity. McClymond argues that Edwards appropriated Enlightenment ideas and epistemology but adapted them to defend and understand his Reformed Christian convictions. Brown focuses much of his analysis of Edwards’ defense of the Bible’s historicity on Edwards’ reaction to deistic critics such as Matthew Tindal. All three argue that scholarship has not sufficiently appreciated the degree to which Edwards’ apologetics engaged the modern critics of the Bible on their empirical and rational terms. Gerald R. McDermott, Jonathan Edwards Confronts the Gods: Christian Theology, Enlightenment, and Non-Christian Faiths (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Michael J. McClymond, Encounters with God: An Approach to the Theology of Jonathan Edwards (New York, Oxford University Press, 1998), 7, 80-106; Brown, Edwards and the Bible.
observes that more than twenty-five percent of Edwards' notebooks called the
“Miscellanies” treated deism or issues raised by the deists. Edwards considered the
deists worse than “heathens” who had no access to the Scriptures of God. The deists, who
defiantly rejected revelation, were “absurd, brutish and monstrous in their notions and
practices.” In one of his “Miscellanies,” he condemned John Toland, Lord Shaftesbury,
Thomas Chubb, David Hume, and Lord Bolingbroke.

Though Edwards and Dickinson reacted to similar deistic critiques of the Bible
and lived in the same intellectual milieu, Edwards responded differently than did
Dickinson. Dickinson initially and confidently attempted to defend the Bible by rational
and empirical standards without resorting to the supernatural agency of God. Edwards
would never have attempted to separate the rational and empirical from the spiritual
interpretation of the Bible. The two faculties were inseparably linked in his mind. Conrad
Cherry argues that Edwards believed in a unitary model of the self in which the head and
the heart worked in conjunction. In 1746, in his *Treatise Concerning Religious
Affections*, he described the mechanisms of the mind with respect to salvation. Where
scholastic anthropology had divided the soul into faculties of “understanding” (perception
and speculation) and “will” (choice and action), Edwards used the term “heart” to avoid
what he perceived to be a false division of ratiocination and emotion. In responding to

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293 Douglass Sweeney, “Edwards, Jonathan,” in *Historical Handbook of Major Biblical

294 Quoted from McClymond, *Encounters with God*, 93-94; Misc. 1297, in Edwards, *The
Philosophy of Jonathan Edwards from his Private Notebooks*, ed. Harvey G. Townsend (Eugene:
God, the entire being acted in unity; the emotion and intellect were integrated in their
assent.\textsuperscript{295}

This integrated reaction was of particular importance in Edwards’ understanding
of how Christians read the Bible. As a Reformed Protestant, the literal and historical truth
of the Bible formed the basis of his approach to the interpretation of Scripture.\textsuperscript{296} The
factual or what he called the “notional” content of the Bible was available to all
intellectually able readers, regardless of their spiritual state. (By notional, Edwards meant
the propositional content of the object of understanding.) However, Stephen Stein has
pointed out that Edwards was far more concerned with the “spiritual sense of the
Scripture” or the “spirit-given” sense of the text.\textsuperscript{297} God granted the believer a new
perception. Edwards called it a “new sense” or “spiritual sense.”\textsuperscript{298} (He used both terms

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\textsuperscript{295} Conrad Cherry, \textit{Theology of Jonathan Edwards: A Reappraisal} (Bloomington: Indiana

\textsuperscript{296} A full treatment of Jonathan Edwards’ views on and interpretation of the Bible would entail the
work of several scholars. This section of the dissertation is limited primarily to how Edwards responded to
deist challenges and his attempts to defend the Bible, particularly on his use of reason, evidence, and
especially history. Edwards’ response to the challenges of deism is of course only a fragment of Edwards’
biblical interpretation. Stephen Stein, for example, has written on the prominence of typology in Edwards’
work. Edwards believed the indwelling presence of the divine in the exegete or reader of the Bible granted
access to the spiritual meaning of the text, which went beyond the literal meaning. Stein argues that
Edwards, with a degree of creativity, explored the typological meaning of the Bible. Though important,
such issues are beyond the focus of this section. Stephen Stein, “The Spirit and the Word: Jonathan

\textsuperscript{297} Stephen Stein, “The Quest for the Spiritual Sense: The Biblical Hermeneutics of Jonathan

\textsuperscript{298} The exact nature of Edwards’ “new sense” has been a matter of some debate. Some argue that
the “new sense” was continuous with everyday and ordinary experience. However, it was a deeper
experience of the ordinary world. Others have argued that it was distinct and an entirely new perception.
Michael J. McClymond gives a good summary of the historiography of the “new sense.” Perry Miller
argued that Edwards’ spiritual sense was continuous and that it came as a natural result of saving
synonymously.) The “new sense” came only with the power of the Holy Spirit. The Christian, with “new senses,” could perceive “excellency, holiness,” “glory,” “amiability,” and especially “beauty” of God and divine things. Unbelievers, lacking the “new sense,” were blind to the spiritual realities of the world. Likewise, according to Edwards, the spiritual sense also affected the way the Christian read and interpreted the Bible. The sanctified mind, Edwards asserted, could perceive the beauty and harmony in the Scriptures. It could recognize the marks of God and could distinguish between truth and error. The Christian saw the signs of God in the texts themselves. The words of the Bible “themselves are an evidence of their own divine authority.”

The believer and unbeliever both read the same Bible of course and though the Christian was blessed with a new and higher knowledge, both occupied the same reality.


299 Quoted from Brown, Edwards and the Bible, 45.

300 Ibid., 42.
With rational understanding, both the believer and unbeliever came to a notional or speculative understanding of God or spiritual matters. In other words, all intelligent people could comprehend the words of the Bible. But, only the Christian, enabled by the Holy Spirit, could perceive the excellency and holiness of the Bible. Edwards believed that though one could arrive at a factual or notional knowledge of the religious teachings of the Scriptures by natural and rational faculties, such natural knowledge did not suffice for salvation. Such knowledge was probabilistic and lacked the certainty that came from spiritually illuminated knowledge.

That only the regenerate could perceive the spiritual truths of the Bible was one of the chief criticisms of skeptics such as Spinoza and Hobbes. Such spiritual knowledge was private and therefore could not be considered a universal or reliable truth, according to skeptics. Edwards asserted that the excellencies of the Scriptures were evident for all to see. If the unregenerate did not recognize the divine majesty, beauty, and harmony of the Bible, the fault lay not with the Scriptures but with the reader. Sin could “blind the mind,” just as “natural temper oftentimes very much blinds us in secular affairs; as when our natural temper is melancholy or jealous, cowardly, and the like.”

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302 Edwards believed that the spiritual sense of the Scripture was consistent with the Reformed Protestant literal-historical hermeneutic. The spiritual sense was the historical sense. However, the significance the words of the Bible have for the soul could only be perceived by the spiritual understanding. A person with understanding, education, and a clear mind could comprehend the literal meaning of the Bible. But the aid of the Spirit was necessary for an individual to be affected by the spiritual meaning of the Bible. Brown, Jonathan Edwards and the Bible, 53. Stephen Nichols notes that according to Edwards, only the Holy Spirit could grant an “absolute sort of certainty” on spiritual matters. This certainty extends to the Christian’s knowledge that the Bible is revelation. Stephen Nichols, An Absolute Sort of Certainty: The Holy Spirit and the Apologetics of Jonathan Edwards (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2003).
knowledge was privileged knowledge, it was the perception of something real nonetheless. Rather than attempting to naturalize or despiritualize his interpretation or understanding of revelation, Edwards argued that the spiritual perception was a legitimate form of sensory information.

Edwards believed there were limits to the spiritual apprehension of God. One could not recognize the divine nature of the Bible without the aid of the Holy Spirit, but one could not rely solely on inner spiritual light. In this manner, Edwards and Dickinson shared similar concerns about individualistic excesses. Edwards was quick to point out that the self-evident and intuitive perceptions of the divine nature of the Scriptures were not irrational or enthusiastic. The recognition of the divine authorship of the Bible was rational. He believed that the reader should conclude that the “consistency, harmony, and concurrence of the train of actions” were the product of a “rational” and “divine mind.”

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303 Jonathan Edwards, “Miscellany” (no. 248), The “Miscellanies,” ed. Thomas A. Schafer, vol. 13, The Works of Jonathan Edwards (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 361; Marsden, Jonathan Edwards, 480-81; Brown, Edwards and the Bible, 44. McClymond argues that “there is a kind of tug-of-war between the distinctiveness and uniqueness of Christian experience as Edwards conceived of it and the Enlightenment’s appeal to general human experience as the basis for all legitimate claims to knowledge.” Edwards employed Locke’s epistemology to argue that the illuminated knowledge derived from a direct experience of God. This experience of God was spiritual in origin, but Edwards believed that it was no less rational than the natural intuitions of the mind. The apprehension of God was analogous but clearly of a different order from the sensory experience of natural objects. Brown calls this spiritual sense a “kind of super-intuition.” Not only could it rise to the level of clarity and certainty of normal sense impression, but it exceeded it. Brown goes on to argue that Edwards employed Locke’s validation of experience as an intuitive, and thus philosophically certain source of knowledge as a justification for the supposition of an illuminated knowledge, which comes from a direct experience of God immediately available to the mind. Edwards believed that though mathematical and axiomatic truths could yield rational truths, sense experience could also yield reliable conclusions as well. Edwards believed that religious truth was grounded in experience and therefore reliable. Cherry also discusses Edwards’ belief that divine illumination was essential for salvation and a genuine knowledge of God and the ability to act. Cherry writes that “one is moved by the Light to judge the truth of God’s revelation in Christ, and to make that judgment while cleaving to the truth with full inclination and affection.” McClymond, —Spiritual Perception,” 197; Brown, Edwards and the Bible, 38-39; Cherry, The Theology of Jonathan Edwards, 27.
The Spirit of God acted on the believer only in conjunction with the Bible. The Bible and rational theological conclusions were essential. He preached,

Such is the nature of man that no object can come at the heart but through the door of the understanding: and there can be no spiritual knowledge of that of which there is not first a rational knowledge. It is impossible that any one should see the truth or excellency of any doctrine of the gospel, who knows not what doctrine is.

Furthermore, Edwards did not believe illuminated knowledge granted the Christian reader the ability to discern the meaning of the Bible in isolation. Edwards studied the Bible within a Reformed tradition of interpretation. He read the Bible with commentaries such as Matthew Poole (1624-79), Matthew Henry (1662-1714), Moses Lowman (1680-1752), Phillip Dodridge (1702-51), and others. Edwards attempted to balance the spiritually guided apprehension of divine matters and the Bible. For example, in Religious Affections and Distinguishing Marks, Edwards asserted that the Bible and doctrine are indispensable, yet only those with spiritually enlightened senses can truly appreciate the Bible.

Edwards always maintained his firm belief in the priority of the spiritual sense of the apprehension of the Bible. On this point, he never wavered. However, Edwards grew

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304 Edwards was aware of the potential of abuses of the affective and immediate nature of the supernatural light of God that could lead to enthusiasm. He attempted to curb such abuses by systematically analyzing the nature of spiritual experiences. See Stein, “Quest for the Spiritual Sense,” 102-103; Scholars, including McClymond, argue that Edwards drew a sharp distinction between regenerate and unregenerate reason.” A thinker who reasoned from biblical principles was wholly different from one who argued from natural reason alone. McClymond, Encounters with God, 95. See also Brown, Edwards and the Bible, 43, 50; Cherry, The Theology of Jonathan Edwards, 44-55.

305 Quoted from Brown, Edwards and the Bible, 50.

306 Marsden, Jonathan Edwards, 474.

concerned with deistic attacks on the factual authenticity of scriptural history. In response, Brown contends, “Edwards increasingly found it necessary to rely on evidential arguments in his engagement with critical issues, far more than he might have preferred.” The world was changing, and Edwards adapted. He developed apologetic arguments against those who attacked the authority and accuracy of the Bible. Reason, evidence, and history confirmed the authenticity of Scripture. Both Edwards and Dickinson were responding to deist critics and reading latitudinarian responses. Edwards was clear that such reasonable and evidentiary knowledge was inferior to true knowledge, which came by the aid of the Holy Spirit.

In his essay “Religious Affections,” Edwards wrote that God granted evidence of revelation. “But it is certain, that such an assurance is not to be attained by the greater part of them who live under the gospel, by arguments fetched from ancient traditions, histories and monuments.” Evidence and histories could not be the primary means by which people were convicted of the truth, for the vast majority did not have access to such scholarship. Edwards reasoned that some natural men yield a kind of assent of their judgments to the truth of the Christian religion, from the rational proofs or arguments that are offered to envince it.” Such means yielded negative results. As examples of such men, he pointed to the notorious sinners Judas and Simon the sorcerer. (It is worth noting

that Edwards was still thinking in essentially pre-modern and ahistorical terms in suggesting that Jesus persuaded Judas of the notional truth of Christianity by rational proofs or arguments.” Later German biblical scholars would argue that biblical texts needed to be interpreted with greater sensitivity to their distinct cultural context. However, Edwards would never have claimed to have adhered to the new standards of enlightenment history. Assent based merely on proofs and rational arguments, Edwards claimed, was insufficient. “The gospel of the blessed God does not go abroad a begging for its evidence[.]” Rather, “it has its highest and most proper evidence in itself.” The new sense allows the believer certain knowledge of the truth of the Bible.

However, such reasonable arguments may be greatly serviceable,” he wrote. “[T]hey may be in some respects subservient to the begetting of saving faith in men.”

He believed a rational and evidentiary defense of the historical reliability of the Scriptures alone was not sufficient for salvation. At best, it could demonstrate the high probability of historical claims, believed Edwards. A scholar could clear up philosophical and factual errors that stood in the way to salvation, but ultimately, the perception of the divine authority of revelation was a gift from God.

In this regard, Edwards differed from Anglican latitudinarians. As discussed by Shapiro, latitudinarians in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries tended to assert that

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309 As a result of the German scholars, men like Andrews Norton were far more sensitive to the historical context of the Bible. They are discussed in chapter 5. Edwards and his understanding of history are discussed below.


311 Marsden, Jonathan Edwards, 481.
probable standards sufficed for true religious knowledge. Nonetheless, selectively and cautiously, Edwards resorted to rational, historical, and probabilistic arguments to defend the historical accuracy of the Bible in light of deist attacks.

Recall that the deists generally argued that all propositions needed to be submitted to the authority of reason and be consistent with experience. By these standards, deists ravaged the Bible as incomprehensible, irrational, and fictitious. Tindal, for example, attacked the rational adequacy of religious forms of knowledge because only propositions confirmed by intuition, self-evidence, or philosophical demonstration should be trusted. Edwards countered these claims by arguing that the skeptics confused two distinct types of reason. In some cases, Edwards wrote, reason “is intended the same as argument or evidence…as when we say we should believe in nothing without reason or contrary to reason … or against evidence.” However, skeptics believed as if “evidence and divine revelation [were] entirely distinct, implying that divine revelation is not of the nature of evidence or argument.”

Edwards also argued that Tindal’s standards of truth were too restrictive. Edwards pointed out that Tindal and his deistic kin were excluding an entire category of accepted knowledge: reliable testimony. Following Locke, Edwards, like Dickinson, pointed out that people generally trusted the testimony of witnesses if the integrity and

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312 Quoted from Marsden, Jonathan Edwards, 476.

honesty of the reporter could be ascertained, even if the testimony defied expectations.\textsuperscript{314}

Most commonly accepted knowledge was based on testimony. In Edwards‘ “Miscellanies” no. 1340, he wrote,

\begin{quote}
I say, all that is known by the experience of mankind, is known only by one or more of these testimonies excepting only the existence of that idea, or those few ideas, which are this moment present in our minds, or the immediate objects of present consciousness. And yet how unreasonable would it be to say, that we must first know these things to be true by reason, before we give credit to our experience of the truth of them.
\end{quote}

Only a very few propositions, argued Edwards, could be known by Tindal’s narrow standards. Such standards would lead to the rejection of almost all knowledge of history or of foreign lands since both depended on the testimony of reliable witnesses. As a general proposition, Edwards argued that historical testimonies were morally certain or generally reliable.\textsuperscript{315} For the same reasons that people trusted credible witnesses for historical accounts, the truth of the Bible could be reasonably trusted.

Edwards, like the latitudinarians, went on to argue that the rules of mathematical certainty could not apply to historical records.

\begin{quote}
[Divine revelation is not the same thing as argument or evidence in general; because \textit{tis a particular sort of evidence. So there are other particular sorts of evidence, and persons might speak as intelligibly, if they should single out any other kind of evidence, and assert that reason or evidence was superior to that sort of evidence. As for instance, one sort of evidence is human testimony of credible evidence.}\textsuperscript{316}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{314} Edwards argues by drawing an analogy with travel accounts. If a man of integrity and sound judgment reported on the culture of a foreign land, it would be irrational to reject his testimony just because it seemed irrational or defied expectations. Edwards also added that one generally trusted the discoveries of natural sciences such as electricity or magnetism without full comprehension. Brown, \textit{Edwards and the Bible}, 72; Marsden, \textit{Jonathan Edwards}, 477.

\textsuperscript{315} Edwards wrote, “The testimony of history and tradition is to be depended on.” Quoted from Brown, \textit{Edwards and the Bible}, 67. Locke made a similar point about trusting witnesses. Locke, \textit{Essay}, 662.
eye witness; another is credible well-vouched history; another is memory; another is present experience; another is geometrical measurement; another is arithmetical calculation; another is strict metaphysical distinction and comparison. Now would it not be an improper and unintelligible way of speaking to ask, whether evidence was not above experience; or whether argument was not above measurement or calculation.\textsuperscript{316}

The proposition was not mathematically demonstrable, but people in general relied upon testimonial knowledge, even if its comprehension and certainty were only probable or partial. Echoing voices such as Grotius and Locke, Edwards argued that biblical history needed different standards for different kinds of evidence. Requiring all knowledge to rise to the level of mathematical or philosophical certainty was unrealistic.

VII. The Historical Accuracy of the Bible

Edwards attempted to make the case that the proofs for the reliability of the Bible were rational and based on universally accessible evidence. Like Dickinson and the English latitudinarians, Edwards built a case on historical evidence, which he knew was probabilistic by nature. Many of the assaults on the Bible’s historical accuracy centered on the Pentateuch. Recall that Hobbes and Spinoza questioned the purported authorship of its books. Simon and Le Clerc, seeking to defend the integrity of divine revelation against skeptical attacks, argued that the bulk of the Pentateuch was compiled by later editors. Their attempts to buttress the eroding trust in the Bible were of little comfort to their more conservative readers.\textsuperscript{317}

\textsuperscript{316} Quoted from Brown, \textit{Edwards and the Bible}, 70.

\textsuperscript{317} See Brown, \textit{Edwards and the Bible}, 116. For a survey of the debates regarding Mosaic authorship, see John D. Woodbridge, "German Responses to the Biblical Critic Richard Simon: From
The proposition that Moses did not write the Pentateuch suggested to the typical eighteenth-century Christian that the book was a fraud. Eighteenth-century Protestants believed that the writers of the Bible were conduits of God’s word. The authority of the holy text depended on the inspiration of the writer. If the connection between the prophetic author and the text were broken, the credibility of the Bible was irredeemably damaged. Protestant defenders of the Bible also needed to preserve the notion of a continuous, uncorrupted, and uninterrupted line between the original text and the series of accurate copies leading to the ones Christians held in their hands. As Locke reasoned, describing the general standards of historical reliability, a testimony lost a degree of reliability with every step it was removed from the original testimony. “[A]ny Testimony, the farther off it is from the original Truth, the less force and proof it has.” He added, “And the more hands the Tradition has successively passed through, the less strength and evidence does it receive from them.” Though Moses’ original manuscript did not survive, Christians typically felt confident that they could be confident that they had accurate copies. But if they possessed redactions compiled hundreds of years after Moses wrote the originals and from a variety of sources, Protestant confidence in its inspired authority would be drastically challenged. At the close of the eighteenth century, Thomas Paine summed up much of the skepticism of the deists and the anxiety of the Christians


318 If the Pentateuch were composed by inspired editors as Simon proposed, then Mosaic authorship was less of a problem, but most were uncomfortable with Simon’s theory.

319 Locke, Essay, 663-664.
that had been building up for the past century or so in his *Age of Reason* (1794). He believed he could undermine the credibility of revealed religion by questioning the historical evidence of the Bible and Mosaic authorship in particular. He argued that if you could —the away from Genesis the belief that Moses was the author” the foundations of Christianity would crumble and revelation would become nothing more than an anonymous book of stories, fables, and traditionary or invented absurdities, or down right lies.\(^3\)

Edwards responded to the questions regarding Mosaic authorship in a relatively polished but unpublished essay entitled —Whether the PENTATEUCH was written by Moses.”\(^3\) Brown notes that, within the essay, what Edwards does not argue is as striking as what he does argue. Edwards generally avoided theological arguments. He did not appeal to providential agency or to the intuitive holiness of the Scriptures apprehended by Christians with a new sense of the heart. Rather, Brown argues that Edwards‘ —effort to explain the genesis of the Pentateuch is probably the most striking example of a purely historical approach among his writings[.\)]\(^3\) Edwards tried to demonstrate that the Pentateuch could meet contemporary standards of historical credibility.

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\(^3\) The essay —Whether the PENTATEUCH was written by Moses” was never published and is found in his *Notes on Scripture*. It is by far the longest essay in any of the four notebooks in the series. Jonathan Edwards, (no. 416), *Notes on Scripture*, ed. Stephen Stein, vol. 15, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 423-69.

\(^3\) Brown, *Edwards and the Bible*, 118. Regarding this essay, Marsden writes, —Scripture could not be defended, in Edwards‘ view, if one conceded the critics‘ claim that it was most essentially a product of human history and then tried to fend off this or that claim about its accuracy.” Marsden goes on to write that in the essay, Edwards —kept the argument on his own ground. The Mosaic authorship fit with all the other evidence within the Scripture itself. Essentially he argued in numerous ways for the internal
Spinoza charged that the Pentateuch should be divided between the laws and the history. Moses might have written a small and primitive legal code, but the priest Ezra acted as an editor and compiled Moses’ work and inserted a narration of historical events to explain the context for readers after the Babylonian exile. Spinoza concluded that the bulk of the Pentateuch was written much later than Moses, and what Moses did write was far different from the books’ present form. Enemies of revealed religion such as Charles Blount and Voltaire popularized these ideas.

In an attempt to defend the Mosaic authorship against Spinoza and his ilk, Edwards began his argument by calling attention to the unified style of the Pentateuch. The five books formed one continuous narrative, suggesting that it was the work of a single author. The legal and historical sections fit seamlessly together, noted Edwards. They grew together as several parts of a tree.”

Edwards also argued at great length that Moses had every reason to integrate the history with the legal portions. Moses knew he was writing for posterity. Edwards wrote, in probabilistic language, that it is reasonably to be supposed that he would write these for the use of the children of Israel in after generations.” Moses wanted the people to remember and reenact their history through annual rituals such as the Feast of Tabernacles or the Passover. However, such rites would have no meaning without the


323 Edwards, Notes on Scripture, (no. 416), 440.
historical context. — ‘tis impossible to understand all these particular precepts about the Passover without an history of that affair.” He argued that logically the author had every reason to write the Pentateuch with the historical and the legal sections together. — say, there is such a dependence between these [laws] and the history, that they can’t be understood without the history.”

Edwards argued that because of the unified nature of the books, there was simply no need for Spinoza’s hypothesis that the historical sections were later grafted onto an original legal code. A unified legal and historical document made more sense. All the parts appeared to be eonneted, interwoven, blended, inwrought, and incorporated.” Edwards conjectured that the Pentateuch could not have been artificially patched and compacted together afterwards” from several different sources. Based on the historical evidence, Edwards speculated, — It seems impossible to impartially and carefully view the manner of their connection, and to judge otherwise.” Though it was plausible that a single author did not write the Pentateuch, Edwards argued that it was more reasonable to conclude that he did.

In 1753, five years before Edwards’ death, Jean Astruc, in his Conjectures sur les memoirs, also attempted to defend the notion of Mosaic authorship (or editorship) of Genesis. However, unlike Edwards, Astruc observed that the style of Genesis was in fact not unified. Astruc believed he discovered two independent narrative strands. Moses,

324 Edwards, Notes on Scripture, (no. 416), 416, 425, 432. Edwards likely drew on latitudinarian sources. Stillingfleet also tired to prove Mosaic authorship with the tools of history in Origines Sacrae (1662). Reedy, Bible and Reason, 48-52.

325 Edwards, Notes on Scripture, (no. 416), 441.
Astruc hypothesized, wove together older narratives. This theory accounted for the apparent contradictions and repetitions pointed out by skeptical critics like Spinoza, yet preserved a notion of Mosaic authorship. Astruc’s theory laid the basis for the later Documentary Hypothesis” which argued that later post-Mosaic editors cobbled together the Pentateuch out of four distinct sources.326 There is no evidence that Edwards knew of Astruc‘s work. However, it seems unlikely that Edwards would have been persuaded by it. Because Edwards‘ reading was ultimately both guided and limited by his theological commitments, he would not or could not see what Astruc perceived as evidence of multiple sources.327

Edwards also argued that, by the standards of eighteenth century historiography, Moses was a qualified witness and recorder of the events of the Pentateuch. He was clearly an eyewitness to many of the critical events on the journey to Canaan. In his Blank Bible,” Edwards argued that Moses –was learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians.” This wisdom of the Egyptians” was a common early modern notion. Advocates of prisca theologia believed that the Egyptians and others possessed remnants of God’s revelation, albeit in a degraded and incomplete form. This –wisdom” included an oral history of the world handed down from generation to generation.328 The fragility

326 Decades later, expanding on Astruc’s work, Johann Eichhorn in 1780 and Wilhelm de Wette in 1805, would argue that the Pentateuch was patched together centuries after Moses.


of this type of history, argued Edwards, required a great deal of training and care. Therefore, Edwards postulated that this education might have prepared Moses writing the history of the world from the beginning.”\(^{329}\) A written record of history was ultimately more reliable, and Edwards believed Moses knew this, though Moses charged the people to teach their children through oral tradition. Moses still valued written records.\(^{330}\) The permanence of the ancient written record also assured the sensibilities of those looking for reliable historical evidence.

Edwards may have demonstrated that the Pentateuch was not a compilation, but he also admitted that this did not prove that it was written by Moses. Edwards therefore pointed to stylistic evidence from the text itself as evidence of a single author who wrote during the time of the exodus, and Moses was the most plausible candidate. During the wilderness travel of the Israelites, the author of the Pentateuch consistently referred to being on “this side” of the Jordan. Edwards wrote, “[t]his style is used nowhere else in any part of the history of the Old Testament; elsewhere the eastern side of the Jordan is evermore called _the other side of the Jordan.”’ The evidence suggested a first-hand witness, which strengthened its reliability by modern historical standards. Of course this evidence could not prove that the contemporary author was Moses, only that it was likely him. As is the nature of all historical evidence, it was probabilistic. Edwards’ manuscript suggested the tentativeness of this proof when he wrote that the argument was “almost

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\(^{330}\) Edwards, Notes on Scripture, (no. 416), 426.
Edwards also argued that the Pentateuch was a reliable historical record because it was recorded by an eyewitness during the time of the events and the written record was preserved and uncorrupted for centuries. The historical record, argued Edwards, was stored and preserved in the Ark of the Covenant, which was one of the most important monuments of the people. It was preserved until the time of the Babylonian captivity. The critic had every reason to believe that the record of Moses would be stored, not only because the Pentateuch stated it but also because the preservation of public records was a common practice in the ancient world. Edwards wrote,

> It appears by profane history to have been the manner of the nations of old to keep the ancient histories of their nations, and their genealogies, and acts of their gods in their temples, where they were committed to the care of their priests as sacred things, which in all probability was in imitation of the example of the Israelites in keeping the Mosaic history, which Moses committed to the care of priests, to be laid up in the sanctuary as a sacred thing.

Such record keeping was a common custom and therefore there was a greater likelihood that the Israelites in fact did preserve the record. Edwards buttressed his claims by pointing to similar customs in neighboring contemporary civilizations.

Edwards argued that a later forgery was highly unlikely. He found it implausible that Ezra, or someone like him, could have created a compiled forgery of the Mosaic books after the Babylonian captivity, as Spinoza claimed. The content of the books were

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331 Ibid., 442.
332 Ibid., 456.
public and well known and honored among many disparate Jewish communities. The books of Moses were kept alive in the public memory though rituals and public recitations, according to Locke. Edwards called these rituals —monuments or memorials.” Recall that memorials and monuments were one of the cardinal categories of historical verifiability. He noted the existence of other monuments such as the ark, Aaron’s rod, and the brazen serpent. These memorials fixed the memory of the history in the minds of the Jews. Edwards notes that even the preserved books themselves were a kind of memorial.333 Edwards argued that if the Jewish people knew that there was a short and fragmentary book by Moses, why would they not honor it? Spinoza claimed that the original writings of Moses were largely forgotten and therefore Ezra could have presented his redacted version as authentic. Edwards found it unlikely that such an important book could be wholly lost. Copies must have existed. Also, the style of writing of the Pentateuch differed from Ezra’s known work. If the Israelites of the time of Ezra knew of the book of the law, argued Edwards, it would be unlikely that they would accept Ezra’s new version as authentic. They surely would have seen it as a forgery.334

Edwards also argued that the Pentateuch, in its complete form, must have existed before the Babylonian captivity because the Samaritans also possessed a copy of the books of Moses. The Samaritan version was written in the ancient Phoenician or Hebrew characters, whereas the Jewish version, after the Babylonian exile, was written in Chaldee letters, which were natural to them after years of captivity. If the Samaritans

333 Ibid., 427.
334 Ibid., 457-58; Brown, Edwards and the Bible, 121.
took the Pentateuch from the Jews after the captivity, their version would have been in Chaldee letters. That their version was written in Hebrew was a strong argument that they took it from the Jews before the captivity, and not afterwards."

Confirmation by other contemporary sources also marked a document or witness as historically authentic according to the standards of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century historiography. Edwards spilled a great deal of ink recounting examples of pagan affirmations of the Bible. For example, regarding the writing of the Pentateuch and the recording of a national history, Edwards wrote,

And the ancient records of the neighboring heathens, particularly of the Phoenicians, show that the priests of the Jews had such a history in keeping, giving an account of the creation of the world, etc., even so long ago as the days of the judges. This appears by Sanchoniathon’s history, wherein he mentions many of the same facts, and confesses that he had them from a certain priest of the God Jao. Edwards also argued that the Samaritans were unlikely to take a Hebrew version if a Chaldean version were available because the Chaldean language was more natural to them. He also asserted that the Samaritans were enemies of the Jews and therefore they would make no great effort to imitate the Jews and deliberately copy Chaldee into Hebrew. Therefore, their copy, containing both law and history, must have been taken before the captivity. Edwards, Notes on Scripture, (no. 416), 464.

He went on to state—The ancient heathen writers do make mention of Moses as the writer of things contained in the former part of the book of Genesis." Furthermore, based on his reading of Theophilus Gale’s Court of the Gentiles, Edwards noted that—any things also that the heathens attributed to their God Bacchus were taken from the history of Moses.” The Egyptians also took the events of Moses and attributed them to their God Osiris. The distorted fragments found in pagan sources based on the real historical events

335 Edwards also argued that the Samaritans were unlikely to take a Hebrew version if a Chaldean version were available because the Chaldean language was more natural to them. He also asserted that the Samaritans were enemies of the Jews and therefore they would make no great effort to imitate the Jews and deliberately copy Chaldee into Hebrew. Therefore, their copy, containing both law and history, must have been taken before the captivity. Edwards, Notes on Scripture, (no. 416), 464.

336 Ibid., 456. Edwards references Bedford, Scripture Chronology, 92-100, 512-13 as the source.

337 Ibid. Edwards references Grotius.
concerning Moses affirmed for Edwards that the Pentateuch recorded actual events. He also observed that Clement of Alexandria, and heathen writers, such as Justin of Trogus Pompeius, Pliny, Juvenal, Tacitus, and Dionysius Longinus affirmed some of the historical evidence.

Elsewhere in the Notes on Scripture, based on his reading of Grotius and Bochart, Edwards noted that there existed many pagan stories similar to the account of Noah and the flood. For example, the Persian holy book, the Zend-Avesta, affirmed the integrity of the Pentateuch. The Zend-Avesta, according to Edwards, contained many accounts that were in the Pentateuch such as the creation account and the deluge. Edwards reasoned that Zoroaster must have taken the stories from the Pentateuch before the time of the captivity of the Jews in Babylon. Therefore, he reasoned, the historical parts of the books could not have been added by Ezra or someone like him after the return from the exile.

Accounts of the tower of Babel also appeared in many pagan sources. Edwards referred to Henry Widner when he wrote, “There is a most noble authentical confirmation of the Mosaic history.” Widner noted a city or country retained the name Babel, or

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339 Notes on Scripture, (no. 432), 511-514.

340 Ibid; Edward cited Humphrey Prideaux’s The Old and New Testament Connected in the History of the Jews and Neighboring Nations (1715-1717) Edwards noted that Prideaux described Zoroaster as the greatest Impostor except Mohamet, that ever appeared in the world, and had all the craft and enterprising boldness of that Arab, but much more knowledge.” Zoroaster was well-versed in the writings of the Old Testament and in the Jewish religion which was for Prideaux “convincing proof” that he was a Jew by birth and possibly a servant of the prophet Ezra.” See “Whether the PENTATEUCH was Written by Moses” (no. 416), 464. Edwards referred to Zoroaster in Notes on Scripture in entry (no. 416) and (no. 464); (no. 432) Edwards also discusses Zoroaster in his “Miscellanies,” (no. 969), 251-252.
“confusion.”” Surely these were “evident vestigia or characters” of the original truth of the biblical account. The real historical events had been imperfectly passed down among the pagan nations. Edwards believed that they were evidence of the truth of the biblical accounts.  

McDermott referred to this as Edwards’ “trickle-down theory of revelation.” Any residual truth in pagan religions, cultures, philosophies, or histories must have been passed down from Noah and his descendents or from contact with the Jews.  

Christians, Edwards argued, could rest assured that the Pentateuch they possessed in the eighteenth century was the same historical witness of the events that Moses himself wrote. Based on the standards of history, it was as reliable a historical document as any in the world. The criticisms of the likes of Spinoza or Tindal were without merit.

VIII. The Spiritual Sense

Edwards undeniably took the deistic critics and the weight of historical evidence seriously. He attempted to follow English discussions on the matter as closely as possible. Though working in relative isolation, his research, readings, and criticism were remarkably thorough, synthesizing a variety of European texts.  

341 Edwards’ references to pagan confirmation of the biblical account are numerous throughout the Notes on Scripture. For example, he discusses pagan historical references to Moses. Edwards attributes Bochart and Grotius as sources, 510-514; entry (no. 409), (no. 424), and (no. 429) discuss pagan versions of the universal deluge. Edwards notes that flood stories can be found in the classical Greek accounts of Abydenus, Plutarch, and Ovid, (no. 416- no. 417); entry (no. 410) and (no. 431) discuss pagan versions of the story of the tower of Babel. Edwards, Notes on Scripture.

342 McDermott, “The Deist Connection,” 44.

343 Regarding Edwards’ defense of the historical authenticity of the Bible against deistic critics, Minkema calls Edwards’ labors “a lone voice from the colonial wilderness,” joining his voice to the growing chorus of English defenders of the Bible. However, Cotton Mather was also current on this matter and attempted to make a contribution to his debate. Kenneth P. Minkema, “The Other Unfinished Great
probabilistic and historical empirical evidences, one must be careful not to overestimate his reliance on empirical evidences to confirm or prove the genuineness of the biblical revelation. His exposure to deist criticism certainly made him more sensitive to issues of historical criticism than he would have been otherwise, but ultimately, he believed that rational arguments about the Bible were incapable of giving a spiritual and thereby genuine understanding of the Bible. Edwards’ historical defense of the Bible must be seen in the context of his larger hermeneutics. He relied on the spiritual interpretation of Scripture.

Edwards’ belief that Christian hermeneutics depended on spiritual senses can be seen in his unfinished “Harmony of the Old and New Testament.” Kenneth Minkema has drawn scholarly attention to an unfinished “great work” on which Edwards had been laboring for some time and never finished due to his premature death. The work would have been Edwards’ most comprehensive statement on the interpretation of the Bible and refutation of deistic attacks on divine revelation. He had at least five hundred pages of it drafted and Minkema pieced together its various parts that were in manuscript form. The great work was to be composed of three parts: prophecies of the Messiah in the Old Work, “ in Jonathan Edwards’s Writings: Text, Context, Interpretation, ed. Stephen Stein (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 52-65.

344 Edwards believed that history could reveal knowledge about God, but history itself must be understood as the realm of God’s divine actions. He would not, as Voltaire and Hume would, remove the providential and sovereign acts of God from history. Thus, history, like the Scriptures, must be seen with new senses. See Avihu Zakai, Jonathan Edwards’s Philosophy of History: The Reenchantment of the World in the Age of Enlightenment (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003); Marsden, Jonathan Edwards, 487.
Testament, types or prefigurations of Christ in the Old Testament, and a harmony of the Old and New Testament. 345

The various "Miscellanies" that would have been the substance of the first part on prophecies and fulfillment pointed to Old Testament prophecies of the Messiah and their fulfillment by Christ. On this topic, Edwards wrote nearly three hundred folio pages. He carefully studied the biblical text and analyzed ambiguous words, exhaustively citing ancient and modern sources. As his driving point, he argued that all the prophecies of the Old Testament were exactly fulfilled by Christ. 346

In the second section on typology, he gathered extensive examples to demonstrate how God "abundantly prefigured and typified ... the Messiah and the things appertaining to his kingdom" in the Old Testament. 347 For example, Edwards declares the temple in ancient Israel to be a type of Christ. He also identified Moses' rod, the tabernacle, the Ark of the Covenant, and the cloud of glory accompanying Israel in the wilderness as "types and symbols" of Christ's

345 Minkema, "The Other Unfinished Great Work," 53.

346 Among the sources he cited were Josephus, Tacitus, and Cyrus to Jaques Basmage, Hugo Grotius, and Johann Stapfer. Minkema writes that among the books that criticized prophecies as irrational were Thomas Woolston's Six Discourses on Miracles (1727), William Whiston's Essay Towards Restoring the True Text of the Old Testament (1722), and Anthony Collins' Discourse of the Grounds and Reasons of the Christian Religion (1724). Edwards also drew upon English works that defended the prophecies of the Bible. These include Edward Chandler's Defense of Christianity, from the Prophecies of the Old Testament (1725), which linked prophecies and types. Edwards frequently cited Thomas Sherlock, Use and intent of Prophecy (1725) to affirm the fulfillment of the prophecies of Christ. Arthur Ashley Sykes' Essay upon the Truth of the Christian Religion (1725) maintained that Christianity had its 'real foundation' in the Old Testament and that Christ's claim to fulfill prophecy was among several proofs of the authenticity of Scripture. Minkema "The Other Unfinished Great Work," 58-59.

347 Quoted from Minkema, "The Other Unfinished Great Work," 59. See Works, vol. 11, 202; Edwards' most sustained reflections on typology appeared in the "Miscellanies" in an essay entitled "Types of Messiah." This essay fills more than seventy manuscript pages, written in the mid-to-late 1740s. His Notes on Scripture also function as a collection point for his interpretation of biblical types. The essay "Types of Messiah" appears in the "Miscellanies," (no. 1069) Works, vol. 11, 187-382. Stein, "Introduction" to Notes on Scripture, 10-11.
presence. He imaginatively writes that the infant Moses, floating on the water, was a type of the church. "This ark seemed weak, made of those things that were very weak and despicable, hereby fitly representing Christ, who became a mean, weak, despised man." The final section, the Harmony of the Old and New Testament, was the least developed. In it, he intended to show that the entire Bible was unified in its teaching and spirit. The Old Testament — harmonize[s] with doctrines, precepts, etc. of the New.”

Minkema writes that perception of harmony was dependent on the "spiritual sense," given by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. "Through the spiritual sense, Edwards linked all the meanings of biblical texts through an 'analogy of faith' by conforming them to the saving doctrines of Christianity[.]” Edwards wrote, "The whole of Christian divinity depends on divine revelation, for though there are many truths concerning God and our duty to him that are evident by the light of nature, yet no one truth is taught by the light of nature in that manner in which it is necessary for us to know it[.]” He went on to say, "It signifies nothing for us to know anything of any one of God's perfections, unless we know them as manifest in Christ.” The "light of nature” could teach some general moral principles, but true knowledge of God came only by revelation. And only by spiritual illumination could the Bible be understood.

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348 Stein, “Introduction” to Notes on Scripture, 11; (no. 6), 50, (no. 503), 601-605. Edwards, The "Blank Bible," 206.

349 Minkema, "The Other Unfinished Great Work," 62.

350 Quoted from Minkima, "The Other Unfinished Great Work," 55.
George Marsden correctly notes that Edwards confronted the modern skeptical attacks on the Bible but did not do so on the rationalistic terms of the deists. The power of the argument of his proposed great work, the *Harmony of the Old and New Testament,* was the demonstration of a single divine mind, guiding the writing of various men of different temperaments in diverse times and circumstances into a single beautiful message. He wrote on the assumption that the unregenerate could comprehend the notional content of the Bible, but only the Christian, empowered with spiritual senses, could see the beauty, unity, and harmony of the divine author that he was attempting to illustrate and articulate.

Peter Gay criticized Edwards for being incapable of writing history in the enlightenment style of Hume, Voltaire, and Gibbon, all of whom removed God as an active agent of history. They instead emphasized human autonomy and naturalistic explanations for historical development. For example, Voltaire believed that history contained no inherent meaning. Rather, historians imposed significance on the past according to their own bias. Historians Avihu Zakai, John F. Wilson, and McClymond correctly argue that Edwards never intended to write a history that divorced God from earthly events. He wrote history with an explicitly theological purpose; he tried to understand history from the perspective of God’s purpose: the redemption of the world. Ultimately, in Edwards’ mind, God’s purpose and meaning in history was more important than the actual events, though the historical accuracy of the record was still essential. Nevertheless, Wilson observes that in parts of his histories, he demonstrated careful and

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precise analysis of details and appeals to evidence and authorities, as clearly evidenced in his work on the Pentateuch. Edwards utilized some methods of modern historical analysis, which were universally accessible to the natural senses. However, he used history to point to spiritual truths that were available to those with spiritual senses.\(^{352}\)

Edwards was never ultimately beholden to the methods of history or empirical examination. He never had any intention to follow them wherever they may lead. For example, when Edwards looked at the Hebrew custom of record keeping, and found that surrounding pagan nations also had a similar custom, he naturally concluded that the pagan nations borrowed from the people of God. He probably never entertained the possibility that the Bible borrowed from pagan sources. However, others read the evidence in the opposite direction. They believed that the Bible could have just as easily borrowed from pagan sources, and likely did so. For example, Ralph Cudworth, John Marsham, and John Spencer believed that Moses got his ideas of monotheism and theology from the Egyptians.\(^{353}\)

J.D. Michaelis (1717-1791) also saw similarities between


\(^{353}\) See Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian*, 55-90.
the Jews and their neighbors and concluded that sacred Hebrew poetry borrowed liberally from neighboring pagan nations. Edwards used history, but he was ultimately accountable to a higher authority.

Furthermore, Edwards noted (as Dickinson eventually discovered in his exchanges with the deist) that historical and probabilistic evidence, especially historical evidence, had its limits. Regarding the efficacy of historical evidence, Edwards wrote, "How do I know when these histories were written? Learned men tell me these histories were so and so attested in the day of them; but how do I know that there were such attestations then?" One could never be completely certain with historical evidence, given its probabilistic nature. Therefore, Edwards reasoned, probabilistic evidence could not sufficiently persuade someone to give one's life over to saving faith. It could never sufficiently assure one to "run the venture of the loss of all things, and of enduring the most exquisite and long-continued torments, and to trample the world under foot, and count all things dung, for Christ." Genuine faith and assurance of the truth of the Bible was not a matter of arguments. Saving knowledge came from the spiritual senses.

IX. Conclusion

Edwards and Dickinson, like Cotton Mather before them, stood at the vanguard of the American Protestant confrontation with deist attacks on the Bible. In their lifetime,

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354 See Chapter 5 of this dissertation for Michaelis.
355 Edwards, Religious Affections, 303-4; quoted from Marsden, Jonathan Edwards, 481;
356 Marsden, Jonathan Edwards, 480; and Stein, "Introduction," Notes on Scripture, 15.
this battle was primarily a European phenomenon, but both presciently understood that its
dangers could come to American shores. Most of the early eighteenth-century learned
defenses of biblical revelation were produced by European churchmen. Edwards and
Dickinson were two of the few Americans of their generation prepared to build a defense
against deistic assaults and evaluate the various European (especially English) responses.

They differed in subtle and important ways on the role of reason and evidence.
Dickinson believed reason and evidence could lead to total certainty on general matters
of natural religion. Issues specific to Christian revelation were highly probable. Edwards
could agree to a degree. Evidences such as history could at best lead the inquirer to a
probabilistic conclusion that the Bible was revelation. However, the new spiritual senses
could lead one to an absolute certainty. As another example, consider the way they both
dealt with the challenge of Islam. Typical of Christians of their day, they both considered
the religion idolatrous and barbaric. Both believed that the miracles recorded in the
Qur‘an could not be historically confirmed. In contrast, the miracles recorded in the New
Testament were confirmed by their public nature and the integrity of the authors.

However, they differed in their use of Islam in their arguments in subtle ways. Recall that
Dickinson wrote that the seeker of truth must be open to reason and evidence. Most
importantly, one must objectively and honestly examine the evidence for one’s own faith.
Otherwise, one would be no better than a Muslim who refused to see the faults of the
Qur‘an. In other worlds, the Christian could be more sure of his faith because he was
more self-critical, objective, and empirical. He did not rely on habit or passive acceptace.
Edwards would not necessarily have disagreed with this point. In his Religious Affections,
he too noted that Muslims believe out of habit and education. Indeed, some so-called
Christians do so as well. He followed up by arguing that reason and evidence alone will not save. Rather, one needs the Holy Spirit and the internal evidences that transcended empirical examination.\(^{357}\) McDermott observes that Edwards used Islam to rebut deist claims. Islam demonstrated that unassisted reason will only lead to absurd notions. The Islamic part of the world had been given revelation, but they “fell away into Mohametanism.”\(^{358}\) This is not to say that Dickinson believed in reason and evidence and Edwards did not. Clearly, Edwards was a serious thinker. Rather, the differences between them were a matter of emphasis. Edwards did not believe a reasonable man unassisted by grace could see the Bible as true. Dickinson, though inconsistently, optimistically embraced the potential of logic, reason, natural history, and history to affirm biblical revelation.

Not all agreed with Edwards and Dickinson on the necessity of the Spirit. In 1728, Reverend Thomas Pender, an obscure minister of Elizabeth City, Virginia, preached a sermon at Trinity Church in New York, which he published as *The Divinity of the Scriptures, From Reason and External Circumstances*. In it, he insisted that the Christian needed to divest himself of all prejudice and partiality to his own religion. He must instead objectively examine the evidences for the validity of the Bible. Like Dickinson, Pender believed that if the Christian simply relied on his inherited religion, “this might justify any Mahometan to adhere to that religion taught them by their Parents.” Pender insisted that he would not “prove” the divine origin of the Bible by referring to the text of


\(^{358}\) McDermott, “The Deist Connection,” 45.
the Scriptures. That, he believed, amounted to a "scandalous arguing in a circle." Instead, following typical latitudinarian proofs of the Bible, he confined his arguments to universally accessible evidences. "We have a Religion which needs not be afraid to stand at the Bar of Reason, and submit the Cause to the most Impartial Decision." Throughout his apologetic, he remained true to his principles. He never granted the Bible a privileged status. And he never argued that the Spirit needed to enlighten the mind. That too, he believed, would be a form of circular reasoning and could not persuade a skeptic. He remained convinced that the sheer power of evidence should compel belief.359 His evidentiary approach would become more typical in the second half of the eighteenth century.

359 Thomas Pender, *The Divinity of the Scriptures, from Reason and External Circumstances* (New York: William Bradford, 1728), 5. There is no other record of Thomas Pender. Evidence in the sermon suggests that he was an Anglican. There was an Anglican Trinity Church in New York. He also made references to apostolic succession.
CHAPTER 3

REVEALED RELIGION, NATURAL RELIGION,
AND THE DUDLEIAN LECTURES

Cotton Mather, Jonathan Dickinson, and Jonathan Edwards kept current with European historical and philological scholarship regarding the Bible to varying degrees in order to understand the skeptical critiques leveled against the Bible and to offer a defense. However, interest in the study of biblical Hebrew and Greek declined precipitously among Americans who came after them. Benjamin R. Foster notes that although the first few generations of Puritans in New England honored biblical scholarship, by the middle of the eighteenth century, the study of the biblical languages declined in colleges and remained vital only in the lonely studies of a few polymaths.  

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360 Benjamin Foster, “On the Formal Study of Near Eastern Languages in America, 1770-1930,” in U.S.-Middle East Historical Encounters: A Critical Survey, ed. Abbas Amanat and Bernhard Magnusson (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2007). Historian John H. Giltner writes that in the second half of the eighteenth century, serious training in biblical languages had been in decline in America. It was once studied seriously at American colleges, but such instruction as there had been in biblical Greek and Hebrew was limited almost entirely to matters of grammar. Nor did the Great Awakening provide much positive impulse in this regard, for it raised issues of doctrine, not biblical theology. Though it is unfair to say that the American religious thinkers during and after the revivals neglected the Bible, philological and exegetical studies were not nearly as important to them as were the disciplines of systematic theology. Hence, the tendency was to pursue Greek and Hebrew grammar deductively to support previously established beliefs. Deeper probing into the theological meanings inherent within the texts or into broader critical questions generally evoked little concern among New England Calvinists – the very group which, by virtue of its educational standards and institutions of higher learning, was best equipped in America to pursue such investigations. … The study of grammar alone could hardly compete with the much more
(Interest would revive again in the early nineteenth century with the introduction of German biblical philology, which is discussed in the next chapter.) In contrast, scholars in England were interpreting the Bible by more sophisticated historical methods. For example, Robert Lowth argued that the biblical interpreter must be more sensitive to literary genres and historical contexts. His insights were largely lost on his eighteenth-century American counterparts.361

Americans no longer vigorously studied biblical languages in the second half of the eighteenth century, but they did not cease to ponder, discuss, and debate the nature of the Bible. Fearful of the threat of deism, some American Christian apologists continued to focus their energies on defending revelation by evidential means. As the eighteenth century progressed, some Christians continued to place greater confidence in the potential of unassisted reason and they subjected the Bible to empirical examination, confident that natural reason would always affirm supernatural revelation. In the process, their interpretations of the Bible grew gradually more naturalistic. By the end of the century, appeals to supernatural aid in interpretation gradually diminished among them. This is interesting and exciting work of speculative theology. In short, though the eighteenth century produced brilliant systems of doctrine, it witnessed no similar accomplishments in biblical studies.” John H. Giltner, Moses Stuart: The Father of Biblical Science (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), 6. See also Mary Latimer Gambrell, Ministerial Training in Eighteenth Century New England (New York: Columbia University Press, 1937), 81.

361 The colonies were certainly not devoid of biblical scholarship at this time. In the mid-eighteenth century, Judah Monis taught Hebrew at Harvard and printed the first Hebrew grammar in America (1735). Stephen Sewall succeeded him and became the Hancock Professor of Oriental Languages (1764). However, Benjamin Foster notes that by most accounts, American students and pastors learned very little about ancient languages. Foster, “Near Eastern Languages.” Edmund Morgan and Mark Noll have also noted that the study of theology declined in the second half of the eighteenth century. Mark Noll, “The Irony of the Enlightenment for Presbyterians in the Early Republic,” Journal of the Early Republic 5, no. 2 (1985): 149, and Edmund Morgan, “The American Revolution Considered as an Intellectual Movement,” in Paths of American Thought, ed. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., and Morton White (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1963), 11-33.
not to say that these rational and evidentiary-minded Christian thinkers became crypto-deists or followers of Spinoza. They had no intention of eroding the authority of or confidence in the Bible. On the contrary, they directed their efforts to strengthen the authority of Scriptures in light of mounting attacks. Nonetheless, interpreting the Bible by increasingly natural and empirical means affected the way they understood Holy Writ. American Protestants began to treat the Bible more like any other book.

The growth of this rational approach to spiritual knowledge was most strongly and conspicuously evident in the close knit community of Harvard's professors and its graduates who pastored in eastern Massachusetts. Changes in the understanding of the Bible in this group during the second half of the eighteenth century can be traced in the Dudleian Lectures at Harvard. The lecturers sought to shore up the intellectual foundations of Protestantism and defend the authority of the Bible from its skeptical enemies, the primary enemy being the deists, as many of the lectures were keen to point out. As John Barnard, one of the lecturers wrote, the lectures were established to defend Christianity from "everything that might have a tendency to overthrow, or corrupt, and debase it." Dudley and the lecturers had reasons to be concerned. The threat of deism and skepticism continued to grow in America during the eighteenth century. In the


363 John Barnard, A Proof of Jesus Christ His Being the ancient promised Messiah (Boston: J. Draper, 1756). 5.

364 Christopher Grasso argues that in the last decades of the century, many Americans feared that deism threatened not only Christianity, but the integrity and existence of the new nation. Grasso, "Deist Monster: On Religious Common Sense in the Wake of the American Revolution," The Journal of American History 95, no. 1 (2008): 43-68. Conrad Wright states that the countless pamphlets defending
early years, the Lectures conveyed the typical balance between empirical evidence and the role of the Holy Spirit in the understanding of Scripture. By the end of the century, the balance tipped decidedly in the direction of evidence, universally accessible by all people. Reference to supernatural guidance in the interpretation of the Bible all but disappeared.

American colleges perceived deism to be a serious problem towards the last years of the century. Historian Kerry Walters points out that in the last decades of the eighteenth century, accounts of Yale College, Dartmouth College, The College of William and Mary, the College of New Jersey (later Princeton University), and Harvard College depict these campuses as dens of deism.\(^365\) By the end of the century, the spiritual state of Harvard was in such disarray that even the school’s comparatively liberal leaders felt compelled to take a hard stand against deism. In 1791, they banned and publicly burned Edward Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. In addition, the college presented each incoming student with a copy of Richard Watson’s *A Perusal of the Polemical Anti-Deist Literature Easily Confirms This Point.* A. Owen Aldridge, “Natural Religion and Deism Before Ethan Allen and Thomas Paine,” *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Third Series 54, no. 4 (1997): 835-48.

Apology for the Bible, hoping that this treatise, a polemic against Thomas Paine’s Age of Reason, would inoculate the vulnerable young against the contagion of deism.\textsuperscript{366} This is ironic considering that in England, by this time, deism was passé.

Though fear of deism rose to a crisis level in the last decade of the century, concern had been growing steadily.\textsuperscript{367} In 1759, Ezra Stiles (who would eventually become president of Yale) wrote to Thomas Clap (then president of Yale) that it was time to take the offensive against deism. He wrote,

Deism has got such Head in this Age of Licentious Liberty that it would be vain to try to stop it by hiding the Deistical Writings: and the only Way left to conquer & demolish it, is to come forth into the open Field & Dispute this matter on even footing – the evidences of Revelation in my opinion are nearly as demonstrative as Newton’s Principia, & these are the Weapons he used.\textsuperscript{368}

Similarly, in the mid-eighteenth century, John Witherspoon, president of the College of New Jersey, said,

It is true, that infidels do commonly proceed upon pretended principles of reason. But as it is impossible to hinder them from reasoning on this subject, the best way is to meet them upon their own ground, and to show from reason itself, the fallacy of their principles.\textsuperscript{369}

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\textsuperscript{366} Walters, American Deists; Wright, Beginnings, 241-251; Richard Watson, An Apology for the Bible in a Series of Letters, Addressed to Thomas Paine (Cambridge: Hilliard and Brown, [1796] 1828).
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\textsuperscript{368} Quoted from E. Brooks Holifield, Theology in America: Christian Thought from the Age of the Puritans to the Civil War (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 170.
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\textsuperscript{369} John Witherspoon, Lectures on Moral Philosophy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1912 [1822]), 2. My emphasis. The lectures were published years after his death in 1794 and probably contrary to his wishes.
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Both Stiles and Witherspoon were supremely confident that the tools of reason and evidence would defeat deism and vindicate revealed religion.

The leaders of Harvard also sought to combat deism in the same spirit. In the middle of the century, Dudley established a bulwark against deism through the Dudleian Lectures. In 1750, the will of Judge Paul Dudley (1675-1751), Chief Justice of the Superior Court of Massachusetts, endowed annual lectures to be delivered at Harvard College. According to his will, the lectures would rotate around four topics: natural religion, revealed religion, the "Romish" church, and the validity of the ordination of ministers.\textsuperscript{370} This chapter is concerned with the evolution over the second half of the eighteenth century of the development of the first two topics: natural and revealed religion. Dudley's vision of the annual lectures may have been in part inspired by the Boyle Lectures in England. The lecturers drew heavily upon British latitudinarian defenses of revelation. Decades after its founding, one of the lecturers, Thomas Barnard Jr., proudly wrote, "The present Lecture was established, no doubt, by Judge Dudley, our

\textsuperscript{370} Regarding the endowment for the lectures, Judge Dudley's will reads, "The first lecture, or anniversary Sermon, to be for the proving, explaining, and proper use and improvement of the Principles of Natural Religion, as it is commonly called and understood by Divines and learned Men. The Second Lecture to be, for the Confirmation, Illustration and Improvement of the great Articles of the Christian Religion, properly so called, or the Revelation which Jesus Christ the Son of God, was pleased to make, First by himself, and afterwards by his holy Apostles, to his Church and the World for their Salvation. The Third Lecture to be for the detecting, and convincing, and exposing the Idolatry of the Romish Church, their Tyranny, Usurpations, and damnable Heresies, fatal Errors, abominable Superstitions, and other crying Wickedness in their high Places; and finally, that the Church of Rome is that mystical Babylon, that Man of Sin, that apostate Church, spoken of in the New-Testament. The Fourth and last Lecture I would have, for the maintaining, explaining, and proving the Validity of the Ordination of Ministers or Pastors of the Churches, and so their Administration of the Sacraments of Ordinances of Religion, as the same hath been practiced in New-England, from the first beginning of it, as so continued at this Day. These Four Lectures I would have held alternately every year in succession." Dudley's prescription for the Lectures is reprinted in the Appendix of John Barnard's published Dudleian Lecture of 1756. John Barnard —Appendix," in \textit{A Proof of Jesus Christ}. For more information about the Dudleian Lectures, see —Dudleian Lectures at Harvard University, Minutes of Trustees, 1830-1984," Repository, Andover-Harvard Theological Library, Harvard University, Cambridge."
respectable countryman, in imitation of [The Boyle Lectures]. A proof, amongst a multitude of others agreeable to our feelings, that Americans have been ready to follow, in laudable and beneficial institutions, the elder and more wealthy inhabitants of Europe!\[371\]

The lectures were hardly original. In 1775, Samuel Langdon, the president of Harvard College at the time, admitted what was obvious to all when he began his turn at the lectern by saying —if I can add nothing to what they have already delivered, it will not be wholly inconsistent with the design of the institution."\[372\] He went on to say that there was great value, particularly for undergraduates who were preparing for the ministry, in reiterating what they all commonly held to be true. Because the lectures were redundant by design, subtle shifts in emphasis indicate the changing intellectual temper of the age. By examining and comparing the lectures over the course of the last half of the eighteenth century, one can see the steadily growing dominance of reason and of evidence derived from natural science and history as sources of authoritative knowledge. Concurrently, the presence of the supernatural steadily declined.

The lectures defended the Bible in two ways. One series of lectures defended —revealed religion.” Another examined —natural religion.” The lectures on natural religion attempted to defend the existence of God and morality by unaided reason and evidence. They initially argued that the evidence of nature was useful, but the book of nature was

\[371\] Thomas Barnard, *A Discourse on Natural Religion, delivered in the chapel of the university in Cambridge* (Boston: Samuel Hall, 1795), 9.

illegible without the grace of God and the Bible. Over the course of the century, the scope
of natural religion changed. Historian A. Owen Aldridge observes that in eighteenth-
century America, the term “natural religion” eluded easy definition. Owen notes that on
the one hand, natural religion was the religion of the deists or a system of belief that
relied on reason and evidence and a rejection of the notion that God revealed himself in
the Bible.\footnote{Philosopher Diego Lucci also calls the faith of the deists natural religion. Lucci, \textit{Scripture and Deism: The Biblical Criticism of the Eighteenth-Century British Deists} (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2008). Aldridge argues that thinkers within the church, such as Cotton Mather, Ebenezer Gay, and Thomas Young, believed that theological truths were accessible by unaided reason. He refers to this expression of Christianity as “natural religion.” These thinkers, he claims, bridged the way to deist thought. Aldridge, \textit{Natural Religion and Deism},” 836.} However, Aldridge and Herbert Morais also observe that some eighteenth-
century Christian pastors in America also advocated “natural religion.” (Recall that
Increase and Cotton Mather discussed natural religion.) These men were not evangelists
of deism. On the contrary, they were explicitly attempting to strengthen revelation against
the attacks of skeptics. When they used the term, they meant knowledge of God derived
from unaided reason and the evidences in the universe. Pagans, with no access to the
Bible, arrived at some spiritual truths. The revelation of God was imprinted on their
minds and in nature.\footnote{Morais, \textit{Deism in Eighteenth Century America} (New York: Columbia University Press, 1934), 61-62. Aldridge, \textit{Natural Religion and Deism,” 836. See also Aldridge, \textit{Shiftesbury and the Deist Manifesto,” Transactions of American Philosophical Society}, 41, no. 2 (1951): 297-382. Robert H. Hurlbutt concurs with Aldridge. He notes that technically, natural religion, defined as moral and religious beliefs based upon reason and tied to the notion of nature, may be distinguished from natural theology. However, the two terms are often used interchangeably in scholarship and by seventeenth- and eighteenth-century figures. See Robert H. Hurlbutt, \textit{Hume, Newton, and the Design Argument} (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985) and Peter Byrne, \textit{Natural Religion and the Religion of Nature: The Legacy of Deism} (New York: Routledge, 1989), 4.} However, most Christians argued that natural religion confirmed
or was a bridge to biblical revelation. Because the term “natural religion” was so vague,
the Lectures were relatively free to redefine its role and function. Not surprisingly, the
term’s definition crept in rationalistic directions. Initially, the Harvard lecturers used
natural religion as an apologetic. Natural religion, they argued, confirmed the validity of
the Bible. But spiritual knowledge of the Scriptures was granted by God. By the end of
the century, the lecturers argued that the knowledge of the Bible was enhanced by the
same natural means pagans used to come to an understanding of natural religion.

The lectures on revealed religion evolved in similar ways. Initially, the lecturers’
ideas were not terribly different from those of Jonathan Edwards. They maintained that
although reason, evidence, or notional knowledge was helpful, ultimately the conviction
of the supernatural status of the Bible was a blessing from God. Evidential arguments had
their limits. By the end of the century, the role of the Holy Spirit in the interpretation of
Scripture disappeared. The Bible could be confirmed by the powers of reason and
evidence like any other historical document. As the Dudleian Lectures expanded the
terrain of spiritual truth accessible to the unassisted powers of the human mind, the
uniqueness and necessity of special revelation eroded.375

The theological temperament of the Harvard community in the second half of the
eighteenth century must be understood against the backdrop of the controversies
surrounding the Great Awakening (occurring roughly between 1740 and 1744).376

375 Grasso similarly argues that in the 1780s, American anti-deists commonly sought to refute
deism by invoking “common sense.” By doing so, they appealed to the natural capacity for judgment. They
sought to delegitimize deism without resorting to supernatural claims. Grasso, “Deist Monster.”

376 The Great Awakening, the religious revival which occurred in the middle of the eighteenth
century, has been extensively examined by historians and only briefly summarized in this chapter. For just
a few examples of the scholarship, see Edwin Scott Gaustad, The Great Awakening (New York: Harper &
Brothers, 1957); idem, “The Theological Effects of the Great Awakening in New England,” The
Awakening left New England divided into three major divisions. The New Divinity men were the heirs of Jonathan Edwards. Their theology was characterized by a systematic rigor premised on the sovereignty of God. The “Old Calvinists” represented the traditional orthodoxy. The liberals, led by Charles Chauncy (1705-1787), sought an increasingly rational theology with a benevolent God and morally and intellectually capable humanity. (The liberals embraced Arminianism and rejected Calvinism’s doctrines of the inherited sin of Adam and the imputed righteousness of Christ.) Chauncy opposed “enthusiasm,” claims of “divine inspiration,” “heated imagination,”

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377 Chauncy denounced the Awakening. Its preachers, he believed, were theologically ignorant and the revivals were disorderly. People claimed new revelations beyond the Bible. Edwards also denounced many of the same problems. However, despite the sins and excesses, the revivals were a work of God, believed Edwards. Edwards and Chauncy carried on their debate in a series of publications. Edwards, *The Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God* (Boston: S. Kneeland, 1741); Edwards, *Some Thoughts Concerning the Present Revival of Religion in New-England* (Boston: S. Kneeland and T. Green, 1742); Chauncy, *Seasonable Thoughts on the State of Religion in New-England* (Boston: Rogers and Fowle, 1743); and idem, *Enthusiasm Defended and Caution’d Against* (Boston: J. Draper, 1742).

378 Gaustad also included a fourth category: the extremists. They were hyper zealous revivalists who were anti-intellectual and had no interest in human learning and were theologically vacuous. Gaustad, “Theological Effects,” 685-88.

379 According to Conrad Wright and Peter S. Field, the dominant Congregational churches in Massachusetts split into two warring factions over Calvinism and the role of reason in knowing God. The Arminians revolted against traditional Calvinism at least in part as a response to the Great Awakening. Wright, *Beginnings*, 28-58 and Field, *Crisis*. Mark Noll points out that the liberal party broke from the path of the Puritans in four important ways. They self-consciously rejected Calvinism, exalted natural theology at the expense of special revelation, embraced Arminianism, and tended towards universalism. Arminians derived their ideas and name from Jacob Arminius (1559-1609), the sixteenth-century pastor and professor of theology at Leyden, Holland. He opposed the reformed doctrine of election or the belief that God selected particular people for salvation. He proposed instead that all could be saved. He still maintained that faith was the result of grace, but people could resist sin and choose the good. The liberals did not specifically adopt the principles of Arminius, but they had an optimistic view of the human condition and prospects. Noll, *America’s God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 139 and Holifield, *Theology in America*, 37.
and phrenzy.” He and his followers believed religion must be of good order, reasonable, and an encouragement to virtuous behavior. They also tended to put more emphasis on natural religion, by which they meant that people could learn the standards of virtuous and ethical behavior by reason and the observation of nature. Of course God assisted in the process to varying degrees depending on the particular theologian. Historian Alan Heimert writes that opponents of the Awakening believed that man is — or should be — a rational being, one who derives his standards of virtuous behavior from an observation of the external world.”

Describing Chauncy’s views about the Awakening, Gaustad writes,

Revelation was not cast aside, not yet; but in that ever-delicate balance between revealed and natural theology, the latter for [Chauncy] weighed more heavily. Natural laws, natural truths, and natural religion were respectable and acceptable because, by definition, they harmed not a single ratiocination. Insights, like those from a mystical experience, not verifiable in the public court of reason, were thrown out.

Harvard followed Chauncy’s lead. Jonathan Mayhew, another leader and prominent voice in the liberal Harvard community, in his sermons published in 1749, exalted the role of natural theology at the expense of special revelation. In doing so, he greatly minimized the distance between knowledge accessible by natural reason and the Bible. He argued that the most important duties of the Christian were universally known by the

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380 Heimert, Religion and the American Mind, 5.

381 Gaustad, The Great Awakening, 83.
“light of nature.” However, only the Bible could reveal the proper motives for virtue, Jesus as mediator, and the assurance of forgiveness for the repentant.\textsuperscript{382}

Though the liberals claimed to be rational in opposition to the emotional excesses of the Awakening, it would be wrong to conclude that their opponents, the Old Calvinists and the New Divinity party, were irrational. Jonathan Edwards, Jonathan Dickinson, and their heirs supported the revivals and were models of reason, moderation, and learning. They discussed empirical evidence that supported the validity of biblical revelation and denounced the excesses of the Awakening. Unlike Chauncy, Edwards believed that God worked through the affections. But Edwards never negated the role of reason. Holifield notes that although the three factions often fiercely disputed each other, they were united by their common use of evidence and reason.\textsuperscript{383} Furthermore, the Old Calvinists participated in the Dudleian Lectures with the liberals.\textsuperscript{384} However, it is fair to say that the liberal party at Harvard in general leaned in more rationalistic directions.


\textsuperscript{383} Holifield, \textit{Theology in America}, 128. Stout notes that as a consequence of the Awakening, preaching in the era could be divided between “rational” and “evangelical.” The rational preachers were composed of the Old Calvinists and the Arminians. The evangelicals were made up of the supporters of the Awakening. He argues that people have made the mistaken generalization that the rationalists preached on morality and the natural evidences of Christianity, while the evangelicals ignored such themes and preached only on conversion. It is wrong to argue that the liberals were rational and the evangelicals were not. He concludes that the differences between rationalist and evangelical preaching are exaggerated. Stout, \textit{New England Soul}, 212-232. Regarding the theological effect of the Awakening, Gaustad writes, “Whereas the Awakening provoked on the one hand a rapidly increased devotion to the dictates of reason, it resulted on the other hand in a rapidly increased dogged reaffirmation of the divine origin and infallible nature of the Bible. All three major parties, Old Calvinists, Liberals, and Strict Calvinists, imbied enough of rationalism, however, to be aware of the fact that dogmatism and authority were not perfect persuaders.” Gaustad, “Theological Effects,” 695.

\textsuperscript{384} Stout, \textit{The New England Soul}, 232.
The growing prominence of naturalistic evidence and reason was not unique to New England in the mid- to late eighteenth century. The Presbyterians of the College of New Jersey (later Princeton) were also moving in similar directions. Mark Noll points out that beginning with the leadership of John Witherspoon, conservative Princeton embraced Scottish Common Sense philosophy. Witherspoon and his successor Samuel Stanhope Smith believed that people could cultivate a moral sense independent of revelation. They also sought to defend revelation by natural means. They appealed to reason and common sense, in part, because they needed to create a common sense of morality for a theologically diverse America, in which denominational ties and traditional reverence for authority declined in influence. Noll finds it ironic, and tragic, that the Princetonians relied so heavily on a naturalistic epistemology to defend a system of belief ultimately based on supernatural revelation. Similarly, Christopher Grasso argues that in the wake of the American Revolution, Americans believed that a morality, based on the Bible and common sense, would hold their fragile society together. Because Christianity needed to function as national religion or a common glue holding the society together, it needed to be accessible to all citizens in possession of reason and clear minds.


This is not to say all American thinkers were of one mind. Though New Divinity theology was characterized as highly rational and systematic, the affections and the grace of God played an important role. Furthermore, at least one prominent academic voice in the eighteenth century grew suspicious of the cost of an alliance between reason and revelation. Samuel Johnson (1696-1772), an Anglican and president of King’s College in New York, like his peers in the Harvard community, followed latitudinarian modes of thinking. He too drank deeply from the well of Locke and Newton. For most of his life, he advocated the study of natural religion because he believed that nature revealed spiritual truths. Morality and virtue could be studied and understood independently of revelation.

Towards the end of his life, Johnson gravitated towards the view that the Bible was the sole source of spiritual truth. His modern biographer, Joseph Ellis, writes that Johnson concluded that — a rational analysis of nature had shown a tendency to produce skeptical deists rather than God-fearing Christians.” Regarding the influential Tillotson, Johnson wrote, “I have myself been heretofore a great admirer of his sermons, but for


these several years have been sensible of the ill effects of them in these parts.” He claimed that he had “done my best to guard against them.” Johnson believed that the scientific approach to nature was not wrong in itself, but it had demonstrated a tendency to woo men away from the mysteries of a supernatural God. Johnson wrote, “I have to fore been long wandering after the wisdom of this world, and eagerly pursued the philosophy so much in vogue, but of late… I have been almost entirely devoted to the study of holy Scripture, and especially the pure and noble original.” Johnson however could not offer a useful model or alternative, as his faith in the Bible was marred by a bizarre hermeneutic.

However, Johnson noted, unlike most of his academic peers, that defending supernatural revelation with the tools of reason and evidence exacts a cost on revelation. But he was unusual. Many communities of faith in the mid-eighteenth century


392 Johnson’s renewed faith in the Bible and rejection of science was in part inspired by his faith in John Hutchinson’s Moses’ Principia (1724), which maintained the bizarre theory that Moses embedded in the Old Testament a long lost message describing the physical universe. He read the original Hebrew allegorically to find an embedded explanation of the ways of the physical universe. Hutchinson reversed the pattern of natural theology. Natural theology tried to discover the attributes of God by exploring nature. Hutchinson tried to find the attributes of nature in the Scripture. Ellis, New England Mind in Transition, 228; John C. English, “John Hutchinson’s Critique of Newtonian Heterodoxy,” Church History 68, no. 3 (1999): 581-91.

393 Holifield notes that by century’s end, as a result of their battles against deism, Andrew Broaddus (1770-1848), James Muir (1775-1820), and Uzal Ogden (1744-1822), reasserted the limitations of reason and thus the need for revelation. However, at the same time, deism prompted a reassertion of the evidences for the Bible and natural theology. Holifield, Theology in America, 171-72.
expressed the rational spirit in their own way. However, even in this rational age, the Harvard community distinguished themselves among their reason-loving peers. Gaustad notes that although most parties became increasingly interested in reason, it was among the Harvard liberals that “reason found its happiest home and some of its ablest exponents.” One reason why the Harvard community was particularly rational and empirical in their approach to the Bible was the influence of the latitudinarians. Norman Fiering and John Corrigan have argued that during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, Harvard and the church leaders it trained embraced the moderation, reason, and evidential nature of latitudinarian theology. Educators such as William Brattle and John Leverett encouraged students to read the writings of latitudinarians, especially John Tillotson (1630-1694). According to Fiering, Tillotson made two major contributions to the Harvard community. First, he argued that nature can be trusted as an independent source of divine truth. Second, religion should be subjected to the free inquiry of autonomous reason. Because of Tillotson’s high regard for the powers of human understanding, he believed Christian morality and ethics were accessible by the


395 1701 generally serves as a convenient marker for the beginning of the decline of Puritan Calvinism at Harvard. In that year, Increase Mather was ousted from his position at Harvard. In 1707, Cotton Mather was denied the presidency of Harvard in favor of Benjamin Colman, one of the leaders of the Brattle Street Church, which was a headquarters of liberalism in Boston. The year 1805 marks the collapse of Calvinist hegemony. In that year, Henry Ware, a Unitarian, was installed as the Hollis Professor of Divinity at Harvard to the outrage of conservatives. For the rupture between the Mathers and Harvard, see Perry Miller, The New England Mind: From Colony to Province (New York: Macmillan Company, 1953). For the election of Ware and the rise of Unitarianism at Harvard, see Daniel Day Williams, The Andover Liberals: A Study in American Theology (New York: Octagon Books, 1970[1941]). See also Daniel Walker Howe, The Unitarian Conscience: Harvard Moral Philosophy, 1805-1861 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970); Wright, Beginnings; and idem, The Unitarian Controversy: Essays on American Unitarian History (Boston: Skinner House Books, 1994).
light of nature. Gerard Reedy notes that Tillotson and other latitudinarians also devoted much intellectual labor to affirming the validity of the Bible by accumulating historical evidence. These latitudinarian influences left their mark on the Harvard community and the Dudleian Lectures.397

I. Revealed Religion

Edward Wigglesworth (1693–1765), the first professor of divinity in the American colonies and holder of the Hollis Chair at Harvard College, delivered a lecture in 1755, the same year the Dudleian Lectures were inaugurated. In his address, he sought to affirm that the books of the Old Testament “were all given by Inspiration of GOD.”398


His lecture demonstrates the pervasive influence of latitudinarians and also set the pattern for the Dudleian Lectures, particularly for the ones on revealed religion.

By defending the authenticity of the Old Testament, he was responding to the critiques of the Old Testament by skeptics such as Spinoza, Toland, and Hobbes. Recall that they brought up textual and historical evidence that challenged Mosaic authorship. Like the latitudinarians, Wigglesworth attempted to validate the authority of the Old Testament by historical evidence. Reedy notes that in response to the critiques of the biblical canon, Anglican divines such as John Tillotson, John Wilkins, William Lowth, and Edward Stillingfleet developed several arguments that became the standardized defense which repeated more or less the following pattern. Jesus and the apostles quoted the Old Testament. Since the New Testament writers were inspired, their reference to the Old validated it. Both Christian and pagan witnesses acknowledge that Moses wrote the laws. Also, the Jews frequently looked upon the law as a burden. If they could have invalidated it by denying Mosaic authorship, they would have. Finally, the miracles, recorded by reliable witnesses, affirmed the divine authority of the author. Latitudinarians believed that the Bible needed to be verified by an independent authority, accessible by all reasonable people.

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399 In the text itself, Wigglesworth gives no indication of the motivation for his lecture. For critiques of the authorship of the Old Testament, see Introduction.

400 Although latitudinarians did not fully engage in or appreciate the historical examinations and problems raised by Le Clerc or Simon, Reedy acknowledges that they were trying to provide a proof of the Bible based on an historical and evidentiary basis that was universally accessible. Reedy, *Bible and Reason*, 46-62.
In this latitudinarian spirit, Wigglesworth believed that the Bible should be subjected to and understood by the same rules of empirical investigation used in the study of history or other ancient texts. Dispassionate examination, he believed, was the key to vindicating the Scriptures. Wigglesworth attempted to examine and reconstruct the historical circumstances in which various books were accepted and rejected for inclusion in the canon. Because the ancient Jews revered their canon, they took an "exact and religious Care … not to admit any Thing into the Number of inspired Writings, but what was unquestionably of Divine Original." Wigglesworth also argued that culture and historical circumstances made it highly unlikely that the Old Testament underwent any material corruption since the time of Jesus. The first followers of Jesus were Jews and they would want to preserve their Scriptures. The unchristianized Jews would also have wanted to preserve their holy writings. In the early years of the church, both unchristianized and christianized Jews used Scriptures to refute each other.

It became (through the Providence of God, who often brings Good out of Evil) an effectual security against any future material Corruption, or alteration of the Books then called the Holy Scriptures, rendering it in the very nature of the thing impossible.

Wigglesworth reasoned that if either group altered the canon, their rivals would have caught the adulteration. If there were any changes, both Jews and Christians would have had to corrupt the text together, and this seemed unlikely.\(^{401}\)

However, unlike skeptics and deists who used history to discredit the special status of the Bible, Wigglesworth did not reduce the Bible to merely the object of

\(^{401}\) Wigglesworth, Some Evidences, 8, 9, 17, 18.
historical examination like any other text. It was still, in his mind, a supernatural revelation. Wigglesworth relied on the Testimony of our Savior JESUS CHRIST that all the Scriptures from the Old Testament were given by the Inspiration of GOD.” He never questioned the divine authority of Jesus, who quoted the Old Testament and thus confirmed the divine nature of the Hebrew Scriptures. Furthermore, unlike Spinoza, for example, Wigglesworth believed that the Bible related genuine miracles. The Jews, he argued, would have witnessed the inspired writers’ miracles or confirmed prophecies to validate their inspiration. He also believed that there was a categorical difference between inspired texts and ordinary writings. The apocryphal books were kept out of the Old Testament because they were not from above by immediate Inspiration” but were mere human Composition.” They were marred by historical and doctrinal errors that were contrary to the infallible spirit of God.” The Bible was written by the immediate Direction and Assistance” and the infallible Guidance of the Spirit of GOD.” 402

The early Dudleian Lectures that defended revealed religion were similar. They examined the Bible empirically, but still maintained that it was a supernatural book. They generally utilized two approaches. First, they offered evidentiary arguments. Close examination and scrutiny affirmed the Bible’s accuracy and supernatural origins. The second argument was spiritual. The reader should sense or be convicted that the Bible was indeed the word of God and not human invention. This intuition was analogous to Edwards’ new sense.” The empirical proof should be accessible to all rational,

402 Wigglesworth and presumably his audience assumed the divine authority of the New Testament because the historical testimony was more recent and therefore more easily verifiable. Ibid., 5, 8, 9, 17, 18, 19, 21.
reasonable, and impartial people. They believed that the spiritual sense was knowledge granted by the Holy Spirit and therefore only available to Christians. The various speakers who defended revealed religion used both approaches.

One argument that most of the lecturers touched upon was the historical reliability of the gospels. For example, in 1756, John Barnard (1681-1770), a moderate Calvinist pastor of Marblehead, Massachusetts, argued that ancient historians, who had no sympathy for Christians, affirmed the particular details of the events related by the gospel writers. Barnard argued that the “Bible … may, at least, be put upon an equal foot with all other authentick Histories of Persons, and Facts, which made their Appearance in former Ages.” The Bible, he claimed, had at least as much historical evidence as profane records of the past.

Similarly, twelve years later in 1768, John’s son, Thomas Barnard, Sr., argued that the gospels must be divinely inspired because the miracles of Jesus and the Apostles affirmed the supernatural origin of their message. The miracles, he argued, were historically reliable because they were performed in the presence of many witnesses.

403 These were typical latitudinarian proofs. Reedy, *Bible and Reason*, 56-57, 46-56.

404 Regarding the Bible, John Barnard wrote that there “is no merely human Composure of past Persons and Things, that has so many, and strong, concurring Evidences of the Authenticity of it, as our Bible has, from the Names of the several Persons, generally, who wrote the various Books, the Time, and Place, they lived in, the Characters they sustained, the Simplicity, and Plainness, of their Narrations; the great Probability of the justness of their Accounts, from the great Agreement of the Whole with itself, tho wrote by such different Persons, in such distant Ages; and from the concurring Evidence of Profane History to the Truth of what is reported, where it falls in with the same Times, or had any Knowledge of the same Things. This I remark, that I may be allowed to make the same Use of Quotations from the Bible, as any person might from any authentick History. Having observed these two Things, I now go on to prove.” John Barnard, *A Proof of Jesus Christ*, 8.

hallmark of their proofs was that the text could be examined almost like any other ancient historical document. The Bible was subject to investigation, and evidence should be plain and obvious to any intelligent and unbiased observer. According to Timothy Hilliard, another Dudleian lecturer, the evidence of the miracles should carry "a great weight with every unprejudiced mind," and the resurrection should provide "incontestable proofs." Anyone who denied the accuracy of the Bible in light of the historical evidence, they believed, was hopelessly biased or irrational.

Although the Dudleian lecturers claimed to examine the Bible in an objective and historical manner, the early lecturers believed that God supernaturally enlightened the Christians’ reading of the Bible. Recall that Jonathan Dickinson and Jonathan Edwards also attempted to prove the authenticity of the gospels on historical grounds. However, they ultimately conceded that empirical or speculative knowledge could only go so far. Historical proofs were only highly probabilistic. Certainty of the Bible’s supernatural status must be a gift from God. The earlier Dudleian lecturers also maintained this balance. They believed that the spiritual and empirical interpretations of the Scriptures were interdependent.⁴⁰⁷


⁴⁰⁷ The increasing use of evidence and reason and the eschewing of spiritual evidences became more evident as the Harvard pastors moved closer to Unitarianism. Reason and evidence were the hallmarks of Unitarian discourse. Howe, Unitarian Conscience and Wright, Beginnings.
In 1756, the trustees of the Dudleian Lecture called upon John Barnard to be the first to lecture on the topic of revealed religion. Barnard paraded the typical latitudinarian historical “Evidences of the Authenticity” and “endeavour[ed] to prove, by ungainsayable Evidence” the truth of the Bible. However, it is quite clear that his faith was not really built upon the rock of history. His confidence and certainty lay, not with the empirical and historical evidences, but with the spiritual sense. Regarding skeptics, he wrote, “Surely this is not from any Defect in the Evidence of the Truth of it; for it is certain they credit ancient Histories, and many other Things, upon much less Evidence.” The evidence for the Bible, he argued, was as reliable as for any historical document and therefore “ungainsayable.”

Why then did some not believe? Since the evidence was sound, John Barnard concluded that the skeptic suffered from a spiritual defect. Ultimately, belief depended on God’s intervention. Arguments were all well and good, but the skeptic needed prayer and divine intervention. “And should we not make it our daily Prayer for them that the Scales may be taken off their eyes.” The biblical reference to the scales and the eyes would have been well known to Barnard’s audience. The Book of Acts relates how the Apostle Paul persecuted the Christians soon after the death of Christ. After God blinded him on the road to Damascus, the author of Acts wrote that Paul’s eyes were miraculously healed as if scales had fallen from his eyes. With his restored vision, he


409 John Barnard, A Proof of Jesus Christ, 54.
became a believer. His conversion, according to the biblical narrative, was clearly miraculous rather than a natural and merely intellectual assent.

Until the spiritual condition was addressed, Barnard believed that the tools of reason and evidence were ineffective against unbelief. In fact, sinful skeptics press philosophy into their service … to undermine Christianity, and strengthen themselves in the Disbelief of it…” Reason and philosophy had shown themselves to be so corruptible and unreliable in the hands of the skeptics that Barnard warned pastoral candidates to —be careful never to resign up your understanding to the Government of any merely humane writings, be they ever so plausible, and artfully contrived, and appear with the face of the strictest philosophy, in anything wherein they differ from Divine Revelation.” Barnard encouraged Harvard students to continue to enlarge their minds by reading humane literature, but, ultimately, reason and evidence could never contradict Scripture. And when they appeared to do so, students should not be concerned because such aberrations were the result of sin. In Barnard’s final analysis, despite his appeals to reason and evidence, he believed theological knowledge was a gift from the almighty.410

In 1768, the trustees of the Dudleian Lectures called upon John Barnard’s son, Thomas Barnard, Sr. (1716-1776), to deliver the lecture on the topic of revealed religion.411 Barnard centered his discussion on one question: —How shall men arrive to this persuasion, which is in our text termed faith?” He articulated his epistemology. Specifically, he addressed how one could know about the world and God. He argued with

410 Ibid., 8, 9, 50, 52, 53, 54.

no uncertainty that all of man’s intellectual abilities were insufficient. Logic, empirical observation, reason, and philosophy could reveal many things about the nature of the world, but they were incapable of discovering matters divine. He asserted,

    I lay it down as clear, that the person who will assent to nothing but what he is intuitively certain of, or convinced of by abstract reasoning, must remain ignorant of many and very interesting truths. That therefore in this state of imperfection and sin, men need to have much religious knowledge conveyed to them in some other way.

By the “other way” he was referring to divine intervention. He acknowledged the remarkable advances that had been made in the realms of philosophy, natural history, technology, and the scope of knowledge in general. Society’s present advanced state was even more remarkable in comparison to recent speculations on the “state of nature.” But Thomas Barnard, Sr. cautioned, despite “the best improvements of the power of the mind,” there were heights man could not ascend. Taking a swipe at the deists, he wrote, “We are beings … of limited capacities; there are bounds we cannot pass.”412 Deists wanted to exclude all religious claims except those based on natural reason and the evidence of nature. By these stringent standards, claimed Barnard, people could believe in almost nothing.413

    Thomas Barnard Sr. argued there were three avenues to the knowledge of God: intuition, reasoning, and testimony.414 Apparently, Barnard was reading Locke. By intuition, Barnard referred to self-evident truths that do not require empirical

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413 Jonathan Edwards had made a similar claim about the limitations of skepticism. See chapter 2.
414 Ibid., 8, 9.
demonstrations. He described intuition as akin to an axiomatic truth. But only a few things were self-evidently certain. For further knowledge, one turned to reason, according to Barnard. By reason, Barnard’s second avenue to theological knowledge, he appeared to have meant the process of deriving deductions from that which was known by intuition. However, the path of reason had its shortcomings. Its conclusions were only probabilistic—and come by an indefinite number of steps, in proportion as truth lies near or more remote from intuition, to low probability or moral certainty. Deductive reasoning became increasingly less certain the more steps one took from the original axioms.

Ultimately, Thomas Barnard, Sr. found both these avenues to theological knowledge wanting. With respect to both these sources of knowledge, reflection on ourselves [intuition], and the experience of mankind in general [reason], compel us to own their deficiency in respects most deeply concerning our best welfare.” Instead, Barnard submitted that the most effective (and only) path to knowledge of God was in the testimony of those who preach. Through the vehicle of preaching, God persuaded the

415 Barnard wrote, “Intuition is the direct view the soul has of the truth and reality of any one, or the relation of any two or more ideas, that are so immediate as neither to need nor admit of any reasoning to discover it.” He went on to write, “The proposition ‘I am’ is intuitively certain; and to argue ‘I think therefore I am,’ is trifling logick. And where one conceives justly of God and man, it lies equally clear in the mind, that men are the subjects of moral government of God. Perhaps the idea of cause and effect, is among all created things, as clear and unperplexed: The mind sees without a course of argument that nothing which begins to exist, can be without some agency to produce it. There must therefore be some fixt and necessary existing cause … So with regard to morality, right and wrong appear in many instances most obvious; and he who labours by a course of ethical arguments to prove the obliquity of ingratitude, profaneness, and the like, might be more usefully employed.” Ibid., 8, 9.

A person would be convinced not by heeding empirical or logical argumentation but by inspiration or what Barnard referred to as an inward influence upon the mind.” Through preaching, God delivered knowledge to the believer’s mind directly, argued Barnard.

It may please God to reveal his truths or will immediately. For cannot the Father of Spirits, ever present with us, enlighten imperfect minds by his inward energy; and direct those he so converse with, how to distinguish between divine communications, and the heights of an enthusiastic fancy, or the illusions of depraved spirits? 

According to Barnard, if unbelievers heard the preaching of the pure sentiments of inspiration,” they should be convinced of its veracity. Ultimately, conviction was a matter of grace.

Thomas Barnard, Sr. believed that for those who did not have the time or the ability to think through the rational process, —innumerable doubts are resolved, and difficulties removed, by the authority of a ‘thus saith the Lord,’ which might otherwise perplex the soul… especially will the case be so with those who cannot abstract, nor enter into the reason of things. And how many are they?” In fact, attempting to discern God by way of intellectual and philosophical deductions was vain and contrary to the spirit of Christianity. The assent to faith was not necessarily rational. God, according to Barnard, bypassed the rational processes of man. Christianity dealt little with metaphysics or any abstruse science. It is designed for the high benefit of those of common understanding, of babes. … The blessed Trinity is not therein described by the doctrine of triangles, or of the emanation of light from the sun; but [revelation] teaches us the personal properties of the Sacred Three, whom we

adore and on whom we depend. Beyond these we ought not, nor can we proceed in our speculations.\(^\text{418}\)

By invoking the “doctrine of triangles,” Barnard was making reference to geometry. Locke believed that geometric logic was the basis of intuitive and axiomatic truths. By the “emanation of light from the sun,” he referred to Newtonian cosmology. Barnard argued in his discourse that logic and the empirical sciences could not pave the road to the knowledge of God. God alone granted this sort of knowledge.

Regarding the benefits of this form of godly intervention, Barnard wrote, “Similar advantages may attend this way of communicating truths, which [though] not before known, yet require but little [thought] for convictions of their solid foundation.” In fact, Barnard believed that to accept something by faith, one need not actually fully understand propositions in order to assent to them.

In this view it is far from being true, that in order to one’s receiving any benefit from holy scripture, he must be first convinced of its divine authority, for they may be a means themselves of proving their original, and opening the mind to a thorough conviction thereof.\(^\text{419}\)

In other words, one did not have to be convinced by logical or empirical arguments that the Bible was the word of God before one was convicted by it. One could start in a state of unbelief, and then be convinced that it was divine revelation by the Spirit. For Barnard, spiritual knowledge was primarily supernatural. One could not think one’s way to God. Rather, God enlightened the reading of the Bible, if he so chose.

\(^{418}\) Ibid., 15, 24, 25.

\(^{419}\) Ibid., 7, 14.
Though Barnard valued the empirical examination of the Scriptures, he was cautious. He closed his lecture with a warning to his audience of future ministers.

—Beware of relying on the wisdom of men, or the researches of human sagacity, where revelation ought to be their only guide. … We shall act as wrongly, and hazard as much, if we put in their place the Dogmas of philosophy.” One should not turn to reason, speculations, or philosophy. Instead, one should rely primarily on the Bible. He advised, —Fix therefore in your minds the design and extent of revelation, and receive its truth from the mouth of its divine author.\(^{420}\)

Though Barnard Sr. did not write with a harsh polemical tone, his lecture was a stern repudiation of the value of unaided human reason in spiritual matters. Divine conviction came first. Evidence only confirmed what one already knew by spiritual means. It could assist man’s religious quest, but alone would never satisfy his spiritual needs. Thomas Barnard Sr.’s lecture of 1768 was the last gasp of a generation who held onto the vestiges of an older supernatural hermeneutic at Harvard. He did not set the patterns for the future.

Four years later, the tone of the defense of the Bible changed. In 1772, the trustees called upon Benjamin Stevens to deliver the lecture on revealed religion. Like the previous four Dudleian Lectures on revealed religion, his proofs were unoriginal. He too paraded the usual tropes of historical proofs of the Bible. Yet by 1772, the status of the Bible had subtly changed at Harvard. These alterations occurred at such a glacial pace that they probably went unnoticed by most and therefore alarmed few.

\(^{420}\) Ibid., 25.
The earlier Dudleian Lectures on revealed religion confidently asserted the necessity of divine illumination. The varieties of empirical proofs were, according to the earlier apologists, helpful but ultimately insufficient. Stevens’ lecture took on a new tone. He quoted at length from the notorious skeptic David Hume. Hume forcefully challenged the credibility of New Testament miracles. Even if miracles had occurred, they would be useless as a support for revelation. The chances of fraud were too great because witnesses were unreliable.\textsuperscript{421} Stevens argued that the number of witnesses and the public nature of the miracles made the likelihood of a fabrication or delusion even more unlikely than the miracle itself. Most revealingly, Stevens insisted that the testimony of the authors of the Bible was adequate even according to Hume’s standards.\textsuperscript{422} Stevens attempted to utilize the standards of the skeptics and heretics themselves to prove the accuracy of the Bible. In a striking concession to the enemy, he implied that Hume’s historical and empirical standards were correct but that Hume arrived at skeptical conclusions because he misapplied them. Furthermore, Stevens did not discuss the necessity of divine illumination. This does not necessarily mean that Stevens did not believe in the need for divine illumination, but its absence in his writing is worthy of note.

In 1788, Timothy Hilliard (1767-1790) fulfilled his duties for the Dudleian Lectures by basing his proof of the New Testament on historical evidence as well.


\textsuperscript{422} Benjamin Stevens, “Mr. Stevens’s Sermon at the Annual Dudleian Lecture, May 13, 1772,” MS, Harvard University Archives, Harvard University, Cambridge.
biblical account, he argued, was affirmed by pagan records. This was all ground covered by his predecessors and the latitudinarians. However, the manner in which he approached these proofs was noticeably different than the lecturers before Stevens. Like Stevens, Hilliard made no reference to the intervention of God. Describing the process of logical deductions, he confidently said, “where the whole process is understood, there is no possibility of doubt. In this case, the premises are of such a nature as to render us infallibly certain of the conclusion.” Recall that twenty years earlier, in his lecture on revealed religion in 1768, Thomas Barnard, Sr. also had discussed logical deductions based on axiomatic proofs. However, he had concluded that such manmade contrivances were unreliable compared to the intervention of God. According to Hilliard, the historical evidence from fulfilled prophecies and the resurrection afforded “a strong and undeniable argument of the truth of revelation” and “incontestable proofs” to any who would observe with an impartial mind. Throughout the entire lecture, Hilliard, unlike earlier speakers, never equivocated on the powers of earthly knowledge to prove the authority and accuracy of the Bible.

Hilliard asked, in the face of such overwhelming evidence, why then do some, such as the deist, refuse to believe? Previous Dudleian defenders of revealed religion believed the issue was primarily spiritual. Hilliard argued that the blindness was intellectual. Deists argued that Christianity lacked sufficient evidence. Hilliard countered

425 Hilliard, Dudleian Lecture, 4.
that the Bible was supported by as much evidence as most other matters commonly
accepted as true.

If these persons [deists] are resolved to believe nothing which they cannot fully
comprehend, the being of God and his providence, together with their own
existence must be called in question and all the phenomena of nature whose cause
have not been investigated, must be properly denied.

Hilliard asserted that, “If [deists] would with honest, impartial minds consider the nature
and design of the Christian institution, and the evidence and facts recorded in the New
Testament, they would perfectly be satisfied with its truth.” In 1788, Hilliard appealed to
the “eternal and immutable rule of reason and religion” to bring people to a knowledge of
God. There were no calls for prayers for divine intervention or scales falling from the
eyes of the deists. Objective and impartial examination would lead to the truth. At the end
of the century, others continued to follow the same intellectual tendencies as Hilliard.

II. Natural Religion

As the Dudleian Lectures on revealed religion sought to defend the Bible by
man’s natural powers, the lectures on natural religion sought to expound on those truths
that man could discover about God unaided by supernatural revelation. As stated earlier,
natural religion was a slippery term without a clear definition. The deists had been using
the term to describe their own views. Though the deists were not a uniform party, they
generally believed that one should only accept truths found by reason and the evidence of

\[426\] Ibid, 28, 29, 30. My emphasis.

\[427\] For example, in 1796, Nathan Fiske increasingly distanced his interpretation of the Bible from
supernatural aid. Nathan Fiske, A Sermon Preached at the Dudleian Lecture in the Chapel of Harvard
College September 7, 1796 (Boston: Manning & Loring, 1796).
nature. Thus, they rejected the Bible as supernatural revelation. In the early eighteenth century, American Protestants also appropriated the term.

Decades before the Dudleian Lectures instituted the regular and formal examination of natural religion, a few Americans discussed the topic. As stated in Chapter 1, Increase and Cotton Mather were the first Americans to publish discourses on the subject. John Bulkley (1679-1731) of Connecticut was also one of the rare American voices writing about natural religion in the first half of the eighteenth century. Though he walked a fine line, he clearly praised natural religion at the cost of revealed religion. His views were unusual for his time, but they were a harbinger of things to come. The Dudleian Lectures would pick up his themes.

In *The Usefulness of Revea’ld Religion, to Preserve and Improve that which is Natural* (1730), Bulkley argued that Christianity was simply “no other than Natural Religion reinforced, and improved by Divine Revelation.” Unlike the deists, Bulkley asserted that natural and revealed religion complemented each other.

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429 The sermon, *Usefulness of Revea’ld Religion*, was published in 1730, but first delivered in 1729. Bulkley was not the first American to publish on the —Narual Religion.” Recall that Increase and Cotton Mather wrote about natural theology and religion. Benjamin Colman, pastor of Brattle Street Church, also believed that God was revealed in nature. Colman, *The Glory of God in the Firmament of His Power* (Boston: S. Kneeland and T. Green, 1743), 2-3, 10, 17 and idem, *The Credibility of the Christian Doctrine of the Resurrection* (Boston: Thomas Hancock, 1729), 14.
Christians generally allowed that unassisted reason could know something of God, Bulkley elevated the role of reason beyond the limits of traditional orthodoxy.

One can trace the development of Bulkley’s tendencies in an earlier work. In 1725, Bulkley wrote the ‘Preface’ to the Poetical Meditations, by Roger Wolcott, which argued that the colonists were entitled to the land of Connecticut and did not violate the property rights of the Native Americans. Basing his arguments on Locke’s Two Treatises on Government and theory of natural law, Bulkley argued the Mohegans did not constitute a settled polity, but were still in the state of nature.430

Although the ‘Preface’ discussed property rights, Bulkley also speculated on prisca theologia, ancient history, and natural religion. He argued that the human race, since the earliest ages, possessed knowledge of God. Because their descendents initially transmitted this sacred information by ‘hieroglyphics’ and ‘oral tradition,’” this original sacred knowledge was ‘liable to corruption and misinterpretation.” But — ‘the traditions still contained fragments” of the — ‘Ancient & True Traditions of the First Ages of the World.” For example, Bulkley observed that Ovid’s Metamorphoses, in particular, preserved remnants of the original revelation from God. As evidence, he noted the ‘great Harmony or Agreement’ of its account of the ‘most Ancient Things with that of the

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Sacred History.‖ He dismissed as “unlikely” the commonly held theory that the ancient pagan writers conversed with Moses or Jewish prophets. He found more plausible—"that the general tradition” was —Pre serv’d in the World,” although —in many Places it was grossly disguis’d and corrupted, yet in others retain’d much of its Primitive Purity.” He argued that Divine Revelation was “imprinted” on the —Mind.”

Admittedly, the ancients expressed these preserved yet corrupted memories of divine truths in fantastic and poetic form. However, Bulkley noted that the ancients had a different mode of understanding reality than modern people. Bulkley observed that Ovid wrote —in the Strain and Manner of others of his Tribe, who are wont generally to mingle a great deal of Mythology with the Truth.” Bulkley believed that this should not be interpreted as Ovid’s deliberate distortion. Men of the time wrote —Mythological History” as they conceived reality differently.\footnote{Bulkley, —Preface,” ii-iii, iv, v.}

It is observed by some Learned Men, that was the most Ancient way of Writing, and that prose is only an imitating of Poetry, and that the Grecians in particular at their first delivery from barbarism had all their Philosophy and instructions from the Poets such as Orpheus … that in old time poets were the lights and instructors of the World and gave laws to men for their conduct in several relations and affairs of Life.\footnote{Ibid.,” iv, v, vi, vii, viii.}

Bulkley did not fully flesh out the implications of this position. Coincidentally, the same year Bulkley wrote the —Preface” to the Poetical Meditations, Giambattista Vico wrote the New Science, which conceptualized the people of past ages as primitive. Decades later, German scholars such as Eichhorn would take similar ideas in radical directions by

\footnote{Ibid., vii - viii.}
arguing that the writers of the Bible conceived of reality in a primitive way. For now, in America, these ideas remained dormant in the obscure work of an isolated country pastor in New England. Bulkley’s contentions were not radically beyond the pale. Recall that Mather believed that pagan myths were borrowed from revelation and degraded memories of biblical events. Edwards argued that although the deists believed that their theologies came from reason alone, they unwittingly absorbed revealed truth transmitted through cultural traditions. In 1725, Bulkley did not break with New England orthodoxy in any significant way.

In 1730, Bulkley made far more radical claims. He used an ordination sermon, entitled *The Usefulness of Revealed Religion*, to praise natural religion. Bulkley admitted that he was venturing on “an untrodden path” and arguing with a method that most would perceive as “improper and very alien from what might be expected” for such an occasion. He argued that the key elements of the Christian revelation already existed in all natural religions. Long before Christ, natural religions taught men to love God, treat one’s neighbor with love and charity, hope for immortality, and expect divine rewards and punishments in the afterlife. These, according to Bulkley, were the core ethical teachings of the Bible. He wrote that “a considerable part (yea, may I not say, the main part) of Faith and Obedience of Reve’l’d Religion (largely taken) is primarily and Really no other than the Faith and Obedience of Natural Religion.” Christianity was — no other

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than Natural Religion.” Elsewhere, he wrote “There is no Opposition or Inconsistency in any, either of the Doctrines of Precepts of the Word of GOD with those which Nature Teaches.” Revelation merely reaffirmed and elaborated old truths known to natural religion. Pagan natural religions arrived at these truths — without the help of supernatural revelation.” Five years earlier he argued that pagan sources were relying on remnant memories passed down from an original revelation from God. In 1730, he argued that pagans learned spiritual truths through reason, independent of supernatural aid. Bulkley was no deist. But his ideas regarding natural religion clearly showed affinity to deist notions. They argued that the Bible was merely one expression of religious truth among several. Scripture was merely an expression of a common and universal religion of nature.

Curiously, Bulkley’s sermon seemed to speak more to the concerns of deists than Christians. He continually reassured that natural religion had nothing to fear” from revealed religion. There was nothing in revealed religion that could Hurt, Prejudice, or Hinder that which is Natural.” In fact, God only intended to use the Bible to preserve, cultivate, and improve” natural religion. Bulkley argued that the Bible conveyed the same message with greater clarity. Reveal’d Religion has Illustrated and Improved these Discoveries of the Pagan Theology, bro’t these things out of their obscurity, and set them in a clearer light.” God sought to strengthen and aid natural religion with revelation. The Scriptures do not make void that Law that is the sum of Natural Religion, but on the other hand Establish it.” Consequently, he wondered how strange it is that the Deists of

435 Bulkley, Usefulness of Revealed Religion, 6, 7, 9, 13, 34.
our age should seek to weaken [the Bible’s] Authority, and procure its Banishment out of the world,” since the Bible only “aided natural religion.” Perhaps he found natural religion more interesting. Regarding this sermon, Perry Miller wrote that “revelation is ritualistically exalted above nature and then all the heartfelt encomia are heaped upon the natural.” 436

By way of contrast, consider the thoughts of Thomas Walter, a pastor in Roxbury, Massachusetts, and nephew of Cotton Mather, who wrote in 1723 regarding the merits of classical and pagan virtues.

UPON the whole, we may conclude the Pagan Ethics to be miserably Defective and false; and in Truth it has been rightly thought by some great Men, that the revival of them has done one of the greatest Disservices & Mischiefs to the Christian Religion, which has ever befell it. … when these [Classical] moral Duties are separated from their Evangelical Relation to GOD in CHRIST, and are not animated by the Spirit of Grace, they are a lifeless & breathless carcase, which GOD will not accept nor regard. 437

Walters, who was on the conservative end of the spectrum, believed that pagan religious or ethical writings were of little value. In contrast, Bulkley chastised Christian pastors for shunning natural religion in their ministry. Furthermore, he made the shocking claim that the Bible was not the only guide to life. He who relied exclusively on supernatural revelation was a person of “a very depraved Conscience indeed.” 438

436 Ibid., 4, 12, 13, 14, 21. Miller, New England Mind: From Colony to Province, 432.

437 Thomas Walter, The Scriptures the Only Rule of Faith & Practice (Boston: B. Green, 1723), 28. Fiering discusses at considerable length the varying degrees to which scholars at Harvard accepted or rejected the ethics of classical thinkers in the seventeenth century in Moral Philosophy at Seventeenth-Century Harvard.

Even when Bulkley used natural religion to defend the Bible, he elevated natural religion. As was common, Bulkley argued that evidence proved that the Koran, unlike the Bible, could not be revelation. The Qur’an was not consistent with natural religion and therefore clearly was not from God.

Nor need we any further Evidence of the Falseness of any pretense the Alcoran or that grand Impostor (Mahomet) makes to this than its teaching things Repugnant to the sincere & pure dictates of Nature: Hereby it assures us it never came from Heaven. No Institution of this sort can do so; for GOD is the Father of Natural Light, as well as that which is Supernatural, and he cannot contradict himself.439

He sought to affirm the authority of the Bible and discredit the Qur’an. Others had done so as well.440 However, Bulkley’s argument assumed the authority and truthfulness of natural religion. The Bible’s and the Qur’an’s validity depended on an external and independent source of authority. In Bulkley’s argument natural religion is the ruler by which Scripture is measured. Fortunately for the Bible, it measured up.

At the end of the sermon, Bulkley mentioned that he knew that he was entering the twilight of both his life and career. He was right. He died two years later. Perhaps Bulkley waited to present his ideas on natural religion in the last years of his life because he knew that such notions were bound to raise alarms from conservative Calvinists. He would not live long enough to suffer any consequences.

439 Ibid., 16.

Thirty years after Bulkley’s sermon, Harvard formalized the study of natural
religion through the Dudleian Lectures. Edward Holyoke (1689-1769), Harvard’s ninth
president, delivered the inaugural lecture, which was on natural religion. Holyoke
defined natural religion as — the regard to a Divine Being or God which Men arrive at, by
mere Principles of natural Reason, as it is improveable, by tho’t, consideration &
Experience, without the help of Revelation.” Holyoke made clear that revelation was
essential. Ebenezer Gay (1696-1787), in his 1759 Dudleian lecture, distinguished
between natural and revealed religion. He stated, – Religion is divided into natural and
revealed: - Revealed Religion, is that which God hath made known to Men by the
immediate Inspiration of his Spirit, the Declarations of his Mouth, and Instructions of his
Prophets: Natural, that which bare Reason discovers and dictates.” In 1763, Peter Clark
(1694-1768) noted that the powers of this rational and intelligent mind of man are of
vast extent in the knowledge of nature.” By observing the natural world, man could

441 Curiously, between Bulkley’s sermon and the first Dudleian Lecture, there is almost no printed
material defending natural religion in New England. One possible exception is Lemuel Briant’s critique of
Calvinism’s doctrine of depravity, which incited a minor pamphlet war. He argued that revelation merely
reiterates the dictates of nature, but this was a minor point. Lemuel Briant, The Absurdity and Blasphemy of
Deprecating Moral Virtue (Boston: J. Green, 1749).

442 Holyoke’s biography is briefly covered in John Langdon Sibley, Biographical Sketches of

443 Edward Holyoke, –The First Sermon for the Dudleian Lecture, 1755,” MS, Harvard University
Archives, Cambridge, 3. Peter Clark concurred with Holyoke in his 1763 lecture on
natural religion. He similarly defined natural religion as the laws or rules or moral conduct as are founded
on deductions from principles of mere natural reason relative to divinity and morality, without the aids of
supernatural revelation. Peter Clark, Man’s dignity and duty as a reasonable creature; and his insufficiency
as a fallen creature (Boston: Richard and Samuel Draper, 1763), 3.

444 Ebenezer Gay, Natural Religion as Distinguish’d from Revealed (Boston: John Draper, 1759),
6, 7. For a biography of Gay, see Robert J. Wilson, The Benevolent Deity: Ebenezer Gay and the Rise of
discover the nature of its creator by "ransacking the creation, and surveying the works of God in the heavens, earth and seas" and trace "the footsteps and impressions of a Deity."

Clark concluded that

God has put this principle of intellectual light into the nature of man to discover his duty to him, and direct him in his whole moral behavior, and also given it the force of a law to oblige him to the practice of it; the same which is commonly called the light and law of nature, or the light and dictates of conscience.445

Holyoke, Gay, and Clark were typical of those who addressed the matter of natural religion in the Dudleian Lectures in the second half of the eighteenth century. Natural religion, they believed, complemented revelation.

However, Clark and his fellow proponents of natural religion reasonably feared being associated with deism.446 The natural religionists still believed that the Bible was ultimately necessary for salvation. Defensively, Ebenezer Gay, like Bulkley, argued that natural and revealed religion did not threaten or compete with each other. Rather, they subsist harmoniously together, and mutually strengthen and confirm each other. … Nothing therefore could be vainer and more preposterous, than the attempt to raise the credit on one, upon the discredit of the other.” More importantly, he assured that revealed religion was not threatened. Reason alone was insufficient. "Revelation gives us the same (tho’ clearer) Ideas of the Attributes of God, which we have from Nature and Reason.” Reason without divine revelation could only give a partial knowledge of God, argued

445 Peter Clark, Man’s dignity, 9, 10.

446 George Whitefield accused latitudinarians such as Tillotson of being practically deists. Some conservative rivals in Massachusetts looked upon them with suspicion. See Field, Crisis.
Gay. Likewise, Andrew Eliot (1718-1778) wrote, “The gospel makes certain, which, without it, is but a dark conjecture.” Reason, though helpful, was inadequate, the Harvard natural religionists assured. Samuel Langdon wrote,

Where the light of nature fails the Gospel offers itself as an infallible guide, discovering the things of God which could not be discovered by the naked eye or the human intellect and correcting errors of misguided reason. … revelation teaches the same things with natural religion, but it teaches more.

By denying the sufficiency of autonomous reason, the natural religionists distinguished themselves from the deists.

Samuel Langdon (1723-1797), in 1775, and Gad Hitchcock (1748-1803), in 1779, both attempted to bridge the distance between natural and revealed religion and remove the taint of deism by arguing that the separation between natural and revealed religion was just conceptual. Like Bulkley, drawing upon prisca theologia, they argued that God revealed himself to Adam supernaturally. Based on this initial special revelation, Adam and his descendents built up their storehouse of knowledge with natural powers of reason. Over the centuries, as the human population grew and spread, the original deposit of revelation degraded, but revelation always existed in some form. Hitchcock reasoned, “There were but two generations from Adam to Noah. So we cannot well imagine that the

knowledge and true worship of God, during that time, could be lost in any part of the world.” God did not leave man alone. He saw fit to interpose and reveal himself with many appearances from the angel of his presence and declared himself as his ways to periodically correct their darkened understanding.”

Similarly, Langdon concluded, there never was a time when mankind was absolutely left without revelation, though some nations have approached very near such a state.” Revelation imperceptibly mixes with natural notions of mankind, so that it is difficult to distinguish between one and the other.” Langdon argued that pure natural religion did not exist anywhere in the world. All civilizations built their ideas on the remnant knowledge derived from God’s original revelation to Adam. He even went on to posit that—then sages,” such as Plato, Socrates, and Cicero, did not gather their ideas from nature alone. They too benefited from divine grace. The Jewish scriptures were spread throughout the entire world … doubtless the philosophers had the curiosity to read them, and did not neglect to take some advantage of the knowledge they gained for the further improvement of their own schemes.”

Hitchcock and Langdon concluded that supernatural revelation pervaded the entire world in some form. Human reason never existed in a form entirely independent from God’s revelation.

452 Gad Hitchcock, Natural Religion aided by Revelation, and perfected in Christianity (Boston: T. and J. Fleet, 1779), 23, 24. Also see Samuel Langdon who wrote, When the world was peopled after the Flood, all mankind were acquainted with the one true God, and that rational and spiritual worship which he requires; but as vice increased, they grew more averse to the purity of religion, though natural reason would not suffer them absolutely to renounce the form.’ Langdon, The Co-incidence of Natural with Revealed Religion, 14.

By collapsing the distinction between revealed and natural religion, Hitchcock and Langdon attempted to create distance between their form of natural religion and deism. They even argued that the deists were unknowingly beholden to the blessings of supernatural revelation. Hitchcock conjectured that “modern Deists know more … than … the ancient philosophers. But this is chiefly to be attributed to the advantages of the Christian revelation, which has been a rich blessing, even to those who do not believe in it.” Though deists claimed that their conclusions were derived purely from the unassisted and natural powers of human reason and observation, their ideas, as well as all knowledge of God, were in fact derived from an original deposit of revelation and God’s periodic gifts of grace.

In 1795, Thomas Barnard, Jr. (1748-1814) gave the Dudleian Lecture on natural religion. By the 1790s, the deist controversy was at its height and rose to the level of paranoia due in part to anxieties about the French Revolution. This perhaps explains why Barnard began his lecture with a noticeably defensive posture. He stated, “A Discourse upon Natural religion in an University professedly under Christian instruction, and by a minister of Christ, appears to some, if not criminal, yet highly improper.” He proceeded to discuss what he believed to be the complementary relationship between revealed and natural religion. — They are to be conceived rather as different rays of light

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454 Similarly, Andrew Eliot argued that “modern Deist, who is acquainted with the Bible” has a better notion of morality because of his exposure to revelation. Eliot, *A Discourse on Natural Religion*, xxxvi.


from the Great Source of Understanding.” Though generally similar to the preceding fifty years of natural religion lectures in content, when discussing the role of reason and the relationship between Christianity and deism, Barnard’s argument took a slight shift. Where is the Christian who will refuse to own his mind has been instructed, and faith strengthened by [deists’] labors? Christians are assisted by the work of deists!” Hitchcock and Langdon had argued that deist and pagan thinkers were aided by revelation. Barnard argued that Christian revelation was continually aided by the progress of natural religion. The firmest believer in Christianity seeks to render his faith more firm, than the evidence of testimony can alone render it, by rational illustration and argument.” The modern Christian benefited from analogies, facts, and inferences from allowed premises” that could explain and corroborate the doctrines or precepts of his religion.” Intellectual advances in natural philosophy and philosophy, spurred on in many cases by the deists, advanced the Christians‘ understanding of revelation, according to Barnard. Though Thomas Barnard, Jr. opposed deism, he emphasized natural means of knowing divine matters more than even his Dudleian predecessors.

Barnard, Jr. also introduced a concept unused by previous Dudleian lecturers. He discussed the idea of historical development. Decades earlier, Bulkley also touched on this idea briefly. Barnard noted that the state of human knowledge was in a process of continual intellectual advancement. Those who had been able to benefit from the

advances in thinking had a more enlightened and profound concept of divine matters.\textsuperscript{459}

In a telling passage, he argued that Cicero had a better notion of the deity than the average Roman. Dr. Samuel Clarke had a more advanced understanding of religion than a "Hottenton" [sic]. And analogously, the apostles possessed more "enlarged sentiments and well-informed notions of God" than the priests of Jupiter. Clarke, Cicero, and the Apostles – in all three cases, according to Barnard, these men were advanced in their knowledge of God by benefit of the "blessings of education," "instructive books," "conversation," and sufficient leisure for "application and study."\textsuperscript{460} He explained why some individuals or cultures possessed more genuine knowledge of religion than others. Taking for granted that all nations had at least some limited access to divine revelation, he proposed that three factors determined one’s religious understanding: "natural strength of mind," "the industry with which they improve them," and "the favorableness of their situation for such investigations."\textsuperscript{461} Since knowledge and culture advances over time, Barnard believed that he, his fellow Bostonian liberals, and latitudinarians like Samuel Clarke were in the most advanced or enlightened state. Implicitly, people of the past must have lived in shadows. Only a few years later, Unitarians like Andrews Norton and

\textsuperscript{459} Thomas Barnard reasoned, "Dove ever find that those who have been denied the blessings of education, of instructive books and conversation, or have had no leisure from the necessary business of life for the application and study, can conceive so extensively upon the subject of religion, and converse so correctly upon them, as those who have been favored with these advantages? No; there is and ever will be, a remarkable difference between them." Ibid., 12.

\textsuperscript{460} Ibid., 12. Barnard indulged a degree of anachronistic fancy in his interpretation of the past. He imagined historical figures, who knew something of divine matters, to be of the intellectual elite such as himself and his Harvard peers. Samuel Clarke, and possibly Cicero, certainly occupied the class of intellectual professional as he imagined, but to say that the Apostles did so as well defied the historical knowledge of his own time.

\textsuperscript{461} Ibid.
Joseph Buckminster would extend this argument further and argue that the writers of the Old Testament, living in a primitive state, only had a limited understanding of revelation.

Barnard offered what he believed to be increasingly naturalistic means by which people ascertained knowledge of God, which were consequently more trustworthy and not arbitrary in comparison to other approaches. Indeed, Barnard still maintained in principle that God spoke through revelation, but his concept of revelation had become so watered down, so general, that it became universally available to all the children of Adam. If revelation had become accessible as remnant knowledge in all mankind, there was little about it that was “special.” In some ways, his views of revelation became indistinguishable from deism, which in important respects paved the way for modern liberal Protestantism.

III. Conclusion

In 1796, Nathan Fiske delivered the lecture on revealed religion. With complete confidence, he referenced the testimony of witnesses to the miracles of Christ. He was incredulous that any “unprejudiced mind” could examine the evidence and conclude that the gospels were composed by the “unassisted powers of man.” Though the Bible was written by the inspiration of God, believed Fiske, it should be interpreted and understood with man’s natural and intellectual abilities. As the century drew to a close, words such as “objectively,” “unprejudiced,” and “rationally” increased as references to the Holy Spirit decreased. Fiske believed that the Dudleian Lectures serve as a laboratory, or armoury, where those weapons may be formed and burnished, by which to defend the religion of Jesus, and the rights of Christians. These weapons have hitherto been proof against every assailant in every attack, in
whatever new mode the opponents might use their own armour, or bring on the assault.462

Fiske and his predecessors were arming their students to fight the deists. In the process of believing that they were making their conception of the Bible became increasingly rational and empirical, they were unwittingly adopting a metaphysical naturalism. In fact, they were becoming deists despite themselves and taking their students with them. The college’s decades of advocacy of an empirical defense of the Scriptures inadvertently encouraged its students to minimize the role of a supernatural God in the reading of divine revelation. The college and its students certainly did not become deists. However, for a season, deism was as rampant at Harvard as it was on many campuses in the late eighteenth century. One can speculate that some students may have been inadvertently encouraged to move in deist directions by the increasing emphasis on naturalistic reading of the Bible.

There was no radical revolution of ideas from Edward Holyoke’s first Dudleian Lecture in 1755 to Thomas Barnard, Jr.’s in 1795. Unlike Emerson’s 1838 Divinity School Address, no one noticed a rupture from the past in Barnard’s treatise. But there was a significant evolution of ideas nonetheless. In the course of four decades, the lecturers shifted the emphasis of the locus of authority and knowledge. The changing conception of the Bible over the course of the second half of the eighteenth century appears particularly dramatic when one compares the Dudleian Lectures of the two Thomas Barnards. When Thomas Barnard, Sr. became too feeble to continue to pastor,

462 Fiske, A Sermon Preached at the Dudleian Lecture, 7, 19.
his son became a candidate for his father's pulpit for the First Church in Salem in 1771. The son shared his father's name but not his father's views on the Bible. The congregation must have sensed this, and they were divided and thus rejected him. Thomas Barnard, Jr. therefore did not take his father's place but instead formed The North Church and Society in Salem on January 13, 1773.\textsuperscript{463} In 1768, Barnard, Sr. emphasized the power of the Holy Spirit and remained skeptical of the powers of the mind. His son, Barnard, Jr., in 1795, gave credit to the deists for improving the state of Christianity. The son never questioned the power of the human mind. Before Barnard, Jr., no Dudleian Lectures ever stated that deists advanced Christian biblical interpretation. Furthermore, unlike most of the previous natural religion lecturers, Barnard, Jr. made no reference to man's fallen faculty of reason. Few people raised alarms, possibly because the changes had been occurring gradually and the Dudleian Lectures were trying to defend revelation. Bit by bit, references to supernatural means of understanding revelation declined.

History played a prominent role in the Dudleian apologetics. It provided an objective and universally accessible way to judge and verify the validity of the biblical accounts, which Christian apologists used against skeptical critiques. When viewed in a larger transatlantic context, the Dudleian lecturers come across as rather behind the times. With the possible exception of Barnard, Jr. who spoke late in the century, the Dudleian lecturers simplistically and superficially mined the biblical accounts as if they were gathering evidence from a contemporary periodical for a court trial. They showed little

\textsuperscript{463} Eliot, \textit{Heralds of a Liberal Faith}, 1: 131-133.
sense that they were dealing with ancient authors from vastly different cultures, writing in
different genres. Certainly few Americans would become aware of the writings of
German historical critical biblical scholars before the nineteenth century. (They argued
that in determining the meaning of a text, the influence of the author’s culture and
historical setting played a larger role than his conscious intentions. Thus, they challenged
the historical reliability of the Bible by arguing that the biblical writers wrote in a
primitive context and therefore interpreted natural phenomena as supernatural events.)
However, the works of the English biblical scholar Robert Lowth were available to
Americans by the middle of the eighteenth century. Lowth argued that the interpreter
must appreciate the alien historical context of the biblical writing properly to interpret it.
The Dudleian lecturers seemed unwilling or unable fully to incorporate such historical
ways of interpreting. However, beginning in the nineteenth century, biblical scholars
Joseph Buckminster and Andrews Norton did integrate a more nuanced sense of history
into their hermeneutic. Though they still held Holy Writ to be a special book from God,
they began to selectively do away with parts of the Bible that did not conform to their
notions of reason. They dismissed some miracles and the historical accuracy of the Old
Testament, as well as traditional notions of inspiration.
By the early years of the nineteenth century, the threat of deism was eroding in the United States. During the eighteenth century, the Bible’s apologists used historical and empirical evidence to place Holy Writ firmly on safe and high ground, far out of reach of the arrows of skeptics. However, at the beginning of the new century, the conservative defenders of the Bible were blindsided by a new threat. This threat was driven not from hostile skeptics but from European Christian scholars who meticulously examined the biblical text with increasingly rigorous historical scrutiny, often based on a naturalistic epistemology.

464 Herbert M. Morais, G. Adolf Koch, and Kerry S. Walters all note that deism was no longer a prominent threat by the early nineteenth century. They attribute this to the vigorous defense of revelation and revivals. They also note that deism was poorly organized and its most prominent leaders died. Herbert M. Morais, Deism in Eighteenth Century America (New York: Columbia University Press, 1934), 24; G. Adolf Koch, Religion of the American Enlightenment (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1968), 239-84. Walters also suggests another possible explanation for its failure. Deism failed because it succeeded so well in ameliorating the dogmatic supernaturalism of orthodox Christianity in America that it reduced the need for its own continued existence.” Kerry S. Walters, Rational Infidels (Durango, Colorado: Longwood Academic, 1992), xiv. He expands on this point in his American Deists. In response to deism, Christian theology changed its style and became more rational and adapted to the discoveries of natural philosophy. Idem, The American Deists: Voices of Reason and Dissent in the Early Republic (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1992), 34, 36.
In 1809, Joseph Stevens Buckminster, a Bostonian Unitarian pastor and scholar, convinced the trustees of Harvard College to publish Johann Jakob Griesbach’s (1745-1812) edition of the New Testament, which was first published in Germany in 1777. The publication sent shockwaves through the American theological landscape. Griesbach examined numerous ancient Greek manuscripts of the New Testament and found that they differed from each other. He made the troubling assertion that the version of the word of God that Protestants commonly accepted for centuries as the Textus Receptus (or Received Text) was corrupted. It in fact was not an exact copy of the autographs written by the inspired authors. In other words, revelation was vulnerable to the same corruptions and degradations as any ancient text copied repeatedly by successive generations of scribes of varying talent, care, and integrity. In short, the infallible word of God contained copy errors. Griesbach’s discussion of the inadequacies of the Textus Receptus was hardly news to European scholars. They had dismissed the notion of a pristine text long ago. But only a very few sophisticated Americans who followed European scholarship knew about these advances. When

465 It should be noted that at this point, Unitarians were theologically still close to their Congregationalist Trinitarian counterparts. Though they denied the trinity, they still believed that Jesus was the “son of God” and the means of salvation. They also held the Bible in high regard as the revelation of God but they challenged a particular and narrow view of inspiration. Early nineteenth-century Unitarians should not be confused with modern Unitarians.


Buckminster published Griesbach’s text, he brought the problem to American soil and radically challenged traditional English speaking Protestant certainties of a pristine text.\textsuperscript{468}

The notion that the original autographs had been altered threatened to challenge the authenticity and authority of the Bible in the minds of more conservative Christians not in touch with European scholarship. Errors in the Received Text did not necessarily refute the special status of the Bible, but many Protestants were alarmed by the implications. To many, it seemed profoundly disconcerting and inconsistent that revelation would contain human errors.\textsuperscript{469} When Buckminster published Griesbach’s edited New Testament, Americans were caught off guard. History, which had been the weapon that defended the Bible in the eighteenth century, threatened to undermine its authority in the nineteenth.

Though the notion of a pristine text and miraculous error-free transmission had been gradually eroding for a centuries in Europe, most Americans were largely unaware

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\textsuperscript{469} Peter J. Thuesen argues that for Protestants, especially English ones, the Bible had been raised to iconic status since the Reformation. Errors and inconsistencies were deeply troubling, and many believed that subjecting the Bible to historical examination like any other ancient document seemed irreverent if not blasphemous. Peter J. Thuesen, In Discordance with the Scriptures: American Protestant Battles over Translating the Bible (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 17-40.
\end{flushright}
that European scholars had been investigating the corruption of the Textus Receptus until Buckminster introduced Griesbach to the United States in the early nineteenth century. He was one of the first Americans to examine thoroughly these European developments and not surprisingly, the liberal Unitarians appreciated his efforts. Orthodox Calvinists were initially threatened by the implications of textual criticism, but they eventually accepted the basic premise of the textual critics and conceded that the Bible had been adulterated and accrued errors over time. Though they resisted the more radical claims, they, in what is by now a predictable pattern, defended their orthodox conclusions by appropriating and using the weapons of their enemies.

I. The Development of Textual Criticism in Europe

Griesbach did not invent the revolutionary idea that the Bible had been corrupted in the process of transmission over the centuries. He inherited a longer tradition of investigation that had been developing in Europe for centuries. Scholars had been examining the biblical text and ferreting out errors. However, previous scholars cautiously left their “suggestions” for corrections to the Textus Receptus respectfully at the bottom of the pages in the notes. The actual Received Text remained intact. (The Textus Receptus, though generally trusted, itself originated in controversy. The text was based on Erasmus’ revision of the Vulgate.) Griesbach was one of the first publicly and
blatantly actually to alter the Textus Receptus. What follows is a brief summary of the development of textual criticism in Europe leading up to Griesbach.\textsuperscript{470}

According to New Testament scholar Bruce Metzger, in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe, printed copies of the Greek New Testament proliferated. However, these Greek texts were all largely based on Erasmus' faulty edition of the Greek New Testament.\textsuperscript{471} Erasmus haphazardly edited a handful of inferior manuscripts and inserted an occasional correction when he found discrepancies. He published his edition in 1516. Despite these shortcomings, observes Metzger, Erasmus' Greek text became the basis of several influential editions of the Bible. The Elezevir edition, in the preface to the second edition, claimed that the readers held in their hands, the "text now received by all, in which we give nothing changed or corrupted." Intended as nothing more than an advertisement, the claim became popularized as a stamp of accuracy and authenticity. In England, the Stephanus edition was revered as the Textus Receptus. Both were based on Erasmus' text. According to Metzger, people "slavishly held onto this

\textsuperscript{470} This chapter makes no attempt to offer a thorough history of textual criticism. Rather this section briefly illustrates radical changes in the understanding of the transmission and accuracy of the Bible manuscripts. Also, this chapter focuses on American reactions to New Testament criticism. This is not to say that the Old Testament was neglected by textual critics. For example, Spinoza, Hobbes, Simon, and Le Clerc challenged Mosaic authorship. See prologue. Also, in 1753, Jean Astruc in his \textit{Conjectures sur les Mémories Originaux} argued that Genesis was compiled by two different authors. See p. 171 of this dissertation. Years later, Benjamin Kennicott attempted to edit the Old Testament. In 1776 and 1780, he published \textit{Vetus Testamentum Hebraicum cum variis lectionibus} [Hebrew Old Testament with Variant Readings].

\textsuperscript{471} Erasmus' Bible was not the first Greek text published. The first printed Greek text was part of the Complutensis Polyglot Bible published in 1514, but not circulated until 1522. Because Erasmus' text was disseminated first and was more affordable, it was vastly more popular than the Complutensian, although the Complutensian was far superior according to Metzger and Ehrman. Bruce M. Metzger and Bart D. Ehrman, \textit{The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration} (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005 [1964]), 139; Jerry H. Bentley, \textit{Humanists and Holy Writ: New Testament Scholarship in the Renaissance} (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 70-111.
"text" as the Textus Receptus — a copy of the words written by the inspired authors without error — and its authority became an object of superstition.⁴⁷²

Some biblical scholars noticed and more carefully examined the troubling discrepancies among the Greek manuscripts and consulted a broader range of sources.⁴⁷³ Hugo Grotius noted in his De Veritate (1622) and Annotationes, or commentaries, on the Old and New Testament (1641-50) that discrepancies between various manuscripts indicated errors in transmission and he believed some sections of the Bible were added at a later date. He believed that corruptions entered the text — through carelessness or perverseness in the transcribers.” Over time — some letters, syllables, or words may be changed, omitted, or added.” Grotius was not disturbed because he thought the errors were minor, the Bible was essentially sound, and the original text could be restored if one carefully studied the manuscripts. He believed that the — most ancient copies … should be preferred before the rest.”⁴⁷⁴ Therefore the oldest copies needed to be found and evaluated in order to restore the true text. His biographer wrote of him, — As a critic, he is


⁴⁷³ It is difficult to determine a beginning point for the process of examination and correction of the biblical text. In the fourth century, Jerome discovered as many different texts as manuscripts of the New Testament as he prepared the Vulgate. Detailed work with ancient biblical manuscripts ceased until Renaissance humanists began to examine seriously the problems of textual variants and corruptions. Lorenzo Valla attempted to correct the Latin Vulgate. Bentley, Humanists and Holy Writ, 32-39; Dean Freiday, The Bible: Its Criticism, Interpretation, and Use in 16th and 17th Century England (Pittsburgh: Catholic and Quaker Studies Series, 1979), 9.

so bold as to treat the Scriptures as if they were no more than a mere literary work. He approaches them as he would any work of classical antiquity.  

In England, during the seventeenth century, Brian Walton, John Fell, and John Mill each published Greek texts in which they noted variants among the ancient texts. The increased attention to the biblical text was prompted in part by the arrival of the Codex Alexandrinus in England in 1628. Cyril Lucar, the patriarch of Constantinople gave the manuscript as a gift to the king of England. The manuscript was copied in the fifth century, 500 to 1000 years earlier than the manuscripts used for Erasmus’ Received Text. The Alexandrian text differed from the Textus Receptus in a number of places. This prompted others to scour European libraries for older manuscripts. Taking advantage of the newly rediscovered manuscripts that were unavailable to previous generations of scholars, in 1657, Walton published the last of six folio volumes of the London Polyglot Bible, which noted manuscript discrepancies. In 1675, John Fell published a Greek Bible in which he also noted inconsistencies among at least one hundred different 

475 Knight, Grotius, 250.


manuscripts. John Mill spent the last thirty years of his life collecting, collating, and analyzing manuscripts and patristic sources. In 1707, the small trickle of errors turned into a flood when Mill published his Greek New Testament, in which he noted an embarrassing and troubling 30,000 variants.\textsuperscript{478} Mill printed the Received Text (Stephanus‘ 1550 edition) but attached notes of the variant readings. The 30,000 variants were only the beginning as successors made more extensive collations. Mill only cited the variants he considered to be significant. He ignored minor issues such as variations in word order or articles. When subsequent scholars examined more manuscripts with greater rigor, Mill’s 30,000 variants multiplied by a factor of five within a century. Walton, Fell, and Mill made notes of the variants. However, they did not actually tamper with the Received Text. Doing so would be too disturbing to the many Christians who practically venerated the Received Text.

Mill’s younger friend and famed classicist, Richard Bentley (1662-1742), was also interested in examining the text of the Bible.\textsuperscript{479} Bentley concluded that the original autographs of the New Testament books lay beyond recovery. He proposed instead to


reproduce the text as it existed in the 4th century. The task entailed comparing “the most ancient and venerable” manuscripts and testing for agreement among Greek and Latin versions, then checking the readings against patristic citations and ancient Syriac, Coptic, Gothic, and Ethiopian translations. His philological principles guided subsequent scholars and German textual critics abandoned the goal of restoring the original autographs.\footnote{Richard Claverhouse Jebb, 	extit{Bentley} (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1901 [1882]), 158-71; James H. Monk, 	extit{The Life of Richard Bentley D.D.}, 2nd ed. (London: J.G. Rivington, 1833). For his critical method, see Richard Bentley, 	extit{Dr. Bentley’s Proposals for Printing a New Edition of the Greek Testament, and St. Hierom’s Latin Version, With a Full Answer to All the Remarks of a Late Pamphleteer}, 2nd Ed. (London: J. Knapton, 1721), 16-27.}

In Germany, Johann Albrecht Bengel (1687-1752) was understandably disturbed when he encountered the Fell edition of the New Testament. However, he concluded that corruptions were inevitable over centuries of successive transmissions. A Bible free of textual errors, he believed, could only be a result of a “miracle so great that belief in it could no longer be called belief.” Despite the errors, he believed that careful investigation, collection, and collation of manuscripts could restore faith in the sacred text. In 1734, Bengel published a Greek New Testament, in which he catalogued variant texts and rated them according to five levels of reliability. He also tried to bring order to the growing number of newly discovered manuscripts by classifying them into families of geography and origins.\footnote{Quoted from Jonathan Sheehan, 	extit{The Enlightenment Bible: Translation, Scholarship, Culture} (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 97. W.R. Baird, “Bengel, Johann Albrecht (1687-1752)” in 	extit{Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation}, 120.}

Historian Jonathan Sheehan notes that Bengel was one of the first biblical scholars to attempt to examine the text of the Bible independent from theological
constraints. Rather than choosing a variant based on theological principles, Bengel attempted to establish sound, consistent, and objective principles of evaluation for determining the probable original form. For example, he posited that number of manuscripts was not as important as their antiquity. An erroneous manuscript could have been recopied many times. Bengel also made central to his method of textual criticism the Erasmian principle that “proclivi scriptioni praestat ardua (the harder reading is preferable to the easier).” Erasmus had imagined that scribes would naturally tend to err in the direction of more obvious phrasing rather than more puzzling terms.482

About two decades later, Johann Jakob Wettstein (1693-1754) continued the task of correcting the ancient manuscripts. In 1751 and 1752, he published a critical Greek New Testament in two volumes, for which he utilized 225 manuscripts, a hundred of which he personally examined. Wettstein included in his New Testament a Prolegomena in which he discussed nineteen principles for evaluating textual variants. Wettstein, like Bengel, also believed, in theory, that the evaluation and the interpretation of the text should be wholly independent of theological or doctrinal loyalties. Evidence should guide the evaluation of texts. Though he wanted to publish a text of the New Testament that departed from the Received Text, sensibly fearing repercussions, he took a conservative

II. Reactions to Textual Criticism

These biblical scholars were not trying to undermine faith. Rather, they believed they were getting to the earliest possible text. However, skeptics took advantage of their discoveries for their own ends, and many more cautious Christians also feared that these biblical scholars were undermining the credibility of revelation. As early as 1670, the arch-heretic Spinoza attempted to dismantle the Bible’s special status by arguing that it should be treated like any other book. He presciently asserted in his infamous *Theological-Political Treatise* that the Textus Receptus, like an ordinary book, had been corrupted and altered from the original manuscripts, which were now hopelessly lost. Over the ages, the text, he asserted, had been degraded either by malicious intent or the natural degradations of time. He attempted to assure his readers that only details of history or the nuances of theology were contaminated and altered. The heart of the word of God, those parts that encouraged love for God and mankind, were still intact. The rest was unimportant.

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484 Spinoza made a distinction between the word of God and the actual written Scripture. He asserted that God originally delivered the word of God in written form. However, God would one day inscribe his law in the hearts of his people. The actual Scriptures could become corrupted but people, through natural reason, could still know the word of God. Baruch Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, trans. Samuel Shirley, (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., Inc., 2001), 90, 145-52.
In the eighteenth century, the deists Anthony Collins, John Toland, and Matthew Tindal attempted to undermine the authority of Christianity by arguing that its foundation was a corrupted text. Taking advantage of Mill’s 30,000 textual variants, they argued that the numerous errors proved that the Bible was not a reliable document and could not be divinely inspired. Both deists and many Christians realized that scholars such as Mill, Grotius, and Wettstein made the status of revelation vulnerable. In this rare case, many Christians actually agreed with the skeptics.

In response, some Christians tenaciously held onto the belief that God would not have allowed errors to creep into His revelation. For example, soon after the London Polyglot was published, John Owen launched a vicious attack. He wrote, “Every tittle and iota in the word of God must come under our care and consideration, as being … from God.” He acknowledged that the original manuscripts of “Moses and the prophets … the apostles and the evangelists” were gone, but every detail —th had been by his special care and providence preserved entire and uncorrupt unto us.” He asserted that all the words of the Bible were —immediately and entirely given out by God himself, his mind being in them represented unto us without the least interveniency of such mediums and ways as were capable of giving change or alteration to the least iota or syllable.” Furthermore, the

copies were preserved unto us entire in the original languages."\(^486\) Other Christians also believed that God's providence extended to the copyist by preserving manuscripts from error. John Edwards of England, in 1691 wrote, we have reason … to be thorowly perswaded that the Books are entirely transmitted to us without any Corruption, and are the same that ever they were, without … Diminution or Addition.\(^487\) Responding to Mill’s discovery and documentation of the 30,000 errors, Daniel Whitby wrote, GRIEVE therefore, and am vexed that I have found so much in Mill’s Prolegomena which seems quite plainly to render the standard of faith insecure, or at best to give others too good a handle for doubting.\(^488\) He, like Owen, also argued that God miraculously preserved the Bible in transmission.

Who can imagine that God, who sent his Son … to declare this doctrine, and his apostles, by the assistance of the Holy Spirit to … preach it, and by so many miracles confirmed it to the world, should suffer any wicked persons to corrupt it and alter any of those terms on which the happiness of mankind depended?\(^489\)

\(^{486}\) In John Owen's Some Considerations on the Prolegomena, & Appendix to the Late Biblia Polyglotta, the brunt of his attack was against an essay included in the Polyglot by Louis Cappel who argued that the Hebrew vowel points were not part of the original Hebrew text but were added no earlier than the 5\(^{th}\) Century A.D. If the Hebrew texts were altered centuries after the original autographs were written by adding the vowel points, then, Owen believed, their authority and authenticity were undermined. However, Owen’s overall concern was to preserve the reliability of the Textus Receptus. Corruption eroded faith in the Bible, he believed. John Owen, Of the divine original, authority, self-evidencing light, and powver of the Scriptures (Oxford: Henry Hall, 1659), 154; Freiday, The Bible, 10.


\(^{488}\) Fox, Mill and Bentley, 106; Daniel Whitby, Examen Variantium Lectionum Johannis Milli (London: Bettesworth, W. Mears, W. and J. Innys, 1709). Fox notes that both the Christian and deistic critics were answered by Richard Bentley in Remarks on a late Discourse of Freethinking (Cambridge: C. Crownfield, 1725, [1713]). Bentley defended both the integrity of revelation and Mill’s work.

Finding errors was disturbing, but the biblical scholars had enough sense not to alter the Textus Receptus. Doing so would alarm most believers. Although the scholars recommended corrections, most did not mar the holy Textus Receptus with the critical hands of historical scholarship. In 1777, Griesbach made the first significant alteration of the Received Text using the texts produced by Mill and Wettstein. In the Prolegomena, he discussed the origin of the Received Text and questioned its reliability. He made cautious changes when Greek manuscripts, ancient translations, and the witness of church fathers supported them. Like Bengel and Wettstein, Griesbach divided the main texts into families (Alexandrine, Western, and Byzantine), and, in his Prolegomena, he discussed fifteen canons for evaluating the reliability of textual variants. Based on his principles, he removed from the Received Text a few passages that he believed to be inauthentic. For example, he concluded that 1 John 5:7-8 was added later. Though he included John 5:7-8:11, he noted that the passage in all likelihood was not original.

Griesbach believed that God revealed Himself in the Bible. However, his views stood in stark contrast to earlier understandings of the authority of the Bible. For example, Griesbach concluded that only Matthew and John were inspired gospel accounts. Mark and Luke were useful, but their accuracy was contingent on their reliance

490 The few bold souls in the eighteenth century who attempted to revise the Textus Receptus were not well received. Based on Mill’s work, the Rev. Edward Wells, in 1719, published a Greek New Testament that differed from the Textus Receptus at several points. His work was ignored. In 1729, the Presbyterian minister Daniel Mace produced a better revision. His edition was vehemently attacked. In 1763, the English printer, William Bowyer, Jr. also published a corrected New Testament based on the work of Wettstein. Possibly because he was neither a pastor nor a formally trained scholar, his work was ignored and forgotten. See Bruce M. Metzger, “Three Learned Printers and Their Contribution to Biblical Scholarship,” The Journal of Religion 32, no. 4 (1952): 255 and Metzger and Ehrman, Text of the New Testament, 155, 157-58;
Recall the enraged protest of John Owen upon the publication of the London Polyglot. “Every tittle and iota of the Word of God” was from God and preserved without corruption.” The Bible was entirely from God and the writers were passive instruments for the reception and representation of words.” God expected Christians, Owen argued, not to examine the Bible skeptically as other books but to receive it in faith. In contrast, nearly a century later, Griesbach wrote, “Those who argue that Mark wrote under the influence of divine inspiration must surely regard it as being a pretty meager one!”

III. Early Encounters with Textual Criticism in Eighteenth-Century America

When Buckminster convinced the trustees of Harvard to publish an American version of Griesbach’s New Testament in 1809, only a few learned Americans knew that their European cousins were investigating the integrity of the biblical text. Examining the texts of the Bible required examining rare manuscripts scattered across various locations throughout Europe. This was an extremely difficult task for someone living in Europe and impossible for someone living across the Atlantic. But Americans were not entirely blissfully ignorant of the problems of textual corruptions of their Holy Writ.

491 He surmised that Matthew was written first and Luke used Matthew as a source. Mark then wrote his account based on Matthew and Luke. Mark, he believed, was writing for a Gentile audience and therefore left out Matthew’s Jewish references. Because Mark was based on an inspired account, and not itself inspired, he considered it to be inferior. Baird, New Testament Research, 138-143.

492 Quoted in Freiday, The Bible, 11.

In 1735, Americans faced these challenges in a small and isolated way. Robert Breck sought to be settled as the pastor of a congregation in Springfield, Massachusetts. Thomas Clap, the future president of Yale College, led a group of conservative clergy to block Breck’s appointment. Among other complaints, Clap charged that Breck denied that several passages of the New Testament were of divine inspiration. After reading Jeremiah Jones’ *Canonical Authority of the New Testament*, Breck agreed with Jones’ conclusion that two passages of the New Testament were later interpolations and not of Divine Inspiration.”

Jones believed that John 8 and 1 John 5:7 were not written by the inspired authors because they did not appear in the Syriac version of the New Testament. Jones believed that the first- or second-generation Jewish Christians, living in Syria, translated manuscripts of the New Testament into their own language. The Syriac manuscripts were translated early and in the lifetime of the apostles and therefore they were likely a highly accurate translation of the original manuscripts. Since they did not contain the passages in question, Jones concluded that they must have been added at a later time and not in the original.

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When Clap confronted Breck regarding his heterodox views, Breck showed Clap the pages of Jones’ book that discussed the evidence. Predictably, the conservative Clap recorded that he did not think that Jones successfully proved that the passages were not originally written by the inspired authors or that it was even Jones’ intention to do so. Clap clearly misunderstood Jones for Jones argued in no uncertain terms that he believed the vast majority of the most ancient manuscripts did not contain the verses in question, which therefore were later interpolations. Not only did Clap misunderstand Jones’ argument but Clap did not address Jones’ textual and historical evidence. One would imagine that Clap could have attempted to persuade Breck that he was wrong by offering counter historical and textual evidence. Instead, Clap simply rejected Jones’ conclusions without engaging in any sort of substantive debate regarding the evidence.

Perhaps Clap did not read Jones very carefully. This is a reasonable conjecture because Clap grossly misinterpreted Jones’ point. However, he may not have cared. Clap, by his own admission, based his belief in the authenticity of the present version of Scriptures on grounds that transcended the evidence based on ancient copies, history, or


496 Jones addressed the matter of textual corruption and interpolation from the original text in Chapter XVIII of his book, entitled “The Syriack translation is of the greatest antiquity, because there is a most remarkable agreement between it and our most ancient Greek manuscripts of the New Testament.” Regarding the disputed verses, Jones wrote, “I need not cite more; it is plain, it was formerly wanting in many copies, which, with what has been said above, seems to be a good argument of the antiquity of the Syriack Version.” He also wrote that the verses in question were “wanting in almost all the ancient manuscripts.” Jeremiah Jones, *A New and Full Method of Settling the Canonical Authority of the New Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1798 [1726-27]), 110-113.
the examination of languages. Rather, Clap believed that the texts were not corrupted on the basis of a theological, rather than a historically naturalistic argument.

I relied much on this Argument which all might rely upon, whether they were skilled in the ancient Copies or no? viz. That as GOD had a gracious Intention and Design in revealing the Scripture at first, so we might depend upon it, that in pursuance to that good Intention, his Providence would be engaged to preserve the Scriptures Pure and Uncorrupted.497

Clap believed God protected and preserved his revelation for His people. To put it another way, Clap believed God would not go through all the trouble of inspiring various authors, only to have the inspired word corrupted. The providence of God superseded the corruptions and degradations of history that affected other writings.

In response, Breck asked Clap, “Do you suppose, that when ever any Man undertakes to write, or print, a Copy of the Bible, that the Providence of GOD would be engaged to secure him from making any mistake in it?”498 A copyist, Clap argued, could make an error; however, if or when such corruptions occur, “GOD in his Providence gives the World sufficient Light and Evidence” to discover the mistake with the aid of the multitude of true and ancient Copies extant in the World.”499 Breck countered that “God in his Providence [has] given the World sufficient Reason to think that these Places are interpolations and not of divine Inspiration.”500 To what extent Clap believed the

497 Narrative of the Proceedings, 57, 58.
498 Ibid., 57.
499 Ibid., 58.
500 Ibid., 23. Clap’s hasty dismissal of Jones and Breck was consistent with his general approach to the challenges of skepticism and deism. He chose to combat it by rejecting it. His successor to the Yale presidency, Ezra Stiles, in contrast believed one needed to confront deism head on in the realm of ideas.
claim that the Bible could contain errors is questionable. He never attempted to address the historical or textual evidences. Rather, he persisted in condemning Breck on the principle that he believed that the Bible had been altered. Under pressure, Breck eventually recanted.\textsuperscript{501}

Many early American Protestants were understandably highly resistant to the notion that the inspired texts had changed. The Breck affair illustrates that in the mid-eighteenth century, some of the most educated Protestants leaders were unwilling or unable to engage seriously with the developing textual criticism of the Bible. More importantly, they did not need to. In the coming decades, Protestants who sought to protect the pristine nature of revelation would not be able to dismiss textual evidence as easily as Clap. However, in mid-eighteenth-century America, fideistic arguments were sufficiently effective. Few Americans confronted the issue of textual criticism in any

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\textsuperscript{501} Fifteen years later, Jonathan Edwards defended the canon of Scripture in his notebooks. His essay —\textit{Concerning the Canon of the New Testament} (Misc. 1060) was essentially an excerpt from Jones' \textit{Canonical Authority of the New Testament}. In the essay, Edwards repeated Jones' argument that the Syriac version of the New Testament demonstrated that the Canon was formed early and therefore accurate. Edwards was marginally involved in the Breck affair, and he knew that Breck and Jones used the Syriac manuscripts to question the authenticity of some passages of the New Testament. Edwards did not mention the textual issues of variant manuscripts or corruptions. Edwards copied extensive sections of Jones' work on the Syriac Bible into his notebook. However, he seems to have consciously avoided copying or summarizing the section that argued for a corrupted text. This is rather conspicuous because he extensively copied large sections of the proceeding and following parts. Brown, \textit{Jonathan Edwards and the Bible}. 20-23; Jonathan Edwards, (Misc. 1060) —Miscellanies,” ed. Amy Plantinga Pauw \textit{Works of Jonathan Edwards}, vol. 20 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 396-427; Byington, —\textit{The Case of Rev. Robert Breck},” 529.
significant way until Buckminster published Griesbach in 1809. However, a few learned Americans were aware of these issues.\footnote{Bruce Metzger points out two obscure exceptions. William Boyer, an English printer, published a Greek text of the New Testament in 1763. Boyer, using Wettstein, departed from the Textus Receptus when the textual evidence warranted change. He sent a copy of his edited Greek New Testament to Harvard, and in 1767 the President and fellows of Harvard sent him a letter, thanking him for his "very curious edition." In 1800, Isaiah Thomas, Jr. published the first Greek text of the New Testament printed in America. Though the title page claimed that the text was based on John Mill's Greek Bible, Thomas eclectically chose from various Greek texts. Almost no one in late-eighteenth- or early-nineteenth-century America mentioned either Boyer's or Thomas' texts. Metzger, "Three Learned Printers," 257-58.}

IV. Buckminster and European Textual Scholarship

Though Americans were behind their European counterparts in the historical study of the Bible, some desired greater rigor in this area. In 1799, the scholarly Boston merchant Samuel Dexter bequeathed his considerable fortune to establish a lectureship at Harvard to examine the Bible rigorously, in part because he was concerned about skepticism.\footnote{For a brief biography of Dexter, see "Biographical Notice of the Late Hon. Samuel Dexter," \textit{Monthly Anthology}, 9 (1810): 3-7.} As he stated the matter in his will, "revelation is rejected because some of the historical, doctrinal, or perceptive parts of the holy scriptures … are misapprehended by unbelievers; the reading of whose writings tends to shake the faith of such as are unable to detect their mistakes[]." The problem, according to Dexter, was not a matter of faith but proper knowledge and education. He confidently believed, "if the Christian religion be but well understood, it cannot fail of convincing every sincere inquirer of its divine authority[]." Dexter was certain that "difficulties would vanish, were the passages objected to critically and judiciously rendered and explained." He endowed his fund for the purpose of "promoting a critical knowledge of the holy scriptures." Unlike the
Dudleian Lectures, endowed in the previous century, which were designed for a general audience, Dexter specified that his lectures be of a more erudite and specialized nature and go beyond the ordinary discussion appropriate for the lay in church meetings.\textsuperscript{504} Though Dexter was willing to allow the trustees some latitude in the handling of the endowment after his death, on some principles he was unyielding. He demanded that

\textit{[T]he usefulness of explaining idioms, phrases, and figures of speech, which abound in the scriptures; and the usages and customs therein referred to; and of clearing up the difficulties in sacred chronology and geography, should not be adverted to by the managers of the legacy.}\textsuperscript{505}

In 1811, the trustees of the Dexter Endowment chose Rev. Joseph Stevens Buckminster as the first lecturer. Buckminster was a most appropriate choice, for his intellectual pursuits embodied the spirit of Dexter’s lectureship.

Buckminster’s interest in European biblical studies in part arose from conflicts with his father, which were a microcosm of the bitter theological war in Massachusetts between traditional Calvinists and liberals (later called Unitarians) in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.\textsuperscript{506} Buckminster was raised by a stern and conservative Calvinist father, also named Joseph Buckminster. At age nineteen, the younger Buckminster abandoned his father’s faith and embraced a liberal Arianism. The younger

\textsuperscript{504} Portions of Dexter’s will were printed in the \textit{General Repository}. See “Intelligence,” \textit{General Repository and Boston Review} 1 (1812): 204, 05, 08.

\textsuperscript{505} Ibid., 208.

Buckminster concluded that Christ secured man’s salvation, but he could not accept Jesus’ divinity. 507

In line with Unitarian tendencies, Joseph Stevens Buckminster, the younger, believed that traditional Calvinists elevated tradition and primitive errors of the past into indisputable religious dogma. Skeptics, believed Buckminster, found such erroneous propositions absurd. He characterized Calvinist adherence to doctrine as the “mummery of unmeaning ceremonies, the superstition of an enslaved people.” 508 Therefore, Christians needed to restore true religion, purified of all the errors that had accrued over the centuries. Thus, it would be safe from skeptical attacks. Most importantly, Buckminster, like most Unitarians, believed that religious truth should be based on an objective, rational, and empirical examination of the source of faith: the Bible. He stated in a sermon, “My friends, if we would all first satisfy ourselves of the historical evidence of the gospel facts, and then each for himself carefully study the New Testament, and find his religion there, we should not see so many” sects or errors. 509

Traditional Calvinists, believed Buckminster, instead assumed their theology was correct and conformed (or distorted) their interpretation of the Bible to fit their theology.


Not only must alien tradition be purged from one’s interpretation of the Bible, but Buckminster believed that the text itself needed to be restored to its original form. At odds with most European scholars, including Griesbach, Buckminster suggested in his various descriptions of textual criticism that he believed it was possible to restore the original manuscript of the Scriptures. However, Bentley convinced European critics that the original manuscripts lay beyond reach. Buckminster’s claim put him eighty years behind European erudition. One can speculate that he may have made this claim to soften the blow and ease the reception of Griesbach’s text. But Buckminster was prepared to put forward the claim that the Received Text had been seriously corrupted. In the American context, this was a radical claim. The Calvinists, he believed, refused objectively to consider evidence. Rather, they stubbornly held on to their conclusion. Buckminster was probably not as objective as he claimed. The Liberals were opposed to Calvinist doctrines such as depravity and the Trinity. However, their arguments were based on their temperament and their general philosophical outlook. Conveniently for Buckminster and eager Unitarians, European textual criticism called into question the authenticity of some of the verses that traditionally had been used to support the Trinity. The textual criticism defended what the Unitarians were already inclined to believe, and Buckminster was only too pleased to provide the ammunition.

The younger Buckminster began to grow weary of Calvinism as early as his teen years at Harvard College. In 1799, his father feared that his son was demanding too much

evidence for revelation which could lead, the elder Buckminster feared, to skepticism. In a letter, the elder Buckminster reminded his son that Christian revelation was indeed supported by evidence that has proved satisfactory to some of the greatest and the wisest of our race, who were accustomed not to believe without evidence.” Nonetheless, the elder Buckminster cautioned that such proofs and evidences had limits. He warned against “the fashionable folly of placing reason before revelation.” Instead, he advised his son to “let a thus saith the Lord, or a plain Scripture declaration, silence your objections and satisfy the craving of your mind, — and “Where you can't unriddle, learn to trust.” The younger Buckminster would not agree with his father.

If the younger Buckminster’s primary image of Calvinism was based on his father, as his sister Eliza Buckminster Lee suggested, the budding textual scholar may have had some grounds to be frustrated. Nathan Parker, in his funeral sermon for the elder Buckminster, described the deceased’s mind as poetical rather than scientific or systematic. Parker remembered of the deceased Buckminster, “His mind was not accustomed to the regular management of argumentative discourse. It was impatient of the forms of close investigation and systematic reasoning.” Similarly, Eliza described her father as a devoted pastor but certainly no scholar. She wrote of him, “he certainly did not pursue any critical or biblical studies, except in the common version of the English


\[512\] Parker compared Buckminster with the Apostle Paul in their steadfastness. Both were convicted by a “miraculous interposition” of the mind. Nathan A. Parker, Discourse Occasioned by the Death of the Rev. Joseph Buckminster, D. D. Pastor of the North Church in Portsmouth, delivered, June 19, 1812 (Portsmouth, New Hampshire: S. Whidden, 1812), 6, 10, 14.
Bible.” She went on to write, he could not be called a student, in any sense of the word, except so far as writing sermons requires study.” His considerable pastoral duties precluded any opportunity for critical researches or learned investigation.” In a letter to Eliza, the elder Buckminster deprecated the pride of science and the wrangling of scholars,” and he avowed that the English Bible was sufficient for all purposes of the knowledge of God.” As the younger Buckminster was coming of age, he found his father’s beliefs increasingly unsatisfying.

After the younger Buckminster graduated from Harvard at the age of 16 in 1800, he set about a rigorous plan of theological reading. The bulk of his reading was made up of latitudinarian authors, and many of the works concerned biblical interpretation. His reading list included Priestly’s Harmonies of the Gospels and Corruptions of Christianity, Grotius’ Veritate, Butler’s Analogy, Newton’s work on the prophets, Locke’s Paraphrase and Notes on the Epistles of Paul, David Hartley, and the Monthly Review.

A letter written in March 1801 to the Rev. Joshua Bates, friend and later president of Middlebury College, suggests part of his motivation for his wide and intense reading.


514 Eliza Buckminster Lee gave the impression that the elder Buckminster had been a strong if not oppressive and nagging presence in the young Buckminster’s life. The elder Buckminster comes across as a cold, stingy, humorless ogre who made unreasonable demands on a young sweet boy. Buckminster Lee made the curious conclusion that the elder Buckminster’s Calvinism was rooted in his sour personality. In contrast, the younger Buckminster’s happy and sunny disposition made Calvinism an impossible option. Buckminster Lee, Memoirs, 331, 364.

515 These works helped move him in Unitarian directions. For example, Priestly’s Corruptions argued for the corruption of original Unitarian Christianity by Greek philosophy. Locke’s Paraphrase similarly argued that Christian belief was originally a simple belief in Jesus as Messiah. At one point, while he was investigating the idea of the Trinity, his notes filled ten pages of a commonplace book. Buckminster Lee, Memoirs, 122, 248.
during this period. Buckminster described an unsent letter which was more of a treatise than a personal correspondence. In the unsent “ingens opus” (or massive work) Buckminster summarized arguments used to confute Hume's assertion of the impossibility of proving miracles by testimony. Buckminster added, “I had begun it as much for my own satisfaction as for your perusal[.]”

Dissatisfied with the general level of intellectual sophistication he found among most pastors in New England, he tried to educate himself.

The age calls loudly for able defenders of Christianity. The wild boar threatens to tear down the hedges of our vineyard, and the laborers are ignorant and inactive; they know not how to use their tools for the culture of the vine or the defence of the vineyard.

The “ignorant and inactive” laborers referred to the orthodox Calvinists. When he said “there is a diffusion of information widely and thinly spread... Our scholars are often employed in loose and undirected studies. They … lose their time in superficial and unconnected inquiries,” he possibly had his father, or conservative Calvinists like him, in mind.

He believed the Calvinists were ignorant of or refused to take seriously the latest theological advances. Not only were they in error, but their beliefs made the church vulnerable to the attacks of skeptics or “the wild boars.” According to the young Buckminster, pastors neglected scholarly theological pursuits. He continued,

516 Buckminster claimed that his notes on Hume and skepticism did not survive, for they were accidentally destroyed. In an early American version of “the dog ate my homework,” he wrote, “When this ingens opus was nearly completed, as it lay loose upon my table, it was by some mischance torn and mutilated, and rendered wholly useless.” Buckminster Lee, Memoirs, 128.


518 Buckminster, “Lecture to the Phi Beta Kappa Society at Harvard, delivered on Thursday, August 31, 1809,” in Sermons, lx, lxi.
I hope, my friend, when the husbandman cometh and asketh for the fruit, we may all be able to produce some of the richest clusters. When I think of the duties and opportunities of a minister of the Gospel, the mark to which they should press forward seems much more elevated than the attainments of many of our clergymen would lead one to expect. Let us endeavor, my friend, to magnify our office, that it may, by the blessing of Heaven, prove at least a barrier to that inundation of infidelity on one side and enthusiasm on the other, which seems to be sweeping away all that we hold valuable.  

Years later, he repeated these sentiments in an address to the Phi Beta Kappa Society. The ultimate purpose of scholarship was the service of the church by defending it against skepticism, fanaticism, and error.  

Typical of Unitarians, Buckminster claimed he rejected Calvinism because he wanted a faith built on evidence and reason. He believed that Calvinists had allowed their inherited theological traditions to cloud their reason. Furthermore, he rejected internal or intuitive evidences. Calvinist pastors, he argued, used their piety as an excuse for their lack of erudition. Empirical evidence, not spiritual experience, must be the foundation of belief. He cautioned that spiritual intuitions were beyond the reach of ordinary minds; but as you offer no external testimony in support of your imagined consciousness, you must not expect to impart your confidence, however just it may be, to those who have not been favoured with like illumination, and perhaps you will not avoid the imputation of enthusiasm.

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Buckminster claimed that he had —. the peculiar advantage … of not being bound by a previous system of established dogma.”

Like most Unitarians, he believed that Calvinists had imported creeds, traditions, and dogmatic systems into their interpretation of Scriptures that were alien to the intentions of the biblical writers. Buckminster, instead, was determined to forge a faith built on evidence and reason. He wrote,

The catalogue of American divines is not crowded with philologers and criticks, with scholars versed in the sacred idiom, and provided with the furniture of sacred science; but we discover in the village and hamlets of New-England scholastic theologues, hair splitting metaphysians, longbreath controversialists, pamphleteers, and publishers of single sermons[.] He also wrote,

If we would all first satisfy ourselves of the historical evidence of the gospel facts, and then each of himself carefully study the New Testament, and find his religion there, we should not see so many dogmatical, nor so many incredulous minds… No, it is from having taken our religious opinions from authority, and not from the scriptures, that we see so much uncertainty and contradictions among Protestants.

The historical examination of the text of the Scripture, Buckminster believed, free from all theological presuppositions, would establish true Christianity.

With this purpose in mind, the younger Buckminster set out to elevate the intellectual development of Boston’s clergy. He immersed himself in European biblical scholarship, which was unknown to most Americans. In 1804, he became the pastor of the cosmopolitan and influential Brattle Street church in Boston, and he wove his

523 Quoted from Brown, Biblical Criticism, 25.


525 Buckminster, —Sources of Infidelity,” 145, 148; Brown, Biblical Criticism, 18.
learning into his sermons. The Anthology Society invited him to join their ranks. As a member, he conversed and dined with the most educated and cosmopolitan men in the Boston area and wrote for the *Monthly Anthology*, a literary publication for liberal highbrow intellectuals.  

Unfortunately, Buckminster suffered from epilepsy. Hoping to cure himself from illness, from 1806 to 1807, Buckminster toured Europe and amassed a three-thousand-volume theological library that became one of the greatest in America. His library was often frequented by other intellectuals of New England. The Rev. Dr. John Pierce of Brookline wrote of Buckminster’s new library, “His study became the resort of the first scholars among us; and his company was equally sought by people of fashion, of literature, and of religion.” The trip did not cure his illness, but it enabled him to continue his quest to examine the Bible, free from what he considered to be narrow doctrinal constraints.

V. Buckminster’s Review of Thomson’s Septuagint

Buckminster was not the only American trying to advance biblical study in America, but he was uncommonly erudite and *au courant* with the advances in European scholarship. In 1808, Charles Thomson, former secretary of the Continental Congress, also attempted to advance the study of the Bible in America by publishing the first


English translation of the Septuagint. However, his efforts were by Buckminster’s evaluation a spectacular scholarly flop. Thomson was an unlikely biblical translator, for he was neither a pastor nor a college professor. As such, he was ill-prepared for his scholarly venture. An ambitious statesman for most of his adult life, he was devastated when he lost his position and was forced into retirement. He sought to memorialize his name by defending biblical revelation against skepticism. In 1789, at the age of sixty, he devoted himself to translating the Bible from the “original” Greek into English. Thomson believed a translation of the Septuagint (or LXX) could strengthen arguments for the Bible’s authenticity and reliability and would help defend the authenticity of Jesus’ claims. Because it was older than many of the Hebrew manuscripts used to translate the Old Testament and it was the text the apostles used when quoting from the Old, Thomson believed it was less likely to have historical errors and corruptions. He conceded that sacred texts could become corrupted over time and ancient manuscripts were preferable.

Buckminster reviewed Thomson’s translation in the *Monthly Anthology* and used the opportunity to express his disdain for orthodoxy’s uncritical and superstitious 


devotion to the Bible. Calvinists, Buckminster asserted, naively accepted the present version of the Bible as a flawless copy of the manuscript written by the inspired writers. Furthermore, they were generally uninterested in the critical biblical scholarship that examined the accuracy of the transmission of the text. According to Buckminster, most Christians believed that God had miraculously preserved and semi-inspired the process of transmission and copying. In ignorance, wrote Buckminster, they even extended this notion to the Septuagint.

In his review of the Septuagint, Buckminster explained the history of the document. The Septuagint was the most ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament. He sought to debunk the commonly believed “fable” that in the third century BC, Ptolemy Philadelphus, the Hellenistic king of Egypt, wanting a Greek version of the Laws of Moses, procured seventy or seventy-two Jewish elders to come to Egypt and translate the Hebrew Scriptures. Although the translators worked alone in isolated cells, they produced identical manuscripts. Buckminster dismissed this as myth with an anti-Jewish wave of his hand that was typical of his day. “The Christians, who have always been the dupes of Rabbinical fables, believed this Jewish fiction, and for many ages considered the version thus made as inspired, and not less authentick than the Hebrew original.” Buckminster believed that many Christians “absurdly retained” this account of a miracle because it helped them maintain their belief that God not only inspired the
original writers of the Scriptures but also supernaturally preserved the transmission of holy writ.\textsuperscript{531}

As a corrective, Buckminster related the long and convoluted history of the Septuagint in order to demolish any notion that the Septuagint was a semi-inspired document. The text itself evidenced that the Septuagint in all likelihood was translated over the course of several centuries by different writers. He wrote, “This is incontestably evident from the great diversity of style, different degrees of accuracy, and various modes of translating the same words, which are discoverable in the different books.”\textsuperscript{532}

Furthermore, passages found in the Hebrew text were often missing in the Greek due possibly to skipped pages. Origen attempted to examine the various copies and restore the document in the original form in what has become called the Hexapla. Unfortunately, his work was lost. No one had yet performed a careful and critical study of the variant manuscripts or families of the present editions. Incidentally, modern scholars agree with Buckminster’s assessment.\textsuperscript{533}

Anyone who compares the various editions of the LXX will see “how unsettled is the text of the Septuagint,” wrote Buckminster. He went on to say, “no one but a consummate critick would be able to form a just text, and make many passages of it


\textsuperscript{532} Buckminster cites Humphrey Hody (1659-1707) and Prideaux as authorities on this matter. Hody, in 1684, published \textit{Contra historiam Aristaeae de LXX. interpretibus dissertatio}, in which he argued that the so-called “letter of Aristeas,” containing an account of the production of the Septuagint, was the late forgery of a Hellenistic Jew. Buckminster, “Thomson’s Septuagint,” 397.

intelligible in English, without better aids than those we have at present.” Clearly, Buckminster believed that Thomson was not a “consummate critic.” He criticized Thomson for neglecting to provide an introduction as the great European biblical critics had done in their critical editions of the Bible. The introductions to the critical editions of the Bible from the Europeans scholars were often extremely learned, dense, and more interesting than the text themselves. There they discussed the methods of weighing the relative merits of variant texts, the history of the families of manuscript copies, and their methods of interpretation. Thomson simply printed the translation without any introduction or explanation, as if to suggest that the Septuagint simply presented itself to the reader without any need for interpretation or any suggestion that it was one version among several.

Because Thomson provided no critical apparatus, or as Buckminster colorfully put it, sent “his work abroad in a state of such absolute nudity,” the task of evaluating the quality of the work for any scholarly contribution was difficult. Buckminster complained, “he has not given us even a hint, that he was aware of the differences of editions.” Unlike European textual critics such as Wettstein or Griesbach, Thomson made no effort to classify or compare the various differing manuscripts to arrive at the most accurate version. Buckminster discovered to his “mortification” that Thomson exclusively consulted only one version of the LXX. To make matters worse, he relied on the London edition of 1653, an edition that had been well known in the learned community to be a very incorrect copy of the Roman exemplar, and … grossly spurious and interpolated.”

Its Greek was “at best, barbarous.” His uncritical adherence to this single inferior version resulted in translations Buckminster considered to be “sufficiently absurd.”

As if to suggest which sources Thomson should have consulted and illustrate how far the critical study of the Septuagint had already advanced, Buckminster briefly reviewed the works of several European scholars. He noted that in England, Robert Holmes, Professor of Poetry at Oxford, Canon of Christ Church, and Dean of Winchester, had been in the process of collecting various texts of the Septuagint in order to untangle the discrepancies and produce a critical edition. He unfortunately died before he could complete his labors. Buckminster also cited John Ernest Grabe, who argued that the Jews may have willfully corrupted the Septuagint because Christians were using it as a source to prove the prophetic predictions of Christ. Buckminster also mentioned Herbert Marsh, who suspected that Christians altered the Septuagint over the centuries to more closely resemble the New Testament.

535 Thomson did not use the 1653 London Septuagint. He had in fact used the four-volume 1665 Cambridge edition of the Septuagint printed in England by John Field, which he stumbled across by accident at a Philadelphia bookseller. It was from this Cambridge edition that Thomson made his translation. Buckminster was wrong, but his guess was not far from the truth. The editors of the 1653 London Septuagint altered and interpolated the text to bring it nearer to the Hebrew text and modern versions. These errors were retained in the 1665 Cambridge edition. See Schenther, Charles Thomson, 206; Albert J. Edmunds, "Charles Thomson's New Testament,” Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography 15 (1891): 334; Thomas Hartwell Horne, An Introduction to the Critical Study and Knowledge of the Holy Scriptures (New York: Robert and Carter and Brothers, 1852), 2: 23; Buckminster, "Thomson's Septuagint,” 399-400.

536 Holmes' work was completed by James Parsons (1762-1847). They produced the first attempt to restore the original LXX by examining the variant texts and provided a critical apparatus. Their type of critical scholarship was the sort that Buckminster hoped Americans could soon appreciate, but the work of Thomson depressingly reminded him that his countrymen had a long way to go. For information on Holmes and Parsons, see Henry Barclay Swete, An Introduction to the Old Testament in Greek (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1914), 185. See Buckminster, "Thomson's Septuagint,” 398; Robert Holmes and John Parsons, Vetus Testamentum Graecum cum variis lectionibus (Oxford: Clarendon, 1798-1827).

537 John Ernest Grabe, Septuagint (Oxonii: Excudebat Jacobus Wright, 1859 [1707-1720]).
Divinity at Cambridge, compared the New Testament quotations of the Old and noted that the Septuagint that the New Testament writers did use was different than the present text.\textsuperscript{538} Henry Owen, who had a wider array of variant manuscripts of the Septuagint than Randolph, made extensive comparisons and concluded the vast majority of quotations came from some version of the Septuagint.\textsuperscript{539} This is all to say, the LXX was not a pristine text. Buckminster showed that it had a long and convoluted history and European scholars were hard at work critically examining the text. Buckminster demonstrated in his review the complexity of the problem and showed readers the work with which Thomson would have to engage if he wanted to make a serious contribution to scholarly discussion.

Buckminster concluded,

These remarks tend to show the shortsightedness of those who deprecate the attention paid to sacred criticism; and the imprudence of maintaining the absolute verbal integrity of the Hebrew, Greek, or English bibles as they now stand. Nothing but the so much calumniated labours of collators, editors, translators and criticks, can place the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments in a proper light.\textsuperscript{540}

An uncritical translation was naive and simple-minded and no longer helpful in light of modern advances. Buckminster concluded that Thomson’s diligence and good intentions were not sufficient to overcome the deficits.

Ignorance of better texts and tools was the least of Thomson’s problems.

Theology was a far more serious matter. For Buckminster, Thomson’s translation served


\textsuperscript{540} Buckminster, “Thomson’s Septuagint,” 197.
as a prime example of the barriers that traditional faith created for the progress of scholarship and search for truth. Buckminster believed dogmatic adherence to theology shackled the mind. Rather than allowing history, the text, and evidence to lead to their natural conclusions, Thomson contorted and deformed the evidence to fit into theologically predetermined conclusions, believed Buckminster. Because Thomson believed the Septuagint was flawless and all of it was the inspired word of God, Buckminster noted that he even attempted to harmonize typographical errors in the text of the London edition by making some painfully contorted translations. Such efforts could have been easily avoided had Thomson simply consulted a better text or been aware that he was dealing with a printing error. There was little excuse for such sloppy scholarship, believed Buckminster, because better versions of the Septuagint were easily available in America.  

Buckminster also noted that Thomson ―unjustifiably disguised the evident sense of the Greek.‖ At times, he rendered distorted translations to preserve theological orthodoxy. For example, 2 Samuel 24:1 stated that God moved David to take a census and David sinned in doing so. This verse disturbingly implied that God moved David to sin. Thomson rendered a bizarre translation that ascribed the influence not to God but to a wholly invented anonymous individual. ―This arose from a mistaken notion of the impropriety of directly ascribing this act to the suggestion of God, which in another place, (1 Chron. 21.) is ascribed to Satan or an adversary.‖ Buckminster concluded with his axiomatic principle, ―These theological difficulties should have no weight in the mind

541 Buckminster, ―Thomson’s Septuagint," 399-400.
of a translator.”\textsuperscript{542} Such ignorance or blatant disregard of the scholarly conventions and European advances surely irritatingly reminded Buckminster of an older and naive understanding of the Bible which he associated with his father and other Calvinists. In the younger Buckminster’s mind, his father believed the Bible was a pristine, infallible text that was delivered by God directly to the modern reader. Therefore, it did not require any rigorous historical and critical examination.

Buckminster did not want merely to discuss narrow and purely academic issues of translation and scholarship. He used his review to address broader issues that concerned all Christians. He asserted that textual criticism was important to all Christians. The \textit{unlearned} Christian must be persuaded that this subject is not unworthy of the attention of any man who would know the foundations of his faith.” Most uninformed Christians, Buckminster regretted, believed that the Received Text of the Scriptures was a flawless representation of the original, inspired writings. Furthermore, most Christians were unnecessarily narrowly dogmatic. Rather than being guided by the text or scholarly examination, they allowed their beliefs to determine their interpretation. Regarding what he considered to be this superstitious view, Buckminster wrote, \textit{Nothing can more satisfactorily illustrate the extreme folly of a bigotted adherence to the Received text and version of the Scriptures, and of that horror of alteration which has been of late so industriously propagated among us, than the study of the Septuagint.”}\textsuperscript{543}

\textsuperscript{542} Buckminster incorrectly cites the verse as 2 Kings 24:1 rather than 2 Samuel 24:1. Buckminster, \textit{Thomson’s Septuagint,” 198.}

\textsuperscript{543} Buckminster, \textit{Thomson’s Septuagint,” 193.}
An examination of the English translation of the Septuagint could erode the notion that the present Bible was a pristine text. He pointed out to his readers that often times, when the New Testament quotes from the Old, the respective Old Testament passages cannot be found in the Bibles most people use. However, the complete quoted passages can generally be found in the Septuagint. The scholarly community widely accepted that the Old Testament Scriptures that the New Testament authors used were a version of the Septuagint. After examining the Septuagint, the Christian will now suspect perhaps for the first time that our Saviour and the apostles, whom he will allow to have had a due reverence for the word of God, did not use King James's Bible." If there were discrepancies between various versions of the Bible, the Christians would be obliged to conclude that "if our Saviour's bible was the true one, his own cannot be so scrupulously correct[..]" If that were the case, reasoned Buckminster, Christians should not condemn textual scholars who questioned the accuracy of transmissions. The essentials of the faith were not affected by the questionable and doubtful readings. However, Buckminster added, "perhaps he will be compelled to make much fewer essentials than he has heretofore done." Buckminster suggested that since the biblical text was at places less than entirely certain, perhaps Christians should be more humble and less narrowly dogmatic. The "grand facts" of faith were unaffected by the discrepancies. Therefore, suggested Buckminster, Christians should focus on these broad "essential doctrines." Of course Buckminster determined what was "essential" based on his own theological leanings.

544 Ibid., 194.
Though Buckminster attempted to write with a polite tone, he made quite clear that Thomson's translation typified the amateurish and uninformed understanding of the Bible that he was trying to move Americans beyond. Working in relative isolation, and detached from European biblical scholarship, Thomson's efforts were characterized by naïve piety rather than scholarly rigor, believed Buckminster. Buckminster lamented that Thomson did not benefit from the century of scholarship that could have advanced his work. Despite Thomson’s twenty years of labor, his translation was so out of touch with recent discoveries, it would make no contribution to the continuing work of textual criticism in Europe. Buckminster must have thought that this was a squandered opportunity. He concluded,

In considering the state of the version which Mr. Thomson has translated, we have almost lost sight of his labours. Indeed we have been continually dispirited by the thought, that in the present state of the Septuagint he has taken great pains to little purpose.\textsuperscript{545}

Buckminster was not satisfied merely to point out Americans' inferiority in comparison to their European cousins. He wanted to make a contribution and encourage his countrymen to enter the mature world of leaning.

VI. An American Griesbach

Around the same time that he was reviewing Thomson’s work, Buckminster was also preparing the American edition of Griesbach’s New Testament. He made clear in his review of Thomson that texts changed and were corrupted over time. Though Christians

\textsuperscript{545} Ibid., 197.
may have had a great deal of respect for the Septuagint, ultimately, there was only one Bible, and it and only it was inspired. However, he did not actually take a shot at the Textus Receptus, though he was coming awfully close. When Buckminster and the Harvard corporation actually published Griesbach’s Greek New Testament in 1809, he made it clear that he believed that the Bible as it stood was altered from the original. He brought the massive weight of the most advanced and radical European textual scholarship to demonstrate that the Received Text was based on manuscripts that had been adulterated over the centuries.

The publication of the American edition was a remarkable event. It was the first critical edition of the Greek New Testament ever published in America. Its American publication also signaled the growing maturity of American scholarship. Buckminster brimmed with pride as he noted that Harvard published an American edition before scholars in England could do so. Buckminster contributed and advanced the scholarly venture by carefully editing and correcting errors that marred the German edition. The publication was, according to Buckminster, an “event not only important to the theological learning of the country, but infinitely honourable” to Harvard.  

Only by studying the text objectively, free from dogma, could one begin to restore the original autographs. Given Buckminster’s aversion to theological loyalties guiding the analysis and interpretation of the text, it is not hard to imagine why Buckminster would become so enamored of Griesbach. Describing his scholarly methods Griesbach

wrote, “First the philologian and exegete must speak; after the completion of his work, then the theologian and philosopher comes.”\textsuperscript{547} Griesbach elevated philology over theology. In him, Buckminster found a kindred spirit.

Buckminster anticipated that Calvinists would be deeply resistant to any claim that the Textus Receptus had been corrupted over time. In his review of Griesbach’s New Testament, he tried to goad them and point out their own inconsistencies in resisting textual criticism. He wrote

\begin{quote}
It has always struck us with astonishment that many of those who may maintain the most rigid notions of inspiration, and exclaim most vehemently against the glosses, evasions, and forced interpretations of heretics, should have discovered so little solicitude to ascertain the true text even of the New Testament, and have felt no more dread than they seem to have done of adding to the word of God.\textsuperscript{548}
\end{quote}

In an attempt to disarm and persuade resistant Christians to be open to the changes to the Received Text by Griesbach, Buckminster argued that readers of classical literature would prefer a critical edition of Homer or Virgil over an inferior copy. Buckminster asked, “[H]as it of less importance that the word of God should be studied in its most correct state?” Just as he had done with the mythical history of the Septuagint, Buckminster pulled the curtain and exposed the long and often haphazard history of the venerated Received Text. He discussed, for example, Erasmus’ use of inferior manuscripts. He wrote that if pious people only knew the history of their Bible, they would discover that “they are defending as the precise language of inspiration, a text, which was given us by two printers of Leyden [Elzevirs], in the infancy of sacred

\textsuperscript{547} Quoted from Baird, \textit{New Testament Research}, 138.

\textsuperscript{548} Buckminster, “\textit{Review of Griesbach},” 110.
criticism.” He proceeded to relate the more recent history of the steadily advancing growth of the availability of better manuscripts and newer methods of textual study. He then asked his readers,

[W]hy, at the present day, when sacred criticism has received so much improvement, we should still be taught to consider as sacred, a text settled two centuries ago upon much fewer authorities than we now possess. Indeed, it may fairly be asked, who discovers the most rational respect for the word of God; the man who persists in considering a text constituted long ago by two printers of Leyden, as totem verbis, syllabis & literis the only, sacred, and unalterable language of inspiration; or the man who is still anxiously solicitous to ascertain, by all the established rules of criticism applied to the testimony of MSS., Versions, and Fathers, what was the original text of the sacred writings.549

One should honor God by utilizing the best made text available by the most recent and advanced science, not one raised on an altar by the accidents of history.

Attacking the received text was troubling enough. However, Buckminster proceeded to use the Griesbach to undermine biblical support for the Trinity. Buckminster assured his readers that though the Bible had indeed been altered over the centuries, the “essentials” of the Christian faith remained “intact.” The specific “details” and minutiae of some theology might be questionable because of textual corruptions, but these were not important. In fact, argued Buckminster, Christians should be less dogmatic about such “narrow” points now that they could clearly see that the biblical support for some issues was questionable. Buckminster in particular pointed to three verses that were commonly used as proof of the divinity of Christ. He brought attention to the evidence, marshaled by Griesbach, that the authenticity of these particular verses was questionable.

He called ignorant any Christian who would use 1 John 5:7, Acts 20:28, and 1 Timothy 3:16 as a proof of the Trinity when Griesbach had shown that the authenticity of these verses was highly dubious. Griesbach concluded that readings that supported the Trinity were found only in later manuscripts. These verses ought to be no more quoted in their present form as proof passages, by any honest and well instructed theologian. 550 As a Unitarian, Buckminster was not at all troubled by these conclusions. In fact, he was pleased and gratified by such conclusions for they affirmed his theological convictions. (Buckminster would claim that he had no theological loyalties and that he was only led by the evidence.)

Of course conservative Trinitarians were not going to take such an attack on the foundations of their faith lightly. The Panoplist, a conservative Trinitarian Congregationalist publication, took up the banner in the fight against Griesbach and Buckminster in a series of articles. 551 Jedidiah Morse, the fiercely conservative and combative Trinitarian Calvinist, began The Panoplist in 1805 with the explicit purpose of combating liberal Unitarian influences. In the inaugural issue, the editors made clear that The Panoplist was created specifically to be an antidote to the heretical poison spewed by the liberal and Unitarian Monthly Anthology which began publication the


previous year. In the first issue, the conservative magazine clearly stated its adherence to Reformed theology. It would not publish anything that would not support evangelical truth.” The editors declared open war against liberal Unitarians who were out to overthrow … the Christian religion.” Buckminster’s claims could not go unanswered.

*The Panoplist* and orthodox Christians in general were unprepared for the challenge of the mountain of erudition coming from Griesbach. From the inaugural issue in 1806 to the first response to Buckminster in 1811, the periodical did not address textual criticism. The *Panoplist* editors of course never hesitated to criticize Unitarians for their lack of piety and heterodoxy, but never did they feel the need to defend the integrity of the Received Text against the textual critics. There were a few minor exceptions. *The Panoplist* printed a historical survey of religious controversies in which the writer of the article made an oblique and passing reference to German scholars who did not respect the Bible and used historical, cultural, and linguistic distance to explain away important passages. This learned article, however, was reprinted from the *Religious Monitor*, published in Edinburgh, Scotland.

However, one cannot assume that the editors and writers of *The Panoplist* and scholarly Americans were wholly ignorant of European advances in textual criticism. Buckminster was certainly rare, but not unique. William Bentley (1759-1819), the

552 *The Panoplist* 1, (1806): i-iii.

553 *The Panoplist* printed an announcement for the publication of Griesbach’s New Testament. They knew that the text was coming, but they may not have been aware of its significance. “Griesbach’s Greek Testament,” *The Panoplist* 3 (1808): 422-24.

remarkably learned pastor of Salem, Massachusetts, was one of the most erudite men living in the United States. He mastered twenty-one languages (including German, French, Dutch, Spanish, Slovenian, Latin, Greek, Arabic, and Persian) and amassed a personal library of approximately four thousand books. Only Thomas Jefferson had a larger library. Through his correspondence with the German scholar Christopher Ebeling, Bentley became steeped in European scholarship.

Though Bentley was interested in a wide variety of subjects such as history and the natural sciences, he spent considerable time studying biblical criticism and went so far as to begin his own translation of the Bible in an interleaved copy of the Standard Version, making emendations in accordance with his own knowledge of Hebrew and of recent biblical studies. His library was well equipped for the task. It included books such as the Leipzig 1769 edition of the remains of Origen’s *Hexapla*, Walton’s *Polyglot*, Alexander Geddes’ critical translation of the Bible, and works by Johann Gottfried Eichhorn and Benjamin Kennicott.  

555 He also owned Grotius’ *Annotationes*. Given his wide reading in European learning, in all probability, he would have had at least some second hand knowledge of Griesbach.

556 Geddes, a Scottish Catholic, pointed out translation errors and identified himself with Eichhorn and Michaelis. He anticipated German higher criticism. Benjamin Kennicott, a Hebrew scholar published *Vetus Testamentum hebraicum cum variis lectionibus* (1776-1780) and *The State of the Printed Hebrew Text of the Old Testament considered* (1753, 1759). He sought to combat the then current ideas as to the “absolute integrity” of the received Hebrew text. Eichhorn in discussed in chapter 5.

Bentley was not a leader in this matter, but he was a well-established pastor and it would seem impossible that he did not share his insights and knowledge with learned friends and acquaintances.\footnote{557} Surely in the small and tight knit community of New England intellectual elites, ideas would have been exchanged. Through men like Bentley, intellectuals would have been aware of the rumblings in Europe.

But Bentley and his library were exceptional. There were other avenues to such ideas as well in America. For example, in 1773, Harvard College published a select catalogue of books that were frequently used by the undergraduates. This list included works by John David Michaelis, Robert Lowth, and Benjamin Kennicott. (The significance of Michaelis and Lowth are discussed in the following chapter.) Kennicott’s \textit{State of the Printed Hebrew Text of the Old Testament} (1753 and 1759), which Harvard possessed, attempted to combat the popular conception of the “absolute integrity” of the received Hebrew text. Kennicott argued, as did Bentley did with the New Testament, that original manuscripts had been edited in antiquity and beyond recovery.\footnote{558} Thus, even by 1773, Americans could have been familiar with textual criticism. The average Harvard catalogue lists 740 books from Bentley. Griesbach was not listed in the collection. Timothy Alden, \textit{Catalogus Bibliothecæ Collegii Alleghaniensis} (Meadville, Pennsylvania: Thomas Atkinson & Society, 1823), 66-88. In 1962, Edwin Wolf, then librarian of the Library Company of Philadelphia, was commissioned by Allegheny College to make a survey of library collection of 1823. His observations are recorded in Edwin Wolf, "Observations on the Winthrop, Bentley, Thomas and Ex Dono’ collections of the original library of Allegheny College, 1819-1823," 1962, Special Collections, Pelletier Library, Allegheny College, Meadville, Penn.

\footnote{557} For example, he knew Moses Stuart, Edward Everett, and George Ticknor.

\footnote{558} [James Winthrop], \textit{Catalogus Librorum in Bibliotheca Cantabrigiensis Selectus, Frequentiorem in Usum Harvardinatum, [A Select Catalogue of Books in the College Library of Cambridge for the More Frequent Use of the Undergraduates]} (Boston: Typis Edes & Gill, 1773). Other relevant authors included in the select catalogue are Jeremiah Jones, Hugo Grotius, Nathaniel Lardner, and Moses Lowman.
student, if he read such works at all, probably did not fully absorb these ideas. But presumably some of the best, brightest, and most curious minds in America could have studied these issues.

It is difficult to ascertain to what extent Americans were familiar with textual criticism at the turn of the century. However, there are some intriguing hints. For example, in the *City Gazette* of Charleston, South Carolina, a pseudonymous letter to the editor, dated September 22, 1797, praised the publication of Griesbach's New Testament in Europe. The author correctly contextualizes his work with Mill, Wettstein, Michaelis, and Marsh. At least one soul reading a South Carolina newspaper kept up with European textual criticism. Remarkably, he wrote his letter over a decade before Buckminster published the American version.559

When *The Panoplist* responded to Buckminster, the magazine provided a surprisingly informed article. The anonymous *Panoplist* writer attacked Buckminster with a surprising opening statement: "If there be, in our country, any who oppose every effort to ascertain and establish, by sound criticism, the genuine text of the Old or New Testament, we do not wish, nor intend, to be ranked with them."560 The author went on at length to support the general mission of textual criticism and expressed his hopes that Americans would continue to delve into the field. Furthermore, he emphasized that *The Panoplist* in no way sought to hinder the progress of biblical criticism.


The writer also expressed sympathy for the “many honest and pious men” who were opposed to any changes in the commonly Received Text of our Bible.” He assured his readers that if only those sensitive souls understood “sound and genuine criticism” their fears would be relieved. However, the writer was opposed to those individuals, motivated by malicious intent, who wanted to destroy the faith of the orthodox by overturning established doctrines.

It appears to us, that the disingenuousness of some, who pretend to a knowledge of criticism … are ever dabbling with it … to support a favorite scheme of theology, or to display their own extensive erudition…. Some text of Scripture, which many well meaning persons had, without sufficient examination, made the symbol and the support of their faith, respecting some important doctrine of their religion, has, on examination, been found to be of doubtful or of insufficient authority. This text has been seized by those who are ready and very desirous to find something which may annoy orthodoxy, and has been held up to public contempt or execration, as a gross interpolation, and perversion of the sacred oracles; while the doctrine, which it seemed to support, has been also represented as vanishing with it, at the magic touch of modern manuscript-mongers and biblical critics.”

The *Panoplist* writer was measured in his evaluation. He conceded that the careful examination of manuscripts had demonstrated that the Received Text required correction and that many Christians had come to trust in particular verses of the Bible for assurance of certain doctrines and some of these verses were possibly of dubious origins. However, it was inappropriate to conclude that these verses needed to be thrown out. The matter was still debatable. Furthermore, other verses still supported these key doctrines. Therefore, argued the *Panoplist* writer, Buckminster was overreaching the claims of criticism when he wrote that the doctrine of the Trinity was indefensible.

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561 Ibid., 503.
The writer then proceeded to take issue with the anti-Trinitarian aspect of Buckminster’s summary of Griesbach. The *Panoplist* writer acknowledged that there was evidence against the authenticity of 1 John 5:7, Acts 20:28, and 1 Timothy 3:16, but there was not enough evidence to make a certain judgment or to eliminate the belief in the Trinity. For support, the writer noted that Griesbach himself was an ardent Trinitarian and Griesbach himself insisted that based on the textual evidence, the divinity of Christ “can not be called into question” and that “it can never be overturned by the daring attacks of critics and interpreters.”

The rest of the essay attempted to counter the anti-Trinitarian reading of the three verses by citing various ancient manuscripts, church fathers, and other learned European biblical critics who supported Trinitarian readings of the text. The author complained “we wish access, and to satisfy us at all, we must have access to the authorities by which Griesbach himself professes to regulate his opinions,” thus affirming the venture of textual criticism if not Buckminster’s particular conclusions. The *Panoplist* article accepted the basic premise of Griesbach’s method and attempted to dispute some of the conclusions based on the principles of textual criticism. More importantly, the journal did not attempt to defend its interpretation on theological grounds. At least rhetorically, the writer did not presuppose a conclusion granted by spiritual insights. Rather, he appeared to be guided by evidence and method. *The Panoplist*, in essence, asserted that Buckminster allowed his Unitarian theology to guide his interpretation of Griesbach.

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562 Ibid., 507.
563 Ibid., 506.
Buckminster countered by arguing that the author of The Panoplist article was driven, not by an objective examination of the evidence as he claimed, but by his own theological agenda. He posited that the Panoplist author’s claims that he had to reserve judgment until he could examine the text himself were simply a ruse. Though The Panoplist could accumulate a list of evidences supporting the Trinitarian readings, they were of an inferior value. Buckminster wrote

If such few, dubious, suspicious, and recent testimonies, and arguments so light, may suffice to demonstrate the genuineness of any reading, there would be no criterion at all remaining of true and false in criticism, and the whole text of the New Testament would be altogether doubtful and uncertain.564

Buckminster also argued that because Griesbach was a devout Trinitarian, his lack of questioning of the particular verses granted greater weight to his dedication to evidence.

More damningly, Buckminster pointed out that the writer of The Panoplist article was in no way qualified to critique or examine the work of Griesbach, as he claims to want to do. Buckminster admitted that he was initially surprised and impressed by the apparent level of erudition of the Panoplist writer. Though Buckminster disputed his conclusions, he certainly had a command of a vast array of European sources.

Buckminster later discovered that the vast majority of the Panoplist article was in large part copied, without attribution, from the English periodical The Christian Observer. To make matters worse, Buckminster pointed out that the Panoplist writer, in copying, did his own share of interpolation and corruption. Where The Christian Observer was far more cautious and measured in its pronouncements, The Panoplist altered some of the

564 Buckminster, "De fence of the Accuracy and Fidelity of Griesbach," 99.
words of *The Christian Observer* to make decided and certain claims. To prove his point, Buckminster printed sections of *The Panoplist* and *The Christian Observer* in parallel columns, like a polyglot Bible, to show how *The Panoplist* strategically altered the sense of the text of *The Christian Observer* for its own ends. Buckminster was right in pointing out that the conservative Calvinist writers of *The Panoplist* were not deeply erudite on the subject. However, they immediately knew which European journal articles to copy. This suggests that they were at least reading accounts of European scholarship.

The publishing skirmishes over Griesbach continued as each side leveled a series of attacks and counterattacks. In 1808, English Unitarian Thomas Belsham published an “Improved Version” of the New Testament. It was a translation heavily dependent on Griesbach’s work. An American edition was published in 1809. A writer for *The Panoplist* accused the editors of the “Improved Version” of the Bible of intentionally declaring Trinitarian passages as later interpolations. In 1813, *The General Repository and Review* predictably shot back and defended the publication. (*The General Repository* was in some sense a successor to *The Monthly Anthology*. They both spoke for the liberal Congregationalists. However, *The General Repository* was more theologically technical and at times more polemical than *The Monthly Anthology*.) *The Panoplist*, in both its critique of Buckminster and the Improved Version, did not condemn Griesbach or textual criticism. The vast majority of the articles acknowledged textual corruptions and accepted

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most of Griesbach’s corrections. They repeatedly emphasized that the errors had almost no effect on established belief. Importantly, the conservative Panoplist accepted the principle that the text had been corrupted and textual criticism was a necessary corrective.\footnote{Philalethes, “Plain Scripture Reading,” Panoplist 9, (1813): 15-18, 58-62, 121-126, 164-74; “Notice of Publication in the Panoplist,” General Repository 4 (1813): 194-223; “Editorial Remarks,” Panoplist 9 (1813): 175-81.}

VII. Conclusion

In 1810, in an article in the Monthly Anthology, Samuel Thacher accused the Calvinists of being driven by theological loyalties rather than a devotion to the Bible and the objective principles of textual examination. Calvinists, he argued, insisted on following a clearly flawed text. They had no interest in investigating “whether our present text is uncorrupt … and [if] our versions [are] a faithful representation of the original.”\footnote{Samuel Cooper Thacher, “Review of Dr. Porter’s Sermon,” Monthly Anthology 9 (1810): 279-80.} This accusation was not entirely true. Some, like the writer for The Panoplist, were interested, though they were clearly far behind the European scholarship. However, the Panoplist writer was honest when he wrote in 1811 that most conservative Christians were “unacquainted with the true nature of critical labors, [and] are, from feelings which it is impossible not to respect, strongly opposed to any changes in the commonly Received Text of our Bible.”\footnote{“Review of Griesbach,” The Panoplist 3 (1811): 503.}

Thomas Clap, seven decades earlier, rejected the suggestion that the Received Text had been corrupted. Clap’s views were slightly more advanced than John Owen who asserted that God had preserved the transmission of the texts over the centuries. Clap was at least willing to accept the possibility that the text had been corrupted, though he quickly followed that admission with the assertion that he saw no such evidence. That he would ever admit the plausibility of any amount of evidence is doubtful.

By the early nineteenth century, some conservative Calvinists could no longer maintain such dogmatic views. The writers of the articles attacking Griesbach, Buckminster, and the “Improved Version” conceded the principles of textual criticism and that the text had been corrupted. Rather than defending a pristine Received Text, they were arguing over which text and words had been corrupted. The Calvinist Panoplist and Unitarian Monthly Anthology and General Repository in arguing their points both claimed to be guided by the objective principles of textual criticism rather than by theological loyalties. Furthermore, by 1811, The Panoplist, like the Unitarian publications, did not make explicit claims of God’s providence to defend the integrity of the text. Historical evidence, The Panoplist trusted, would affirm that the essentials of their doctrine were not corrupted. Buckminster once argued that a pristine Received Text would “require a perpetual miracle to preserve … the text from corruption, or the pen of every translator from mistakes.” The writers of the conservative Panoplist, at least not explicitly, could no longer resort to miracles to establish its points. They too needed to bring their claims to the bar of history.

569 Brown, Biblical Criticism, 24; Buckminster, “Sources of Infidelity,” 145.
Decades later, in 1834, the conservative Calvinist Edward Robinson looked back at the controversy regarding the textual corruption of the manuscripts of the New Testament. In retrospect, he thought that those who believed that God preserved the transcribers from error appeared “amusing” and “absurd.” He concluded, “Time and the power of indisputable facts have, at length settled many of these questions; and no one any longer feels alarm at the thousands of various readings in the Bible[.]”\textsuperscript{570} As Robinson noted, there was no dramatic moment when this radical shift occurred among the conservatives. Rather, the orthodox seemed to have gradually accepted textual criticism. Repeated exposure blunted the radical edge of claims which were once considered heretical. Eventually, the orthodox adapted and domesticated such tools for their own purposes. They were forced to alter their conception of the Bible to preserve a plausible faith. In the early nineteenth century, conservative Christians were making concessions regarding the status of Holy Writ that their parents could never have imagined.

Although the notion that the inspired text itself had a history and could be corrupted in the process of transmission was profoundly troubling, the conservative writers of the \textit{Panoplist} could accept aspects of textual criticism. The historical evidence and argumentation were too persuasive to be denied. The increasingly sophisticated historical examinations of the text of the Scriptures undermined the traditional understanding of the book as flawless and transcendent revelation, immune from the


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corruptions of history that affected ordinary ancient books. Conservative Christians could still maintain that the Bible was a transcendent book, unlike ordinary ancient texts, but by the nineteenth century, it seemed a bit more vulnerable.

One reason why the orthodox conceded the argument was that for decades, history had been one of the strongest weapons in the arsenal of the Christians against the deists and skeptics. In eighteenth-century America, liberals, Calvinists, and skeptics all grew to trust history as an independent arbiter of truth. All sides often turned to the evidence of history to assert their points. Skeptics believed that history could reveal the contradictions and flaws of the Bible. Christians, in turn, defended revelation using history. Calvinist thinkers generally believed a full and genuine understanding of the Scriptures ultimately depended on some form of divine illumination. Some Christian apologists believed that the facts of history could testify to the authenticity of Scripture, though the lack of divine illumination limited the full spiritual comprehension of the Bible. So great was their trust in history and its confirmatory powers that some Christian apologists argued that the gospels were in all probability true because the writers fit the qualifications of credible historical witnesses. Buckminster told his congregation, “Faith that is not founded on testimony is no longer faith.” Christian faith did not require a special faculty. Rather, believing in the gospels is analogous to trusting in the testimony of history and natural science.\(^{571}\)

The eighteenth-century Christian apologists' trust in history would come back to haunt them in the nineteenth century. In the next century, historical criticism would arrive

in America but in a new, different, and far more corrosive form. The orthodox eventually accepted that historical evidence demonstrated that the text of the Bible had been altered. However, European scholars such as Johann Gottfried Eichhorn went far beyond challenging the accuracy of the transmission of the texts. He questioned the historical factuality of the biblical writers. Eichhorn and others argued that the testimonies of miracles were merely the expressions of primitive modes of thought, turning revelation into myth. For decades, American apologists used history to argue that the apostles were men of integrity and would not deceive. Eichhorn did not challenge the honesty of the biblical writers. Rather, he made the novel and historical argument that as men of a radically distant alien time and culture, they were being honest, but in their own primitive mode. These claims were far more devastating.
CHAPTER 5

BUCKMINSTER, NORTON, AND HISTORY

The scholarly examination of the history of the texts and transmission of the Bible developed in conjunction with a related and second line of inquiry that had the potential to disturb the authority of Scripture in the minds of traditional American Protestants. As textual scholars discovered that the Bible had a history, subject to change and corruption, some scholars also examined more closely the historical contexts in which parts of the Bible were composed. They pondered the effect of the culture and environment on the biblical text. European biblical scholars believed that knowledge of the historical context shed light on the original meaning of passages. However, the examination of the circumstances in which the Bible was written led some scholars to a more disturbing and radical conclusion. Some argued that much of the Bible was an expression of a primitive mind and culture and therefore should not be read literally. In the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century, the "mythical school of interpretation," principally composed of J.G. Eichhorn, J.P. Gabler, and G.L. Bauer, argued that the biblical texts were an amalgam of history and myth, and they questioned the supernatural elements of the
The historical examination of Scripture, which had defended the integrity of the Bible throughout most of the eighteenth century in America, by the early nineteenth century, threatened to devastate it.

Just as Joseph Stevens Buckminster introduced Americans to advances in textual criticism, he also attempted to open a window for Americans to see how European scholars were examining the historical context in which the Bible was written. Buckminster was excited and encouraged by these developments for the new light they shed on the biblical authors’ intended meaning. He, however, did not accept the more radical conclusions of historical criticism that dismissed the biblical miracles as myth.

Andrews Norton, another Boston Unitarian and Buckminster’s successor in the Dexter Lectureship, continued to explore European biblical scholarship after Buckminster’s death. Like Buckminster, he found much he liked about historical criticism, particularly...


573 Both the deists and the German scholars threatened the American understanding of the Bible, which placed a heavy emphasis on historical accuracy. However, Hans Frei notes that they were different in at least one significant way. “[T]he Germans almost to a man took the Bible, especially the New Testament, to be a rich embodiment of religious truth. It did not matter that they had grave reservations over large parts of it or even that some of them (Semler, for instance) thought that all of it was subject to explanation as a product of its time.” Hans Frei, The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 113.

574 It is difficult to know if Buckminster lived long enough to witness the more radical conclusions of historical criticism. In 1810, in letter to Herbert Marsh, he complained of his inadequate knowledge of the German language. In 1811, soon after he was appointed Dexter Lecturer on Biblical Criticism, he hired a German tutor so that he could master the works of Eichhorn and Semler. A year later, he died. Thus, he may not have fully understood the implications of Eichhorn’s work. However, he had enough second hand knowledge to realize that Eichhorn was important. Jerry Wayne Brown, The Rise of Biblical Criticism in America, 1800-1870 (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1969), 26.
the ways it could be used as a weapon against Calvinism. Norton lived long enough to see the radical (and in his mind heretical) conclusions of the historical examination of the Bible. Alarmed, Norton attempted to defend what he believed to be the essentials of the Christian faith. Believing history could vindicate the Scriptures, he was not willing to relinquish the tools of history to the hands of the enemy.

I. Historical Examination of the Bible in Europe

The historical examination of the Scriptures developed alongside the study of classical texts. Scholars developed similar tools and techniques to examine classical Greek and Roman works and the Bible. For example, Bentley studied both classical and biblical philology. Robert Wood, in *An Essay on the Original Genius and Writings of Homer*, painted an image of Homer and classical Greece that was drastically different from the traditional conception. He placed ancient Greeks in their primitive historical context, arguing that Homer was an illiterate primitive living in a crude world. As James Turner writes, “The once urbane Homer, font of philosophy and arts, became in Wood’s hands a primitive bard, singing songs to amuse his smelly comrades scratching their fleabites.”

Wood sent a copy of his book to the Göttingen philologist Johann David Michaelis. Michaelis loaned it to the classical scholar Christian Gottlob Heyne, who praised it in a 1770 review. Heyne also believed that people of the past conceived of the

world differently. In their inability to understand the universe, primitive people assigned natural forces to personalities. Lacking science, primitive people created myths to explain their world. Heyne described two types of myths. Historical myths related the founding of a city or the acts of great people. Philosophical myths explained the origin of things or the meaning of life. 576

Just as textual scholars took the tools of textual analysis of classical texts and applied them to the Bible, scholars eventually historicized the Bible as the productions of primitive minds and cultures. Re-imagining Homer as a semi-civilized primitive was radical and disconcerting. However, applying the same tools of the historical analysis to the sacred Scripture was an entirely different matter. Doing so would imply that the Bible could be treated like any other book, a heresy that made Spinoza anathema. Recall that Spinoza argued that the Bible must be interpreted as the writings of people thinking within the limitations of their cultural circumstances. For example, the miracles recorded in the Pentateuch should not be interpreted as supernatural. Rather, they were natural events, and Jewish custom and idiom tended to ascribe all good things to the agency of God. 577


577 As discussed in previous chapters of this dissertation, Spinoza attempted to do away with the traditional interpretation of miracles. He wrote, “To interpret Scriptural miracles and to understand from their accounts how they really took place, one must know the beliefs of those who originally related them.” He went on to assert “for the proper understanding of the reality of miracles, it is important to be acquainted with the diction and metaphors affected by the Hebrews,” meaning that the Jewish modes of speech reflexively attributed actions and results to the Lord. They were not necessarily miracles or prophecies. The accounts from the Bible must be read according to the peculiar understanding of the writer’s culture. Spinoza warned that reading the Bible as if it were written in a modern context distorted the author’s intended meaning. Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, translated by Samuel Shirley
Nearly a century later, European biblical scholars gradually eroded the barrier that separated secular and biblical writings. Heyne’s student and colleague, Johann Gottfried Eichhorn, applied newly developed conceptions of history to his interpretation of the Bible. In 1779, he argued that the first three chapters of Genesis should be understood as a philosophical myth – an expression of a primitive people that was neither inspired nor historical. He also applied the same mythological interpretation to the New Testament. For example, he argued that the appearance of angels at Peter’s escape from prison as recorded in Acts 12:3-13 should not be interpreted literally. Peter did not know, according to Eichhorn, how he had been set free. He assumed that God had freed him and that angels were the agents of God’s design. This was his natural conclusion as this was consistent with his Jewish mental world. Eichhorn concluded that his escape was no miracle.  

Eichhorn, and others, were beginning to interpret the Bible with “historicism” tendencies. The term “historicism,” has been used in a variety of ways and there has been little scholarly consensus on its meaning. For the purposes of this dissertation, historicism refers to the belief that an ancient text was written in an alien culture and the interpreter must take into account the historical context of the writer. Contemporary dogmatic theologies or philosophies should not be imposed upon the

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interpretation of an ancient text. As was the case with Eichhorn, historicism, when applied to the Bible, did not necessarily, but often tended to challenge traditional conceptions of the Christian faith, particularly accounts of the miraculous. For example, Ernst Troeltsch, writing in the early twentieth century, believed that historicism devastated the Christian faith by denying the validity of miracles recorded in the Bible, annihilating conceptions of providence in history, and reducing all religious truth to a state of relativity. The Bible, he believed, did not stand outside the normal course of history. Of course simply being sensitive to the historical and cultural context of the biblical writers did not necessarily lead to such radical conclusions. Some, like Norton, contextualized the Bible and still believed it was a supernatural revelation. One could say that there were degrees of historicism.579

II. European Historical Criticism

Buckminster read as much European historical criticism as he could from his side of the Atlantic. Of the numerous writers he read on the matter, he noted that Hugo Grotius, Jean Le Clerc, John Locke, Johann David Michaelis, and Robert Lowth were

particularly influential. He incorporated their ideas into his own views on Scripture and disseminated literally inclined New England. Just as he spread the textual criticism of the Textus Receptus in New England learned circles, he also introduced his countrymen to the historical examination of the Scriptures.

Hugo Grotius believed that in order accurately to understand the Bible, one needed to understand the cultural world in which the writings were composed. Thus, he studied Jewish scholarship and literature. In the preface to his *Annotationes in Vetus Testament* (1644), he declared that he would use external secular histories to confirm sacred history. For example, Grotius believed that when Moses wrote Genesis, he used a number of sources from neighboring peoples. Therefore, the biblical interpreter needed to study the literature of the ancient near eastern world. Grotius also studied Jewish writers such as Ibn Ezra, Maimonides, and Abravanel — in order to familiarize himself with a mass of expressions and words employed by the sacred writers, which were completely foreign to ancient profane literature.” According to a biographer, Grotius was the first who, furnished with the requisites of talent and learning, showed by example

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the proper method of applying the Septuagint, as well as other Jewish and Eastern Writings, to the interpretation of the New Testament.”

After reading Jean Le Clerc’s *Ars Critica* and *Five Letters on Inspiration*, Buckminster wrote, “What a wonderful man was Le Clerc! Learned, to an extent almost unequalled by any who have succeeded him; liberal, perhaps to a fault.” The *Ars Critica* was a massive introduction to philology and history in which Le Clerc argued that ancient historical documents must be read skeptically as many were full of anachronism. For example, classical historians often inserted speeches that were inconsistent with the character and culture of the supposed speakers. Furthermore, he proposed that ancient texts must be understood within the historical and cultural context of their writers. Le Clerc’s *Ars Critica* dealt with classical histories, but he also believed that the Bible must be interpreted in its historical context as he proposed in his *Letters on Inspiration*. He was profoundly influenced by Spinoza’s historical hermeneutic. He wrote that Spinoza’s “critical-historical methods are not only in a great part justified,” but they are “necessary for the proper interpretation of many scriptural passages.” Of course Spinoza was a skeptic and a heretic, but Le Clerc attempted to use the historical method to defend what he considered to be the “fundamental articles” of the faith. Le Clerc argued that only the

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passages where God was speaking were divinely inspired. Therefore, the biblical authors were fallible witnesses to divine revelation.

Le Clerc argued the interpreter needed to understand the culture and limitations of the writers. He believed that large portions of the Old Testament were obscure because God accommodated his revelation to the limited intellectual abilities of the Hebrews. The older parts of the Bible were full of errors, not because God was fallible, but because of the crude level of understanding of the ancient Hebrew people. Due to the primitive state of the Jewish people, God prescribed for Israel a cult proportionate to their weakness and similar to that which they had seen in Egypt, a worship full of ceremonies and physical figures.”

Furthermore, God may have given laws to Moses by revelation, but these laws were neither necessarily perfect nor eternally relevant for all people. Many of the sins and prohibitions were those that were common in the Egyptian way of life to which the Hebrew people had grown accustomed. Therefore, Le Clerc argued that the Bible had to be interpreted within its authors’ primitive and alien cultural context.

585 Quoted from Martin I. Klauber, “Between Protestants, Orthodoxy, and Rationalism: Fundamental Articles in the Early Career of Jean Le Clerc,” Journal of the History of Ideas 54, no. 4 (1993): 623, 631-632. J.H. Hayes, “Le Clerc (1657-1736)” in Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation, 51-2. Spinoza also believed that the ceremonial law was an accommodation to the limitations of a primitive and vulgar people. The idea that God accommodated his revelation to the limitations of his people was neither entirely new nor unique to skeptics. Paul Helm notes that John Calvin believed that God could accommodate revelation to the abilities of the inspired writers. But the idea of textual error in the Bible or Jesus including erroneous material in his teaching would have been abhorrent to Calvin. Helm notes that Calvin’s idea of accommodation should not be confused with that of Enlightenment thinkers. The notion that Jesus would have included erroneous material in his teachings for pedagogical purposes would have been abhorrent to Calvin. Helm writes, “For Calvin accommodation is a way of presenting what is true, particularly what is true of God. For the Enlightenment it is a transposition of what is true into a pre-modern form because of the capacity of the popular, primitive mind to assimilate ideas that only a modern, informed and cultured intellect appreciate in its unaccommodated form.” There was no consensus on this matter among seventeenth-century Puritans. R. Hooykaas concurs with Helm. Paul Helm, John Calvin’s Ideas (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 184-209 and R. Hooykaas, Religion and the Rise of Modern Science (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 118-137. See also Stephen D. Benin, The Footprints of God: Divine Accommodation in Jewish and Christian Thought (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993), 177-98
Buckminster noted that he read John Locke's *A Paraphrase and Notes on the Epistles of St. Paul* (1707). It is highly likely that he would have also read Locke's *The Reasonableness of Christianity* (1695) and the *Essay on Human Understanding* (1690). In line with his general epistemology and understanding of language, Locke argued that Scripture can only convey ideas derived from ideas people already have. The Bible must communicate by way of propositions that make sense in the same way that ordinary books do. In other words, Locke submitted that the interpretation of the Bible must conform to the common rules for the meaningful use of language. The Holy Spirit did not supernaturally convey ideas that are beyond the plain meaning of the words of the Bible. Even if it did, Locke found such meaning impossible to verify. Instead, in order to ascertain the authentic meaning of a biblical text, the interpreter must read the Bible within its historical context.

Locke found it perplexing that Paul, who was clearly learned and inspired by God, wrote Epistles that were difficult to understand. Locke concluded that the modern interpreter lost a sense of Paul's intentions and his historical context. Locke believed that Paul had never intended for his letters to be divided into verses and read in isolation. Rather, the original text was intended to be a coherent whole. Locke argued that the modern reader lost the "thread and coherence" of the discourse by reading verses isolated from their context. Instead, one should read an entire Epistle in one sitting in order to understand the Mind of him that writ it. Only in this way could one" find the main

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tendency and aim or the genuine Sense of the Author.” Locke also noted that the Epistles were obscure because they were written for a particular situation. However, the modern reader did not read with an awareness of the specific circumstances that shaped Paul’s letters. Locke attempted to reconstruct the situations by examining the contents of the Epistles. Victor Nuovo writes of Locke’s study of Paul’s Epistles, “His description of the apostle’s intellectual character and varieties of expression is unsurpassed. Moreover, he seems to have discovered the practice of contextualization long before it became fashionable.” (Locke of course did not invent this idea of historical contextualization or the notion that the Bible should not be studied dogmatically. Erasmus attempted to interpret the bible within its historical context in the sixteenth century. However, Locke was writing for a broader Protestant audience rather than for scholars.) Locke argued that the Epistles to the Galatians, Corinthians, Romans, and Ephesians were written at a time when Paul’s main opponents


were Judaizing Christians and must be read in that light in order to accurately assess his meaning.\(^{591}\)

Paul also shaped his discourse to fit the needs of the specific audience he was addressing. In his Epistle to the Romans, Paul used the term “doption” because it was a “Custom well known amongst those in Rome.” In contrast, in the Epistle to the Hebrews, Paul used “Allusions and Arguments, from the Records of the Old Testament.” Thus, the biblical interpreter needed to know “the state, and exigencies, and some peculiarities of those times.” He needed to consider the mind of the writer as well as the mental world of the intended recipients. The reader needed to know history to interpret properly.\(^{592}\)

History also disciplined biblical interpretation. Too often, noted Locke, interpreters representing a particular sect of the church read parts of the Bible to support their particular theology. People inserted their own “systems, confessions, or articles of any church or society of Christians” into the Bible. Locke noted that “we may see still how at this day everyone’s Philosophy regulates everyone’s Interpretation of the Word of God.” The reader needed to read without presuppositions and avoid imposing an alien interpretation. Locke was adamant that philosophical and theological constructions that were developed after the apostolic age should not be imposed upon an interpretation of Paul. “He that would understand St. Paul right, must understand his Terms in the Sense he uses them, and not as they are appropriated by each man’s philosophy, to Conceptions

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that never enter’d the Mind of the Apostle.” The historical context of the biblical writer should regulate interpretation. Historical contextualization had its limits, though. In his commentary on 1 Corinthians, Locke asserted that Paul’s writings were based exclusively on divine and immediate revelation. The apostle's writings were “all a pure revelation from God and not in the least the product of humane discovery parts or learning.” Though Paul clearly expressed himself in the cultural style and language of the era, revelation was transcendent and not reducible to contemporary philosophy, pagan religions, or culture. Despite claims to objectivity, Locke of course imposed his own views on the Bible.

Buckminster also noted that Johann David Michaelis’ *Introduction to the New Testament* (1750) informed his thinking. Lacking German, Buckminster would necessarily have read Michaelis in Herbert Marsh’s translation. Marsh included in his edition notes, which would have acquainted Buckminster with a good deal of more recent German biblical criticism. In his *Introduction*, Michaelis sought to establish the authenticity of the New Testament by investigating the historical evidence and scrutinizing it in the same manner one would examine a classical text. Michaelis defended the authenticity of Scripture by placing it in its historical context. Though he still believed that much of the Bible was inspired, he read it as essentially a product of particular times and cultures. Therefore, Holy Writ had the same flaws as any ordinary

593 Locke, “Understanding of St. Paul,” 64, 65, 32.

document. Flaws in fact affirmed its authenticity. For example, he noted that the Greek used by the New Testament writers was full of Hebraisms and far inferior to “pure” Attic Greek. He wrote, “Several harsh idioms of this nature, especially in the translated Gospel of St. Matthew, have occasioned obscurity, and sometimes mistakes[.].” He also noted that “the Hebraisms in general were blemishes in the New Testament.” Michaelis held that many Christians believed that the inspired texts could not be marred by grammatical errors or written in a corrupted Greek. 595

For example, a century earlier, Cotton Mather defended the Greek prose of the New Testament as “noble,” “sublime,” and “pure.” He seemed to believe that the claim of bad prose eroded God’s dignity. Regarding Erasmus and Grotius, who called the style of the Greek of the New Testament barbarous, Mather wrote “the gentlemen are mistaken in every one of their pretended Instances; All the Unquestionable Classicks may be brought in to convince them of their Mistakes. Those Glorious Oracles are as pure Greek as ever Was written in the World; and so Correct, so noble, so sublime is the Style, that never anything under the Cope of Heaven, but the Old Testament, was equaled it.”

Buckminster countered such views by arguing that the peculiar Hebraic nature of the Greek of the New Testament testified to its authenticity.

Would it not have been ridiculous in St. Paul, who was probably well acquainted with the classic Greek, to have used, in writing to such persons, the same language as he would have spoken before an Athenian audience? … [I]t is highly probable that, if the New Testament had been written with Attic purity, it would have been unintelligible to many of its earliest readers, who had never read the doctrines of religion in any other than Jewish Greek.

595 Cotton Mather, Manuductio ad Ministerium (Boston: Thomas Hancock, 1726), 46-47.
By taking into consideration the nature of the writers of the New Testament and the intended audience, Michaelis argued that the corrupted Greek affirmed its authenticity. Only by divine intervention could the apostles have written in pure Attic Greek. And even if God caused such a miracle, Buckminster argued, that classical pure prose would arouse suspicions of forgery and its authenticity would defy plausibility.\textsuperscript{596}

Michaelis’ devotion to the principles of historical interpretation led him to deny the divine inspiration of parts of the Bible. Presupposing his interpretation to be correct, he rejected the parts of the New Testament that misinterpreted the Old. For example, Matthew 1:22-23 interprets Isaiah 7:14. Isaiah writes that God will give a sign to his people: a virgin giving birth to a son. Matthew interprets this as a prophecy predicting Jesus. Michaelis believed that Isaiah referred to a child born in his own time rather than Jesus.\textsuperscript{597} He noted that some explained away the discrepancy by arguing that God inserted a hidden meaning into the text.\textsuperscript{598} Michaelis completely rejected such a method of interpretation. He contended that people must concede that Christian revelation is capable of being tried by rules as severe as those which are universally applied to other

\textsuperscript{596} John David Michaelis, \textit{Introduction to the New Testament}, translated by Herbert Marsh, 4th ed. (London: F. C. & J. Rivington, 1823), 1: 124-25, 119, 120. It should be noted that modern scholars now know that the writers of the New Testament wrote in Koine Greek, which was the lingua franca of the Hellenistic world. This fact was not understood until the late nineteenth century.

\textsuperscript{597} Michaelis believed that this only affected the inspiration of the first two chapters of Matthew and not the whole Gospel. Ibid., 120.

\textsuperscript{598} He noted that early church fathers used the principle of ececonomia or logical finesse and the Jews sought a hidden meaning according to the interpretive principles of the Midrash. Ibid., 204.
writings.” Interpretation must adhere to the principles of history. The author must understand his own writings” and passages must be interpreted accordingly.⁵⁹⁹

Buckminster also recorded that he read Robert Lowth’s *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews.*⁶⁰⁰ As discussed earlier, Lowth, a Hebrew scholar at Oxford University, made remarkable innovations in the study of the Old Testament. He argued that people had failed to recognize that much of the Hebrew Scriptures were composed in a poetic form. Biblical writing had of course been studied as a source of theological truth but not as art. He suggested that people felt they were at liberty to analyze classical poetry because it was a product of human invention. However, the Bible was a revelation from God and therefore most believed that it was not as conformable to the principles of science, nor to be circumscribed by any rules of art[. ]” Lowth did not dispute the Scripture’s heavenly origin, but he believed the artistic quality of its human authorship warranted examination. As poetry, the words of Moses, of David and Isaiah” should be analyzed and studied for their artistic style just as scholars studied classical writers such as Homer, Pindar, and Horace. He sought to study the Bible with the principles of science and the rules of art that applied to any sample of ancient poetry.⁶⁰¹

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⁵⁹⁹ Ibid., 205, 210.


When reading any foreign and ancient poetry, one needed to know the intentions of the writer and his purpose in writing as well as the conventions of the culture. However, the world of the ancient Jews was even more alien and strange to the modern reader than was the classical world.\textsuperscript{602} Lowth argued that the writings of “the Orientals above all foreigners” were the hardest to understand because of this cultural distance. They were “the farthest removed from [English] customs and manners[].” Furthermore, “of all the Orientals” the writings of the ancient Hebrews were the most difficult to interpret because their writings were the oldest. In order properly to interpret the Old Testament, the reader needed to enter the mental world of the biblical author and become accustomed to the “habits of life totally different” from his own. Lowth warned the reader to avoid “ashly estimating all things by [his] own standard.” Otherwise, he would “form an erroneous judgment.” Lowth summed up his hermeneutical strategy in the following manner.

We must act as the astronomers with regard to that branch of their science which is called comparative, who, in order to form a more perfect idea of the general system, and its different parts, conceive themselves as passing through, and surveying the whole universe, migrating from one planet to another, and becoming for a short time inhabitants of each.

By leaving behind modern European cultural standards and expectations and instead becoming inhabitants of the alien world, the reader would “feel [the Bible] as a Hebrew, hearing or delivering the same words, at the same time, and in the same country.” Lowth instructed his readers that if they desired to “perceive and feel the peculiar and interior

\textsuperscript{602} Turner, Turner, \textit{At the Origin of the Humanities}, Chapter 4, 30; Maurice Olender notes Lowth’s emphasis on the cultural distance of the ancient Hebrews in \textit{Les langues du Paradis: Aryens et Sèmites: un couple providentiel} (Paris: Gallimard/Le Seuil, 1989), 49-50.
elegancies of the Hebrew poetry," they must imagine” themselves exactly situated as the persons for whom it was written, or even as the writers themselves.” In doing so, many passages which struck — the superficial reader as coarse, mean, or deformed” would appear graceful, elegant, and sublime.”

Furthermore, one also needed to understand the world of the surrounding ancient cultures. Though the Bible’s ultimate author was God, the inspired writers did not compose in a vacuum. They followed the cultural conventions that had been established in the most ancient of times and followed by a wide variety of cultures. Lowth noted that Persians, Arabs, and most eastern nations in the ancient world commonly preserved their history, laws, morals, and religion in poetry. He wrote that poetry was the — only mode of instruction, indeed, adapted to human nature in an uncivilized state, when the knowledge of letters was very little.” Poetry was well suited to preserve words in the — minds and hearts” of a preliterate people. Lowth tried to understand Moses and the ancient Hebrews by seeing them as analogous to other surrounding nations of the time. He believed that poetry, though inspired by God, was an adaptation for a primitive, illiterate, and rude people.

Lowth also concluded that some parts of the Pentateuch were not originally written by Moses. Rather, Moses incorporated oral histories into his writings. For

603 Lowth, Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews, 71, 72-73.

604 Michaelis in his notes on Lowth went even further in his speculations. He argued that Hebrew poetry originated when people danced to music, and words were subsequently added. These dances were rustic and uncultivated and not necessarily religious. The poetry of the Bible had primitive and rude origins according to Michaelis. Furthermore, he noted that sacred Hebrew poetry borrowed liberally from neighboring pagan nations. Ibid., 33, 57.
example, when Moses recorded the benedictions of the patriarchs Isaac and Jacob in Genesis 27:27-40, the poetic form of the verses led Lowth to conclude that it was highly probable that they were extant in this form before the time of Moses; and that they were afterwards committed to writing by the inspired historian, exactly as he had received them from his ancestors, without presuming to bestow on these sacred oracles any adventitious ornaments or poetical colouring.

Furthermore, Lowth speculated that some historical sections of the Pentateuch were not originally composed by Moses or even Hebrews but by neighboring nations. Moses merely incorporated history which had been preserved in oral tradition. Thus, a proper interpretation of the Hebrew Bible also required knowledge of the surrounding cultures.

Though these biblical scholars believed that the Bible was inspired by God, they increasingly emphasized its human authorship. As such, they viewed the books of the Bible as products of distinct cultures and individuals. The Bible possessed the peculiar idiosyncrasies and even limitations of its author and his world. In their views, the Bible was becoming an increasingly human book, and they were beginning to examine it, as Spinoza suggested a century earlier, almost like any other book. These critics assumed a zero-sum game. In their minds, the human quality of the book came at the expense of the divine.

Buckminster and Norton were particularly interested in incorporating these ideas into their own understanding of revelation. Of course examining the Bible in a historical context was not new to Anglo-America. Men like Cotton Mather, Jonathan Edwards, and Jonathan Dickinson certainly read or were aware of writers such as Hugo Grotius and

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605 Ibid., 60-61, 62.
turned to history to defend the credibility of the Bible. Mather and Edwards believed that the history and literature of the nations surrounding ancient Israel validated the Old Testament. However, these men still presumed that the Bible was a book unlike any other. It was a message from God, recorded by inspired writers. Though it was written by a person in a particular historical context, it was not purely a product of a culture. Traditionally, many believed that the Scriptures were transcendent revelation, written by God but using the pen of his chosen inspired author.  

Buckminster and Norton were certainly not the first Americans to discover these historicist ideas. For example, the works of classical art historian Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717-1768) were easily available in translation by mid-century in New England. According to Friedrich Schlegel (1772–1829), Winckelmann recognized the “immesurable distinctness” and “totally unique nature of Antiquity.” He believed most distorted the character of antiquity by imposing alien philosophical notions. As noted in the last chapter, William Bentley owned some of the works of Eichhorn and Lowth and would likely have loaned out the books or discussed them with the intellectually curious. Bentley also acquired John Spencer’s De Legibus Hebraeorum Ritualibus (1685), which


argued that the ancient Jews were primitive people and their religion was heavily influenced by the Egyptians. Also, Lowth sent Jonathan Mayhew a signed copy of his English grammar, suggesting that they were at least indirectly acquainted. Presumably, Mayhew also knew about Lowth's work on the Old Testament. When Lowth was rumored to have died in 1774, the Boston Post Boy called him — the finest scholar in Europe.” Even ordinary presses found the English biblical scholar worthy of note. This at least suggests that Americans had a vague awareness of European learning.

By no later than 1773, Harvard College’s library owned works by Michaelis and Lowth. A few may have read these books, but it does not appear that they integrated such ideas into their thinking in any substantial way. If the Dudleian Lectures delivered in the late eighteenth century are any indication, most did not drink deeply (or even sip) at the well of historical consciousness. Harvard’s best and brightest used history to gather evidence that — proved” that the biblical writers had neither inclination nor opportunity to fabricate their accounts. Showing little sensitivity to the historical and cultural context of the ancient writers, they seemed to assume that the New Testament

608 Bentley’s copy of Spencer was previously owned by Andrew Eliot and his father John Eliot before him. It was originally owned by Joshua Gee, the Harvard librarian. Thus, several generations had access to this book. Edwin Wolf, “Observations on the Winthrop, Bentley, Thomas and ‘Ex Dono’ collections of the original library of Allegheny College, 1819-1823,” 1962, Special Collections, Pelletier Library, Allegheny College, Meadville, Penn.

609 — Extract from Sunday News-Papers, and Also of Letters from London, Dated July 6,” Boston Post-Boy, August 29, 1774, 1.


611 See Chapter 3 of this dissertation.
writers were men very much like themselves. Buckminster and Norton did not discover these ideas but they integrated them into their theology with greater rigor than their predecessors. They did so because they found these ideas genuinely intriguing and they claimed that they were trying to find an independent arbiter of the theological battles in New England. However, they were also using history to fight for their liberal Unitarian interpretation of the Bible.612

III. Buckminster, Historical Contextualization, and Paul

Though he was physically cut off from the European institutions that advanced the historical study of the Bible, Buckminster did his best to engaged with the world of ideas across the ocean. His journals demonstrate a ravenous appetite for European critical studies of the Bible, and he attempted to convey this new learning to a broader audience. As a member of the Anthology Club, he presumably discussed these ideas with his contemporaries. His immense library was also a center of conversation. The historian can only imagine the lost conversations Buckminster would have held with other pastors and

612 The American deists Thomas Paine and Ethan Allen briefly addressed the problems that the distance of history raises for the interpretation of the Bible. They asked how the meaning of revelation given in one language could be preserved over centuries of linguistic evolution. Even within one language, the meaning of a word changed several times. Most anti-deist writers did not respond to this point. Andrew Boaddeus, a self-taught Baptist in rural Virginia, countered that if language was truly mutable as Paine and Allen asserted, then the rational interpretation of any historical text would be impossible. He asserted that “the substance” of what was conveyed in one time or language could be “faithfully conveyed” in another. Andrews Norton would later address the problem of the mutability of language head on. He argued that indeed language did change, and this was the cause of much theological distortion. However, recovering the genuine meaning of a biblical text was possible through rigorous and dispassionate historical research. Ethan Allen, *Reason the Only Oracle of Man* (Bennington: Haswell & Russell, 1784), 426-28; Thomas Paine, *Age of Reason* (Boston: Thomas Hall, 1794), 63-68; and Andrew Boaddeus, *Age of Reason and Revelation* (Richmond: Dixon, 1795), 24.
men of learning in Boston. However, one can see the influence of the historical contextualization of the Bible in some of his preserved sermons.

In his sermon “The History and Character of Paul and the Causes of Obscurity in his Writings,” delivered to the Brattle Street Church, Buckminster imported European biblical scholarship and the study of historical context of the Pauline epistles to advance an Unitarian theological position in New England. He began his sermon by observing that Paul was difficult to understand.

In order to understand the unconnected writings of any person, written at a remote period, and in a foreign language, the character of the writer, the opinions that prevailed in his time, his object in writing, and every circumstance peculiar to his situation, must be taken into consideration, before we can be sure of having reached the whole of his meaning.

Buckminster’s stated aim was to give “the history and character of this apostle, and then to consider the causes of that obscurity in his writings.” Paul wrote in a distant time and culture. Though the Epistles were the timeless and universal word of God, they were written in a particular historical moment that shaped their form.\footnote{Buckminster, “Sermon XI: The History and Character of Paul and the Causes of Obscurity in his Writings” in \textit{Sermons by the Late Rev. Joseph S. Buckminster with A Memoir of his Life and Character}, 2\textsuperscript{nd} ed. (Boston: Wells and Lilly, 1815 [1814]), 135-36.}

Like Locke, Buckminster noted that the Epistles were written as “private letters, addressed to particular societies, or individuals, upon particular occasions.” Therefore, it was impossible to understand the full meaning of the correspondence without knowing the historical circumstances such as the occasion, on which it was written, the peculiar circumstances of the writer, and of those to whom it was addressed; and still further,
without being acquainted with a thousand little incidents well known to the parties.” He laid down as a “maxim,”

The epistles of Paul cannot be thoroughly understood, without knowing something of the history of the times, the character of the writer, the prevailing prejudices of the age, and the particular purpose, which the writer meant to effect.

To that end, he also examined the character and life of Paul. He noted that Paul was educated in the literature and philosophy of the Greeks as well as the Jewish religion. Paul used words with both a Jewish and a Greek context, which were distant from the nineteenth-century American reader. Therefore, Buckminster noted, Paul used “many words in a signification, which it is now extremely difficult to settle.” Some key terms such as justification, law, faith, and death were difficult to understand because there was a multiplicity of possible meanings. For example, Buckminster observed that “law” could signify either the Jewish ceremonial law or the moral law to which all rational creation are accountable. Paul used words that were “used in various acceptations, more or less modified by the peculiar notions of the age, and therefore more or less different from the meaning we assign to them in modern times.” Buckminster wrote that only by careful examination of the historical use and the particular context of the words could their particular meaning be derived.614

Buckminster believed, like Locke, that Paul wrote most of his Epistles in the context of the Judaizers. “There was one controversy, however, in the apostolical age, in which Paul was especially interested, which we must keep in mind during the perusal of his writings, or we shall never attain to a just understanding of his epistles.” For several

614 Ibid., 147, 148, 141, 149, 150.
pages, he attempted to reconstruct the climate of theological controversy. To read the Epistles without this background knowledge would be akin to listening to only half a conversation, Buckminster believed. He wrote, “It is only by keeping in mind this controversy, and the state of the churches to which Paul wrote, made up of Jews and Gentiles, that we can understand the reasonings of the apostle.”

In the last section of his sermon, Buckminster took direct aim at his conservative Calvinist opponents and used his historical hermeneutic to attack their position. He opposed the widespread habit of believing that everything written in the Bible must apply to the modern church. Because Paul’s letters were written at a specific time and for a particular occasion, every word and instruction should not be interpreted to apply universally, argued Buckminster. Some phrases, propositions, and arguments applied “solely to the situation of Christianity, at its first institution.” In this matter, Buckminster again clearly was inspired by Locke, but he also drew from William Paley. Buckminster argued, “It would have been one of the strangest things in the world, if the writings of the New Testament had not, like all other books, been composed for the apprehension, and consequently adapted to the circumstances, of persons they were addressed to.”

Times and circumstances changed, and therefore not all verses applied universally.

Buckminster believed Calvinists constructed a distorted theology by interpreting words from the Bible out of their historical context. According to Buckminster, Paul used

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\[\text{\textit{\textsuperscript{615}}}\] Ibid., 150-152.

\[\text{\textit{\textsuperscript{616}}}\] Ibid., 153. The editor of his sermon noted that Buckminster ended the sermon by quoting from Paley’s sermon, “Cau tion recommended in the use and application of Scripture language.” See *The Works of William Paley* (Edinburgh: Thomas Nelson and Peter Brown, 1828[1823]), 575-78.
the terms —elect,” “called,” and —saints” to refer to the few Christians living in a predominantly pagan world. However, the vast majority of the European and American world was now Christian. The context in which Paul used the terms was drastically different. Calvinists believing ―these expressions to have a perpetual meaning” and —forgetting the original use of them” applied words to their modern context in a manner —extremely foreign from the design of their author.” Rather than using terms to distinguish pagan from Christian, in the absence of pagans Calvinists appropriated the terms to distinguish various kinds of Christians, according to Buckminster. Paul also wrote that God chose the Gentiles to become his new chosen people and he knew this beforehand. Buckminster argued that Paul —originally conceived” of the idea as an antidote to the —narrow and excluding claims of Jewish Prejudice.” Losing sight —of the proper occasion of these expressions,” Calvinists misinterpreted Paul’s writings and constructed their doctrine of predestination.

In another sermon, Buckminster, like Locke, cautioned that the biblical authors were not —on every occasion, delivering a system of dogmas, for the instruction of all succeeding time.” To ascertain the true meaning, one needed to examine the circumstances of the writing and consider that the writer accommodated his words to the —assumptions,” —suppositions,” and —habits of interpretation” of the intended audience.

The historical interpretation of the Bible was not a trivial matter for Buckminster. He believed the Calvinists had drastically misunderstood the original intent and meaning

617 Ibid.

618 Buckminster, —Philemon,” Sermons, 103-05; Brown, Biblical Criticism, 20.
of the Epistles of Paul precisely because they did not pay attention to the historical circumstances that Paul was addressing. Though some parts of the Bible were universally applicable for all times and all Christians, he concluded, some were limited to the particular circumstances of the first-century church. Only the examination of the Scriptures in their historical context could allow the interpreter to make the proper distinction.

IV. Andrews Norton

Buckminster died at the age of twenty-seven in 1812. Illness cut short a promising scholarly career. Had he lived longer, presumably, he would have continued to study European biblical scholars and spread their ideas in the United States. However, his efforts to introduce European biblical scholarship to Americans lived on in part through the sale of his massive theological library.\(^6\) Others also took up the role of disseminating historicist criticism. The Dexter Lectureship, to which Buckminster was appointed but was never able to take up because of his premature death, soon went to Andrews Norton. Norton was a most appropriate successor. Norton admired and wrote glowingly of Buckminster as the very model of the intelligent and broadly educated liberal Christian who pursued the Bible with scholarly rigor.\(^6\)

\(^6\) A notice relates the purchase of some of the more important books. "Sale of the Library of the Late Rev. Mr. Buckminster," The General Repository and Review 2 (1812): 392-394. For the contents of his library, see Catalogue of the Library of the Late Rev, J. S. Buckminster (Boston: John Eliot, 1812).

The two had much in common. Norton read European biblical scholarship and became deeply interested in biblical hermeneutics. He too came to believe that the Bible must be examined historically. His biblical erudition grew over the years of his career. Norton, like Buckminster, was also a Unitarian who opposed conservative Trinitarian Calvinism. However, unlike Buckminster, Norton was not raised in a world of strict Calvinism. Samuel Norton was a liberal Congregationalist. Therefore, Andrews did not experience the psychic trauma of rebelling against his father’s belief. Andrews Norton had little sympathy for Calvinism. Exposing the faults of Calvinism and attempting to destroy it by logic and evidence was one of the driving causes of his life.621

Though he has largely been forgotten, Andrews Norton was one of the most erudite and formidable intellects of his day. He graduated from Harvard in 1804, and afterwards remained to study for the ministry with Henry Ware, a leader of the Congregationalist Liberals. His ambitions to settle in an elegant and cultured pulpit in Boston were frustrated. Though studious and learned, he was not a good preacher. In 1809, he reluctantly became a pastor in remote Augusta, Maine, which he quickly left to

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accept a tutorship at Bowdoin College. Yearning for cosmopolitan conversation, he returned jobless to Cambridge in 1810.

In 1811, he accepted an appointment at Harvard as a mathematics tutor. After only a year, he quit the tutorship to edit the new liberal Unitarian publication the *General Repository and Monthly Review*. Unlike its predecessor the *Monthly Anthology*, the *Repository* reflected Norton’s highly polemical tone. Whereas the Trinitarian *Panoplist* sought to engage the liberals in direct combat, the *Anthology* tended to avoid harsh argument. Norton was irritated by liberal passivity. He wanted completely to annihilate and defeat his Trinitarian enemies. Most liberals did not appreciate Norton’s degree of rancor, and they tried to muzzle his vitriol. 622 Less erudite readers, which in Norton’s mind included almost everyone, could not keep up with the intellectual sophistication of the publication. The *Repository* collapsed after one year.

In 1813, Harvard appointed Norton to the Dexter Lectureship and promoted him to the Dexter Professorship of Sacred Literature in 1819. In 1829, he resigned from his position due to poor health and disillusionment with the Harvard administration. However, retirement did not dampen his fighting spirit. He continued to write polemical articles against Calvinists, and he completed his magnum opus, *Evidence for the Genuineness of the Gospels* (3 vols., 1837-1844), in which he sought to establish an

intellectual foundation for liberal beliefs and attack radical German scholars who questioned the historical reliability of the Gospels.

As Andrews Norton looked across the theological landscape in both Europe and America, and as he looked back over the history of biblical interpretation, he grew concerned. Calvinists and Unitarians in his own city could not agree on the meaning of the Bible. As he looked back on history, he saw that believers had often splintered into factions, fought bloody wars, and accused each other of heresy. Yet all these Christian sects maintained some common commitments, which they held onto as fiercely as they despised one another. All agreed that the Bible was the word of God. Furthermore, their theological truth claims were based on their reading of the Bible. They all believed that they interpreted the Bible correctly and accused anyone who disagreed with them of misinterpreting the Bible. There was one solution to this theological chaos, believed Norton. Before Christians could come to a common consensus regarding the meaning of the Bible, they would have to establish a common hermeneutic or a "scientific interpretation of the Bible." His method of interpretation was shaped by the same European scholars that influenced Buckminster.623

623 In addition, the English biblical scholar Herbert Marsh was a particularly strong influence. He was one of the first English language conduits of German biblical scholarship. Fortunately, his Lectures arrived in America just as Norton was about to begin his teaching career. Norton praised Marsh’s Lectures as soon as they appeared in the U.S. Norton, "Marsh’s Lectures," 216. Norton’s works particularly illustrate the influence of Marsh’s Lectures II and III. See Herbert Marsh, A Course of Lectures, Containing a Description and Systematic Arrangement of the Several Branches of Divinity: Accompanied with an Account, Both of the Principal Authors, and of the Progress, Which Has Been Made at Different Periods in Theological Learning (Boston: Cummings and Hilliard, 1812-1819) and idem. Lectures on the Criticism and Interpretation of the Bible (London: Rivington, 1838), 283-320.
Norton devoted a great deal of energy attacking the Calvinists. He believed that traditional Trinitarians maintained retrograde superstitions and held onto outdated dogmatic formulations that were no longer plausible in light of advances in history and hermeneutics. They harmed the progress of faith for modern people who were increasingly unwilling to accept what he considered to be antiquated dogmatic assertions such as the Trinity and man’s depravity. Norton could not understand how rational people could assent to the belief in a God who would create people who were constitutionally incapable of being good; condemn them for all eternity; and then claim that this was a matter of justice that was beyond human comprehension. Intelligent men, he asserted, either rejected or merely gave lip service to this horrifically cruel and intellectually untenable theology.⁶²⁴

Norton used historicist ideas to undermine Calvinism. He argued that the past was a very different and alien place. People’s minds were formed and shaped by the world they lived in. Furthermore, the cultural worlds people inhabited changed dramatically over the centuries. Therefore, the people who wrote the Bible thought differently than the modern nineteenth-century Bostonian. Because the Calvinists believed that a transcendent and timeless God inspired the Scriptures to be read and understood by all believers at all future times, they hermetically sealed the Bible from historical criticism and examination. Consequently, Norton believed that the orthodox paid too little

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attention to the human factors regarding the writing of the Bible. Nor did they seriously consider, argued Norton, that their own interpretation of the Bible was influenced by historical circumstances and ideas alien to the biblical authors.

To demonstrate the necessity of a historicist hermeneutic, Norton attempted to establish that any interpreter ignorant of the historical circumstances of the writer of the Scriptures was bound to misinterpret the intended meaning. The interpreter, lacking the discipline of a historicist hermeneutic, inevitably contaminated the purity of God’s revelation with ideas from his own culture. Norton observed that the history of interpretation demonstrated that the Bible had been misinterpreted since its earliest days due to the intellectual and cultural chasm between the biblical writers and the readers. Norton believed that people of the past were more primitive. Their historical context both shaped and limited their minds. Due to the moral and intellectual condition of the world at the time of the introduction of Christianity,” Norton concluded that revelation was very imperfectly understood by a large proportion of believers and that many erroneous opinions were connected with it.” Gentile converts accustomed to the unrefined barbarisms of paganism were not free from the influence of their former associations

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625 Norton’s characterization of Calvinist theology was perhaps extreme. Charles Hodge, one of the most learned representatives of the Presbyterians in the nineteenth century, asserted that God inspired every passage of the Bible. He acknowledged historical factors in the composition of the Bible but not to Norton’s extent. See Hodge, Systematic Theology (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995 [1871-73]), 1: 15, 182-188. For Hodge’s neglect of historicism, see Turner, “Charles Hodge in the Intellectual Weather of the Nineteenth Century,” in Language, Religion, Knowledge, 31-49.

626 In his first five lectures on biblical criticism, Norton recounted what he believed to be the long history of error, gross ignorance, erroneous interpretation, and theological warfare from the founding of Christianity to the Reformation.

and habits and they were not at once transformed from ignorant heathens into enlightened Christians.\textsuperscript{628} Short of \textit{direct miraculous illumination} the first-century convert could not have fully or correctly comprehended the message of Jesus, argued Norton. Only the apostles were the beneficiaries of a direct illumination, he believed.\textsuperscript{629}

The crude and ignorant were not the only ones responsible for distorting the message of Christ. \textit{Learned and philosophizing converts} imported ideas from pagan philosophy. Norton reasoned that philosophers were unlikely to \textit{at once wholly relinquish their old belief} for it was the source of their pride and distinction.

It was connected with their minds by many associations; it had influenced all their habits of thinking; it had governed them in their modes of apprehending and conceiving subjects; it had been the source of invention in their arguments; and all their language upon the subjects of philosophy had been conformed to it. Norton noted that inevitably, the minds of the early Christians were \textit{conformed to the intellectual character of the age.} Therefore, their theology was \textit{deloyed and debased by Platonism.}\textsuperscript{630} The philosophers may have become Christians, but they did not leave behind their former opinions, and they could not leave behind their former habits of mind. \textit{With what they now learnt they mingled much of what they had before been accustomed to teach.}\textsuperscript{631}

In Norton’s recounting of church history, the misinterpretation of the Bible only grew worse over the course of the centuries as western culture drifted farther away from

\textsuperscript{628} Norton, \textit{Defence of Liberal Christianity},” 44.

\textsuperscript{629} Norton, \textit{Lectures, I.”}

\textsuperscript{630} Ibid.\textsuperscript{631} Norton, \textit{Defence of Liberal Christianity,” 45.}
the cultural world in which the New Testament was composed. Some of the early church fathers could read classical Greek, but the Greek Scriptures were written in a form with Hebrew idioms that the scholars must have found alien. Furthermore, the writers of Scripture presumed cultural knowledge that their immediate audience would have known but of which later Christians would have been ignorant. Norton believed that various groups elevated error to the level of divine truth. “As soon as Christians begin to divide into sects, and to attach an extravagant importance to the holdings of their peculiar opinions, and to engage in controversies, the tendencies of persecution begin to operate.” To defend their beliefs, they claimed that their particular beliefs were based on the Bible and their interpretations were granted by God. Sects tended to regard themselves as being, like the ancient Jews, the chosen depositories of the religious truths communicated by God to men; and have in consequence claimed like them to be the sole favorites of Heaven.”632 As a general historical pattern, Christian sects made sacred their errors. All assumed God had communicated their particular interpretation.

Believing that he established that the early interpreters of the Bible distorted its meaning, Norton attempted to thrust a lethal blow at the Calvinists. He argued that the reformers themselves were shaped and limited by their historical circumstances. He granted that the reformers of the sixteenth century were right to revolt against the accumulated errors and corruptions of the Catholic Church. However, the reformation was far from being a restoration of uncorrupted Christianity.”633

632 Norton, “Lectures, 2.”
633 Norton, “Lectures, 3.”
Norton found impossible that the reformers, educated under a Catholic system, could completely break free of their historical context. He wrote,

It would have been an event without parallel, if the reformers, educated in the belief of the prevailing superstition and false doctrine of their age, and having then incorporated with all their religious principles and feelings, had been able not merely to free themselves from some of these, but to cast them off altogether, and in the struggle and laceration of their minds to examine and to discriminate all truth from error.

Indeed, the Reformation freed Christianity from many of the errors with which it had been surrounded; but they left many unassailed, and they substituted error of their own instead of those which they removed.” For instance, in reaction to certain aspects of Catholic practices, some reformers constructed the doctrine of the impotence of man and irresistible grace and forced the entirety of Scripture into their theological system. Due to the environment of theological warfare and the threat of death, the reformers were in a state of mind very little favorable to the best exercise of the judgment upon matters of study and speculation.” The Westminster Assembly wrote their confession during one of the most tumultuous, fanatical and disgraceful periods of English history.” Surely, reasoned Norton, the circumstances made their writings narrow and defensive. Calvinists, argued Norton, did not acknowledge that the theological convictions of the reformers were rooted in issues particular to sixteenth-century history, politics, and philosophies. They acted as if they were timeless.

635 Norton, “Lectures, 3.”
This history of error and dispute suggested that all readers of the Bible seemed hopelessly trapped by the limitations of their own cultural context. Christians read their own ideas into the text, which were often alien to the intention of the author. However, Norton reassured that there is now no reason for our being discouraged in the hope of attaining a correct and satisfactory knowledge of our religion. There was a path out of the hermeneutical mess. The science of biblical interpretation... is the only guide on which we can rely.” Only recently had learning advanced to a point that the original meaning of the Bible could be recovered. Historical biblical interpretation could scrape away the barnacles of centuries of misunderstanding and reveal the treasure chest that had lain covered for years. Hermeneutical advances liberated the interpreter from his own historical moment.

Christians of the past lacked the ability to recognize the errors of the doctrine of their day. His age, the refined Anglo-American nineteenth century, had finally reached a state of intellectual maturity. The ancients lacked enlightened thinkers such as Bacon, Locke, and Butler who could release one from the thralldom of one’s limited perspective. Norton believed that armed with fully matured reason and scholarly tools, he and his fellow liberal scholars were now finally able to rediscover the truth because

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637 Norton optimistically argued that the more our religion can be freed from those additions of human weakness and folly, which have debased its character in regard to some men of powerful minds, by whom it might not otherwise have been respected, and which have rendered many unbelievers, and many doubtful and indifferent, as to its truth;—the more all this can be done, the more powerful and universal will be its influence.” Norton, Defence of Liberal Christianity,” 56.

638 Norton, Lectures, 1.”

639 Norton, Lectures, 1”; see also Defence of Liberal Christianity,” 50.
the world had at last come of age. We know that reason so far from having exhausted itself on the subject of Christianity, has almost from the first ages to our own time scarcely come to its examination except in fetters. … Reason has rarely freely examined scriptures till now.”

Norton found it absurd that Calvinists insisted on deferring to the opinions of men of an era long past. The state of textual scholarship available to the reformers also limited their interpretation. The reformers lived when true philosophy and the principles and art of correct reasoning were almost unknown. They lived when the science of biblical interpretation had but just appeared. Because the biblical criticism at the time was still in its state of infancy, their theological conclusions were less accurate than Norton believed the nineteenth-century man could achieve. He wrote, Thus it is, that religious doctrines, which had their birth in ages of ignorance, of false principles, and false reasoning, still remain in full vigor; though all the rest of the brotherhood of errors, of which they made a part, have long since perished. No other field of learning would rely on opinions from the Middle Ages, yet many Christians placed centuries-old conclusions above those informed by the latest modern research.

Calvinism, Norton argued, in fact had undergone significant change over the course of time. According to Norton,

640 Norton, Lectures, 4.”
641 Norton, Lectures, 3.”
642 Norton, Defence of Liberal Christianity,” 54.
643 Norton, Thoughts on True and False Religion,” in Tracts, 116-117.
Calvinism, it is now contended, has undergone a change. It is not now the system of doctrines that was maintained by Calvin, and the Synod of Dordt, and the Westminster Assembly and which has made its way into the Articles of the Church of England and into the creeds of so many other Protestant sects. It may be said that it now exists, for the most part, in a qualified and mitigated form. However, Calvinists did not acknowledge their own historical development, according to Norton. Doctrines which once represented the sentiments of the time in which they were produced were no longer acceptable to many Calvinists. Norton asserted that, in theory, Calvinism did not allow modification of dogma to become more amenable to the spirit of the time. Norton explained that, in practice, some Calvinists were repulsed by the formulations of the past because people's sensibilities had advanced over the ages. He wrote, “Morality is now better understood than in former times, and it will, we may believe, be better understood by our posterity than it is by us.” Consequently, people's ability to think theologically advanced as philosophy and sensibilities progressed.

The Calvinists did not let Norton's contentions go unanswered. Nathaniel William Taylor carried on a lengthy debate with Norton, between 1822-1824 in the pages of the


645 Norton’s portrayal of Calvinism was perhaps more caricature than portrait. The Calvinist willingness to consider innovation over time depended on which Calvinist one considered. For example, Moses Stuart, of Andover Theological Seminary, was generally respected by American Protestants for his dedication to scholarship, his conservative opinions on the inspiration of Scriptures, and the reality of miracles. However, in his 1832 Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans, he departed from the traditional Westminster view of sin. This example suggests that development and change were indeed part of the American Calvinist theological scene in the early nineteenth century. On the other hand, his innovations made him suspect to some New England conservatives and to almost all Old School Presbyterians. Mark Noll, America’s God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 304.

646 Norton, “Extent and Relations of Theology,” in Tracts, 82.
Oddly enough, in defending Calvinism, Taylor conceded to some of Norton’s historicist logic. Taylor charged that Norton had been criticizing all of modern Calvinism by looking to older writings such as Calvin’s writings or the Westminster Confession. Taylor argued that Norton was absurd to expect a sixteenth-century reformer to reason with the light of the nineteenth. Taylor implied, without saying so explicitly, that theology had developed since then. No one in America, argued Taylor, adhered to the “exact creeds of Calvin” anymore. “Such a Calvinist is not to be found in this country.” However, Taylor certainly did not say, as did Norton, that because Calvin could only reason within his context, his thinking was inferior. However, the implication was inevitable. Remarkably, even a Calvinist like Taylor was moving towards a historical mode of thinking.

V. “A Science of Interpretation”

In examining the history of interpretation, Norton argued that readers tended to interpret texts based on their previous knowledge, experience, and personal preferences. He wrote, “The philosophy of every age has a powerful influence upon the contemporary


forms of religion professed among Christians.”

In the absence of hermeneutical discipline, people’s minds naturally and unknowingly wrote onto the pages of the Bible their own ideas. Even the most philosophically sophisticated thinkers of the early church came to the study of revelation with a set of preconceived notions.” Thus, they fancied that they found in it support for the opinions which they already maintained.”

Examining the history of interpretation, he wrote that interpretation was always contaminated by the ideas of the culture of the interpreter.

In his lectures for the Dexter Lecturship, Norton did not discuss the content of the Bible, nor did he elucidate the meaning of particular verses. He neglected these matters for two reasons. First, he stated that he did not intend that the lectures would settle the meaning of a few obscure passages, the misapprehension of which affects no important truth” or would define the shades of signification of some doubtful word for the gratification of the critical scholar.” Rather, he instead believed hermeneutic was of far higher importance.” The primary purposes of his lectures were to establish correct opinions respecting the true character, and original purpose of the sacred writings; and to settle and to apply principles of criticism which may guide us throughout in determining their meaning.” Criticism would discover the original meaning from the mass of erroneous, absurd, and contradictory explanations.” There was little point in talking about the particular texts of the Bible unless one could first establish the proper method

649 Norton, “Extent and Relations of Theology,” 76.

650 Norton, “Lectures, 1.”

651 Ibid.
of interpretation. Until then, various factions would simply talk past each other. Norton naively believed that only the “science of biblical interpretation” could allow one to transcend one’s own subjective limitations and silence the endless debates. The second reason he kept to himself. At this point, Norton did not know enough to interpret any given passage with philological expertise. He essentially had little background in biblical scholarship when he was appointed Dexter Lecturer.

Trinitarians certainly read their Bibles, but because their hermeneutics were so hopelessly flawed almost all their interpretations were inevitably warped, believed Norton. In a lecture on biblical interpretation, Norton compared the “science of interpretation” to the “science of optics.” Some images he noted “appear[ed] at first sight only a confusion and shapeless mass of colors.” However, when the image was refracted through the properly calibrated lens, the picture became clear.652 To extend his metaphor, once the interpreter was fitted with the corrective lenses of scientific interpretation, all he saw would be clear. Without them, no matter how hard he looked, everything would be distorted. Only the proper hermeneutic would allow one to see the Bible accurately.653

Norton believed the vast majority of people, especially Calvinists, unfortunately did not sufficiently reflect on the ways they interpreted any text. Rather, they believed reading was reflexive instead of involving a myriad of choices and rational processes. They assumed, according to Norton, that self-evident words of the Bible left the page and entered directly into their minds with the aid of the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, most held

652 Norton, “Lectures, 5.”

that “certain words are the definite expression of one certain idea, or series of ideas, and of this alone.” Reading, they believed, required “no more exercise of reason or judgment to determine its meaning than is necessary when we see the picture of a man, to determine what it is intended to represent.” They did not believe that they needed to use their rational abilities when they saw a simple picture. The colors and shapes seemed spontaneously and automatically to enter their eyes and minds. Reading, they assumed, was analogous to seeing.

Norton tried to undermine and destabilize those who rested on their easy confidence in their reading of Scripture by pointing out that even seeing and visually recognizing objects did in fact involve a complicated process of cognition. Norton was clearly making an allusion to Locke’s theory of primary and secondary qualities. Locke believed that physical objects possessed primary qualities such as solidity, extension, figure, and motion that really existed in the bodies themselves. Secondary qualities such as color, smells, taste, and sound were not actually inherent in the objects. Rather, objects had the power to cause the mind of the perceiver to produce sensations such as color. Though the secondary qualities were not inherent in the object but the production of the mind, Locke still believed the secondary qualities were objective as the sensations were prompted by the nature of the object.

Most people were not aware of the complicated process involved in seeing, but their mind was interpreting and processing nonetheless. Likewise, Norton pointed out that when reading, the mind constantly and actively worked at the process of

654 Norton, “Lectures, 10.”
interpreting.\textsuperscript{655} When individuals encountered a seemingly familiar and simple text such as the Bible, they erroneously assumed that the plain and obvious meaning of the text simply entered their mind. However, the same reader was self-aware that he was making interpretive choices when dealing with an extremely difficult text from an alien culture. The experience was slow enough that one could be conscious of the rational process involved in trying to decipher the meaning of the words. For example, one carefully chose from a variety of possible meanings of words and considered the context of the sentence. One weighed the various merits of a figurative or literal interpretation in order to reconstruct the author’s intended meaning.

But when we judge of the meaning of common works upon subjects with which we are familiar, the acts of reasoning are essentially the same with those which are employed upon works of more difficulty, and to which the science of interpretation is properly applicable; in the same manner as our common judgments respecting the objects of sight, are founded upon the same principles, as those which we exercise concerning remote bodies, to the examination of which we apply the rules and instruments of art. The process of interpretation, like other processes, may be very correctly performed to a certain extent by those who are ignorant of its principles.\textsuperscript{656}

The same process was involved in reading both seemingly simple texts and obviously challenging texts. If Norton could establish that all reading involved a process of interpretation, then he could argue that some methods of interpretation were better than

\textsuperscript{655} In addition to Locke, Norton pointed to Dugald Stewart’s philosophy and Le Clerc’s \textit{Ars Critica} as sources of influence for his theory of language. However, Norton noted that it had never been so explicitly stated.” Norton, Lectures, 10; Turner, “Curious Case,” 23. Incidentally, Samuel Miller, a Presbyterian professor at Princeton, was also influenced by Scottish views of language around the same time. Miller devoted a chapter to the origin and nature of human language based on the ideas of Thomas Reid and Dugald Stewart in his \textit{A Brief Retrospect of the Eighteenth Century} (1803). See John Stewart, \textit{Mediating the Center: Charles Hodge on American Science, Language, Literature, and Politics} (Princeton: Princeton Theological Seminary, 1995), 51-53.

\textsuperscript{656} Norton, "Lectures, 10.”
others. The reader who examined his own interpretive choices was more likely to have a correct hermeneutic.

Further complicating the problems of interpretation, Norton also pointed out that just as ideas and cultures changed over time, the meaning of words changed as well. Moreover, words rarely carried their full meaning when translated from one language to another, especially when the cultures were particularly distant from one another. He wrote,

The intellectual character and furniture of men’s minds undergo changes quite as great as do their habits of life and external accommodations. Under the influence of different circumstances and associations … the composition and character of abstract ideas are continually varying with changes, which it would be in vain for language to attempt to follow and to mark, by a corresponding change of names.

Norton cautioned that if the interpreter was not sensitive to the ways in which words changed over time, the careless interpreter could easily impose a “modern instead of ancient” idea on the language of an ancient author. One could misinterpret an ancient writer as holding views and opinions that did not exist till long after his time.657

Norton argued that words that expressed abstract ideas, such as theological concepts, were particularly fragile. He noted that the Greek term — dikaiosune (righteousness)” could signify several different meanings, even in the same book. Context and reason needed to determine its use in a particular circumstance. He wrote,

In the interpretation of Scripture, generally speaking, it has not been sufficiently remarked that the meaning of words undergoes essential changes, and that even where this is not the case, it is frequently extending, and contracting itself, and assuming a some what different form.658

657 Norton, “Lectures, 5.”
658 Norton, “Lectures, 12.”
Norton believed that words and their meaning are never permanent. Rather, their relationship is determined by the collective use of a particular community at a particular moment in history. Thus, meaning was always in a state of flux. Therefore, people were liable to make drastic errors in interpretation when they assumed that a word used in an ancient text from a foreign culture had the equivalent meaning as the contemporary use. This principle of course applied to the Bible.

Most uninformed Christians, according to Norton, did not appreciate that language was a “very imperfect instrument for expressing our thoughts.” Words potentially could signify a wide variety of meanings or shades of meaning. He wrote, “There can be nothing in mere words alone to decide our choice.” Yet Norton was not a fan of ambiguity. The clear solution to finding the original meaning of the author was to examine the context of the writing. Following Locke, Norton argued that one needed to look at the surrounding words and sentences, the circumstances in which the words were written, the tendencies and characteristics of the writer, and the modes of expression that were common in the culture of the writer.659

Following Buckminster and the European biblical critics, Norton concluded that only by understanding the world of the biblical writer could the interpreter attempt to recapture the original intended meaning of the author. Only by studying the historical context could the modern interpreter fathom the cultural and intellectual distance between his own world and that of the first-century Near East. Most importantly, historical

659 Norton, Lectures, 10.
knowledge prevented the modern scholar from reading his own contemporary sensibilities into the text.

Like Locke and Lowth, Norton was sensitive to the cultural distance between the modern world and the first-century Near East. In order to know, in any particular instance, what is the true meaning of words, it is often necessary to know under what circumstances and relations they were used in that particular instance.” Therefore the biblical interpreter must immerse himself in the world that yielded the text by acquainting himself with the style of the writer and his period, the outlook of the people to whom he directed his message and the circumstances under which he wrote.” To rediscover the meaning of Scripture, the interpreter needed to become fully acquainted with the historical context.

The theologian therefore will proceed to collect and arrange all the variety of facts and truths, in connection with which the language of the Scripture must be viewed, in order to perceive its bearing and relations; and some one or more of which is continually entering as a principal element into all those reasonings by which its sense is determined. With these facts and truths he will make himself familiar. One also had to reconstruct the character, feelings, and opinions of the author. He summarized,

In order to understand the words of another, we assimilate as far as possible our minds to his, and enter into his situation, and we then understand his language in that sense in which his character, in his circumstances, and using language with the same license or the same restriction which he does, should ourselves employ his words.

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662 Norton, “Lectures, 10.”
Anyone who presumed to interpret the Bible, Norton wrote, "must be, in the most comprehensive sense of the word, a philologist." Otherwise, texts were bound to convey as false an impression as an historical picture might give to one wholly ignorant of the story which forms its subject. 663

According to Norton, Calvinists did not fully appreciate the cultural chasm that lay between the biblical writers and the nineteenth-century American. Following the European critics, Norton asserted that in the Old Testament, God accommodated his message to "a almost barbaric people of low moral standards." Thus, God "adapted" his revelation "to minds very differently modified from our own." 664 In the New Testament, Jesus, contended Norton, adapted his message to the nature of his "comparatively rude and uncivilized" audience, using images, words, and hyperbole to move the passions of the people. Norton wrote, "In many parts of the New Testament there is a boldness and license and sententiousness of expression, which sometimes obviously and sometimes not, leaves much to be limited and defined by reason and good sense." The audience, he wrote, was accustomed to "oriental modes of expression." Jesus' words would "have been very different, if he had been addressing a body of men of calm, enlightened, unprejudiced minds, from what they were when he spoke to the Jewish multitude."

Because of the intellectual limitations of his first-century audience, "the style of the New

663 Norton, "Extent and Relations of Theology," 71, 68.
664 Norton, A Discourse on Religious Education: Delivered at Hingham, May 20, 1818. Before the Trustees of the Derby Academy; Being the Annual Derby Lecture (Boston: Wells and Lilly, 1818), 22.
Testament is not that of logical accuracy and precision, it is the style of sentiment, of passion, of feeling, and of imagination.” Norton went on to say,

The writings of the New Testament are among those from which it is least allowable to detach particular propositions and sentences. And to regard as universal truths meanings which separate parts may be forced to render up, when understood strictly and to the letter, without regard to their connection, or to the circumstances under which they were spoken or written. Its modes of expression are essentially different for those of a philosophical treatise on the doctrines and duties of religion, composed with the accuracy and precision of a European scholar.  

Because the writers of the Bible were addressing particular people and circumstances, some pronouncements only applied to the first-century community. Many erroneously read the ancient writings as if they were compositions of yesterday, and expect to find every thing accommodated to our habits of thinking, and the knowledge which we may happen to have acquired.” He lamented that while we are so solicitous to circulate the Scriptures, we do not discover a little more solicitude to have them correctly understood.” Only history, believed Norton, could reveal the true meaning of the Bible, and the uneducated were bound to misinterpret.  

Recall that Buckminster and Locke made similar points regarding the interpretation of Paul.  

665 Norton, “Lectures, 5.”
667 As did Buckminster in his sermon “The History and Character of Paul,” Norton cited and summarized Paley who recommended caution in the use and application of Scripture language” when he discussed how Scripture was distorted when passages applying to specific circumstances were applied universally. Norton, Lectures, 7. Predictably, Charles Hodge rejected Norton’s views on the interpretation of the Bible. He believed that Norton’s desire to culturally contextualize would lead to distortion. He wrote, “I should feel that I reject [the New Testament’s] authority if I allowed myself to regard as mere Jewish modes of thought, those ideas, and to inquire what were the essential truths which they embodied. ...[I]t indicates the point, where lies the source of the differences of our views of what Christianity really is.” Charles Hodge to Andrews Norton, 27 February 1840, Andrews Norton Papers.
Norton warned that many Calvinists erroneously read the Bible as if every pronouncement was written for a modern audience and it were to be interpreted as a philosophically precise treatise, because they believed that Scripture was designed for the use of the whole Christian community throughout all ages, composed under the superintendence and direction of God Himself:” God interpose[d] in a miraculous manner” so that the Bible would transmit history and doctrine to a future age totally unknown to the biblical writer. “If this were true,” wrote Norton, “then the writings were in no way affected by local or temporal circumstances.” Norton complained that Calvinists do not expect to find the meaning much disguised by peculiarities of expression characteristic of the writer, or of the age or country to which he belonged; they pay but little regard to the circumstances in which he wrote, or to those of the persons whom he addressed; and they are not ready to believe that writings expressly intended for the general use of all Christians, should be much occupied by controversies which prevailed only in the first ages of the Church. Calvinists, according to Norton, believed that God had written the Bible with the intent that, with the aid of the Holy Spirit, “all Christians in all countries and in all ages” would be able to understand His message.

Norton conceded that God could have supernaturally dictated the Scriptures to be applied universally. However, there was no reason why this should necessarily or even probably be true. Norton proposed that the interpretation of the nature of the Bible should not be made on theological grounds or on any a priori arguments.” Rather, the question

668 Norton, Lectures, 6.”
669 Norton, Defence of Liberal Christianity,” 18.
is to be decided on by an examination of the writings themselves” and based exclusively on historical evidence. Once again, history, for Norton, was the final referee. Norton observed that the Gospels showed no evidence that the writers self-consciously wrote for posterity. They did not write "in the style of a classic historian." The writings lacked prefatory material, explanations, or dates. Many parts seemed incomplete because the writers assumed the readers already knew the history. If the writers knew they were writing for posterity, they would have included information about which "men in a future time would have a very reasonable curiosity." Norton observed that Paul's Epistles explicitly addressed specific communities, and the unique issues did not apply to modern European or American Christians.  

Norton in his zeal exaggerated the ahistorical tendencies of Calvinism. Even John Calvin acknowledged that God accommodated his revelations to the capacities of primitive Israelites. Archibald Alexander and Charles Hodge, professors at the Presbyterian Princeton Theological Seminary, were also aware that conditions and ideas changed throughout history. Though they believed that the inspired writers taught no error of a religious nature, the biblical writers shared the views of their day. Regarding the inspired writers, Hodge wrote, "As to matters of science, philosophy, and history, they stood on the same level with their contemporaries." Therefore, some of their incidental comments on science or history were liable to error. Hodge also acknowledged that the Bible must be interpreted in its "plain historical sense" or "the sense attached to

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670 Norton, "Lectures, 6.”
them in the age and by the people to whom they were addressed.” However, Hodge did not go as far as Norton in his belief in the effects of history.

Perhaps what Norton found most offensive about prevailing conservative interpretations of the Bible was what he perceived to be their potentially arbitrary nature. Norton concluded that most people followed two main principles. First, they insisted that the Bible should be interpreted according to the “analogy of faith.” Norton believed people used this principle to bend the meaning of various passages of the Bible to affirm a “system of theological opinions which the interpreter may have chanced to adopt.” Second, most Christians believed that the Bible should be interpreted literally. However, Norton pointed out various instances when Calvinists did not interpret the Bible literally. They resorted to figurative readings when the literal interpretation defied reason or common sense, or contradicted their established theological system. As a result, most interpreters allowed theological loyalties to dictate the rules of interpretation. The Bible would always affirm their theology.

Norton noted that many notable and learned European biblical critics such as Robert Lowth, William Warburton, and Johann Jakob Wettstein argued that the verses of the Bible must be interpreted in their historical context. However, he observed that these same scholars also acknowledged that ahistorical and theological considerations should guide interpretive choices because God intended the Scriptures to be understood by the


672 Norton, “Lectures, 11.”
church. Norton noted that the choice between the two interpretive modes was too arbitrary. Readers, believed Norton, tended to vacillate between the temporal and universal modes and chose according to their needs. The vagaries of ahistorical interpretive principles permitted readers to impose theologically driven interpretations on the text that the biblical writer might not have intended.\textsuperscript{673}

Predictably, Norton found Calvinists particularly guilty of this crime. Yet the Calvinists did not believe they were being subjective or arbitrary. Norton asserted that for the Calvinists, the "main evidence of truth" was based on "something placed beyond the uncertainty of reasoning." Their confidence in their interpretation of the Bible was grounded on "a higher source than any human reasoning, or opinions or conjectures; it is derived from the secret witness of the Spirit."\textsuperscript{674}

Calvinists, according to Norton, thought they could bypass a scientific and historical hermeneutic. He argued that their Spirit-aided interpretation made his historical hermeneutic superfluous and did not acknowledge the degree of subjectivity that was involved in their own reading. Furthermore, they did not acknowledge their own theological biases that affected their interpretation. Norton wrote of Calvin,


\textsuperscript{674} Norton, \textit{Lectures}, 7." Norton quoted from Calvin's \textit{Institutes}, 1: 7. 4.
His interpretation of the New Testament as far as I am acquainted with his commentaries, or the manner in which he has applied passages in his theological reasonings, are of such a kind as might be expected from his views on the character of the scriptures. He imposes that meaning upon words in which he was accustomed to use them, without any investigation to discover whether it were their true one.  

Norton argued that the Calvinists relied on their hermeneutic because they sought certainty. Norton observed that Calvin argued that belief based on “arguments or probabilities” could only lead to fear or doubt. Norton based his interpretation on historical knowledge, which was by its nature probabilistic. He wrote, “I know of no absolute certainty, beyond the limit of momentary consciousness, a certainty that vanishes the instant it exists, and is lost in the region of metaphysical doubt.” He asserted that the Calvinist certainty was an illusion, for no knowledge, with the exception of mathematical propositions, could achieve absolute certainty.

Norton’s combative, polemical nature tended to lead to exaggeration. Historian W. Andrew Hoffecker has argued that Archibald Alexander and Charles Hodge forged a via media between an objective and rational doctrine and the importance of inner experience and the witness of the Spirit. Just as Norton criticized Lowth, Warburton, Norton quoted from Calvin’s Institutes I, VII, 4.

675 Norton, —Lectures, 7.”
676 Norton, —Lectures, 7.” Norton quoted from Calvin’s Institutes I, VII, 4.
677 Norton, —Latest Form of Infidelity,” in Tracts, 31; Norton wrote some thoughts on the difference between probabilistic knowledge and mathematical or philosophical certainty on a loose sheet of paper that is folded up inside a notebook. —Lecture on Biblical Criticism,” Andrews Norton Papers.
678 Alexander wrote about the importance of the Holy Spirit in reading the Bible in Thoughts on Religious Experience (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publications, 1841). He also wrote two books defending the Bible on empirical grounds that grew out of his anti-deistic lectures — Brief Outline of the Christian Religion (1825) and Evidences of the Authority, Inspiration, and Canonical Authority of the Holy Scriptures (1826). Hodge summed up his beliefs on the matter in The Theology of the Intellect and of the Feelings,” (1850) which Mark Noll calls “the fullest exposition found anywhere in [Hodge’s] writings.
and Wettstein, he believed that all interpretation must be based exclusively on historical evidence.

VI. “The Modern School of German Infidelity”

Norton was not the only man in the nineteenth century who believed that history would open the way to religious truth. German theologians were also discarding the alleged errors of the past using historical tools of investigation. However, they were moving in a direction far more radical than Norton would have ever desired. Some were questioning the authenticity of the Gospels and the historical reality of miracles. While Norton wanted the Calvinists to shed an unnecessary adherence to certain dogmas of the past, the Germans were challenging what Norton considered to be essential beliefs.

Norton wanted to harness the corrosive effects of history to eliminate the false beliefs of the Calvinists. The Germans were also using history to challenge what they considered to be outdated superstitions that Norton held close to his heart.

By Norton’s day, German scholars were turning their critical attention to the Gospels. G. E. Lessing had dared to suggest that the reported miracles were merely exaggerations of natural events by credulous followers of Jesus. The mythical school,
principally composed of J. G. Eichhorn, J. P. Gabler, and G. L. Bauer, shared the conviction that the biblical texts were an amalgam of history and myth. They defined as mythical those parts of the Bible that could not stand up to the rational scrutiny of Enlightenment epistemological presuppositions and relegated to mythical status events such as Lot’s wife turning into a pillar of salt or God’s appearance to Moses in a burning bush. Through careful scholarship they felt that the mythical chaff could be separated from the historical wheat and a truly accurate history of Israel could be established. The composition of the Bible reflected the worldview of what Eichhorn referred to as the ‘primiti

ve mind.’ The contribution of their criticism, so these scholars reasoned, was to the newly championed ability to make appropriate epistemological distinctions and supply a natural cause where a biblical author had given a mythical one. Norton had little interest in the critical study of the Old Testament. He believed that the Jews were guided by the providence of God and that their conception of religion was far superior to that of other ancient nations, but that their canon contained much irrelevant and contradictory material, which had nothing to do with revelation from God.

When Eichhorn turned his critical eye towards the New Testament in his *Einleitung in das Neue Testament*, Norton grew concerned. Eichhorn examined the historical evidence in the first two centuries and argued that the four Gospels, according to this theory, were second-century recensions and therefore could not have been written

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by apostles or their contemporaries. Consequently they could not be relied upon as accurate historical accounts of the life of Jesus. \(^{681}\) For example, “Justin Martyr,” wrote Eichhorn, “nowhere quotes the life and sayings of Jesus according to our present four Gospels, which he was not acquainted with.” He also examined discrepancies between different Gospels describing the same event and concluded that scribes embellished the texts. Eichhorn believed that if one put aside “idle tales and unsupported tradition” the historical evidence forced one to conclude that “before our present Gospels, other decidedly different gospels were in circulation, and were used during the first two centuries in the instruction of Christians.” \(^{682}\)

Norton possibly began to study Eichhorn around 1818. (He could not read German before then.) George Ticknor, a Harvard graduate, had gone to Germany and took classes with Eichhorn. \(^{683}\) He gave his lecture notes to Andrews Norton. In a letter to his father, Ticknor wrote that he did not agree with Eichhorn’s beliefs about the formation of the Gospels, but he found Eichhorn’s expositions on particular parts to be “luminous elucidations of dark and doubtful passages.” \(^{684}\) He found alarming the fact that

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\(^{681}\) Brown, *Biblical Criticism*, 82.


\(^{684}\) George Ticknor, “Notes taken by Ticknor while studying with Eichhorn in Göttingen, Germany, Oct. 27, 1815- Mar. 27, 1816,” Andrews Norton Papers. On the fly leaf of Ticknor’s notebook,
Eichhorn denied that Isaiah 7:14 was a messianic prophecy. However, he did not believe the Gospel writers to be dishonest in their citation of the passage as a clear reference to Jesus. Rather, the biblical writers were thinking according to the standards of their time.

In Ticknor’s notes on Eichhorn, he recorded,

What is evidence in one [age] would not be in another, and what would suit Jewish simplicity and ignorance would not be fitted for Grecian learning or Roman refinement. The mode of proof in every age is, according to the stock of knowledge possessed in the age, whether precise or loose – and as we use one kind of proof with children, and another with men, so one kind of proof was used in the early ages of the world and another now. The writer, therefore, might have used this form of speech strictly or metaphorically and yet have been justified by the custom of his age.685

Eichhorn argued that one should not ask if the biblical writers were honest or dishonest. Rather, the standards of truth were different from age to age. One needed to know the mind of the culture and time.

Edward Everett was another possible window onto the world of the more radical German theologians. Everett, like Ticknor, studied with Eichhorn in Germany. He was named to the Eliot chair in 1815 and then went to Germany for advanced training. When he began teaching in 1819, Everett introduced Harvard students and colleagues to the higher criticism of German scholarship. He explained that a new approach to the study of

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685 Ticknor, “Notes taken by Ticknor while studying with Eichhorn in Göttingen,” 13-14. The manuscript states that the notebook was in the possession of Andrews Norton.
religion, pioneered by Christian Gottlob Heyne, which tried to show that all religions began as mythology.\footnote{Gary J. Dorrien, The Making of American Liberal Theology: Imagining Progressive Religion, 1805-1900 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 45; Everett’s admiration and use of Eichhorn are evidenced by his manuscript of preliminary notes for an Introduction to the Old Testament.” In it, he makes frequent references to Eichhorn and notes the dismay of those in England who sought to stop the translation of his work out of fear of his heterodoxy. \textit{Introduction to the Old Testament Preliminary Notes},” The Edward Everett Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston, Reel L, vol. 247A, Undated.}

VII. Proving the Authenticity of the Bible

Norton had little regard for what he believed to be the collection of superstitions in the Hebrew Scriptures. However, he believed that Jesus was the messenger of God and the Gospels were the reliable account of his life and teachings and therefore the basis of true religion. In order to combat the destructive effects of Eichhorn’s biblical criticism, Norton fought back with history. For eighteen years, he devoted himself to composing an adequate response to the German threat. In 1837, he published the first two volumes of his magnum opus, \textit{The Evidences of the Genuineness of the Gospels}.\footnote{The Evidences of the Genuineness of the Gospels was certainly an impressive accomplishment for an American scholar of this period. When Norton began the work in 1819, he thought he could complete the project in six months. As he encountered the complexity of his subject matter, his project expanded to fill eight hundred pages and three volumes. After the first volume of \textit{The Evidences of the Genuineness of the Gospels} was published, Moses Stuart hailed it as a great achievement in American scholarship.}

In order to establish the authenticity of the Gospels, Norton attempted to reconstruct the world of the second-century Christian to demonstrate that corruption and fabrication would have been highly unlikely. For example, Norton referred to Dionysius, who was Bishop of Corinth about the year 170. Dionysius condemned in unqualified terms anyone who altered the Scriptures. Norton reasoned, based on the prevailing

\footnote{Gary J. Dorrien, The Making of American Liberal Theology: Imagining Progressive Religion, 1805-1900 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 45; Everett’s admiration and use of Eichhorn are evidenced by his manuscript of preliminary notes for an Introduction to the Old Testament.” In it, he makes frequent references to Eichhorn and notes the dismay of those in England who sought to stop the translation of his work out of fear of his heterodoxy. \textit{Introduction to the Old Testament Preliminary Notes},” The Edward Everett Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston, Reel L, vol. 247A, Undated.}

\footnote{The Evidences of the Genuineness of the Gospels was certainly an impressive accomplishment for an American scholar of this period. When Norton began the work in 1819, he thought he could complete the project in six months. As he encountered the complexity of his subject matter, his project expanded to fill eight hundred pages and three volumes. After the first volume of \textit{The Evidences of the Genuineness of the Gospels} was published, Moses Stuart hailed it as a great achievement in American scholarship.}
Norton attempted to imagine the intellectual milieu of the time and culture in which the early Christians were duplicating and distributing the Gospels to assert that, given the environment, gross fabrication and distortion of the Gospels would have been unlikely.

Interestingly, Norton did not assemble a series of authoritative pronouncements by saints and bishops and attempt to overwhelm his opponents with the declarations of men whom Christians believed had been entrusted with divine knowledge. Rather, to illustrate the intellectual tenor of the times, he gathered an array of voices writing on the sacredness and importance of the Gospels. He quoted from Clement of Alexandria as well as from a lowly anonymous writer. The opinion of the church father carried evidentiary weight, not because Norton deferred to authority but because the church father represented the opinions of his community and influenced the minds of his church. He sought to reconstruct the ideas of the time. He noted that Origen believed that the Scriptures were dictated by the Holy Spirit. Though Norton thought this notion was absurd, he used it to establish the "existence of sentiments" that would make the intentional alteration of Scriptures improbable during the first two centuries. The context proved, believed Norton, that the Gospels were authentic.

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689 To further elaborate on this historical principle, Norton wrote, "In estimating the weight of evidence which has thus far been adduced for the genuineness of the Gospels, we must keep in mind, what has not always been sufficiently attended to, that it is not the testimony of certain individual writers alone on which we rely, important as their testimony might be. These writers speak for a whole community, every member of which had the strongest reasons for ascertaining the correctness of his faith respecting the authenticity, and, consequently, the genuineness of the Gospels. We quote the Christian fathers, not chiefly
Norton’s proofs were not necessarily original. For example, he pointed his readers to the latent antagonism between the Jews and Gentiles. He observed that the Gospels were evidently the works of Jewish authors. By the second century, Gentile Christians far outnumbered their Jewish brothers and regarded them with suspicion. Therefore, he reasoned that Gentile Christians would have examined four histories of Christ, from Jewish Christians, with the greatest scrutiny. If Jewish authors had attempted to fabricate the history, the Gentile community would never have accepted the accounts. Americans had been using similar proofs against the deists as early as the mid-eighteenth century in the Dudleian Lectures.

Norton also pointed out that the Gospels were “evidently the work, not merely of Jewish authors, but of unlearned Jewish authors, men unskilled in the use of language generally, and of the Greek language in particular.” He referred to Origen who wrote that “the style of the scriptures was regarded by the Greeks as poor and contemptible.” He also looked to Lactantius who observed, “Literary men when they give their attention to the religion of God … do not become believers. … they despise as sordid the simple and common language of the divine writings.” Norton therefore concluded that if the Gospels had not been genuine, “their style and idiom alone would have formed no small obstacle to their reception.” He argued that if the Gospels were forgeries, then the forger would

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690 Ibid., 122.
have utilized a better form of Greek. A century earlier, Locke had made a similar point. The great classicist Bentley demonstrated that anachronistic language disproved the authenticity of the letters of Phalaris.\(^{691}\) Le Clerc, in his *Ars Critica*, argued that the ancient historians did not accurately record the past if the language of the actors was uncharacteristically eloquent.\(^{692}\)

Norton's disagreements with the Germans were not merely academic. He believed that the radical German scholars were adversely affecting religion in the United States. Since Norton's battle against the Transcendentalists is well known and has been examined at length by historians, one need not rehash the details.\(^{693}\) In 1836, George Ripley defended an intuitionist doctrine of religious knowledge in the *Christian Examiner*. He and other Transcendentalists borrowed their ideas from German Idealism through Samuel Coleridge and Victor Cousin. They attacked the use of external evidence to support Christianity. Norton could not stand for such absurdities. Not only did such views nullify the purpose of Norton's great work, *The Genuineness of the Gospels*, but Norton argued that evidence was the ultimate foundation upon which faith could rest. The issue of evidence erupted again in 1838 when Emerson delivered his famous Divinity School Address. Norton responded with *A Discourse on the Latest Form of Infidelity*, in


which he argued that the Christian faith must be grounded on historical evidence. Most importantly, the external evidence of miracles authenticated Jesus‘ divine mission. In his *Remarks on the Modern German School of Infidelity*, he linked Transcendentalism with Schleiermacher, Strauss, De Wette, Neander, and Paulus.\(^{694}\)

The heart of the problem, according to Norton, was that the Transcendentalists and Germans relied on intuitions as a source of knowledge. Intuitions were vague and subjective. Only the rigorous and exacting work of historical and linguistic scholarship could ground religious truth on precise and concrete biblical meaning. Interestingly, Norton opposed Transcendentalists and Calvinists for similar reasons. Norton believed that the Trinitarians and the Transcendentalists both distorted the meaning of the Bible by detaching words from their socially conditioned contexts. Furthermore, both sought certainty through intuition and believed they could bypass the work of historical research. Calvin certainly had very little in common with Emerson. However, from Norton‘s perspective, neither group‘s wildly subjective hermeneutic was restrained by history.\(^{695}\)

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\(^{694}\) See Norton, "A Discourse on the Latest Form of Infidelity," in *Tracts*, 229-268; Remarks on the Modern German School of Infidelity” in *Tracts*, 269-368.

VIII. The Limits of History

Norton had historicist tendencies. He believed that ideas and words must be understood within their historical context. But he still believed that God effected miracles. Norton rightly pointed out that Spinoza collapsed God into nature, and thus God could not violate the laws of nature. God, insisted Norton, did use miracles to confirm the divine authority of revelation. Therefore, the very ahistorical nature of the Gospels proved their divine origin. They did not appear to emerge from their historical context or resemble other literature produced in the historical and cultural milieu.

It was indeed a most marvelous event, and wholly out of the sphere of natural causes, that one who had never entered the schools of human wisdom, who had lived all his life in the midst of the gross ignorance, the inveterate prejudices, and the habitual and degrading vices of Galilean Jews, surrounded by a people not more cultivated nor intellectual than those who now occupy the same land, that such an one should make known to mankind a universal religion, the most pure, the most holy, and the most powerful in its operation.

When he examined the state of morals and the philosophy available to the apostles, Norton found it impossible that such uneducated and primitive men could ever have created the religion on their own.\(^{696}\) Such an advance had never occurred in the history of mankind.

Norton accepted that the people of the past thought differently, but he still believed that common principles transcended history. Some people, in all times and cultures, could still be reasonable. When he lectured on the interpretation of ancient...
writings, he advised the interpreter to ask if the writer was reasonable or irrational.\(^{697}\) Likewise, he believed that the first-century Christians would have inquired about the authenticity of the Gospels. ―But Christians at that period, \textit{equally with Christians at the present day}, must have considered the question of the genuineness of the Gospels as one of the greatest importance.” Any man, modern or ancient would test them to see if they were true.\(^{698}\) Norton assumed that the Gospels must have been authentic because Christians of the second century would have examined the Gospels just as he would have. He went on to write, ―[Second-century Christians] must have felt, at least as strongly as \textit{we} do, the fundamental importance of the subject of [evidence].”\(^{699}\) Who exactly were the \textit{we} to whom Norton referred? Apparently, the second-century Christians shared the values of not only a person of the nineteenth century, but in particular a Boston Unitarian.

This point reveals tensions in Norton’s view of history. At several points in his lectures on interpretation, Norton argued that the first-century Christians were ignorant primitives who could not possibly fully comprehend the meaning of the Gospels. However, these first-century primitives were still capable of searching for proof just as someone like Norton would. Eichhorn also believed that the people of the past were different, but he was willing to go much further. Primitives interpreted the world as myth. The modern man erroneously interpreted the myth as real miracles.

\(^{697}\) Norton, \textit{Lectures}, 1.

\(^{698}\) Norton, \textit{Genuineness of the Gospels}, 1: 100. My emphasis.

\(^{699}\) Ibid., 100, 101-102.
Norton may have assumed that all reasonable people throughout history relied on evidence, but the German theologians took the tools of historical analysis and challenged this assumption. David Friedrich Strauss took historical interpretation to a new level when he argued that to the writers of the first century, myths and legends were common modes of expression, and in using myth they were neither creating falsehoods nor describing events in a scientific manner. By Strauss’s paradigm, erroneous accounts of Jesus’ life would not have been considered deceptions or fabrications by the standards of the first century. They were true in a mythological sense. According to Strauss, the scholar of the nineteenth century did not share common conceptual modes with the authors of the Gospels.

Norton addressed the heresy of Strauss in his *Internal Evidences for the Genuineness of the Gospels*, which he composed in 1847 and 1848. He did not directly engage with the most radical aspect of Strauss’s theory, that the people of the past conceptualized truth mythically. Instead, he reasserted his thesis from *The Genuineness of the Gospels*. Norton believed that he had already proven that the apostles wrote the Gospels. Therefore, he argued that the apostles and other Christians were either intentionally deceptive or honest, but certainly were not both. People, even those living in the first century, would not look at a falsehood and believe it was the truth, he insisted. Norton assumed that the early Christians shared his nineteenth-century epistemology.

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700 Brown, *Biblical Criticism*, 144.

One could also look at the conflict between Norton and Strauss as a difference of degree. Like Strauss, Norton believed that ideas changed throughout history. However, Norton did not think that ideas changed as radically as Strauss posited. Even before he read Strauss, Norton said in 1819 that the biblical interpreter must understand the previous condition, opinions, and character of mankind.” He went on to write,

He must make himself familiar with forms of error, *and modes of exhibiting truth, very different from those to which he has been accustomed*. He must become, as it were, an inquisitive traveler in a strange country, among men who use a new language; and he will see around him much, of which he cannot at once comprehend.  

Norton and Strauss were utilizing a similar historicist principle to understand the Bible. The very foundation of Norton’s dispute with the Calvinists was that they had not taken history seriously enough. Strauss could have made the same accusation of Norton.

Norton maintained that some aspects of human nature were essential and did not vary through the ages. He simply could not accept Strauss’ thesis that people of the past could look upon a myth as reality. Strauss had taken the explanatory powers and relativistic implications of history into regions where Norton would never venture. For example, Norton took issue with Strauss’ view on miracles. Norton was a historicist, but he still believed that miracles were possible. Strauss, like Spinoza, worked on the *a priori* assumption that the laws of nature could not be broken and therefore any record of a miracle could have been the result of a primitive mythological mind interpreting the life of Jesus. Norton charged that Strauss had gone too far. Norton needed to preserve the reality of the miracles from the corrosive effects of history. He shifted the debate from

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historical to theological grounds and argued that God’s nature allowed for the miraculous.⁷⁰³

The Calvinists, according to Norton, adhered to an older epistemology in which the ultimate cause and meaning of historical events on earth were understood to lie in the supernatural world. They believed that God interrupted the natural flow of worldly events and therefore historical criticism could not completely apply to miraculous events, the Bible, or perhaps the writing of theology. For the Calvinist, these immutable and eternal truths floated above the world of natural causes. Strauss, on the other hand, asserted that earthly causes and prior circumstances could explain all the events and ideas of the world. He banished God from the earth and relegated Him to the realm of ideas. Strauss knew that history would eventually eliminate the supernatural. He wrote that “the pure historic idea was never developed among the Hebrews. ... Indeed, no just notion of the true nature of history is possible, without a perception of the inviolability of the chain of finite causes, and of the impossibility of miracles.”⁷⁰⁴ Timeless propositional truths and miracles had no place in a world where natural causes and historically different modes of conception could explain everything.

Norton sought to straddle both worlds. While he attempted to pull the Calvinists into a historical awareness of some of their own myths, he tried at the same time to keep the historical criticism of the Germans at bay. He wanted to historicize the Reformed


conception of Christianity, yet he still wanted to preserve his own sacred cows: the Gospels and the miracles of Christ. He thought he could place them on a pedestal above the relativizing ravages of German historical criticism.

IX. Conclusion

Joseph Stevens Buckminster and Andrews Norton believed they lived in a time of hermeneutical chaos. Though the Bible was still the revelation and truth of God in the minds of most, there was little control over its interpretation. They were essentially dealing with the same problems that plagued the American Puritans earlier. Puritans thought that the Holy Spirit would bring interpretive consensus. In the first half of the eighteenth century, Cotton Mather, Jonathan Dickinson, and Jonathan Edwards thought that a combination of the Spirit and science and history could resolve interpretive disputes. Buckminster and Norton naively believed that they relied exclusively on a historicist hermeneutic to resolve interpretive conflicts. Both believed that the Calvinists in particular were mired in the past, clinging to a dated hermeneutic. According to the two Unitarians, these Calvinists relied on a hermeneutic that affirmed their own conclusions. Discussion was fruitless. The liberals were continually struck by barbs from orthodox publications such as the Panoplist. Both Buckminster and Norton, drawing upon European resources, believed that a historical hermeneutic could place the discussion on objective and empirical grounds. The interpretation of the Bible required discipline. Otherwise, people could make the Bible support their own notions. Buckminster and Norton believed history provided the only viable grounding. Needless to say, they were partial to European criticism, for it happened to affirm their own
conclusions. However, the tools of history which they thought would affirm their interpretation of the Bible threatened to attack the very foundations of their beliefs.
EPILOGUE

THE ORTHODOX RECONCILE WITH THE PAST

Buckminster and Norton certainly stood near the liberal end of the theological spectrum in early nineteenth-century America. It is not surprising that Unitarians departed from traditional conceptions and interpretations of the Bible. What is interesting is how elements of this evidentiary and historicist tendency pervaded the theological landscape beyond the liberal Unitarians. The belief that the Bible must be studied objectively, historically, and free from theological presuppositions can be found in conservative Moses Stuart as well.

It is impossible to do full justice to Stuart’s life and work in this short space. Other scholars have already examined him in great depth. I would like to point out the extent to which this orthodox Calvinist absorbed the historicist hermeneutic. Stuart, one of the most able biblical scholars in the early nineteenth century, taught at Andover Seminary as a professor of biblical literature from 1810 to 1848. The seminary was

founded in 1808 with the express purpose of safeguarding Calvinist orthodoxy from Harvard Unitarianism. Unlike the Unitarian Norton, Stuart believed that the Bible in its entirety was inspired by God and that reason could not determine which parts of it were less reliable.

Nonetheless, Stuart, along with Norton, was one of the first Americans to recognize the importance of German biblical criticism. He wrote, "there is more scientific knowledge of biblical criticism comprised in the German … than in all the other languages of the world taken together." Stuart was deeply impressed by the scholarship of Eichhorn, though he was troubled by his conclusions regarding the historicity of the Bible. Stuart wanted to introduce the German methods, not to undermine the orthodox, but to strengthen them. He attempted to extract the best German scholarship on biblical subjects, and then refute the radical German criticism through an informed reading of these sources. Like Norton, Stuart believed that the interpreter must examine what the text actually said by a thorough knowledge of the grammar and the historical background of the subject of the passage.

706 Stuart wrote that the sale of the Rev. J. S. Buckminster's library in Boston threw a considerable number of German critical works" for his consumption. Among the first Germans who influenced him, he notes "Seller, Storr, Flatt, [and] J. D. Michaelis." Later, "Eichhorn, Gabler, Paulus, Staüdlin, Haenlein, Jahn, Rosenmüller (father and son), Gesenius, Planck, and others of like rank and character" influenced him. He also wrote, "have, for the last twenty years, read much more in German authors (comprising their Latin as well as German productions), than I have in my own vernacular language: a matter not of choice, i.e. not out of any special partiality for the German, but one to me of necessity. Those who do not understand this subject, and have never engaged in critical studies, may say, as some of them have often said, that such a course was unnecessary for me." Christian Review 6, no. 23 (1841): 449-450.


708 Stuart articulates his principles of biblical interpretation in a variety of places. For example, see Stuart, "Study of the German Language"; idem, "The Same Principles of Interpretation to Be Applied to
Also like Norton, Stuart was concerned with the problems of arbitrary interpretation and subjectivity. All Christians, (by which he meant Protestants) he noted, appealed to the Bible but many arrived at different conclusions, undermining the Bible’s credibility. Christians, Stuart noted, regrettably imported their own theological convictions into their interpretation of the Bible. Thus people, perhaps unintentionally, read the Bible to justify their particular theological convictions. Only scientifically determined and universally accessible laws of interpretation, free from theological or spiritual bias, could adjudicate between partisan bickering. “Our ultimate appeal then is to the laws of Exegesis.”709

The interpreter should not read his own modern culture into the past. Doing so would be doing violence to the laws of interpretation.”710 Theological convictions and presuppositions must always yield to the conclusions of historical criticism and philology. Stuart argued that the interpreter needed to enter the cultural world of the biblical writer.

Whether [the biblical author] agrees or disagrees with our present notions, yea, whether he inculcates truth or error, is nothing to him as interpreter. With this he may be deeply concerned as a man and a theologian; he is so; but as an interpreter, his work is done, when the true meaning of his author is unfolded.711

the Scriptures as to Other Books?” Biblical Repository 2, no. 5 (1832): 124-37; and idem, —Remarks on Hahn’s Definition of Interpretation and Some Topics Connected with It,” Biblical Repository 1, no. 1 (1831): 139-60. See also his unpublished lectures on Biblical interpretation at the Andover Newton Theological School.


710 Stuart, —Hahn’s Definition of Interpretation,” 158.

711 Ibid.
Stuart, like Norton, was over confident in his ability to transcend his particular prejudices. Stuart fervently asserted that a proper interpreter must lay aside all theological or personal opinions. He claimed that he would take leave of all theology and aim to act merely the part of a historical inquirer, who applies to the appropriate sources of information, and endeavors in this way to find out what he ought to believe.”

He boasted that the simple sling and stone of historical criticism are all that I assay to use.” He was from a modern perspective naive. He believed that he could eliminate all elements of subjectivity. He also believed that hermeneutics could eventually discover almost all questions of meaning definitively. He predicted that in a few decades, hermeneutics will be a science as definite and as well bounded and discriminated, as most other sciences which have long been taught as complete.” He even cautiously though cryptically challenged John Calvin. He noted that Calvin’s knowledge of biblical languages was admirable for his times” but the state of knowledge had far exceeded him. Calvin, Stuart suggested, imposed his theology on all his interpretations. Stuart carefully added the contorted critique that though Calvin’s methods were not reliable his conclusions were correct. Stuart noted that only readings based on the proper methods were trustworthy.


713 R. W. Yarbrough writes that Stuart naively believed that philological methods could discover the genuine meaning of the text with absolute certainty. He was guilty of philological positivism.” Yarbrough, Moses Stuart,” 370. Stuart, Hahn’s Definition of Interpretation,” 139 and idem, Critical History and Defence of the Old Testament Canon, 3.

So great was Stuart's confidence in the methods of interpretation that he argued that the Bible must be interpreted like any ordinary ancient book. He certainly believed that the Scriptures were divine revelation and the miracles it recorded were real. But he explicitly denied the notion that one must be "enlightened in a spiritual sense" before one could understand the Scriptures. "That illumination and guidance are promised to humble inquirers after heavenly wisdom, is a most delightful truth, by no means to be obscured or surrendered." But the Bible, he insisted, could be understood with common "reason and understanding." A spiritual person would naturally have more sympathy for the Scriptures than someone who did not believe. But this was no different than saying "poetic feeling" was necessary to understand Milton more properly, or that "mathematical feeling" aided the comprehension of Laplace or Newton. "I must then relinquish the idea of a miraculous interposition, in every instance where the Bible is read and understood," Stuart wrote. The true meaning of the Bible could only be adjudicated by completely natural and scholarly labor.\textsuperscript{715} He believed the Bible was a supernatural revelation from God. However, he argued for a completely natural means of interpretation. Interpretation not founded on "clear and certain laws" led to the "subjective caprice of interpreters." By so fully embracing the historical method, Stuart rejected the views of Mather, Dickinson, and Edwards. However, Stuart believed he could maintain traditional convictions, but with more certain, reliable, and universally

\textsuperscript{715} Stuart, "Principles of Interpretation," 134-35.
accessible methods. Like his predecessors, he believed that putting the meaning of the Bible in the open light of examination could more effectively convince the skeptic.716

The issue of slavery and the Bible reveals how deeply the historical hermeneutic pervaded Stuart’s thinking and pushed his interpretations to conclusions at odds with more conservative views. Many scholars have noted that in the decades before the Civil War, the biblical interpreters were deeply divided over the biblical view of slavery.717 Proslavery apologists pointed out that the Old Testament clearly permitted slavery and the New Testament never explicitly condemned it.718 Moses wrote laws regulating the practice of slavery. Jesus interacted with slaves and slave owners, and he never condemned the practice as a sin. The Apostle Paul urged the escaped slave Onesimus to return to his master Philemon. The Bible appeared tacitly to tolerate and even approve of

716 Stuart, ‘Lectures on Hermeneutics 2 and 3’; idem, ‘Principles of Interpretation,” 124-37; and idem, —Study of the German Language,” 449.


718 For proslavery arguments based on a literal and plain interpretation of the Bible, see Fox-Genovese and Genovese, The Mind of the Master Class.
the practice. Thus, antislavery Christians faced a problem. How could one oppose slavery when the Bible appeared to support it?

Some abolitionists such as William Lloyd Garrison and Gerrit Smith simply rejected the moral authority of the Bible over the matter of slavery. Similarly, the Transcendentalist Theodore Parker wrote that —if the Bible defends slavery, it is not so much better for slavery, but so much worse for the Bible.\footnote{Theodore Parker, *The Slave Power* (New York: Arno Press, 1969 [1910]), 272. Noll, "Bible and Slavery," 51; George M. Fredrickson, *The Inner Civil War: Northern Intellectuals and the Crisis of the Union* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993 [1965]); and Anne C. Rose, *Victorian America and the Civil War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994).} Such views were too radical for most Christians. William Ellery Channing, a leading Unitarian, argued that conscience and reason should determine the general tenor and spirit of the Scriptures and determine which parts of the Bible should be privileged over others. The spirit of Christianity, he determined, was opposed to slavery and therefore it overruled any passage that sanctioned slavery.\footnote{Other abolitionists including Jonathan Blanchard, Albert Barnes, and Henry Ward Beecher also moved from the Bible’s letter to its spirit. Many associated this move with the liberal theology of the Unitarians. Thus, this approach was not popular among many conservative Americans. Noll, "The Bible and Slavery," 51.} Furthermore, Channing and other Unitarians believed that the world had been progressing morally since the Bible was written and therefore God intended that the complex social evil would be gradually eradicated over time. The New Testament writers did not overtly call for the abolition of slavery because the world was not morally mature enough for such a radical move. Furthermore, if Jesus overtly called for the immediate abolition of slavery, the Roman Empire would have surely crushed the young religion, not allowing the church the opportunity to grow. Instead, in
their wisdom, argued the Unitarians, the New Testament writers wrote about love in such a way that implicitly made slavery untenable. Channing argued that God intended gradually to abolish slavery.\textsuperscript{721}

Such solutions were of course unacceptable to more conservative Christians who believed that the entire Bible was inspired. It seemed unsettling to them that reason and conscience could adjudicate which parts of the Bible were more correct or that the timeless and transcendent word of God could be morally inconsistent. Did not God establish a single unified revelation for all times and places?\textsuperscript{722} Using what J. Albert Harrill calls ―semantical subterfuge,‖ some abolitionists who maintained their commitment to Scripture attempted to maintain a literal interpretation of the Bible and escape the embarrassing suggestion that the Bible supported slavery. For example, Theodore Weld and George Cheever, despite all historical evidence to the contrary, denied that the Old Testament and first-century Jews ever owned slaves.\textsuperscript{723} Thus, Jesus' silence on the matter should not be interpreted as approval. However, most Christians did not need to resort to elaborate and contorted interpretations. Most preferred the decidedly intellectually unsophisticated argument that the pious and learned translators of the King James Bible never translated the Greek word \textit{doulos} as slave but only as servant. Therefore, Jesus,


\textsuperscript{722} Noll, —Bible and Slavery,” 44-45, 51-52.

they concluded, never encountered slavery.\textsuperscript{724} As historian Molly Oshatz observes, “The hermeneutical lengths to which Christian abolitionists were willing to go to avoid the conclusion that the Hebrews practiced slavery under God’s watch demonstrated the depth of their commitment to the universality and unchangeability of moral law as reflected in the Bible.”\textsuperscript{725}

Though Stuart was opposed to slavery, he was also devoted to his principles of philology and biblical interpretation. He found the conservative interpretation that there were no slaves in the New Testament world untenable. He could never support a “strained or unnatural interpretation” in order to reconcile the Bible to the moral needs of the modern reader or resolve an apparent inconsistency.\textsuperscript{726} Oddly enough, he agreed with the Unitarian Channing in his belief that the writers of the New Testament hoped to abolish slavery through principle rather than explicit precept. However, he did not believe that reason and conscience could adjudicate which parts of the Bible were more true than others because he held that all parts of the Bible were inspired. How then could Stuart argue that the Bible opposed slavery when the inspired biblical writers did not condemn the practice in their midst? Stuart argued that the Bible must be read in a manner that took into account the understanding of morality in the culture of the writers.\textsuperscript{727}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[726] Stuart, \textit{Conscience and the Constitution} (Boston: Crocker & Brewster, 1850), and idem, “Hints Respecting Commentaries Upon the Scriptures,” \textit{Biblical Repository} 3, no. 9 (1833): 140.
\end{footnotes}
For example, the biblical account states that Moses instituted rules to regulate the practice of slavery. However, Stuart argued that Moses intended to ameliorate the brutality of slavery gradually. When Moses came out of Egypt and gave laws to the Hebrews, he declared that male slaves would be free after six years. No such provisions were given to female slaves. However, forty years later, on the borders of the promised land, he declared that female slaves would also be free after six years. Why did Moses wait forty years to make this declaration? Stuart argued that this was a matter of culture and development. The “universal degradation [of women] in the East, rendered [the equal treatment of male and female slaves] revolting to the Jews, and quite impractical.” However, Moses had been “moulding [sic] the manners and customs of the Hebrew nation for forty years” to prepare them for the improved treatment of female slaves.728

Just as the Hebrews’ understanding of women improved over the course of forty years, humanity had been progressing morally over the centuries, argued Stuart. Moses allowed slavery as a concession to the moral immaturity of the age. His people were not prepared for the emancipation of all slaves. Stuart argued that despite being the recipients of God’s grace and revelation, they were still people of their time. To expect the Jews to accept immediate emancipation given their cultural context was simply unreasonable.

728 Stuart, Conscience and Constitution, 29.
Slavery and brutality prevailed in the ancient near east. The Mosaic legislation was, by comparison, quite humane.

Compare all this now with the laws of Moses. Does it now not lie on the very face of his legislation, that he far outstripped all the legislation and sages of antiquity? How came he, issuing from Egypt, the very hot-bed of polytheism and slavery, to know so much about the right of men, and to do so much for the interests of humanity? There is but one satisfactory answer to these questions; and this is, that he had light from above.\(^{729}\)

Moses’ slavery laws were quite progressive given the historical and cultural context. Stuart argued that “the Mosaic dispensation was a preparatory one, and not a complete, perfect, or permanent one.” It was intended for a morally primitive era. Therefore Moses’ permission for slavery simply did not apply to the modern age.\(^{730}\)

The same logic applied to the toleration of slavery in the New Testament. Stuart argued, like Channing, that Christ and his apostles chose to abolish slavery through principles instead of explicit precepts. Christ “doubtless felt, that slavery might be made a very tolerable condition, nay, even a blessing to such as were shiftless and helpless, in case of kind and gentle mastership.” Christ decided that slavery should be tolerated for the time being, but “took care to utter truths and establish principles, which in their gradual influence and operation would banish slavery from the face of the earth.” The writers of the New Testament adapted their message to the cultural and moral state of the age. Also, Stuart argued, Christ and the writers of the New Testament did not abolish slavery immediately for pragmatic reasons. Like Channing, Stuart believed that the New

\(^{729}\) Ibid., 37.

\(^{730}\) Ibid., 36-7. My emphasis.
Testament writers tolerated slavery as a pragmatic concession to contemporary needs. If Christ and the apostles declared that all slaves must be freed, then the whole power of the Roman government would have been brought down upon it, to crush it in the bud, and never to suffer it again to rise up. Paul, Peter, and other disciples, thought it best to wait with patience for the greater prevalence of Christianity and its more matured state, before they urged obligations on masters to free their servants.\footnote{Ibid., 46, 56.}

Some more conservative voices took issue with Stuart’s belief in moral progress. Charles Hodge, a conservative Presbyterian, opposed the contention that Christ avoided the immediate abolition of slavery to avoid strife and bloodshed in the first century. He also disputed the notion that human nature and the moral maturity of people were different from one age to another. ‘Is human nature so much altered, that a course, which would have produced universal bloodshed, and led to the very destruction of the Christian religion, in one age, is wise and Christian in another?’\footnote{Charles Hodge, ‘Review of ‘Slavery’ by William Ellery Channing,” The Biblical Repertory and Theological Review 8, no. 2: 283.} Stuart was not a full-fledged historicist, but more than Hodge, he believed that people shaped by distant times and cultures perceived moral issues in profoundly different ways. Clearly, Stuart had been more open to and influenced by the ideas of German scholars such as Eichhorn.

Stuart believed that the immediate audience of the biblical writers did not conceive of the world in the same manner as the modern reader. They were morally immature. Therefore, without the aid of a properly trained historical scholar, some of revelation’s meaning was inaccessible to the average reader. The exacting and scientific
historical reconstruction of the biblical scholar demonstrated how culturally remote and distant the world of the biblical writer was from the modern reader. In previous generations, theology or the light of the Holy Spirit closed any perceived historical gap between the biblical writer and the modern reader. The reader enjoyed a sense of intimacy and immediacy with the Bible. But Stuart rejected any notion that the Spirit enlightened the Christian reader by supernatural means.

Stuart threaded a difficult needle. On the one hand, he believed that the whole of the Bible was inspired. The Christian, Stuart believed, was not permitted to believe that he had wisdom above the inspired writers. The entire Bible was inspired. Historical context provided the solution. Stuart argued that Christ and his apostles fully understood that slavery should be abolished. However, the first-century culture in which they were living had not morally progressed to the point where they could reasonably abolish slavery. The writers of the New Testament accommodated their revelation to the pragmatic considerations of their times, and the Bible needed to be interpreted within its historical context. To be sure, Stuart’s historical hermeneutic should be distinguished from that of the late eighteenth-century German critics such as Semler, Eichhorn, and Gabler. They argued that the biblical record was accommodated to the cultural limitations of the time and place of its writers. The Germans argued that the writers were unaware of their own limitations. They themselves were blinded by their culture. Stuart never went that far. He believed that the inspired writers transcended their culture. Nonetheless, Stuart believed that the human race was in a state of continual moral progress, the immediate audience of the biblical writers was part of this evolution, and their culture determined their moral maturity. The culture limited and constrained the writing of the
inspired writers. Of course Stuart believed that the Bible was a transcendent revelation, but his hermeneutic increasingly made it a product of its historical moment.

Stuart’s hermeneutic illustrates the gradually increasing domination of philology and history in the interpretation of the Bible over the course of the eighteenth and the first half of the nineteenth century. Although Stuart represents the more conservative end of the spectrum of theological views in the early nineteenth century, he rejected the views typified by Jonathan Edwards when he denied that the Holy Spirit’s illumination was a prerequisite for reading the Bible and claimed that theological considerations must be put aside in the interpretation of the Bible. The meaning of the Bible became accessible, not by recourse to supernatural means or intuitions, but through dispassionate empirical examination. The Bible might have been composed by supernatural means, but its interpretation became thoroughly natural. Both Norton and Stuart might have been partly correct in their assertion that in an increasingly theologically diverse age, philology was one of the few common languages people could speak about the Bible. Consequently, the Bible might have been the final authority, but the tools of philological and historical interpretation increasingly became the arbiter over the Bible’s meaning.

Stuart was of course not fully historicist in his hermeneutic. He believed that alien cultural settings had a profound effect on the writers, but he did not believe that the writing could be completely reduced to a product of its historical setting. Rather the writers were inspired and could transcend the morality and ideas of their culture. However, their message was tailored to an audience that was not inspired and their words needed to be interpreted accordingly. He attempted to utilize historicist methods for orthodox ends. But historicism would prove to be an unreliable ally. Historian Grant
Wacker contends that interpreting the Bible increasingly through lenses of historicism lay at the heart of the twentieth-century division between fundamentalist and liberals. Historicist critics continued to undermine the Bible’s traditional conception as transcendent and timeless revelation and portray the Bible as marred by errors, prejudices, ignorance, and limitations of its human authors and their primitive cultures. During the next hundred years after Stuart, American biblical scholars such as William Rainey Harper, Charles Augustus Briggs, and Shirley Jackson Case would push historicism in far more radical directions that would have shocked Stuart. Furthermore, the theory of moral progress became fundamental to the development of late nineteenth-century liberal Protestantism developed by theologians such as Newman Smyth, Lyman Abbott, and Theodore Munger.  

733 Grant Wacker argues that historicism or historical consciousness lay at the heart of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century liberal theology. He writes, “The contrast to the assumptions undergirding conservative Protestantism could not have been sharper. Conservatives typically claimed that some parts of God’s self-revelation escaped the grip of history. For them, knowledge of divine things was imposed upon history, mediated by human authors to be sure, but uncontaminated by the context in which it was received. This meant that revelation is subject to clarification, but not development. It also meant that biblical writers were partly ahistorical persons, in significant respects transcending the settings of their lives in the ancient world. Indeed, it could be argued that this insistence that the method and content of revelation were not a function merely of historical process stood at the core of what came to be known, especially in the United States, as fundamentalism.” Grant Wacker, “The Demise of Biblical Civilization” in The Bible in America: Essays in Cultural History, ed. Nathan Hatch and Mark Noll (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 127. See also idem, Augustus H. Strong and the Dilemma of Historical Consciousness (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1985). For the ways moral progress undermined traditional certainties, see Oshatz, “The Problem of Moral Progress.”
CONCLUSION

From the early eighteenth-century Puritan Cotton Mather to the early nineteenth-century Unitarian Andrews Norton, the scholarly Americans discussed in this dissertation increasingly subjected their sacred revelation to rational, empirical, and universally accessible examination. They did so in part to answer the challenges that skeptics leveled against the Bible. Skeptics, deists, and German critics, in various ways, challenged the factual accuracy, historicity, and authority of the Bible. They challenged the possibility of prophecies and miracles. The American apologists all defended the notion that the Bible was sacred revelation. However, in light of the ever increasing attacks and the changing standards that constituted legitimate knowledge, they felt pressure to do so on evidentiary grounds. They believed that they could no longer take for granted that everyone assumed that the Bible’s truth and status were self-authenticating and self-evident. The apologists, like their skeptical enemies, subjected the Bible to examination by a variety of disciplines. Both sides believed that evidence of the Scripture’s authenticity needed to be accessible to any intelligent and unprejudiced mind. However, these apologists tacitly conceded some of the argument to their enemies. The authenticity and authority of the Bible could no longer be based primarily on dogmatic authority, tradition, or spiritual intuition.
Increasingly, the status and meaning of the text became subject to a growing body of disciplines such as history, philology, and natural science, and the Bible needed to meet new standards of evidence. Initially, theology still dominated. Defenders marshaled empirical evidence to support traditional theological views, but rarely did evidence seriously challenge older certainties. When necessary, they bent external evidence to confirm traditional interpretations of the Bible. However, gradually, the prestige, and influence of history, science, and philology grew. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, where there were apparent conflicts, the Bible had to be interpreted in such a way as to be consistent with new findings.

However, this new evidentiary approach to the Bible showed signs of tensions even in the early eighteenth century. Cotton Mather believed that the challenge of the skeptics needed to be answered on empirical grounds. He confidently declared in 1712, “How gloriously do we pursue our Victory over Infidelity! We have seized the Enemy’s Cannon, & we now turn it all upon themselves.” His commitment to his traditional Puritan theological heritage forced him to bend the historical and scientific evidence to confirm his interpretation of the Bible in peculiar if not strained ways. For example, to maintain his belief in a universal flood in light of the impressive historical records of the Chinese, he concluded that China’s first emperor was in fact Noah. On the face of the evidence alone, this was a broad speculative leap. However, Mather believed that the biblical history was literally and universally true. Thus the Chinese historical annals needed to be brought in line with the biblical account.

But Mather's commitment to the evidence of history challenged his traditional view of the Bible in a few cases. He questioned a literal interpretation of some Old Testament miracles. He speculated that Joshua’s record of the sun standing in the middle of the sky could have been a poetic device or the primitive perception of the author. For the most part, Mather appropriated evidence to support his traditional view of the Bible. Nevertheless, building the defense of the Bible on empirical evidence yielded mixed results. Using evidence to verify the Bible's authenticity was beneficial only as long as the conclusion of the historical examination supported traditional beliefs. However, tying the Bible to history would yield unforeseen results.

Jonathan Edwards seemed particularly aware of this potential danger. He certainly explored the ways in which historical evidence confirmed the biblical record. For example, he argued that the Bible met the modern standards of reliable historical testimony and that textual evidence supported Mosaic authorship. Such evidence was in his words “valuable.” However, he ultimately believed that empirical evidence was only probabilistic. The Bible was a spiritual book, and true knowledge could only come when God opened the believer’s eyes. Jonathan Dickinson for the most part agreed with Edwards but was more willing to commit the Bible to the empirical standards of his day.

Mather, Edwards, and Dickinson, to a degree, allowed the Bible to be examined by a variety of disciplines. They believed that if one treated it like any other historical and ancient text, Scripture would hold its own. Evidence would only confirm what they already knew by the Spirit. They of course had their limits and were more likely to interpret the evidence to fit their theological commitments. Their conclusions were ultimately accountable to their theological commitments. They held, to varying degrees,
that independent examination could affirm the validity of the Bible, but the status of the Bible was never fully dependent on its approval. The Bible occupied a privileged seat.

Over the course of the second half of the eighteenth century, the scholarly pastors associated with Harvard College gradually grew to conceptualize the Bible in increasingly naturalistic ways. In response to the Great Awakening, Charles Chauncy, Jonathan Mayhew, and the liberals grew less comfortable with what they perceived as enthusiasm and claims of “divine inspiration.” Instead, they sought an increasingly rational theology and embraced natural religion. Scripture remained for them a special revelation from God. However, the truth that the Bible revealed became less exclusive. They closed the conceptual distance between the Bible and other revelation as both were subject to historical and empirical scrutiny. In their minds, biblical truth became more available and accountable to universally accessible and rational means. This evidentiary turn only accelerated in the following century.

In the eighteenth century, apologists primarily used evidence to argue that the Bible was compatible with the findings of history and science. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, Unitarians Joseph Buckminster and Andrews Norton began to interpret the Bible as a product of a truly alien and distant culture. They used history to vindicate its status as revelation, but also to uncover what they perceived to be its true meaning. History did not validate its perceived meaning. Rather, it potentially revealed its original meaning, which could be at odds with Calvinist orthodoxy. Only a historical and philological examination of the biblical text could reveal the original intention of the author that could have been lost or distorted over the distance of centuries and culture. Norton in particular adamantly rejected any attempt to interpret Scripture based on
anachronistic theological assumptions or a special spiritual sense granted by supernatural means. These, he believed, were alien and ahistorical interpretations imposed upon an ancient text. Meaning needed to emerge exclusively from the text and the intention of the author. The theologian must yield to the philologist. Norton was part of a long trend. Over the previous century, the Bible became increasingly accountable to authorities other than theologians. Evidence of its veracity and meaning needed to be accessible by ordinary and universal standards.

The impulse rationally to scrutinize the Bible was not only an attempt to shield Holy Writ from the arrows of skeptics. Theological leaders turned to history to create order and consensus. Due in part to the cultural upheaval of the First Great Awakening, the Revolutionary War, and the formation of a new nation, most Americans became less deferential and more independent. By the middle of the eighteenth century, Americans generally rejected the authority of tradition, of mediating elites, and of organizations that were perpetual rather than volitional. Furthermore, because of its peculiar nature, America was far more religiously pluralistic than most European nations. By the end of the eighteenth century, as Nathan Hatch argues, the varieties of Christianity grew exponentially due to the Second Great Awakening. A proliferation of new leaders felt free to interpret the Bible as they wished. Some claimed new revelations and unique spiritual insights. Many of the freelance religious entrepreneurs felt little accountability to the role of history, theology, or the collective will of churches. Biblical interpretation was following the same egalitarian trends driving American culture. Consequently, during the late eighteenth century, a revolution had taken place that made private judgment the
ultimate tribunal for the exposition of Scripture.” Americans felt entitled to choose from a wide and diverse Christian menu.

Without an established state religion and unable to coerce belief, many leaders turned to Scottish Common Sense philosophy to establish a common minimal consensus about the Bible as authoritative revelation. As Christopher Grasso writes,

Public champions of Christianity realized that … making the United States a Christian nation would require more than the simple perpetuation of a religious heritage. To maintain Christianity as the foundation of a nation that rejected traditional authority by appealing to self-evident truths, many American Protestants felt compelled to defend scripture by invoking common sense, insisting that the Bible’s divine origin was obvious to any sensible person. The Bible’s defenders argued that the truth of the Scriptures was available to all people of common sense and reason and not merely the elect or those blessed with privileged spiritual senses. A diverse society necessitated broadly accessible means of being convinced of the Bible’s divine authority.

Similarly, scholars such as Buckminster, Norton, and Stuart turned to the language of evidence and history to curb the interpretive independence and chaos of their world. In the Second Great Awakening, unbridled interpretations were spinning out of control. In this context of ever-expanding hermeneutical possibilities, one can understand the impulse to despiritualize the interpretations of the Bible. Multiple interpretations,
based on individual insights, ultimately undermined the Bible’s claims to authority. Thus, in their attempt to protect the plausibility of the claim that the Bible was a supernatural revelation, they sought to discipline its interpretation, making the text subject to universally accessible and rational criteria. Doing so yielded mixed results. The hermeneutic of Norton did not negate the Bible’s status as supernatural revelation, but it certainly strained it.
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