THE SCIENCE OF THE BIBLE IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY AMERICA:
FROM “COMMON SENSE” TO CONTROVERSY, 1820-1900

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Michael L. Kamen, B.A., M.A.

James Turner, Director

Graduate Program in History
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Abstract

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The controversy surrounding the historical criticism of the Bible in late nineteenth-century America can be understood by examining approaches to the Bible among Protestant intellectuals between 1820 and 1900. The scholarly study of the Bible lay near the heart of American intellectual life during the nineteenth century, and, for much of the century, learned discourse more or less presumed the timelessness and certitude of biblical revelation. From the early years of the century, the Scottish philosophy of Common Sense armed American theologians with an effective apologetic by which to defend Christianity from the dangers associated with German biblical criticism and other threats. But the weapons of the Common Sense apologetic, ironically, became a stumbling block to many Protestant intellectuals, especially during the second half of the nineteenth century, because its assumptions increasingly pitted the modern disciplines against the older science of the Bible. Responses to the modern disciplines, especially geology and Darwinian evolution, sapped the older Common Sense approach and encouraged concessions among American scholars to historicist approaches, making the menace of German biblical criticism seem real for the first time.
After 1870, concerns about the encroachments of philosophical naturalism, associated with Darwinian theory, exacerbated concerns about the naturalistic overtones of historical biblical criticism. These worries sharpened reactions to German criticism among American Protestant intellectuals. As an increasing number of Protestant intellectuals accommodated themselves to the historical, “scientific” understanding of the Bible, other Protestant intellectuals, maintaining the older scriptural apologetic, attacked these innovations as antithetical to divine revelation. Both sides, however, saw their efforts as defending the Bible’s relevance to the modern world. Moreover, these debates provided one of the chief avenues by which historicist assumptions about human culture infiltrated American intellectual life: large numbers of Americans, both the educated and the ordinary, encountered the claims of historicism most directly or for the first time in the arena of conflict over biblical criticism.

As a work of history, this project relies primarily on research in the personal papers and published essays of American Protestant intellectuals, especially theologians and biblical scholars in the Unitarian, Congregationalist, and Presbyterian denominations.
To my parents, Donald and Elaine Kamen.

Your gifts of patience, generosity, and love have helped me in life more than you will know.
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INTRODUCTION

In 1893, the General Assembly of the northern Presbyterian Church convicted Charles Augustus Briggs of heresy. Briggs, an ordained Presbyterian minister, was a leading biblical scholar in the nation’s mainline Presbyterian denomination. He had served since 1874 as a professor at the Union Theological Seminary in New York City, an important Presbyterian institution, and was appointed to a newly established chair in biblical theology in 1890. In keeping with a longstanding academic tradition, Briggs in 1891 delivered an inaugural address to mark his induction.¹

That oration, though nearly two hours in length, resulted in anything but a staid academic exercise. On the contrary, it was electrifying. It sparked fires of theological controversy that, within a matter of months, had engulfed several governing bodies of

Briggs’s denomination, roused church leaders, enflamed the religious and secular press, and seared hearts among the reading public across the English-speaking world. Before the conflagration was out, Briggs had endured a two-year ordeal that climaxed in his removal from ordained Presbyterian office and resulted in the dissolution of Union Seminary’s ties with the Presbyterian Church.

The topic of the address, “The Authority of Holy Scripture,” had been potentially explosive from the outset. At the insistence of the president of Union Seminary’s governing board, Briggs had elected to address some of the major issues confronting the Presbyterian Church in his day, particularly the so-called “higher criticism” of the Bible. The “higher,” or historical, criticism entailed the application of literary and historical scholarship to the study of the Bible. During roughly the previous hundred years, historical biblical scholarship had developed into a highly specialized discipline in several universities of Europe, especially Germany. The conclusions of the historical critics had slowly been revolutionizing traditional understandings of the Bible on the Continent, and their influence in recent years had begun to spread noticeably to the English-speaking world, as well.² This new form of historical biblical study, along with a related movement

to revise the Presbyterians’ Westminster Confession of Faith, had been agitating American Presbyterians for a number of years already. By the time of Briggs’s inaugural in 1891, the historical criticism of the Bible had already become a flashpoint of controversy in American Protestantism.³

Briggs, however, had not intended to agitate his audience. Years after the fact, he remembered his address as an effort “to maintain and to assert in the strongest terms the divine authority of Holy Scripture in connection with a full recognition of the results of modern Biblical criticism and modern thought in all departments.”⁴ Briggs had wanted to save the Bible, so to speak, from the intellectual threats of the modern world. In his

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⁴ This point is made particularly clearly in Ferenc Morton Szasz, The Divided Mind of Protestant America, 1880-1930 (University, Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1982), 1-41.

address itself, he recognized a pervasive fear among American Christians that “[t]he progress of criticism in our day has so undermined and destroyed the pillars of authority upon which former generations were wont to rest that agnosticism seems to many minds the inevitable result of scientific investigation.” The modern science of historical criticism, Briggs acknowledged, had badly corroded the once unquestioned foundations of Christian faith for many Americans. He wanted passionately to reconcile the new criticism with the heart-felt evangelicalism that he and the majority of American theologians still held dear.

Briggs’s assessment of the corrosive effects of historical criticism was apt. To many Americans during the final decades of the nineteenth century, the conclusions of historical biblical criticism had, in fact, eaten away at the pillars that once seemed to support the edifice of evangelical Christianity so securely. Many observers genuinely feared that science resulted inevitably in agnosticism — or at least that modern knowledge demanded a serious re-thinking of religious certitudes once taken for granted. Biblical criticism, natural science, and modern thought, generally, seemed at times to conspire against Christianity as American Protestants had typically understood it. By many accounts, the notion of the Bible as divine revelation — an idea which traditionally had implied the Bible’s internal coherence, its articulation through God’s chosen authors, and its factual reliability — appeared irretrievably lost.6

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6 Several historians have suggested these ramifications of historical biblical criticism. See, for example, Neil, “Criticism and Theological Use of the Bible”; Mark A. Noll, Between Faith and Criticism: Evangelicals, Scholarship, and the Bible in America
Briggs intended his address to assure listeners that this was not the case. But Briggs shored up these biblical foundations in a way that many American theologians, and probably the majority of Protestant church leaders, regarded as suspect, even unorthodox. Most notably, Briggs argued that God had made his presence known, not through the Bible alone, but through “three great fountains of divine authority”: the Bible, the Church, and the Reason. As one later historian assessed, Briggs seemed to imply that these three sources of divine authority were equally important and even mutually independent.\(^7\) The insinuation, intended or not, struck many of Briggs’s hearers as a challenge to the uniqueness and centrality of the Bible for the knowledge of God. Thus interpreted, Briggs’s address weakened this cardinal tenet of Protestant religion, one that had enjoyed an especially prominent place in nineteenth-century American theology.\(^8\)

Worse yet, Briggs’s critics maintained, were his depictions of contemporary obstacles to the divine authority of the Bible. Such obstacles, Briggs argued, frequently resulted from theologians’ insistence on views contrary to modern knowledge and biblical scholarship. These obstacles included, among other things, “bibliolatry,” or the elevation

\(^7\) Loetscher, *Broadening Church*, 51.

of the Bible as an object of veneration. True veneration, Briggs asserted, belonged to the
God of the Bible, not to the Bible itself, and he implied that American theologians and
church leaders generally had fallen into error on this point. A second obstacle he discussed
was theologians’ insistence on authenticating scripture by proving the authors’ special God-
given authority. Authorship offered a feeble apologetic, at best, Briggs argued. The actual
authors of large portions of the Bible could never be known, due to the great age and
murky provenance of the writings, and tradition was no reliable guide as to who had
written what.

A third obstacle to the operation of divine authority in the Bible, Briggs argued,
was the doctrine verbal inspiration, the notion that God’s influence over the biblical
authors extended to the authors’ very choice of words. Every word of the original
documents was equally inspired. This doctrine, Briggs believed, was neither the historic
doctrine of the Christian church, nor was it an idea that made much sense. The biblical
texts everywhere showed evidence of God’s general inspiration, but not the divine
inspiration of each and every word. The biblical authors displayed all the limitations of
their humanity, and it was foolish to ask modern readers to believe otherwise.

Still other barriers to divine authority in the Bible were the supposition of the
Bible’s inerrancy, the insistence that biblical miracles necessarily violated the laws of nature,
and the belief in the specificity of the Bible’s prophetic predictions. Briggs argued that
these and other obstacles contravened the dictates of evidence and reason, alike. The true
nature and message of the Bible were thereby obscured, and readers were prevented from
hearing the true divine voice speaking through the scriptures.
And Briggs did not stop there. He articulated several additional ideas that some members of his audience found deeply troubling. For example, Briggs saw Jesus Christ as the Messiah, but imagined him in much more earthly terms than had been the case for most American Christians. Briggs saw him not as completely different from other human beings, but as the culmination of a broad moral development that had encompassed all the people of Old Testament history who had preceded him. Briggs also argued that church divines had often exaggerated human sinfulness. He argued that the middle state between one’s death and the resurrection was a time of progressive sanctification during which one was made ready for final judgment. And he assumed that Moses had not written the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Hebrew scriptures, which were traditionally ascribed to that author. In each of these areas, Briggs challenged widely held beliefs about the origins, nature, and theology of the Bible, and, instead, endorsed conclusions common among the European historical critics. He added insult to this injury by charging holders of opposing positions with standing in the way of divine truth.

By arguing these things, Briggs succeeded spectacularly well in his effort to confront the issues pressing on American Protestants near the end of the nineteenth century. As Briggs’s heresy trial exemplified, these issues were becoming increasingly divisive and frequently held broad ramifications. In fact, the two-year ordeal that resulted from Briggs’s inaugural address only revealed in stark relief a more general spirit of anxiety and controversy over the historical criticism of the Bible during the late Victorian era.

This spirit of controversy reached across a broad spectrum of American Protestantism. As early as 1875, the case of William Robertson Smith, an Old Testament scholar in the Free Church College at Aberdeen, Scotland, riveted Americans’ attention on
the results of recent historical criticism. Smith’s growing engagement with German
theology and biblical criticism during the 1870s produced a storm of controversy that led
to two official inquiries in the courts of the Scottish Free Church. Smith’s article on the
“Bible” in a new edition of the Encyclopaedia Britannica presented a sympathetic summary
of the theories of Julius Wellhausen, an important Old Testament critic working then at the
University Greifswald. Smith, in effect, endorsed Wellhausen’s contention that distinct,
sometimes disparate, literary traditions had been woven together into the first five books of
the Bible. This work of redaction had occurred at several distinct times in Israel’s ancient
past. The Pentateuch, therefore, could not have been written by Moses, and it was not,
strictly speaking, a factually reliable account of history. These conclusions collided with the
view of the Old Testament cherished in the churches of the Anglo-American world, and
Smith’s publication of them resulted in a five-year-long controversy that ended his career in
the Scottish Free Church. The lengthy proceedings against Smith attracted widespread
attention in the American religious press, as well, and Smith’s fellow Presbyterians on this
side of the Atlantic followed his trials with rapt attention. Moreover, Smith’s efforts as a
biblical scholar directly inspired Briggs to champion the higher criticism in America, and
Briggs, in turn, did more than probably anyone else to make higher criticism the object of
public controversy on these shores.10

9 For a brief introduction to Wellhausen, see Rudolf Smend, “Julius Wellhausen,”
Deutsche Biographische Enzyklopädie, vol. 10, ed. Walther Killy and Rudolf Vierhaus
(Munich: K. G. Saur, 1999), 425-426. See also Douglas A. Knight, ed., Julius Wellhausen
and his Prolegomena to the History of Israel, (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1983).

America”; Nigel M. de S. Cameron, “William Robertson Smith,” Dictionary of Scottish
Church History and Theology, ed. Cameron and others (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark,
1993), 782-783; Peterson, “American Protestantism and the Higher Criticism.” The
Similar controversies reached Baptist circles in the person of William Rainey Harper. Harper was probably one of the most influential figures in late-century discussions about the historical criticism of the Bible. Trained as a Hebrew scholar, Harper enjoyed a long career that included a professorship in the Yale divinity school, the presidency of the University of Chicago, the editorship of two journals he founded, the supervision of his own Hebrew Correspondence School, and a regular schedule of summer lectures at Chautauqua. These many endeavors served as his platform to promote the historical-critical method. Harper’s abiding passion was to reconcile its results with the spirit of evangelical Christianity, and he enjoyed fairly wide latitude, from an institutional standpoint, to champion its benefits. Harper thus became one of the most effective popularizers of the higher criticism in America during this period.


12 Ira V. Brown, “Higher Criticism Comes to America”; Peterson, “American Protestantism and the Higher Criticism.”
But his personal correspondence was rife with controversy over his efforts. On the one hand, some of Harper’s correspondents were like one woman who heard him at Chautauqua. She believed Harper “could come as near [to] convincing an honest unbeliever of the truth of the revelations [of the Bible] . . . as any one I have met.”13 Another writer acknowledged the “sweet, manly, Christian spirit” that Harper maintained even in the face of “unjust,” “hasty,” and “unreasonable” criticism.14 But at the same time a reader of Harper’s Old Testament Student criticized him for publishing an article by Crawford H. Toy, another exponent of historical criticism; the least Harper could have done, in this man’s mind, was to include “an emphatic disclaimer of [Toy’s] position and tone.”15 Another correspondent pointed out that Harper’s views on the historicity of Genesis had been roundly criticized by the St. Louis Observer under the heading, “A Baptist Heresy Brewing.”16 Still another correspondent attacked Harper directly, writing in a letter to him, “I can’t believe that a man who is President of a University endowed by Christian men . . . can so far lapse from the high position which he holds, as to throw a [single] doubt on the Word of God.”17 Proponents of historical biblical criticism, even in Harper’s self-consciously “evangelical” form, found it difficult to escape controversy during these years.


14 J. O. Staples to Harper, March 30, 1894, WRHP, Box 2 #4.

15 William Arnold Stevens to Harper, December 24, 1888, WRHP, Box 1 #7.

16 L. A. Johnson to Harper, March 9, 1894, WRHP, Box 2 #3.

17 A. E. Harmon to Harper, February 19, 1894, WRHP, Box 2 #3.
Less influential but even more controversial than Harper was Crawford H. Toy, an Old Testament scholar at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville. In 1879 Toy was threatened with formal investigation for teaching the views of Abraham Kuenen, an Old Testament scholar at the University of Leiden, and Julius Wellhausen, the Old Testament scholar then working at Greifswald. Kuenen, like Wellhausen, was an Old Testament critic of signal importance, and Toy resigned his position in Louisville rather than ignore the controversial conclusions of these eminent scholars.\(^\text{18}\) Similarly, Hinckley G. Mitchell, a Methodist, promoted the historical criticism of the Old Testament as a professor of Latin and Hebrew at the Boston University School of Theology. Mitchell served from 1882 to 1888 as the secretary of the newly established professional organization dedicated to biblical scholarship, the Society of Biblical Literature, and he edited that organization’s scholarly journal. The Methodist bishops accused Mitchell of “Unitarian” sympathies because he, just as Briggs and Smith, denied Moses’ authorship of the Pentateuch. Mitchell eventually lost his professorship in Boston and later joined the faculty of the Universalist school, Tufts College.\(^\text{19}\)

In the Episcopal Church, Heber Newton, the rector of All Soul’s in New York City, published a series of sermons in 1883 on *The Right and Wrong Uses of the Bible*. Newton argued that the current climate of controversy in the Protestant church centered on the question of whether the Bible was God’s word itself or merely contained God’s


\(^{19}\) Ira V. Brown, “Higher Criticism Comes to America”: 205.
word. Newton drew fire for siding with the historical critics on that question; he argued that the Bible merely contained God’s word, that the Bible was not infallible, and that many judgments of the historical critics were valid. Newton managed to dodge threatened heresy proceedings, but the incident nevertheless drew wide attention. Phillips Brooks, a nationally known Episcopalian rector, commented on the flap over Newton’s book by castigating “the obstinate dishonesty of men who refuse to recognize any of the new light which has been thrown upon the Bible. . . .”20

In a similar vein, the Presbyterian Church in 1892 suspended Henry Preserved Smith, a biblical scholar at Lane Seminary, for advocating the higher criticism in the pages of the Presbyterian Review. Smith eventually lost his professorship.21 Likewise, George Foot Moore, a Presbyterian, made a name for himself as an Old Testament critic at the Congregationalist Andover Seminary during the 1880s and 1890s. Moore quit his Presbyterian ordination after Henry Preserved Smith’s dismissal, rather than risk a similar fate.22 And Arthur Cushman McGiffert, a theologian at New York’s Union Seminary, only avoided a similar investigation for heresy by leaving the Presbyterian Church for Congregationalism.23

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21 Ira V. Brown, “Higher Criticism Comes to America”: 205; Loetscher, Broadening Church, 63-68.

22 Ira V. Brown, “Higher Criticism Comes to America”: 202, 205. See also Peterson, “American Protestantism and the Higher Criticism.”

23 Ira V. Brown, “Higher Criticism Comes to America”: 205; Loetscher, Broadening Church, 71-74; Peterson, “American Protestantism and the Higher Criticism.”
However, Congregationalism was not necessarily a safe haven for advocates of the higher criticism, either. Lyman Abbott, the pastor of Brooklyn’s well-known Plymouth Congregational Church and the editor of the Outlook magazine, provoked severe criticism near the turn of the century when he offered a mild presentation of historical criticism in one of his books. And conservative Congregationalists brought charges against several of the faculty at Andover Seminary over the dissemination of unorthodox views of the Bible during the late Victorian period, as well.

These and other spasms of controversy were symptomatic of the reception of the historical criticism of the Bible in late-Victorian America. During the years spanning, roughly, the 1870s through the turn of the century, Protestant leaders in the United States reinvigorated long-standing debates about the Bible’s “reliability” and “accuracy” as a historical record. They also discussed with unparalleled intensity the compatibility of natural science and the Bible. And, most significantly, they wrestled as never before with the results of the historical-critical method of biblical study, which stood at the center of these controversies.

The controversies surrounding the higher criticism of the Bible were perhaps the most significant feature of what historians have sometimes referred to as the “Victorian crisis of faith.” Several historians have depicted the late nineteenth century as a period of social, intellectual, and religious convulsion in America. Paul Carter’s text on religious

24 Ira V. Brown, “Higher Criticism Comes to America”: 207. See also Peterson, “American Protestantism and the Higher Criticism.”

doubt and spiritual malaise during the decades after the Civil War has been definitive. His *Spiritual Crisis of the Gilded Age* charts some of the wrenching changes in religious expression and belief driven by such things as industrialization, the growing prestige of natural science and technology, and the rising tide of mass education, university-building, and the resulting “intellectualizing” of American life. Carter identifies eight specific sources of religious doubt in America: Darwinian evolution; the social ills spawned by industrialization; religious ecumenism; the new comparative study of world religions; the declining prestige of Christian ministers; and a new questioning of common Victorian assumptions of human goodness, human immortality, and “progress.” Carter argues that the crises of the late nineteenth century resulted not so much from an absolute decline in religious feeling and practice, but from the fracturing of the essential unity of ecclesiastical and secular institutions under the weight of these contemporary pressures. Thus, the growth of fundamentalism, Pentecostalism, and a statistical rise in church membership accompanied a simultaneous, large-scale move away from supernatural religion. While this move by no means encompassed all Christian adherents, religious culture and tens of thousands of its members newly sensed that traditional religious understandings and institutions had been cut adrift from their familiar moorings. More particularly, Carter’s book implies that the Yankee heirs of the old Protestant denominations largely experienced the Victorian spiritual crisis as the decline in prominence of their Boston-centered, New England culture.

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In a similar vein, D. H. Meyer identifies the “thoroughgoing and unsettling” “crisis of faith” that beset intellectuals and cultural spokespersons during the late Victorian period. Though Meyer accepts the now-debunked notion that science and religion were at war throughout the nineteenth century, he nevertheless identifies several challenges to religious authority posed by the emergence of a competing scientific authority. His project encompasses a much narrower scope than Carter’s, but points to similar conclusions: among Victorian intellectuals, the fountain of religious doubt and uncertainty flowed deep and wide.\(^\text{27}\)

Other literatures have charted related aspects of intellectual, religious, and cultural change in Anglo-American culture during the latter half of the nineteenth century. James Turner’s \textit{Without God, Without Creed} explains the emergence of unbelief in God as a sound, coherent perspective. In short, Turner argues that Reformed theologians and apologists since the seventeenth century had linked theology to science as a means of grounding the existence of God on empirical, rational proofs from design in nature. As science became increasingly naturalistic during the nineteenth century, religion was left with a strong allegiance to a natural science that no longer declared the handiwork of God in creation. New scientific disciplines and their findings, especially Darwinian evolution, undermined empirical proofs for the existence of God. Thus, natural science facilitated the emergence of unbelief as a viable intellectual position.\(^\text{28}\)


Similarly, T. J. Jackson Lears’s *No Place of Grace* posits that late Victorian culture was moving in an increasingly secular, materialistic, consumption-oriented direction. Growing numbers of old-stock, Protestant “custodians” of American culture felt pressed by these developments, Lears argues. Confronted with a creeping secular materialism, many struggled to preserve a “place of grace” in modern culture. Victorian “antimodernists” reacted to secular cultural trends by seeking out more intense forms of physical and spiritual experience that they supposed medieval and eastern cultures embodied. Modern secular culture deserves the blame for the Victorian antimodernists’ predicament: their desire for intense experience resulted from the disappearance of a “place of grace” in modern culture, and the only genuine solution, Lears suggests, would have been the defeat of secularism.

The list of scholarship elaborating on various aspects of religion and cultural change in the late nineteenth century goes on. Owen Chadwick has written a masterful account of the secularization of European thought and culture during the nineteenth century.\(^\text{29}\) Bernard Lightman has pinpointed the origins of agnosticism as an articulated epistemological stance.\(^\text{30}\) Basil Willey, Susan Budd, and Robert Wolff have written useful studies of Victorian agnosticism and its reflections in English literature and scholarship.\(^\text{31}\)


Other historians have charted the fundamentalist-modernist split, which traces many of its theological and institutional origins to the particular crises of late Victorian religion.\textsuperscript{32} Still others have offered biographical sketches of prominent individuals involved in the Victorian cultural and religious controversies.\textsuperscript{33} Taken together, these and other works create a compelling picture. They form large mosaic depicting an entire intellectual culture beset by a creeping doubt and problematization of belief — one even drifting away from Christian moorings altogether.

Nevertheless, this compelling mosaic lacks a detailed depiction of an image that rightly belongs near the center of the picture: the Bible itself. While scholars have long viewed the last three decades of the nineteenth century as a period of intellectual, religious, and cultural upheaval in the United States, few have treated the important role of debates about biblical criticism in that upheaval. Several historians have charted, with varying degrees of resolution, the contours of biblical scholarship within particular institutions or denominations.\textsuperscript{34} A handful have recognized biblical scholarship as a major point of


\textsuperscript{33} See, for example, Massa, \textit{Charles Augustus Briggs: Wacker, Augustus H. Strong and the Dilemma of Historical Consciousness} (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1985); Shriver, ed., \textit{American Religious Heretics}. Shriver’s volume includes essays about Philip Schaff, Crawford H. Toy, Charles A. Briggs, Borden Parker Bowne, and Algeron S. Crapsey, each of which touches on these men’s views of scripture to some extent.

\textsuperscript{34} See, for example, Ira V. Brown, “Higher Criticism Comes to America.” Despite his comprehensive-sounding title, Brown deals almost exclusively with Northern Presbyterians. See also Robert E. Chiles, \textit{Theological Transition in American Methodism: 1790-1935} (New York: Abingdon Press, 1965); Handy, \textit{History of Union Theological...
contention in some of the famous denominational heresy trials that were both symptom and cause of the Victorian spiritual crisis. Others have suggested the significance of the higher criticism of the Bible in the unraveling of the nineteenth-century American cultural order, dominated as it was by the ethos of evangelical Christianity. And a few have given a fuller treatment of impact of historical criticism in late-Victorian Britain. Still, even in this literature, the prominent lines of debate over biblical criticism in America have not, for the most part, been unfolded carefully or comprehensively, and neither the origins nor the specific timing of these controversies about the Bible have been fully explained. This dissertation helps to complete the picture of religious and intellectual life in nineteenth-century America by filling in some of these missing but vitally important features.

As the foundation of Protestant religion (in theory if not always in practice), the Bible was of immense importance in a culture whose intellectual culture and public discourse were dominated by evangelical Protestantism. The far-reaching intellectual and religious changes pictured in the historiography of late Victorian Anglo-American culture depended, at least in part, on new knowledge that eroded the religious foundations of that

Seminary; Loetscher, Broadening Church; Jack B. Rogers and McKim, The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible: An Historical Approach (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1979); Williams, Andover Liberals.

35 See, for example, Massa, Charles Augustus Briggs; Shriver, ed., American Religious Heretics.

36 See Marsden, Fundamentalism and American Culture, espec. ch. I-II; Noll, Between Faith and Criticism; and Wacker, “Demise of Biblical Civilization.”

37 See Cameron, Biblical Higher Criticism; Riesen, Criticism and Faith; Rogerson, The Bible and Criticism in Victorian Britain; Rogerson, Old Testament Criticism in the Nineteenth Century.
culture. The dictates of modern thought often hammered against traditional understandings of the Bible, and the urgent question facing Victorian Christians was whether the pounding had not cracked, or even crumbled, that biblical foundation.\(^3\)

A major source of concern was the trustworthiness of the Bible’s historical narratives. For example, Charles Lyell’s *Principles of Geology*, first published in 1830, challenged readings of biblical chronology first worked out by the Anglican Archbishop Ussher in the seventeenth century. Using the narratives of the Bible as his guide, Ussher had pieced together a chronology of world history from the moment of creation. Ussher’s chronology spanned a mere 6000 years and, while incomprehensibly brief by later standards, it provided the temporal framework for scholarly reflection in both natural and human history for the subsequent two centuries. Lyell shattered this received biblical chronology by arguing persuasively that the earth was many orders of magnitude older than most intellectuals previously had dared to think.\(^4\)

Lyell’s revolution in geological time, moreover, provided a basis for new thinking about human ethnological and biological history: if the earth had existed for countless ages, so might have human beings. Lyell’s later work on *The Antiquity of Man*, published


in 1863, presumed exactly that. It offered a coherent vision of a nearly immeasurable span of human cultural history. And Charles Darwin’s theories of natural selection and random variation, articulated about the same time, placed biology within the vastly expanded chronological framework Lyell helped establish. This vastly expanded view of human history entailed a significant departure from traditional readings of scripture.

The upset to literalistic interpretations such as Ussher’s came even more strongly from Darwin’s theory of species development. Darwin overthrew literal readings of the first chapters of Genesis by arguing that the species had evolved from one another, from less complex forms to more complex. The ramifications were at least three-fold. First, Darwin called into question the biblical notion that human beings were a unique creation by God in the very image of God — itself a troubling prospect, at least initially, to most Victorian intellectuals. Second, Darwin posited a world more random, more cruel, more wasteful of life than a divinely-engineered world might imply; even if God were responsible for the order of the world, he must not be the benevolent Father that most had supposed. Finally, and more broadly, Darwin undercut the basis of contemporary Christian apologetics. By removing God from the narrative of the origin of species, Darwinian theories made evolution through natural selection the source of order and structure in the biological world; no longer did the apparent design and order in nature imply a Designer and Ordainer. Darwin, in the final analysis, offered a seemingly plausible explanation for the variety of life that undermined theistic explanations and, more importantly, cast long shadows over the biblical narrative of Creation and biblical images of God.\footnote{Neil, “Criticism and Theological Use of the Bible,” 255-265; Szasz, Divided Mind, 1-9; Turner, Without God, Without Creed, 182-186. See also Carter, Spiritual Crisis of the Gilded Age, ch. 2, “The Ape in the Tree of Knowledge,” 23-42. There is a large}
Such intellectual challenges to the Bible were not limited to anthropology, geology, and biology, however. In fact, discoveries in fields spanning the range of knowledge — from geology, archaeology, and philology to biology, comparative religion, and biblical studies — all challenged received understandings of scripture during the nineteenth century. Moreover, these intellectual developments were given strength and stability in a new institutional framework provided by modern research universities. The leaders of the new American research universities strove to foster a project of inquiry that was liberated from traditional religious dogma at points where new learning challenged received notions.

These developments cast lengthening shadows over the Bible as nineteenth-century Americans had typically understood it. But even more unsettling was a broad intellectual revolution that threatened to overthrow several foundational assumptions about the Bible and its place in Western culture. Looked at from a broader vantage point, the Bible was probably only one of the most important battlegrounds in the more general revolution of historicism. At heart, that historical revolution, as one author has summarized it, consisted

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in a “changed understanding of the nature of historical process” itself.\textsuperscript{43} That changed understanding held deep implications for Victorians’ understanding of the Bible.

The historian Georg G. Iggers has described the “core” of historicism as the assumption of a fundamental difference between the phenomena of nature and the phenomena of history. On the one side, the phenomena of nature are devoid of conscious purpose; they simply recur endlessly without regard to time and place.\textsuperscript{44} Thus, the realm of nature, according to those who adopt this philosophy, is best understood through the classification and interpretation of phenomena according the principles of nomothetic rationalism. On the other side, the phenomena of history are comprised of “unique and unduplicable human acts, filled with volition and intent.” Thus, the realm of history, according to the historicist worldview, is one of constant flux. Within this changing stream are the actors of history — institutions, nations, and individual persons, who are the agents of historical change. Yet, even each of these historical agents possesses its own history — its own unique structure, character, and principles of development.\textsuperscript{45}

Thus, according to the historicist outlook, the study of history was the only means of understanding human culture, human institutions, and human events. Ideas, institutions, and even morals were wholly conditioned by the historical settings in which

\textsuperscript{43} Wacker, “Demise of Biblical Civilization,” 125. Similarly, Massa demonstrates that historicism was the central issue in Briggs’s controversies with conservatives in the Northern Presbyterian Church, and Wacker shows the crisis of historicism in the theology of the great Baptist theologian, Augustus H. Strong. See Massa, Charles Augustus Briggs; Wacker, Augustus H. Strong.

\textsuperscript{44} Georg G. Iggers, The German Conception of History: The National Tradition of Historical Thought from Herder to the Present, rev. ed. (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1983), 4-5.

\textsuperscript{45} Ibid.
they had existed. In brief, historicism implied a potentially radical destabilization of the
meaning of events: meaning no longer arose from outside history, independently of the
historical process; it arose, instead, from inside history, forged wholly within the course of
events themselves. From this new perspective, the meaning of events, ideas, and
institutions in the past could be rendered only by explaining the historical origins of those
phenomena.46

These assumptions saturated professional biblical study in Germany during the
nineteenth century. But the roots of modern biblical science can be traced further back in
time. Earlier, the European Renaissance fostered a spirit of inquiry that loosened
intellectual allegiances to medieval conceptions of the Bible as an essentially supernatural
book. Later, Luther, Calvin, and other Reformation leaders encouraged a similar change,
first by engaging in a critical re-reading of the Bible, themselves, and second by
championing the right of private judgment in biblical interpretation against the imposed
authority of the Church.47

During the seventeenth century, European philosophers and theologians only
furthered these nascent trends toward the re-evaluation of the Bible. For example,
Descartes, Hobbes, Spinoza, and Richard Simon variously asserted that the Bible must be


“Criticism and Theological Use of the Bible,” 238-239.
treated like an ancient literary document, maintained reason as the final judge of the Bible’s authority, and questioned Moses’ authorship of the Pentateuch. The work of these men, along with Pierre Bayle in Holland and John Locke in England, laid firm foundations for the rise of rationalistic interpretations of the Bible later, during the eighteenth century.48

Early rationalistic criticism assumed reason’s supremacy in all matters of religion and revelation. But whereas Locke endeavored to show the compatibility of reason and revelation, Bayle made revelation appear patently unreasonable.49 Bayle’s skeptical rationalism supplied early eighteenth-century Deists with a plethora of arguments by which to attack the traditional view of the Bible.50 And attack they did. English Deists of the eighteenth century often scoffed at the absurdities, inferior morality, and cult-like ritualism they believed they found throughout the Bible. Many Deists cited these examples as grounds for rejecting the Bible as divine writ.51 By century’s end, rationalistic opposition to traditional orthodoxy had grown particularly trenchant in the English-speaking world and, by that time, characterized the leaders of the French Enlightenment, as well.52

German biblical scholars took their cues from these eighteenth-century rationalists. But they added to rationalistic criticisms of the Bible a new and increasing appreciation for


50 Ibid., 240.

51 Ibid., 241-249.

historical development. These German efforts produced a radical approach to biblical scholarship during the late eighteenth century that was at once rationalistic, historically-minded, and sensitive to literary considerations.\textsuperscript{53} This was the birth of historical biblical criticism.

An early example were the works of Herman Samuel Reimarus, whose most important writings were published posthumously in Germany by the philosopher and author Gotthold Lessing.\textsuperscript{54} Reimarus, an Orientalist at the Gymnasium in Hamburg, expressed open skepticism for the miraculous elements in the biblical narratives of Jesus' ministry. For example, Reimarus suggested the disciples had stolen the body of Jesus to bolster their fraudulent claims of the Resurrection. Equally shocking, he presented Jesus as the victim of his own deluded Messianic visions. These heterodoxies resounded with a rationalistic inflection. But Reimarus displayed a modern historical and literary sensibility, as well. For example, he recognized the Jewish context out of which the Gospels had arisen, and he noted the eschatological elements woven into the Gospel narratives. These and similar observations helped move biblical interpretation in a modern direction.\textsuperscript{55}


Johann Salomo Semler, a theologian at the University of Halle, was another eighteenth-century pioneer of historical criticism in Germany.\footnote{For lengthier treatments of this most influential figure in modern German biblical criticism, see Eric W. Carlsson, “Johann Salomo Semler, the Protestant Enlightenment, and German Theology’s Historical Turn,” Ph.D. dissertation in progress, University of Wisconsin, Madison; Gottfried Hornig, Die Anfänge der historio-christlichen Theologie: Johann Salomo Semlers Schriftverständnis und seine Stellung zu Luther (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1961); Hornig, Johann Salomo Semler: Studien zu Leben und Werk des Hallenser Aufklärungstheologen (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1996). For brief introductions to Semler and additional bibliographic references, see also Kurt Nowak, “Johann Salomo Semler,” Deutsche Biographische Enzyklopädie, vol. 9, ed. Walther Killy and Rudolf Vierhaus (Munich: K. G. Saur, 1998), 282-283; and Paul Tschackert, “Johann Salomo Semler,” Allgemeine Deutsche Biographie, vol. 33 (Berlin: Duncker and Humblot, 1971 [1891]), 698-704.} Semler’s theories
discarded the Church’s long-held belief in the Bible as an organic, unified whole. In the Old Testament, for example, Semler discovered separate priestly and prophetic textual traditions in dialectical relationship with one another. In the New Testament, similarly, he found evidence of antagonism between early Jewish and Gentile factions in the Church. He also explained the New Testament as an ad hoc collection of documents, the product of historical accident instead of a timeless statement of Christian doctrine. In light of these and other historical considerations, Semler presented the critic’s ultimate task as distinguishing between the temporal and the timeless in the Bible — discarding the temporal and preserving the eternal. On these grounds, he, himself, rejected portions of the New Testament and most of the Old as of little value. Semler’s work provided a great impetus to historical biblical criticism, and his ideas continued to influence Old and New Testament scholars, alike, throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.  

Johann Gottfried Eichhorn, Göttingen’s famed philologist and biblical scholar, was a fourth early figure in German historical criticism. His critical introductions to the Old and New Testaments were particularly influential; his work on the Old Testament, most notably, developed in greater detail recent theories about the composite nature of several Old Testament books. Many scholars were persuaded, for example, by his reconstructions of the source documents presumed to lie behind the first six books of the Bible. Eichhorn’s elaboration of the composite theory provided one of the main lines of critical


investigation into the Hebrew scriptures for nearly two centuries.\textsuperscript{61} In subsequent decades, a host of historical critics developed, extended, and modified the work of Reimarus, Griesbach, Semler, and Eichhorn. During the nineteenth century, men such as Heinrich von Ewald, Wilhelm Gesenius, Wilhelm Vatke, Wilhelm M. L. de Wette, Hermann Hupfeld, and Karl Heinrich Graf contributed to the historical and literary analysis of the Old Testament in Germany. Eduard Reuss did the same in the German border city of Strasbourg, and Kuenen performed similar work in Holland.\textsuperscript{62}

New Testament criticism took shape in Germany along similar lines. During the nineteenth century, for example, the theologians Friedrich Schleiermacher and Heinrich Paulus subjected the Gospels to a rationalistic analysis.\textsuperscript{63} But it was left to David Friedrich Strauss and Ferdinand Christian Baur, both eminent New Testament critics at the University of Tübingen, to forge the most radical — and some of the most discussed — historical-literary analyses of the New Testament.\textsuperscript{64} Early in the century, Strauss almost


\textsuperscript{62} Neil, “Criticism and Theological Use of the Bible,” 283-284.

\textsuperscript{63} Ibid., 274.

\textsuperscript{64} Ibid., 274-275. There is a large body of literature on David Friedrich Strauss. For a brief but helpful introduction to Strauss’s ideas and career, see Nowak, “David Friedrich Strauss,” \textit{Deutsche Biographische Enzyklopädie}, vol. 9, ed. Walther Killy and Rudolf Vierhaus (Munich: K. G. Saur, 1998), 574. For lengthier studies, see Frei, \textit{Eclipse of Biblical Narrative}, 233-244; Friedrich Wilhelm Graf, \textit{Kritik und Pseudo-Spekulation: David Friedrich Strauss als Dogmatiker im Kontext der positionellen Theologie seiner Zeit} (Munich: Kaiser Verlag, 1982); Edwina Lawler, \textit{David Friedrich Strauss and his Critics: The Life of Jesus Debate in Early Nineteenth-Century German Journals} (New York: P. Lang, 1986); Jörg F. Sandberger, \textit{David Friedrich Strauss als theologischer Hegelianer} (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1972); Claude Welch, \textit{Protestant Thought in the}
single-handedly set New Testament study on a new course by arguing that former
interpreters, rationalist and orthodox alike, had mistakenly assumed the Gospels contained
testimony about historical facts. This assumption, Strauss argued, had distracted scholars
with debates about rational explanations for Jesus’ miracles rather than helping them
understand the import of the narratives from a literary and religious standpoint. The true
significance of the narratives could only be discovered, he argued, when the Gospels were
understood as largely mythical, legendary interpretations of the life of Jesus. This point of
view, Strauss argued, revealed the texts’ profound apprehension of religious and moral
truth. But it also unhinged most of his readers by rendering the historical Jesus essentially
unknowable.65 This removal of the Jesus of the Bible from the realm of history to the
realm of myth explains why Strauss’s revolutionary insights outraged readers throughout
Europe and America. But his largely negative reception did not prevent Strauss from
helping direct the attention of later interpreters to the New Testament books as literary
creations. This insight became a hallmark of the historical-critical method.

Baur, who had once been Strauss’s instructor, began with an idea not unrelated to
Strauss’s theory.66 Baur made it the first task of the biblical interpreter to discover the

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*Nineteenth Century*, vol. 1, 1799-1870 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1972),
147-154, passim.

M. L. de Wette: Enlightenment, Romanticism, and Biblical Criticism”; Neil, “Criticism and
Theological Use of the Bible,” 275-276.

66 For brief introductions to the ideas and public career of Baur, see Ulrich Köpf,
“Ferdinand Christian Baur,” *Deutsche Biographische Enzyklopädie*, vol. 1, ed. Walther
Deutsche Biographie*, vol. 2 (Berlin: Duncker and Humblot, 1967 [1875]), 172-179. For
lengthier studies, see Horton Harris, *The Tübingen School: A Historical and Theological
Investigation of the School of F. C. Baur*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House,
point of view of the biblical authors. It was practically impossible to determine whether
the events of the Gospels had happened precisely as they were recorded. But it was
possible at least to approach the objective history behind the texts, he argued, by
determining the intentions of the writers. Baur arrived at some startling conclusions of his
own by employing this approach. For example, he found evidence, as Semler had, of a
split between Gentile and Jewish factions in the early Church. He argued that most of the
New Testament had been written during the second century. And he presented the book
of John as a Gnostic treatise. These conclusions removed the persons, events, and
admonitions of the New Testament some one or two centuries from the actual history of
Jesus’ ministry and cast doubt on the received history of the early Church. The almost
tangible immediacy of the New Testament was lost. The radical conclusions of Strauss
and Baur defined many of the specific problems that occupied European and American
biblical scholars for the rest of the nineteenth century. More significantly, the literary and
historical approach they inaugurated gave many of the foundations to modern New
Testament criticism itself.

Two additional scholars, in particular, helped to solidify the results of historical
biblical criticism during the second half of the nineteenth century. Julius Wellhausen
bolstered theories of the composite nature of most of the Old Testament. Building on the
theories of previous scholars, he convincingly teased out four strands of textual tradition

1990); and Peter C. Hodgson, The Formation of Historical Theology: A Study of


68 Ibid., 278, 283.
contained in the Pentateuch, posited three great stages of Israel’s history, and argued for the
determinative influence of the prophets in shaping the Hebrew scriptures.

Wellhausen’s ideas held sway over Old Testament criticism for many decades.\textsuperscript{69} Adolf von
Harnack, a theologian who worked at the Universities of Giessen, Marburg, and Berlin,
provided a similar service for New Testament criticism.\textsuperscript{70} He firmly established the two-
source hypothesis for the Synoptic Gospels, showed that Mark had been one of the
sources used in the writing of Matthew and Luke, and bolstered arguments for the essential
differences of John from the three Synoptics. He also theorized about the progressive
influence of Greek culture over the Jewish Gospel and the gradual consolidation of the
New Testament canon.\textsuperscript{71} Harnack and Wellhausen each made historicism the touchstone
of theology, and their work ensured historicist assumptions would define many of the chief
concerns of biblical scholars during the nineteenth century and beyond.

By the late nineteenth century, the assumptions of historicism, already dominant in
German biblical studies, began to influence the academic disciplines in the United States.
The increasing acceptance of these ideas ultimately placed biblical scholarship in America,

\textsuperscript{69} Ibid., 284.


\textsuperscript{71} Neil, “Criticism and Theological Use of the Bible,” 283-284.
as in Europe, under the investigations of the historical-critical method. Critical biblical scholarship in the United States developed in tandem with the professionalization of academic life late in the century; the articulation of a new “liberal,” “modern” view of scripture in America resulted, more than anything else, from the embodiment of this new historicist Weltanschauung in the modern academy. All this new attention to historical development — along with a century’s worth of German innovations in biblical study — held tremendous consequences for the understanding of scripture.

Readers of the historian Dorothy Ross might be tempted to conclude that historicism remained relatively unimportant in the intellectual life of the United States during the late Victorian period. In her study of the American social sciences, Ross concedes that German historical models influenced the social disciplines heavily during their early formative years after 1870. But she argues that those early historicist impulses quickly became subsumed beneath an a-historical, “scientific” methodology. An emphasis on predictability — the discovery of law-like patterns — soon dominated the new social


science disciplines of economics, sociology, and political science as leaders strove to make those disciplines “scientific.” Thus, the assumptions of historicism failed to shape the social sciences in America in a significant way both during and immediately following the late Victorian period.\(^75\)

However, the pattern Ross describes, whatever its merits, does not speak adequately for the history of American biblical scholarship. Although biblical studies became professionalized in tandem with the social sciences in the United States, biblical studies remained more dissimilar from than similar to the social sciences that Ross’s study examines. In contract to the social sciences, biblical studies was largely text-based and remained heavily laden with religious implications. More than that, the study of the Bible was difficult to render “scientific” in the same ways as economics, sociology, and political science. The latter three fields may have sought to “look through history” to find “natural” processes operating underneath, as Ross has asserted.\(^76\) But biblical studies meshed more easily with organic theories of development than with “scientific” conceptions of social processes. One does not, after all, typically look for the operation of social “laws” when reconstructing the history of the Pentateuch or interpreting an obscure Hebrew word. Regardless of what was occurring in other disciplines, then, historicism exercised an increasing influence over biblical studies during the final quarter of the nineteenth century. In turn, the importance of biblical study itself added to the force of historicism in late Victorian intellectual culture.

\(^75\) Ross, *Origins of American Social Science*, xiii-xv and passim.

\(^76\) Ibid., xiii.
The significance of the new historicism for the study of the Bible is difficult to overestimate. First, as Alan Richardson has pointed out, its basic premises contrasted sharply with the conception of divine revelation once universally accepted among Catholic and Protestant scholars throughout Europe and America. To historicism’s converts, the Bible could no longer easily be viewed as a book of timeless, inerrant propositions. If God had spoken at all, his divine voice sounded with fallible human inflections, for all historical phenomena were products of their cultural milieus. Second, it implied a new basic attitude toward the knowledge of God. The historical criticism of the Bible established reason as the judge of revelation, an inversion of the relationship most frequently imagined by American intellectuals earlier in the century. In the historicized world, even the artifacts of history that claimed divine influence, such as the Bible, must be studied critically — that is, historically, as the time-bound products of human history. Third, and related, historicism suggested that God, if he were active in human history at all, must be immanent in the process of history itself. He now appeared more dependent on the actions of men and accidents of history than he did as the Immutable Lord who sustained the world from Above. Each of these implications demanded a fundamental, even radical, rethinking of religion and theology.\(^\text{77}\)

\(^{77}\) Several historians have elaborated on these and other implications of historicism to varying extents. Two of the most comprehensive studies about the influences of historicism in American intellectual life are Henry F. May, The End of American Innocence: A Study in the First Years of our Own Time, 2d ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992); and Morton White, Social Thought in America: The Revolt Against Formalism, 3d ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976). Herbst describes the influence of historicism in American universities; see Herbst, German Historical School. Howard offers a comprehensive picture of the influence of historicism over biblical scholarship by exploring the careers of two central figures in this movement, W. M. L. de Wette and Jacob Burkhardt; see Howard, Religion and the Rise of Historicism. Massa frames his discussion of Charles A. Briggs’s public career and heresy trial in a broad
For all these reasons, the new historicist view of the Bible made an impossibly poor fit with firmly established traditions of biblical interpretation in America. American religion had both greatly elaborated on and elevated Western traditions of biblical literalism, and the historicized view of a fallible Bible clashed hard against them.78

More than this, theologians, biblical scholars, and other American intellectuals also interpreted the Bible under the heavy influence of the philosophy of Common Sense Realism, and the tenets of historicism contradicted several of its fundamental presumptions. The tenets of the Common Sense philosophy flowed through large areas of the American intellectual landscape during the early- and middle-nineteenth century and formed a dominant undercurrent of American theology. The headwaters of these streams were abroad, in Scotland, where Thomas Reid, a professor of moral philosophy at the University of Glasgow, helped give them their classic formulation. Reid’s Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense, published in 1764, became the sine qua non of the Scottish philosophy. It offered an effective refutation of eighteenth-century treatment of the implications of historicism for Protestant religion in America; see Massa, Charles Augustus Briggs, espc. ch. 1, “The Problem of History,” 3-23. Wacker does the same in regard to the public career of Augustus H. Strong; see Wacker, Augustus H. Strong. A convenient summary of many of these points can be found in Noll, Between Faith and Criticism, 12-15; Richardson, “Rise of Modern Biblical Scholarship,” espc. 294-305; and Wacker, “Demise of Biblical Civilization,” passim.

philosophers who had argued that all human beings perceive the world through the
refracting lenses of the “ideas” in their minds. According to that theory, put forward by
such intellectual giants as John Locke and Bishop Berkeley, we perceive only our minds’
representations of the world around us. We do not — we cannot — perceive the world
directly. Working from this theory of representationalism, the essayist David Hume drew
the startling conclusion that our knowledge of the real world must be highly uncertain: if
all we had were our minds’ representations of the world around us, there was no way to be
sure our perceptions corresponded exactly with reality.79

Reid and a cadre of other Scottish philosophers would have none of Hume’s
philosophical skepticism. Disliking the potentially skeptical implications of the
representational theory, these men set out a theory of perception that did away with
mediating ideas altogether. Reid argued there was no particular reason to suppose that

79 For this account, I have relied largely on the concise summaries provided by
Sydney E. Ahlstrom, “The Scottish Philosophy and American Theology,” Church History
23 (September 1955): 260-261; Marsden, “Everyone One’s Own Interpreter?”, espec. 81-
84; Marsden, Fundamentalism and American Culture, 14-17; and Noll, America’s God, 93-
113, 233-238. Several additional accounts have also informed this summary, including
Theodore Dwight Bozeman, Protestants in an Age of Science: The Baconian Ideal and
Antebellum Religious Thought (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press,
1977); Gladys Bryson, Man and Society: The Scottish Inquiry of the Eighteenth Century
(Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1945); Elizabeth Flower and Murray G.
Murphey, A History of Philosophy in America, vol. 1 (New York: Capricorn Books,
1977), ch. 4, “Philosophy in Academia Revisited—Mainly Princeton,” 203-273, and ch. 5,
“Philosophy in the Middle Atlantic and Southern States—Metaphysics and Morals,” 277-
361; S. A. Grave, The Scottish Philosophy of Common Sense (Oxford: Oxford University
Press, 1960); Daniel Walker Howe, The Unitarian Conscience: Harvard Moral Philosophy,
Enlightenment in America (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976); Meyer, The
Democratic Enlightenment (New York: Putnam, 1974); Jane Rendall, The Origins of the
Scottish Enlightenment (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1978); Douglas Sloan, The Scottish
Enlightenment and the American College Ideal (New York: Teachers College Press, 1971);
Stewart, “Tethered Theology.”
experience came mediated through the ideas of our minds; only philosophers would entertain a notion with such absurd implications. Instead, there was every reason to suppose that our senses presented the real world to our minds directly and immediately. Every human being of normal intellectual capacities instinctively believed in several things as a matter of common sense: the reality of the external world; the continuity of the self over time; the relationship of cause and effect; the reliability of sense perceptions; and the trustworthiness of memory, reasoning, and the testimony of others. Moral principles, the Scottish philosophers argued, were also self-evident intuitions. Human beings perceived moral principles directly and immediately, as a matter of common sense, not as a result of deduction from other ideas. People of all times in all places intuitively operated as if these principles of common sense were true, and there was no reason to suppose that all of humanity had been mistaken. This philosophy of Common Sense, therefore, assured its proponents that we could rely on our perceptions of the world, trust our knowledge and reasoning about things and people, and remain confident in our ideas of morality.80

Related to the Common Sense theory of immediate perception was an important corollary: empirical observation was the surest path to knowledge. The Common Sense philosophers influenced scores of American thinkers in their veneration of the seventeenth-century philosopher Francis Bacon, who had championed the inductive approach to knowledge. Bacon believed that the careful observation and classification of facts provided the most reliable path to knowledge, and the Baconian ideal pervaded Americans' understanding of epistemology during the nineteenth century. Thus, Baconianism told Americans that the inductive method best enabled them to apprehend

80 Ibid.
the facts of reality, and the Common Sense philosophy assured them that their perceptions of the facts were true. It was a potent combination.81

Common Sense Baconianism held at least one important implication for the interpretation of the Bible: the understanding of scripture, like other forms of knowledge, was largely a matter of observation and induction from the facts. One must first determine, then classify, and finally generalize from the “facts” of scripture in order to attain a knowledge of scripture, and speculative hypotheses were to be scrupulously avoided. The “facts” of the Bible, according to this understanding of scripture, were the words of the Bible; once the meaning of the words was certain, the facts of scripture could be known with the same kind of certainty as the facts of astronomy or biology.82

The historian Mark A. Noll has demonstrated that American Protestants, especially evangelicals, embraced these ideas with gusto beginning in the late eighteenth century. From the 1760s onward, the assumptions of the Common Sense philosophy gained footing in America to such an extent that, by the early nineteenth century, they “prevailed everywhere in the United States, among both laity and clergy, inside the colleges and far beyond.”83 The universalistic, intuition-based ethics of that system that gave Protestant leaders a way to maintain traditional Christianity without appealing to religious authority. It also offered Americans a radically democratized epistemology; for the first time, even


82 See Marsden, “Everyone One’s Own Interpreter?”, 82-83; Marsden, Fundamentalism and American Culture, 14-17; Noll, America’s God, espec. ch. 18, “The ‘Bible Alone’ and a Reformed, Literal Hermeneutic,” 367-385.

83 Noll, America’s God, 102.
ordinary people were deemed capable of discerning truth for themselves. On both counts, Common Sense was well suited to the American temperament. Additionally, as the historian Sydney E. Ahlstrom argued a half-century ago, the power of the Common Sense philosophy resided in its success as an apologetic. It effectively “short-circuited” the threat of secular rationalism and several other philosophical heresies perceived by American intellectuals during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. It was because of this apologetic power, Ahlstrom concluded, that Common Sense “came to exist in America . . . as a vast subterranean influence, a sort of water-table nourishing dogmatics in an age of increasing doubt.”

The Common Sense philosophy amplified older Western presumptions of the constancy of human nature. The fundamental beliefs of humankind — which included the reliability of sense perceptions, the existence of the external world, and the understanding of right and wrong — transcended culture and history. Beneath the variety of cultures throughout history lay an unchanging stratum of common-sense beliefs. Historicism, by contrast, presumed almost exactly the opposite. The character of each person, nation, and

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84 Ibid., 103, 233. See also Marsden, “Everyone One’s Own Interpreter?”, 82-83.


86 Ibid.: 268.

institution emerged through the process of its own development.\textsuperscript{88} In effect, historicism destabilized the ways Westerners conceived of history, the universe, and human personality. It implied a world radically different than many nineteenth-century American intellectuals had previously known.

These high stakes help explain the intensity of the battles between proponents and opponents of historical biblical criticism.\textsuperscript{89} The responses of Catholic and Protestant intellectuals to this challenge ranged from “conservative” to “liberal.” The liberal camp, as several scholars have described, could be “virtually defined by its sympathetic response to the historicist understanding of culture. . . .”\textsuperscript{90} That sympathetic response necessarily entailed the historicization of the Bible; in the end, as Wacker has summarized the matter, nearly all theological liberals shared the same assumption that “God’s self-revelation [was] mediated through the flow of history.”\textsuperscript{91} At the other end of the spectrum were those who found it nearly impossible to choke down the pill of historicism at all. The historicist outlook, as far as conservative Christian intellectuals were concerned, flatly contradicted

\textsuperscript{88} Igers, \textit{German Conception of History}, 5.


the notion of divine revelation and contravened the basic truth of God’s transcendence over earthly matters.\(^2\)

But most American intellectuals struck some sort of compromise between these two extremes. As Wacker has put the matter, those who adopted the more common mediating position “took the problems raised by historical consciousness with utmost seriousness because they knew that they had no choice. At the same time, they clung to the conviction that the faith once delivered to the saints somehow stands above the vicissitudes of historical process.”\(^3\) This mediating position, in particular, led nineteenth-century biblical scholars to devote an increasing amount of energy toward the often-controversial task of sorting out what in the Bible had come from God and what might be discarded as merely human contrivance.

This framework for understanding the intellectual and religious upheavals of late Victorian America helps explain the sense of crisis that historical biblical criticism frequently engendered. As Mark S. Massa has argued, for example, the episode of Briggs’s heresy trial, described above, provided the single “crucial and dramatic instance” during which this larger threat of historicism to the older, stable evangelical order was confronted directly.\(^4\) The level at which American actors usually engaged in these controversies, however, only vaguely, if ever, reached this level of intellectual sophistication. For the most part, discussions about historical criticism occurred in the less rarefied atmosphere of


\(^3\) Wacker, “Demise of Biblical Civilization,” 130.

\(^4\) Massa, Charles Augustus Briggs, 15.
debates about biblical “accuracy,” the nature of biblical inspiration, and the relationship of the Bible to modern science. These concepts provided a simple canopy under which much of the confrontation of historicism with the weakening Common Sense apologetic took place.

All this is not to suggest that controversy over the Bible burst suddenly onto the American scene during the 1870s. There were several harbingers of these later developments earlier in the century. One arrived from Britain shortly after mid-century. With the publication of Essays and Reviews in 1860, the American reading public became broadly, if dimly, aware of a new critical challenge to the authority of scripture. The Essays, a collection of papers written by seven prominent Anglican churchmen, put forward a mild version of the higher biblical criticism already flourishing in German universities. Collectively, the essayists contended that the Bible should be studied like any other ancient text and that many of the Bible’s seeming historical narratives ought to be understood as parable, poetry, and legend. For advancing such notions, the essayists provoked charges of heresy and apostasy from English-speakers the world over. Many commentators worried that dangerously advanced critical notions had infiltrated the top ranks of the Anglican Church.95

Still earlier in the century, a smattering of American scholars had also challenged traditional understandings of the Bible when they assimilated aspects of German biblical

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95 Neil, “Criticism and Theological Use of the Bible,” 281-83. See also Willey, Honest Doubters, 137-85, for a detailed discussion of this episode.
scholarship directly into their work.⁹⁶ The apparent successes of the German critical methods impressed a handful of American seminarians at Andover, Harvard, and Yale during the first half of the nineteenth century. Men like Moses Stuart, Andrews Norton, Theodore Parker, Josiah Willard Gibbs, Edward Robinson, and George R. Noyes demonstrated their appreciation to their German colleagues both by appropriating aspects of German scholarship outright and by attempting to transplant the German historical and grammatical disciplines to American soil.⁹⁷

Yet these earlier developments failed to provoke the kind of sustained, vociferous fighting over biblical scholarship that occurred during the final three decades of the century. The case of antebellum critical scholarship in New England is instructive: as Jerry Wayne Brown has argued, Yankee seminarians like Stuart, Norton, and Noyes sparked theological brush fires over questions of biblical scholarship and interpretation, but these controversies never grew into a conflagration. Antebellum biblical study failed to provoke much interest outside a handful of theologians. By about mid-century, biblical study itself had ceased to generate much serious theological discussion, and its early practitioners failed to establish critical biblical study as a distinct, self-sustaining scholarly tradition in the United States. As the first generation of critical scholars died and the Civil War disrupted the nation’s intellectual life, the smoldering embers of critical biblical scholarship in the

⁹⁶ The historiography on antebellum biblical scholarship is thin. These works include, for example, Jerry Wayne Brown’s slim monograph, which deals with only a handful of critical biblical scholars in New England, and Stewart’s Ph.D. dissertation on antebellum Princeton biblical scholarship and theology. See Jerry Wayne Brown, Rise of Biblical Criticism and Stewart, “Tethered Theology.”

United States simply burned themselves out. While Brown’s explanation for the late appearance of widespread controversy over biblical criticism in America is incomplete, his argument corroborates the main outlines of the historiography relating to American biblical scholarship: the Bible became a widely contested text only during the final three decades of the nineteenth century.

During that later period, the most direct assault on received understandings of the Bible probably came, ironically, from biblical scholars and theologians themselves. By the late 1870s, many Protestant intellectuals had reworked traditional notions of divine revelation in order to accommodate the insights of historicism and better assimilate specific developments in other fields of knowledge, such as geology. Theologians and biblical scholars helped turn the Bible into the subject of widespread debate when this spirit of accommodation led an increasing number of them publicly to champion the methods and assumptions of historical biblical scholarship. Once they had made this move, a full contingent of church historians and clergymen followed close behind. Counterpoised against these troops stood a formidable array of forces defending older understandings of divine revelation, the verbal inspiration of scripture, and biblical inerrancy. The clash of these forces reverberated with serious implication for American culture: Grant Wacker suggests that confidence in the Bible as the Word of God began to wane among well-educated Americans beginning in the late 1870s. He argues that a new

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98 Ibid., 7-9, 180-182.

“biblical question” — the “problem of the source and the authority of Scripture” — stood at the center of that loss of crisis of belief.\textsuperscript{100}

The origins of this sweeping intellectual and religious upheaval can be traced to the beginning of the nineteenth century. During this earlier period, American theologians and biblical scholars expressed a deep ambivalence about the work of German biblical scholars. Their responses to developments in German theology and biblical criticism during the 1820s, 30s, and 40s helped set the stage for the crisis and controversy of the 1870s, 80s, and 90s.

\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, 123.}
CHAPTER ONE

THE AMBIGUOUS VIEW OF GERMAN BIBLICAL SCHOLARSHIP

American theologians cast a crooked glance at German theology near the beginning of the nineteenth century. On the one hand, American theologians looked to German theologians as paragons of theological sophistication and biblical erudition. Americans existed on the outskirts of an essentially European intellectual culture at the beginning of the nineteenth century, and American intellectuals as a matter of course conceived their ideas in reference to centers of learning and culture in Europe. The advanced learning embodied in the German university system loomed large in the minds of America’s intellectual elites generally. Protestant theologians and church leaders, in particular, maintained a strong interest in German philosophy, theology, and biblical studies. Many Americans, in fact, exalted the Germans especially as the world’s paragons of biblical inquiry. American Protestant intellectuals saw the Germans as intellectually rigorous, dedicated to the pursuit of truth, and particularly fitted, as a class, to understand and interpret the Bible for the modern world.

American biblical scholars and theologians, therefore, began the nineteenth century with German biblical research firmly in view. The small community of theologians in America’s newly-formed seminaries and schools of divinity in the Northeast followed developments in the fields of philosophy, theology, and biblical studies in Europe, and they
were especially interested in the work of their peers in the German-speaking states, whom they viewed as trend-setters in the techniques of biblical research. This view of German biblical research and theology deeply influenced leaders in the two most prominent denominations in the Reformed tradition, the Presbyterians and Congregationalists, as well as a noteworthy reaction to the excesses of New England Calvinism, the Unitarians. These three Protestant denominations together exerted great influence, well beyond their numbers, over American culture during the nineteenth century. They carried on the most vibrant, sophisticated, and well-developed theological discussion of all the American denominations for most of the nineteenth century; by virtue of that fact, they deserve particular attention in a discussion of American theology during this period. Although theologians in these denominations often struck discordant notes with one another on questions of theology, they frequently sang sweet harmony in their veneration of German biblical research during the first half of the nineteenth century.

Nevertheless, their hymns of praise for the methods of German biblical criticism often accompanied loud refrains of lament about the ends to which German theologians deployed their craft. While American theologians often praised German biblical scholarship during the early nineteenth century, they also frequently treated it with suspicion, disapproval, even condemnation. Evidence in American journals of the early nineteenth century shows that theologians frequently faulted German theology on a number of points. One was that German theology, in general, and biblical research, in particular, were too frequently mixed up with philosophical speculation, rather than grounded on the actual facts of history. Another was that the Germans frequently indulged in philosophical sins, especially rationalism and naturalism; Americans commonly
saw German biblical interpretation and criticism as tainted with these fundamentally anti-Christian ideas, and they feared their influence threatened to undo the credibility of the Bible and promote religious skepticism. The net effect was that Americans during the early nineteenth century generally viewed German theology and biblical scholarship with a studied ambivalence. In the right hands, they believed it held tremendous potential for mediating the Bible to the modern world. In the wrong hands, it threatened great harm to the Kingdom of God on earth.

Theological discourse in the Congregationalist, Presbyterian, and Unitarian denominations during the early nineteenth century can be followed in several important periodicals associated with these denominations. Moses Stuart, Charles Hodge, and Andrews Norton were recognized, both by their contemporaries and by later generations, as the leading spokesmen of these three denominations, respectively, on biblical questions. While additional writers merit some attention for also having dealt with topics related to biblical scholarship, these three men merit special attention because of their prominent roles in those discussions during this period. Moses Stuart merits particular attention for his work as the Professor of Sacred Literature at Andover Theological Seminary. Stuart published more frequently in the field of biblical studies — and knew more about it — than almost anyone else, and this fact alone makes him an especially important figure for understanding antebellum responses to the so-called German “higher criticism.” Stuart took the lead early in the nineteenth century to mediate the most recent results of German
biblical research to American readers, and his views more or less typified those of other American theologians in the major periodicals of the period.¹

From an early date in the century, Stuart displayed a facility for critical biblical analysis that was rare among American intellectuals. A lengthy review he published in an early volume of the *North American Review* represents one of the first substantive discussions of German biblical research in American print. Writing in 1826, Stuart reviewed thoroughly the history of modern research and critical commentary on the Samaritan Pentateuch. The Samaritan Pentateuch consists of the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, as it existed in the textual tradition of the northern tribes of Israel after their return from the Assyrian captivity in the eighth century B.C.E. Distinct from the textual tradition of the Hebrew Bible, the Samaritan Pentateuch tantalized modern biblical scholars with the opportunity to compare the received Hebrew text with an alternative ancient source. In fact, biblical scholars of Europe had been studying it with great interest, and American theologians took note of the Europeans’ labors. Stuart took the lead in publicizing the most recent results of this important research to American readers. In doing so, he helped set the tone of the American response to critical research on the Bible in Germany.

That tone can best be described as ambivalent. Stuart’s praise for German biblical scholarship began implicitly when he recognized Germany as the locus of the most significant research on this important ancient document. He began his review of scholarship on the topic by mentioning a smattering of European scholars who had debated the relative merits of the Samaritan and Hebrew text during the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. But by the time he discussed the research of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, he mentioned German scholars alone — Michaelis, Eichhorn, Bertholdt, Bauer, and Jahn — men who “have discussed the subject in question with a good degree of moderation and acuteness.”

Stuart’s praise for German critical scholarship on the Bible moved from implicit to explicit when he singled out Wilhelm Gesenius, the great Jewish scholar of Hebrew philology and Old Testament at the University of Halle, as particularly praiseworthy. Stuart’s praise included a recognition of the “great extent of critical and philological knowledge which [Gesenius] had acquired,” a knowledge that Stuart believed had “fitted him in a peculiar manner for the difficult task” of weighing the textual authority of the Samaritan tradition against that of the Hebrew. Gesenius, above even the other German scholars Stuart had mentioned, had “forever settled” that important question.

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Nevertheless, Stuart’s appreciation for this eminent German came with a caveat. Although Gesenius had correctly argued for the Samaritan Pentateuch’s comparatively late date of composition, Gesenius, he insisted, had argued wrongly for a similarly late date of composition for the canonical Hebrew text of the Pentateuch. Contrary to Gesenius’s claims, Stuart insisted that Moses himself had authored all but the most miniscule portions of the first five books of the Bible as we currently have them. To argue anything else would contravene the great weight of both biblical and extra-biblical evidence in favor of Moses’ authorship and thereby impugn the divine origins of the Sacred Volume.⁵

Stuart’s passion to defend Moses’ authorship of the Pentateuch appears to have run deep: he devoted upwards of twenty pages refuting Gesenius on this point alone.⁶ While it is possible to view Stuart’s arguments against Gesenius simply as a point of scholarly debate, they appear to signify something more important. The sheer volume of Stuart’s refutation of Gesenius on the question of Moses’ authorship appears striking against the backdrop of praise he had just lavished on German biblical research — Gesenius’ research in particular. Also, Stuart’s arguments against Gesenius here form a part of his frequent refrain of criticism against the assumptions and results of German biblical scholarship, which he usually articulated alongside anything good he had to say about the Germans’ efforts.

Stuart’s ambivalence toward the German critics had become even more obvious by the 1830s. Discussing the German critics again in 1833, Stuart, on the one hand, called them his “favorite critics and commentators.” As with Gesenius and others in 1826, Stuart

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⁵ Ibid.: 281.

⁶ Ibid.: 281, ff.
praised the erudition of the German biblical scholars. He acknowledged the many “distinguished” biblical scholars of Germany, “men who leave a train of light behind them, and also scatter it before them, . . . men who are furnished with such an abundance of philological materials, that they are able to stand at the head of the critical world, and have nothing to fear from any competitor.” Not content with generalities, Stuart went on to single out Tholuck, Gesenius, Neander, Hengstenberg, Flatt, and Olshausen, all scholars at German-speaking universities, as noteworthy for the quality and insightfulness of their commentaries on various books of the Bible.

Nevertheless, Stuart couched these highly complimentary words within a pointed critique of German biblical literature as a whole. For example, Stuart believed that the typical German commentator displayed great “patience,” “thoroughness,” and “accuracy” when it came to explaining grammar, etymology, and usage. But that exacting precision nearly always drained the life from the biblical text. The typical German scholar, to use Stuart’s metaphor, was “like an anatomist, who will dissect the brain, or a limb, with abundant skill, but who can make out no consistent and satisfactory account of the relation in which the parts of the human body stand to each other, . . . or of the perfections and beauty of the tout ensemble’” Worse still, Stuart argued, were the typical motivations behind much of this work. Many German commentators “seem to measure their fancied importance by the degree of extravagance exhibited in their thoughts and expressions. . . .” All too frequently, for example, they “think they have done nothing, unless they have


8 Ibid.: 150-151.
published a book such as no man ever read, saw, or even thought of. . . .” Rather than producing sound research, too often their main object seemed to be writing books for the sake of generating controversy or garnering attention.  

The German schools of critical biblical scholarship, then, offered much to be admired, but at least as much to be criticized. 

This deep-seated ambivalence toward German biblical scholarship appears to have followed Stuart throughout his career. In only a few published pieces did Stuart speak particularly favorably on the subject. One was from 1835, when he commended the work of the late J. A. H. Tittmann, a New Testament scholar at the University of Leipzig. Tittmann’s readers, Stuart advised, ought to “relish the works of this writer,” for “sound judgment, uncommon powers of nice discrimination, together with grammatical and exegetical tact, abound in them all.”  

Another appeared in 1838, when Stuart defended Gesenius against charges of spreading infidel theology. Stuart found it perplexing when one American reviewer found “infidel” opinions on every page of Gesenius’ great Hebrew Lexicon. Far from wishing to ban the work from seminary libraries, as that same reviewer had recommended, Stuart crowned Gesenius the “Coryphaeus of Hebrew literature in Germany” and called him an indispensable authority.  

But these exuberant endorsements remained relatively rare for Stuart. More typically, he treated the positive contributions of German theologians as exceptions to the general rule. Thus, in 1835 Stuart paid respectful homage to the originality and intellectual

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9 Ibid.: 148-149.


acumen of the late Friedrich Schleiermacher, the acknowledged father of modern theology. But much of what recommended Schleiermacher was his dissimilarity to most other German theologians, who typically lacked Schleiermacher’s degree of insight. As Stuart saw them, many of Germany’s prominent authors frequently “indulge[d] in singular and excessive speculations, at the expense of sober reason and sound judgment. . . .” He found this to be particularly true of those “who have been conversant with philosophy and sacred criticism.” Stuart’s compliments to Schleiermacher, in other words, amounted to an indictment of German philosophers and biblical critics as a whole.

He demonstrated a similar attitude in a lengthy review of Andrews Norton’s defense of the Gospels a few years later. In this piece, Stuart could see only a few bright spots on the landscape of German biblical criticism. A few exceptional historical critics of Germany, he argued, had marshaled great knowledge and skill to defend the long-

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established doctrines of the Christian faith. And the textual critics of Germany, particularly Griesbach, had established the original texts of the Bible with greater accuracy than ever before — the most “triumphant” result of recent labors in that field. But Stuart pictured an otherwise bleak landscape. He lamented the existence of an entire school of German “Neologists” who had departed traditional Christian orthodoxy for new, heretical ideas. In particular, the Neologists had, in one way or another, “assailed the general and settled belief of the Christian church at large, in respect to the genuineness and authenticity of the New Testament Scriptures,” causing confusion among even the most stalwart defenders of traditional Christian orthodoxy. Stuart singled out Johann Gottfried Eichhorn, Göttingen’s esteemed philologist and biblical critic, as particularly blameworthy in that regard. Eichhorn had combined “charms of genius and taste” with a broad knowledge of classical and sacred learning to craft a potent attack on the authenticity of the Gospels. Stuart blamed the potency of Eichhorn’s attack as the single greatest force behind the diffusion of unbelief among the educated classes of Germany. Worse still, there were so many others like him: Eckermann, Gabler, Henke, Paulus, Semler, and many others who worked the same mischief. Stuart shuddered to imagine what havoc a similar English-speaking cabal might wreak in the Anglo-American church.


16 Ibid.: 316-317.

17 Ibid.: 268.

18 For sources on J. G. Eichhorn, see Introduction, n. 60.

19 Ibid.: 268-270.
Stuart’s ambivalent view of German biblical criticism persisted for the duration of his career. He continued to take some encouragement from Americans’ study of critical philology during the 1840s — for example, in his review in 1842 of Albert Barnes’ study of the book of Hebrews. But he also grew ever more weary of the rationalistic bias of Continental biblical interpretation during the same decade. In 1843, for example, he complained that recent commentaries on the biblical view of angels merely rejected out of hand the actual existence of angelic beings. These commentators explained away all the biblical representations of angels as superstitions borrowed by the Jews from the old Persian mythology during the Babylonian Exile. Thus, Stuart rejected the arguments of the historical critics who would treat the Hebrew angelology as the product of pagan historical influences, and he fingered the critics’ rationalistic philosophy as the source of their error.

Moses Stuart was hardly alone in his opinion of German biblical studies. Dozens of authors in several periodicals demonstrate that his ambivalence was widely shared. Contributors to Princeton Seminary’s publication were no exception. As a rule, the Princeton Presbyterians spoke less favorably of German theology than did Moses Stuart, but even they still found much to praise. One of the earliest issues of the Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review, for example, acknowledged Germany’s clear superiority in biblical studies. D[avid?] Young, reviewing an American anthology of recent German


biblical scholarship, imagined America as cut off from both the sources of European
culture and the materials for proper biblical research. Yankee theologians stood at a
serious disadvantage when it came to nurturing their own vibrant tradition of biblical
research. While Young expressed satisfaction that American clergymen were waking up to
the importance of biblical literature, the sheer volume and quality of biblical research
flowing from German pens led him to conclude that Europeans would stand at the
pinnacle of biblical scholarship for a long time to come.\textsuperscript{22}

At that pinnacle stood the German greats of Michaelis, Tittmann, Storr, Eichhorn,
and Gesenius, “names which no lover of German literature, or connoisseur in the higher
walks of theological science, can pronounce without respect. . . .”\textsuperscript{23} It is true that this
respect was tinged with suspicion, much as it was for Moses Stuart and others; Young
worried about the “erroneous opinions” displayed among the German authors, even
offering with “regret” that several German scholars, tainted by neology, had enlisted on the
side of rationalism.\textsuperscript{24} Still, Young’s opinion of German superiority won out in the end. He
argued that the results of German biblical researches, at heart, tended toward much good.
Though many critics had strayed into theological error, “there is nothing in the nature or
tendency of these [biblical] investigations in themselves, if conducted in a proper spirit and
manner, from which piety or orthodoxy, even in its ‘most straitest’ forms, need shrink.”
The benefits of German critical investigations outweighed the errors, for if nothing else,


\textsuperscript{23} Ibid.: 324.

\textsuperscript{24} Ibid.: 324.
they led readers back to “a fundamental acquaintance with scripture, to a confirmation of its claims as the inspired word of God, and to a sound and incontrovertible system of religious faith, founded in all its parts . . . on the Bible, and nothing but the Bible.”

No orthodox Presbyterian evangelical could hope for anything more than this kind of vital faith grounded in a reaffirmation of the Protestant principle of sola scriptura.

Other reviewers connected with Princeton expressed similar opinions during the first third of the nineteenth century. One anonymous author offered his less-than-enthusiastic endorsement of German critical work as a whole, but still found at least one German biblical scholar worthy of commendation. Similarly to Young, this reviewer noted the “suspicion” with which the American religious public had for “so long, and so justly” viewed the general direction of German criticism. Yet, he took pleasure in the fact that the recent work of Ernst Wilhelm Hengstenberg, a professor of Old Testament at the University of Berlin, had accomplished the remarkably “novel” feat of wedding a “marked . . . learning and acuteness” to an “evangelical” defense of religion.

An occasional reviewer in Princeton’s journal mentioned little besides German successes in biblical study. One contributor, for example, believed that the German historical method helped modern readers understand the original texts of the Bible in ways that “English” methods could not. The products of English theology, he explained, “are generally doctrinal and practical, rather than philological”; as such, they were useful only for the general reader. But for the serious student, there was “no question” about German

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25 Ibid.: 327.

superiority. The German method defined “immeasurably the better and the safer plan,” for its success at ascertaining the original meaning of the scriptures was the only solid foundation of theology. He commended Moses Stuart’s recent published commentary on the New Testament book of Romans precisely because it imitated German, rather than English, models.27

Most contributors to the Princeton Review, however, were a good deal less sanguine about the Germans’ labors. One anonymous reviewer, for example, found himself hard pressed to find a single exemplar of sound method among German biblical scholars at all. Taken together, he argued, German theologians produced a steady stream of “deistical theology” that tended to destroy faith in the God of the Bible.28 Many New Testament scholars, for example, “dissect away from the pure body of the New Testament what they call the mysticism of John and the Judaism of Paul,” leaving in its place “a denuded, heartless, lifeless corpse.” Only a small handful of biblical critics had resisted the trend; one was August Tholuck, a professor of theology at the University of Hamburg. Tholuck, he argued, had “beautifully” confounded the critics by showing that the material of John and Paul displayed a harmonious continuity with the rest of the New Testament.29 While by no means a model of sound biblical commentary in all respects, Tholuck represented at least the possibility that German biblical research could be harnessed to


29 Ibid.: 324.
both warm evangelical faith and orthodox Christian theology. But he stood nearly alone among his German colleagues in doing so.\textsuperscript{30}

Similar visions of German biblical scholarship were reflected in articles penned by the faculty of Princeton Seminary, as well. Archibald Alexander, a professor in various areas of theology during his tenure at the Seminary between 1812 and 1851, provides a case in point. Alexander’s basic theological stance influenced, either directly or indirectly, several generations of the Seminary’s professors, and he helped set the tone of Princeton’s response to German higher criticism for much of the century.\textsuperscript{31} As he argued in an early volume of the \textit{Princeton Review}, he thought it important that American seminary students be acquainted with German research on the Bible. Though convinced that German biblical scholarship presented a potentially faith-destroying threat to the American church as a whole, he called attention to the “increasing facilities for biblical investigation which are possessed in Germany.”\textsuperscript{32} The major portion of Alexander’s piece reverberated with his recognition of the sophistication of German historical-critical scholarship, and that sophistication, he believed, contributed to its danger. Thus, he argued, an “American student will need a long training in the new school of Germany, before he will feel himself

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid.: 322, passim.


competent to settle the genuineness of scriptural passages, upon merely critical grounds.”33 Americans should study the Germans if for no other reason than to learn how to arm themselves against the most destructive conclusions.34

But this was not the only reason Americans should study German biblical criticism. After several pages of critique directed at the perpetrators of German errors, Alexander still found reason to hope that German critics could offer a deeper understanding of the Sacred Word. Hengstenberg, Tholuck, and Kleinert, in particular, presented the force of sound biblical reasoning in opposition to the rationalistic, speculative theories of many German biblical scholars. Hengstenberg he described as “excellent.”35 Tholuck he labeled as “distinguished” and “entitled to very high consideration.”36 Kleinert, he said, occupied the “English ground of faith and common sense, instead of the German ground of scepticism and nonsense.”37 The work of these three men led Alexander to conclude, rather hopefully, “... [W]e find abundant reason to believe that, even in Germany, there is a recession from the quagmires of neology and atheism to the sure ground of inspiration.”38

As a group, reviewers in Princeton’s journal agreed with Alexander and these early reviewers in seeing great potential for both harm and good in German biblical criticism. By the 1840s, authors associated with Princeton had begun more consciously to identify

33 Ibid.: 12.
34 Ibid.: 9.
36 Ibid.: 17.
38 Ibid.: 18.
the different facets of historical study as the Germans’ signal contribution to biblical and theological understanding. The high place occupied by historical philology in the minds of American reviewers, for example, testified to the pervasive influence German methods were having even among conservative American theologians into the middle decades of the nineteenth century. Historical philology enjoyed such esteem that one contributor to the Princeton Review found it “almost superfluous” to mention that a German commentary on the Old Testament book of Isaiah evinced an intimate knowledge of biblical Hebrew. But he was glad to see that it was so. “In Germany,” he explained, “a man would be unable to sustain himself, either as an author or professor, who should undertake to interpret such a book, without a personal knowledge of the original language, in its niceties, as well as in its broader features, and of the views maintained by eminent grammarians on some disputed points of etymology and syntax.”39 The reviewer noted these facts approvingly, at least as far as the erudition of the particular author in question.40

Similarly, Joseph Addison Alexander, another of Princeton’s prominent theologians during the early nineteenth century, offered high praise for the German historical study of Christian theology more generally. In 1847, he noted that recent German scholars deserved “praise” for having studied the development of doctrine in historical context.41 While speculative flights of fancy among German scholars abounded, it would be a great error to allow the “just dislike and dread of German speculation . . . to deprive us of the

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40 The reviewer did not, however, appreciate the “rationalistic” bias of the author in question. Ibid.: 159 196, espec. 161-164.

fruits of their historical researches.” Instead of the “indiscriminate proscription” of German work, Alexander urged Americans instead to separate the good from the bad. Otherwise, he warned — with a well-placed jab at the preoccupation with biblical infallibility — Americans would “infallibly exclude the sound and wholesome food which [the German works] contain.”

Instead, Alexander implored, American students of theology must sit down to dine at the rich feast of German historical study. They need only add a heaping portion of common sense in order to digest the German fare, for the empirical results of German historical researches presented a danger only when interpreted according to the dictates of speculative philosophy. Alexander’s emphasis on the principles of “common sense” placed him in good company among American theologians. But in his mind, common sense was emphatically compatible with the empirical results of German historical study. Alexander’s piece thus presented one of the most conciliatory statements toward German historical scholarship to appear in the Princeton Review during the antebellum period. And while the other Princeton theologians often noted the potential benefits of historical biblical criticism, their general tone toward its results usually came with considerably more caution and disapproval.

Charles Hodge, a major antebellum theologian, belonged to the latter camp. Hodge served as a professor of theology and biblical literature at Princeton Seminary from 1822 to 1878. During these fifty-six years, he instructed more than three thousand

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42 Ibid.: 92.
43 Ibid.: 93.
44 Ibid.: 93-96, passim.
students, edited the seminary’s journal, and published innumerable articles and several books. Hodge was both a chief proponent of the Common Sense approach to theology and a spokesperson for conservative Old School Presbyterianism. He was recognized in his own day as a formidable force in American theology; even the Methodist editor of the National Repository called him “not only par excellence the Calvinistic theologian of America, but the Nestor of all American theology . . . [] the grandest result of our Christian intellectual development. . .”45

Of the articles in the Princeton Review attributable to Hodge, none has much good to say about German theology or biblical criticism.46 Into the 1840s, Hodge’s criticisms of


46 The Biblical Repertory (1825-1829), Biblical Repertory and Theological Review (1829-1836), and various official titles widely known as the Princeton Review (1837-1888) served as Princeton Seminary’s main organs of communication during the nineteenth century. Because not every article in the Princeton Review can be traced readily to its particular author, it is possible that Charles Hodge somewhere acknowledged credit due to German biblical and theological studies. If that were the case, however, it would have to
Germany revolved around twin philosophical poles: rationalism and Idealism. While they sometimes lacked nuance and sophistication, Hodge’s criticisms of these two philosophical positions animated much of his opposition to German theology and biblical study throughout his career. His criticisms of the influence of Idealism can be detected as early as 1830 when Hodge complained about the penchant for philosophical “speculation” among several German and English theologians. They exerted more effort on philosophical speculation than on the exegesis of the Bible and, thus, had utterly missed the point of theology.47

Likewise, Hodge’s criticism of rationalism in German theology had assumed a specific form by 1837. That year, he singled out David Friedrich Strauss, a New Testament scholar of the University of Tübingen, for nearly total condemnation.48 Strauss’s Das Leben Jesu (The Life of Jesus) offered a profoundly radical work of historical criticism. Before its publication, German historical critics had already been engaged in recovering the so-called “historical Jesus” from within the Gospel record. Strauss’s work carried that

have been infrequent. Only a handful of the anonymous articles in the Princeton Review speak favorably about German biblical researches, and all the articles known to be Hodge’s speak negatively. Moreover, Hodge, himself, served as the chief editor of the Review from its inception in 1825 until 1871 and, as a result, exerted an influence on that publication’s generally negative tone on the topic of German theology and biblical research. For more on Hodge’s editorship of and contributions to the Princeton Review, see Noll, America’s God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 300-302; and Noll, “Charles Hodge,” 907.


48 For an introduction to the ideas and public career of D. F. Strauss, see Introduction, n. 64.
quest further, but in a decidedly unorthodox direction, by questioning whether the Gospel narratives were based on actual events at all.

Hodge found Strauss’s hypothesis completely vexing. He proclaimed it the “consummation” of the “infidel theology,” the fullest expression yet of the movement to explain the miraculous and supernatural elements of the Bible in purely rational terms.\(^49\) Particularly odious was that Strauss had “denie[d] the historical truth of the gospel altogether, and explain[ed] it as a mere philosophical or religious mythus.” Worse yet, Hodge charged, was Strauss’s pantheism, which flowed throughout the book. Together, these ingredients made a poisonous brew; “in this one book,” Hodge agreed, “. . . are concentrated all the skepticism and unbelief of the age.” He shuddered to think that Strauss was writing books for popular instruction.\(^50\)

While Hodge’s opinion of German scholars was not entirely negative, even his approvals read more like a concession than a genuine endorsement. In the same article that condemned Strauss’s rationalistic pantheism, for example, Hodge also mentioned August Neander, a conservative theologian and church historian, and Ernst Wilhelm Hengstenberg, the conservative Old Testament scholar, both of whom worked at the University of Berlin. These men deserved praise simply because they stood at the head of the “evangelical” party of German theology.\(^51\) Hodge also saw hope in other biblical scholars, such as F. W. C. Umbreit, a professor of Old Testament at the University of


\(^50\) Charles Hodge, “Gleanings from the German Periodicals”: 198.

\(^51\) Ibid.: 199.
Heidelberg, who had been forsaking his former errors of rationalism and was warming to the reality of the supernatural. More than this, Hodge also went on to praise a handful of German periodicals. The *Repertorium* was a model of “fulness [sic] and variety of intelligence and criticism on theological subjects. . . . We have often been indebted to its pages, and believe that, for a foreigner who wishes to be fully informed of what is going on among all classes of the German theologians, it is the most valuable of their publications.” Yet, these were the exceptions in his otherwise negative piece. Hodge’s words largely fell around his familiar bone of contention, the “speculations” associated with philosophical Idealism. His views of Heinrich von Ewald, a professor of Oriental philology and Old Testament theology at Göttingen, mirror the general attitude he expressed toward German biblical scholarship as a whole: “Like many other celebrated writers,” Hodge wrote, “he has thrown into the background that in which his strength consists, and spent his labour in transmuting sense to nonsense, by enveloping the simple exposition of the scriptures in a fog of transcendental metaphysics.”

In later pieces, Hodge wrote equally unfavorably of the German biblical critics. His criticisms continued to center on the twin concerns of rationalism and Idealism; by the 1840s, his criticisms of Idealism, the “fog of transcendental metaphysics,” had taken yet more definite shape. Hodge’s review of Philip Schaff’s recent work on church history in 1845, for example, brought his criticisms of rationalism and Idealism together at once. Schaff, a Swiss-born, German-trained immigrant to the United States, stood for the whole

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52 Ibid.: 200.

53 Ibid.: 205.

54 Ibid.: 201.
lot of German theologians when it came to the problem of Idealism. “German writers,” Hodge complained, “are seldom very intelligible. Their preference for the reason over the understanding leads them to eschew Begriiffe, definite conceptions, and to abound in ideas, whose import and limits are indeterminate.” The distinctions Hodge drew here between reason and understanding, ideas and conceptions amounted to a backhanded slap at Kant; they represented an implicit accusation, again, that the Germans as a class were guilty of indulging in vague metaphysical speculations in the noumenal realm of Ideas instead of solid exegesis and empirical study in the realm of facts. German biblical scholarship, he implied, was susceptible to the influence of speculative philosophical Idealism.

Hodge’s criticism of rationalism emerged in the same piece in smaller proportion than his criticism of Idealism. Hodge went on to endorse Schaff’s argument for the pernicious influence of German rationalism in a brief comment. Hodge conceded the merits of some aspects of German biblical scholarship, particularly the amount and intensity of research that informed it. Yet their dedication to research was too much of a good thing, for “[t]he Germans have never been . . . [able] to distinguish between the unknown and the unknowable, they cannot discern the limits of human knowledge; and by passing those limits they lose all the criteria of knowledge, and are unable to distinguish between truth and the phantoms of their creative imaginations.” Hodge summed up the

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56 Ibid.: 634-635.
article by condemning both tendencies at once in castigating both the godless and the pantheistic tendencies of German theology.  

This kind of polemic continued in Hodge’s published pieces throughout the 1840s. In another article published a year after his review of Schaff, for example, Hodge noted the corrosive influence of rationalism in German theology. He singled out the Rationalistic party among German theologians for condemnation, and he praised the work of Hengstenberg as a lone voice of evangelical sanity in biblical interpretation there.  

Similarly, Hodge in 1850 criticized rationalism again as a problem in the German method of Bible scholarship. By that time, he saw rationalism as waning in influence. While Hodge welcomed that turn of events, he worried all the more about the rising influence of “Transcendentalism,” his shorthand for German philosophical Idealism.  

Hodge’s nearly total silence on the positive value of German criticism distinguished him both from Congregationalist theologians and from his Presbyterian colleagues at Princeton, such as Joseph Addison Alexander and Archibald Alexander. It was once tempting for historians of American ideas to interpret nineteenth-century Princeton Seminary as a bastion of rigidly conservative Reformed orthodoxy, an institution cut off from the modernizing trends of the broader intellectual world. After all, Hodge proclaimed proudly at the celebration in honor of his semi-centennial that “a new idea

57 Ibid.: 635-636.


never originated in this seminary.”

But this negative characterization of Hodge and Princeton is unfair. When Hodge uttered these words, he simply meant that Princeton had preserved the “faith once delivered to the saints” by standing firm against the “new methods or new theories” of “speculative men,” by which he had in mind ideas common among German theologians. In the same context, he contrasted Princeton’s “simple” theological method, which interpreted the Bible in its “plain historical sense,” with the more convoluted “philosophical” method. The philosophical method, as Hodge presented it, treated the doctrines of the Bible as mere “objects of faith” held by ordinary people, mere outer coverings hiding deeper “abstract truths” that required uncovering. The unfortunate result of this philosophical approach, Hodge argued, was that it ultimately changed the doctrines of Christianity into a “gas,” thereby sacrificing the substance of Christianity along with its form. The point of Hodge’s remarks about avoiding new ideas, therefore, was far less about his valuing closed-mindedness than it was about his desire to keep Christian theology firmly linked to the actual events of history. Hodge simply intended to defend a Realist epistemology, not ignore major developments in his field.

Thus, while the Princeton Review offers scant evidence that Hodge saw much value in German biblical scholarship, Hodge cannot be characterized as an intellectual philistine. Other faculty at the Seminary, moreover, talked more freely of the many benefits offered by German biblical research. This assessment confirms that of Theodore

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60 Nichols, for example, assessed Hodge as rigidly orthodox, even obscurantist; see Nichols, “Charles Hodge,” 98. Charles Hodge, quoted in A. A. Hodge, Life of Charles Hodge, 521.

61 Charles Hodge, address at his semi-centennial celebration, quoted in A. A. Hodge, Life of Charles Hodge, 521-522.
Dwight Bozeman, who characterized Princeton’s Old School Presbyterianism as “aggressively confessional, yet firmly evangelical; militantly on the move, out to prove it was no ‘dead orthodoxy’ . . .” The intellectual leaders of the Old School Presbyterians displayed an “intimate involvement with intellectual issues of the day” and remained “[r]emarkably alive to current developments in literature, philosophy, and science. . .”62 From this vantage point, it is not surprising that the Seminary’s Review continued to publish pieces arguing the tangible benefits of German scholarship even into the 1850s, a decade when one might otherwise have expected the dangers of German criticism to have impressed themselves firmly on the minds of these conservative theologians.

An article on “The Theology of the Old Testament” in 1853 furnishes an example. The anonymous piece argued strongly in favor of the German-inspired historical approach to biblical study. The reviewer noted the value of historical research into the Scriptures, and he cited German methods as exemplary. He argued against the “usual” approach to theology, which drew theological conclusions from the Bible treated as an undifferentiated whole. This method, typical in America, flattened the entire biblical message and failed to distinguish between the more complete, morally superior character of later revelations compared to the less complete, morally inferior character of earlier revelations. While the entire Bible was the inspired word of God, the revelation of the Bible clearly displayed

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evidence of development, he argued. Indeed, this development in the writings of the Bible simply mirrored the unfolding of divine revelation in the course of Israel’s history. Thus, the correct interpretation of the texts of the Bible required the recognition of the progressive character of divine revelation. Taking the most obvious example, the relationship between the Old and New Testaments, the reviewer argued that it was “to confound the nature of the two dispensations [Old and New] to attempt to bring everything into the old, with the same fullness and distinctness as in the new.” Theologians ought not seek support in the Old Testament for doctrines not revealed until the New. Otherwise, theologians would “be obliged, in proving our doctrine, either to force a meaning upon texts which they do not bear, or to admit that the proof is partial and defective, when we might and ought to claim that it is real and complete, all that could be expected or need be desired.”

The preceding quotation may have been a direct attack on Charles Hodge, who took precisely the ahistorical view of the relationship between the Old and New Testaments that the author of this piece criticized. Whether or not that is the case, it

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64 Ibid.: 105-107, 117, and passim.

65 Ibid.: 117.

66 Hodge’s ahistorical view of the relationship between the Old and New Testaments can be seen clearly, to take just one example, in a section from “Thornwell on the Apocrypha,” Princeton Review 17 (April 1845): 271-276. Hodge argued here that the Bible was equally inspired in all its parts; maintained that the biblical conception of God, sin, and other basic theological concepts was consistent throughout the entire Bible; and displayed little apprehension of any basic differences between the revelation of the older parts of the Bible compared with the newer.
demonstrates that contributors to the Princeton Review, taken as a whole, spoke with conflicting voices about German methods of biblical study. The German scholars, the reviewer argued, have done well to interpret each part of the Bible according to its own historical context. Such an approach, championed so well by the Germans, in no way detracted from the divine character of the Sacred texts. It did no less for the argument of the Bible’s divine origins to recognize that the Spirit of truth chose to use many men in different ages under different circumstances to communicate to the world the way of salvation. Indeed, it allowed access to the “true character and intent of the Bible. . . .”

Andrews Norton provides another gauge of the ambivalent view of German biblical scholarship in America during the early nineteenth century. Andrews Norton stood out as one of the few New Testament scholars in the young Republic and one of the chief figures in the Unitarian movement during the early part of the nineteenth century. Norton served as the Dexter Lecturer on Biblical Criticism at Harvard beginning in 1813 — an irony because Norton was neither a biblical scholar at the time, nor did he settle into that role quickly. Nevertheless, by 1817, he had learned enough German to begin reading the results of German criticism in earnest, and he soon dominated the new Harvard Divinity School as the Dexter Professor of Sacred Literature shortly after assuming the role in 1819. Norton’s prominence as Harvard’s premier biblical scholar and as a leading

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Unitarian during this period makes his views on German biblical scholarship particularly worthy of consideration. Conservative Calvinists at Andover and Princeton frequently accused Norton and other Unitarians of rationalism in religion. Indeed, the Unitarians themselves subjected Christian revelation and doctrine to the test of “reason.” In so far as their emphasis on reason led Unitarians to reject some of the traditional Christian doctrines of the Congregationalist establishment from which they grew, they deserved the “liberal” appellation that conservatives applied to them. Given their liberal position vis-à-vis the American evangelical denominations, then, it is not surprising that Norton and other Unitarians typically wrote less critically of German biblical scholarship than Stuart, Hodge, and other contributors to American theological discourse. Nevertheless, Unitarians shared many ideas about German biblical scholarship in common with their more orthodox brethren and, so, found much to criticize in the German model.

Andrews Norton demonstrated this ambivalence in a piece he published in an early volume of the Christian Examiner. On the one hand, Norton found an indispensable insight in the historical-critical method. The German biblical critics, he argued, rightly gave serious attention to historical context when interpreting the Bible. Because the message of the Bible came to particular people in particular places at particular times in history, the Germans’ efforts at contextualization aided greatly in the understanding of the text. Norton applied this principle in his field of specialization, the New Testament. He

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emphasized that the preaching of Christ and his Apostles had been first delivered in a real historical context. This represented a significant point to Norton, for it meant that the words of the New Testament itself need not be taken as Gospel, so to speak. Christ and the Apostles had accommodated their message to the historical situation of the original hearers of their message. As such, their message reflected the ideas and attitudes of the original audience, even when those ideas and attitudes were erroneous or morally inferior. Thus, the contemporary interpreter of the New Testament enjoyed some latitude in the interpretation of the text. That latitude consisted in the permission to separate the eternal, timeless moral and theological truths in the New Testament from the temporal, historically-contextualized elements of the text that reflected an accommodation to the prejudices and predilections of the original audience. Norton justified this interpretive latitude by an appeal to the past. “About the truth of this principle of interpretation,” he argued, “there is no dispute among those who understand the subject. It is admitted, at the present day, by all expositors of any reputation. . . . [I]t was clearly laid down sixteen hundred years ago, by the most ancient and most eloquent of the Latin fathers, Tertullian.”

Nevertheless, this principle of interpretation was potentially radical in its implications. Norton himself never used the principle to stray far beyond the literal words of the New Testament text, and he expressed dismay over the way many German theologians deployed it. As he put it, “The principle of accommodation, though undeniably true in itself, is, however, obviously liable to be extended too far and applied in

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improper cases. It is to be connected with and limited by other sound principles of interpretation. It has without doubt been abused by the infidel critics of Germany” who had used it to escape or undermine some of the central ideas and claims of the Gospel.\textsuperscript{70}

While Norton certainly wished to escape classification with the bastions of Calvinist orthodoxy, as represented specifically by Moses Stuart and the Congregational Church, neither did he believe in the justice of the “infidel” label applied to him by more conservative American church leaders. Without conceding the distinctive points of Unitarian theology, Norton argued that Unitarians could not rightly be called infidels, precisely because their opinions differed fundamentally from the opinions of the true German infidels. The specter of German “infidel critics” provided Norton his foil in defending American Unitarianism against charges of infidelity that had been leveled against the Unitarian movement in another periodical. As Norton argued, “We are at quite as great a distance from the infidel theologians of Germany, as we are from the most ignorant and bigoted among the orthodox writers of our own country.”\textsuperscript{71} This was particularly true in regard to the interpretation of Scripture, he emphasized.

Norton singled out Johann Salomo Semler, Halle’s famous biblical critic, in order to distinguish Unitarian liberalism from true German infidelity. Semler was both at the time and henceforth the acknowledged father of historical criticism in Germany; by the early nineteenth century, his rationalistic historical interpretation of the Bible had influenced many schools of biblical scholarship at universities across the German-speaking

\textsuperscript{70} Ibid.: 345.

\textsuperscript{71} Ibid.: 324.
landscape and beyond.72 “With regard to our [Unitarian] modes of interpreting scripture,” Norton continued in self-defense, “there is not less ignorance or injustice discovered, in attempting to confound them with those which have prevailed in Germany, among the followers of Semler, . . . the ‘father of the modern Liberalism.’” Norton went on to criticize Semler’s biblical interpretation as far-fetched, over-extended, and naturalistic in it tendency. As Norton argued, even if Semler had articulated some valid historical methods and conclusions regarding the original texts of the Bible, he had failed to distinguish between truth and error. “Few writers,” Norton complained, “have dogmatized more freely or have been more sparing of arguments.” Semler’s “love of novelty, and fondness for innovation” often led him “beyond the bounds of reason, probability, and truth, to the regions of hypothesis and extravagant conjecture.” This was very much the case with Semler’s skepticism toward the “miraculous evidence” in support of Christianity — so much so that Semler could justly be charged with planting the seed of “that system of infidelity which has so extensively prevailed among his countrymen.” Norton thus deflected the attention of his American critics to Semler, whose many errors, he argued, qualified him as a true paragon of infidel biblical scholarship. American Unitarians were not infidels in as much as they failed to measure up to the real infidels, the rationalistic German critics like Semler.

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72 For an introduction to Semler’s ideas and public career, see Introduction, n. 58.


74 Ibid.: 343.
Thus, on the one hand, Norton clearly separated himself from many “infidel” features of recent German historical criticism. His opinion in this piece might be summed up as agreement with the fundamental premise of German historical interpretation, but strong disapproval of both rationalistic assumptions and speculative methodology that all Americans agreed characterized the worst German biblical scholars. Several additional pieces in the *North American Review* show Norton’s strong affinities with the modern school of historical critics. They suggest that the historical critical methodology, despite the excesses of German speculation and rationalistic interpretation, had captured his allegiance very early in the century. In a piece in 1829, for example, Norton argued that the New Testament book of Hebrews was not canonical because critical study of the text had demonstrated that Paul was not its author. While his reasoning was straightforward, his position would have shocked nearly every other church leader or theologian in America at the time. He reasoned that the “genuine” New Testament epistles — those written by Paul or one of the Apostles — and the Gospels alone constituted the primary sources of knowledge about the Christian religion. The canonical status of a text depended on its author’s proximity to Christ. This was the basic argument for biblical canonicity adopted by the Church during the fourth century, a position later re-affirmed by Protestant Reformers, and the position upheld by orthodox theologians in America during the early nineteenth century. Yet, in a departure from the classic Christian formulation, Norton made an assertion that amounted to heresy among most theologians in America: canonicity did not denote revelation. These canonical books of the New Testament were not themselves revelation. As Norton put it, “They are nothing more than the best records
which remain to us of the revelation which God made by Jesus Christ. This revelation . . . is not to be identified with the canonical books of the New Testament.”

Norton’s departure from conservative orthodoxy went even further: in distinction to views shared by conservative theologians, Norton believed that the Bible was not, in fact, infallible. He believed, with conservatives such as Hodge and Stuart, that Christ had appointed the Apostles to teach with divine authority. He even conceded, willingly, that God had enlightened the minds of the Apostles in order to help them carry out their teaching commission. But that marked the point at which Norton bid his orthodox colleagues farewell, for, unlike them, Norton could not accept that God’s influence over the New Testament authors had elevated them above the prejudices, errors, and limitations of the human condition. The Apostles had remained fully human. Despite their gifts of religious insight, it appeared obvious to him that the imperfections of their earth-bound, creaturely situation came co-mingled with the revelation of God in the writings of the New Testament.

To Norton, then, the inspiration of the Apostles had remained limited in its extent. While the Bible contained an infallible revelation, the Bible was not coextensive with that infallible revelation. While this example was not a discussion of German biblical criticism per se, Norton here was bringing into the American theological discussion ideas that had been circulating among German biblical scholars for more than half a century. In point of fact, Norton probably developed his idea of biblical revelation from the Anglo-Dutch-

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76 Ibid.: 344-345.
French critics of the late seventeenth century.\textsuperscript{77} Regardless, it is clear that he was working in sympathy with the German historical-critical approach to biblical scholarship, at least in part, during the early decades of the nineteenth century.

Despite his basic affinities with the historical critics, however, Norton disliked the excesses of German biblical scholars. In this way, he demonstrated an ambivalence toward German biblical scholarship not unlike that of Stuart, Hodge, and other Reformed theological commentators. This became evident when he discussed the state of New Testament textual criticism in 1824. Writing again in the \textit{Christian Examiner}, Norton considered at length the arguments of the eminent German New Testament critic, Johann Jakob Griesbach, who had argued for the existence of important differences between the texts of the New Testament common in the Ancient Greek East and the Latin West.\textsuperscript{78} Norton criticized Griesbach’s conclusions as “adapted to weaken . . . the genuineness and authority” of the current best text of the New Testament. Griesbach and other textual critics had simply put forward “extravagant” theories that had exaggerated the differences among the textual traditions of the New Testament in the Ancient World. There simply were no major differences among the Byzantine, Alexandrian, and Western texts of the New Testament in late Antiquity, Norton argued. In fact, it was more accurate to argue that the small number and insignificant character of the differences among ancient textual traditions of the New Testament support the genuineness of the current text rather than

\textsuperscript{77} Turner, \textit{manuscript long version of The Liberal Education of Charles Eliot Norton}, Special Collections, Hesburgh Library, University of Notre Dame.

\textsuperscript{78} For a brief introduction to the ideas and public career of Griesbach, see \textit{Introduction}, n. 56.
discredit it.\textsuperscript{79} Thus, on the one hand, Norton concluded that Griesbach “appears sometimes to have been biased [sic] in his peculiar theory; and we do not agree with him in all his decisions.”\textsuperscript{80}

Nevertheless, Norton concluded several matters in Griesbach’s favor. Despite his theory of divergence among ancient textual authorities, Norton argued, Griesbach had still given the modern world a highly authoritative corrected text. Indeed, Griesbach had followed the “rules of criticism” so assiduously that his corrected text of the New Testament escaped the effects of his own exaggerated argument for variation among ancient textual authorities. Thus, Griesbach’s corrected text remained the product of the objective discipline of textual criticism, and his theory of divergent authorities may be discarded without discarding the corrected text it produced.\textsuperscript{81} Despite his criticism of the fundamentals of Griesbach’s theory, then, Norton could still conclude that Griesbach “merits, undoubtedly, great praise; and there is good reason to regard his edition as approximated very nearly to the original text, more nearly indeed than . . . he himself seems to have apprehended.”\textsuperscript{82} Norton, therefore, remained ambivalent when it came to Griesbach’s work. While he held a higher view of the results of the German critical project than contributors to Congregationalist and Presbyterian theological discussion, Norton

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\textsuperscript{80} Ibid.: 221.

\textsuperscript{81} Ibid.: 220-221.

\textsuperscript{82} Ibid.: 221.
demonstrated an ambivalence toward the German critical project that placed him in the company of those same Congregationalist and Presbyterian authors.

This ambivalence toward German criticism characterized the attitude of other contributors to the Unitarian journal during the early nineteenth century. For example, an author in 1840 articulated a positive value of research in the Samaritan Pentateuch for the sake of textual criticism. The reviewer saw only good in the comparison of the Samaritan texts to the received Jewish text of the Pentateuch. Errors, discrepancies, and ambiguities had crept into the Jewish text over the centuries, and any attempt to attain better surety as to the original forms of the text ought to be welcome. Considering the Samaritan text, he wrote, “from what has been seen of its character, it must appear highly valuable as a source of correcting the received text. . . . The more carefully and impartially the two copies are collated, the more nearly may we expect to arrive at the genuine words of Moses.”

American observers, taken as a whole, then, saw many perplexing features in German biblical scholarship during the early nineteenth century, and this view persisted through much of the century. On the one hand, they valued the efforts of German textual critics because their work had helped solidify the original text of the Bible, especially the New Testament. They also appreciated the philological work of German scholarship in biblical languages because it was aiding in the proper interpretation of the Bible by clarifying what the original authors had meant to communicate. Finally, they admired German erudition and scholarly energy in general. The Germans represented the best

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potential of modern learning in the fields related to the study of the Bible. On the other hand, many Americans deplored the propensity of many Germans toward an overly analytical, meticulous, detailed treatment of the texts. The Germans too often mistook dissection for resuscitation; their work, instead of bringing the Bible to life, frequently bled it of life and sapped the vitality of the whole organism. Many American observers also deplored the influence of German philosophical speculation on biblical scholarship. German philosophizing had resulted in flights of fancy and the production of abstruse, groundless, and indeterminate ideas that frequently obscured, rather than clarified, the genuine meaning of the Bible’s texts. Many deplored rationalistic interpretations of the Bible among German biblical scholars as the source of creeping skepticism in the life of the German churches. And many deplored German theories of the composite nature of many biblical books for their potentially destructive effect on a religious understanding that depended on the historical accuracy of the biblical texts.
CHAPTER TWO

COMMON SENSE AND THE LOGIC OF AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM

Early nineteenth-century American theologians viewed even the most troubling aspects of German theology with a remarkable degree of aplomb compared to late nineteenth-century theologians. During the latter decades of the century, many Americans greeted German historical criticism with cries of alarm, and the study of the Bible became a topic of heated debate. The difference from the reception of German criticism during the earlier decades of the century is striking, and it poses a historical problem: if antebellum Protestant intellectuals were more or less aware of the results of German historical criticism from the beginning of the nineteenth century, why did they only begin seriously to view it as a problem during the 1870s? If they had found many of the premises and conclusions of the German historical scholars perplexing, even destructive, why then did they not worry the American church would be led into skepticism and unbelief, much as the German church had? Why, ultimately, did historical biblical criticism become a matter of public controversy in the United States only during the last quarter of the nineteenth century?

The periodical literature of the nineteenth century shows that perhaps the most important answer to these questions was the pervasive influence of Scottish Common Sense Realism. First, Common Sense, and the ideas associated with that formal
philosophy, allowed antebellum Protestant intellectuals to define German historical
criticism largely as a German problem. The principles of Common Sense stood out in
contrast to many ideas and methods associated with German criticism and theology. The
more persuasively Protestant intellectuals argued that they and other Americans were
imbued with the principles of Common Sense, the more they separated themselves, by
definition, from much of what they disliked about German theology and criticism.
Common Sense, in other words, made the baleful forces of German criticism and theology
seem foreign, and therefore less relevant, to the American context. Second, several of the
principles and aims associated with the Common Sense approach to theology, in fact,
resonated with the work of German biblical scholars. This resonance helped antebellum
theologians see several aspects of German biblical research, however grave its errors, as
beneficent to evangelical religion. Finally, American Protestant theologians regularly wore
the amulet of Common Sense to ward off the bewitching influences of German skepticism,
rationalism, and philosophical speculation. The sheer strength of Common Sense Realism
in the minds of American theologians encouraged them confidently to invoke the powers
of German biblical research while believing they could avoid its evils. Likewise, to the
extent that American intellectuals could make a similar case in regard to American thinking
generally, the more immune to German skepticism and infidelity did the American
churches appear. It is not too much to argue that Protestant intellectuals in early
nineteenth-century America believed in a kind of American exceptionalism when it came
to questions of theology and religion. The American intellectual context, most of them
believed, was basically different from the European, and that basic difference, they
thought, excepted Americans from the dangers of German theology and criticism.
Evidence abounds showing that antebellum intellectuals defined German biblical criticism almost exclusively as a German problem. Norton, Stuart, and even the especially cautious Hodge rarely, if ever, defined German biblical criticism as a threat to religion in America despite their frequent, and usually substantial, quarrels with its methods and results. Charles Hodge, for example, routinely viewed the German biblical scholars and theologians with suspicion and disapproval, and he believed that unbelief and religious skepticism were very grave problems. Nevertheless, he also seems not to have drawn a strong connection between these negative developments and German theology. In 1833, for example, he discussed the reasons for “indifference to divine truth” among many Americans — that is, reasons why people failed to feel the force of the Gospel’s claims on their lives. Hodge suggested several causes: a misguided spirit of liberality that, in the name of tolerance, failed to conserve the essential elements of Christian doctrine; a too-strenuous avoidance of partiality and party-identification; and a failure to experience of the power of the Gospel. Nowhere in his lengthy discussion did Hodge mention the influence of German theology, biblical criticism, or the voice of prominent skeptics as reasons for the spread of unbelief. Indeed, he defined the problem with Christian belief and practice as one of mere indifference, rather than contact with bad theology or the influence or religious skepticism. This was very different than his attitude a few decades later.¹ German criticism appears simply not to have been of great concern to him during the 1830s.

This was still the case in 1840, when Hodge reviewed a battle of pamphlets between Andrews Norton and Ralph Waldo Emerson. Norton had labeled Emerson’s Transcendentalist philosophy the “latest form of infidelity,” and Hodge, in his review, agreed wholeheartedly. Hodge criticized Emerson’s “pantheism,” in particular, charging that Emerson had “exceed[ed] even the limits of the most liberal Christianity.” Hodge linked Emerson’s Transcendentalism to the influence of “German philosophy,” a negative association with the Germans that he held throughout his career. Yet, this was the extent to which Hodge linked German ideas to the new theological heresy in the United States. This is striking because he might have taken the ready-made opportunity to rail against the deleterious effects of German philosophy on religious orthodoxy, for he clearly identified that dynamic at work in the example of Emerson’s pantheistic transcendentalism. Without overstating the case, it is fair to say that that Hodge cared more about refuting the errors in Norton’s criticisms of Emerson than he did in discussing Emerson’s Transcendentalism or its German origins. The German roots of this new infidelity, let alone German biblical criticism, simply failed to exercise Hodge in an example in which it conceivably might have.

The same was true in 1846, when Hodge reviewed theological controversies that had been raging in Germany. He identified the three main parties in the German fray as Catholics, Rationalists, and orthodox Protestants. In his extensive discussion, he gave particular attention to the various elements of the Rationalistic party, who had been responsible for many of the most radical arguments about the origins and meaning of the biblical texts. Nevertheless, Hodge treated the problem as “over there.” To him, it was an

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unfortunate, even lamentable, development in Germany, but it was not a problem for America per se. He simply did not see rationalistic theology and biblical study in Germany having much influence over the religious situation in America.³

Hodge showed a similar nonchalance toward German biblical criticism in 1845 when he reviewed Philip Schaff’s work on religion in Germany. Schaff, a Swiss-born, German-educated emigrant to the United States, argued that the most serious threat to Protestant religion in Germany was rationalism, not the influence of Roman Catholicism, as many believed. Hodge thought Schaff had gotten things backwards. Contrary to the Swiss émigré, Hodge maintained that Catholicism presented a graver threat to Protestant truth than rationalism, for “a false religion is more likely to spread than mere irreligion, and . . . the human mind has greater affinity for superstition, than for infidelity.”⁴ Hodge’s argument is particularly significant for two reasons. First, as discussed in a previous section, Hodge had few kind words for German theology and biblical studies, even when compared to the ambivalent views of other American theologians. To elevate Romanism as a greater threat than rationalism was to mitigate somewhat his own negative view of the German rationalistic critics.

Second, and more importantly, Hodge’s own opinions about the Roman Church help put his opinions about German theology and biblical scholarship into clearer perspective. Whereas many of his fellow Old Schoolers viewed the Catholic Church as a false church, Hodge’s pronouncements here should not be taken as absolute or complete.


He thought it far better for people to be papists than unbelievers. The Roman Church, while corrupt in many of its practices and misguided in much of its theology, nevertheless remained a true church in which people found salvation. For Hodge to maintain Romanism as the greater threat to Protestantism than rationalism, therefore, is to suggest his relative lack of worry about the influence of German infidelity. Nearer the end of the century, Hodge and his theological descendants at Princeton, including his own son, came to see much of German theology and biblical scholarship as the gravest of threats to genuine religion; during the early part of the century, however, these failed to register particularly strongly in Hodge’s mind.

Like Charles Hodge, Moses Stuart appears hardly to have been ruffled by even the most radical theories of German biblical criticism. As early as 1826, for example, Stuart engaged the arguments of Gesenius, the formidable Old Testament scholar at the University of Halle. Gesenius argued that Moses had not authored the Pentateuch. This was a radical notion in 1826, contradicting the centuries-old view, shared by Christians and Jews alike, that Moses had penned these first five books of the Bible. Unlike later Americans who engaged this question, Stuart offered no emphatic warnings of dire consequences should such ideas influence the American church, and he avoided prognosticating on the deplorable heresies of German biblical scholars. Instead, Stuart countered Gesenius’s evidence and assumptions point by point and then put forward

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several arguments of his own in favor of the traditional view. For example, Gesenius had argued that the first five books of the Old Testament must have been written after the time of Moses because they appear to offer predictive warnings to the ancient Israelites that had, in fact, come true. Stuart pointed out that Gesenius could not have argued this way unless he had presumed that predictive prophecy was impossible. Stuart concluded, almost dismissively, that Gesenius’s presumptions about prophecy had determined Gesenius’s results, not Gesenius’s investigation into the facts.

Another piece in 1833 confirmed Stuart’s essentially dismissive attitude toward what he thought were German heresies. As Stuart discussed the state of biblical commentary in Germany, he could not do so without recognizing the division between Germany’s school of rationalistic biblical critics, the “neologists,” and the orthodox interpreters of scripture — “[t]he great controversy in Germany, between the neologists and those who adhere to the doctrines of the reformation, must be well known to my readers,” Stuart acknowledged. Thus, he presumed that the controversy over rationalistic historical criticism was hardly unknown to American readers even very early in the century. Yet, he defined this “great controversy” as one that belonged to Germany. Nowhere did Stuart suggest that the controversy in Germany ought to exercise Americans’ passions, and nowhere did he write about the need to defend against the influence of German neological views. It remained to him a German problem.


7 Ibid.: 294-295.

This is not to suggest that Stuart failed to imagine the possibility of crisis over biblical criticism in America. The evidence of his published articles indicates that Stuart came closer to viewing German theology with alarm than did Hodge and Norton. In a piece from 1838, for example, Stuart speculated that English-language apologists might someday have a tall order on their hands as a result of German biblical literature. He worried about the spread of German theology in both Britain and the United States. Because of its diffusion in the English-speaking world, he argued, “it is unwise, indeed it is impossible, for us to remain idle spectators of the great contest which has been and still is going on.”9 Stuart’s charge to Americans in light of this potential threat was clear: vigilance. Those who would wish to defend the genuineness and authenticity of the two Testaments must never allow themselves to “slumber on their post, and let neological views have their course. . . .” Otherwise, he warned, the neologists would gain a foothold in the United States.10 And because German theology was becoming known in American, he argued, “we have no way left but to prepare for the worst, and to take the vantage ground if we can in the contest, by shewing those who would attack the cause of settled belief in the Scriptures, that neither their attacks are unprovided for by us, nor their weapons or tactics unknown to us.”11 His desire to see Americans prepare the defenses of the Faith against future incursions of German neology led him to commend Andrews

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10 Ibid.: 268-269.

11 Ibid.: 270.
Norton’s new work on the *Genuineness of the Gospels*. Stuart’s example in this article, thus, represents the first stirrings of public discussion of a contest against German rationalism on American shores.

Despite his language of conflict, however, it is important not to exaggerate Stuart’s position. For one thing, his tone is probably best described as strong, but not alarmist. Also, Stuart defined the battle over German neology as a future threat rather than a current reality. As far as Americans were concerned, Stuart suggested, the European battle for the faith had not yet arrived on American shores. Thus, he could not “doubt the expediency of preparing for the great contest which must ensue, if once the views of Neologists shall become current among us.” Yet, he “would not anticipate these [German theological heresies], and diffuse them prematurely. Sufficient for the day is the evil thereof.” Instead of alarm, Stuart preached preparation to meet the influence of German neology, and he did not see any evidence that a party of neologists was currently rising up within the Anglo-American world. Moreover, this piece represented Stuart’s strongest expression of crisis in all of his published pieces during the 1830s, and it appears to have been the single occasion he suggested that English-speakers arm themselves for battle against German neology. Though the problem presented a future threat to America, it remained just that: a strong possibility, even a likelihood — but not a current reality. The immediate problem, despite the strains of urgency in his article, still resided in Germany.

A second piece, published during the same month as this piece on Norton, suggests that Stuart was generally nonchalant toward German biblical criticism. In this

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12 Ibid.: 271.

13 Ibid.: 269.
second example, Stuart acknowledged the spread of German “neology.” Yet, he implied that one American’s attempt to write a Hebrew lexicon turned out so poorly that it would actually encourage Americans to read the German master of philology, Gesenius. While Stuart did not see Gesenius as a threat, he suggested that poor English-language parodies of German philological study would drive Americans closer to the German neologists, not farther away from them. Stuart’s tone here is almost dismissive of American fears of German neology, and while his dismissiveness might have been influenced in this example by his dislike for the work he was reviewing, he passed up the opportunity to call for a better defense against German neology. Stuart simply failed to define the Germans’ work consistently as a threat to American religion. Therefore, Stuart shared much in common with Hodge, Norton, and American theologians as a whole. Stuart’s urgent tone in his review of Norton in 1838 remained uncommon in American theological discourse during the 1830s. Though similar strains could be heard now and then over the next decades, their frequency and intensity grew only slowly, if at all, before the 1870s.

Evidence in antebellum periodicals likewise indicates that Andrews Norton failed to define German biblical criticism as a problem for Americans to contend with. This is true even while he often pointed out the erroneous and destructive character of German biblical scholarship. As explained previously, Johann Jacob Griesbach, the New Testament critic, had argued that wide variations existed among various Eastern and Western textual traditions of the New Testament during late Antiquity. Griesbach’s arguments, Norton said, suggested that the current text of the New Testament had been corrupted relatively shortly after its documents were first written. Such arguments, Norton believed, both

undermined the authority of the New Testament and encouraged religious skepticism. Nevertheless, Norton does not seem to have been greatly upset by them. He simply cast aside Griesbach’s argument for important divergences between Eastern and Western textual traditions by labeling them simply as “peculiar.” Norton went on, in fact, to endorse the fruits of Griesbach’s labor — a “corrected” text of the New Testament, based on comparisons among different ancient authorities — while dismissing Grieback’s theory without much fuss.¹⁵

Norton’s relative nonchalance toward other ideas he found erroneous could be seen again in 1827 when he reviewed the state of liberal biblical study in Germany. Norton criticized the “rational” interpretation of scripture that Johann Salomo Semler had pioneered at the University of Halle.¹⁶ Semler deserved his title as the Father of Modern Liberalism, Norton argued, because he had supplied the seed of “that system of infidelity which has so extensively prevailed among his countrymen.”¹⁷ Yet, Norton saw Semler and the rationalistic school of biblical interpretation as a German problem, not something for Americans to trouble themselves with much. As Norton wrote, “... [Semler’s] writings have been but little known in this country, and such are their defects, especially the


obscurity and barbarism of their style . . . that we believe they are at present but very little read any where.”\(^{18}\) It must be acknowledged that Norton did pen his Genuineness of the Gospels in 1837 specifically to counter modern religious skepticism in light of the previous half-century of attacks on Christianity on these grounds, specifically German rationalistic Bible interpretation. Yet it must also be said that his published articles throughout the same decade nowhere discuss threats of German theology or rationalistic biblical interpretation to American religious belief. This is true even when Norton specifically discussed results of German biblical scholarship or theories that clearly touched on issues of rationalism, biblical interpretation, and the Canon.\(^{19}\) While Norton clearly opposed the school of rationalistic theologians in Germany, he does not appear to have viewed their errors as an imminent danger to religious belief in America, at least not to a great extent.

Additional evidence from the Christian Examiner during the early nineteenth century fills out the picture of Unitarians’ responses to German higher criticism. While Unitarian theologians and commentators followed Norton in looking more favorably upon German biblical critics than their Congregationalist and Presbyterian brothers, they also offered sharp criticisms of the rationalistic premises, speculative methods, and ill-founded conclusions they associated with German biblical scholarship. Like Stuart and Hodge, Norton and other Unitarians were inclined to define biblical higher criticism as misguided

\(^{18}\) Ibid.

or harmful, but they failed to perceive a threat to the American religious world from the errors of German biblical commentators. They displayed a similar nonchalance toward the higher criticism as that which pervaded American theology generally.

David Friedrich Strauss’s *Life of Jesus* had already electrified Europe with its interpretation of the New Testament’s Gospels as myth by the late 1830s. Charles Hodge, the Presbyterian theologian, had reviewed the book in 1838; a second author in the Unitarian *Christian Examiner* reviewed it again in 1840. This anonymous Unitarian, similar to Hodge before him, characterized the book as “negative, destructive, and unsatisfactory. . . . It is colder than ice. It is the most melancholy book we ever read. All nature was dark to us as we closed and finished it.”20 Part of what depressed the reviewer about Strauss’s work was that it “struck at the most deeply cherished [Christian] doctrines . . . ,” although this was also the very thing that he believed gave the book its single redeeming value.

Despite the book’s gloomy implications for the viability of traditional Christian belief, at least Strauss had helped to purify Protestant theology from its characteristic “lifeless rationalism” and “stiff supernaturalism.”21 The reviewer went on to hope that the book “only marks a period of transition.” “Doubtless,” he went on “some will be shaken in their weakly rooted faith; and the immediate effect will probably be bad; worse than former religious revolutions with them. . . .” But he charged his readers not to fear the shaking, for, “[i]f a church can be destroyed by a criticism, or a book, however pungent, the sooner it fall the better. . . .” Moreover, he concluded, “an institution, cherished and clung to by the choicest hopes, the deepest desires of the human race, is not in a moment to be

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21 Ibid.
displaced by a book.” Therefore, this reviewer did not interpret even a book he found disturbing and utterly depressing as ultimately harmful to Christianity. In fact, he prefigured the views of the school of theological moderates that emerged late in the nineteenth century. The Unitarians were several decades ahead of their time when it came to attitudes toward German biblical scholarship.

This piece fairly well characterized the view of German criticism published in the Unitarian review during the early nineteenth century. Another reviewer, for example, pronounced on the topic of German theology two years later. He declared as foolish the notion that German theology necessarily led to infidelity. He had grown weary of reading the “sweeping anathemas” against the whole cadre of German theologians who had “for the last half century [been] engaged in the impious work of undermining the authority of the Bible. . . .” He complained that the religious climate had chilled to the point that anyone who even picked up a German book was “suspected to be already on the broad road to infidelity.” It was time for Americans to put away “such crude prejudices” and learn to better appreciate the studious labors of the Germans. Besides, the author argued, there was little for Americans to fear from the results of even the most speculative and rationalistic biblical scholarship. As he put it, “We greatly mistake the American mind if these attenuated speculations ever take deep root among us. That mind is too clear-sighted, keen, and practical to be enamored of a cloud.” He remained confident that “the

22 Ibid.: 315-316.

American scholar will estimate the deep research of the Germans above all price” but still maintain “little respect” for their speculations.24

This general attitude extended back to the 1820s, as well, in an article by Samuel Gilman. Gilman made reference to a recent work of Barthold Georg Niebuhr, who at various points in his career served as the Prussian ambassador to Rome and as a historian of ancient Rome at the Universities of Berlin and Bonn.25 Niebuhr had articulated several opinions that many viewed as undermining the authority of the Bible. This gave Gilman occasion to write on German theology and the proper American response to it. “. . . [I]f we should hope to restrain that wildness of criticism on theological subjects which is too prevalent in Germany,” he argued, “we must learn to tolerate amongst ourselves a sober freedom of honest and humble inquiry. . . .”26 German theology should not be opposed, but engaged critically.

Still other reviewers in the Christian Examiner discussed the reality of controversy in religious thought. Orville Dewey wrote in 1825, “[w]e live in an age distinguished by liberal, and, as many think, by rash and hazardous speculation. . . . [I]nvestigation is certainly more liberal, more free and extensive now, than it ever was.”27 Dewey

24 Ibid.: 324.


acknowledged what appeared obvious to most American religious leaders early in the century: such “free inquiry” was unsettling. The danger was the spread of infidelity. As Dewey wrote, “. . . I think it must be manifest . . . that he who is growing lighter and looser in religion as he advances in religious speculation is as far from true and thorough research as philosophy is from sophistry, . . . as far as rational faith is from reckless infidelity.”28 All this spelled upset for religious belief. Yet, Dewey anticipated the ultimate result for religious truth would be not harm but good. “Through what storms and tempests the ark of truth is to pass, what dangers it is to encounter, . . . God only knows.” But one thing remained certain to him: “it will move onward, and it will rest at last in more elevated regions than it now occupies.”29 Thus, while the tempests would rage over the new spirit of inquiry in religion, of which biblical higher criticism was clearly a part, there was no real crisis for Americans to fear. Such inquiry would eventually, and only, lead to a firmer grasp of the truth. Dewey, in arguing thus, anticipated the position of moderate and liberal theologians in American during the second half of the nineteenth century.

These perceptions that the ills of German theology were confined to the European Continent accompanied strong commitments to the principles of Common Sense, or ideas that resonated with Common Sense, among American intellectuals. By frequently invoking the ideals of Common Sense when discussing German theology and criticism, antebellum Protestants used Common Sense to define themselves as fundamentally different than

28 Ibid.: 410.

29 Ibid.: 411.
most German theologians and biblical scholars. By imagining themselves as wholly
different than the Germans, American theologians rendered the malignant influences of
German theology less threatening than they otherwise might have appeared.

The commitments of American intellectuals to the principles of Common Sense ran deep. Andrews Norton’s strong sympathies with the Scottish philosophy stood out, for example, in a four-part series of articles in which he discussed the authorship of the Epistle to the Hebrews. In his discussion, Norton determined that the internal evidence from the book indicated that it had not been authored by one of the Apostles; as a result, he concluded, Hebrews ought not be considered a part of the canon of scripture.30 The reason was fairly straightforward in Norton’s mind: he believed that the Apostles had been uniquely equipped to teach the elements of Christian religion to others. As Norton summed up their qualifications, “[t]he light from Heaven . . . shone into the minds of the apostles. . . .” It gave them “a view of the essential character of Christianity, preserved them from all essential errors respecting it; and, above all,” kept them from “superadding any human doctrine as a part of that revelation which they were to teach.”31 The Apostles alone had been able to protect and promulgate the “magnificent simplicity of our religion.” By contrast, other early Christian writers had been prone to complicate and confuse things. Norton determined that, “[i]n the minds of those who were not guided by the miraculous influences of God’s spirit, a mixture of human opinions and conceptions with the truths of


our religion, almost immediately took place. . .”\textsuperscript{32} Furthermore, he defined the texts of the New Testament as the “best records which remain to us of the revelation which God made by Jesus Christ.”\textsuperscript{33} The point of the records was almost factual to Norton, a matter of facts to be reported. As he wrote, “The books of the New Testament afford satisfactory information concerning those truths which it was the purpose of God to reveal to man. Those truths are continually stated, appealed to, or implied.”\textsuperscript{34} For all these reasons, it was important to know with certainty who wrote each of the texts, for the authority of the documents rested upon the authorship of the documents. This was the source of Norton’s interest in the authorship of the Epistle to the Hebrews. This reliance on authorship to establish authority, a pervasive notion in the Protestant world, made it all the more crucial that the texts be interpreted clearly. Norton wanted no less than to interpret the true canonical texts just as their authors had intended, for, “[w]hen the meaning of the books of the New Testament is understood, and a proper use is made of them, then will the true character of our religion be revealed to men anew.”\textsuperscript{35}

Norton’s piece evinced several characteristics of the Common Sense philosophical apologetic. First, Norton believed in the essential perspicuity of the scriptures — hence, his desire to translate and interpret the Bible in order to make plain Christianity’s “magnificent simplicity.” Second, Norton thought of the Christian religion, seemingly by instinct, as a matter of “truths” — facts and propositions that demanded assent; the very

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{33} Ibid.: 344.

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid.: 345.

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid.: 346.
things the Apostles had been uniquely equipped to understand, he emphasized, were the truths of Christian revelation. Third, Norton simply presumed the literal historicity of the biblical record. The texts of the New Testament recorded Christ’s teachings, words, and deeds as they had occurred in history; as the best existing record of Christ’s revelation, they provided the best foundation for Christian knowledge. Forth, and closely related, Norton pinned apostolic authority on the historical position of the Apostles as eyewitnesses to the life and work of Jesus Christ. Finally, because we knew that Christ had commissioned the Apostles as authoritative teachers of divine truth, we could trust that God’s spirit had enabled them uniquely to apprehend Christ’s teachings more fully and accurately than any one else. Norton may have found affinity with German New Testament scholars when he studied the Epistle to the Hebrews, but he did so within a theological matrix still thoroughly defined by the tenets of the Common Sense philosophy.

Charles Hodge’s Common Sense predilections have been well known to scholars of American religion and intellectual history; they had a profound influence on his theology throughout his long career. They were evident early on, for example, when Hodge

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36 Norton’s understanding of the inspiration of the scriptures differed from the formulations of most American Protestant leaders of the day. See Ch. 1 and espec. Ch. 3.

advocated the plain, simple truths of scripture over systems of religious philosophy. Writing in 1830, Hodge blamed most religious controversies, past and present, on theologians who had made philosophy the “mistress,” rather than the “handmaid,” of religion. In the past, disputes over Pelagianism and Arminianism, for example, had resulted from the subservience of religion to philosophical disputation. Likewise, in the present, “questions in mental or moral science . . . alienate and divide Christians in this country,” again because religion had been made subservient to philosophical controversy.38 Instead of entanglement with matters of philosophical speculation, Hodge advocated a return to “common sense” and the empirical facts of Christian revelation — a return to the Bible instead of philosophical speculation. Thus he argued that “theology might have, and ought to have, much less of a philosophical, and more of an exegetical character than it has commonly assumed.”39 “Exegetical,” of course, entailed the interpretation of the Bible as the basis of theology and the source of knowledge about matters of God, the human condition, and salvation. Indeed, Hodge argued, ordinary Christians often understood these principles better than theologians did, for “in all ages and countries” ordinary

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39 Ibid.
peoples’ views of divine truth were “very nearly the same.” 40 Theologians’ opinions, by contrast, varied widely by comparison.

Nowhere was this more evident than in the comparison between religion in modern Germany and England, Hodge argued. The philosophical theologians of the two countries shared hardly a single principle in common; yet, the ordinary Christians in the two countries were remarkably united in both religious understanding and feeling. 41 Why, Hodge asked, might this be the case? “Because their opinions [of ordinary people] are formed from the Bible, under the guidance of the Spirit, and the influence of those essential and consequently universal principles of our nature, which it has been the grand result of philosophy to sophisticate and pervert.” 42 This is not to suggest that Hodge devalued serious scholarly inquiry in the various departments of knowledge; even he, himself, hastened to add that “all truth is harmonious, whether taught in the word of God or learned from the constitution of our own nature. . . .” 43 Still, he argued, it was imperative to guard against the wedding of philosophy to theology, for “systems of philosophy have been as changeable as the wind; [and] . . . each in its turn has been presented, urged and adopted with the utmost confidence; and each in its measure [has] perverted the simple truths of the Bible. . . .” 44

40 Ibid.
41 Ibid.: 251·2.
42 Ibid.: 252.
43 Ibid.
44 Ibid.
Hodge’s Common Sense principles flowed near the surface of this article. Like Norton’s piece on the authorship of Hebrews, Hodge advocated an “exegetical” theology. This reflected the Common Sense interpretation of the Bible as the basis for religious understanding. Also like Norton, Hodge here defined theology as a matter of grasping the “truths” of the Bible, and he defined those truths as “simple,” straightforward. This reflected the Common Sense emphasis on the perspicuity of truth, particularly the perspicuity of the truth revealed in the Bible. Last, Hodge also emphasized the compatibility of all truth. He defined good philosophy as well-disciplined inquiry, and well-disciplined inquiry in every field of knowledge necessarily supported, clarified, and confirmed Scriptural revelation.

Again in 1846, another article by Hodge on biblical history emphasized still other aspects of the Common Sense theological apologetic. Hodge in this later piece presumed the literal historical accuracy of the biblical chronology as laid out in the book of Genesis, even as he argued for the historical accuracy of the accounts of the Creation and the Deluge. Taking the Genesis genealogies at face value, it was quite possible, Hodge argued, to demonstrate the direct transmission of Adam’s firsthand knowledge of the Creation down to the time of Noah, and, ultimately, to Moses, who included it in the Pentateuch. A recent work by William Neill, a Presbyterian minister, the one-time president of Dickinson College, and a member of Princeton Seminary’s board of directors, provided Hodge the occasion to elaborate on these ideas.

Neill’s Lectures on Biblical History, published in 1846, grappled, among other things, with the increasingly thorny problem of the historical accuracy of the Old Testament. Neill conceived of a solution to the problem of how Moses, whom he
presumed to be the author of the Pentateuch, would have had accurate knowledge about the creation and early history of the world living thousands of years after the events he described. In particular, Neill theorized how the knowledge of early biblical events could have survived the universal Deluge at the time of Noah — the Flood had, after all, destroyed the entire human race, save Noah and his family.\textsuperscript{45} By adopting the Bible’s chronology and accepting the descriptions of the great ages reached by early members of the human race, Neill was able to demonstrate that Adam had enjoyed a 695 year period during which he could relate the history of the Creation to Enoch. Enoch, in turn, had had eighty-four years in which to pass the story down to Noah. In fact, there were six distinct genealogical paths by which Adam’s knowledge of the Creation could have been handed down directly to Noah and his family.\textsuperscript{46}

Hodge found in Neill’s lectures a ringing endorsement of his own Common-Sense ideas about the Bible’s complete historical accuracy. He bolstered Neill’s argument by offering an analogy from his own life. Hodge asserted his own knowledge that his grandfather, while serving as a sergeant in the Revolutionary War, had been hit in the arm by a musket ball. “How do I know that,” he asked, “seeing he died before my birth?” He answered by explaining the obvious: his grandfather had told his mother at least once during the thirty years they were alive at the same time. His mother, in turn, passed that knowledge on to Hodge sometime during the twenty-five years they were alive at the same time.


time. The analogy with Noah was complete: Noah and his sons, Hodge explained, had enjoyed precisely the same direct line of knowledge about the historical facts surrounding the Creation. The first chapters of Genesis were historically true.47

This example demonstrates the relationship between literal historical accuracy and the empirical model of knowledge characteristic of the Common Sense school. As with Norton, Hodge conceived of revelation as depending on historical facts. The Bible must record the historical facts of revelation accurately if it were to be of any real value. Unlike Norton, Hodge believed that divine revelation extended to the text of the Bible itself. God’s revelation came in the written record about the facts of history.48 But like Norton, he pinned scripture’s value on the historicity of the biblical record. Hodge’s commitment to Common Sense principles such as these continued to exercise a determinative influence on his theology and biblical reflection throughout his career. They had clearly provided his basic framework for viewing German historical criticism during the first half of the nineteenth century.

The Common Sense philosophy also influenced Moses Stuart deeply, much as it did Hodge and Norton. Stuart’s chief points of concern, as evidenced in his published articles, centered around both the interpretation of the biblical texts and the relationship between the Bible and natural science. In at least two articles in 1831 and 1832, for example, Stuart discussed his philosophy of biblical interpretation. He both emphasized the necessity of accurate biblical interpretation as the cornerstone of Christian theology,

47 Ibid.

48 For a discussion of Norton’s understanding of revelation and inspiration, see Ch. 1 and espec. Ch. 3.
and he assumed that goal to be more or less achievable. First, he believed that all humanity possessed the powers to interpret language, and that language was a reliable vehicle for truth. In 1831, for example, he wrote,

Mankind have universally been interpreters, to a great extent, ever since our first progenitors commenced the use of language in paradise. All men interpret, every day, which is addressed to them by their fellow men. The laws of interpretation are a consequence of the practical, exegetical instinct. . . of the human race. . . . [T]he interpretation of language is as natural to man, as the use of it is. . . .

Similarly, Stuart argued in 1832 that “[a]ll the human race . . . are, and ever have been, interpreters. It is a law of their rational, intelligent, communicative nature. Just as truly as one human being was formed so as to address another in language, just so truly that other was formed to interpret and to understand what is said.” More than that, he argued, human beings were quite good at interpreting the meaning of one another through language. That is, language was a reliable vehicle of truth, and interpretation was a skill human beings automatically possessed by nature of their humanity.

Stuart’s belief in the natural human ability to interpret language shaped his understanding of biblical interpretation. He argued that “[a]ll the principles of language and criticism which [the act of interpretation] applies to exegesis, are only means which

49 Stuart, “Remarks on Hahn’s Definition of Interpretation, and Some Topics Connected with it,” Biblical Repository 1 (January 1831): 139.

50 Stuart, “Are the Same Principles of Interpretation to be Applied to the Scriptures as to Other Books?” Biblical Repository 2 (January 1832): 125.

51 George M. Marsden makes similar points about Stuart’s views of language and interpretation in “Everyone One’s Own Interpreter?: The Bible, Science, and Authority in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America,” in The Bible in America: Essays in Cultural History, ed. Nathan O. Hatch and Mark A. Noll (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 92-94.
common sense has pointed out, as necessary and proper to be used in the explanation of any written or spoken language.”52 Interpreting the Bible, even when it required special expertise in the ancient biblical languages, nevertheless remained merely an application of this common-sense principle of interpretation. Thus Stuart concluded, “Possibly it may excite surprise in the minds of some, to be told that, after all, hermeneutics is no science that depends on learning and skill, but is one with which all the race of man is practically more or less acquainted.” And it was precisely because interpretive skill was innate to human experience that we can be “satisfactorily assured of its stable and certain nature.”53

This stress on the universal and quotidian necessity of practical hermeneutics for human communication echoed German writers, notably the liberal theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher.54 But it appealed to Stuart, undoubtedly, because it also overlapped and resonated with Common Sense, which presumed almost exactly the same thing.55

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52 Stuart, “Remarks on Hahn’s Definition of Interpretation, and Some Topics Connected with it”: 139.

53 Stuart, “Are the Same Principles of Interpretation to be Applied to the Scriptures as to Other Books?”: 126.

54 For sources on Schleiermacher’s ideas and public career, see Ch. 1, n. 12.

Stuart showed further agreement with the principles of Common Sense when he likened the principles of language-interpretation to natural science. The natural scientist cannot create, arrange, or modify the laws of nature, Stuart explained, and neither was the world created or sustained by any scientific system. Instead, scientists merely observed phenomena, deduced laws from them, and helped others understand and explain them. So, too, with “science of interpretation.”56 It required the interpreter of the Bible to be free from preconception or prejudice when reading the text, much as the natural philosopher must be free from preconception or prejudice when investigating the laws of nature. The philosopher’s role — whether that “philosopher” was a biblical scholar or a geologist — was simply to observe phenomena and draw conclusions. The facts or phenomena in any field of knowledge must be allowed to speak for themselves. As Stuart summarized his point,

If I bring along with me my philosophical creed, or my party theological creed, or my rationalist creed, or my convictions as an enthusiast, and in the explanation of Scripture permit either of these to influence or guide me, instead of the plain principles of exegesis which nature has taught all men in regard to the interpretation of language; then I do not make an explication of the sacred text, but an implication.57

This empirical model of interpretation borrowed heavily from the Common Sense view of science, and it held important implications for biblical interpretation. First, by construing the interpretation of language as a native art, Stuart rendered the Bible the common property of all — ordinary and learned people, alike, could interpret scripture. As he put it, “the business of interpreting the Bible need not necessarily be confined to a

56 Stuart, “Remarks on Hahn’s Definition of Interpretation, and Some Topics Connected with it”: 140.

57 Ibid.: 141.
few, but may be practiced, in a greater or less degree . . . by all men who will attentively
study it.” The only exception to this rule was the interpretation, or criticism, of the original
texts of the Bible — but that was simply because nineteenth-century Americans did not
naturally understand New Testament Greek or Ancient Hebrew. Still, even the biblical
critics must employ the same common-sense principles of interpretation. The learning of
the critics simply gave them knowledge of the ancient biblical languages, not special skills
of interpretation per se.59

Second, by emphasizing that the interpreter, like the natural scientist, does not
create the phenomena he studies, Stuart asserted a simple, reliable relationship among
language, meaning, and truth, and linked the biblical scholar closely with the original
authors of the texts. Just as there was one way the natural world actually existed, so, too,
was there one meaning in the biblical texts, the meaning that the original author had
intended. This was nothing less than a “self-evident” principle of the relationship between
meaning and language to Stuart. As he summarized the matter, “the words of Scripture
convey the idea which the writer attached to them, and neither more nor less. If you deny
this,” Stuart warned, “you set aside the definition itself of the meaning of writing.”60

One corollary Stuart drew from his epistemology of language was the notion that
all parts of scripture were meant to be understood. This had been a recurring question in
American theological discourse, especially in regard to such books of the Bible as Daniel

58 Stuart, “Are the Same Principles of Interpretation to be Applied to the Scriptures
as to Other Books?”: 129.

59 Ibid.: 128.

60 Stuart, “Remarks on Hahn’s Definition of Interpretation, and Some Topics
Connected with it”: 141.
and the Apocalypse, which, even in English translation, often confused readers almost as much as Egyptian hieroglyphics. Stuart assured his readers that even these prophetic books of the Bible, though opaque, were nevertheless meant to be interpreted.  

The keys to unlock the meaning of obscure biblical passages, Stuart believed, was an understanding of their historical context. As Stuart explained,

... [W]hen God speaks to any particular men, he uses the language of these men, in order to be understood; it follows, that when he spoke to the ancient Jews, through the prophets, he employed the language of the times and of the nation. But in order to interpret this, one must be acquainted with the circumstances and relations of the Hebrew nation at that time; because the language, as it then was, was entirely conformed to these.

From these very plain and obvious principles it results, that in order to interpret rightly, we must have respect to all these circumstances and relations. It follows with equal certainty, that to carry back our recent notions of philosophy, theology, morals, government, or any thing else, and attach them to the words of the ancient Hebrews, would be doing a violence to the laws of interpretation which every one must spontaneously disapprove. The simple question for an interpreter, always and without variation, is, What idea did the writer mean to convey?

Stuart repeatedly articulated his belief in the reliability of language as a vehicle of truth and in the essential perspicuity of scripture. In a subsequent article, he put these ideas into practice by interpreting a few passages in the Apocalypse of John that had proven vexing to many modern readers. True to his ideals of interpretation, Stuart treated the historical context of the book as the solution to understanding its opaque prophetic references. Stuart used internal evidence of the book, for example, to confirm that the Apostle John had written it during the reign of Nero, the great persecutor of the early

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62 Ibid.: 158.
Christians. This fact explained the enigmatic character of certain historical references in the text, Stuart argued: they had to do with Nero. Considering that historical context, Stuart asked, “What could John do...? Must he come out and denounce Nero by name, and incur the crimen laesae majestatis? This were certain death.” As Stuart saw things, John’s message was from God, and John simply found that the most pragmatic way to communicate it, given the circumstances, was to veil some of its messages from the dangerous eyes of the Roman magistrates.63 It may have been true that John had “spoken enigmatically; but the enigma,” Stuart asserted, “does not need a second Oedipus to explain it.” The Revelation of John was inherently intelligible — not only to the persecuted Christians of the first century, but also to any modern readers who took the time to understand the book’s historical setting.64 Even obscure biblical prophecy had a plain meaning, just as all other parts of scripture.

Stuart’s insistence on the reliability of language and the essential perspicuity of scripture closely paralleled the ideas of Norton and Hodge. And while Stuart and Norton emphasized historical context more than Hodge did, all three agreed that texts of the Bible were inherently intelligible, even if sometimes opaque to modern readers. The meaning of the original authors, these three agreed, was the goal of all exegesis, and the modern interpreter must understand the historical context of each text, its author, and its audience in order fully to grasp that meaning. Thus, the basic Common Sense premises surrounding

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64 Ibid.: 351.
the belief in the intelligibility of language fueled Americans’ efforts to read the biblical texts in their historical context.

The notion of interpreting the texts according to the author’s intent had ramifications for the relationship between the modern disciplines and the Bible, as well. Stuart, like nearly all other American theologians of his day, believed in the compatibility of natural science and the biblical revelation. Yet, this position already by the mid-1830s presented a problem, for the theories of the developing science of geology, particularly regarding the manner of the earth’s creation and the meaning of the fossil record, increasingly seemed to contradict the literal interpretation of Genesis. Stuart took up the question of the compatibility of this new science with Christian belief in an exchange of articles with Edward Hitchcock, a professor of chemistry and natural history at Amherst College.

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In one of his pieces, Stuart acknowledged that “general and sometimes indiscriminate charge[s] of skepticism” had frequently been leveled against the new geologists. He questioned, with Hitchcock, the fairness of painting all geologists with the brush of skepticism and infidelity, particularly when they “altogether disavow infidel sentiments, and openly profess their belief in the Christian Revelation. . . .” Tellingly, Stuart drew a parallel between the supposedly infidel geology and biblical criticism. He noted that “[p]hilology and theology received a pretty full measure of the like treatment.” “Does a man enlarge his sphere of study, and embrace within its circle the German philologists of recent times?” he continued. “Then surely, as some believe and assert, he must be of kindred spirit with the Neologists.” Stuart thought that was nonsense; Hitchcock’s “unaffected reverence for the authority of God’s holy word[,] [his] abiding and deep conviction that it is and must be true, and that its authority is supreme and final” were what mattered most. Like philology, geology did not necessarily entail skepticism or heresy.

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68 Ibid.: 47.

69 Ibid.: 48.
Thus, Stuart defended Hitchcock’s emphasis on the importance of empirical research in the field of geology to understand the physical history of the earth. The only point at which he disagreed with Hitchcock was Hitchcock’s recourse to theories of geology when interpreting the words in the Creation account of Moses. “I am unable to see how the discoveries of modern science and of recent date, can determine the meaning of Moses’ words,” Stuart explained. “Nothing can be more certain, than that the sacred writers did not compose their books with modern sciences in view, or indeed with any distinct knowledge of them.”\(^{70}\) The meaning of the words in the Hebrew text clearly was a matter for philology, not geology.

To Stuart, then the interpretation of Genesis entailed fundamentally the same principle as he had previously applied to biblical prophecy: the only proper interpretation was the meaning intended by the original author. This is precisely the point at which Stuart parted company with Hitchcock. As Stuart explained, “There is plain evidence in the context, and in the writings of Moses, that he considered all which he relates to have been done in Genesis I., AS DONE WITHIN THE COMPASS OF SIX DAYS.”\(^ {71}\) That was the plain meaning of the text, whether or not modern geology agreed with it. Thus Stuart cautioned students of Genesis not to falsely interpret Moses’ words in order to make them conform to modern geology. “Even if geology could shew that Moses has committed errors in his narration,” Stuart argued, “it matters not to our present purpose. We inquire simply for his

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\(^{70}\) Ibid.: 49.

\(^{71}\) Ibid.: 73.
meaning. When we have obtained this, geologists may canvass, if they think best, the question whether he was in the right or the wrong.\textsuperscript{72}

Stuart hoped it would never come to that question, however. The science of geology was still new, he reasoned, and the new theories of the earth’s great age might better be described as conjectural and unstable, rather than settled and certain.\textsuperscript{73} It was only “consistent with all that we know of intelligent agency,” Stuart concluded, to suppose God would have kept Moses from error even on “every collateral subject which it would be in the course of his narration to notice.”\textsuperscript{74} Stuart believed that the presumption of accuracy belonged to Moses; it was likely moderns’ “deficiency” in understanding the history of the earth “which hurries us to discredit, or to doubt, or oppose him.”\textsuperscript{75} The biblical books were capable of being interpreted, and Stuart stood by his assertion that their interpretation depended upon understanding exactly what the original authors had intended to convey. He remained firmly committed to the Common Sense approach to theology.

Their adherence to the tenets of the Common Sense philosophy and related ideas not only allowed antebellum theologians to define German criticism as a German problem. It also, in fact, pulled Americans closer to the orbit of German biblical research than otherwise might have been the case. The resonances between German historical criticism

\textsuperscript{72} Ibid.: 81-82.

\textsuperscript{73} Ibid.: 83.

\textsuperscript{74} Ibid.: 105.

\textsuperscript{75} Ibid.: 105.
and the Common Sense approach to biblical study helped make several aspects of the 
German scholarship, whatever its defects, appear attractive and useful to American 
evangelical religion. One way the Common Sense apologetic accomplished this was 
through its ideas about language. The presumption of the reliability of language as a 
vehicle of truth encouraged American theologians to emphasize the accurate interpretation 
of the biblical texts. This emphasis on accurate interpretation, in turn, drove a growing 
interest, present among many American theologians, in an historically-informed 
interpretation of the various biblical texts.\textsuperscript{76} Similarly, the Common Sense definition of 
truth in empirical terms — as discrete, particular facts — led to its definition of the Bible 
as a collection of facts to be discovered. This, likewise, entailed an emphasis on the 
historical reliability of the texts. Both strains in the Common Sense approach to theology 
couraged American theologians to take a strong interest in the historical study of the 
Bible. That interest in history grew over the course of the century, and it pulled American 
exegetes closer to the historical critics of Germany than might otherwise have been the 
case.

Americans’ interest in historical context took a number of forms. One was the 
preoccupation with the authorship of the various biblical texts. Most American 
theologians thought it of signal importance to know who wrote what in the Bible. This 
would allow the verification of each author’s credentials as God’s chosen spokesman, and, 
by aiding in the understanding of each author’s experiences, would also shed light on each 
one’s message. This interest in historical context was related to a second form of historical

\textsuperscript{76} For historical studies on the theories of language associated with the Common 
Sense philosophy, see n. 55, above.
interest, the understanding of the historical context in which each author wrote. During the early nineteenth century, that interest in historical context entailed essentially two things: the knowledge of the geography associated with the events in each text, and the knowledge of the large-scale movements of history, such as the rise and fall of empires, the actions of kings, and the occurrences of war, that formed the historical background of each text. The interest in geography among American biblical scholars, in point of fact, explains why Edward Robinson’s work on the biblical geography of the Holy Land stood out to European eyes as the only genuinely important American contribution to biblical research before the Civil War.\textsuperscript{77} The attention to historical milieu, whether geography or large-scale movements of history, aided in the understanding of the Bible, and both were fields in which German scholars had excelled.

Also, the Common Sense presumption of the reliability of language as a vehicle of truth drove an emphasis on linguistic study, drawing the attention of American biblical scholars to German philology. American theologians wanted to understand the language of each text so as to understand the original intent of each author as nearly as possible. They recognized the value of historical language study, particularly in Hebrew and Greek, as a means of understanding the original biblical texts.

Furthermore, the Common Sense presumption of the unity of truth drove Americans’ reliance on the various fields of knowledge as means of confirming the truth of

the biblical revelation. For example, natural theology was a confirmation of biblical theology. The truths discovered in the empirical study of the natural world would always confirm the truths revealed in the study of the scripture. More generally, any truth discovered through the inductive study of the Bible must comport with truth discovered in other fields of knowledge. Likewise, other departments of knowledge, when they observed the principles of inductive study, were presumed to complement biblical revelation.

For all of these reasons, Hodge, Stuart, Norton, and other Protestant theologians of the early nineteenth century saw much to gain by attending to German theology. The German theology, understood broadly, encompassed several disciplines that American Common-Sense theologians recognized as useful for interpreting the Bible to the modern world: historical and comparative philology, ancient Near Eastern history, biblical archaeology, textual criticism, and historical criticism. The direction of German historical criticism for the nineteenth century had been more or less clearly staked out by the early decades of the century, and American theologians by a relatively early date had identified both the chief errors and the chief insights of the German theological method. Despite the speculation, skepticism, rationalism, and pantheism displayed by many German biblical critics and theologians, American theologians still saw great value in their work.

These Common Sense principles not only functioned in the background of theological discourse, influencing American theologians’ ideas about German biblical scholarship. American biblical scholars and theologians also frequently asserted their identity as Common Sense adherents in order to claim exemption from the folly of German theological error. Protestant intellectuals believed themselves capable of taking
the best from German theology while remaining immune to its dangers because they defined themselves as too commonsensical, too imbued with the practical spirit of American evangelicalism, to catch the sickness of German philosophical speculation.

Simply put, the principles of Common Sense philosophy, or ideas that resonated with them, appeared to hold the malignant influences of German theology at bay. The historian Sydney Ahlstrom has argued that Scottish Realism “was an apologetic philosophy, par excellence. . .”78 This is true, and in the hands of American theologians, the ideas associated with the Scottish philosophy exerted some of their greatest apologetic force on the question of biblical science. Also, American theologians tended to elide ordinary “common sense” with the formal principles of the Scottish philosophy, and the imprecision in their thinking only strengthened their perceptions of a robust orthodoxy in America. Thus, while the Common Sense philosophy and its associated ideas told American Protestant thinkers that much of German biblical criticism amounted to dangerous speculation and agenda-driven pseudo-science, they also believed that the prevalence of Common Sense ideals in Americans’ minds provided immunity to infection from the German bug of neology.

American theologians routinely asserted this attitude of confidence during the first half of the nineteenth century. Moses Stuart, for example, criticized the German biblical critics variously for their overly technical discussions, obscurity of style, and speculative theorizing in place of grounded biblical exegesis. He appealed to his readers’ common sense as a matter of course when stating his case. Stuart made such an appeal, for example, when he criticized a particular group of commentaries, written in English, on the various

books of the Bible. Stuart applauded this group of commentaries for having undertaken the work of comparing the books of the Bible with one another. He advocated comparative study because “it greatly strengthens the confidence of an intelligent reader of the Scriptures, in any particular interpretation, when he sees that other inspired writers speak in accordance with the sentiment thus given.”

Yet, modern critics fell woefully short in carrying out this potentially useful work, Stuart argued. Simple common sense made it clear that the multitude of modern reference Bibles — those which offer cross-references among passages of similar content — were largely useless. But anyone who had had “any considerable experience, and [was] capable of judging” would know that most of their references to parallel passages were highly misleading or superficial.

Common Sense dictated the rejection of theories whose conclusions had been determined by faulty presuppositions, as well. Stuart criticized an entire “class of recent commentators” in Germany, for example, who had fallen into this type of speculative error. Modern New Testament scholars such as Semler and Baur imagined that the Apostles Peter and Paul displayed competing theological agendas in the writings of the New Testament. Stuart cried foul, arguing that these and similar theories were speculative and plainly “unjust.” These types of commentators “appear not only to assume, for example, that Paul and Peter may differ from and contradict each other, but that this is a thing so very probable, that the contrary can scarcely be supposed. . . .” These New Testament commentators made assumptions about what must have happened in the past, given what they saw happening in the present. Moreover, it was simply “reasoning from

79 Stuart, “Hints Respecting Commentaries on the Scriptures”: 144.

80 Ibid.: 145.
analogy to an extent greater than fact demands” to argue that “good and enlightened men differ from each other on all, or on most, or even on any, of the important doctrines of religion. . . . [I]t would be quite too much to say that there is no real concord; especially among the immediate disciples of a great and enlightened teacher.” “I cannot in any way…see how it is to be assumed a priori,” Stuart concluded, “that Paul and Peter did differ from each other, in their beliefs as to facts or doctrines.”

Stuart’s frustrations with commentators’ frequent recourse to a priori reasoning did not stop with this example. Stuart showed an even greater exasperation with skeptics’ rejection of the Bible’s divine inspiration based on a priori reasoning. Some skeptics were arguing that the very need for scriptural commentaries, which had been persistent throughout the history of biblical interpretation, evinced the Bible’s solely human origins. “How can that be a revelation for all men,” such skeptics asked, in Stuart’s words, “which all men cannot easily understand, and about the meaning of which they must constantly disagree?” Stuart answered his hypothetical objectors with a question of his own: why would anyone expect it to be otherwise? “We may be permitted to ask, in the first place, in what manner a revelation should be made, to satisfy the objector? Must one be made in a language that all men understand, and which no one is liable to misconstrue, in any respect? Then tell us,” Stuart demanded, “what is that language?” As he concluded the question, “. . . to say that the Divine Being ought to have so constituted the human race, that they all would speak and understand the very same language . . . is a mere a priori

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81 Ibid.: 141-142.

82 Ibid.: 162.
ground of assumption. . .”83 Neither would it be possible for a translation of the scriptures to reflect the originals perfectly well in all their nuances of meaning and intent. As Stuart observed, “it is not within the bounds of possibility, that it should do so . . . ,” for “[e]very language on earth . . . takes the hue of the people who speak it.”84 “Facts show that such is the case,” he argued, “beyond any possibility of contradiction.”85

The facts, logic, and common sense render the objections of modern skeptics powerless, and they show the futility of many German scholars’ approach to biblical commentary. These questions of the Bible were ones of simple common sense, Stuart believed, and anyone who listened to the dictates of common sense could apprehend the errors he described. Stuart was confident in the powers of common sense to insulate Americans against the errors of the modern skeptics and the erroneous assumptions of modern biblical critics.

Stuart maintained his confidence in Americans’ commitment to Common Sense as a bulwark against the skeptical, faith-destroying theories of the German biblical critics a few years later. In his review of Andrews Norton’s first volume of The Genuineness of the Gospels in 1838, Stuart treated recent German scholarship as an assault on the historical reliability of the New Testament accounts of Jesus’ life and ministry.86 He feared what might happen if these foundational texts of Christianity lost their influence in the American

83 Ibid.: 163.

84 Ibid.: 164.

85 Ibid.: 165.

church. If such “neological views have their course without any effort to check or regulate them,” he wrote, “[w]e may be assured that in the end this country will see a revolution not unlike, in many respects, to that in Germany.” Stuart worried what German-style attacks on the Bible might do to the Church in America in the future, for, as he saw it, “[t]here is no small part of our [American] community . . . who would be glad of an opportunity fairly to escape from the obligation which the Bible imposes upon their consciences.” 87 These were genuine fears. Nevertheless, Stuart had faith that Americans were not susceptible to the most brazen forms of modern skepticism and theological heresy. “The gulf is too wide, deep, and foul, to be inviting” to the opinions of the worst modern heretics and neologists. Americans, Stuart argued, had been so shaped by the “consequence of their education” and by the “influence of the circles of friends in which they now move” that it was inconceivable to think they would fall prey quickly, at least not to the more outrageous forms of German religious infidelity. 88

The real danger to Americans, Stuart feared, was from a more insidious form of infidelity represented by Eichhorn, the philologist and biblical critic at the University of Göttingen. Eichhorn’s Einleitung in das Neue Testament, published in five volumes from 1804 to 1827, was having a broad influence on European biblical interpretation. 89 It was precisely this influence that worried Stuart. Eichhorn, Stuart pointed out, had argued against the authenticity of the Bible “on grounds of archaeological history and criticism,”


88 Ibid.

thus maintaining an appearance of erudition. More than that, Stuart continued, Eichhorn possessed “charms of genius and taste,” thus preserving a veneer of intellectual objectivity and social respectability. To the extent that Eichhorn could present himself as a genuine biblical scholar — one who argued from the facts of archaeology and biblical research without preconceived conclusions — he thus represented a particularly insidious evil to the American church. If such a man as Eichhorn “should by his talents and learning contribute to make the cause of skepticism respectable among the well informed classes of society,” Stuart argued, “I doubt not that sooner or later we should have a large neological party in our country.” Americans, by virtue of their education and the influence of common society, simply were not susceptible to the most blatant forms of religious skepticism; it would take someone more menacing — an Angel of Light like Eichhorn — to divert Americans from the path of truth. Thus, Stuart defined Americans as too shrewd, too commonsensical, too imbued with the sense of truth to easily adopt the theories of modern biblical skeptics, but any who could lay claim to evidence and impartiality represented a great danger.

Like Norton and Stuart, Charles Hodge early in the nineteenth century saw Americans as repositories of the best principles of Common Sense rationality. Like his fellow theologians, Hodges believed Americans’ common sense offered them immunity from the disease of German neology. In a piece from 1845, for example, Hodge contrasted Americans’ clear thinking with the Germans’ general obscurity. In a review of Philip Schaff’s history of Protestant Christianity, Hodge complained of the book’s

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91 Ibid.
impenetrable argumentation and literary style. As Hodge wrote, “[t]he book is thoroughly German. The mode of thinking, and the forms of expression are so unenglish, that it is not easy for an American to enter into the views of the authors.” This was no simple matter of style pertaining to the book in question; it was a defining characteristic of German scholars as a whole: “German writers have many characteristic excellencies,” Hodge wrote, “but they . . . are seldom very intelligible.”\(^92\)

Hodge drew a sharp contrast between the reigning obscurity of German scholars and the typical intelligibility of American writers. This contrast extended beyond simple matters of style; it also had to do with the intellectual content of German prose. Hodge suggested that the Germans, as a class, suffered from unclear conceptions. When he accused German authors in his article on Philip Schaff of preferring the “reason” over the “understanding,” for example, he intended his words, at least in part, as a criticism of German vagueness. German thinkers in Kant’s Idealistic wake had left the solid ground of facts, perception, and clear ideas for the ethereal realms of speculation and fuzzy concepts, and Hodge found it difficult to understand them. So it was in Schaff’s case. As Hodge continued, Schaff’s “whole book is about the church, and yet we have tried in vain to find out what the authors mean by the church. . . . These are questions we cannot answer; and therefore we cannot tell what interpretation is to be put upon [the writers’] language.”\(^93\)

Hodge’s opinions about such German obscurity and imprecise ideas had ramifications for his view of German biblical scholarship. It appears to have prevented Hodge from seeing German biblical criticism as a serious threat to the American reading

\(^92\) Hodge, “Schaff[i]’s Protestantism”: 626.

\(^93\) Ibid.
public. The Germans were simply unintelligible — hopelessly mired in ill-defined prose and poorly-developed ideas. In broad terms, Hodge viewed the German theologians, like Schaff, as essentially impotent. Americans, he clearly implied, rightly valued definite conceptions and clear argumentation. It is difficult to imagine how Hodge could have defined the German scholars as much of a threat to American religion when he viewed their mode of thinking and forms of expression as essentially weak when compared to that of his American readers.

A second article helps demonstrate where Hodge located the source of German obscurity. He located it in the Germans’ speculations in the realm of Idealistic philosophy. In a lengthy review of the current state of German biblical criticism in 1837, Hodge implicitly contrasted the literary and argumentative style of the German theologians with that of the American theologians. Hodge singled out as an example the commentary and translation of the Psalms by Heinrich von Ewald, a theologian and Hebrew philologist then working at the University of Göttingen.94 Hodge faulted Ewald for sacrificing the literary style of the Hebrew poets in favor of “a kind of measured prose or irregular blank verse, which he has chosen as the dress of his translation.” He might have sacrificed German literary style and idiom to a more faithful imitation of the original Hebrew.95 Moreover, Hodge argued, Ewald had abandoned his strength as a Hebrew grammarian and, instead, adopted a wrong-headed philosophical exposition. “Those who know Ewald as a grammarian,” Hodge wrote, “will be surprised to learn that in his work the philological

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element is almost swallowed up in the logical, historical, and soi-disant philosophical mode of exposition.”\textsuperscript{96} In other words, Ewald had left the solid ground of grammatical study and exegesis for a flight in the ethereal realms of unsubstantiated philosophical fancy. Hodge generalized his criticism of Ewald to the German philosophical theologians in general: “Like many other celebrated writers he has thrown into the back-ground that in which his strength consists, and spent his labour in transmuting sense to nonsense, by enveloping the simple exposition of the scriptures in a fog of transcendental metaphysics.”\textsuperscript{97} As a result, Americans should not find much of value in the work of Ewald. Hodge implied that Americans were too grounded in the solid facts of interpretation and history to find much of value in Ewald’s style of philosophical speculation. Later in the century, American theological commentators, including Hodge, would respond in far less sanguine a manner to such groundless speculations by German biblical scholars. Still, in the first half of the nineteenth century, their faith in American common sense overrode whatever fears they might have had about German theological heresies.

Hodge reflected a similar sentiment later in the same article when he reviewed David Friedrich Strauss’s \textit{Das Leben Jesu}.\textsuperscript{98} Hodge expressed little short of abhorrence for Strauss and his work. Hodge recounted that Strauss had written a work on the life of Jesus that “denied the historical truth of the gospel altogether, and explains it as a mere philosophical or religious mythus.” Worse yet, “[h]e is a pantheist, and acknowledges no

\textsuperscript{96} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{97} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{98} For sources on the ideas and public career of Strauss, see Introduction, n. 64.
God but the God incarnate in the human race.”

Nevertheless, Hodge found such heresies so far-fetched that he found it difficult to see them as a threat to the American church. As he stated the matter, “A doctrine so extravagant . . . can scarcely be imagined in America, or any other country where a religious common-sense is still predominant.”

The Anglo-American world, Hodge argued, was simply too commonsensical, too grounded in its religious opinions, to be swayed by the nonsense of Strauss’s heretical pantheism and scriptural skepticism.

Norton, Stuart, and Hodge, alike, believed Americans’ commitment to the principles of Common Sense rendered them immune to theological opinions that otherwise might destroy their faith. As long as American commentators on the state of theology saw the principles of Common Sense as fully viable and firmly fixed in the minds of American readers, little did they fear the effects of the increasingly godless departures from the ground of faith by German biblical critics and theologians. America, they believed, was different from Europe. The logic of American exceptionalism bolstered the confidence of American theologians and biblical scholars that the American church would remain untouched by the faith-destroying effects of German “neology.”

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99 Hodge, “Gleanings from the German Periodicals”: 198.

100 Ibid.: 198-199.
CHAPTER THREE

THE PERSISTENCE OF ORTHODOXY IN AMERICAN BIBLICAL SCHOLARSHIP

Three features associated with American theologians and biblical scholars suggest additional reasons why German historical criticism failed to ignite controversy in antebellum America, unlike the later decades of the nineteenth century. These features included, first, the persistent orthodoxy and conservatism of American biblical scholars, themselves, during the early nineteenth century. The conservative cast of American biblical studies helped ensure that biblical scholarship in America, for the time being, at least, would arouse little suspicion. Second among these attitudes associated with American biblical scholarship was its relative unimportance on the American theological landscape. American theologians, taken as a whole, usually gave more attention to other matters of theology than critical biblical studies — let alone German biblical studies. Third was belief that the worst of the German errors had seen their day. Many American theologians and biblical scholars near mid-century believed that the rationalism characteristic of the worst German criticism was passing into historical irrelevance. All three attitudes can be found woven through the fabric of American theological discourse during the middle decades of the nineteenth century.
The conservative cast of American biblical scholarship during the first half of the nineteenth century itself helps explain why American observers failed to worry much about biblical criticism in a general sense. Very few Americans produced significant works of critical biblical scholarship early in the nineteenth century, and the few who did usually stayed within the bounds of Protestant evangelical theological orthodoxy. Even Andrews Norton, who argued for the expulsion of Hebrews from the canon and sympathized with the historical critics, nevertheless strenuously maintained the historical reliability of the Gospels, believed in the authority of divine revelation, and clung to the principles of Common Sense. The Common Sense theological apologetic had grown to such a position of influence early in the nineteenth century that adherence to its maxims passed for a certain kind of theological orthodoxy in America.¹

To the extent that antebellum American theologians produced original work in biblical studies, a persistent conservatism characterized their work. A survey of the North American Review, Princeton Review, Christian Examiner, and other periodicals shows that American biblical scholars and theologians remained wedded to the principles of the Common Sense philosophy in theological questions and, aside from Unitarian doctrinal innovations, remained well within the bounds of Protestant Christian orthodoxy. Moses Stuart’s article on the Samaritan Pentateuch, mentioned previously, demonstrated this type of theological and epistemological conservatism. While some of Stuart’s conclusions about

the inspiration of the Bible tended in a “liberal” direction, his arguments about the historicity, authority, and authorship of the Bible remained firmly fixed within the Common Sense theological apologetic. Distinct from the textual tradition of the Bible in Hebrew, the Samaritan Pentateuch offered modern biblical scholars the opportunity to read extant Hebrew texts of the Bible against an alternative source. The Samaritan version had presented the question of the relative antiquity of the Hebrew and Samaritan texts to the biblical scholars in Europe who had been comparing the two versions with one another. Stuart included a lengthy discussion of this question in his review of modern critical commentary on the Pentateuch.

Stuart considered at length one of the most influential scholars who had dealt with the question, Wilhelm Gesenius. As mentioned above, Germany’s most renowned Old Testament scholar had argued what was becoming a familiar line in German historical criticism: the texts of the Hebrew scriptures, as we have them, had been composed much later than traditional Jewish and Christian theology had maintained — specifically, the so-called Books of Moses, the first five books of the Bible, had not, in fact, come from Moses’ hand.² This position was in direct contradiction to one of the fundamental requirements of the Common Sense theological apologetic: certain knowledge of the authorship of the biblical texts. Authorship took on central importance in the Common Sense system because it provided the key to certainty that the texts were God’s word, not man’s. The divinity of the biblical texts could best be established when modern readers knew for certain that the authors of those texts had been appointed by God to speak His word to His people.

² For a fuller discussion of Semler’s ideas and public career, see the Introduction.
The Common Sense theological apologetics provided the major source of Stuart’s ideas about the origins and character of the Bible. Foremost among these ideas was his insistence that Moses had written the first five books of the Old Testament. Stuart took questions about the authorship of the Pentateuch quite seriously because they were the linchpins of his entire religious understanding. It is no surprise, then, that Stuart dedicated upwards of thirty pages to refuting the arguments of the highly influential, respected Gesenius in favor of the late composition of the Pentateuch in Hebrew. The late composition of these texts, Stuart rightly recognized, removed the possibility of Mosaic authorship and rendered the Common Sense theology ineffective for establishing these texts as the Word of God. Thus Stuart fought to defend the ancient tradition of Mosaic authorship. As he introduced the matter, “... [T]hat the Jewish Pentateuch had a much earlier date than is here assigned to it, is what we fully believe. To state all the reasons of this, and to examine all the objections made against this opinion by recent critics, would require a volume, instead of the scanty limits of a review. We shall merely advert therefore, in the first place, to some of the leading reasons why we believe that the Hebrew Pentateuch, with the exception of a very few isolated passages, came from the hand of Moses; next, examine briefly the reasons which are alleged against this; and then endeavor to show why a more ancient date is to be assigned to the Samaritan Pentateuch, than Gesenius gives it.”

Stuart articulated more than thirty pages of competent critical analysis in favor of his position. His discussion ranged from technical points of Hebrew interpretation to the

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historical context of the ancient Near East, just the kind of material any good German biblical critic would have included. For example, Stuart considered the precise meaning of the Hebrew text of Exodus 17:14 on the battle between Israel and the Amalekites. Stuart concluded that the best rendering was “And the Lord said unto Moses, Write this for a memorial in the book. . . .” He concluded, “the meaning seems obviously to be [that God intended Moses to write the account of the battle] in the book already begun and in which other things were recorded, in the well known book.”

Stuart bolstered his complaint against Gesenius with arguments based on the historical context and literary content of the Pentateuch. Stuart argued that the “indirect” testimony from history and literary analysis were important sources of evidence that Gesenius, like other German biblical scholars, had neglected to consider. Stuart’s argument from the historical context was straightforward: the Pentateuch’s “historical, religious, political, and geographical matter, is such as might be expected in a book of the age which is claimed for it.” His argument from the literary qualities of the Pentateuch was more developed. On this point, Stuart refuted the arguments of recent German criticism directly. “It has been alleged, as a very formidable objection against the authorship of Moses,” he argued, “that the whole of the Pentateuch is in a fragmentary condition, exhibiting the formulas appropriate to the beginnings and endings of different compositions by a variety of persons . . . and a considerable number of discrepancies, which could not have proceeded from one and the same writer.” Yet, this evidence

4 Ibid.
5 Ibid.: 286.
6 Ibid.
actually bolstered the opinion that Moses was the sole author of the entire work, Stuart argued. It is inconceivable that Moses should have sat down and written the whole text continuously. “His work, then, would necessarily contain a great many different compositions, each of which would very naturally have some formula of commencement and conclusion. Nothing could be more accordant with the condition and circumstances of Moses than this.” Therefore argued Stuart for more than thirty pages.

The tenor of Stuart’s lengthy discussion about the Samaritan Pentateuch was both conservative and critical at the same time. In all of Stuart’s defense of the Mosaic authorship and divine inspiration of the Pentateuch, he remained a willing advocate of responsible biblical criticism. In particular, he sought to place the critical investigation of the Samaritan Pentateuch, a variant textual tradition of the Hebrew Pentateuch, on a firm theoretical footing. In making his case, however, Stuart drew at least a tentative distinction between the Word of God, on the one hand, and the exact words of the Bible, on the other, a move that might seem to indicate doctrinal liberalism. Christ and the Apostles drew a similar distinction, Stuart argued; they invoked the authority of the Old Testament by freely quoting from the Septuagint, a far less accurate version than even the worst Hebrew manuscript available in modern times. More than this, Stuart argued, any fair study of the Hebrew scriptures revealed sometimes glaring discrepancies between different recensions of repeated passages, for example Ezra 2 and Nehemiah 7, or the Books of 1 and 2 Kings and the Books of 1 and 2 Chronicles. Invoking a phrase from Jerome, Stuart

7 Ibid.: 286-287.
8 Ibid.: 311.
9 Ibid.: 312.
reminded readers that “the scripture was not the shell, but the nut;’, [sic] by which he meant,” Stuart went on, “that the sentiment of the Bible is the word of God, while the costume, that is, the words in which this sentiment is conveyed, was of minor importance.”

This distinction, developed by nineteenth-century theologians, became a hallmark of liberal theology throughout Europe and America.

But it would be possible to make too much of the inconsistencies between Stuart’s predominant conservatism and the liberal strains in his caveats here. Writing early in the nineteenth century, Stuart did not prefigure later liberal developments to any great extent. First, he devoted only two or three pages to arguing these points — this, in an article that spanned some thirty-eight pages — and nothing about the rest of his discussion about the historical reliability of the Pentateuch depended on his arguments here. Stuart did not hinge his theory of the Pentateuch upon them.

Second, and more importantly, Stuart deployed his distinction between the “shell” and “nut” of scripture not to forge a looser doctrine of biblical inspiration, but to reassure his readers that the existence of variant textual traditions did not threaten the authority of scripture. There could be no more danger in supposing there were discrepant recensions of the Hebrew Bible, even early in its history, than in admitting there were different recensions of the New Testament. The multitude of early New Testament versions,

10 Ibid.: 311.

11 Jerry Wayne Brown has pointed out similar inconsistencies in Stuart’s understanding of the Bible on a few points. Nevertheless, he concludes that Stuart remained firmly committed to the binding authority of the Bible, believed in the divine inspiration of the entire record, and could find no contradictions in the writings except for a few discrepancies related to the faulty transmission of the texts over the millennia. See Brown, The Rise of Biblical Criticism in America, 1800-1870: The New England Scholars (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1969), 52-58.
though now thoroughly investigated, had failed to shake Christians’ love and reverence for the Bible; similar discoveries about the Old Testament should fail to do so, as well.\textsuperscript{12} More than that, the critical investigation into the history of the texts, such as the comparison of the Hebrew and Samaritan traditions of the Pentateuch, would only benefit our understanding of the Bible. “The Bible has nothing to fear from examination,” Stuart concluded the matter. “It has ever been illustrated and confirmed by it.”\textsuperscript{13}

Thus, it is no exaggeration to say that Stuart deployed a sophisticated, historically-informed biblical criticism, much as the historical critics of Europe had, but that he deployed it toward conservative ends. His biblical criticism, while not of a different order than that of the best German biblical critics in its grammatical, literary, and historical argumentation, stood out from most German criticism for its conservative conclusions about the authorship, date, and literal historical accuracy of the Bible’s texts.

To that end, Stuart made it among his chief concerns to use the best research in recent philology to shed light on the interpretation of the Bible. He used this aspect of modern biblical research to elucidate the meanings of particular portions of scripture, for example, in article after article during the 1830s. His “Interpretation of Romans VIII.18-25” in 1831 offered a technical discussion of New Testament Greek philology. He cited the history of the interpretation of the passage in question, including mention of the most recent European critical scholarship. His aim was to provide a correct sense of the passage in question — that is, he had an exegetical goal, in keeping with the Common Sense

\textsuperscript{12} Stuart, “The Samaritan and Hebrew Pentateuch”: 311-312.

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid.: 312.
emphasis on deciphering the original meaning of the biblical texts.\textsuperscript{14} His articles on the
“Meaning of ΚΥΡΙΟΣ in the New Testament” and “Remarks on the Internal Evidence Respecting the Various Readings in 1 Tim. III.16,” likewise, offered well-grounded arguments in the history of the interpretation of the passages under consideration. They delved into detailed, technical discussions of Greek philology and usage.\textsuperscript{15} Stuart’s piece on the “Interpretation of Psalm xvi” borrowed even more of the Germans’ philological tools than some of his other pieces. His argument in that article rested squarely on a foundation of comparative philology in ancient Chaldean, Arabic, and Hebrew, which might have made any German biblical critic proud. Stuart would have found favor among the German biblical scholars also for the detailed, technical, and thorough quality of his argumentation. Moreover, he might have heard their applause for carefully considering the history of criticism and interpretation, going so far as to mention the opinions of the early church fathers, medieval scholastics, Protestant reformers, and recent European critics, both Jewish and Christian.\textsuperscript{16}

Indeed, in article after article during the 1830s and 40s, Stuart offered the same kind of competent, detailed, thorough biblical criticism. Stuart’s efforts at biblical interpretation offered arguments well grounded in the history of interpretation, the philology of no less than four languages of the Ancient Near East, and the work of recent


German biblical scholars. Some of his pieces suggested Stuart’s particular gifts in the philology of the Bible’s languages; these included a piece on “Hints and Cautions Respecting the Greek Article,” one on the “Meaning of πληρωμα in Col. 2:9,” two on an “Inquiry Respecting the Original Language of Matthew’s Gospel . . . with Reference to Mr. Norton’s View,” a “Review of the Manual Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon by W[ilhel]m Gesenius,” and, finally, an “Examination of the Rev. A[lbert] Barnes’ Remarks on Hebrews 9:16-18.”17 Other pieces suggested Stuart’s particular attention to historical-critical theories about the origins of the texts and the history of criticism and interpretation. These included articles such as the “Genuineness of Source Texts in the Gospels,” the “Christology of the Book of Enoch,” and “Future Punishment in the Book of Enoch.”18

In still additional articles, Stuart brought both technical philology and the history of biblical criticism to bear directly on pertinent theological questions. For example, Stuart applied the best critical commentary in a hundred-page essay on the question, “Is the Manner of Christian Baptism Prescribed in the New Testament?” And two pieces entitled “What is Sin?” brought Stuart’s historically-informed discussion to a minor theological


dispute between the Congregational and Presbyterian Churches. In all these pieces, Stuart showed himself to be very well informed of the history of biblical interpretation, including recent historical critical scholarship from Germany. He directed his erudition and grounding in the best German biblical criticism, nevertheless, in generally conservative directions.

Stuart’s concerns were not limited to the exegesis of the Bible based on the best results of German biblical scholarship. They also, more importantly, included the defense of the Bible according to the terms of the Common Sense theology. Stuart’s theological and epistemological conservatism became clear again when he published a critical interpretation of the book of Revelation in 1843. Taking a cue from the methods of the German historical critics, Stuart considered carefully the actual historical context in which the book had been written as the primary means of understanding the meaning of the book. Unlike many of the German critics, however, Stuart’s historical arguments served to uphold the integrity and traditional authorship of the book. Stuart saw two chief benefits of historical criticism when it came to the Book of the Apocalypse in particular. First, it provided the solution to enigmatic references in the text that had been the object of debate for centuries. Second, it helped prove the Apostolic authorship, and hence, divine authority, of the book. For example, Stuart used this kind of historical analysis to argue that “[i]t might easily be shown…that the tenor of the book renders it necessary for us to suppose, that the persecution [of which it speaks] was actually raging when it was

written....” That fact, determined by careful attention to the presumed time and location in which the book had been written, confirmed that, “consequently, it must have been written during Nero’s life, for [the] persecution [it mentions] ceased immediately after his death.”20 Multiple portions of the book, Stuart argued, “put it beyond a reasonable doubt, that the Apocalypse was written before the destruction of Jerusalem” in A.D. 70. Moreover, Stuart interpreted John’s references to historical figures throughout the book as corroborating this view of the early date for its composition. If nothing else, he argued, Revelation 17:10, which declares that five kings or emperors of Rome had already fallen, while a sixth was still reigning at the time the author was writing the book, clearly demonstrated the date of the book’s composition.21 Stuart’s brand of historical criticism, then, confirmed a substantially traditional, conservative view of the authorship and authority of the book. He used historical argumentation to inform the exegesis of the book, but he did not use it to deconstruct the book’s composition or suggest the need for some fundamentally new understanding of that portion of the biblical message. His was, indeed, a “conservative,” “traditional” use of historical argumentation, for Stuart concluded that the Apocalypse had come from the hand of John at an early date.

Stuart used historical-critical methods to argue a conservative position on the origins of the New Testament Gospels, as well. His conservative position on Matthew was essentially the same as his conservative position on the authorship of the Pentateuch. Stuart reviewed Andrews Norton’s Evidences of the Genuineness of the Gospels, a


21 Ibid.
defense of the Apostolic authorship and the general historical reliability of the Gospels. Stuart, like Norton, abhorred recent theories that one or more of the Gospel-writers had used a now-lost proto-Gospel when they wrote their accounts of Jesus’ life. Stuart expressed hope that the theory had “of late been gradually and almost silently going in desuetude on account of the internal and insuperable difficulties which it presents. . . .”22 Yet, he, with Norton, remained dismayed to see a “newer and more fashionable [theory] of a Protevangelium, which Eichhorn and Marsh have decked out in so many gaudy colours, [and] has been wide spread on the continent. . . .” Stuart continued, “Eichhorn was not indeed the father, but only the nurse, of this unlucky progeny. Semler I take to be its progenitor; Lessing, Niemeyer, Halfeld, and Paulus, its Lucinas; Eichhorn its prime-nurse, Marsh its god-father, and Ziegler, Gratz, Bertholdt, Weber, and Kuinoel, its foster-fathers.” “But with all the nursing and care bestowed upon [the presumed existence of a now-lost proto-Gospel],” Stuart was glad to report, “it has proved to be but a sickly child. . . . It has recently been fast approaching the last stages of disease; and now Mr. Norton has administered a dose which will precipitate its death. If not, then my prognosis is not secundum artem.”23

Stuart affirmed Norton’s arguments nearly in toto for the complete untenability of the German critics’ theory of the proto-Gospel behind the canonical Gospels. “On the supposed Protevangelium or Original Gospel thus proffered to the notice of the critical


23 Ibid.
world, Mr. Norton proceeds to make some judicious and common-sense remarks.”24 Any common-sense remarks scored high in Stuart’s estimation. Thus, he agreed that “[v]ery plain and striking it is, as [Norton] shews, that if such an Original Gospel did exist in early ages, it must have been regarded as a work of great importance and of very high credit. . . .” How then, Stuart demanded, could it be that “no ancient writer ever once makes mention of any such Protevangelium? THE FACT CANNOT BE DISPUTED. . . . Yet we have often repeated mention of any and all kinds of apocryphal writings, even the most contemptible and insignificant.” “The whole affair, then,” Stuart concluded, “is upon the very face of it an incredible thing.”25 If such a source Gospel had, in fact, existed, evidence of it would surely have emerged in the historical record.

Similar to his concerns with the criticisms of the Apocalypse, Stuart’s contempt of the proto-Gospel theory lay in that theory’s potential to damage the sacred authority of the canonical Gospels. The existence of a source Gospel behind the canonical Gospels threatened the idea that the canonical texts represented historically accurate accounts written by firsthand witnesses to Christ’s life and ministry. Stuart engaged in a critical discussion of his own to prove that the Gospels remained essentially uncorrupted from their original forms and that they had been ascribed to their true authors, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, as Christian tradition had maintained since the second century.26 Stuart marshaled a critical discussion of the Bible in order to defend the traditional understanding of scripture and preserve Common Sense apologetic. His conservative positions on the

24 Ibid.: 323.

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid.: 265-343; see espec. 284 ff.
authorship of both Matthew and the Pentateuch were crucial for the Common Sense idea that the inspiration of the scriptures depended on the character of each original author of scripture. We know that the first five books of the Bible are the word of God if we know for certain that Moses was their author. The evidence in the text, itself, showed that Moses had been commissioned directly by God to speak on behalf of God. Similarly, the biblical evidence showed that Christ had vested the Apostles with his own authority, making Matthew’s Gospel, for example, inherently authoritative. The Common Sense apologetic was aimed at the proof of the divine inspiration of the Bible.

Stuart authored some of the few works of critical biblical scholarship in antebellum America, and his conclusions typically refuted the “liberal” opinions of German scholars and supported, rather than challenged, the Common Sense apologetic. Stuart offered a “domesticated” biblical criticism of sorts, one that appeared to support the traditional understanding of the Bible and affirm the Common Sense theological apologetic that under-girded much of American Protestant theology. He is the primary example of how American biblical scholarship, to the extent it existed at all in antebellum America, remained more or less safely domesticated in the American theological scene. It failed to push against the Common Sense apologetic or elements of traditional theology to any appreciable extent. Stuart’s prolific writings in all sorts of areas of biblical criticism mark him as the most prominent example of the fundamentally conservative nature of American biblical scholarship during the early decades of the nineteenth century. This helps explain why historical criticism of the Bible failed to rouse much suspicion in the American theological world before the Civil War.
Unitarian liberalism stood out in contrast to the more conservative views of the Reformed denominations represented by Charles Hodge and Moses Stuart. Unitarians were a numerically small reaction movement against New England Calvinism. Yet, they were important, for around their theological center of gravity in Boston and Cambridge revolved the only sustained discussion about biblical scholarship and theology carried out by theological liberals during this period. They were genuine theological liberals. Not only did they reject classic Trinitarian theology; they dissented from the theological orthodoxy shared among most American denominations on a number of important points, not the least of which was their understanding of the Bible.27 Regarding their understanding of scripture, it was not uncommon for important Unitarian intellectual leaders to agree with certain ideas shared widely among liberal German theologians and historical biblical critics. To take an important example, German liberals and American Unitarians, alike, tended to view the Bible as a record of divine revelation, rather than as itself the inspired revelation of God — a crucial distinction between sacred text and divine revelation that American theological conservatives usually rejected out of hand.28 While Moses Stuart flirted with a


28 See the discussions about Andrews Norton’s theories of scripture in this ch., below. For additional accounts of the views of the Bible shared among antebellum Unitarians, see espec. Brown, Rise of Biblical Criticism, which deals with the theories of scripture held by Andrews Norton, 31-35, 76-93, espec. 76-79; Joseph Stevens Buckminster, 15-26; Edward Everett, 36-42; William Ellery Channing, 62-64; George R.
similar view in his piece on the Pentateuch, mentioned above, he gave the idea only minor emphasis when viewed in the context of the entire article; his obvious intent remained fundamentally conservative, and his general tenor remained decidedly critical of the novel theories of the German critics.29 Indeed, conservative evangelical theologians like Hodge and Stuart treated theological questions such as Unitarian departures from classic Christian theology as a more pertinent a threat to evangelical Christianity in America than whatever dangerous ideas they detected in German theology.30

Two particular characteristics of Unitarianism, however, tended to mitigate the intensity with which conservatives perceived that liberal denomination as a threat to evangelical religion. These characteristics of Unitarianism were crucial for improving Unitarians’ position vis-à-vis German liberals in the world of American theology as a whole. First, Unitarianism remained more or less limited in scope to the vicinity of Boston. Unitarians exerted no small influence in the American intellectual, literary, and theological world, particularly because of their entrenchment in the Harvard College and

Noyes, 125-131, 134-137; and Theodore Parker, 153-170. See also Ahlstrom, Religious History of the American People, 388-402, passim; and Howe, Unitarian Conscience, 82-92, passim.

29 See the discussion of Stuart’s distinction between scripture and revelation in this ch., above.

30 See, for example, Charles Hodge, “Neill’s Lectures on Biblical History,” Princeton Review 18 (July 1846): 456-461; Charles Hodge, “Suggestions to Theological Students,” Princeton Review 5 (January 1833): 100-113; and Stuart, “What is Sin?” parts 1-2. In these pieces, Hodge admonished his readers not to adopt a false spirit of liberality, by which he probably had in mind Unitarian theology, and warned readers of the dangers of Transcendentalism. Stuart defended the doctrine of original sin against those who would soften its force. See the discussion of Hodge’s and Stuart’s preoccupation with theological questions other than biblical criticism, in this ch., below.

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Divinity school; yet, the extent of their influence in terms of geography and church membership did not reach very far beyond eastern Massachusetts.\textsuperscript{31}

Second, and probably more important, was the fact that prominent Unitarian theologians shared similar commitments to the Common Sense approach to theology as their conservative, evangelical brethren. This is true, notwithstanding notable Unitarian clergymen, such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Theodore Parker, whose ideas reflected the new, decidedly un-Scottish philosophy of Transcendentalism. For example, the historian Daniel Walker Howe has demonstrated the pervasive and deep influence of the Scottish philosophy on Unitarian thought at Harvard College and Divinity School during the first two-thirds of the nineteenth century. Howe argues that Harvard Unitarians were steeped in the Common Sense philosophy. The philosophical system represented by Thomas Reid, Dugald Stewart, George Campbell, James Beattie, and others affected the panoply of ideas shared among intellectual leaders at Harvard. These ideas, on topics related to the broad field called “moral philosophy,” dealt with the nature of Christian religion, divine revelation, ethics, social thought, philosophy, and politics.\textsuperscript{32} The Harvard men who developed and applied the Common Sense philosophy to these various fields included the political economist and philosopher Francis Bowen, the biblical scholar Andrews Norton, and others. Bowen, as a subsequent chapter will demonstrate, would come to play a role in mid-century debates about the presumed scientific accuracy of the Bible; Norton, by the 1820s, had already assumed his role as an apologist for the historicity of the New

\textsuperscript{31} Ahlstrom, \textit{Religious History of the American People}, 400.

\textsuperscript{32} Howe, \textit{Unitarian Conscience}, 6, 29.
Testament’s Gospel narratives. Both men drew heavily from the Common Sense philosophy.\textsuperscript{33}

Howe argues that “this highly distinctive group of [antebellum Harvard] intellectuals were more remarkable for their representativeness than for their distinctiveness” in Western intellectual culture. Even while they espoused a distinctly Unitarian theology in the midst of an overwhelmingly Trinitarian religious culture, their views of natural theology, ethics, and metaphysics were nevertheless shared widely in America and Europe. Moreover, the Unitarians’ emphasis on individual moral perfectibility as the essence of salvation, while distinctive, only carried to an “explicit extreme” an attitude of Arminian moral perfectability that was becoming more and more prevalent; one need only think of the softening of emphasis on the doctrine of total depravity among American Calvinists and the decidedly Arminian cast of the Second Great Awakening to see Unitarians only as the more-explicit exemplars of a general trend. Finally, antebellum Harvard Unitarians prefigured several aspects of later American Protestantism as a whole, including a de-emphasis on dogma and a re-definition of

Christianity as a system of ethics and way of life.\textsuperscript{34} In all these ways, Unitarians before the Civil War stood well within the consensus of American theology, despite their theological innovations. Unitarians’ entrenchment within the bulwarks of the Common Sense philosophy, then, placed them shoulder-to-shoulder with Reformed theological conservatives in an important way during the early nineteenth century.

This Common Sense Realism exerted a strong influence over Andrews Norton. Its epistemological machinery moved him into a kind of middle ground between the Calvinism of conservatives like Hodge and Stuart, on the one hand, and liberal German biblical critics, on the other. Many of his ideas about scripture can best be identified as conservative. For example, Jerry Wayne Brown has pointed out that Norton, like the orthodox, believed that the Bible contained the authoritative, binding revelation of God.\textsuperscript{35} Likewise, Norton believed in the possibility of miracles, and, similar to evangelicals, vindicated the divine authority of Jesus Christ on the truthfulness of the miraculous stories in the New Testament.\textsuperscript{36} Moreover, Norton labored to defend the Gospels as authentic, independent accounts of the life of Jesus Christ. In direct opposition to the work of the German New Testament critics Eichhorn and Griesbach, for example, he refused to define the synoptic Gospels as fundamentally different from John, and he rejected all theories of

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35 See, for example, Brown, \textit{Rise of Biblical Criticism}, 81.

36 See, for example, ibid., 91.
\end{quote}
the existence of a now-lost proto-Gospel or any other kind of literary interdependence
among the canonical accounts. In each of these ways, Norton consciously resisted the
foundational ideas of German New Testament criticism.37

On the other hand, Norton allied himself with many of the positions shared among
the historical critics of Europe. For example, he saw the theory of verbal inspiration,
maintained by conservatives, as woefully inadequate.38 Moreover, he maintained a
distinction between the text of the Bible and divine revelation similar to that which
characterized most German historical critics.39 Norton believed that use of reason would
bring to light religious conceptions frequently delivered through figure, metaphor, and
hyperbole. The Bible contained a true, authoritative revelation of religious principles that
could not be found through the use of reason alone, but it was not itself the revelation of
God.40 More specifically, Norton believed that God’s revelation to the ancient Hebrews,
contained in the Pentateuch, had been shrouded in myth, clouded by legend, and encased
in an outmoded religious system.41 Similarly, he rejected several books of the New
Testament canon, and he elevated the Gospels to a level of importance substantially greater
than the books he did accept.42 In these ways, Norton shared much in common with
modern liberal historical critics. The historian Lilian Handlin has justly characterized

37 Ibid., 82-83.
38 Ibid., 81.
39 Ibid., 81, 92.
40 Ibid., 80-81.
41 Ibid., 93.
42 Ibid., 91.
Norton’s approach to the Bible as a “soft version of higher criticism,” a description that corroborates his mediating position on biblical revelation.\textsuperscript{43} Norton, in fact, saw himself and his fellow Unitarians as occupying this middle ground between German rationalistic historical criticism and conservative Protestant literalism. In a review of a German book on biblical theology in 1827, Norton answered charges of religious infidelity that American conservatives had been leveling against Unitarianism. According to Norton, the translator of the German book had argued that “[t]he Unitarianism of [the United States] is fundamentally the same as the infidelity of Europe; its principles are the same, and lead to the same results.”\textsuperscript{44} Norton looked at such an assertion as nothing short of ludicrous. “We are not about to defend ourselves against this charge of infidelity,” he answered back. In fact, he asserted, American Unitarians had done much to defend Christianity from the infidel theologians and skeptical biblical scholars of Europe. More than that, he continued, the so-called orthodox churches in America — the Presbyterian and Congregationalist establishment, which had originated the charges of infidelity against Unitarianism — were themselves the actual corruptors of good religion.\textsuperscript{45} These arguments, aimed against the Calvinist theological establishment, resulted largely from Norton’s view of scripture. On the one hand, Norton’s views put him in line with the same conservative Common Sense theologians whose Calvinism he hated.

\textsuperscript{43} Lilian Handlin, “Babylon est delenda — the Young Andrews Norton,” in American Unitarianism, ed. Conrad Wright, 70.


\textsuperscript{45} Ibid.
Norton drew a sharp distinction between the uses of scripture common among German theologians and those common among American Unitarians. This is one reason why Norton was certain to identify Semler as the father of modern liberal interpretation in his review of German biblical theology, mentioned previously. Semler’s liberal, rationalistic biblical interpretation stood as a symbol for all that was wrong with the enterprise of biblical criticism in Germany, and the contrast with Unitarian biblical interpretation was striking. “With regard to our modes of interpreting scripture,” Norton argued, “there is not less ignorance or injustice discovered, in attempting to confound them with those which have prevailed in Germany, among the followers of Semler, who is called the ‘father of the modern Liberalism.’”

It may be true, Norton conceded, that Semler had applied principles to the interpretation of the Bible that “make some approach to those that we regard as rational and just . . . ,” but the resemblance was only surface deep. Norton had weighed the methods of Semler’s biblical criticism in the balance and found them wanting on several counts.

Norton ran to the arms of the American Common Sense theology when he formulated a rationale for his criticism of Semler’s infidelity. One feature of that rationale was his strong defense of evidence-based, empirical epistemology, and this Baconian epistemology placed him firmly in the camp of American Common Sense conservatives. Knowledge, he believed with Hodge and Stuart, could not be called such unless it rested on a secure foundation of facts. Norton charged Semler with violating this fundamental principle of good theology and biblical exegesis. As a general characterization, Norton

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46 Ibid.

argued, Semler “wanted patience to distinguish and separate truth from error.” Semler’s “love of novelty, and fondness for innovation,” Norton continued, “often led him beyond the bounds of reason, probability, and truth, to the regions of hypothesis and extravagant conjecture.” Norton characterized Semler’s recklessness as one of wild speculation, driven more by a desire to make an impact on other theologians and academics, rather than by a desire to pursue the simple truth. In contrasting himself to Semler, Norton championed “reason, probability, and truth” over against “hypothesis and extravagant conjecture.” In these ways, Norton endorsed the cardinal tenets of the Common Sense approach to truth through Baconian empiricism.

A second point in his criticism of Semler placed Norton in the company of American Common Sense conservatives, despite his own liberal theology. This was his insistence on the possibility of the supernatural. Norton criticized Semler’s school of biblical criticism because it belittled the supernatural elements of the biblical narratives and, consequently, conducted its criticism of the Bible along rationalistic lines. That had spread like leaven, distorting the shape of the entire field of biblical criticism in Germany. In the most basic sense, Norton argued, Semler’s “language concerning the miraculous evidence which attended the first promulgation of Christianity” had provided “the germ…of that system of infidelity which has so extensively prevailed among his countrymen.” The supernatural must not be ruled out of hand. Instead, it was a simple question of evidence. Did the biblical records offer credible evidence for the miraculous and supernatural events they narrated? Then the supernaturalism of the Bible must be accepted as real. No

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48 Ibid.: 343.

49 Ibid.
interpretation of scripture could be thoroughly authentic that excluded an entire realm of evidence a priori. In accepting the possibility of the supernatural — and by insisting that it inform the interpretation of the Bible — Norton placed himself in line with mainstream antebellum American Common Sense theology.

Still, Norton moved to a middle ground between conservatives Hodge and Stuart and liberals like Semler in important respects. In this piece on German biblical theology, he endorsed several ideas shared among the majority of German historical critics. Despite his criticisms of Semler and his followers in Germany, Norton still argued that Semler had “obtained some just views in regard to the original design of the sacred writings, and the principles on which they should be explained. . . .”\textsuperscript{50} In Norton’s estimation, German biblical scholars had contributed a vital insight to biblical interpretation: the principle of “accommodation.” Accommodation had become a fundamental tenet of biblical interpretation, he explained. The term “. . . is used to express a characteristic of the preaching of our Saviour and his apostles; namely, that they adapted or accommodated their instructions to the peculiar circumstances, and the peculiar moral and intellectual state of those whom they immediately addressed.” Christ and his Apostles, even the Old Testament prophets, had taken into account the prejudices and level of spiritual comprehension of their original audiences, “making use of that particular mode of instruction, which was required in each particular case.”\textsuperscript{51} “Is it not seen in the Mosaic institutions, adapted to an uncultivated people? and in the clearer revelations, which were

\textsuperscript{50} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid.: 344.
made by the prophets, at a more advanced period of the world. . . ?” Norton asked.52
Thus, Norton’s defense of accommodation carried with it the notion that humanity, at least
those peoples influenced by God’s revelation, had enjoyed progress in their general
spiritual and moral comprehension over the course of history. This idea implied two
additional corollaries related to the study and interpretation of the Bible: the historical
context of the original message must be reconstructed in order to truly understand the
original message, and the moral principles of the biblical message had to be re-accommodated, as it were, to the audience of modern readers. All these notions appeared
frequently among the German historical critics.

Norton followed the German historical critics still further. If all biblical teaching
had been accommodated to the original audience, then language itself must be a form of
accommodation, for that teaching had come through the medium of human language. As
Norton put it, “Human language is but a very imperfect medium for the communication of
thought. Yet all [divine] revelation . . . must be made to us in the language of men. Is not
this accommodation?” In all the revelations of God to mankind, Norton saw the “same
wise and merciful condescension. . . .”53 This view separated Norton from the majority of
American theologians; the Common Sense apologetic defined language not as an imperfect
medium of communication, but as a reliable vehicle of truth.54

52 Ibid.: 346.

53 Ibid.

54 For historical studies on the theories of language associated with the Common Sense philosophy, see Ch. 2, n. 55.
Norton’s view of language informed his understanding of the Bible, and that understanding separated him still further from his Congregationalist and Presbyterian colleagues in at least a few important respects. Norton concluded his article on German biblical theology by highlighting an “extraordinary statement” that had been made about American Unitarians. “It is this,” he wrote: “‘Unitarians take the writings of the New Testament not as being themselves a revelation from God; but only as a history of such a revelation.’ Assuredly they do so,” he was happy to say.55 While meant as an accusation of heresy by the conservatives who had leveled it, Unitarians, Norton exulted, united in embracing it. Their accusers had been correct to group them with liberal German biblical critics on this point. Divine revelation, as far as Norton could see, did not consist of the words of the Bible; such a notion belonged to the Dark Ages. “It is a proposition so unintelligible in any sense, which one acquainted with the writings of the New Testament, can for a moment admit to be true . . . ,” Norton explained. “[T]he glorious gospel of the blessed God, does not consist of the historical books and epistles which compose the New Testament, but of the sublime truths which God has taught us by Jesus Christ.”56 The very thought amounted to heresy for most American theologians of the early nineteenth century, and it ran contrary to positions that his contemporaries Moses Stuart and Charles Hodge had labored to defend.

Moses Stuart, for example, had labored to defend the literal accuracy of the Old and New Testaments, even in the face of some very serious obstacles that the science of


56 Ibid.
geology had thrown in the way of the book of Genesis. He had also striven to justify
Moses’ authorship of the Pentateuch — not just as a means of defending the credibility of
its story of God’s gracious dealings toward his people, but also, in a broader sense, as a
means of defending the texts themselves as God’s word. Along with Stuart, Charles
Hodge, for his part, had repeatedly argued against the speculative nature of much German
biblical literature. Hodge believed that a penchant for speculative philosophy and a
prejudice against the miraculous, both hallmarks of German biblical criticism, destroyed
the trustworthiness of the Bible as divine revelation. Either the Bible was reliable in all its
particulars, or its revelation was not a clear and certain communication from God at all.
Despite Stuart’s occasional inconsistencies, to both Stuart and Hodge, the text of the Bible
remained co-identical with the revelation of God. And Norton, while agreeing with many
of Stuart’s and Hodge’s positions, disputed them on this final one. Norton drew a sharp
distinction between divine revelation, on the one hand, and the text of scripture, on the
other; doing so, he had adopted one of the cardinal tenets shared by many of the German
historical critics.57 This view became a dominant feature of theological modernism among
American theologians late in the nineteenth century, and Norton, following the Germans,
had fully anticipated this later change.58

57 Compare the differences between Stuart’s reference to a similar distinction, in
this ch., above, with Norton’s sharply defined distinction, here. For Stuart, the point was
incidental and aimed toward a conservative defense of the Bible’s historical reliability and
divine authority. For Norton, the point was central to his understanding of the Bible, and
it aimed at a more liberal definition of biblical inspiration than Stuart’s.

58 Howe makes a similar claim about antebellum Unitarian intellectuals generally;
see Howe, Unitarian Conscience, 6-7 and passim.
One of Norton’s articles about Stuart’s commentary on the book of Hebrews demonstrated his dual position as both an adherent of the Common Sense approach to theology and a sympathizer with core ideas belonging to the German historical critics. The article fleshed out Norton’s theory of scripture as it stood in 1829. The canon of New Testament scripture, Norton argued, could be defined by those books that afforded the best sources of knowledge about Christ and the religion he had established. The Epistles of Paul and the other Apostles, along with the four received Gospels, qualified as canonical on these grounds. The Gospels qualified because they offered reliable historical testimony of the life, character, and teachings of Jesus. The Epistles of Paul qualified because Christ had miraculously called Paul to preach in his name. The writings of the other Apostles qualified because their “minds were enlarged and elevated by immediate communications from God, so that they were enabled to attain a correct comprehension of the character of the new dispensation [of Christianity].”

This was essentially the same argument that the Protestant Reformers had put forward in defense of the canon three hundred years earlier; indeed, it was the same rationale that Church fathers had used when definitively settling the canon during the third century of the Christian era. The Common Sense theologians in America had adopted those basic criteria for canonicity, as well. Norton was not arguing anything that other American Protestant theologians would not have already agreed with.

However, Norton departed from the theology of most American evangelicals when he described his understanding of biblical authority more thoroughly in 1829. He

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reiterated the notion that canonicity did not entail divine revelation; the canonical books of the New Testament, as he put it, “are nothing more than the best records which remain to us of the revelation which God made by Jesus Christ. This revelation . . . is not to be identified with the canonical books of the New Testament.”60 In this later article, however, Norton developed the implications of that idea further. As mentioned in a previous chapter, Norton argued in 1829 that the Bible contained an infallible revelation from God, but he believed the character of the writings demonstrated God’s limited influence over the biblical authors. In distinction to views common among most conservative American theologians, he argued that the divine inspiration of the Bible extended only to the specific matters God had intended to communicate; the Bible contained much that reflected the fallible, limited, and earthly perspectives of its human authors. As Norton put it,

Neither the teaching of our Saviour nor the influences of God’s spirit in enlightening the minds of the apostles, preserved them from all the errors of their age; from the influence of all human prejudices and feelings, from all inconclusive reasoning, or from all ambiguity, impropriety, and insufficiency in the use of language.61

All that could be said of the New Testament books, therefore, was that they “afford[ed] satisfactory information concerning those truths which it was the purpose of God to reveal to man.”62 So while Christ may have commissioned the Apostles to preach and instruct in his name, he by no means had guaranteed them freedom from error and imperfection. The Apostles, in effect, had remained subject to their own historical situation. In this

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61 Ibid.: 344-345.

62 Ibid.: 344.
example, Norton had stated a position that placed him much closer to liberal European biblical scholars than most American theologians were willing to contemplate.

Moreover, Norton followed the thinking of liberal German biblical critics when he argued for the exclusion of the book of Hebrews from the Canon. The book of Hebrews ought not be given the weight of canonicity because historical-critical study had demonstrated that Paul was not its author, he argued. The “genuine” New Testament epistles — those written by Paul or one of the Apostles — and the Gospels alone constituted the primary sources of knowledge about the Christian religion, Norton argued. It was this criterion of direct knowledge of Christ and his teachings that defined canonicity.

Norton desired deeply to bring to light the full import and original meaning of the genuine foundation texts of Christianity. “But to effect this purpose,” he continued, “we must not have recourse to any other writings we now possess, as of equal worth.”

This caveat opened the door to his re-examination of the extent of the biblical canon itself. The Epistle to the Hebrews stood out to him as an obvious question. The New Testament itself, Norton argued, showed that many of Christianity’s early converts understood Christ’s teachings “very imperfectly.” “In the minds of those who were not guided by the miraculous influences of God’s spirit,” he explained, “a mixture of human opinions and conceptions with the truths of our religion, almost immediately took place; and the former were often regarded as equally with the latter of divine authority.” Hence his argument that the canonical writings must be limited to those of the close personal

63 Ibid.: 343-344.

64 Ibid.: 346.

65 Ibid.
followers of Christ, the men who had been most guided by the miraculous influences of Christ’s presence. The author of Hebrews gave a clear example of the importance of this principle. While the writer’s theology did not contradict any essential doctrine taught by the Apostles, the epistle nevertheless distorted the church’s picture of the character and moral government of God.\textsuperscript{66} Norton failed to explain how and why he believed that distortion had occurred, but he remained adamant in drawing a “wide distinction between his work [in the Epistle to the Hebrews], or any other of however early an age, and the writings of the apostles.”\textsuperscript{67}

These represented clear departures from Protestant orthodoxy, and both Norton and his conservative critics recognized it. Nevertheless, Norton’s views on the Bible, language, and knowledge remained within the bounds of the Common Sense theological apologetic in at least three important ways. First, Norton maintained a conservative approach to scripture in his passion to see the texts of the New Testament understood correctly, and that approach reverberated with the ideas of the Scottish Enlightenment. Like Hodge and Stuart, Norton urged that the proper interpretation of the Bible entailed understanding the biblical writings in a light as close to that of the original authors as possible. As Norton wrote,

\[\ldots\] [W]e are most desirous that [the New Testament] epistles should be understood as they may be understood by every intelligent Christian; that correct notions should be entertained of their character and design; that they should not, though written in English words, speak an unknown tongue to the great majority of readers; that they should not remain veiled in almost impenetrable obscurity, so that only a glimpse of the true meaning of the writer here and there appears; and that they should not, in

\textsuperscript{66} Ibid.: 346-347.

\textsuperscript{67} Ibid.: 347.
consequence, admit of almost any perversion, and afford a lurking place for almost any error.⁶⁸

Norton remained committed to this goal of sound exegesis, and he had adopted the insights of the historical critics primarily as a means of achieving this end. His purposes for doing so remained utterly noble: “When the meaning of the books of the New Testament is understood, and a proper use is made of them, then will the true character of our religion be revealed to men anew.”⁶⁹

Second, Norton’s article on Hebrews shows that he believed the authors of the Bible had to have been eyewitnesses to the facts of revelation, and he made this principle the criterion of canonicity. Although he argued Hebrews ought to be excluded from the canon on these grounds, it was the same criterion of canonicity suggested by the Common Sense approach to theology and shared by Hodge, Stuart, and a host of other American theologians. By way of contrast, the more liberal German critics did not insist on expelling Hebrews from the canon simply because its author was not Paul; in fact, they had concluded that much of the canon had not been written by the authors to whom the books had traditionally been attributed.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Ibid.: 346.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

Third, Norton’s understanding of language and knowledge remained fundamentally the same as that of Hodge and Stuart. All three maintained an essentially Locke
epistemology and understood language within the tradition of the Scottish Enlightenment.
For example, James Turner’s essay on Norton’s theory of language shows Norton speaking
about the relationship between language and knowledge in ways that appear remarkably
similar to the ideas of Hodge and Stuart. Hodge, like Norton, decried the imprecision and
obscurity of German scholars. They each clearly linked Germans’ imprecision in language
with the defective and dangerous German intuitionist epistemology.71

In a similar vein, Stuart gave his “warmest approbation” and “unqualified assent”
to Norton’s reliance on miracles as the proof of the authority of the Bible. Stuart and
Norton each attacked the notion, shared among German theologians, that God’s voice

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71 Compare Norton’s criticisms of German scholars as cited in James Turner,
(Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003), 20-22, with Charles Hodge’s
criticisms of German scholars in both “Schauf[]’s Protestantism,” Princeton Review 17
(October 1845): 626-636 and Hodge’s address at the semi-centennial celebration of his
tenure at Princeton Seminary, quoted in Archibald A. Hodge, Life of Charles Hodge:
Professor of the Theological Seminary, Princeton, N.J. (New York: Charles Scribner’s
Sons, 1880), 521-522. See Turner’s mention of the congruencies between Hodge and
Norton’s views of language and knowledge, “Charles Hodge in the Intellectual Weather of
could be discerned in the Bible even if that book’s miraculous events had never really happened. Instead, they upheld the Lockean theory that knowledge came from the external world through the senses. Revelation from God provided knowledge of the spiritual realm beyond physical experience, to be sure, but one could know that revelation truly came from God only by the external evidence of divine authority. Knowledge of divine truth came through external demonstration, not internal intuition, and the German scholars were on a slippery slope to epistemological suicide.72

Hodge, likewise, was pleased with Norton on this point. He applauded Norton’s Discourse on the Latest Form of Infidelity, a sermon in which Norton had blasted Ralph Waldo Emerson’s Teutonic “pantheism.” Norton had done well to insist that the miraculous evidences in the gospel were the path to confirming the Bible’s reliability and authority. Hodge pronounced on the aptness of Norton’s criticism of Emerson’s German-style pantheism. Norton, unlike Emerson, had correctly perceived that “a denial of the miracles of Christ, is a denial of the gospel . . . because the miraculous character of the gospel enters into its very essence.”73 By the assent of this most conservative proponent of the Common Sense approach to theology, Andrews Norton maintained his orthodox standing at least when it came to the Common Sense theological apologetic. Unitarians may have departed from important elements of classic Christian theology by insisting the Bible’s doctrines must comport with reason. But Norton, the “liberal” Unitarian, remained linked in common cause with even such an orthodox conservative as Charles Hodge.


Thus, Norton promoted liberal opinions about the source and nature of the biblical texts. At the same time, he upheld Common Sense philosophical principles when it came to understanding the texts of the Bible. Norton’s theology might be characterized as a sort of domesticated liberalism: it was liberal, unorthodox, even sometimes abominable to other American religious leaders, yet it often appeared far safer than the wild speculative infidelities of many of the German biblical critics.

Not only did antebellum biblical criticism in America persist in its conservative orthodoxy, biblical criticism also remained relatively unimportant in the world of American theology until the second half of the nineteenth century. This attitude made it all the easier for American Protestant intellectuals to see German biblical criticism as an exclusively European problem during the early nineteenth century, and it provides a second explanation for why historical criticism failed to ignite controversy in antebellum America. In a general sense, modern European theories about the source, origins, and significance of the Bible’s texts ranked rather low on the list of American theological concerns during the early nineteenth century. If the subject matter of theological publications is any guide, American theologians paid comparatively little attention to German biblical criticism, particularly when viewed against the second half of the nineteenth century. Their minds remained occupied with more pressing theological controversies closer to home, not with the controversies of German historical criticism, which they still viewed largely as a foreign problem.

One of the most significant theological disputes during the early nineteenth century, for example, had to do with the Unitarian controversy. Because Unitarians’
understanding of scripture stood at the center of their differences with orthodox
Protestants, the nature of the Bible emerged as a point of discussion when Unitarian
question was debated. To the extent that American theologians debated issues with one
another during the first half of the nineteenth century, they tended to focus on topics like
the proper mode of Christian baptism, the results of evangelical revivalism, the merits and
demerits of Calvinism, and the threat to American religious life from the growing Catholic
immigration. Those more interested in biblical scholarship per se tended to offer extended
exegesis of particular biblical passages, often based on the latest research in Hebrew or
Greek language study. Moreover, the majority of American theologians of the early
nineteenth century made their arguments with constant reference to the Bible as
interpreted within the confines of the Common Sense apologetic. Most American
theologians presumed the authority and authenticity of the biblical texts. Theories of
biblical composition and the nature of divine revelation came up relatively infrequently.

Andrews Norton, himself a Unitarian, reflected this trend in American theological
discourse. A defense of Unitarian principles occupied his attention in the 1820s. Thus, in
1827, Norton reviewed William Ellery Channing’s 1826 “Discourse” in defense of
Unitarian Christianity and offered an apologetic for Channing’s sermon itself. “...[I]n
most minds, the established faith,” orthodox Trinitarianism, “is identified with Christianity.
Religion has thus been abandoned to very weak expositors and defenders,” Norton argued,
“men better fitted to render it an object of doubt and ridicule, than to vindicate its
character.”

“...We do believe that the time is approaching,” he continued, “when the

74 Norton, “A Discourse Preached at the Dedication of the Second Unitarian
evidences of our faith shall be unobscured, and its sublime and ennobling truths be presented to the affections of men, unmingled with, unconcealed by, a mass of revolting errors.”

Norton’s interests followed along similar lines during the 1820s. Occasionally, he wrote about them with a devotional, almost evangelical, passion, as when he penned a reflective piece on the eighth Psalm in 1824. Norton exhorted readers of that piece to consider fully the “works of God” in Creation. He offered what was, essentially, a vision of the devotional possibilities of natural theology. Similarly, in 1825, Norton wrote about the “Joy and Consolation Afforded by Religion,” the “Punishment of Sin,” and “On the Duty of Continual Improvement” — all articles articulating distinctive features of Unitarian Christianity. In 1835, likewise, he articulated a distinctive Unitarian view of the afterlife. Although he authored one of the century’s important works of New Testament criticism in his Evidences of the Genuineness of the Gospels, published in three volumes from 1837 to 1844, Norton’s published articles demonstrated an abiding preoccupation with the distinctive features of Unitarian theology that matched, if not outdid, his interest in German biblical criticism.

75 Ibid.


The published articles of Charles Hodge, the Princeton Presbyterian, touched on points related to German biblical criticism somewhat more frequently than Norton’s, yet Hodge showed a relative lack of concern about German biblical criticism in the 1830s that mirrored Norton’s. Though not entirely absent, his discussions of biblical criticism were relatively infrequent or incidental compared even to his own pieces in the 1850s and 60s. Hodge frequently discussed other matters of theology and religion, however. Thus, his criticism of the philosophical spirit in German and English theology in 1830 touched incidentally on the German theological world; however, it failed to engage German biblical criticism directly, and the entire discussion occurred in a piece on “Regeneration, and the Manner of its Occurrence.”79 In another article from 1833, chief among Hodge’s “Suggestions to Theological Students” was his admonishment to avoid a false spirit of “liberality” in opinions about the Gospel. Students ought not become “indifferent to important departures from the faith of the Gospel” for fear of appearing partisan. Liberality of spirit, Hodge instructed, did not entail laxity on core Christian doctrine.80 But missing from his article was any warning of the dangers of German biblical scholars’ departures from the faith of the Gospel. Though an obvious opportunity to mention that topic, there is no evidence to show it was on Hodge’s mind.

To the extent that Hodge engaged in any particular theological controversy during these years, it was the controversy over the Unitarian movement within New England Congregationalism, especially its Transcendental phase. Thus, the “Latest Form of


80 Charles Hodge, “Suggestions to Theological Students”: 103.
Infidelity” Hodge considered in 1840 was Emerson’s “pantheism.” While Hodge located the roots of Emerson’s heresies in German philosophy, he dealt only incidentally with the German problem. He was more concerned about whether the Unitarian Norton’s refutation of Emerson would stand up adequately well for evangelical Christians, as well. Later, in 1846, Hodge presumed the literal historical accuracy of the long line of genealogies given in the book of Genesis, and he defended the notion that immediate knowledge of the Creation, Deluge, and early history of the world had been passed down from the Patriarchs directly to Moses. Yet nowhere did he mention specifically any theories of the German historical critics, any of whom would have found Hodge’s ideas naïve, even absurd.81 In 1849, Hodge dealt with theological change in America, but only by way of criticizing Horace Bushnell’s Discourses for their woeful imprecision and slippery re configuration of core Christian doctrines; he did not mention the connection with German Idealism that lay behind many of Bushnell’s ideas.82 It was not until 1850 that Hodge clearly linked German theology to innovations in America; he blamed the “Transcendentalism” of theologians Bushnell and Edward Amasa Park on a German infection.83

Similarly, Moses Stuart’s many articles during the 1820s, 30s, and 40s considered a variety of topics, despite the fact that he published more prolifically as a biblical exegete than Hodge or Norton. Moreover, many of Stuart’s pieces that did deal with biblical

81 Charles Hodge, “Neill’s Lectures on Biblical History.”


interpretation mentioned German higher criticism only obliquely, if at all. Thus, he published theological pieces on baptism and the nature of sin during the 1830s, not touching on German historical criticism at all.\footnote{Stuart, “Is the Manner of Christian Baptism Prescribed in the New Testament?”; and “What is Sin?” parts 1 and 2.} The same remained true in 1843, even as he discussed ideas borrowed from historical critics in connection with his discussion of angels in the Old Testament. He did consider unnamed opponents who had argued that Hebrew conceptions of angelic beings had been borrowed from ancient Zoroastrianism — which itself was an idea put forward by historical critics who had sought to explain the origins of Hebrew angelology. Nevertheless, Stuart declined to discuss the critics and their methods directly. His concern remained angels, not German biblical criticism.\footnote{Stuart, “Sketches of Angelology in the Old and New Testament,” \textit{Bibliotheca Sacra} 1 (February 1843): 88-154.} Similarly, in 1836 he dealt with the relationship between the Genesis history and modern geology. He discussed at length, from the standpoint of linguistic study, the proper interpretation of Genesis 1. The only possible meaning of the text, he argued, was that God had accomplished the Creation over a literal period of seven days. Although Stuart noted the obvious contradiction between that view and the conclusions of geology, he declined an obvious opportunity even to mention modern critical theories of the text. Instead of opening the door to historical criticism in any sense that might do away with notions of the Bible’s literal historical accuracy, Stuart held out hope for the confirmation of the biblical text as the new science of geology developed. Modern geology, while certainly a problem
for his Common Sense theology, failed to open the door, as far as Stuart was concerned, to anything like an endorsement of German historical criticism.86

In a more general sense, it is not surprising that biblical criticism in antebellum America should have remained in relative obscurity compared to the latter decades of the nineteenth century. Seminary faculties were small, and American Protestants as a whole shared fairly naïve conceptions about the Bible during this period. As a result, teachers of scripture at American seminaries were few in number and rarely expert. They knew little by comparison with later biblical scholars about the history of the biblical texts, the historical situations in which the texts had been written, and the finer points of Hebrew and Greek philology. Adding to this situation was the newness of formal seminary education in the United States. The first theological seminary, Andover, where Stuart worked, had been founded only in 1808. The second, Harvard Divinity School, where Norton began his scholarly career, gradually coalesced only around 1815. Both Princeton Seminary, where Hodge worked, and Yale Seminary were still being established in the 1820s.87

Even after the formation of specialized institutions for theological study, there was still little context for serious, widespread engagement with the latest trends in biblical


criticism. For example, Hodge might properly be classified as a kind of generalist, who
wrote as much, if not more, about religion and politics as about the Bible. Norton
focused more of his efforts on biblical studies, particularly the New Testament, but he
wrote extensively about other theological subjects and general literature, as well. In a
striking contrast to German biblical scholars, Norton, in fact, knew almost nothing about
biblical criticism when he accepted a teaching position in that field at Harvard in 1813;
mORE astonishing, it was another five years before he began to read Eichhorn’s Einleitung
in das Neue Testament, the leading survey of the field. Stuart was about the only
American who approached the degree of specialization found at the German universities.
Jerry Wayne Brown’s study of biblical scholarship, although focused exclusively on New
England, demonstrates clearly that biblical studies remained an underdeveloped discipline
in the United States until late in the nineteenth century. Brown’s exclusive focus on

88 For the most complete published bibliography of Charles Hodge, which
demonstrates Hodge’s wide ranging interests, see John W. Stewart, “Bibliography of the
Works by and about Charles Hodge,” in Charles Hodge Revisited: A Critical Appraisal of
his Life and Work, ed. Stewart and James H. Moorhead (Grand Rapids, MI: William B.
Eerdmans, 2002), 335-352.

89 See, for example, Howe, Unitarian Conscience, 15-16, 312-313, and passim. The
assessment of Norton as a generalist is confirmed by Handlin, “Babylon est delenda,” 53-

90 Brown, Rise of Biblical Criticism, 32-33.

91 See ibid., ch. 3, “Defensive Armaments. Moses Stuart at Andover Seminary:
1810-1819,” and ch. 6, “Arming the Orthodox. Moses Stuart: 1820-1852” (Middletown,
Father of Biblical Science in America (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988); W. Andrew
Mark C. Carnes (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 79-80; and Turner, ed.,
Andover Seminary, Yale, and Harvard does not distort the overall picture of American biblical scholarship significantly, for there simply were very few intellectuals engaged in that enterprise anywhere else in the United States.\textsuperscript{92}

As a result, even the handful of Bible scholars who did exist in the United States before the 1850s were hardly specialists, able to devote most of their working hours to biblical scholarship. The contrast with the European context, particularly the German states, was striking. There was little place in antebellum America for a professional biblical scholar. The fact that German criticism was not much engaged with made it far less likely that it would be perceived as a significant threat.

A third characteristic of antebellum American theology and biblical studies further explains why German historical criticism failed to excite widespread, sustained concern during this period. Near mid-century, several American theologians and commentators began to articulate a genuine hope for the overthrow of German rationalism. Hodge, Stuart, and Norton alike pointed their fingers at the rationalistic preconceptions of German critics as the source of most German exegetical waywardness. To the extent that they perceived a return to sound evangelical scholarship among German theologians, they imagined an incipient sea-change in German theology. These perceptions, real or imagined, helped dissipate whatever worries American theologians and biblical scholars might have harbored about the faith-destroying effects of German biblical criticism.

Hodge expressed such hopes for the overthrow of rationalism in German biblical scholarship. As early as 1837, Hodge was already calling rationalism in German theology

\textsuperscript{92} Brown, \textit{Rise of Biblical Criticism}, espec. 7-9, 180-182.
outmoded and anticipated its overthrow. In a review of German journals of theology, he explained that a “great proportion of German theologians, whether infidel or Christian” considered rationalistic biblical interpretation obsolete.93 Furthermore, he noted that F. W. K. Umbreit, the Old Testament scholar at Heidelberg, was likely to “exert a happy influence on students of theology” because he had made a thoroughgoing break from his former errors of rationalism as a biblical critic. More encouraging still, Umbreit belonged to an entire class of theologians “who have for years been receding more and more from rationalism, and may now be regarded as truly though not fully evangelical.”94 Hodge was greatly encouraged at the development. In a similar vein, Hodge in 1840 declared rationalism a far lesser threat to evangelical religion in America than Romanism, and he suggested Americans need not be as concerned about the former as they once had been.95

If anything, Hodge’s optimism over the waning of rationalistic biblical interpretation was tempered by the emergence of theologies inspired by philosophical Idealism in Germany. Thus in 1846, the theological situation in Germany had developed to the point that Hodge argued it could “little be doubted that . . . pantheism or self-deification, is the prevailing form of German infidelity” of the day. He presented this situation as a contrast to the former ascendancy of rationalism.96 And again in 1850, Hodge saw that “[t]he age of naked rationalism is almost over. That system is dying of a


94 Ibid.: 200.


want of heart. Its dissolution is being hastened by the contempt even of the world.” In both pieces, from 1846 and 1850, Hodge defined the emergence of transcendental philosophy as a new potential threat, even as he saw the specter of the old rationalistic criticism fading from view. Thus by mid-century, Hodge was worrying less and less that rationalistic biblical interpretation would spread from Germany to infect the American Church. While some German biblical scholars appeared to be turning toward new heresies spawned by the influence of German philosophical Idealism, Hodge had only begun in 1850 to link the turn toward Idealism with a new brand of German biblical criticism. Concerns about this new shift toward theologies marked by “pantheism,” “transcendentalism,” or “Idealism” (each of which designated the same thing to Americans) would rise to greater ascendency during the 1850s and help lay the groundwork for the coming crisis in biblical interpretation. It was not until that shift had happened that Americans began to see a genuine threat to American Christianity from German theological unorthodoxy.

Andrews Norton appears to have been silent about the waning threat of German rationalism near mid-century. Ill health had sapped his strength for writing, but it is safe to speculate, based on his previous work, that he would have been glad to see any shift away from radicalism among the German critics. Moses Stuart, however, was not silent on the subject. He articulated a similar hope as Hodge for the lessening influence of rationalism in German theology near mid-century. Stuart’s hopes for brighter days in the world of theology took shape primarily in his article on Andrews Norton’s defense of the historical

97 Charles Hodge, “Professor Park’s Sermon”: 642.

reliability of the New Testament Gospels. Stuart saw in Norton’s book evidence that the theological climate had changed. German “neology” had indeed enjoyed “a prosperous run and propitious gales.” He remembered a time when only “[n]ow and then a solitary voice was heard, in defence of the Old Testament or of the New. . . .”99 He was greatly relieved to find that times had changed. Stuart was greatly encouraged to find this state of affairs changing. At long last, a “party in literature are plainly rising up, at present, who believe and maintain for substance the long established doctrines of the Christian churches. . . . Another day, I fully believe a better one, is dawning once more on the churches of the Continent.”100 While he encouraged Americans not to “slumber on their post” in the “great contest which has been and still is going on,” his view of theological change in Germany released some of the pressure he might otherwise have felt.101 Rationalistic theology and criticism appeared to be on the wane.

A similar view of the receding influence of rationalism appeared among additional American authors near mid-century, as well. An anonymous author in the Christian Examiner, for example, articulated a similar view from the reverse angle as Charles Hodge. Rather than express relief over the eclipse of rationalistic historical criticism, the author lamented that the critical study of the Bible was being neglected by both the clergy and the younger generations of the Unitarian churches, alike. Looking at the situation in 1847, the author observed the sheer “unpopularity” and “undue neglect” of the critical study of the Bible. He noted the “jealousy and fear with which it is regarded by many at the present

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100 Ibid.

101 Ibid.: 268-269.
day. . .”  

102 The author identified two causes for the unpopularity, jealousy, and fear surrounding critical scholarship that he perceived among Americans. First was the perceived failure of historical criticism to deliver on the good it promised. Instead of making the Bible clear to modern readers and defending it from modern skepticism, the author noted the “prevalent feeling of disappointment at what critical inquiry has been able to effect for the cause of pure Christianity and its recommendation to the skeptically inclined. . .”  

103 The second cause for the unpopularity of biblical criticism at mid-century, in this author’s mind, was its perceived harm to religious belief. Many of his fellow Unitarians, he observed, saw criticism as causing “alarm on account of its supposed positive tendency to unsettle the faith of Christians, and even to undermine the authority of the Christian revelation, so far as it is founded in history.”  

104 While the author did not agree with this popular assessment, he nevertheless testified to the state of opinion about the worth of biblical criticism: not only had it failed to present the Bible effectively to the modern age and modern religious skepticism, it had actually helped contribute to modern religious skepticism. Interestingly, the upshot of these perceived failings was not a crisis over historical criticism as would be the case later in the century; the upshot at mid-century, at least in this author’s mind, was that criticism’s shortcomings had simply led Unitarian theologians to discard it. This author’s comments suggest not only that the reaction against historical criticism ran across denominational lines; they also suggest that


103 Ibid.

104 Ibid.
Charles Hodge and the Princeton Presbyterians were in good company when they viewed criticism at mid-century as an issue of waning influence and importance in the world of antebellum American Christianity.

The strong commitment of American theologians to the theology of Common Sense promoted a kind of American exceptionalism when it came to the faith-destroying powers of German historical criticism, and three additional features of American theology only contributed to the sense of safety they shared. American biblical scholars and theologians, themselves, remained conservative exegetes to an overwhelming extent, regardless of however much they borrowed from the German biblical critics. This mitigated whatever fears of destructive German influence that some American religious leaders might otherwise have worried about. Second, the historical criticism of the Bible remained relatively unimportant, compared to the later decades of the nineteenth century, in the world of American theology. American theologians remained largely preoccupied with other concerns. Third, American biblical scholars and theologians saw rationalistic biblical criticism as a waning influence in its own Vaterland, and that fact further mitigated whatever worries American religious leaders might have entertained about its spread to the New World. It is debatable whether these three features of antebellum American theology were symptoms of or causes for the lack of concern about German biblical criticism. Regardless, their presence bolstered the strong walls of the Common Sense apologetic in pushing back the waves of controversy and crisis on this side of the Atlantic until the latter portion of the nineteenth century. Those walls faced a growing pressure from within, however, and that pressure placed an increasing stress on the American Protestant understanding of the Bible that left it in a weakened state.
CHAPTER FOUR

GEOLOGY AND GENESIS: THE BIBLE UNDER PRESSURE AT MID-CENTURY

By the 1870s and 80s, American theologians and biblical scholars had become anything but sanguine about German biblical criticism. This raises the question of why things should have appeared radically different to many American religious leaders in 1875 than they did in 1845. To the extent that theologians such as Hodge, Stuart, and Norton defined historical criticism as a problem, they defined it mainly as a European problem. German higher criticism might present a direct threat to the American church in the future, but that future seemed a long way off, as far as they were concerned. During the antebellum period, if not beyond, many American theologians felt more or less sure that the Bible stood safe behind the ramparts of the Common Sense apologetic. And even those who had adopted Common Sense and Baconian ideals only implicitly remained, for the most part, unconcerned that Christianity was in danger from modern religious skepticism.¹

However, outside forces had begun to exert significant pressure on the Common
Sense apologetic as mid-century approached. These other forces proved more difficult for
American theologians to push aside than the historical criticism of the Bible. Ultimately,
this pressure, from geology and other areas of modern thought, made older American
approaches to theology appear less viable to many American Protestant intellectuals. By
the 1870s and 80s, then, these outside pressures had weakened the walls of Common Sense
to such an extent that the historical criticism of the Bible became a pressing concern
among many American religious leaders, rather than a controversy conveniently located an
ocean's width away.

The Common Sense apologists, since the beginning of the century, believed the
facts of the natural world confirmed the facts of the Bible. By mid-century, however, the
facts of the natural world were becoming increasingly unruly, and American thinkers were
finding it more difficult to discipline them into conformity with their existing view of the
Bible. During the 1830s, 40s, and 50s, the new science of geology appeared to flout the
rules of the Common Sense theology more than other departments of knowledge, as far as
most American thinkers were concerned.

Geology made trouble for the older approach to theology on at least two
significant points. First, geologists had theorized that the surface of the earth, as we see it
today, had been formed by the operation of natural processes working gradually over time.
These modern geologists made little or no reference to any special creative acts of God in
the creation of the earth. This seemed to many Christian believers, if not a tacitly atheistic
theory of creation, certainly one that seemed to contradict the biblical record. Second,
geologists at the time had posited that the age of the earth was numbered in the millions of
years, the time they believed it had been necessary for the natural processes of sedimentation, rock formation, and erosion to create the world we see today. They had discarded, altogether, the 6000-year chronology of the earth’s history determined by the literal reading of the narratives and genealogies of the Old Testament. These geological theories contradicted, most obviously, the literal reading of the Creation narrative on the first page of the Bible and did damage to the received understanding of the biblical chronology of human history, as well. Either geology was wrong, or the understanding of the Bible that prevailed among American theologians and other intellectuals required serious re-thinking.²

This re-thinking was required in at least a few other areas of modern knowledge during the early- and mid-nineteenth century, as well. The interplay between established ideas of Protestant religion and new developments in other natural sciences, for example, has been the subject of several historical studies. In brief, these studies demonstrate the various lengths to which American intellectuals went in order to reconcile new knowledge with their understandings of biblical authority. As a rule, thinkers during these decades found ways to preserve a strong commitment to the Bible's authority and finality as divine

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revelation, an idea that enjoyed particularly strong emphasis in nineteenth-century America, while still admitting the theories of the modern sciences, even if sometimes only on a provisional basis.3

This dissertation builds on the research of these other historians in order to demonstrate the direct relevance of early- and mid-century discussions about new knowledge to the origins of late-century controversies over historical biblical criticism. Discourse in American periodicals between the 1830s and 1850s show that new developments in knowledge, especially geology, helped usher in a greater appreciation for the historical context in which the biblical texts had been produced. That new attention to history in American biblical exegesis was implied in the Common Sense theological apologetic and, in one sense, represented an elaboration of ideas already shared among American Protestant theologians. But it also mirrored, even if only dimly, the reigning historicism of German biblical exegesis. This new appreciation for history, thus, represented a movement in American thinking about the Bible that simultaneously took American theology closer to the historical critics of Europe and also brought controversy over historical criticism closer to home.

A raft of American theologians and other intellectuals tried a variety of means to discipline geology’s new unruliness. Moses Stuart, for example, offered one of the first serious discussions of geology’s missteps in his exchange of articles with Edward Hitchcock during the middle years of the 1830s. Hitchcock, the professor of chemistry and natural history at Amherst College, had already addressed the recent work of geologists in Britain and France in 1835. That work, based on a revolutionary dating of the earth’s observed geological strata, had presumed both that the earth was very old and that many species of plants and animals had once existed prior to the appearance of human beings. These ideas appeared fundamentally to contradict the biblical account of the creation and the early history of the world. Hitchcock, however, had attempted to reconcile geology with Genesis. Where most readers saw contradictions, he found compatibility between the accounts of geology and Genesis; the means of creation were similar — both emphasized fire and water — as was the general order of creation — both placed the heavenly bodies, for example, near the beginning, terrestrial plant life near the middle, and human beings at the culmination. Hitchcock’s conciliatory fiat required, as its price, reinterpreting each “day” of the ancient Hebrew text to mean “epoch.”

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Conciliatory or not, Stuart was confronted with at least two major problems in Hitchcock’s work. The first was the question of whether the geology had anything to say about the meaning of the words in the Hebrew text. The second was the question of whether good science could really ever contradict the Bible at all. These questions penetrated to two core assumptions of the Common Sense approach to theology, giving them an added measure of significance for Americans who were interested in the source and nature of the Bible. Stuart, himself, compared the modern science of geology to modern biblical criticism in Germany and, so, connected geology to the uneasiness many Americans felt when they studied the German biblical scholars.

By 1836, Stuart was commenting on the rather indelicate quality of the growing controversy over geology. He could not understand why, for example, protagonists in the debate so frequently resorted to hurling “general and sometimes indiscriminate charge[s] of skepticism . . . against [the] geologists.” Stuart pleaded for his readers to avoid making similarly indiscriminate charges. Nevertheless, Stuart also took the general question of heresy and skepticism seriously. He admitted it was true that “some among this class of men have been skeptical, and even atheistical”; this class of skeptical geologists included even eminent men “whose names stand quite near to the head of the list as natural philosophers. . . .” The notion that natural history might lead its practitioners to religious skepticism, even atheism, appears to have disturbed Stuart no small amount. His words testify to the provocative character of the new geological theories during the first half of

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6 Stuart, “Examination of Genesis I, in Reference to Geology”: 46.

7 Ibid.
the nineteenth century, as many thinkers found it difficult to reconcile geology with the Bible.

Nevertheless, Stuart urged, not all geologists ought to be painted with the same brush of unbelieving skepticism. Many geologists “altogether disavow infidel sentiments, and openly profess their belief in the Christian Revelation,” he pointed out with some apparent relief. “[I]t would be difficult to shew on any ground of justice or of candour,” he argued, why a professor of natural history like Edward Hitchcock should be classified with the religious skeptics. Hitchcock, while not correct in all of his opinions, still did not deserve the same opprobrium as the unbelieving geologists of Europe.8

Stuart used Hitchcock’s work as a springboard for dealing with these new questions about the relationship of natural science to revealed religion. He began on a satirical note. Hitchcock, Stuart explained, would have the Hebrew philologists leave their closets and, “like himself, shoulder the sledge and the knapsack, and march over hill and dale, deep ravine and lofty mountain” to conduct the necessary field study to determine the meaning of Genesis 1. Such labors would surely lead to the agreement that Genesis cannot teach the origin of the world within the last 6000 years.9 Stuart’s satire thus captured a fundamental dilemma presented more and more insistently by the Common Sense apologetic as the nineteenth century progressed: its presumption of the literal historical and scientific accuracy of all portions of the Bible squared less and less well with the conclusions of natural scientists on an increasing number of points. Some Americans, like Hitchcock in this example, had begun to articulate the primacy of natural science in

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8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.: 49.
resolving apparent conflicts between the biblical revelation and the conclusions of natural science.

The charges of skepticism leveled against Hitchcock, Stuart seemed to suggest, stemmed from Hitchcock’s stance on this crucial question of whether geology could legitimately speak to the interpretation of Genesis. Stuart made it clear that he disagreed fundamentally with Hitchcock’s opinions. Much of that disagreement, according to Stuart, stemmed from Hitchcock’s erroneous starting point: Hitchcock started with an exegesis of nature and used that to inform his exegesis of the Bible. Stuart, by contrast, insisted the Bible must be interpreted on its own terms. While he considered the exegesis of nature a valid and important means to truth, he believed it offered nothing by way of interpreting the meaning of the scriptural texts themselves. “I am unable to see how the discoveries of modern science and of recent date, can determine the meaning of Moses’ words,” Stuart reasoned. “Nothing can be more certain, than that the sacred writers did not compose their books with modern sciences in view, or indeed with any distinct knowledge of them.”

Stuart’s reasoning followed a prominent line of Common Sense thinking, the necessity of interpreting the texts according to the intentions of the original authors. While the principle of interpretation by original intent neither depended upon nor arose from the philosophy of Common Sense, it had found a particularly congenial home among American Protestant theologians because of their well-developed ideas about the Bible’s reliability as a means to knowledge. If the biblical authors truly had written with the

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11 Ibid.: 49.
prompting and guidance of the Holy Ghost, it behooved modern readers to understand, to
the greatest extent possible, exactly what those authors had meant to teach. Because the
original authors knew nothing of modern geology or other natural sciences, Stuart and
others reasoned, the results of modern sciences had no place in the interpretation of the
biblical texts. Nineteenth-century geology had not shaped Moses’ mind; therefore,
nineteenth-century geology could not help interpret Moses’ words.

Nevertheless, Stuart also pointed to a second theme in the Common Sense
apologetic that sometimes made an ill fit with these ideas. This second theme stressed the
compatibility of the revelation of the Bible with rational investigation in all fields of
knowledge. Natural science, like other sciences, offered a reliable means to truth when
conducted according to the inductive method; the Bible offered God’s specially-revealed
truth. Therefore, natural science and the Bible were compatible, complementary means to
the knowledge of reality. Because truth could not contradict itself, the Bible must not
contradict natural science. Thus Stuart argued, “My own belief most fully is, that there is
indeed nothing in the sacred books, which, when rightly viewed and interpreted according
to the established principles of sound hermeneutics, will contradict any of the real and
established maxims or principles of recent science.”12 Stuart could not imagine “that God
will contradict in one book,” the book of nature, “what he has taught in the other,” the
biblical revelation.13

Stuart’s affirmation of both these themes of the Common Sense apologetic — an
emphasis on interpreting the Bible according to the intentions of the original authors and

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.: 50.
the belief in the compatibility of natural science and biblical revelation — placed Stuart in the company of most American theologians during the first half of the nineteenth century. Yet, the potential incongruity between those two positions had begun to make itself felt by the time Stuart wrote this review in 1836. The unstated problem driving Stuart’s discussion on Hitchcock was that the science of modern geology no longer seemed to confirm the Bible’s time-table of world history.

Wishing to preserve both ideas, Stuart searched for a tenable solution to the dilemma geology had presented. He suggested that Genesis, even when interpreted strictly according to the rules of philology alone, would still eventually confirm modern geology. In fact, he argued, the book of Genesis had already proven more durable than many of its modern detractors would have had it. Infidels and skeptics had argued on many occasions in modern history that particular discoveries or advances in knowledge had conclusively disproved the Bible’s history of the world. Yet, these pronouncements had never amounted to anything substantial, and such would be the case, he was confident, with the pronouncements of infidels and skeptics about geology. Stuart went on to offer a brief sketch of the conclusions of several recent geologists to show that the science of geology had failed in its bid for intellectual certitude, despite the exaggerated confidence of its propagators. Mentioning several English and French geologists by name, Stuart presented the theories of modern geologists as arbitrary, speculative, and often mutually contradictory. “Nothing is plainer,” as Stuart concluded this line of argumentation, “than that all is yet conjecture and uncertainty among geologists, as to the length of time since the earth was first created, and which was taken up in the formation of the beds of
strata.”

He found support for his assertion of the overly speculative nature of modern geology in the work of another commentator, Sharon Turner. When modern science ceased its speculative tendencies and grounded itself on the solid basis of established fact, Turner had argued, modern science would be found compatible with the Mosaic cosmogony. “But until this desirable event arrives, there will be as much incongruity between this ancient account and our modern speculations, as there cannot but be between the devious excursions of an active imagination, and the simple and solid, but unattractive, reality.”

Stuart drew a connection between the speculative nature of German biblical research and the speculative character of modern geology, bringing the discussion about geology, full circle, back to the question of the source and nature of the Bible itself. Stuart continued his quotation of Turner: “Our German contemporaries, in some of their reveries on ancient history;” Stuart quoted, “are equally alert to prove that novelty of fancy is more sought for by many than justness of thought . . . ; that even truth becomes weariness when it ceases to be original, and has lost the impression of its beauty by its habitual familiarity.” Several modern geologists, he suggested, followed the same speculative path as modern historical researchers of the Bible. The powerful drive toward novelty for its own sake pushed geologists toward indefensible conclusions, much as it did

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14 Ibid.: 83.


16 Stuart, “Examination of Genesis I, in Reference to Geology”: 104.
the German biblical critics. As with the speculations of the biblical critics, so with geology: neither ought be allowed to confound the simple, plain truth.

In the end, Stuart argued, sound empirical research would bolster the Mosaic account of the world’s history, despite Moses’ lack of knowledge of modern geology. Quoting Sharon Turner again, he argued that, while Moses never professed expertise in geological science, Moses was nevertheless “the chosen organ of Divine truth to man, on his moral and religious duties. . . .” That being the case, “it is most probable that what he expresses on other subjects . . . will be also what is true and proper.17

Stuart’s piece on geology in 1836 marked an early discussion of the problem of science in the Common Sense apologetic. As the mid-point of the century approached, the conclusions of natural science appeared more and more out of step with the plain assertions of the Bible. Geology was the most obvious problem, but other sciences, like cosmology and biology, soon followed suit. One result was that natural science, supposed to confirm the biblical revelation according to the Common Sense apologetic, appeared to fit less and less well the contours of biblical revelation. The perception of incongruity between science and religion, already by 1836, suggested to American theologians the need to reexamine their understanding of what the Bible was and, consequently, how it ought to be interpreted. These types of questions from the realm of science ultimately forced such an extensive reevaluation of the Bible that they opened up a major controversy over historical biblical criticism and dislodged the Common Sense system from its place at the center of American Protestant theology. But it would take several decades for this broad movement of people, religion, and ideas to reach that culmination.

17 Ibid.: 104-105.
American thinkers, following in the footsteps of Moses Stuart, had only just embarked on that journey by the 1840s — but they had certainly embarked. Several additional articles in American periodicals demonstrated the growing strains on the Common Sense understanding of the Bible near mid-century. One of the most significant examples came from the pen of Francis Bowen in 1845. Well-known as the editor of the North American Review and later as a professor of philosophy and political economy at Harvard, Bowen wrote a lengthy review of Robert Chamber’s Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation.18 Chambers, who was Scottish, had published his Vestiges anonymously, and while his authorship remained a mystery for many years, his book produced a measurable effect on the Anglo-American intellectual world. Whatever else the publication of Chambers’ book signified, it testified to the increasing pressure natural science was exerting on Americans’ views of theology by the 1840s.19 It also rankled ideas associated with Bowen’s own Common Sense predilections, his commitment to demonstrable evidence as the basis of knowledge, and his view of the Bible as a reliable record of facts.20 Bowen focused his strong criticism of the book around at least three

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18 For sources on Bowen’s life and public career, including his credentials as an exponent of the Common Sense philosophy, see Ch. 3, n. 33.


20 Bowen’s strong dislike of the Vestiges most likely resulted from Bowen’s own sympathies with the Common Sense philosophy and the Baconian ideal of inductive science, which he apparently still held at this point in his career. See espec. Daniel Walker
major themes in particular, each of which overlapped with questions Moses Stuart had raised a few years earlier. First, Bowen considered the potentially detrimental effects of new scientific theories, particularly geology, on the biblical story of Creation. Second, he railed against speculation in the field of natural history, particularly by the author of the Vestiges. Finally, he suggested that the science of geology, when properly based on solid evidence, confirmed, rather than overturned, the Creation narrative of Genesis.

First, Bowen outlined the detrimental effects of new scientific theories on the book of Genesis. Bowen denounced the prevalence of “scientific quackery” in his day, and he chastised the author of the Vestiges for adopting several theories “to the exclusion . . . of the well-accredited facts and established doctrines of science.” He listed several new theories woven into the work that were enjoying increasing favor in the scientific world — the nebular hypothesis of the origin of stars, Laplace’s idea that the planets had formed from the sun, and the philosophy of scientific “materialism.” Bowen recognized that each of these theories represented a challenge to received Christian understandings of the origins of the world.

In addition to these, Bowen gave special attention to the new science of geology. He summed up the new theories as an example of evolutionary theory, par excellence.


22 Ibid.
Developmental ideas abounded everywhere in the geological theories, presuming that “continually advancing orders of beings” had appeared on the earth, each linked to the developing conditions on the planet.23

Bowen expressed his marked contempt for the idea, particularly the ends to which the author of the Vestiges had used it. “How are we to account for the origin of life. . . ?” Bowen asked, his copy of the Vestiges in hand. He sneered at the author’s answer: “If the inherent qualities of matter have built up a solar system, they may have created, also, the first animalcule, the first fish, the first quadruped, and the first man. . . . [G]eology informs us, that the causes, whatever they may be, which produce life, have been long and frequently in operation.”24 According to this ridiculous theory, Bowen went on, those natural causes have led to the evolution of species over the long eons of the world’s history.25 Bowen made little effort to conceal his disdain for the notion when he remarked, “Man, of course, upon this theory, is only a more perfectly developed monkey, or chimpanzee.”26 These theories clearly troubled Bowen because they overturned the common understanding of the cosmology and natural history of the Bible.

More than that, Bowen also complained of “the rather liberal rules of interpretation, which it is now the fashion to apply to the first chapter of Genesis. . . .”27 Modern interpreters had bent the biblical narrative out of shape in an attempt to make it fit

23 Ibid.: 431.
24 Ibid.: 431-432.
25 Ibid.: 434.
26 Ibid.: 437.
27 Ibid.: 426.
with their pseudo-scientific speculations. To that end, Bowen treated the theories of the Vestiges as utterly inimical to biblical faith. “A person who should hear for the first time this naked exposition of the writer’s theory,” Bowen wrote, “would be tempted at once to reject the whole, as too extravagant and absurd to deserve further notice.” He saw it as merely a revised presentation of the “old atheistic hypothesis, — the Epicurean doctrine of the formation of the universe by a fortuitous concourse of atoms. . . .” But the great danger of the book, in Bowen’s estimation, was that it could not, on a careful reading, be easily dismissed. Not only had the old atheistic hypothesis been updated “with all the modifications and improvements that were rendered necessary by the discoveries of modern science,” but also, in a more general sense, the theory appeared alarmingly plausible. It was simply “one of the best cosmogonies that the wit of man has ever framed.”

The speculative nature of the author’s argument formed a second facet of Bowen’s complaint against the kind of pseudo-science represented by the Vestiges. He took the author to task for using geology and related theories to argue for a history of creation that varied widely from the biblical account of Genesis. Worse yet, that history — unfounded and utterly “hypothetical” — was “in fact no history at all.” Bowen went on, in an extensive discussion, to dismantle the important aspects of the author’s theories by exposing their wildly speculative character. The author of the Vestiges, Bowen charged, could only make their cases on unsubstantiated theories and wild speculations. The

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28 Ibid.: 438.

29 Ibid.: 441.

“discoveries” of this and all pseudo-scientists like him, in other words, amounted to no discoveries at all because they were not based on demonstrable empirical evidence. Thus, Bowen argued,

Grant to [a geologist] of this character a few modest postulates, — give him certain millions of years, a sufficient number of earthquakes, a whole battery of volcanoes, a few ocean deluges, and the rise and fall of half a dozen continents, — and he will frame a theory off-hand, which will account for the most perplexing phenomena. Our author [of the Vestiges] is certainly entitled to take his place at the very head of this class of speculatists.31

Bowen concluded his litany of complaints against the theories of the Vestiges by attempting to recapture science for the side of religion. Whereas the speculations of modern geologists had been destructive to the cause of truth — and hence to the Bible — good, evidence-based geology had something constructive to offer. The difference had to do with the proper use of the inductive method in geological science. Proper geology, Bowen argued, had rendered at least one service to natural religion by showing that the present state of things had had a definite beginning. “Science now tells us distinctly,” he explained, “that time was when ‘the earth was without form and void’. . .”32 More than this, the history of the earth proposed by modern geology confirmed the order of creation as narrated in the first chapter of Genesis.33 Third, geology had shown that successive species had lived and become extinct throughout the history of the world, each species marvelously adapted to the particular conditions of the earth when it appeared. This, in Bowen’s hands, became an additional proof of the “wisdom and constant oversight of a

31 Ibid.: 448.

32 Ibid.: 476.

33 Ibid.
designing Creator” who had fitted these creatures to their environments. Finally, the existence of gradations among both plant and animal species, instead of witnessing to the author’s materialistic theory of evolution, bore witness to the fact of divine creation. The gradations among species show evidence of repeated intervention from heaven in the progressive evolution of life.35

A third significant example of the strain on older ways of thinking about the Bible came from the pen of Stephen Chase, a professor of mathematics at Dartmouth College. Writing on the “Consistency of Scientific and Religious Truth” in 1847, Chase dealt with the problem of natural science in the Common Sense apologetic squarely. The problem of geology occasioned the piece, but he began his article with a philosophical statement: “Truth is eternal,” Chase began his argument. “We talk of the discovery of new truths, and sing paeans for the achievement, but they are new, only because we have been ignorant of them.”36 Thus, Chase argued, the discovery of new truths about nature entailed simply the articulation of some state of things that had already existed. The problem with the discovery of new truths, he conceded, was that such discoveries could often appear “strange” and “dreadful.”37 Such had been the case frequently in the past, and Chase saw it as more and more true of the present. “Scarcely . . . a single department of knowledge

34 Ibid.


37 Ibid.
has ever been entered,” he wrote, “but infidels have boasted, and theologians have feared, that its discoveries would involve the overthrow of Christianity.”38

Fortunately, those infidels and theologians of the past had been mistaken every time. The discoveries of Galileo, which had upended the Church’s cosmology during the sixteenth century, furnished only the most obvious example since the dawn of the scientific age. In the major case of Galileo, as in every case since that time, “Christianity has come off, not unharmed merely, but absolutely strengthened by the investigation; not only unconquered, but triumphant.”39 Chase went further. Instead of asking only whether new scientific theories were compatible with the Bible, Chase urged that modern thinkers redefine their questions altogether. Natural science had proven a great help to the Bible in the past, he argued, and that fact compelled him to seek a new framework for thinking about science and the Bible. As he wrote,

The sciences, which gave occasion to objections against the truths of revelation, have not been crushed, that revelation might stand upon the ruins; but have given her their aid and confirmation, in proportion as they have been more firmly established. The true issue has turned out to be, not between science and revelation, but between true and false views of science; and, at the same time, between true and false views of revelation.40 Science, rather than a problem to solve, instead presented new opportunities to better understand biblical revelation.

Chase regretted greatly that his contemporaries missed this positive good that science had to offer. By adopting the false terms of debate established by unbelievers in

38 Ibid.: 665.

39 Ibid.

40 Ibid.
the Bible, Christian thinkers wanting to defend the biblical revelation actually conceded the field to their opponents. Chase wondered that scientific infidels and Christian apologists should engage in such a contest. When science and religion had proven to support one another in the past, despite all cries of alarm to the contrary, he stood amazed that any modern scientist should “willingly extort from science some testimony against the statements of revelation. . . .” And why modern believers in biblical revelation should, likewise, suffer themselves to be drawn into “irrelevant and bootless attack[s] upon the doctrines of science,” he could not fathom. By attacking science, Chase argued, zealous defenders of the faith had engaged in a false battle and turned it into a life-and-death struggle, for they presumed that, “if science is established, revelation must be acknowledged to be false.”

This had been the very problem with the science of geology, in his estimation. Unbelievers, Chase explained, had seized upon one of the tenets of modern geology, that notion that the earth had existed for eons longer than the Mosaic account seemed to indicate. These unbelievers were swift to argue that the facts of geology were utterly inconsistent with the statements of the Bible, and that, therefore, the Bible had lost all claim as a true revelation from God. And theologians, Chase lamented, had taken up the challenge on the infidels’ terms: instead of looking for ways to show that these fact, if true, did not conflict with the Bible, they, instead, “affirmed the utter fallacy and falsehood of the whole science.” This had been a foolish tactical error, in Chase’s estimation.

41 Ibid.: 665-666.

42 Ibid.: 666.
Worse still, many apologists, when attacking geology, had done so without reference to sound reasoning or empirical data. Too often, they had simply asserted geology’s utter falsehood on the premise that it contradicted certain doctrines contained in the Bible.\textsuperscript{43} This approach, Chase suggested, had merely played into the infidels’ hands, for it required defenders of biblical revelation either to answer the scientists point by point, or else appear obscurantist and anti-scientific. It wrongly perpetuated the false enmity between science and religion that the infidels had claimed existed.

To demonstrate the viability of his position, Chase suggested several ways in which the results of modern geology complemented the Mosaic account of the creation and early history of the world.\textsuperscript{44} Sadly, he argued, most defenders of the Bible had failed utterly to consider the fundamental points of agreement between geology and Genesis. Failing to do so, most Christian apologists in America had “suffered the infidel to choose his own ground for the battle . . . ,” thus placing themselves at a false disadvantage from the outset.\textsuperscript{45} Why American apologists for the Bible persisted in this approach made little sense to Chase. He explained an approach that he believed would serve the Bible better:

When the infidel brings forward any proposition, or alleged fact, as opposed to the Bible, we equally destroy the force of his attack, either by showing the falsehood of his proposition, or pretended fact, or by showing that, if true, they are not inconsistent with the declarations of the Bible. But, if we undertake to show the falsehood of the proposition, it will avail us nothing to insist on its inconsistency with the truth of divine revelation.

\begin{footnotes}
\item[43] Ibid.
\item[44] Ibid.: 667-672.
\item[45] Ibid.: 672.
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For that is the very position maintained by the infidel. He rejects revelation, because it is inconsistent with his proposition. . . . \(^{46}\)

Chase wanted Christian apologists in American to stop playing into the hands of the scientific skeptics by adopting the skeptics’ binary view of science and the Bible. On the contrary, Chase saw much to be gained if the same apologists for Bible would, instead, demonstrate as frequently as possible that the propositions of science, if true, were not inconsistent with the Bible. Chase’s words give evidence that many had begun to perceive a genuine rift between science and religion already by mid-century.

Finally, Chase dealt with the “worst that can happen” with this new approach to science he had advocated. What if a proven, verifiable fact of science could not be made to reconcile with some portion of Scripture? In that worst case, we must remain intellectually honest both to natural science and to revealed religion at the same time. On the one hand, the scientist must admit any lack of certainty as to the full import of his scientific doctrine for the passage of Scripture in question. On the other hand, the biblical interpreter must admit any lack of certainty as to the correct interpretation of the Scripture in question and its bearing upon scientific doctrine. Intellectual honesty demanded that we not reject the scientific doctrine on the grounds that it is inconsistent with the Bible. Intellectual honesty likewise demanded that we not be in haste to throw out the Bible, for, “. . . on the other hand, the truth of the Bible is sustained by an overwhelming mass of evidence, which renders it impossible for us to doubt or to disbelieve.”\(^ {47}\)

\(^{46}\) Ibid.: 684.

\(^{47}\) Ibid.: 685.
Stuart, Bowen, and Chase testify to the kinds of problems the Common Sense apologetic faced at mid-century. While these three men did not necessarily represent an equal level of dedication to the Common Sense philosophy *per se*, their examples nevertheless demonstrated the new problems that geology had posed to American intellectuals trained to expect the complete compatibility of the Bible and the discoveries of natural history. To each of them, the science of geology forced a re-thinking of that a notion that was once almost taken for granted. Stuart represented one type of response to these new questions of science and religion in the middle years of the nineteenth century. While not an opponent of science, he believed on philological and historical grounds that natural science had nothing to add to the interpretations of the Bible. He held out hope that geology and Genesis would one day fit together perfectly well. Regardless, science and the Bible remained in their separate realms; they did not aid in one another’s interpretation. Bowen offered a second type of response. He expressed contempt for speculative pseudo-science of all kinds, geology in particular, and he counseled Christian apologists to give heed only to properly substantiated geological theories. He encouraged defenders of the Bible to find in such theories a confirmation, rather than a contradiction, of the biblical record. Finally, Chase represented a third type of position. Like Stuart, he argued that modern interpreters ought not look for meanings in the Bible that were not there. However, Chase emphasized that modern apologists for the Bible would do better to reclaim the terms of discussion about geology and Genesis from the hands of the scientific skeptics. Instead of fighting the conclusions of natural scientists at each point of apparent conflict, theologians would do better to seek harmonization between science and religion to the greatest extent possible. So strongly did Chase remain committed to at least some of
the tenets associated with Common Sense Realism, he maintained that natural science and
the Bible could, in fact, each aid in the interpretation of the other. Regardless of their
approach to the issue, these three apologists for the Bible testified to the fact that geology
had demanded a re-thinking of the relationship between natural science and religion. The
Common Sense approach to theology had come in for serious re-examination by the
middle of the nineteenth century.

Stuart, Bowen, and Chase were hardly alone in sensing the need to address the
once- presumed amity between natural science and the Bible. Several additional pieces in
the Biblical Repository, North American Review, and Christian Examiner testify to the
growing sense that science was presenting increasing problems for understanding the
source and nature of the Bible at mid-century. For example, Rufus P. Stebbins, a Unitarian
pastor and the president of the Meadville, Pennsylvania, School of Theology, further
testified that the question of science and religion had moved front and center in the
theological world of the United States at mid-century.48 Writing in 1852, Stebbins noted
that, “[i]ndeed, the subject of natural religion seems to claim peculiar attention at this time,
especially on account of the modifications of their interpretations of Scripture which recent
scientific truths require at the hands of theologians. . . .”49 Reviewing Edward Hitchcock’s
Religion of Geology, Stebbins argued “[e]very body reads now-a-days; and every body
knows that the supposed difficulties exist, that insuperable obstacles lie in the way of

48 For a brief introduction to Stebbins, see Francis A. Christie, “Rufus Phineas

1852): 51.
present explanations [of the Bible]. Some new interpretations must be given, or the validity of Revelation will be shaken.”50 Clearly, the results of geology appeared to assail the Common Sense understanding of Scripture. Geology seemed to contradict Genesis, and that knowledge was widespread, in Stebbins’ estimation.

Similarly, an anonymous author, reviewing the work of Thomas A. Davies on the Mosaic cosmogony in the North American Review in 1858, saw the problem of geology opening up into several additional questions: whether the views of modern geology on the origins and early history of the earth could be reconciled with the book of Genesis; how we ought to interpret the biblical history and cosmogony in light of the emerging fossil record; and whether humankind had descended from Adam and Eve or had had its origins elsewhere. This was the first time the question of the descent of the human race had been considered directly in the pages of the North American Review and suggests ways in which the problem of science and religion widened as the century progressed. In particular, the author criticized Davies for too easily dispensing with the implications of recent fossil discoveries. Davies, the reviewer complained, had answered the problem of dinosaur bones and prehistoric palms by supposing that these pre-Adamic fossils had never existed as living creatures. The reviewer could hardly believe what he had read. He found it utterly inconsistent with God’s truthfulness to imagine that God would create appearances that meant the opposite of what reason and evidence told us it meant. If that were the case, he argued, we might as well also “maintain the delusiveness of all astronomical

50 Ibid.: 51-52.
reasoning, and deny the earth’s rotation and the sun’s superior magnitude, because the ancient system of the universe is recognized by Moses.”\(^{51}\)

Nevertheless, the reviewer praised Davies for opening “a new route for Biblical inquiry” with his theory of the origins of humankind. Davies theorized that God had, in fact, created several progenitors of humankind, including the parents of distinct human races. The biblical record simply traces the history of the parent stock of the Hebrews. Davies had supported his argument by interpreting the Hebrew word *adam* sometimes as “Adam,” and sometimes as “man,” so as to support his theory and, in doing so, the reviewer maintained, Davies had violated no rules of philology. Instead, he “furnishes a rendering which serves his purpose, in which we can detect no error, and which certainly deserves the attention of Hebrew critics.”\(^{52}\) Davies’s interpretation had the added benefit of relieving the original human family from several sorts of “abhorrent” relations that would have been required to produce the human race.\(^{53}\)

By the 1850s, additional authors had broadened their concern beyond geology, in particular, to natural science, more generally. They had begun to see a conflict between science and religion in general terms. Their perception of increasing conflict led them to call American thinkers of all sorts to give special attention to the problem. M. B. Hope, for example, generalized in 1852 about a growing sense of conflict between natural science and the religion of the Bible. That broad conflict between science and religion, Hope worried,

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\(^{52}\) Ibid.: 285.

\(^{53}\) Ibid.
had begun to foster a genuine sense of unease — even unbelief — among the wider educated public. As he wrote in the Princeton Review,

Our experience, first as a student, and then as a teacher has entirely convinced us, that there is vastly more suppressed infidelity (chiefly in the form of the scepticism . . . of nascent science) among young men, than is apparent. An impression lurks in thousands of young bosoms, that there is a conflict between science and religion, a want of harmony between nature and the Bible: and that the former rests upon a vastly more tangible and secure basis than the latter. . . . 54

Hope hailed the publication of a series of lectures in defense of the scientific evidence for Christianity, but he still wished for something more compelling to offer modern readers. He judged the current relationship of science and religion with some gravity, and he was sorry to report that the authors of those lectures appeared hardly to have appreciated the real facts and difficulties of the conflict. He wanted desperately for someone to bring the “full force of the Christian argument” to bear on the skeptical men of science. 55

Hope clearly believed that presumptions of the old Common Sense theology had lost their force on the younger generation of educated men. No longer was it easy for them to see the compatibility of science and religion; if those old ideas of the Common Sense apologetic were to stand, they would require special attention. It was with this idea in mind that Hope complained about the lack of preparation among American clergy to answer this modern skepticism. “. . . [N]o man, whatever his abilities or polemic skill,” Hope warned, “is prepared to discuss such subjects as they should be discussed, without a training which our ministers do not often receive.” He admonished his Old School


55 Ibid.: 253.
Presbyterian brethren to meet and answer the skeptical tendencies of modern science. “If these dangerous systems of scientific infidelity are not refuted,” he charged, “it is our fault [who have not attempted it], as much as theirs who attempt it and fail.”

It was clear that Hope saw scientific infidelity as an increasing problem at mid-century. Indeed, he argued, it was time for Americans to start dealing seriously with the topic of science and religion, for “[i]t is preposterous . . . to think of furnishing a complete and final refutation of a system of infidelity, which has been three quarters of a century in rearing its ground-work and its defences, without a thorough training for the task. . .”

The problem with geology not only opened up to encompass natural philosophy as a whole by the 1850s; it also had begun to encompass modern learning in a general sense. For example, George E. Ellis, a Unitarian minister, the editor of the Christian Examiner, and the soon-to-be chair of systematic theology in the Harvard Divinity School, reaffirmed in 1854 that a “great many perplexities” were besetting reflective minds in all classes of society when it came to views of the Bible. Near the top of his list were “all the questions which science has turned up, which learned research opens, and which fantastic ingenuity can suggest; questions which, once first asked by some inquisitive or restless mind, get published abroad, are caught up by everybody, and are never afterwards put to rest.” Some of these questions were a waste of time — manufactured for effect and

56 Ibid.: 254.

57 Ibid.

magnified in importance. They were only “made to suggest themselves from each one of the sciences as they now offer their results.” Yet others of these questions were legitimate. Those questions that constituted “[t]he real perplexities of the Bible for honest minds,” Ellis explained, “may be classed under the following heads: scientific difficulties; historical objections; indelicate details; narratives of wars; and the constant presence of miracle.”

Whether the questions it raised were legitimate and serious or disingenuous and trivial, modern learning had begun to raise perplexing questions about the Bible during the middle decades of the nineteenth century — that much seemed clear. Where once the various disciplines harmonized with theology in Americans’ minds, now, in the changed climate at mid-century, they often struck discordant notes. In the field of astronomy, for example, Pierre Simon Laplace’s nebular theory challenged literal readings of the Bible, both by requiring far more than six days for the creation of the solar system and by remaining obscure about the role of God in the process. Similarly, the “American school” of anthropology, led by Samuel George Morton and supported by the eminent Harvard naturalist Louis Agassiz, posited the theory of “polygenesis,” the primal creation of several distinct human races. Needless to say, polygenesis did not square well with the Mosaic record of a single original pair, Adam and Eve, from which all of humankind


60 Ibid.: 343. Emphasis added.

61 James Turner, Without God, Without Creed, 144. See Numbers, Creation by Natural Law.
descended.\textsuperscript{62} Some language theorists, for their part, supported polygenesis with theories of the multiple origins of human language. And in a broader sense, American philological reflection, flowing in courses set largely by Locke and the leaders of the Scottish Enlightenment, was believed capable of unearthing the distant origins of human thought and culture in the history of language. While still understood poorly, the American tradition of philology appears to have given nineteenth-century knowledge much of its structure and possibly to have weakened biblical literalism.\textsuperscript{63}

Similarly, cultural anthropology and comparative religion, though still in their infancy during these decades, had begun to paint a new picture of Christianity as a cultural artifact. Instead of appearing as the result of divine intervention in at specific points in human history, biblical religion increasingly appeared to be the product of human religious instinct as shaped by the vicissitudes of history.\textsuperscript{64} Finally, discoveries in Near Eastern

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archaeology often required finagling to fit with the biblical chronology, and sometimes the
fit remained poor. The deciphering of Egyptian hieroglyphics, for example, led to the
production of several chronologies of Egyptian history that seemed plain to contradict the
Old Testament.  

Even still, Ellis concluded his article about the problems for revealed religion by
arguing that the modern disciplines need not detract from the Bible’s status as a divine
book. He debunked the notion that each of the areas of supposed difficulty did, in fact,
pose much serious trouble for the Bible at all, and he all but dismissed the idea of a
fundamental enmity. All such claims had been dramatically exaggerated. In his words, “As
to the presumed collision between statements in the Bible and modern science, we might
say, that when science has settled its own ever-changing theories, in geology, in
chronology, in the nebula hypothesis, and in ethnology, it will be time enough for science
to triumph over the Bible.” The inconstancy of the conclusions of the modern sciences
rendered them no real threat at all. That much appeared certain to him. Nevertheless,
Ellis’s estimation of the status of the Bible in mid-century America testified that modern
learning had presented a changed countenance to many Americans committed to the
truthfulness of scripture.

American intellectuals were still working through the implications of geology for
the Bible as late as the 1860s. In 1861, for example, an anonymous author in the North
American Review considered a book on the Debate Between the Church and Science. The

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66 Ibid.: 341-342.
reviewer presumed, as a matter of course, the existence of an “issue between the Church and the geologists,” and he noted the author’s success in suggesting a reconciliation between the two. The author had argued “that the Biblical account, in the very meaning of its terms, implies and contains what science has since discovered. . . .” He had also argued “that the popular interpretation of that account is not philologically correct, nor in accordance with ancient scholarship.” He concluded that the author’s discussion on these questions deserved careful attention. Nevertheless, he saw deep strife between natural science and Scripture and remained skeptical that this book would help much to end it. “We are afraid,” the reviewer concluded, “that the author's enthusiastic hope will not be realized, and that men will still continue to see opposition where he sees harmony.” History, in fact, confirmed his fears. Whatever theologically-minded Americans believed about the conclusions of natural science during the middle period of the nineteenth century, it was clear to many that the Common Sense apologetic could not coordinate biblical knowledge with other departments of knowledge as handily as it could previously. The results of modern geology simply did not confirm the older literal reading of the Old Testament narratives, particularly the Creation story in Genesis, and other disciplines seemed headed in a similar direction. The emergence of the fault lines between religion and modern knowledge was sending tremors rippling through the intellectual world of the mid-nineteenth century.


68 Ibid.
Those who wished to retain the notion that the Bible’s statements were “accurate,” even in natural science and history, found themselves in collision with several aspects of modern knowledge. These new theories in natural science and other departments of knowledge were forcing a serious re-examination of some core ideas of the Common Sense apologetic in the American theological world at mid-century, for if the Bible was God's book, how could it be in error? What did geology mean for the doctrine of biblical inspiration?

Rufus P. Stebbins, the Unitarian pastor and college president who reviewed Hitchcock’s Religion of Geology in 1852, had noted the troubled relationship between geology and Genesis as early as 1841. Stebbins noted that geology had revealed facts that seemed “utterly irreconcilable” with Moses’ history of the world, and he feared the apparent contradiction was grist for the mill to religious skeptics who wanted to undermine the divine authority of Moses. The religious world, responding in turn, had already begun to view geology as some kind of “dark art.” Charges and counter-charges, though unfortunate, were inevitable; “[i]t is always thus,” he concluded, “at the disclosure of any scientific truth, which demands a new interpretation of Scripture.”

This Unitarian author, thus, suggested the all-important connection between geology and the Bible’s status as a divine book: the facts of geology required a “new interpretation” of Scripture. The theories of natural science had several essayists at mid-century asking, along with Stebbins, what it meant to say that God had inspired the texts of the Bible. How did modern knowledge, especially the science of nature, affect the once-unquestioned divine authority of the Sacred Word? However they dealt with modern

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geology and other sciences, defenders of the Bible’s status as divine writ found themselves in an increasingly difficult position as the century continued. Geology had demanded a serious reconsideration of the older ideas about the Bible associated with Common Sense Realism. James Turner has summed up the impact of mid-century intellectual developments on established ideas of Protestant religion as “considerable.” While “[t]he collision of science and literalism rarely destroyed Christian faith,” he writes, “. . . it certainly shook complacency; the Bible, hence Christianity, never looked quite so plainly and simply true afterwards.”

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70 James Turner, Without God, Without Creed, 146.
CHAPTER FIVE

RETHINKING REVELATION IN LIGHT OF THE MODERN SCIENCES

Faced with the collision of the sciences and biblical literalism, many American Protestant intellectuals near the middle of the nineteenth century began to reshape their notions of biblical revelation. That trend, evident in Rufus P. Stebbins’ call in 1841 for a reckoning with geology, reached many American intellectuals during the 1830s and 40s. In many examples, defenders of biblical literalism simply refuted modern geology wherever geology collided with the events suggested by the Old Testament narratives. In other examples, defenders of the Bible’s accuracy searched for new interpretations of the language of Genesis so as to reconcile its words with the results of modern sciences. In still other examples, defenders of the Bible redefined biblical “accuracy,” itself, so as to admit both modern geology and Genesis as true at the same time.

Moses Stuart, the nation’s premier biblical scholar, preferred to redefine the prevailing notion of biblical accuracy in hopes of reuniting geology and Genesis quickly and peacefully. Stuart may have planted his exegesis on solid philological ground when he rejected the geologist Edward Hitchcock’s reinterpretation of crucial Hebrew words.¹ But if anything, Stuart’s sound exegesis, taken alone, only highlighted the growing chasm

¹ See the discussion of this point in Ch. 4.
between Genesis and geology: if we must not allow geologists to suggest alternative meanings of the biblical Hebrew, then was the Bible in error? Most American Protestant intellectuals blanched at the thought. The notion seemed to contradict cherished beliefs in biblical infallibility, associated with the notion of revelation itself, and it did violence to the Common Sense apologetic.

Not content to do away with his basic philosophical commitments — let alone the Bible’s basic reliability — Stuart found a solution that he might easily have borrowed from the historical critics of Germany he had been reading. Stuart argued that the historical situation of Moses, the presumed author of Genesis, provided the foundation for an exegesis that could simultaneously maintain the Bible’s trustworthiness, uphold sound philological principles, and take a friendly stance toward the new science of geology. An example from the first page of the Bible demonstrated his point.

Any ordinary reader could see that the “firmament,” described in the Authorized Version as holding back the waters of heaven, undoubtedly referred to the sky overhead. Modern interpreters, Stuart argued, knew there was no such thing as a literal firmament. But they naturally assumed that Moses had merely described how things appeared from an earthly vantage. Reading Genesis this way, Stuart pointed out, modern readers rarely worried about Moses’ description of a firmament that, in actuality, does not exist. Readers naturally understood Moses’ description as a poetic, rather than a scientific, description, Stuart implied — it offered a truthful account of the Creation, to be sure, but one that
reflected the earthly perspective of a man writing thousands of years ago. The Bible never meant to treat such descriptions as an exercise in modern science.²

This solution to the clash of biblical literalism and geology, while ingenious at the time, nevertheless led Stuart inexorably to a changed understanding of biblical inspiration. Where once American Protestant intellectuals widely assumed a simple correspondence between theology and other departments of knowledge, Stuart had been persuaded otherwise. The Bible may have been inspired by the Holy Ghost, but that inspiration, Stuart concluded, “does not make men omniscient. It does not teach them the scientific truths of astronomy, or chemistry, or botany, nor any science as such.” Instead, the divine inspiration of the Bible was limited to “teaching religious truths, and such facts or occurrences as are connected immediately with illustrating them, or with impressing them on the mind. This is the object and extent of it. . . .”³ This represented a significant shift in evangelical thinking. But Stuart did not stop there.

Not only did he argue that this more precise definition of biblical inspiration was necessary. It was also desirable, for it brought modern interpreters closer to understanding Moses’ actual meaning. Reading geological truth into Genesis actually obscured the real significance of the book. Thus Stuart wrote,

Most plainly it is the writer’s design to set forth the facts, that God was both the original and subsequent maker and disposer of all things in heaven and on earth; that he performed this great work in the period of six days; that different parts of it were successively performed in an order established and decided upon by his own mind; and that one great, yea exceedingly important truth, respecting the order of the Sabbath and the obligation to


³ Ibid.: 80.
celebrate it, is to be derived from the time and order in which the great work of creation was performed, and the rest enjoyed which was consequent upon this work. 4

Any effort to force Genesis into conformity with modern natural science only worked to distort this true point of the Creation narrative. Well intentioned geologists, Stuart continued, may plead to interpret the six “days” of creation as referring to geological cons — he undoubtedly had Edward Hitchcock in mind. But any such claim all but “annihilates the force of the appeal in the fourth commandment”: to honor the Sabbath and keep it holy. Such interference by geologists was therefore a serious matter for religion.

“Geologists will bear patiently with us, then,” Stuart chided, “while we delay a little, and take time to express our doubts, whether what Moses has said can be so readily moulded into a new form, and made to mean almost any thing at the will of him who moulds it.” 5

On the surface, the calls of geologists like Hitchcock to reinterpret Genesis according to the findings of modern geology sound as if they might repair the growing cracks separating geology and the Bible and thus preserve the Common Sense apologetic. However, Stuart pointed out, such efforts only did violence to another fundamental tenet of the Common Sense apologetic, the necessity of interpreting the biblical authors as they themselves meant to be interpreted. If God had indeed spoken by the prophets, we must hear the voices of the prophets clearly and distinctly if we would hear Him. Thus, Stuart held out the necessity of interpreting the author of Genesis without reference to modern science, much as he presumed that geologists would interpret the book of nature without direct reference to the Bible. This principle formed the bedrock of good interpretation

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.
according to the Common Sense apologetic. And while Moses’ understanding of the natural world did not seem to comport well with the conclusions of modern geology, neither did Moses intend to teach geology.

Stuart’s form of historical exegesis, though bland compared to many of his German contemporaries, nevertheless helped initiate a crucial shift in American theology. Sensitivity to the historical context of the biblical texts, Stuart believed, promised to resolve the tensions between geology and Genesis. The Creation in Genesis no longer need contradict geological science, despite the apparent divergence between the two. But Stuart’s admission of historical perspective limited biblical inspiration and infallibility to a narrower scope than many American Protestants had previously considered. Such trends, initiated in part by Stuart, would loom large in American theology by century’s end.

But during the first half of the nineteenth century, it was far from clear that solutions like Stuart’s would carry the debate. Francis Bowen, for his part, acknowledged that natural science had occasioned new, “rather liberal rules of interpretation” of the first chapter of Genesis. Writing in his piece on geology and the Bible in 1845, Bowen appeared to acknowledge the need for some modification of the understanding of the nature of the Bible in light of this new knowledge. Nevertheless, he continued to find ways to preserve the straightforward correspondence between the sacred history and natural history, even if it was clear that Genesis I could no longer be read as a literal text of natural history. For example, the history of the earth established by geologists placed

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events “in the same order in which they are narrated in the first chapter of Genesis,” something Bowen called a “remarkable” correspondence.7

Just a year later, Bowen carried his arguments about the Bible in light of geology even further. He placed greater emphasis on the need for a departure from the theory of verbal inspiration. He criticized the over-zealous efforts of theologians who had argued for the infallibility of the Bible. Such theologians had left little room, for example, even for such an obvious fact of minor differences in detail and emphasis among the writers of the Gospels.8 The minute, particularistic exactness of the Gospels was a red herring. “There is not a work or a fragment of ancient biography extant, claiming to be authentic, which makes any approach to such minuteness. . . . [W]hat various and conflicting statements may we not reasonably expect to find in four such narratives?” Bowen asked. He suggested that zealous defenders of biblical infallibility played into the hands of infidels like David Friedrich Strauss, who pointed to such minor discrepancies as evidence of the spurious nature of the Gospel narratives.9 It is tempting to speculate that Bowen might have been influenced by the nearly identical argument in Norton’s Genuineness of the Gospels, completed only the year before the publication of this article. Both men were Unitarians, taught at Harvard during their careers, lived in Cambridge, and knew one another.10

7 Ibid.: 476.


9 Ibid.: 395-397.

10 I have to thank my dissertation advisor, James Turner, for suggesting this idea to me. See Ernest S. Bates, “Francis Bowen,” Dictionary of American Biography, vol. 1, ed.
Chase concluded his article on geology in 1847 by taking exception to one of Moses Stuart’s core ideas. Moses Stuart had argued in 1836 that the conclusions of modern geology had no bearing on the interpretation of scripture. The words in the Mosaic account of the Creation must be interpreted in the way that Moses intended them to be interpreted. Because Moses had no knowledge of the theories of modern geology, the theories of modern geology offered nothing to aid the interpretation of Moses’ words in Genesis. Chase argued the opposite position. He argued that men like Stuart did, in fact, admit a changed interpretation of scripture to bring the Bible into conformity with the facts of science. They did so by conforming their interpretations to “new views of philology, or to increased knowledge of manners, customs and circumstances” associated with the historical context of the texts. In other words, Chase pointed out that men like Stuart were ready and willing to alter their interpretation of the Bible in light of the modern sciences of history and historical language study. Yet, they “will tolerate no change, — however it may be authorized by the laws of language, — to bring the sacred record into conformity with . . . the actual condition and arrangement of the works of the Creator.”


11 See Stuart, “Examination of Genesis I, in Reference to Geology.”
Chase saw a glaring contradiction in their position that admitted of the sciences of philology and history, on the one hand, and rejected the science of geology, on the other hand.

Chase could only argue this by taking a strong view of the Common Sense presumption of the unitary nature of truth. So strong was his commitment to the idea that natural science spoke to the interpretation of Genesis. This is an interesting point, for it suggests that Moses Stuart and theologians like him actually contributed to the distinction between natural science and other forms of science. He helped contribute to the restriction of the term “science” to the sciences of nature. Chase, by contrast, refused to adopt Stuart’s kind of distinction between the sciences. All truth was God’s truth; therefore, geology had something to contribute to the interpretation of the Bible, as did philology and history. Chase, in effect, held up this aspect of the Common Sense apologetic more faithfully than did Stuart. This suggests that historicizers, even conservative ones like Stuart, contributed to the undoing of the Common Sense apologetic even as they sought to affirm the truthfulness of the Bible. Solving the apparent conflict between science and the Bible by saying that the Bible was not a scientific document, they in effect undid the common sense apologetic’s insistence on the unitary nature of knowledge. They separated science, particularly natural science, from the realm of the Bible. They, as Chase so clearly perceived, played into the hands of their skeptical opponents, the scientific disbelievers in the Bible, by admitting that either the Bible is true or that science is true, not both.

These essays by Stuart, Bowen, and Chase represented attempts to save the Bible as God’s Word in the face of a serious challenge to the widely shared notion of biblical accuracy. These three men were each responding to a challenge that put the Common Sense theological apologetic at risk. Each of them, in response, looked for a new understanding of their old understanding of inspiration in an attempt somehow to preserve the notion of inspiration. Charles Hodge, like these three intellectual heavyweights, immediately connected the new conclusions of natural science and other intellectual developments to the question of the inspiration of the Bible. But this Princeton Presbyterian, in contrast to them, worked particularly diligently to keep the old Common Sense approach to theology afloat, completely intact, instead. He found the solutions to the conflict between geology and Genesis offered by Stuart, Bowen, and Chase to be damaging to the cherished idea of biblical inspiration.

Charles Hodge’s published articles show further evidence that American theologians were paying closer attention to their theories of scripture at mid-century. For Charles Hodge, the evidence suggests that he was at least as concerned about both the effects of natural science on theology as he was about the errors of German philosophy and theology. As he surveyed the religious landscape in 1850, he saw the Bible “assailed . . . from various quarters and in different ways.” To Hodge, that assault on the Bible was none other than an assault on the view of the Bible according to the Common Sense theological apologetic — in his words, the “old doctrine of the plenary inspiration, and
consequent infallibility of the written word. . .”\textsuperscript{13} One major class of assailants to this “old doctrine” of scripture could be defined, in Hodge’s mind, as “those who are sincere in thinking they are doing God service in making his word more pliant. . .” These assailants sought pliancy in the interpretation of the Bible both in reference to “science” and “philosophy.” Yet, Hodge added one caveat: these men did not actually accommodate the Bible to natural science itself, but to “the theories of scientific men; not to philosophy, but to the speculations of philosophers.”\textsuperscript{14} Hodge remained convinced, according to the dictates of his beloved apologetic, that true science, true philosophy comported with scripture. All truth remained God’s truth, whatever the source. There was little room to maneuver in Hodge’s idea of the unitary nature of truth.

To Hodge, the problem with accommodations to natural science was linked to bad German philosophy. Attempts like Stuart’s, Bowen’s, and Chase’s to reconcile the Bible with science amounted to a capitulation to German-style philosophy. In other words, these men had abandoned the principles of Common Sense in order to deal with modern science. Thus, those biblical interpreters who sought accommodation with the theories of philosophers and scientists stood united in their fundamental ideas, Hodge claimed. Those ideas had their source, at bottom, in the speculations of German philosophical theologians. “Since the discovery of the Anschauungs Vermögen,” Hodge explained sarcastically, “men see things in their essence.” The discovery of Intuition, the Anschauungs Vermögen, had led recent biblical interpreters to believe they could see the spiritual kernel beneath the

\textsuperscript{13} Charles Hodge, “Professor Park’s Sermon,” \textit{Princeton Review} 22 (October 1850): 642.

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.
husk of the particular historical forms in which it had grown. According to this new intuitional consciousness, “the facts and doctrines of the Bible are the mere forms” of spiritual realities.\textsuperscript{15} Thus, biblical interpreters who had fallen under the spell of this German “transcendentalism” made an unjustified distinction between the material form and the spiritual reality in the Bible, Hodge complained, as if the historical facts and assertions of scripture had little to do with the theological message of the Bible.\textsuperscript{16} To Hodge, this distinction between the outer and inner message of the Bible, along with all the theories of scripture that stem from it, were simply “inimical to the proper authority of the word of God.”\textsuperscript{17} Hodge, therefore, connected mid-century challenges to the literal historical and scientific truthfulness of scripture to recent developments in science and philosophy. In an attempt to make the Bible and science meet, contemporary biblical interpreters were unwisely adopting new German-style theories about the relationship between text and meaning. Thus, Hodge’s defense of the Common Sense theology was thoroughgoing. Moreover, the fact that Hodge crafted a defense of the older American understanding of biblical inspiration itself testifies to the presence of new theories that challenged the older understanding. The disjunction between natural science and the Common Sense understanding of the Bible had led contemporary theologians to seek new understandings of the Bible.

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.: 643.

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.: 646. While Hodge applied this particular criticism to Edwards Amassa Park of Andover Theological Seminary, he was speaking of Park as one of a class of theologians who had damaged the authority of the Bible by adopting German Idealism. Hodge mentioned Horace Bushnell, pastor of Hartford’s North Church, and others as additional examples of theologians who had been seduced by German philosophy.
Hodge’s worries about the status of the Bible appear to have deepened with time. In 1857, Hodge published a piece that dealt with the doctrine of biblical inspiration more directly and at much greater length than his piece in 1850. He re-affirmed the notion of the infallibility of the Bible, an idea that had been a tenet of the Common Sense apologetic in one form or another since the end of the eighteenth century. More significantly, he worked to shield the Bible from challenges to its infallibility from the realm of science and philosophy.

Hodge presented a strong position in this re-articulation of the doctrine of the Bible’s infallibility. He went so far as to include belief in the inspiration of the Bible as one mark of true Christianity. “When a man becomes a true Christian, when he is made a partaker of the precious faith of God’s elect, what is it that he believes?” Hodge asked. “… He believes the record which God has given of his Son. And where is that record? In every part of the Bible, directly or indirectly, from Genesis to Revelation.” This was not all. Belief in the Bible’s inspiration, Hodge went on to explain, entailed belief in a particular kind of divine inspiration. “… [F]aith in the Scriptures as the word of God, is faith in their plenary inspiration. That is, it is the persuasion that they are not the product of the fallible intellect of man, but of the infallible intellect of God.” 18 In effect, Hodge presented a strong version of the same view of the Bible that the Common Sense apologetic had traditionally affirmed. The Bible remained the accurate, reliable means to truth that American theology had traditionally said it was. Hodge fortified that position by affirming the absence of error as a part of the Bible’s plenary inspiration.

Nevertheless, Hodge’s piece belied the problematic nature of that view of inspiration at mid-century. The fact that Hodge’s article presented a lengthy, firm case for the plenary inspiration of the Bible itself testified to the fact that the divine origins of the Bible had come into question in more pronounced ways by mid-century. Moreover, Hodge’s arguments themselves corroborate this fact. They show the particular ways in which Hodge sought to insulate the idea of the infallibility of the Bible from challenges he found in the contemporary intellectual scene.

Hodge sought to protect the infallibility of the Bible in at least two ways in his article from 1857. First, Hodge emphasized that the persuasion of the infallibility of the scriptures did not rest on the demonstrability of their infallibility. Instead, it depended primarily on the inward confirmation given directly to the reader of scripture by the Holy Spirit. As Hodge described the idea,

> This faith, as the apostle teaches us, is not founded on reason, i.e. on arguments addressed to the understanding, nor is it induced by persuasive words addressed to the feelings, but it rests in the demonstration of the Spirit. . . . It does not consist in the outward array of evidence, but in a supernatural illumination imparting spiritual discernment, so that its subjects have no need of external teaching, but this anointing teacheth them what is truth.19

Instead of external proof for the infallibility of the Bible, Hodge located confirmation of the infallibility of the Bible in the internal conviction of the spirit.

Hodge’s ideas can be traced back to the earliest days of Reformed Protestantism. They also show affinities with one of the salient features of the Common Sense apologetic, the idea of moral intuition. People everywhere at all times, according to the tenets of the Common Sense philosophy, possessed a moral sense or moral intuition. This moral sense

19 Ibid.

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was a faculty of perception by which individuals were able to know and understand universal principles of morality. These principles of morality were presumed constant throughout time and across cultures. Thus Hodge’s argument in 1857, in effect, made the conviction of the Bible’s infallibility similar to a moral intuition. As he put it, this conviction of the infallibility of the Bible “cannot be shaken off by any voluntary effort, any more than a man can free himself from the moral law.”20 It was, at bottom, an inward conviction that did not depend on external proof or demonstration.

While not a new idea in Reformed Protestantism, Hodge’s re-articulation of the inward confirmation of the infallibility of scripture in 1857 was significant for both its force and timing. It represented something of a shift in emphasis going on in American theology at 1857. The Common Sense apologetic had emphasized the compatibility of the Bible with natural science and other forms of modern knowledge, and many contributors to American periodicals during the nineteenth century tended to defend or promote the Bible’s merits by means of demonstration and evidence. Hodge reminded his readers of the classic doctrine of the Reformation — the Holy Spirit confirmed the Bible as God’s infallible word, not the proofs of science and logic. By invoking this idea, Hodge de-emphasized one class of tenets of the Common Sense apologetic — those that stressed the unitary nature of truth, the compatibility of natural science and biblical science. Simultaneously, he placed the weight of his defense of the Bible firmly on another class of tenets of the Common Sense apologetic — those that stressed the internal conviction of the Bible’s inspiration and infallibility, the self-evident sense beyond all sense that the Bible was God’s word.

20 Ibid.
By arguing for an internal confirmation of the Bible’s divine origins, Hodge in no
wise meant to advocate a kind of intellectual philistinism or obscurantism. In fact, he
believed firmly that the Bible deserved careful study, and he conceded that the doctrine of
infallibility entailed some difficulty that required investigation and reflection. “[T]here are
many intellectual difficulties connected with the doctrine, that the Scriptures are the word
of God,” he acknowledged. “It is our duty to endeavor to . . . disperse these clouds; to
bring [our] understanding into harmony with our spiritual convictions.”21 Still, Hodge
remained firm that the inward testimony of the Holy Spirit, not rational proof and
demonstration, confirmed the Bible’s divine origins in the final analysis. This position, he
believed, liberated Christian believers from shouldering the burden of proof for the divine
origins of the Bible, and it represented one way Hodge sought to insulate the Bible from
skeptics in the contemporary intellectual scene.

Hodge’s shift toward internal conviction was borne out in a second feature of his
argument: not only was the doctrine of the Bible’s infallibility free of the need for
philosophical and scientific demonstration; philosophical and scientific demonstration were
likewise powerless to overturn the infallibility of the Bible. The belief in the infallibility of
the Bible as an internal conviction of the spirit, Hodge argued, could not be “effectually
assailed by any of the weapons of argument, contempt, or ridicule.”22 Philosophy and
natural science were his two greatest concerns. Hodge singled out German Idealism as the
primary challenge to the Bible from the realm of philosophy. He even noted the
apparently weak position in which believers in the Bible stood compared to German

21 Ibid.: 662-663.

22 Ibid.: 661.
Idealism. As he wrote, “Comparatively few men are able to meet or refute the arguments of a skilful [sic] idealist. . . .” Yet, this did not matter, ultimately, for the philosophical speculations of German Idealism could not overturn plain common sense perceptions about the real world. In a humorous jab at Idealism’s preoccupation with the metaphysical realm, Hodge noted that, even in the hands of the skillful Idealist, “comparatively few [people] are the least shaken in their convictions of the reality of the external world.”

Hodge believed in the essential weakness of Idealistic philosophy when it came to common sense convictions about the Bible, as well. As Hodge argued, “We can even acknowledge our incompetence to meet [the Idealists] in argument, or to answer their objections; and yet our faith remain unshaken and rational.” Regardless of apologists’ degree of success at stemming the tide of German philosophy, Hodge insisted that “the simple faith of the Church remains ever the same and ever sure.”

Hodge’s criticism of German Idealistic philosophy ran throughout his article, and it reached a peak when he outlined its specific effects on the interpretation of the Bible. The core problem with German Idealism in theology was precisely its basic incompatibility with the doctrine of biblical inspiration and infallibility. Multiple arguments might be put forward for rejecting the inspiration and infallibility of the Bible, Hodge acknowledged — he refuted several of them in the course of his article — yet such arguments “are used as means of annoyance, while the real ground of dissent lies much deeper.” The real ground of dissent was over philosophical principles: the “common doctrine of inspiration does

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23 Ibid.: 662.

24 Ibid.
not admit of being brought into harmony with the reigning philosophy, and therefore it is rejected.”²⁵ German philosophical Idealism had entailed a “great change” across a spectrum of foundational beliefs touching on religion: the “nature of God,” God’s relationship to the world, the “constitution of man,” the “principles of virtue,” the “nature of free agency.”²⁶ The net effect of this great change was no less than an upending of the basic assumptions of theism itself. Whereas theism supposed the belief in a “personal, extra mundane God, existing before and independent of the world,” Idealism amounted to a kind of “Pantheism.” It failed to conceive properly both of God’s individuality and of His separateness from the world.²⁷

This “pantheistic” Idealism had been the driving force behind contemporary changes to the classic doctrine of biblical inspiration, Hodge insisted. “The fundamental [pantheistic] idea that God and the world are one . . . , and that all history is the self-evolution of God, determines the nature of all the doctrines of religion” among German theologians, he argued. “There is . . . according to this view, no such thing as miracles, supernatural revelation, or inspiration.”²⁸ German philosophical Idealism had been nothing short of destructive to Protestant Christianity. “It need hardly be remarked,” as Hodge concluded, “that this doctrine destroys the authority of Scripture.”²⁹ This explains the urgency with which he addressed the topic.

²⁵ Ibid.: 687.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.: 687-688.

²⁸ Ibid.: 688.

²⁹ Ibid.: 694.
The ill effects of natural science occupied Hodge’s efforts in his essay on inspiration almost as much as the ill effects of German philosophy. Again, Hodge sought to exempt the Bible from criticisms of its divine origins. The key to his argument was a clarification — some would say a strategic limitation — of what he meant by the Bible’s infallibility. While Hodge believed that the Bible’s divine inspiration entailed the Bible’s infallibility, he rejected the notion that the biblical writers themselves possessed the trait of infallibility. For example, the infallibility of the Bible did not entail the omniscience of the biblical authors. “Inspiration did not cure their ignorance, nor preserve them from error,” Hodge argued, “except in their official work, and while acting as the spokesmen of God.”30 Again, he argued that their infallibility “was limited to the nature of the object to be accomplished” — that is, limited to “what God willed to be communicated and recorded as his word. . .”31 Thus Hodge introduced the idea that the object of the text defined the limit of its infallibility, and he was part of a trend among American theologians. Many apologists for biblical inspiration began to mention similar strategic limitations on the Bible’s infallibility after mid-century — and they had done so less frequently before mid-century, a telling fact.32

This qualified sense of biblical infallibility offered Hodge a means of insulating the Bible from the challenges of modern science, in particular. For example, Hodge argued, it would have been impossible for a biblical author “to teach by inspiration that the earth is

30 Ibid.: 668.

31 Ibid.: 668.

32 Hodge emphasized that God’s intent was the primary consideration, whereas most other theologians stressed the intent of the human authors; nevertheless, the principle remained the same.
the centre of our system, or that the sun, moon, and starts are mere satellites of our globe, but such may have been his own conviction.”

This statement implied both that Bible contained no error and that the Bible’s intent had never been to teach pre-Copernican cosmology. Whether or not a biblical author believed in a pre-Copernican cosmology was beside the point; the divine intent behind the biblical texts was the key to understanding the biblical texts properly. “Whatever the ancient Hebrews thought of the constitution of the universe, of the laws and operations of nature, of the constitution of man . . . was no part of the faith of the sacred writers . . .,” Hodge concluded. “We may therefore hold that the Bible is in the strictest sense the word of God, and infallible in all its parts, and yet admit the ignorance and errors of the sacred writers as men.”

This distinction between the intent of the texts and the opinions of the authors offered the keys to freedom from the results of modern science. Nothing about the Bible’s intended message contradicted any of the forms of modern science. Hodge pointed to the Early Modern revolution in astronomy as his case in point. “It is true,” he wrote, “when astronomy first began to unfold the mechanism of the universe there was great triumph among infidels, and great alarm among believers, at the apparent conflict between science and the Scriptures. But how stands the case now?” Hodge asked. “The universe is revealed to it profoundest depths, and the Bible is found to harmonize with all its new discovered wonders.”

The example of modern astronomy illustrated Hodge’s point: the Bible nowhere taught anything that contradicted modern science, and modern science

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33 Hodge, “Inspiration”: 669.
34 Ibid.
nowhere taught anything that could not harmonize with the Bible. Hodge held out hope that the same was true for troubling results from the more recent field of geology, as well. “. . . [A]ny one who has attended to the progress of this new science,” he wrote, “must be blind indeed not to see that geology will soon be found side by side with astronomy in obsequiously bearing up the queenly train of God's majestic word.” 36 Hodge did not elaborate at this point on exactly how he expected geology to bear up that queenly train, but he nonetheless expressed confidence that it would happen soon.

Protestant theological discourse as a whole circled around the new problems of the Bible’s character and worth during the middle decades of the nineteenth century. Some American theologians dealt with the disjuncture between the modern disciplines and older understandings of the Bible in very different ways than Hodge dealt with it. Whereas Hodge argued for the preservation of older understandings of biblical inspiration and infallibility, even in light of geology, others called for serious modifications to those ideas. A few of the more daring theological observers by the 1850s began to suggest the Bible might contain outright errors, after all.

Not surprisingly, Unitarian publications led the way in advancing these more daring assertions. George E. Ellis’s article on the “Popular Use of the Bible” from 1854 offers a significant example. When Ellis considered the place of the Bible in American culture at the middle of the nineteenth century, he saw a book that stood in an increasingly embattled, uncertain position. Ellis believed that, among the American public as a whole, the Bible was still regarded as “a book of inestimable value”; as nearly every intelligent

36 Ibid.
reader would agree, “the world would be cast into night if deprived of its sacred lessons, its perfect morality, its strong consolations, its precious hopes. . . .” Nevertheless, Ellis saw that the Bible had also become “invested with many embarrassing difficulties.” Chief among them were its pervasive supernaturalism, the logical inconsistencies among many of its assertions and historical details, and its contradictions of the modern sciences. Modern-day readers must be willing to admit the fallibility of the biblical record.38

Ellis held modern knowledge largely responsible for this situation. Geology led his list, but it was followed by the nebular hypothesis of the formation of the solar system, which also called into question the literal understanding of the Genesis creation accounts. His list also included archaeology, particularly Egyptian archaeology, which had unsettled the picture of ancient Near Eastern history and seemed to challenge the Old Testament’s historical reliability. And it also included ethnology, the study of human cultures and language, which often seemed to suggest serious problems with the Mosaic accounts of early human history.39

Ellis identified at least two ways out for those beset by perplexities. First, Ellis cautioned that readers ought not put too great a stock in these new disciplines. Unscrupulous polemicists had exaggerated many of their supposed contradictions with the Bible, and scholars in these fields seemed incapable of settling even their own ever-


39 Ibid.: 341, ff.
changing theories. But even more to the point, Ellis argued, readers ought to change their own conceptions of what the Bible actually was. Specifically, Americans would do well to give up their insistent, painstaking biblical literalism. For one thing, the sciences, despite their own internal inconsistencies, had proven strict biblical literalism untenable. Furthermore, literalism was not a necessary condition of biblical inspiration. By turning the Bible into a source book of facts — historical, scientific, and otherwise — American readers had simultaneously missed the Bible’s grand sweep and mired themselves in pointless controversies.

On the one hand, there was nothing new in Ellis’s prescriptions. Andrews Norton, the father of Unitarian biblical study in America, had anticipated many of Ellis’s ideas almost forty years earlier. It is not surprising, therefore, to find echoes of Norton in Ellis’s contention that “[t]he Bible itself gives us no assurance that God dictated every line in it, [n]or that [God] has watched over its transcription, its translation, and its transmission through all ages, guarding it . . . from the ventures of its writers when they undertook to say something for themselves beyond what they were to say for Him.” These ideas obviously harkened back to Norton’s belief in the limited inspiration of the biblical texts; as Norton had seen things, God’s inspiration of the biblical writers extended only as far as the particular truths that God had intended to communicate. Even Norton’s three-

40 Ibid.: 341-342.

41 Ibid.: 338, 339, and passim.

42 Ibid.: 339.

43 See, for example, Andrews Norton, “A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews,” pt. 4, Christian Examiner 6 (2d ser., 1) (July 1829): 344-345. See also the more complete discussion of Norton’s view of inspiration in Ch. 1 and espec. Ch. 3.
volume magnum opus in defense of the Gospels sought to demonstrate only that the first
four books of the New Testament had accurately recorded the testimony of reliable
eyewitnesses; nowhere did Norton contend that God had guaranteed the incorruptibility or
infallibility of the texts.\textsuperscript{44} Thus, when Ellis argued “we shall better honor the whole spirit
of the [Bible] by confessing,” rather than “denying” its shortcomings and “mistakes,”
Norton, his Unitarian forebear, undoubtedly would have agreed in principle.\textsuperscript{45}

On the other hand, however, Ellis’s piece evinced something of the fundamental
changes in the relationship between the modern disciplines and the Bible underway by
mid-century. It was hardly novel to find a Unitarian author advocating a liberal
understanding of scripture during the antebellum period, but it was novel to find an
American religious leader making so clear a connection between problems associated with
the disciplines and the need for a new theory of scripture. Ellis emphasized, in ways even
the Unitarian Andrews Norton never did, that received understandings of the Bible must
give way to the evidence and theories associated with the outlook of the modern sciences.

More than this, Ellis moved beyond Norton’s views on the question of the Bible’s
supernaturalism. While still maintaining his belief in the miraculous elements of the Bible,
Ellis argued that its narratives lay couched in the “rich imagery and rhetoric of the Oriental
mind. . . ,” and he offered rationalized explanations for several of the Bible’s more famous
“miraculous” assertions. For example, the Pillar of Fire in the book of Exodus, Ellis
suggested, may signify Moses’ campfire because it served as a “beacon” to the long line of

\textsuperscript{44} See Norton, \textit{The Evidences of the Genuineness of the Gospels}, 3 vols. (Boston:

\textsuperscript{45} Ellis, “The Popular Use of the Bible”: 338.
desert trekkers behind him. The confusion of human speech at Babel might symbolize
“the way in which men fall out and are discomfited when they plot together against the
purposes of God. . . .” And Sampson’s great strength, which was ascribed to his uncut
hair, might signify, instead, “the brain under his locks” as the source of his power.\(^46\) Ellis’s
dismissals may have been simplistic, but they effectively removed the immediacy of the
supernatural from the stories of the Bible. This shift suggested, as a minimum, that
allegory and literary license had played a much larger part in writing the Bible than was
usually believed. It might also suggest, as biblical critics such as David Friedrich Strauss
had done, that the biblical authors were guilty of superstitious thinking and pious
exaggeration. This confirms the assessment of one later author who, quoting a friend of
Ellis’s, referred to him as “a gentle agnostic.”\(^47\) Ellis’s apparent squeamishness with the
concept of the supernatural went beyond anything that Norton, let alone orthodox
evangelicals like Stuart and Hodge, would have imagined.

But Ellis expressed only more clearly an opinion that other American intellectuals
and religious leaders were gravitating toward, as essayists during the middle decades of the
nineteenth century began to line up on all sides of the question of the Bible’s inspiration.
Geology gave much of the impetus to that realignment, but, as Ellis’s piece demonstrates,
fields as diverse as astronomy, archaeology, and ethnology contributed their muscle to

\(^{46}\) Ibid.: 349-351. A similar move away from a literal supernaturalism can be seen
in additional articles Ellis published during this decade. See, for example, “The Evangelical
and the Philosophical Spirit in Religion,” Christian Examiner 54 (January 1853): 62-90;

7, ed. John A. Garraty and Mark C. Carnes (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999),
444.
these moves, as well. In fact, American theologians and commentators had already begun
to address the topic of the Bible’s relationship to modern knowledge in small numbers
during the 1830s. In 1831, for example, Archibald Alexander, Hodge’s mentor and
colleague at Princeton Seminary, cautioned American theologians not to make the divine
inspiration of the Bible dependent on validation from external sources. Reviewing a work
by Leonard Woods, a theologian at Andover Seminary, Alexander suggested that Woods
had erred by relying too heavily on science and history to corroborate the infallibility of the
Bible. While Alexander assigned a useful role to external evidences of the Bible’s divine
origins, Alexander emphasized that the internal conviction of the Holy Spirit speaking
through the scriptures provided the best evidence of their divine origins.48

Discussion about the Bible’s status as a divine book only grew in the discourse of
Protestant theology from that point forward. In 1844, for example, an author in the
Christian Examiner expressed his great concern for the doctrine of inspiration because of
modern science and philosophy. “No one . . . can fail of being convinced,” he argued, that
the inspiration of the Bible “is soon to become the most absorbing question of Christian
theology.”49 He worried that the authority of the Bible was being threatened with “total
subversion” — in part from “the absurd and fantastic criticism, by which the letter is made
to bend and accommodate itself to newly discovered facts in natural or moral science,” and
in part from outright “concessions to an unbelieving age.”50

(January 1831): 3-22.

340.

In keeping with these concerns, Rufus P. Stebbins’ review of Edward Hitchcock’s *Religion of Geology* in 1852 attempted to resolve competing claims of Genesis and geology. Stebbins’ solution borrowed heavily from ideas first proposed by Moses Stuart in 1836. In the Mosaic accounts of Creation and the early history of the world, Stebbins argued, we need not look for historical, scientific accuracy. Instead, the first part of Genesis contained a compilation of accounts that were intended to communicate a religious and moral message: that God alone was the Creator, Sustainer, and Lord of all things. Moses, therefore, “does not make himself responsible for the truth of the opinions or of the cosmological statements contained in the documents. He only says, by Divine direction, These old accounts show that later generations have gone astray from the primitive faith. . . .” And so, Stebbins continued, “Moses would be just as much inspired in this case as in the other [older notion of inspiration].” “God saw that it would be well for these old accounts to be preserved and spread abroad,” Stebbins concluded, “and he directed them to be collected, not because of their historic, scientific verity, but for dogmatic purposes, to give to future ages the opinions of the earliest time. . . . Thus the inspiration of the writer is retained, while the scientific statements are considered only as opinions of the ancients.” Stebbins, therefore, confirmed that science, particularly geology, was raising the problem of the inspiration of the Bible at mid-century. It was clear, to borrow Stebbins’ words, that “some modification must be made in the popular


52 Ibid.: 60.

53 Ibid.
interpretation of the first chapter of Genesis” — a proposition “evident to every scholar who is a believer in both Geology and the Bible.”

Taylor Lewis, a Professor Greek at the University of New York and a frequent contributor to American religious periodicals, articulated similar concerns about the Bible in relation to modern knowledge in 1848. Lewis saw the question of the Bible’s inspiration as “everything or nothing. If it is indeed a voice to us from God, it can suffer no compromising partnership with anything merely human, or with anything below itself.” Lewis witnessed little outward opposition to the Bible as he surveyed the American landscape at mid-century; nevertheless he worried about the position of the Bible, particularly in regard to the influences of an insidious natural science. As Lewis argued, “Science bows to [the Bible] blandly and respectfully, even while taking for granted unproved positions which contemptuously nullify its authority. . . .” Believers, Lewis insisted, had to make a choice: either

the Bible is nothing to us except as a remarkable relic of antiquity, or it is our conclusive authority . . . in all questions, even should they be matters of science, on which it professes to speak and to declare the truth. If God does, indeed, specially reveal Himself to us in it, or through it, then every other voice that claims to be heard, be it reason, be it science, be it nature, be it conscience even, . . . must be hushed at the utterance of its oracles.

54 Ibid.: 52.


57 Ibid.

58 Ibid.
As Lewis’s career propelled him toward a professorship in biblical literature at Union College, his concerns about the place of the Bible in the modern world only loomed larger. As early as 1850, for example, he feared that the perceived moral distance of the Old Testament from modern enlightened sensibilities threatened to damage belief in the Bible’s inspiration. Lewis observed that more and more Christians acted as if “the Old Testament is rapidly becoming, if it has not already become, obsolete in respect to us and our age . . . — that its teachings are, in great measure . . . actually at war, and, in some very important respects too, with what is called the genius and spirit of the gospel.” These opinions were nothing short of “perilous to all solid and healthy faith in Scriptural inspiration” — made worse because many so-called evangelicals were adopting them.

Other writers at mid-century shared Lewis’s broadened conception of the troubles besetting the Bible in the modern era. In other examples, commentators connected the historical accuracy of the Bible to the question of its inspiration. George F. Simmons, no theological conservative, argued in the Christian Examiner that “the question of the Gospels is not a question of inspiration, but a question of testimony.” The doctrine of the plenary inspiration of the Bible had failed, he argued, because it rested on the presumption of the Gospels’ historical accuracy to the point of “absolute freedom from error.” Simmons spent more than thirty pages elaborating on the utter indefensibility of the

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59 See Hale, “Tayler Lewis.” Hale offers a list of Lewis’s publications during the 1850s, which coincided with Lewis’s move to Union College.


61 Ibid.: 3.
Gospels’ absolute historical accuracy, and he argued strenuously for the overthrow of the rigid doctrine of inspiration that was premised upon it.  

Like his Unitarian brother George E. Ellis, Simmons re-deployed the thinking of earlier Unitarian leaders like Andrews Norton to address the now more widespread and pressing anxiety about the Bible’s inspiration at mid-century.

The topic of biblical inspiration had moved nearer to the top of concerns among many American theologians as several disciplines continued to press their claims upon the creaking Common Sense understanding of theology. Natural science now made the divine origins of the Bible a problem to be solved in mid-nineteenth-century America. It simply presented serious difficulties to Americans used to reading literal historical and scientific accuracy in the first chapter of Genesis. A reviewer in the Christian Examiner, for example, urged readers in 1842 to exempt Moses from the requirement of scientific accuracy in his account of the Creation. As the reviewer argued, “while the theology of the Mosaic account of the creation is sublime and true, its Astronomy is evidently that of the age in which Moses lived.” The divine inspiration of the Bible did not extend to subjects other than religion, narrowly defined.

Likewise, Lyman Atwater, writing in 1850, defined the plenary inspiration of the Bible as an essential Christian doctrine, alongside the incarnation and divinity of Christ.

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J. M. Sherwood, the editor of the Biblical Repository, similarly worried about the “[g]reat laxity of views on the subject [of biblical inspiration that] prevails with many,” adding that “[w]e cannot be too watchful and vigilant here.” He praised a book on “Plenary Inspiration” for its ability to curb the further spread in America of Europe’s “latitudinarian” views of scripture.\(^6^5\) At the same time, A. A. Livermore, a Unitarian reviewer, complained that “the Evangelical churches, as they exclusively term themselves, are insisting in their books and tracts, with even stronger emphasis, on the extreme views of a verbal and plenary inspiration, as if alarmed at the daring invasions of human reason.”\(^6^6\) He suggested that Unitarian views offered “a more excellent way,” avoiding skeptical rationalism, on the one hand, and absurd views of scriptural infallibility on the other.\(^6^7\) In a similar vein, additional authors in the Princeton Review considered the topic of the biblical inspiration in 1844 and 1848.\(^6^8\)

Commentators at mid-century also continued their refrain against bad philosophy that had infused Americans’ criticisms of German biblical scholarship since the beginning of the century. D. R. Goodwin complained that Robert William Mackay’s Progress of the Intellect, published in 1850, showed the influence of “the leading philosophers and so-


\(^{67}\) Ibid.

called theologians of Germany.” Like them, Mackay denied the possibility of miracles, called into the question the immortality of the soul, and held a “quasi theology, vibrating between Pantheism and Atheism. . . .” 69 These philosophical positions had serious implications for the understanding of the Bible. As Goodwin argued, “It is impossible,” according to the dictates of these German-style philosophies, “the Scriptures should be truly a ‘revelation,’ for the plain reason, that no revelation whatever is possible. Such is the method of a class of philosophical critics, who profess to come to their work of destruction without any prejudices or assumptions.” 70 Goodwin went on to dismantle the mythological interpretation of the Bible that grew from the tainted soil of Mackay’s bad philosophy.

Likewise, a contributor to the Princeton Review, possibly the Seminary’s professor of Old Testament, William Henry Green, linked the question of the Bible’s inspiration to the twin questions of science and philosophy in a way similar to Hodge in 1857. The reviewer, publishing in 1853, objected strongly to the prevailing philosophy behind German theology, which he identified as “Hegelian.” Particularly objectionable was the supposition, traceable to Hegel, that Christianity represented the historical culmination of interaction among the Greek, Roman, and Jewish religious systems. The very notion overturned the idea of divine revelation, he implied. Still, revelation had been given in history, incrementally, through specific men. Thus, the recognition of the human, historical element in the Bible’s texts in no way overturned the doctrine of the Bible’s


70 Ibid.: 16.
inspiration, he argued. The author linked his philosophical position directly to the question of science and the Bible. The biblical authors, he argued, must not be held accountable for scientific knowledge. It would be absurd, for example, to assume that Moses must have known as much about the universe as the God who chose him as his prophet, “as though dishonour were put upon our first father, by supposing him ignorant of steam or of the electric telegraph.”

Geology had opened up the question of the inspiration of the Bible to Americans who had once been used to accepting the words of the text as true more or less at face value. The fissure between science and religion remained small and fairly easy to cross when Moses Stuart first argued in 1836 that Moses could not be held liable for teaching geology. That fissure, however, widened to troubling, even if not always insurmountable, dimensions over the subsequent two-and-a-half decades, as testified by the growing attention given to it in American theological literature. The 1840s and early 1850s, then, marked a turning point of sorts in American Protestant theology’s understanding of the relationship between the modern intellectual disciplines and the Bible. During these pivotal decades, roughly the mid-1830s through the 1850s, modern intellectual developments, most obviously in the field of geology but also archaeology, anthropology, and astronomy, forced American biblical scholars and theologians into a careful re-examination of the Bible’s divine inspiration. The evidence shows that the topic of inspiration continued to surface during the 1840s and 50s, as American theologians and

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72 Ibid.: 117.
others considered more and more the once-presumed compatibility of the sciences with the Bible. By this time, the encounter between the Common Sense interpretation of the Bible and modern intellectual developments had upset the world of American Protestant theology and biblical interpretation.
CHAPTER SIX

HISTORY, NATURALISM, AND THEOLOGICAL CHANGE: ESTABLISHING

THE TERMS OF CONTROVERSY

By the 1850s, the increasing pressure on the Common Sense system of theology
had led many American theologians and scholars to reexamine their understanding of the
Bible. At decade’s end, few American theologians had given up the Bible’s divine
inspiration, and most had strayed little from the older Common Sense approach to
theology. Yet, theological writers had begun to place significantly greater emphasis on
historical context as a means of interpreting the Bible accurately. Recovery of the original
meaning of the texts had been the stated goal of exegetes for a long time. But many
authors now underscored its importance, believing the heightened emphasis would ease
tensions with modern knowledge and, thereby, preserve, more or less intact, the older view
of the Bible’s inspiration. In broad terms, this shift in emphasis characterized
conservatives and liberals, alike. Ironically, the more American interpreters relied on the
facts of history to understand the biblical texts, the closer they moved to Continental
historical critics, who, in principle, were doing the same thing. By 1860, American
Protestant exegesis, as a whole, had moved a few steps closer to German models of
historical interpretation compared to 1830. Unknown to them, American theologians were
inching toward the late-century controversies over biblical criticism.
Some American theologians had given special attention to the historical background of the Bible’s texts fairly early in the century. Arguments from history played a pivotal role, for example, in Moses Stuart’s defense of the Pentateuch, discussed previously, as early as 1826. The first five books of the Bible exhibited a wealth of internal evidence of having survived intact from Moses’ own lifetime, Stuart argued. In opposition to German theories of the Pentateuch’s relatively recent composition, historical considerations corroborated Moses’ authorship and thereby demonstrated these books to be the Word of God.¹ A few years later, a similar emphasis on historical context, likewise, helped Stuart unlock several befuddling passages in the Apocalypse. Nero’s persecution of the Christians was the salient historical fact. Stuart demonstrated that many of John’s prophecies became perfectly clear when viewed as predictions of Nero’s downfall. And the opaqueness of the prophecies themselves could be explained by John’s desire to encourage the persecuted Christians while preventing the Roman authorities from understanding his subversive messages.² Current interpreters might smile at this simplistic use of history, but Stuart was operating without the benefit of later research into the genre of apocalyptic literature. Stuart’s example is perhaps best seen as helping to cut a new path, along the lines of history, through the thickets of biblical interpretation.

While the Common Sense approach to interpretation already aimed at the original meanings of the texts, many writers expended more energy articulating and implementing that goal as mid-century approached. These efforts moved some American exegetes


outside the previous conceptual boundaries of the Common Sense system, and not
surprisingly, American Unitarians were among the first to leave. As early as the 1830s, for
example, writers in the Christian Examiner were making a strong case for this type of
historically informed interpretation. If we would understand the Pentateuch, one reviewer
wrote in 1834, we must first take the historical journey back to Moses’ world ourselves.
That journey required, at the outset, recovering the true character of the Mosaic revelation:
God’s direct revelation to Moses extended only to the special understanding of the
religious nature of man. Moses had expressed that God-given revelation in the first five
books of the Bible, to be sure. But Moses communicated this religious purpose using the
ordinary historical traditions that were his cultural inheritance. Moreover, he selected only
those stories that served his religious purpose, “leaving the rest untold, and speaking of
nature according to the ideas of the times.” “[M]oral and religious truth” was Moses’
intent, “and the history is merely the refracting atmosphere which transmits . . . [this] holy
light. . . .”3 Historical accuracy or completeness could not be expected of Moses’ texts.
This author, therefore, aimed at recovering Moses’ original intentions, as American
interpreters in the tradition of Common Sense usually did, but he distanced himself from
the idea of the Bible’s historical accuracy. This move meant he was cutting across the grain
of American theology, and he spent several pages justifying the innovation.

He found his justification by drawing a clear distinction between “scientific”
writing and “religious” writing. Genesis, his arguments indicated, must be interpreted
according to the rules of religious writing. One need only consider Moses’ poetic

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1834): 180.
descriptions of the sun, moon, stars, and firmament to grasp the point — though technically inaccurate as science, he argued, only the most “cold,” “thoughtless,” and “superficial” interpreter could miss their divine authority. “There are men, who have called themselves philosophers,” he argued, “… that would fain have brought down the rich, glowing, brilliant effusions of the seraph-touched souls of the Prophets to the test of a cold, logical analysis. …” Such cold-hearted “philosophers” had failed entirely to grasp the nature of what they were reading. Moses’ writings displayed no deficiencies at all when interpreted as Moses himself intended, for they conveyed every extent of the truth that he had intended. “The fact is,” this reviewer concluded, “[Moses] did not intend to teach men natural philosophy, but religion. …”\(^4\)

This author’s innovation was not in arguing that Moses was not a scientist; Moses Stuart had already done that in 1836.\(^5\) His innovation lay in imagining such a clear distinction between the religious realm of the Bible and the actual facts of science and history. His historical view of Moses indicated the largely unhistorical, unscientific nature of Moses’ writings, and it resolved his perceived tensions between science and Genesis. Future American theologians from his own and other denominations would duplicate his example in their own efforts to resolve conflicts between the modern sciences and older understandings of scripture.

For example, a second Unitarian reviewer advocated a similar type of historical sensitivity to the biblical authors during the same decade. In 1838, this anonymous author

\(^4\) Ibid.: 180-181.

\(^5\) See Ch. 4 and Ch. 5 of this dissertation for a discussion of Stuart’s views of the relationship between geology and Genesis. See also Stuart, “Examination of Genesis I, in Reference to Geology,” Biblical Repository 7 (January 1836): 50.
praised Wilhelm M. L. de Wette, a German-born Old Testament scholar and theologian who was then working at the University of Basel. The reviewer apparently appreciated de Wette’s migration away from his former rationalistic sensibilities; he not only praised de Wette for his sensitivity to the historical context of the biblical authors, but he also faulted the German rationalists for holding biblical authors to modern standards of knowledge. As the reviewer saw it, de Wette, unlike most German biblical critics, “does not criticize the Biblical writers as if they were modern authors, nor seek a philosophical argument where none was intended.” That is, de Wette made the biblical authors responsible neither for modern knowledge, nor for modern standards of evidence, accurate description, and logical analysis. We might have anticipated de Wette to expect such “philosophical” rigor in two primary areas — natural science and history — but, the American reviewer was

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6 Ironically, it would have been highly unlikely for many Americans to praise de Wette for much of anything during previous decades. De Wette had spent the early part of his career working alongside the great liberal theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher to build up the theological faculty at the newly established University of Berlin. De Wette had been an influential figure in the development of the historical and literary criticism of the Bible, and his theology and politics were so radical as to win him dismissal from his post at Berlin in 1819. But after moving on, first to Weimar and then to Basel, his views mellowed to the point of a remarkable reversal. Toward the end of his career, de Wette’s increasingly conservative views of the Bible earned him the criticism of his former rationalist allies in Germany. Likewise, American observers of de Wette’s later career had begun to see him as an example of a highly sophisticated but believing scholar of the Bible. Thomas Albert Howard has written an excellent study of de Wette’s development and career as a biblical scholar and theologian; see Howard, Religion and the Rise of Historicism: W. M. L. de Wette, Jacob Burckhardt, and the Theological Origins of Nineteenth-Century Historical Consciousness (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000). For brief introductions to the career and ideas of de Wette, see also “Martin Leberecht de Wette,” Deutsche Biographische Enzyklopädie, vol. 2, ed. Walther Killy (Munich: K. G. Saur, 1995), 509; and Holzmann, “Wilhelm Martin Leberecht De Wette,” Allgemeine Deutsche Biographie, vol. 5 (Berlin: Duncker and Humblot, 1968 [1877]), 101-105.

happy to report, de Wette did not hold the biblical authors accountable for either. \(^8\) The reviewer went on to argue that modern exegetes ought not read Genesis as if the writer had known of modern geology or intended to communicate “rigid historical truth.” These were modern ideas, and to weigh the biblical authors in the balance with modern scholars amounted to an absurdity. \(^9\) Instead of repeating these common errors of the German rationalistic critics, de Wette set an example for all modern exegetes to follow: he “seeks to revive the lives and times of the sacred writers, and throw himself into their feelings, and thus to judge all Scripture by that same spirit in which it was written.” \(^10\)

Thus, in one sense, this Unitarian reviewer conformed to the dictates of the Common Sense apologetic by emphasizing the interpretation of the biblical books according to the intentions of their authors. But he also deviated from other Protestant theologians’ interest in history in several important ways. First, he emphasized the recovery of history as a goal of scriptural exegesis in ways that exceeded the attention to history given by most other biblical scholars and theologians during these decades. To this author, writing in 1838, research into the full range of historical detail surrounding each of the biblical texts offered the potential to resurrect the world of the Bible — and the God of the Bible — to an extent that mere grammatical study did not. History, to this author, had become essential to exegesis.

Second, he and other Unitarians extended one element of the Common Sense system as means of counteracting problems in another. Moses Stuart, Charles Hodge, and

\(^{8}\) Ibid.

\(^{9}\) Ibid.

\(^{10}\) Ibid.: 152.
a bevy of conservative and moderate Common Sense theologians either presumed or asserted the Bible’s scientific accuracy, in one way or another, even while they believed the biblical authors must be interpreted on their own terms. But this reviewer in 1838 emphasized the latter point at the expense of the former. He and other Unitarians extended the idea of allowing the biblical authors to speak for themselves by abandoning altogether the hope for reconciliation between natural science and theology. They argued that authors had no notions of modern history or natural science in mind as they wrote; therefore, Genesis had little, if anything, to say about the beginning of the world and early human history from the standpoint of natural science and history. This position allowed this and other Unitarian authors to esteem the biblical texts while sidestepping the problem of their scientific and historical accuracy altogether.

Other Unitarian authors were not far behind with additional innovations for biblical interpretation based on this heightened emphasis on history. George E. Ellis sharpened and elaborated on these previous distinctions between scientific knowledge and religious knowledge. Writing in 1854, for example, he argued strongly that the Bible’s texts must be interpreted as their authors had intended. Natural science, particularly geology, occupied his attention on this point. As he wrote, “the Bible occupies ground wholly distinct and apart from that of science. It is no part of its design to teach geology or history merely, or astronomy. Its allusions to anything of the sort are only incidental.”

A simple, but pertinent, illustration demonstrated his point: Moses had devoted only a few verses in the book of Genesis to describe the creation of the world; by contrast, Moses had

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devoted many chapters in the book of Exodus to describe the Tabernacle and its rituals of worship during the Hebrews’ wilderness wanderings. “The difference,” Ellis concluded, “is amazing. . . . The simple explanation is that Moses intended to describe the Tabernacle, but he did not intend to describe the Creation.” The point of the creation account, Ellis argued, was to show God as the source of all that is, not to show when the beginning had happened or how God had accomplished His creative work.\textsuperscript{12} By arguing for the separation of science and the Bible, Ellis was able to sidestep controversy surrounding modern science on the question of Genesis.

But like most Protestant writers in his day, Ellis was not entirely comfortable with this separation between the two realms. Writing in 1853, Ellis defined the religious and scientific approaches to the Bible as irreconcilably different. They offered “two very distinct points of interest,” engaged “two very distinct classes of our human faculties,” and required two very distinct methods.\textsuperscript{13} The religious, or “Evangelical,” approach accepted the New Testament as the authentic source of true religion, an inspired volume whose “sacred authority . . . distinguishes [it] from all other sources of human knowledge.”\textsuperscript{14} In contrast, the scientific, or “Philosophical,” approach questioned the Bible’s claims to divine revelation, evaluating “the general grounds for believing the Gospel to be, as it claims to be, an additional means of knowing the mind of God beyond all the other sources of such

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid.: 342.

\textsuperscript{13} Ellis, “The Evangelical and the Philosophical Spirit in Religion,” Christian Examiner 54 (January 1853): 62.

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.: 62-63.
knowledge.”

Ellis worried that the scientific approach was necessarily unsparing, even antagonistic toward the religious — “no ingredient in the whole composition of the Gospel” could escape its “searching” gaze. But Ellis threw up his hands in seeming resignation over the antagonism. Thinkers had been “left to mediate between these two parties in Christendom, to heed them both, and to study all their open questions,” but he offered little help navigating these troubled waters. All he could do was conclude, gloomily, “[T]he Christian faith cannot . . . work its highest mission, if it is burdened with [this] antagonism. . . .”

Ellis’s example testified to the mounting sense of conflict between the Bible and the results of modern scholarship during the middle decades of the century. But more than that, it showed how the goal of recovering the original intentions of the biblical authors could pull theological writers away from older moorings associated with the Common Sense approach to theology. Ellis, himself, departed from the familiar shores of the Common Sense apologetic by validating the separation between religion and scientific knowledge, even if only reluctantly. This was a separation that most of his American predecessors — even Andrews Norton, his Unitarian forebear — would have found troubling. But Ellis helped chart a course to the future, for most theologians and biblical scholars by the end of the century would accept a similar distinction.

This movement toward a more profound appreciation of the history surrounding the Bible was not limited to Unitarian circles. Even the conservative Princeton Review

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15 Ibid.: 64.
16 Ibid.: 83-84.
17 Ibid.: 85.
showed evidence of similar responses to the problem of science at mid-century. A review essay in 1853, noted previously, underscored the importance of considering the historical context of the biblical authors. To that end, its author, possibly William Henry Green, a professor of Old Testament at Princeton Seminary, devoted several pages to a discussion of the human element in the biblical texts. The human element in the biblical texts necessarily entailed a historical element: the biblical texts originated with particular human authors in particular historical contexts. While the “Bible is a unit,” he argued, it must not be viewed as a “uniform indistinguishable mass . . . but as a system combining many and various parts. . . .”  

Second, a clear recognition of the multiplicity of the Bible’s “parts” entailed, ipso facto, a clear recognition of the multiplicity of the Bible’s human authors over the centuries. Indeed, this author argued against some of his less reflective contemporaries that “[t]here is no impropriety in the admission that there are peculiarities of style and diction belonging to each of the sacred writers; and no harm is done by investigating what these are.”  

If the Spirit of truth had chosen to communicate the way of salvation not through one man, “but many, and those in different ages, from different ranks of life, trained under different circumstances, and with different mental constitutions and habits,” biblical scholars would do well to reconstruct those various historical circumstances and take them into account when offering their interpretations.  

This reviewer’s emphasis on the human element in the Bible entailed a clear recognition of the

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19 Ibid.: 106.

20 Ibid.
historical location of each of the biblical texts, whatever else might be said about the divine origins of those writings. An earlier Old-School Presbyterian, such as Charles Hodge, would not have disagreed with this author’s point in substance; instead, he would have seen little need to dwell on, or even mention it. Though this particular principle of historical interpretation was not entirely new, then, the need to articulate and emphasize it was.

Just in case this shift in emphasis troubled readers, this conservative Presbyterian author offered reassurances that the Bible remained the same divine book that it always had been. The recognition of the multiplicity of parts and biblical authors in no way overturned the notion of divine inspiration, for all the parts of the biblical record show the “guidance of one master mind,” much the same way a “machine has unity in spite of its complication . . . , its wheels moving upon wheels with their various velocities and directions, yet no interference, no jarring, all necessary to the end of its formation.”

Moreover, he argued, the attribution of historical context to the origins of the Bible only extended so far. For example, he acknowledged some similarities between the religion of the ancient Hebrews and that of other peoples of the ancient Near East. Yet, he dismissed those similarities as merely incidental. The same human desires and needs lay behind both Jewish and other ancient Near Eastern religions, he argued. This constituted the extent of the similarities. The Hebrew religion remained a divine revelation and must be seen as

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transcending its historical context. Finally, the reviewer distanced himself from “the modern philosophy of Germany toward the Old Testament,” and he singled out Hegel for specific criticism. Hegel, he argued, had wildly misconstrued Christianity as more the product of Greek and Roman religion than Judaism — but it was really “useless to argue with a thing so airy and intangible as a German philosophy,” he concluded, with a wry touch of humor.

Nevertheless, this contributor to the Princeton Review maintained a strong notion of historical development in the Christian religion. He complained a second time in the same review piece that typical American theology reduced the entire Bible to a uniform mass. The Bible must be read with a sense of historical distinction between the religious economy of the Old Testament and that of the New. “It is to confound the nature of the two dispensations,” he argued, “to attempt to bring every thing into the old, with the same fullness and distinctness as in the new.” This author’s insistence on some recognition of historical development within the biblical revelation stands out in contrast to previous discussions about the Bible. Charles Hodge, for example, showed a strong tendency to view the Bible in ahistorical terms. He displayed a weak notion of historical development in Christianity, and his method of theology tended to reduce the Bible to just the kind of uniform mass that this author argued against. It is a measure of the theological change


23 Ibid.: 113-114.


25 Ibid.: 117.
taking place during the 1850s that historicism was making its way into the Princeton Review, despite the persistent conservatism of Hodge, its editor and a main contributor.

Like many other American theologians of the 1850s, this anonymous author in the Princeton Review linked discussions about historical development in the Bible to lingering questions about the relationship of modern knowledge to the Bible. The recognition of development from the Old Testament to the New and the consideration of each biblical author’s historical location as an aid to biblical interpretation, together, offered this conservative Presbyterian hope for resolving the problem of science and the Bible. As he argued, “[E]xtravagant assumptions have been made with regard to [the patriarchs’] acquaintance with scientific and all other truth, as though Moses must have known as much about the origin and constitution of the universe as that Being who commissioned him. . . .”27 The problem of science and the Bible could be solved with a proper understanding of the historical location of the biblical authors; those authors, when considered in their proper historical context, simply did not know modern science. Again, this was not a simple re-affirmation of Moses Stuart’s old solution to the apparent conflict.

26 For a clear example of Hodge’s lack of modern historical perspective, see “Neill’s Lectures on Biblical History,” Princeton Review 18 (July 1846): 456-461, a piece that evinces practically no modern sense of historical development and insists on a rigidly literal interpretation of the Genesis genealogies and narratives. Another clear example is “Thornwell on the Apocrypha,” Princeton Review 17 (April 1845): 271-276, mentioned in Ch. 1, n. 66, wherein Hodge argued the Bible was equally inspired in all its parts; maintained the biblical conception of God, sin, and other basic theological concepts was consistent throughout the entire Bible; and displayed little apprehension of any basic differences between the revelation of the older parts of the Bible compared with the newer.

between geology and Genesis.\textsuperscript{28} It was also, when taken in the context of this new, extensive discussion about historical context and historical development, the logical outcome of a more thoroughly historicized understanding of the Sacred Word.

A second expression of this increased emphasis on the historically informed interpretation of the Bible was a new appreciation for history itself as an aid to interpretation. This appreciation of history as an aid to interpretation often went hand in hand with the drive to interpret the Bible in accord with the original intentions of the biblical authors. However, it also entailed the growth of new, vital connections between history and biblical interpretation.

Moses Stuart suggested some ways in which history, itself, had begun to infuse Americans’ approach to biblical interpretation in new ways during the years prior to mid-century. If the North American Review, Princeton Review, and Christian Examiner are reliable guides, Stuart’s historically informed interpretation of the Bible had grown in depth and sophistication from his first discussions in the 1820s such that he was grasping associations between history, language, and biblical interpretation as few other Americans were during the 1850s. For example, his review of Edward Robinson’s Greek Lexicon in 1851 stood among the first pieces in this body of periodical literature explicitly to link history and biblical interpretation to a consideration of the history of language itself. The idea that language, itself, had a history was not new to American intellectuals, who, generally speaking, knew well the writings of the Scottish Enlightenment on the origin and

\textsuperscript{28} See Ch. 4 and Ch. 5 of this dissertation for a discussion of Stuart’s views of the relationship between geology and Genesis. See also Stuart, “Examination of Genesis I, in Reference to Geology,” Biblical Repository 7 (January 1836): 50.
development of language. However, Stuart’s example suggests that even conservative to moderate theologians could now link the history of language with biblical interpretation in new, productive ways.

Stuart, himself, felt very pleased at the development. In fact, he felt pleased about the progress in language study as a whole during his lifetime. As he reflected admiringly on that progress, he found that the philosophy of language, as he called it, was much better understood than just a mere half-century earlier. That understanding had lain the foundations for still greater improvements in the understanding of how word-forms had developed, of the shades of meaning among ancient word-forms, and of the syntax and grammar that governed the combination of those words into sentences. These advances were particularly pleasing to Stuart, for, as he summarized their importance, “On these, every thing depends in enucleating the meaning of any language. . . .” Stuart, of course, would have been particularly glad for these advances in regard to the dead languages of the Bible, ancient Hebrew and first-century Greek, but he viewed them in context with all the forgotten languages of the ancient Near East and Mediterranean region. Interpreting these dead languages had proven a particularly difficult task at times, and Stuart could not have been more pleased with the breakthroughs in understanding.


[31] Ibid.: 261-266.
Stuart associated history with recent progress in the interpretation of language in at least two ways. First, the wedding of historical knowledge to the study of dead languages had yielded important results in and of itself. There were certain points at which the knowledge of ancient history allowed modern interpreters to understand ancient languages better. As Stuart wrote, “Now and then, the solution of a difficulty [in interpretation] depends on the knowledge of antiquities and of historical facts, and without such knowledge, no satisfactory explanation, in such cases, is feasible.”32 This is why, Stuart explained, the “appellation of historico-grammatical interpretation is given to the now generally admitted and established rules of exegesis.”33 Historical grammatical study had begun to make a real appearance in the minds of America’s foremost biblical scholars.

Stuart noted that this historical grammatical study had supplied most of the recent advances in the understanding of first-century Greek, ancient Hebrew, and other ancient languages. Few new meanings of words had emerged, and few new rules of grammar or syntax had been discovered. Instead, progress had come through historical study. The knowledge of the ancient biblical languages had progressed because history had yielded vastly more complete knowledge of the nuances involved in the interpretation of the ancient languages. “All the stores of antiquity have been ransacked, in order to find material for filling out and perfecting both grammars and lexicons,” Stuart explained. That material had encompassed even the languages of “the remotest East,” and all had been related to Greek, Latin, and the other European languages.34 The result of this progress in

32 Ibid.: 261-262.

33 Ibid.: 262.

34 Ibid.: 263.
historical knowledge, aside from the impressive connections among these far-flung languages, had been the advancement in the understanding of biblical Hebrew and Greek: “[W]here confusion once reigned,” Stuart proclaimed, “order is now introduced; . . . where examples or satisfactory proof of this portion of syntax or of that, of this meaning or of that, were once wanting, the lack has for the most part been supplied.” Historical study had aided the understanding of the dead languages of the Bible immeasurably.

More significantly, Stuart associated history with recent progress in interpretation in a more philosophical sense. Not only had better historical knowledge yielded better understanding of ancient languages; conversely, the study of languages had also yielded historical knowledge. This was true because language, as Stuart had discovered, provided a window onto the soul. “Human language,” Stuart explained, “has . . . enstamped upon it the history of man’s thoughts, the picture of his mind.” He continued,

Words are signs of ideas, whether written or spoken. When written, they are the visible signs or symbols of what passes in the interior man. They show us his course of thought and feeling and reasoning; they develop the objects which most excited and interested him; they show the degree of his culture and knowledge; they discover what passed within him in such a way, that we may see how high or low he stood in the scale of human intellect, and rational improvement and enjoyment. In a word, they are the history of his soul, just as the usual accounts of external events are the history (so to speak) of his body.

Thus, language itself shows the historical state of a culture at any given time.

This view of language as a window on the soul implied, then, that the history of a given language would reveal a cultural history of the writers of that language. And indeed,

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35 Ibid.

36 Ibid.: 264.

37 Ibid.: 265.
Stuart made that extension himself: “In languages where we have specimens of earlier and later writers, we can distinctly trace the history of progress in any nation.” Continuing, he wrote, “A critical philologist will find . . . in the language itself which he studies, the history of the culture and advance of any people; and he will be better able to tell us what they were as sentient and rational beings, by the study of their language, than by all the histories extant. . . .” Language yielded better understanding of the “real development of man in the highest sense of this word. . . .” he insisted.³⁸ “. . . [T]here is more to be known of man as a rational, sentient, religious being, by the study of his language, than by all the external history in the world.”³⁹

Recent critical philology had done a great service to the knowledge of language by showing the relationship among the various words derived from similar root words, Stuart continued. The knowledge of relationship among the various words and senses derived from common roots had been greatly enriched.⁴⁰ More than that, lexicography had made a quantum leap forward by presenting the relationship among words in new ways. In the grammars of the past, all the possible senses of each Greek or Hebrew word had been presented in the form of a simple list. Only a handful of these older grammars included important branches in meaning for many words. And even in the best of those older grammars, these branches of meaning appeared as “disjecta membra. One limb is here and another there; but where they once grew and were fitted on [to the original root word], we

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.: 266.

⁴⁰ Ibid.: 263.
are not informed." Recent lexicography reflected the advances of recent philology by showing the relationship among the various branches of meaning of related words. In short, Stuart praised recent philology — and its lexicographical expression — for revealing the relationships among various words. Thus, “[i]n recent lexicography, the literal and original meaning being ranged first in order, is regarded as the root and trunk of the tree. From this, branches shoot off . . . giving birth to other and subordinate, or secondary branches. . . . [A]ll the branches . . . cling to the trunk . . .”42 Stuart singled out the grammars of Gesenius and Passow on the Hebrew and the Greek, respectively, for particular commendation. Modern philology yielded knowledge precisely because it had revealed the relationships among word forms, not just the meanings of various word forms. Modern grammars excelled to the extent that they represented the relationships among words. In a real sense, language showed branching patterns of descent and relationship in similar ways that the species of the plant and animal kingdoms did in the biological realm. Moreover, these branching patterns of linguistic descent and relationship revealed the history of language, for pictorial representations of linguistic relationships, showed the history and evolution of language.43

This was a highly important development in the history of biblical interpretation in America. Stuart, in effect, helped pioneer a rationale for the historical study of the

41 Ibid.: 267.

42 Ibid.: 266-267.

43 The parallels to developments in the realm of biology during the nineteenth century are striking. Stephen G. Alter points out that Darwin drew on comparative philology because it was already well known and established. See Alter, Darwin and the Linguistic Image: Language, Race, and Natural Theology in the Nineteenth Century (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999).
language of the biblical texts themselves. In order to understand the language of the texts, the historical context of the writers of the texts must be understood. That was the first part of his argument. And in order to understand the development of the biblical ideas and thus understand the texts better, the history of the language of the texts yielded crucial knowledge. Thus, the biblical record itself might offer clues to the development of the cultures that produced the biblical record. As the history of the biblical record was better understood, the history of the biblical writers was better understood, and as the history of the biblical writers was better understood, the Bible itself might be better understood. Thus, Stuart linked history and language in a close, reciprocal relationship in the science of biblical interpretation. This marked the beginning of a new era in biblical scholarship in America, when history first took a particularly important place at the table of biblical interpretation. In a broad sense, Stuart in 1851 pointed the way for future generations of evangelical Protestant biblical interpreters in America. Stuart stood at the head of future generations of biblical interpreters who consciously linked history to the interpretation of the Bible as means of understanding the Bible better.

This new type of appreciation of history was not limited to George E. Ellis, contributors to the Princeton Review, or Moses Stuart. The Common Sense apologetic creaked under the weight of its own internal logic that science ought to confirm biblical religion, and more and more theologians turned to history in new ways in order to alleviate the strain. Similar to Stuart, who grasped the importance of the historical study of language as an aid to biblical interpretation, other essayists in American Protestant theology turned to historical-grammatical arguments, as well. T. M. Hopkins, for example, deployed historical-grammatical arguments that appeared similar to those of many European biblical
critics, but he did so in order to defend the historical integrity of the book of Joshua. His example, from 1845, ranks among the first in the American periodical literature to do so. Hopkins took up what had become a troublesome passage to many Victorian readers of the Bible, the record of the Israelite’s leader, Joshua, having commanded the sun and moon to stand still at the battle of Gibeon in Joshua 10. Hopkins saw the book of Joshua as a true historical record, but he saw the passage in question as a “bungling interpolation by some one” years after the original had been written. While the scientific absurdity of the sun standing still drew his attention to the passage, historical and literary arguments provided him with a solution.

From a literary standpoint, he argued, the troublesome verses did not even fit in the context of the passage. Hopkins went on at some length to justify the passage as a later poetical addition. “Remove the interpolation,” he argued, “and the passage reads easily and naturally; retain it, and all is unnatural and contradictory.”44 The historical record, he continued, confirmed this internal literary evidence for the interpolation. Such a remarkable event surely would have been noted in the world’s historical record somehow. The fact that no mention had ever been made in any other historical source confirmed that the event had never, in fact, happened.45

Hopkins’ argument may appear almost too convenient a way to deal with a seeming scientific impossibility. Yet, he seems genuinely to have believed that the passage did not belong to the original text. Hopkins was not interested in dissecting the biblical record,


\[45\] Ibid.: 122.
unlike many German historical critics. Neither did he distrust the historical truth of the
biblical record, as did many German historical critics. His aim in removing the single
passage in question was plainly to protect the integrity of the divinely-inspired, historically
accurate original. The internal literary evidence of the book of Joshua, he argued, simply
showed the passage to be a later addition. As he put it, “There are . . . most serious
difficulties in the way of receiving the disputed passage as a part of the records of truth.”
Hopkins truly intended to protect the historically-accurate original, but he did so by
marshaling historical and, to a lesser extent, literary arguments in a manner not unlike many
European critics. This suggests that arguments common among the critics of Europe had

Another piece from 1849 shows a similar use of historical arguments in new ways
at mid-century. The editors of the Biblical Repository published a piece by Ferdinand
Christian Baur, the eminent New Testament critic at the University of Tübingen. The
Repository’s introduction to the article spelled out Baur’s theories concerning the
relationships among the Bible’s accounts of the life of Christ. Baur argued, contrary to
received opinion, that an anonymous author had written the Gospel of John a hundred or
so years after the death of Christ; the Fourth Gospel could no longer be attributed to the
Apostle John’s personal recollections of events he had witnessed. In fact, the Gospel of
John did not have an historical intent at all. Whereas Matthew, Mark, and Luke offered a
synopsis of Christ’s life and ministry, the author of John had intended to communicate a

46 Ibid.: 113.

47 For an introduction to the ideas and public career of Baur, see Introduction, n. 66.
metaphysical and theological portrait of Christ. The historical facts were largely incidental to the philosophical aims of the anonymous author.⁴⁸

Baur’s translator in the Repository, Alfred H. Guernsey, saw much good to be gained from the historical method that had produced these conclusions, whatever Baur’s errors. On the one hand, Guernsey could not agree with the full extent of Baur’s argument. The notion that anyone besides the Apostle John had written the book that bears John’s name ran directly contrary to the common basis for supporting the divine inspiration of the Bible’s books; it was “needless to say that this is not the standpoint of the biblical Repository [sic]...”⁴⁹ On the other hand, Guernsey asserted, Baur’s ideas must not be ignored entirely; they had provided “some of the most acute and far-seeing surveys... into the domains of Biblical knowledge.”⁵⁰ Indeed, Guernsey suggested, Baur had offered a good way to understand the relationship among the four Gospels. Baur had helped to explain the design and purpose of the Gospel of John, and he had shown that the author of John put forward the “nature of Christianity in its highest stage of development.”⁵¹ Guernsey appears to have been persuaded of the power and viability of these ideas. Indeed, the simple fact that Guernsey had given Baur such a favorable introduction to the American public itself helped validate new historicist theories of the Bible’s texts.


⁴⁹ Ibid.: 637.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.: 636.
Guernsey concluded his discussion with a question: should we ignore the labors of German biblical scholarship because of the liberal bent of German theology? “We may,” he wrote, “. . . refuse the aid of Gesenius, because of his ‘Neology,’ and cling to Parkhurst; we may refuse, for the same reason, to avail ourselves of the labors of De Wette, Rosenmüller, and Baur, resting content with Scott, Henry, and Clarke.” But the approach would clearly be the inferior one in Guernsey’s mind. The Germans simply had too much to offer the field of biblical scholarship, whatever their errors.  

American theological discourse, then, showed evidence of new kinds of historical thinking beginning around the late 1840s. Many American theologians began to emphasize the historical situation of the biblical authors, at least in broad terms. They frequently did so to free the biblical authors from the burden of responsibility for scientific accuracy. The statements of the book of Genesis about the beginning of the world did not have to agree in literal detail with the conclusions of modern geology or any other science. Moses, the traditionally-held author of Genesis, had no knowledge of modern geological science. Indeed, Moses never intended to write an accurate, literal account of natural history even if he could have. In addition to this new historical view of the biblical authors, Americans also began to adopt new ways of thinking historically when they read the biblical texts themselves. Though the older Common Sense apologetic was still exercising a pervasive, determinative power over American theology at mid-century, historical thinking was influencing American theological discourse in new ways.  

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52 Ibid.: 637.
As science and other pressures drove many American theologians toward history in new ways near the middle of the nineteenth century, many theologians also began to look differently at natural science itself. Specifically, American theologians, taken as a whole, defined problems over natural science and the Bible increasingly as a clash between the philosophy of scientific naturalism and the supernaturalism that pervaded the biblical narratives. The Unitarians, as with much of the history of the Bible in the nineteenth century, were among the first to identify the problem of scientific naturalism as a chief concern. George E. Ellis’s article from 1854 on the popular use of the Bible suggested this new concern about the spread of naturalistic philosophy. Ellis noted that American readers of the Bible perceived problems with the text and message of the Bible in increasing numbers. As noted previously, Ellis believed that the apparent conflict between natural science and the Bible had created many of the problems. “. . . [T]here are all the questions which science has turned up, which learned research opens, and which fantastic ingenuity can suggest . . . ,” in Ellis’s words.53 In almost the same breath, Ellis identified the problem of supernaturalism in the Bible. The supernatural element of the Bible suggested problems to modern readers, and Ellis linked it closely with the perplexities of natural science for religion. As the question of the relationship between natural science and Bible came into sharper focus, Americans also increasingly considered the problem of scientific naturalism. Generally speaking, the reality of the supernatural became less palatable to Victorian-era thinkers as the century wore on, and the 1850s brought some of the earliest discussions of the problem.

Natural science, by definition, dealt with phenomena in the natural realm, and its investigations offered natural, as opposed to supernatural, explanations for those phenomena. Natural science did not necessarily entail a commitment to naturalism, the idea that the natural world was all that existed. Indeed, most natural scientists during the nineteenth century believed in some kind of supernatural realm, usually unseen, that transcended the ordinary realm of physical experience. Nevertheless, the increasing explanatory power of many scientific theories and the rising cultural prestige of natural science, generally, elevated “natural” ways of thinking about the world. Many American theologians worried that that elevation of natural science was crowding out supernatural ways of thinking. American periodical literature suggests that this worry surfaced among American theologians around mid-century. This coincided with the increasing recognition of conflict between natural science and the older literalistic approach to biblical interpretation emphasized by the Common Sense apologetic.

Numerous examples from the 1850s and 60s suggest that American theologians and essayists had begun to treat the problem of natural science and biblical interpretation as a question of philosophy, not facts. A piece in the Christian Examiner from 1853, for example, shows evidence that Americans had begun to treat the question of geology as a problem with philosophical naturalism. Oliver Stearns, the author of the piece, noted that many believers in the supernatural aspects of Christianity — Protestants, no less! — feared that the “use of reason in theology” would result in discarding the idea of supernatural revelation altogether.54 “[I]f reason be allowed to judge of the inspiration or truth of any

portion of the Scripture contents,” such people complained, “it may . . . set aside all inspiration, and thus reduce us to Naturalism. To fence out Naturalism, we must accept the dogma of plenary inspiration. . . .” Stearns urged that reason may judge the Bible’s inspiration without denying the possibility of supernatural revelation. His terms are significant: the question was one of scientific naturalism.

The perception of a philosophical conflict against the forces of naturalistic philosophy had clearly spread to the North American Review by 1860. For example, A. P. Peabody imagined a battle in such terms while writing for the North American Review that year. He considered the old nemesis to American theologians of all denominations, David Friedrich Strauss’s book, the Life of Jesus. Peabody complained that Strauss’s denial of the possibility of the supernatural had pre-determined Strauss’s arguments against the historical character of the Gospel accounts. Laced within Peabody’s complaint was the new terminology of conflict between supernaturalism and naturalism.

Francis Bowen framed his criticisms of the Oxford clergymen’s new book, Essays and Reviews, in similar terms. One of the essayists, for example, had presumed the impossibility of “external revelation or any other miraculous occurrence.” That presumption itself was hardly new among religious skeptics; what was new, Bowen argued, was that the Essayist had stressed illustrations drawn from natural science, “as if the

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55 Ibid.: 247.

56 Ibid.

advancement of science tended to place the old argument in a new and stronger light.”

Bowen complained that the Essayist would require interpreters of the Gospels to seek an explanation of the events surrounding Jesus’ life “by reducing them to the ordinary operation of law. . . .” “Thus enunciated,” Bowen argued, “the doctrine is only a revival of the theory . . . of the earlier German Rationalists . . . that they were only seeming miracles, or natural occurrences in disguise.” Bowen further argued that the absurdities required by this theory, in fact, support the position of the “supernaturalist.”

Again, Bowen had framed his discussion largely in opposition to the false philosophy of scientific naturalism.

The problem of biblical miracles also occupied C. T. Brooks’ attention when he reviewed the work of Renan, the French biblical critic, on the Life of Jesus in 1864. Brooks found Renan’s work particularly odious because it practically dismissed the topic of the miracles in the Gospel narratives. Was this not “strange and significant” when considering a life whose “miraculous character [had] produced the profoundest effect in the world these eighteen centuries . . .?”

“How could the man of sentiment, the man of soul, or the man of science, think to give a life of Jesus to the world and yet throw so into the shade Jesus the wonder-worker of beneficence?” Brooks asked. Renan might have done better to do away with the false distinction between the natural and supernatural

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59 Ibid.: 197.


61 Ibid.
realm, Brooks suggested — something that Jesus himself did — rather than to obscure the supernatural features of Jesus’ character altogether.62

To the extent that a conflict between supernaturalism and naturalism perplexed American thinkers at mid-century, moreover, it had the potential to perplex them greatly. George E. Ellis noted as much in the article mentioned just above. He remarked that the supernatural character of the Bible “is not a stain spotting the records here and there, but it is the indyed [sic] color. . . .” “. . .[I]f the supernatural element were to be extracted from the Bible,” Ellis continued, “not a single leaf in it would hold together, and the effect would be like that of taking the heart, the arteries, the veins and blood vessels, out of a human body.”63 Correctly recognizing the centrality of the person and character of God in the Bible, Ellis saw that the Bible would lose its life without its in-dyed supernatural quality. By testifying that many Americans found the Bible’s supernaturalism perplexing, Ellis thereby testified that the Bible itself was in an increasingly uncertain position in the American cultural world by the 1850s. This marked a significant development in the American discourse about the relationship between science and the Bible at mid-century. Ellis’s linkage of “science” and “learned research” so closely with the question of the supernatural element of the Bible suggests that Ellis, at least implicitly, saw natural science as the primary culprit in arousing troubling questions about the nature of the Bible. While natural science did not necessarily preclude the existence of the supernatural, its approach to knowledge of the natural world, functionally speaking, operated separately from God.

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62 Ibid.

63 Ellis, “The Popular Use of the Bible”: 332.
Increasingly as the century wore on, natural science functioned according to a naturalistic methodology, and Ellis’s piece suggests that he was observing the beginnings of that trend.

By the last third of the nineteenth century, American theologians, biblical scholars, and others were increasingly apt to frame discussions about science and biblical interpretation in terms that pitted a supernatural view of the universe against a hard scientific naturalism. Thus it was that an author in the North American Review argued in 1865 that the old question of the relationship of faith and science was, in actuality, a conflict between these grand philosophical concepts. The controversy between faith and science, he argued,

> "profoundly agitates at the present moment, the entire world of thought. . . . What is the ostensible ground of the controversy? It is whether human history is a strictly natural phenomenon, or a strictly supernatural one; whether man’s origin and destiny transcend nature, or whether they fall exclusively under the dominion of natural law. Faith maintains that man’s origin and destiny are strictly supernatural; while Science implicitly . . . regards him as essentially a subject of Nature, and a sharer consequently of her fortunes, whatsoever they may be."

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The problem of reconciling geology and the Bible, these examples suggest, was being superceded by a conflict of much greater proportion. American biblical scholars had long made the connection between the philosophical commitments of biblical scholars and the conclusions they reached about the Bible. Several American theological commentators had also criticized the results of geology as the result of speculative reasoning during the first half of the nineteenth century. However, it was not until the 1850s that they named whatever problems existed with geology as a problem of scientific naturalism. And that trend toward defining problems with natural science as, at bottom, problems with scientific

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naturalism continued. By the 1870s, American theological debate swirled around a conflict that pitted naturalism against supernaturalism. The perception of conflict between the Bible and recent intellectual developments had grown. During the 1870s, it would begin to take on more epic proportions.

The 1850s and 60s were pivotal years in American theology in at least one additional respect. The periodical literature of the nineteenth century suggests that the first inklings of a genuine sense of crisis over biblical criticism first emerged during these decades. A few voices in American theology during these years defined German biblical criticism and theology as an American problem when English-speaking theologians began to show evidence of its influence. The dreaded German neology, some American theological leaders perceived, had begun to infect the American church.

There had been occasional cries of alarm over historical criticism earlier in the century. One reviewer in the Christian Examiner in 1845, for example, praised English Unitarian authors for standing at the vanguard of the defense of the faith against David Friedrich Strauss’s mythical interpretation of the Gospels. Edward Beecher was appalled to find Moses Stuart in 1847 treating the book of Revelation in a manner befitting a German biblical critic; he suggested that Stuart had betrayed the evangelical churches in America by refusing to apply the great prophetic book of the New Testament literally to recent historical events. A. A. Livermore in 1854 argued that the New York Independent

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might have exaggerated when it claimed that “four fifths of the young men of our country . . . are skeptically inclined,” but he nonetheless worried that “disbelief in some quarters has become a fashion. . . .”67 These early worries about the influence of German biblical criticism and the spread of religious skepticism, however, were articulated infrequently and, by comparison with later discussions, remained relatively muted in tone. They simply did not sustain a sense of crisis among the vast majority of writers on theological subjects until the errors of German “neology” seemed to land closer to home.

Not surprisingly, given his vigilant conservatism, Charles Hodge was among the first Americans to suggest grounds for genuine crisis about the influence of German biblical scholarship in America. In 1850, as shown in a previous example, Hodge was appalled to see German Idealistic philosophy influencing the prominent American Unitarian theologian Edwards Amassa Park. This German “Transcendentalism,” as Hodge called it, was no longer “confined to Germany.” He worried that, as with “most of the productions of that teeming [German] soil, it is in the process of transplanting. Shoots have been set out, and assiduously watered in England and America which bid fair to live and bear fruit.”68 One of the noxious weeds springing from the teeming soils of German theology was the conception of Christianity as a “life independent of the propositions . . . of the scriptures.” Another was the notion that the inspiration of the biblical authors differed in degree, but not in kind, from ordinary spiritual illumination. Hodge wanted to weed these notions from Anglo-American soils before they choked out “the authority, if


not the necessity of the Scriptures,” the way such ideas had affected Germany.\textsuperscript{69} Hodge was correct — both “transplants” of German theology certainly did away with notions of biblical infallibility and a high view of biblical inspiration, each of which the Common Sense apologetic had been designed to protect and promote.

Hodge’s concern heightened the more he witnessed such ideas finding a home among American theologians. His lengthy article on the divine inspiration of the Bible in 1857 reflected his growing sense of crisis. As shown previously, his essay outlined the ill effects of German Idealistic philosophy on the German understanding of the Bible. The German philosophy had misunderstood the nature of God’s relationship with the world and, thus, had misconceived God, Himself. Consequently, Hodge argued, German theology had been led astray and abandoned what he insisted was the orthodox, classic doctrine of biblical infallibility. The greater part of German theology had given up the divine origins of the Bible; instead, it favored the notion that the Bible’s doctrines and prophecies “are nothing more than the forms in which holy men expressed their thoughts and aspirations. . .”\textsuperscript{70} “These radical ideas,” Hodge pointed out, “are the life-blood of two-thirds of what passes for orthodoxy in Germany. . .”\textsuperscript{71}

Particularly alarming to Hodge was that these “radical” German errors no longer remained a German problem alone. Hodge worried that they were also the life-blood of “affiliated systems in this country.”\textsuperscript{72} He thought it “lamentable” enough that professed

\textsuperscript{69} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{71} Ibid.: 689.

\textsuperscript{72} Ibid. Emphasis added.
unbelievers in Germany denied the divine origins of the biblical text. But “... it is enough to make a man cover his face with his hands in shame, to see those who profess to be Christians, and who are set for the defence [sic] of the gospel, through treachery, vanity, or weakness, assuming the same position.”\textsuperscript{73} Hodge literally grieved over “[t]he Christians, therefore, in England and America, who strip themselves of their clothing that they may encounter in puris naturalibus the wintry blasts of error. ...”\textsuperscript{74} No longer were the German errors about the Bible and core Christian doctrines confined to the Continent. They were now “radical ideas” with radically destructive implications for religious life in America — a “formula of incantation ... by which all positive doctrines, all fixed forms of faith, are blown into thin air. ...”\textsuperscript{75}

Other American authors during the 1850s and 60s also worried that the ideas of German biblical scholars and theologians were taking root in America. A review by D. R. Goodwin in 1852 provides one example. Goodwin correctly traced the influence of David Friedrich Strauss on William Mackay’s \textit{Progress of the Intellect}. Strauss, a New Testament professor at Tübingen until his radical ideas cost him his position, maintained an infamous reputation in America for his treatment of the Gospel narratives as “myth” instead of “history.” Goodwin, the American reviewer, charged that “Mr. Mackay freely deals out to us the skepticism, ribaldry, and blasphemy of Strauss, in regard to the Holy Scriptures, and

\textsuperscript{73} Ibid.: 695.

\textsuperscript{74} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{75} Ibid.: 689.
on almost all other points. . .”76 Goodwin went on to argue that Mackay, following the lead of the infamous German critic, had made it “impossible [that] the Scriptures should be truly a ‘revelation;’ for the plain reason, that no revelation whatever is possible. . .”77 These represented a new kind of theological worry among American Protestant theologians — one that charged an English-speaking author with the taint of infidel German biblical criticism.

Goodwin built a case against Mackay by linking the infidel German biblical critics to skeptics who had preceded them. As he wrote,

The scoffs of Paine and the mockery of Voltaire are too often mingled [in Mackay’s book] with the stereotyped objections of the old English Deists, and the newly-vamped forms in which, with a bristling array of circulating, critical erudition, and great pomp and circumstance of philosophical pretension, the same objections are reproduced by the modern school of German infidels. 78

The German infidels — biblical critics such as Strauss — had merely added the pomp of philosophy and critical erudition to the old ideas of religious skeptics. Goodwin concluded, “It is quite amusing to see with what naïveté all these things are retailed by Mr. Mackay . . . as if they were now, at length, established facts. . .”79 Yet, the tenor and intensity of Goodwin’s rebuttal demonstrated that he was hardly amused at all. German biblical criticism was becoming more of an American problem as far as essayists like Goodwin were concerned. To him, it was no longer a serious problem in far-off

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77 Ibid.

78 Ibid.: 16-17.

79 Ibid.: 17.
Continental Europe. It had become a serious possible threat to the Anglo-American world, as well.

The evidence suggests that this fear of the growing influence of skeptical German historical criticism continued to grow slowly over the next several years. In 1858, an unknown author in the *North American Review*, for example, expressed alarm at the importation of ideas from European criticism when he reviewed recent commentaries on the New Testament. He related a comical example to illustrate his point:

We were startled the other day on being asked by a friend . . . whether the cock that alarmed Peter [during the night of Jesus’ trial before Pilate] was a Levite on duty at the temple, or a Roman sentinel; and were surprised to learn that this alternative, which we supposed had not found its way into sober English, had been named . . . in one of the most deservedly popular of recent American commentaries. In point of fact, [this erroneous idea] has been gravely maintained by more than one Continental critic . . . The ground of this strange perversion of the only possible sense of the narrative is a passage in an obscure Rabbinical writing, in which it is said, ‘They do not keep cocks at Jerusalem, upon account of the holy things. . .’\(^{80}\)

The interpretation maintained by Continental critics was simply nonsense, and the reviewer was “startled” to have found it in “sober English” — in an American publication, no less.

The reviewer marshaled his obvious humor over such a ridiculous interpretation to make a serious point. As he put it, “[w]here commentators have not outraged probability and the laws of language, they have not infrequently ignored patent or easily ascertainable facts in geography, history, and archaeology, and substituted for them their own ideas of what ought to be.”\(^{81}\) The reviewer went on to outline the fallacies of the German method of biblical criticism. For example, “what prides itself on being the ‘higher criticism’ of the


\(^{81}\) Ibid.
sacred writings, ignores or confounds [the] marks of discrimination” among different literary genres. It does away with a sense of distinction among allegory, myth, history, and eye-witness narrative, he argued, “and seems to substitute for them the more simple law of casting doubts on the authenticity of each book in proportion to its spiritual and religious worth if true.” This was a troubling development to him; “[w]e make this stricture in sad earnestness . . .,” as he put it.82 Equally troubling to him were the German theories of the composite nature of the Pentateuch, the prophetical writings, and the Gospels; he outlined how such theories displayed “great defect.”83 Finally, he expressed dismay over the growing class of biblical critics “of the naturalist school,” which “has for its major premise the proposition, ‘A miracle is incapable of proof.’” The naturalistic law of interpretation precluded the possibility of a trustworthy exegesis of the texts, for they regarded the texts as inherently “mythical or fabulous, while to the religious world they are the reputed record of truth and fact.”84 The reviewer’s juxtaposition of the fallacies of German biblical criticism next to his example of the spread of erroneous interpretations into “sober English” suggests that he linked the two, if only implicitly. The errors of German biblical scholars, his article suggested, might be working their way into American minds.

The publication of Essays and Reviews in 1860 occasioned alarm among many Americans that the infidel theories of the German biblical critics were gaining a hearing in the Anglo-American world. Francis Bowen, for example, sounded an alarmist note when he reviewed the infamous publication in 1861. “The publication of this volume,” he

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82 Ibid.: 238.

83 Ibid.: 239.

84 Ibid.
proclaimed in the *North American Review*, “is a strange and even a startling event.”

Bowen characterized the *Essays* as an “attack” on the Bible’s “authority and truthfulness,” a “scornful depreciation of the evidences” of Christianity, a “bold and dogmatic assertion that any supernatural event whatever . . . is, in the present state of science, essentially incredible. . . .” Bowen identified several sources for their bold assertions: the English Deists of the eighteenth century, physicists who insisted on limiting the study of nature to the observation of natural laws alone, the English skeptical philosopher David Hume, and, not least, the recent “German metaphysicians.” Bowen had “cease[d] to wonder, though not to grieve” at the repetition of the infidel ideas, coming now from the mouths of prominent Oxford clergymen. “. . . [W]e did not expect to see their revival at the seat of orthodoxy by dignitaries of the English Church and officials of high standing in the University of Oxford.” It was not the fact that the assertions of the Essayists were new and original that Bowen found deeply troubling; it was that the assertions and arguments had come from the pinnacle of the Anglo-American Protestant establishment.

The growing sense of discomfort over the apparent incursions of skeptical biblical criticism into the Anglo-American church accompanied a growing perception of theological drift among American church leaders in a general sense. American theology itself had begun to show signs of change by the middle of the nineteenth century. The Scottish Common Sense philosophy, once the close companion of American theology, had

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85 Bowen: 177.

86 Ibid.: 177-178.

87 Ibid.: 178.
been diminished in power and persuasiveness in American Protestant theology as a whole. These developments in American religious discourse near the middle of the century added to this growing sense of contention and further set the stage for an explosion of controversy over biblical criticism during the 1870s and 1880s.

For example, the doctrinal innovations of Edwards Amasa Park, a luminary in Unitarian theology, and Horace Bushnell, a prominent Presbyterian theologian, each attracted the attention of theology’s watchdogs at mid-century. Charles Hodge criticized Bushnell for his slippery grip on the doctrines of the Trinity and the divine nature of Christ in 1849. A year later, he penned a withering critique of both Bushnell and Park. Each of these theological leaders, Hodge argued, had abandoned “common sense” and surrendered to the philosophical “speculations” of the “Transcendental” German theology. At bottom, Hodge explained, the Transcendental theologians — those who had been influenced by German Idealistic philosophy — drew a false distinction between the essence of revelation and the form in which that revelation had appeared. They disembodied the so-called “religious truths,” separating them from the actual facts of history and the actual text of the Bible. Both Bushnell and Park had followed the Germans in making that error. Thus, Hodge argued,

Dr. Bushnell . . . endeavoured to seduce us from cleaving to the letter of the Scriptures, by telling us the Bible was but a picture or a poem; that we need as little to know its dogmas, as the pigments of an artist; the aesthetic

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89 Hodge, “Professor Park’s Sermon”: 642-643.
impression was the end designed, which was to be reached . . . [through] the imagination.  

Similarly, Hodge argued, Professor Park had proposed a distinction between the theology of the feelings and the theology of the intellect. The two modes of theological apprehension did not necessarily agree, “so that what is true in the one, may be false in the other. If an assertion of Scripture . . . clashes with any of our preconceived opinions, we can refer it to the theology of the feelings, and deny its truth for the intellect.”  

Park’s theory, Hodge suggested, held a sinister advantage: “[I]t enables a man to profess his faith in doctrines he does not believe. . . . A judicious use of this method will carry a man a great way.”  

“In this way, it is obvious,” Hodge concluded, that “any unpalatable doctrine may be got rid of, but no less obviously at the expense of the authority of the word of God.” These theological innovations had the effect, in Hodge’s mind, of severely weakening the very foundation of religious life, itself.

This sense of theological drift among some Protestant theologians continued to grow. Bushnell received a second complaint for his departures from orthodoxy in 1866 in the North American Review. The author, most likely Henry James, Sr., noted sarcastically that Bushnell had “persuaded himself” that theologians had made it difficult to believe in the dogma of Christ’s vicarious sacrifice by their “vicious habit” of treating Christ’s death as an exceptional fact of history. Bushnell had maintained that all love consisted in a

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90 Ibid.: 645.
91 Ibid.: 646.
92 Ibid.
93 Ibid.
vicarious sacrifice; therefore, Christ’s sacrifice remained rather unexceptional in nature. James was appalled at the theological heterodoxy. The fact that James, himself a Swedenborgian and no stranger to departures from mainstream Protestant orthodoxy, would react so strongly to Bushnell suggests the severity of Bushnell’s theological heterodoxy in James’s mind.  

Unitarian theologians had departed from conservative notions of the historical and scientific reliability of the Bible only sporadically during the 1830s and 1840s. By the 1850s, however, the view had been all but discarded among contributors on the subject to the Unitarians’ chief scholarly publication. Several Unitarian writers, by that time, openly advocated the overthrow of the old Common Sense understanding of the Bible. George E. Ellis, the frequent contributor to the Christian Examiner, exemplified this shift. Already by 1857, he had heralded the coming of the “New Theology” in Calvinist circles, especially in New England Congregationalism. The New Theology, he proclaimed approvingly, had “subverted the old theory of the inspired infallibility of all the contents of Scripture.” Ellis expressed sincere hope that the movement of New Theology would not “rest content with quibbling with the two words [inspired infallibility], but will labor to define and vindicate a new and defensible statement of such a truth as to the authority and value of the Bible as will make it not one whit less precious to us all.” The root of this theological “agitation” among Congregational leaders, Ellis explained, could be found in the skepticism of Calvinist clerics, themselves. As he wrote, “Men in the maturity of their intellectual powers

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... find themselves struggling painfully within the fetters of the creed by which they have pledged themselves. To accept it in its own plain sense, is to them an utter impossibility."96

More than just a departure from rigid orthodoxies about the nature of the Bible, Ellis went on to link historical biblical criticism with this theological shift. “Now we say, without any fear of being challenged for the assertion,” he explained, “that the best works in Biblical criticism and exposition . . . indicate opinions and a spirit more or less inconsistent with the formulas” of the conservative creed.97 “They have all our sympathy . . .” he added, for “[t]heir object is to redeem Christian truth from metaphysical perplexity; to shape the dogmas of the creed into assertions of faith which will bear to be uttered in this modern age of time. . .”98 Hodge decried and Ellis welcomed the theological changes at home associated with the influence of historical criticism and Idealistic philosophy. While each man reacted differently, they, together, testified to the reality of the theological changes they described.

Likewise, conservative observers of American theology took Congregational thinkers to task for departing from orthodox theology and biblical interpretation in the late 1840s. Moses Stuart, himself, came in for increasing criticism near the end of his career — this, the great Congregationalist biblical scholar whose theology had once seemed deep-dyed in the Common Sense apologetic. In a review of Stuart’s recent commentary on the Apocalypse, Edward Beecher chastised Stuart for adopting a German-style interpretation of this metaphorically rich yet frequently impenetrable book of the Bible. Beecher accused

96 Ibid.: 339.
97 Ibid.: 340. [321-369]
98 Ibid.: 341.
Stuart of betraying the Protestant cause in its long battle against the false religion of Rome. The Protestant world had long been battling against the enemies of God as manifested in the Church of Rome, Beecher reminded readers. “. . . [S]oon after the commencement of the era of Protestant missions,” he wrote, “we see a universal revival of the papal power, manifestly as the antecedent and cause of the final and decisive struggle [to convert the world].”99 Our Protestant fathers,” Beecher continued, “firmly believed that in the Apocalyptic visions [of the Apostle John] . . . they had received from the Spirit of God an inspired prophetic outline of the combatants in that war, and of its origin, progress, and final results.”100 Stuart’s interpretation of the Apocalypse, he lamented, would destroy the biblical perspective on this cosmic struggle against Rome; indeed, “now, just as this great battle is coming to a crisis, . . . a new system of prophetic interpretation arises to strip the people of God of their arms.”101

Stuart had stripped Protestants of their arms, Beecher insisted, by denying that John’s words had anything specific to do with their epic struggle against the Roman Church. Beecher defended the Common Sense understanding of the Bible to the letter. He believed firmly in predictive prophecy, and he was quite certain that the Apocalypse referred in the most literal of ways to the historical events of the early nineteenth century. Stuart’s interpretation of the Apocalypse seemed like a betrayal, for it interpreted John’s words as referring only to the historical context of the first century. In Beecher’s mind, Stuart had denied the genuine prophetic significance of the book by limiting its references


100 Ibid.

101 Ibid.: 273.
to the historical context in which John had written. Eichhorn had advanced a similar idea more than twenty years earlier, and Beecher never imagined it would find such a willing advocate in the leader of an evangelical Protestant church in America. Beecher was dismayed to have been proven wrong; Stuart, in Beecher’s mind, had sold out to the Germans.\footnote{Ibid.}

References to Congregationalism’s slide toward heterodoxy appeared in the Unitarian \textit{Christian Examiner}, as well. One reviewer, for example, singled out both Moses Stuart and Stuart’s home institution, Andover Seminary, as cases in point. The Unitarian reviewer noted that Andover had been founded by conservative Congregationalist leaders in order to check a nascent trend toward liberal theology in New England. Ironically, this reviewer argued, in the founding of Andover,

\begin{quote}
Never did the Orthodoxy of New England receive a more fatal blow. There has been in that institution [of Andover Seminary], since the beginning, a constant tendency towards a more liberal theology; and those who rejoiced most over its foundation, have lived long enough to bewail its departure from what they esteemed [as] the faith that was ‘once delivered to the saints.’ It has been mourned over . . . as fast verging towards the worst errors of Cambridge and Germany.\footnote{“G. W. B.,” “Stuart on the Apocalypse,” \textit{Christian Examiner} 40 (March 1846): 162.}
\end{quote}

While the reviewer himself thought these liberalizing developments at Andover showed signs of a hopeful improvement — he detested the dictates of old Calvinistic orthodoxy — he testified to the fact that many American theological leaders were worrying about change within once-orthodox Protestant circles.
These and similar observations of theological change among American Protestant theologians and biblical scholars frequently circled back to the topic of biblical criticism explicitly. Contributors to the Unitarian Christian Examiner continued to push the envelope of American theological discourse when they began openly to advocate the adoption of historical biblical criticism during the 1850s. The reviewer of Moses Stuart’s commentary on the Apocalypse in the Christian Examiner, above, stood with a small but growing cadre of Americans calling for this change during that decade. As he surveyed the theological landscape in America at mid-century, he saw the Bible in trouble, as many of his contemporaries did. The roots of the trouble were the false, outmoded theories of the Bible that prevailed in American theology; the consequence was “that the Bible is brought into conflict with science, with reason, and with conscience.”104 The author advocated a position that later came to typify American moderates late in the century: American theology needed a “reverent” and “believing” historical criticism of the Bible in order to save the Bible, particularly the Old Testament, from obscurity and irrelevance. He went even further to suggest that historical criticism would do this by discriminating “more accurately than has yet been done, between what is divine and what is human in it.”105 Instead of working to redeem the notion of scriptural infallibility and the Common Sense theological apologetic, this author left both behind. Historical criticism held the promise for the redemption of the Bible.

Historical criticism, instead of undermining divine revelation, instead of rendering the Bible irrelevant to the modern era, might, in fact, accomplish exactly the opposite.

104 Ibid.: 194.

105 Ibid.
Perhaps the historical criticism of the Bible — careful research into the history of the texts and the historical contexts that produced them — might help the Bible meet the challenges of the modern intellectual context. Writing in 1846, this Unitarian expressed what was at that time still a novel idea. Nevertheless, Americans began to consider that novelty in serious ways during the 1850s. The Germans’ theology and biblical criticism, though still widely deplored, were being adopted by a small but increasing number of American theologians. The Germans might not have gotten as much wrong as had once been universally assumed.

The example of the Unitarian theologian George E. Ellis further suggested that that trend was underway, at least in Unitarian circles, by the 1850s. In his article from 1853, mentioned previously, Ellis fully conceded an irreconcilable distinction between the “evangelical” and “philosophical” modes of dealing with the New Testament.106 This perception of division between the scientific and religious realms held important ramifications for the old Common Sense grounding of theology. Where once the Common Sense system posited the complete harmony between the two realms, Ellis now posited an irreconcilable enmity. Ellis pictured an “earnest” and “severe” contest in which “physics and metaphysics, geology and mesmerism, astronomy and chronology, archaeology and mythology, the ghosts of old Egypt and the winged bulls of Nineveh, Spinozism and Hegelianism, science and history” stood “levelling their spears, and seeking to find a vital part in the Gospel at which they may aim.”107 Ellis’s bleak acquiescence in this enmity effectively rendered the Common Sense apologetic a dead issue.

106 Ellis, “The Evangelical and the Philosophical Spirit in Religion”: 62, 84.
107 Ibid.: 84.
Even Moses Stuart, once a paragon of both critical biblical scholarship and the Common Sense approach to theology, also emerged as an advocate for a type of theological change near the end of his career. Stuart continued to stand on the ground of Common Sense in at least one sense. In an article cited above, he acknowledged that language, in fact, was often difficult to interpret, especially the dead languages of the Bible. He applauded the immense progress in philology, the science of these dead languages, over the last half-century. Much of that progress, he pointed out, had come from historical study. Clues to the meanings of words and usages had resulted directly from the discovery of historical facts. So far, he remained on the familiar ground of Common Sense orthodoxy. He suggested a departure from this old terra firma, however, by arguing that language itself ought to be viewed as an expression of history. “Words are signs of ideas,” Stuart argued. “... They are the history of man’s soul, just as the usual accounts of external events are the history (so to speak) of his body.” “In languages where we have specimens of earlier and later writers,” Stuart concluded, “we can distinctly trace the history of progress in any nation.” That is, language was historically grounded. Language changed over time, and language represented the “mind” of its speakers at any given point in history. History had taken on an importance in Stuart’s mind in ways that it had not for his Common Sense predecessors.

These examples by no means suggest that the project of historical criticism had suddenly become palatable to the majority of American biblical scholars and theologians.

110 Ibid.: 265.
Rather, the 1850s and 60s were pivotal decades in the history of controversy over biblical interpretation in America. These years were a time of growing separation in which American theologians and biblical scholars began to part ways on a number of points having to do with the inspiration, infallibility, and historical study of the Bible. It was entirely possible for one author in the North American Review in 1863, for example, to assert the doctrine of inspiration and defend the literal historical accuracy of the Bible’s texts — while another author in the same issue openly doubted Moses’ authorship of the Pentateuch and the historical accuracy of the book of Joshua.111 But despite the conflicting voices, those arguing for the newer understanding of the Bible were growing in number and persuasiveness.

The trend toward open avowal of the full results of German historical criticism continued to grow throughout the 1850s and 60s, as American essayists imagined the positive good that historical criticism had to offer the interpretation of the Bible in the modern era. For example, the Transcendentalist sympathizer Octavius B. Frothingham, a contributor to the Unitarian journal in 1854, both urged the overthrow of the doctrine of inspiration and advocated the enlightenment offered by historical biblical criticism as a means of dealing with modern science. “The dogma of inspiration, without any abatement or concession whatever,” he was sorry to write, “is the corner-stone of the prevailing Protestant theology.” He added, with a note of dismay, “It is partially accepted even by the

Unitarians.”¹¹² “But how is it possible that a liberal study of the Bible can exist under this
dogma?” he wondered. “It is inconsistent with the very idea of scientific method. The
interpretation it demands is positively and perversely unscientific. A moment’s
consideration will make this plain.”¹¹³ He added later, “We are only confounded by the
effrontery that pretends to investigate books whose inspiration is taken for granted.”¹¹⁴

Frothingham urged that a “scientific” investigation of the Bible was sorely needed.
“[T]he Christian Bible could not be understood unless it were taken in connection with
contemporaneous thought,” he argued. The Bible simply could not be understood as a
“singular production, complete by itself, and submitted to its own scientific, artistic, and
literary laws . . .” Instead, it must be studied in its historical connections. Frothingham
continued, “[T]o keep it sacredly aloof from all profane learning; to contrast it, instead of
comparing it, with the wisdom of its own generation . . . is to put it beyond the reach of
knowledge, and even of investigation.” The book, whatever else it might be, was a product
of human history and must be understood in its historical connections. Close examination
showed the book to be “no marvel at all . . .” It possessed “no formal unity of history, no
stiff harmony of doctrine . . .” It might represent “a very precious collection of
documents . . .,” but it was “altogether human in method and construction” and bore all
the marks of incidental development over time.¹¹⁵ Frothingham had completely


¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.: 103.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.: 119-120.
historicized the Bible — older approaches to the Bible had precluded all genuine investigation into the biblical texts, he believed, and modern readers needed a candid investigation of the Bible with a complete picture of its history in full view. Any German historical critic would have applauded him.

H. E. Scudder, in a similar vein, urged American readers to see the positive necessity of the historical criticism of the Bible. He argued passionately that the Bible had become a lifeless book whose color had long since bled into the impenetrable obscurity of historical distance. It “becomes in our hands a dead book, especially in the historical portions, when we suffer the feeling that the abyss of time forms an impassible gulf between it and us. It is one thing to assent to the historical truth of the biography of Moses, and quite another to treat Moses in our minds as if he were a man like ourselves.”

Scudder called it a “development of the last importance” that modern biblical criticism had entered into a “living phase, regarding the past not as past but as present, looking upon it as active, and so presenting it to others.” This modern phase of critical scholarship had become the link between past and present. “It delights in discovering the real connection between things . . . [It] shows how the great fields of ancient and modern civilization are under one Master. . . . It recognizes humanity under [even] its most uncouth garb, and by this power annihilates time and space. . . .”

In a word, historical biblical criticism had the power to bring to life the world of the Bible and present it in all its living colors to the modern world.

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117 Ibid.: 82.
The literalistic approach to biblical infallibility, whether tacitly assumed or actively articulated, made it increasingly difficult for American Protestant theologians to reconcile the Bible and modern knowledge. In response to the pressures created by the modern sciences, especially geology, several thinkers by the middle of the nineteenth century suggested modifications to long-held understandings of the divine inspiration of the Bible. But when Protestant leaders in the Anglo-American world began to carry their modifications to the point of obvious agreement with the assumptions of German biblical criticism, other Protestant leaders began to worry. No longer could skeptical biblical criticism be defined as an unfortunate feature of European theology; it was becoming an American problem, now, as well.

The decades of the 1850s and 60s established the principal terms of debate over historical biblical criticism when controversy finally exploded during the 1870s. The value of historical study and the necessity of theological change emerged repeatedly as points of contention during the controversies over historical biblical criticism during the last three decades of the nineteenth century and beyond. Likewise, the fight against scientific naturalism and defense of the supernatural remained goals lauded by both proponents and opponents of historical critical scholarship during the same period. Liberal theology had remained more or less contained within the confines of New England Unitarianism until this point, and most Unitarians had remained firmly wed to several core tenets of the Common Sense theology, to boot. During the latter half of the nineteenth century, many conservative Protestant intellectuals saw troubling evidence that a wider spectrum of leaders within the Anglo-American Protestant establishment were abandoning their conservative theological opinions and adopting heterodox German views of the Bible.
Buffeted by the winds of scientific difficulties and other challenges from the realm of ideas, the entire edifice of Common Sense theology, including its understanding of the Bible, was poised for collapse by the beginning of the 1870s. Once that collapse had happened, the waters of controversy over historical biblical criticism flooded the landscape of American Protestant theology.
CHAPTER SEVEN

THE NEMESIS OF NATURALISM IN THE CRITICAL STUDY OF THE BIBLE

Modern intellectual developments hold an additional key to the controversy over the historical criticism of the Bible during the late nineteenth century. Fears of an encroaching scientific naturalism first helped push the topic of historical criticism to the center of theological discourse in late nineteenth-century America, and then they continued to animate much of the discussion from that point forward. It is almost a truism that the stunning successes and rising prestige of natural science in the nineteenth century were raising questions of whether other fields of inquiry represented genuine knowledge. This concern about encroaching scientific naturalism had roots that extended deeper than the question of biblical scholarship; it was one of the signal features of the so-called “Victorian crisis of faith,” that upheaval in the intellectual and cultural world that beset very many of the educated members of the English-speaking world from roughly the mid-1870s to the turn of the century.¹

¹ Paul Carter offers perhaps the clearest articulation of the Anglo-American “crisis of faith” thesis. He gives significant attention to the impact of the natural sciences and the methodology of scientific naturalism on Victorian knowledge; see Carter, The Spiritual Crisis of the Gilded Age (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 1971). Bernard Lightman describes the shrinking sphere of the “knowable” and its relation to religious knowledge in the nineteenth century; see Lightman, The Origins of Agnosticism: Victorian Unbelief and the Limits of Knowledge (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987). For similar studies, see also Susan Budd, Varieties of Unbelief: Atheists and
biblical scholarship — and the ensuing anxiety over whether the Bible was indeed the Word of God — formed only one of the main features of the Victorian crisis of faith.

Late-Victorian theologians and biblical scholars, whatever their differences on the question of biblical criticism, stood united in principle against the spread of “agnosticism,” “atheism,” “materialism,” “rationalism,” and “naturalism” in the interpretation of the Bible. Writers most typically used these terms loosely, sometimes interchangeably. But in a general sense, these terms signified theologians’ insistence on the existence of a personal God who intervened, sometimes miraculously, in human history; the fact of divine revelation; and the possibility of genuine knowledge in these matters of ultimate importance.\(^2\) The controversy over higher criticism between 1870 and 1900 might rightly be interpreted, therefore, as a struggle within the ranks of men who had enlisted to fight a war against naturalistic philosophy. This larger war against naturalism united American theologians, despite their deep divisions on questions of science.

This fact frames the controversy over historical criticism within the larger fight to save understandings of the world grounded in Christianity from the encroachments of a malignant naturalistic ontology. When, for example, Philip A. Nordell, the pastor of the First Baptist Church in New London, Connecticut, wrote to William Rainey Harper, he conceived of the controversy over biblical criticism in precisely these terms. Harper, still a member of Yale’s faculty, already had become perhaps the leading American voice for

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\(^2\) These concerns suggest that “naturalism” is the most accurate term, though I sometimes adopt the terminology of my subjects by using the word “rationalism,” as well.
reconciling evangelical Christianity with the historical criticism of the Bible. Nordell, commenting on a minor flap over something in Harper’s *Old Testament Student*, believed the incident revealed “a feeling of great sensitiveness, not to say uneasiness, as to the ultimate results” of the higher criticism. “The situation is very different here from what is in Germany,” Nordell continued. The vast majority of American biblical critics had had “a practical experience of the power of religion” — in a word, they were evangelicals. American scholars, therefore, rarely approached the study of the Bible without “an immeasurable conviction of the supernatural origins and supreme authority of the Bible. . . . How different it is [in] Germany, I need not mention.” Nordell saw himself as an ally in Harper’s fight for a “believing” biblical criticism against the Germans’ unbelieving rationalism.3

The drive against naturalistic philosophy, then, added impetus to both sides of the controversy over biblical criticism, as indicated previously; it also, by corollary, created the climate within which the controversy over biblical criticism could flourish in the United States. It was not until the problem of scientific naturalism moved to the forefront of concerns shared by many American intellectuals and educated people that historical criticism became a matter of serious public discussion at all. Naturalism was the reason historical criticism came to public attention, and it helps explain why the controversy over historical criticism occurred in the 1870s and not earlier in the century.

Worries about naturalistic theories of the universe and of encroaching religious skepticism were nothing new in the hearts and minds of American intellectuals, particularly

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theologians, academics, and church leaders. Questions about the reality — or at least knowability — of the supernatural had been treated in scholarly and polemical literature of Europe since the early eighteenth century, and religious skepticism was nothing new to well-read Americans during the nineteenth century. Indeed, discussions of the perils of naturalistic science, the denial of the supernatural, the impossibility of miracles, and all manner of materialistic philosophies filled volumes in the popular and scholarly literature of the United States during the second half of the nineteenth century.⁴

In short, very few Americans saw historical biblical scholarship as a grave danger until naturalism first emerged as a real danger and threatened to redefine genuine knowledge as only that which could be empirically demonstrated. That is, the identification of scientific naturalism as a contender for chief explanatory power in the epistemological world of the Victorian era enabled Americans to identify naturalistic strains in historical biblical criticism more readily as a threat. This explains why naturalism was a central issue in discussions about biblical criticism from the 1870s through the turn of the century.

The New York Independent offers a good window on ways in which materialism, rationalism, and scientific naturalism became the common foe of American theologians and gave impetus to the crisis of biblical criticism. The Independent was a semi-popular religious weekly. In 1870, its circulation approached something like 100,000, and it drew more advertising revenue, issue for issue, than any other newspaper in the United States,

⁴ Evidence of such discussions can be found, for example, in Budd, Varieties of Unbelief; Carter, Spiritual Crisis of the Gilded Age; Chadwick, Secularization of the European Mind; Lightman, Origins of Agnosticism; and Meyer, “American Intellectuals and the Victorian Crisis of Faith.” See also the discussion in this ch., following.
secular or religious. Its editor and publisher, Henry C. Bowen, shared the sympathies of conservative Congregationalism, but the paper maintained a relatively non-sectarian evangelical tone. The Independent reached a broad, trans-denominational audience, and it was far and away the most widely read religious periodical during the quarter-century following the Civil War.5 Its pages chart the emergence of public controversy over biblical criticism especially well.

Among the most important signposts on the road to that controversy in the pages of the Independent was crisis over Darwinism. It is a truism of American history that Darwin was central to the secularization of American intellectual culture during the late nineteenth century. Darwin, like few other figures, upset the more-or-less coherent Protestant understanding of the world that dominated much of the nation’s formal intellectual life during the nineteenth century. The Origin of Species, Darwin’s seminal work, first appeared in 1859, and by the early 1870s its potentially troubling conclusions had broken upon the minds of American thinkers.6 Darwin’s theories failed to capture the attention of the editors of the New York Independent at all before 1871; once Darwin received notice, however, direct discussion of naturalism in science followed shortly behind, and, caravan-like, the debate about historical biblical criticism followed closely behind that.


6 A large literature describes the reception of Darwinism among Anglo-American Protestant intellectuals. Two of the most definitive works on the American reception are Ronald Numbers, Darwinism Comes to America (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998); and Jon H. Roberts, Darwinism and the Divine in America: Protestant Intellectuals and Organic Evolution, 1859-1900 (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988).
The first direct discussion of Darwinian evolution in the pages of the *Independent* appeared in 1871, when James D. Dana, the famous biologist at Yale University, published a short letter in response to requests from the newspaper’s editor. Dana confronted the issue of evolution head-on, and the salient points he identified were those elements of Darwin’s theory that pressed the question of scientific naturalism. Referring readers to his *Manual of Geology*, he affirmed that geological science sustained a view that life had evolved through successive cons. That much was certain. The real questions pertaining to Darwin’s theory, however, had to do with Darwin’s unique proposals: whether evolution occurred through natural selection, whether species had evolved into new species over time, and whether development proceeded through natural causes, supernatural causes, or some combination of the two. Dana noted that Darwin’s argument of evolution by means of natural selection was losing ground in Darwin’s own England. However, evolution as the result of some sort of natural causes appeared to be gaining ground, despite the as-yet inadequate explanations of the mechanism of change. Still, Dana pointed out, even most earnest advocates of the theory of natural selection believed in some sort of role for God

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in creation, even if only in the creation of human life. Thus, Dana shows evidence, himself, of wanting to limit the scope within which naturalistic explanations could operate.9

Natural science, Dana admitted, could not prove that the hand of God was ever needed in the progress of creation through the ages; neither could it claim conclusively that the hand of God was not needed. Therefore, he argued, we needed more observation to determine the special secondary causes that have worked to cause evolution; until we had more conclusive evidence, it would be dishonest to entertain a purely naturalistic explanation for evolution, whatever scientists suspect to be true. Thus, intoning a theme common to Briggs and Hodge in their debate over inspiration, Dana argued that the question of whether evolution was a natural or a supernatural process would be settled empirically — by observation. “At the same time,” Dana assured his readers, the broad results of such observation would pose no major problems for Christianity, for “he who recognizes man’s exalted position over Nature, and his allegiance to its Author, will see God in his works, and a spiritual purpose in creation; and his faith will have no occasion to waver, however the progress of investigation may widen the range over which secondary causes, or God’s fixed modes of action, are seen to have prevailed. God’s fixed laws should have continued unvarying, except where new energy was required for higher developments, in the system of progress.”10 The ascertainment of natural laws, Dana reminded his readers, was simply the discovery of God’s fixed modes of action, and God

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9 Dana’s view here corresponded to other intellectuals who complained that some scientists wanted to make all science a matter of physical causes. See James Turner, “Le concept de science dans l’Amérique du XIXe siècle,” Annales: Histoire, sciences sociales 57 (May-June 2002): 753-772.

would not act outside his fixed modes of action unless they were inadequate to move evolution forward. Whatever evolutionary theory determined about the means of biological change, then, God still remained the source of life and ruled over the process of its creation. Thus, as early as 1871, Darwin was raising the issue of the role of God in human history, at least in the popular religious press. Dana, in this article, took pains to assure readers that Darwinian theories did not obviate God’s role in creation. Life had indeed not been reduced to the results of a meaningless natural process.

From this early starting point, the nagging problem of scientific naturalism found on-going impetus in the increasing attention given to Darwin’s theory of natural selection. James McCosh, widely known as a philosopher in the Common Sense tradition and the president of Princeton College, revisited Darwinism not two months after Dana had inaugurated the first direct discussion of the issue. McCosh took note of Darwin’s *Descent of Man*, which had just been published. Darwin’s later work extended *The Origin of Species* and theorized that humankind itself had descended directly from the animal kingdom. Like Dana, the core question McCosh identified in Darwin’s theories was their naturalistic foundation. Specifically, McCosh asked whether Darwin’s theory of natural selection could account for all of the modifications to organisms required to create the enormous diversity of life we see today. The answer, he implied, was no. Neither did natural selection explain the origin of life. While the naturalistic mechanism of evolution in

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Darwin’s theories held much explanatory power, it remained incomplete and, therefore, left plenty of room for God to act. As McCosh put it, “...[B]ehind the development there is a power which produced the life developed, and is involved in the development — the powers working in which naturalists do not profess to be able to explain.”12 Thus, he concluded, naturalism could not entirely explain the development of species and the beginning of life. God had infused the creation of life on earth through and through.

The question of naturalism — the explanation of all phenomena without recourse to divine agency — continued to loom large in religious discourse in the 1870s, and it had direct implications for the understanding of the Bible. By the time Darwin had captured widespread attention, American theologians and other thinkers had already taken serious note of men such as T. H. Huxley, Herbert Spencer, and John Tyndall, whose naturalistic theories of development in human society and the physical world had made them famous (or, more often than not, infamous). Nevertheless, Darwinian theory thrust the issue of naturalism to the forefront of religious concerns during the 1870s, pressing the problem of naturalistic philosophies of the world in new, significant ways. Whether an explicit concern or an unspoken doubt, many American thinkers feared that a naturalistic understanding of the universe, presented so compellingly in Darwin’s work, would prevail over centuries-old views that depended on the existence of God and the reality of the supernatural. This was truly the first time that significant numbers of reading Americans began to worry that God was dead.

Once the discussion of Darwin had begun in the pages of the Independent in 1871, a gradual change in the content of the articles followed. As the 1870s progressed, the

discussion of Darwin mushroomed into other related areas, and the question of whether all the phenomena of the universe could be explained by the action of natural laws became a common theme. For example, the answer to questions of naturalism took on practical importance for the experience of faith within the American Church. Was prayer effective? Was there a God who listened to his people? If the universe obeyed only the dictates of natural law, what difference did prayer make?

Tayler Lewis, now, late in life, a Professor of Oriental languages at the University of New York, was one among many who found the problem of Darwinism pertinent to the practice of prayer.\textsuperscript{13} Even in these practical questions about prayer, Lewis felt constrained to address the Baconian requirement for empirical evidence. It was true, Lewis admitted, that the efficacy of prayer could not be demonstrated with absolute certainty because the answers to prayer are necessarily coincidental. Nevertheless, he continued,

there are facts here, in the Church’s experience, which men . . . who have so much to say about facts, as the ground of all true induction, ought to take some notice of. . . . When science takes the other ground [that prayer cannot be answered], it is something more than a question of the first of Genesis or the universality of the flood. No ‘reconciliation,’ so called, ‘of Science and Revelation’ could prevent the Darwinian theory of Nature from sponging out the most precious teaching of Christ in respect to the relation between men and their prayer-hearing Heavenly Father. How many pages of the New Testament would [Darwin’s theory] leave an utter blank?\textsuperscript{14}

Darwin’s theory was naturalistic, Lewis argued, and naturalism necessarily removed God from His active role in earthly affairs. There was no reconciling Darwinian theory with the New Testament, in Lewis’s mind, because of the inherent naturalistic underpinnings of


natural selection. This example shows that Darwinism raised the broader issues of scientific naturalism and, ultimately, the nature of revelation and the biblical record. Lewis’s train of logic in this example linked Darwinism to the larger question of naturalism, and it linked both of the former to questions of religious practice and the understanding of the Bible. This kind of logical linking of these or similar ideas became more pronounced and more common as the decade progressed. It suggests that the problems of Darwin and scientific naturalism were finally responsible for throwing open the doors to the question of the source and nature of the Bible.

As the question of naturalism moved to center stage in the pages of the Independent in the 1870s, it became clear that most evangelicals were finding it particularly unsettling that natural science, by seeking ever greater power to explain the questions of life and the universe, increasingly appeared to stand opposed to faith. Natural science, for many contributors to the Independent, appeared increasingly as the enemy of evangelical Protestantism, rather than the friend it had once been. It was in this context that William C. Wilkinson published a piece to defend again the efficacy of prayer in early 1873.15

John Bascom, a month later, broadened this discussion of prayer to a defense of the possibility of the supernatural. Against scientists’ new claims to represent the only sure way to knowledge, Bascom countered that recent natural science “can make nothing of the supernatural, and is offended by it.” This was a troubling development. When natural science promoted the philosophy of naturalism, it stripped life of purpose and meaning. As he put it, “The natural [—] rigid, predetermined, giving no scope to liberty, no play to

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imagination, no ground to faith [—] becomes more and more . . . a prison-house in which the soul expends its forces, with false, fleeting appearances, for no sufficient ends.”

This problem of purpose alone required natural science to keep close company with the supernatural. If the hopes, aids, and purposes associated with the belief in the supernatural were to cease, the human soul could never find uplift and reach its “true spiritual elevation.” An “inspired life,” by contrast, blends the supernatural “as a subtile [sic], inseparable element, with the natural. Neither the natural nor the supernatural are tolerable in their separation. . . .”

Darwinism continued relentlessly to press the issue of scientific naturalism like no previous theory of natural science. The previous examples suggest that many American thinkers found themselves increasingly troubled by Darwin’s theory because it appeared to leave little room for God in the explanation of life. Darwinian theory by 1873 had raised the issue of scientific naturalism in the Independent, and the ultimate result was that many feared the explanatory powers of scientific naturalism were growing. The debate between naturalism and supernaturalism remained a source of anxiety throughout the 1870s and beyond, and it played directly into the controversies over the Bible, its origins, and its meaning for the modern world.

As the discussion of Darwinian theory led to more general discussion of naturalism, an increasing number of thinkers were drawn into the effort to limit the scope of natural science’s operation. With increasing frequency, also, they linked naturalism to

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17 Ibid.
the question of the Bible and historical biblical scholarship. For example, an editorial in the *Independent*, possibly by Henry C. Bowen, was mapping out boundaries for natural science by 1876. The author pointed out “What Science Does Not Know,” arguing that the much-vaunted powers of natural science were over-drawn: “Our complaint against scientists is not that they have too little faith in religion, but that they have too much faith in their own systems.” “So far as actual knowledge [sic] is concerned,” he pointed out, “light, heat, electricity, magnetism, chemical affinity, and life are just as mysterious as ever.”\(^\text{18}\) He demanded the “keenest criticism” into the scientists’ “materialistic philosophies” of the universe. “The more thoroughly [that] materialistic and atheistic claims are studied,” he was certain, “the more clearly are they seen to be untenable. Nor is this our assertion only. It is the admission of every thoughtful scientist.” Religion, itself, would benefit from a critical engagement with modern thought. “The only danger to be feared by religion,” he concluded, “is not from knowledge, but from ignorance.”\(^\text{19}\)

This competition between the voices of naturalistic science and religious-based intellectual authority was reflected clearly again later in the same year. This time, the editor of the *Independent* appeared to limit the scope of religious-based knowledge. In doing so, he also drew the Bible explicitly into his considerations. His editorial, in September 1876, discussed evolutionary theories in anticipation of a series of lectures by “Darwin’s bulldog,” the English biologist Thomas H. Huxley.\(^\text{20}\) The editor noted that the lectures


\(^{19}\) Ibid.

\(^{20}\) For studies on Huxley, see, for example, Mario A. di Gregorio, T. H. Huxley’s *Place in Natural Science* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1984); Roberts,
would undoubtedly stir up Charles Hodge, the eminent Princeton theologian who had recently equated Darwinism with atheism. The question of the validity of various evolutionary theories, this editorial argued, depended on what the scientists said. “[I]n this matter the theologians are at a disadvantage.” Indeed, “[t]he belief of the world is to be settled utterly without their advice…” He argued unequivocally for limits to religious-based intellectual authority on the matter. Intoning a now-familiar theme, he argued that inductive natural science, rather than religious science, held the key to genuine knowledge in the matter of evolution. Thus, “[w]hether species have been produced by development or by creation is a question of fact, to be settled purely by scientific evidence. It is not a matter of philosophy or of morals, to be decided by consulting the psychical or ethical consciousness; nor is it a matter of revelation, to be decided by consulting the Word of God. For the conclusion we must examine to see whether new species are being now produced about us and whether the records which the earth has preserved of its own history tell us anything on the subject. This is the task of the naturalist and not of the religionist; and, so far as we can judge at present, the answer with the naturalists will give is in favor of the new theory.”

This piece, then, did not merely affirm the inductive method of natural science. It went considerably further and walled off an entire realm of knowledge from the theologians. The author, in effect, was helping lay the foundations for a Berlin Wall in the realm of knowledge: the exclusion of religious-based epistemologies from the other

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Darwinism and the Divine, passim; and Paul White, Thomas Huxley: Making the “Man of Science” (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

intellectual disciplines. The hope for theology, he argued, lay in religion’s ability to accommodate and adapt to the truth of natural science. Given the likely victory of some form of evolutionary theory in the field of natural science, “it is not good generalship for those who set themselves up as the special defenders of revelation to make [the Bible] absolutely inconsistent with evolution.”22 Biblical literalism had to go.

Finally, the same author affirmed that evolution did not deny God. Here, he argued directly against Charles Hodge:

That evolution is inconsistent with the literal prosaic interpretation of the story of Adam created de novo out of dust, and Eve out of his rib, we do not deny; but the story of Eden is so true in its essence and yet carries so many signs of a symbolic or poetical meaning that this fact need disturb none but those who will not listen to reason. . . . None but the most rigid defenders of an unchangeable faith, settled to its minutiae some centuries ago, need fear the doctrine [of evolution].23

While not arguing for the overthrow of the Bible, the author argued clearly for a new understanding of the Bible. This position reflected the emerging moderate-liberal position among American theologians, who argued for a new understanding of the Bible that would better accommodate the results of modern knowledge. Thus, it is clear in this example how discussions of Darwinism had begun to generate questions about the nature of the Bible. Darwinism brought the discussion of the historical and scientific reliability of the Bible to public attention and raised the possibility of a less than-infallible Bible. That, in turn, tilled the soil that allowed debate over historical biblical scholarship to take root.

Supernaturalism and science remained key issues in the Independent throughout the 1870s, and they continued to press the question of the Bible’s authority. An editor,

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid.
writing in 1878, summed up the prevailing sentiment: he commended Noah Porter, the President of Yale University, for finding new ways to commend Christianity to thoughtful moderns. But he complained that Porter’s conservative critics had failed to grasp the central conflict of the age: “that of supernaturalism against naturalism. . . .” Rather than quibble about the orthodoxy of Porter’s apologetics, Christians ought to wake up to the “danger” of modern “assaults” on biblical revelation and follow Porter’s example: “do what can be done to make the Christian religion seem reasonable and attractive to the [modern] world. . . .”24 Efforts such as Porter’s appeared only more necessary to Protestant leaders as philosophical naturalism continued to expand its reach.

These efforts to protect the domain of the supernatural appear related to debates about “science,” itself, during the latter half of the nineteenth century. For example, the Yale Sanskritist William Dwight Whitney complained in 1867 that some theorists were “trying to materialize all science,” and he worried what would happen if humanity were reduced to the level of physical determinism. Proper science, he believed, was not limited to the study of physical causes, and he was not alone. Many other American intellectuals agreed with him by defending the broader notion of the term.25

When the Independent in 1878 described the Bible as suffering from the blows of naturalistic philosophy, it spoke a language of conflict that, by then, was becoming familiar

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to the Protestant reading public.26 Taken as a whole, that language highlighted three important terms — Darwinism, naturalism, and revelation. Darwinism was the naturalistic theory par excellence, and naturalism threatened both the concept and the content of biblical revelation. The juxtaposition of these three terms gave the language of conflict its alarming tone.

The first major example clearly to link all three appeared in an exchange between Tayler Lewis, the aging Orientalist at the University of New York, and Augustus Blauvelt, an evangelical pastor and a frequent contributor to the Independent. Blauvelt, among the clearest instigators of this crisis mentality, began in 1874 to warn readers of the growing tidal wave of European unbelief. From Blauvelt’s vantage point, that wave of unbelief had all but swamped the European Continent, and it was sure to reach American shores soon. Blauvelt relayed warnings from the Continent supplied by Theodor Christlieb, an evangelical theologian at the University of Bonn and a leader in the Evangelical Alliance.27 In Christlieb’s words, as Blauvelt quoted them, “[t]housands of educated people feel themselves compelled, by an essential requirement of modern intellectual culture, to assume a critical position toward the whole of Christianity . . .” Citing another European authority, Blauvelt continued, “a man must be blind indeed not to see that Christianity is engaged in a deadly struggle, in which she is suffering alike from the unwise defenses of her friends and from the attacks of her enemies.” Blauvelt saw baleful implications for Americans in this European struggle. “. . . [J]udging from the present signs of the times,”


he warned, “. . . what intelligent American Christian observer can fail to tremble at the prospect ten years in advance of us” unless a coordinated defense be undertaken immediately? The point was clear: Western intellectual culture was being eroded by the pounding surf of apostasy, and the American churches must shore up their levees to withstand the cresting waves.

It was in this atmosphere of growing crisis that newer theories of specific biblical critics found their first mention in the *Independent*. Following up on his warning of the rising waves of apostasy, Blauvelt warned that the existing Christian apologetic defenses (those of the old Common Sense school of philosophy) stood wholly inadequate against the pounding surf of modern thought. And in this discussion, Blauvelt specifically mentioned historical biblical criticism as part of the threat. Apologists of the past, to be sure, had provided an able defense of Christianity. But the current state of Christian apologetics did not meet the new questions of contemporary thought, particularly biblical criticism. Blauvelt highlighted the example of Heinrich Paulus, the German biblical scholar, whose rationalistic interpretation of the Gospels threatened the credibility of the supernatural elements of these crucial biblical documents. Other recent threats in modern biblical interpretation included Strauss’s hypothesis of the Gospels as mythical accounts; Renan’s hypothesis of the Gospels as legend; and the “tendency hypothesis” of Ferdinand Christian Baur, the New Testament critic at Tübingen. Blauvelt argued ardently that his Christian contemporaries were “utterly unprepared” to offer a “successful resistance


against [such] incursions of modern unbelief. . . .” He quoted Christlieb’s assessment of the situation in England, where “theological training has been too long neglected in her great universities, and the vast majority of her clergy remain quite inadequately furnished for encountering the attacks of modern criticism.” England sorely lacked “experienced leaders through the thickest labyrinths of modern criticism,” and with terrible results. Many “are seen heedlessly rushing on toward the most dangerous precipices of critical skepticism,” while others “still thoughtlessly cleave to the bare letter of Scripture and their church formularies, and think to entrench themselves behind these paper fortifications in a vain security from the importations of German theology and critical science.” Blauvelt endorsed Christlieb’s assessment of the present need: “. . . Christian faith stands in need of a more extended line of defense, addressed in various suitable forms to the different sections of modern society. . . .” These were new, strong words about the threat of historical biblical criticism to the wider American reading public. They had been nearly unparalleled in their intensity before this point, and they sounded a call to swift, strategic action, lest the Gospel drown in a sea of modern unbelief.

Blauvelt continued to sound the clarion for the defense of the faith in several subsequent pieces; in all of them, he intoned similar warnings of the “grave religious crisis now rapidly converging and crowding upon all our Christian churches.” The threat of scientific naturalism and its implications for the Bible were recurring refrains. Again in

30 Ibid.

September 1874, for example, Blauvelt argued that modern science presumed supernaturalism to be undemonstrable, if not outright impossible. This bias against belief in God posed a genuine threat to the notion of divine revelation, and the well-known rationalistic biblical critics Renan and Strauss testified to the reality of the threat. Christianity, he argued, was staggering under the load of the modern “scientific” way of thinking that denied the possibility of the supernatural.32

Before he had finished sounding the alarm in the pages of the Independent, Blauvelt mapped out a course of argumentation that became characteristic of the crisis over biblical scholarship in America during the following decades. In charting that map, the question of the inerrancy and historical reliability of the Bible served as his compass point. The two points of greatest contention, as he defined them, were, first, that the Bible, “verbatim et literatim, is a divinely inspired history, without a single error, even down to details; and, secondly, that to maintain this view of the Bible presents the only possible way in which to save, even in respect of its essentials, the real Christian faith.” Blauvelt commended Charles Hodge, the great defender of orthodox Christianity at Princeton Seminary, and other orthodox theologians for their efforts to help Americans “answer the modern forms of doubt, which reach us from the other side” of the Atlantic. The Germans, however, were already far ahead of the Americans when it came to addressing these questions of biblical inspiration and infallibility. “Fortunately for the future of Christianity among us . . . the discussion of the Bible question in all its essential relations to modern unbelief has already been most thoroughly canvassed, pro and con, by the leading German scholars.” Still, Blauvelt pointed out that Christlieb, the evangelical

theologian at Bonn, had to admit that “the assumption [had become] now so common among educated and half-educated people in Germany that the mythical character of the gospel narrations and the spuriousness of most of the books of the New Testament” were beyond serious question. Christlieb asserted that the orthodox view of Scripture might yet be vindicated through “a careful and scholarly examination” of the apologetic work of more conservative German scholars such as August Neander, a theologian and church historian, and August Tholuck, a professor of theology. However, the efforts of these faithful scholars had not yet persuaded the skeptical critics of Germany.33

Instead, the “skeptical views, in a fair and scholarly conflict with the orthodox views, have thus far succeeded . . . in planting their banners upon the ramparts of the general German mind, beyond a doubt or question.” Worse still were the deteriorating conditions regarding the Bible and scientific naturalism outside of Germany. Quoting another authority, Blauvelt noted that serious students of the Bible in England now found themselves in serious trouble. Such students claimed that “Christianity fears no inquiry and that the open Bible is the inheritance of Protestants. . . .” Yet, the student who read the histories of Christianity, the introductions to the New Testament, and other recent works of biblical scholarship “perceives that the history becomes less and less distinct as the investigation is more searching and precise. Every new publication proves that its author deems former explanations to be faulty or insufficient, and his refutation of previous solutions is usually the most conclusive portion of his work. The student is reluctantly compelled to admit that the materials for a trustworthy life of Jesus and for a

truthful history of those momentous [biblical] events do not exist.”34 Thus, the verbal inspiration of the Bible no longer could stand as a bulwark against skepticism, for the modern challenges to the older doctrine of inspiration had rendered the position practically indefensible.

As for orthodox theologians who assumed otherwise, still arguing against modern thought from the assumption of the verbal, literalistic inspiration of the Bible, Blauvelt concluded it was hopeless. Those who insist on linking divine revelation with the inspiration of the Scriptures sought to do battle with modern religious skepticism from behind a “paper fortification, . . . a vain security from the importations of German theology and German science.” The weight of intelligent Christian reflection leaned heavily toward one conclusion: “it will be utterly impossible to save the belief in so much as the leading supernatural features of Christianity . . . by maintaining the orthodox dogma of the inspiration of the Bible.”35 Blauvelt’s opinion, it turned out, came to characterize self-styled “believing critics” such as William Rainey Harper and Charles Augustus Briggs who, during the 1880s and 90s, carried the same banner to “save the Bible” for modern civilization.

The solution to the problem of anti-supernatural bias in modern thought, argued Blauvelt, depended on the question of evidence. Like his contemporaries Hodge and Briggs — indeed, like nearly every thinker in late nineteenth-century America — Blauvelt appealed to the ideal of inductive scientific investigation. He argued that the facts must decide theory and that theory must not shape the scientist’s or the theologian’s handling of

34 Ibid.

35 Ibid.
the facts. Conceding one point to the naturalistic scientists, he admitted that Darwin had demonstrated his evolutionary arguments on the basis of evidence. Yet, the world possessed evidence for the supernatural features of Christianity, as well. Foremost among these was the impossibility of Christ’s disciples being able to carry out the deception if Christ’s resurrection had not, in fact, occurred. Greater still was the impossibility that such a hoax would have fooled the multitudes who had witnessed Christ’s death. In a similar article, Blauvelt turned his discussion to Darwin and the origins of life. Again, how one decided these questions came down to a matter of the evidence. As Blauvelt put it, “[A]ll hypotheses, without distinction or exception, thus far advanced by the mere physical scientists in explanation of the problem [of the origins of life] . . . are at bottom equally only conjectural.” The naturalists in evolutionary biology have gone beyond factual evidence when it came to the origin of life; thus, their claims were not valid.37

If contemporary theologians would put aside their reliance on the outmoded notion of biblical infallibility, the evidence would still support the existence of God, the possibility of the supernatural, and the reality of divine revelation. However, the task of combating naturalistic epistemologies required much diligence and intellectual sophistication:

If, for example, [the Christian believer] is to be any more intelligent in his belief than a Tyndall or a Darwin or a Huxley . . ., then he must understand far more than merely the bearings of the discoveries of modern physical science on the supernaturalism of Christianity. If he is scientifically to

36 Blauvelt, “Modern Denial of the Supernatural”: 4-5.

vindicate the claims of such supernaturalism, despite all modern objections to the contrary — *hoc opus, hic labor est* 38

Such labor was the crucial task of the theologian in the modern age.

Not every American theologian shared Blauvelt's bleak assessment of the modern crisis of faith. Only some heeded the calls of Blauvelt and others by setting to work formulating better doctrines of Scripture and new refutations of rationalism. To a large number of Americans, neither of these projects seemed to offer a viable solution to the problems Christianity encountered in the wider intellectual arena. Tayler Lewis, in a written response to one of Blauvelt's pieces, criticized Blauvelt for arguing that modern science truly presented new challenges to the Christian religion. It was not the discoveries of science that posed a threat, but “new theories about reasoning, about evidence. Among all these the main hypothesis simply amounts to this: nothing can prove the supernatural because the supernatural is impossible.” 39 The battle with modern intellectual culture was a battle against the naturalistic assumptions that had begun to shape modern thought in a non-Christian form. Lewis went on to argue in a subsequent article that the battle against naturalism was not entirely new. It was true that recent forms of rationalistic biblical scholarship appeared to be new; indeed, a new rationalistic form of biblical science had taken flight since the work of Paulus at the beginning of the nineteenth century. But the ideas and “catchwords” of contemporary rationalistic biblical scholarship merely

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give an appearance of newness to theories and ideas as old as human thought. The ‘impossibility of the supernatural’ is one of these, and as an accompaniment the continual prattle kept up about ‘natural agencies,’ the ‘reign of law,’ ‘cause and effect,’ ‘invariable sequence,’ etc., as though these were all new and the human mind had never recognized any such ideas as law and Nature previous to this latter part of the nineteenth century. . . . For this denial of the possibility of the supernatural . . . is sheer atheism; and that, certainly, is very old. It is simply saying that Nature is all, involving the very profound conclusion that, therefore, there is nothing outside of it.  

Lewis pointed out that the church through the ages had dealt with the problem of naturalism. He reminded his readers that “this whole argumentative region transcends science — I mean inductive science. From the very force of terms, a science of Nature — that is, of force, motions, atoms — cannot carry us beyond Nature, so as to see whether there is anything on the outside or not.” Thus, when Blauvelt claimed that Christian apologists of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries offered no help to the Church in the late nineteenth century, he was wrong, Lewis argued. The only aspect of the new naturalistic ideas that the older apologists could not answer was the absurd attempt of modern thought to explain existence without supposing the supernatural. Such was Lewis’s assessment of Blauvelt’s warnings about the new threats of naturalistic assumptions in modern thought. Nevertheless, the fact that Lewis found occasion to point out that naturalism was nothing new, itself, belied the reality that American thinkers were talking about it frequently and intently. Even detractors from the “crisis” thinking of men like Blauvelt tacitly acknowledged that the crisis existed.

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41 Ibid.

42 Ibid.: 5-6.
Before the decade of the 1870s had passed into history, the Independent’s regular reprints of sermons and addresses reflected the sense of crisis over naturalism with crystal clarity. After the exchange between Blauvelt and Lewis, the questions of naturalism nearly always brought up discussion of some aspect of the Bible or biblical criticism, as author after author gave serious warnings about the troubles for Christian belief in the modern world. For example, one reprinted sermon in 1878 expressly linked scientific naturalism to particular concerns about the Bible’s reliability, historicity, and divinity. The author, H. W. Thomas, asserted that the “first marked tendency of our age . . . is the general breaking away from old beliefs — the wide unsettling of the public mind in reference to things once regarded as settled. Our is peculiarly an age of doubt.” By this point in time, such assertions were no less poignant for having become familiar. The author went on to bemoan “the growth of science and criticism, and the gradual unsettling of what was, perhaps, an overconfidence in the literal and critical infallibility of the Bible.” Here was the clear link between concerns about naturalism and the Bible’s reliability, historicity, and divinity.43

In citing reasons for this sorry state of affairs, Thomas laid blame where most of his contemporaries did: natural science. Recounting several developments in modern thought, Thomas pointed out the importance of the modern sciences of geology and paleontology, which had “unfold[ed] the method of creation and demand[ed] a longer time in which the earth was created and an earlier date for the appearance of man in the world

43 H. W. Thomas, “Tendencies of the Age,” Independent 30 (June 6, 1878): 5. Reprint of sermon delivered at Centenary Church, New York, May 12, 1878.
than our [biblical] chronology allows...” This new evidence, he reminded his audience, had demanded a reinterpretation of the book of Genesis. Not only that, but

questions of history and criticism have arisen as to the authorship of some of the books in the Bible, and as to the dates of the books and the authority of the councils that composed our present canon — admitting some books and excluding others. And, along with all this, the demand has arisen for a new translation of the Bible... [because] scholars have admitted that the mistakes and inaccuracies in our present translation were such as to... demand a new translation.44

The result of these developments had been devastating to Christian religion, for “all this has had a tendency to weaken the confidence of the masses in the authority of the Bible, and, hence, also in the authority of religious teachings.” At the current historical moment, there had emerged even in America “an open and active opposition to religion, a positive avowal of unbelief, and an organized antagonism to the Bible and the Church and the whole system of religious truth and worship.” And the stakes, in Thomas’s mind, were enormous:

The tendencies of the age, I think, then, are nothing less than to a conflict of thought and ideas and principles the most radical and far-reaching in their consequences that the world has ever known. In thought and principle the conflict is both philosophical and religious. In action the conflict is to be over the possibility of society to exist without a religious faith.45

Like Blauvelt several years earlier, Thomas defined the main ground of conflict as a battle of materialism and naturalism, on the one hand, and belief in God, on the other:

“No God; no soul; no future life... [T]he same is true of the whole materialistic

44 Ibid.

45 Ibid.
philosophy. The battlefield of thought is to be on this ground.”\textsuperscript{46} “[S]ociety [is] already trembling to its center” while awaiting the outcome.\textsuperscript{47} Thomas’s example, from 1878, captures what was by then the poignant sense of crisis over historical biblical criticism in relation to the epic struggle between belief and unbelief.

Once the themes of naturalism, Darwinian evolution, and the trustworthiness of the Bible had been articulated together, as in this example, authors in the \textit{Independent} tended to keep linking them with one another. The years 1878-1882 were banner years in this important publication for full-blown expressions of the sense of crisis over these and closely-related issues. In January 1878 alone, there were four articles about Darwin, heredity, evolution, and scientific naturalism.\textsuperscript{48} In March of the same year, William Robertson Smith, an Old Testament scholar who was currently standing trial for heresy in the Presbyterian Church of his native Scotland, received discussion in two separate articles.\textsuperscript{49} In April, David McCrae, a pastor, dealt with the topic of current “Theological

\textsuperscript{46} Ibid.: 5-6.

\textsuperscript{47} Ibid.: 6.


Upheavals.”

In mid-1879, Simon Newcombe, an astronomer and economist at the Washington, D. C., Naval Observatory, wrote about “The Attitude of Theology Toward Science.”

E. J. Wolf asked the unsettling question, “Are Genesis I and II Pictorial or Historical?” later the same year.

And in 1880, the editors of the Independent began printing large portions of Asa Gray’s lectures on Natural Science and Religion. In February, that eminent Christian botanist at Harvard dealt with the prickly questions of evolutionary biology for belief in the Genesis account of creation; he offered readers a theistic theory of biological evolution he believed remained consistent with the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures.

Like Gray’s piece, several articles in 1880 took up the debate about Darwinian natural selection, and several discussed the possibility of reconciling evolutionary theory with the notion of biblical revelation, in particular. This further demonstrates how the increasing acceptance of Darwinism demanded a serious reconsideration of biblical

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inspiration for many educated Americans. One essay, for example, connected Darwinian evolution directly to the undermining of the inspiration of the Bible. The author, William Hayes Ward, noted a criticism of evolutionary theory in the *Herald and Presbyter*. That criticism maintained, “We cannot see how any one can avail himself of a salvation taught in the Bible unless he regards the Scriptures as the Word of God, or enjoy salvation by the second Adam unless he believes we fell in the first, who was created in the image of God, instead of evolving from irrational animals.”54 With more than a hint of humorous sarcasm, Ward roundly criticized such thinking. “The man who allows his love for Christianity to exceed his love for truth is on the road to logical idiocy . . . ,” he argued. “The most common form of this error is in the assumption that we can under no circumstances allow that the Bible contains a single incorrect statement, on any subject whatever. . . .” The notion was absurd, for, facing the slightest difficulty, “the whole grand structure of our faith topples to the ground. . . .” To drive home the point, Ward included a rather humorous example: “[t]he Bible says the hare chews the cud,” he wrote, “but scientists say it does not. These expositors must, on the authority of Lev. xi, 6, give the lie to science, or say that to chew the cud means to seem to chew the cud. The incarnation, the resurrection, salvation through Christ all hang in one scale, balanced by a hare’s cud in the other. . . .” This was the logical conclusion of maintaining the conservative position on biblical infallibility, “[f]or, as *The Observer* says, on the matter of Evolution, . . . ‘That testimony of God by Moses is the staple on which depends the whole chain of man’s history from creation to completed redemption. Pull out that staple, and the scheme falls.’

To my apprehension,” Ward concluded, “it is better philosophy and better prudence to hang the thread from the cable, and not the cable from the thread.”\textsuperscript{55} Thus the link between Darwin and the question of the literal infallibility of the Bible had been clearly drawn by 1880.

Following Ward’s piece, the \textit{Independent} in 1880 also reprinted four addresses delivered at the meeting of the Presbyterian Alliance, a trans-Atlantic organization of English-speaking Presbyterian bodies. These four addresses demonstrate further the general pattern by which the discussion about science and the Bible unfolded over the course of the 1870s. James McCosh, the president of Princeton University, dealt with evolution as he considered the question of “How to Deal with Young Men Trained in Science in this Age of Unsettled Opinion.” He noted that evolutionary theories had created an unsettling of belief, particularly among the educated younger men of the current day.\textsuperscript{56} He insisted on the primacy of scientific investigation in dealing with the problem. “Our first inquiry, when a supposed discovery in science is announced, should be not, Is it consistent with Scripture? but, Is it true?” he urged. Yet, religion need not fear, for no truth could be unfavorable to biblical religion. Indeed, he concluded, “Some of the scientific truths which were at first viewed with suspicion by religious people have turned out to be favorable to religion, not only by widening our view of the works of God, but by positively confirming the Bible. . . .”\textsuperscript{57}

\textsuperscript{55} Ward: 5.

\textsuperscript{56} McCosh, “How to Deal With Young Men Trained in Science in this Age of Unsettled Opinion,” \textit{Independent} 32 (October 14, 1880): 2.

\textsuperscript{57} Ibid.: 3.
An address by Henry Calderwood, a professor at an American college, addressed
the second great point of concern, the reality of the supernatural. In discussing the
“Relations of Science and Theology,” Calderwood, like previous authors in the
Independent, argued that science and theology ought only to operate within separate
realms. Theology may not speak to science, he argued, because theology stood upon an
authoritative revelation. Likewise, science may not overturn belief in the supernatural
because science concerned itself solely with empirical observations in the natural world.58
In dealing with the problem of naturalism, then, Calderwood helped to wall off the realms
of science and religion from one another further.

Similarly, Robert Flint, also a professor at an American college, addressed “the
present prevalence of Agnosticism” and its relationship to modern biblical scholarship. In
his words,

Many of our modern critics first assume that there can be no real objective
knowledge of God and divine things; that the phenomena of religion, those
of Christianity included, may be fully explained on naturalistic principles,
and, at least, without reference to special revelation; and then proceed to
explain away, by means of narrow and one-sided theories of development
and ingenious but inconclusive critical processes, everything which conflicts
with their assumption in the history of the Jew, in the character, words, and
works of the Saviour, in the lives of the apostles, in the Bible, and in the
Church.

Thus, an agnostic temper infects much critical biblical scholarship; agnosticism “vitiates
and corrupts [the Bible] . . . and is undoubtedly very dangerous to religion.”59 Flint argued
for the need of what some of his contemporaries called a “believing” biblical criticism. As

58 Henry Calderwood, “Relations of Science and Theology,” Independent 32
(October 14, 1880): 4-5.

he put it, “A truly reverent, truly enlightened, profound, and thorough biblical scholarship can alone successfully combat Agnostic criticism.” Churches must not fight a rear-guard action in response to modern forms of agnosticism regarding the Bible. Instead, they must press forward to deeper, greater theological understanding. Thus, the Church ought to pursue the truth, not from agnostic presuppositions, but with a positive face toward all sources of religious knowledge, including reverent biblical scholarship.\(^6^0\)

Finally, the \textit{Independent} concluded its coverage of the meeting of the Presbyterian Alliance in 1880 with a piece by E. P. Humphrey. His piece shows the logical endpoints of all the previous discussion to be the inspiration of the Bible and historical biblical criticism. Humphrey mentioned several theories of biblical criticism, rejecting each because they undid the unity and chronological unfolding of the biblical revelation as given in the text. Any theory that did so ran contrary to the internal claims of the Bible, for the Bible presumed “an organic unity of veritable history, tracing consecutively the progress of redemption from its foreordination before the world was to its accomplishment after time shall have run its course.”\(^6^1\) Humphrey went on to anticipate a position later adopted by A. A. Hodge, the son of the great Charles Hodge, in a famous debate with a theological rival within his own Presbyterian Church, Charles A. Briggs: Humphrey clarified conservative arguments about the divine inspiration and infallibility of the Bible by

\(^6^0\) Ibid.

emphasizing that idea that God’s inspiration was behind even the very choice of the specific words the original authors had used when composing the texts.62

Thus, these four articles on the Presbyterian Alliance capture neatly much of the debate about biblical scholarship as it stood at 1880 in America. They encapsulate the history of the emergence of biblical scholarship as a topic of public consideration: Darwin and evolutionary theory first raised questions about the Bible. The possibility of the supernatural and its relationship to the natural realm informed the debates about evolutionary theories, and scientific naturalism raised even more fundamental questions about the existence of God. The possibility of knowledge about the things of God thus became an anxious point of contention, and all of the previous problems informed opinions about the nature and source of the Bible. The final result was that the Bible and biblical scholarship became topics of debate, as American intellectuals argued about the relationship of the human and the divine in the production and collection of the texts that make up the volume.

These items were habitually debated alongside one another by the early 1880s. The article titles in the Independent show as much: in September 1880, John Bascom considered the “Search for the Supernatural.”63 Norman Fox in November discussed “The Extent of Inspiration” in the words of the Apostles.64 Simon Newcombe undertook

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62 Ibid.: 8. See Ch. 8 for a discussion of the debate between Archibald A. Hodge and Charles A. Briggs.


a three part series on modern scientific naturalism in December. In September, 1881, Edward Hayes Plumptre, who was just retiring as a professor of exegesis at King’s College, London, discussed together historical biblical criticism, scientific naturalism, and ethics in dealing with the “Field of Conflict Between Faith and Unbelief.”

Finally, an editorial in 1882 took up two frequent topics of the biblical critics, the authorship of the books of the Bible and the relationship of the divine and human elements in the biblical material. On the latter point, the author drew a distinction between “what is personal and transitory as contrasted with the divine and the eternal” in the biblical record. The strategy was intended to avoid the increasingly frequent spasms of anxiety caused by the exposure of biblical “errors.” Moderates and liberals, in particular, had increasingly emphasized this distinction since the first half of the nineteenth century. One can find such earlier examples in Moses Stuart’s admission that Genesis might contain a technically faulty cosmology but yet maintain an infallible theology, or in Andrews Norton’s insistence that the New Testament epistles contained both the bright light of


God’s revelation and the dimmer reflections of fallible human wisdom.\textsuperscript{68} However, this later author, writing during the 1880s, put this kind of distinction to a somewhat different use. Even the comparatively liberal Andrews Norton believed it was essential to know with reasonable certainty the identity of the sacred authors, for the knowledge of their identity provided the basis for accepting their written testimony as true — he was a Common Sense Realist, after all.\textsuperscript{69} The editorial of 1882, by contrast, dispensed with this kind of concern about establishing the identity of the biblical authors. He argued, in fact, that concern over the authorship of the books of the Bible was misplaced; if the Holy Spirit had considered the authorship of the texts important, he would not have left humankind completely in the dark as to who wrote Genesis, Ruth, the Chronicles, the Psalms, and Hebrews. Our lack of knowledge of the human authorship in no way impugned the Bible’s message, he argued, for “[t]hese are not questions of faith, but questions for the critics.”\textsuperscript{70}

Between 1880 and 1882 alone, as many as twenty additional articles on various aspects of Darwinism, evolutionary theory, materialistic philosophy, and naturalism


\textsuperscript{69} See, for example, Norton, “A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews,” pt. 4: 343-344.

\textsuperscript{70} Ibid.
occupied the pages of the Independent — a substantial proportion of the total number of articles — while discussions about the Bible, theories of inspiration, and historical criticism continued unabated. And this by no means exhausts the number of articles on such topics in the Independent published before the turn of the century. To cite just a few examples of literally dozens, James McCosh, the outgoing President of Princeton, was asking “Is There Final Cause in Evolution?” still in 1889. Francis L. Patton, the incoming President of Princeton, was defending the reality of the Resurrection (even while questioning the strict infallibility of the Bible) in 1890. The Independent published a symposium of seven learned theologians in 1893 that included pieces on the “Harmony of the Two Revelations” of religion and natural science, “Science, Ignorance, and Religion,” and “The Present Nature of Relations Between Biology and Revelation.”

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was arguing “The Case Against Evolution” even as late as 1898. And Charles Briggs was discussing again the nature of biblical inspiration in two pieces on “The Scientific Study of the Holy Scripture” still in 1899.

Spurred by discussions about Darwinism, evolutionary theory, and scientific naturalism, the question of the nature and origins of the Bible by 1880 clearly had emerged as an equally important topic of public discourse. Indeed, debate over the nature and origins of the Bible quickly overshadowed the former topics in its ability to excite public controversy, and it was not until the 1920s that the fundamentalism controversy thrust Darwinism back to center stage.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

HISTORICAL CRITICISM, THE BRIGGS-HODGE DEBATE, AND THE QUEST
FOR A “SCIENTIFIC” THEOLOGY

As with many stories from the intellectual and religious history of the late
nineteenth century, science stands out as one of the major plot elements in the story of
controversy over biblical criticism. As shown earlier, the modern sciences had seriously
challenged the authority of the Bible. The body of modern knowledge, by late century, had
raised ever more troubling questions about the Bible’s once-presumed historical and
scientific accuracy, and the encroaching philosophy of scientific naturalism appeared to
threaten both the concept and the content of biblical revelation.

But what is more, the very definition of science itself — what the term meant and
how the “scientific method” functioned as a means of ascertaining truth — became a point
of increasing controversy, even confusion, during the late nineteenth century. Recent work
by James Turner suggests that the term “science” underwent a transformation during this
period. Whereas the word had once described the systematic approach to knowledge in
any of a wide variety of subjects, natural scientists in the latter half of the nineteenth
century began to cut away at the term, limiting it more exclusively to their own naturalistic
methods and approach. During the period of this study, then, the meaning of term
“science” was in flux. Sometimes it meant “natural science” in the way an American might
naturally use the term at the beginning of the twenty-first century; at other times, it
denoted something broader, encompassing the ordered, disciplined approach to knowledge
in fields from history and theology to geology, physics, and chemistry. Regardless of how
intellectuals used it, however, one thing was clear: “science,” whether biology or philology,
implied naturalistic methods.¹

The Common Sense philosophy helped create and sustain an emphasis on science
and scientific legitimacy throughout the nineteenth century. By focusing on the empirical
and Baconian approaches to knowledge, the Common Sense philosophy was “scientific” at
its core, and its pervasive influence on American intellectual culture helped ensure that
science would remain, even grow as, a prominent arbiter of truth. Even while the
Common Sense philosophy exerted less and less direct influence over the disciplines after
mid-century, its ideal of empirically grounded science exerted ever greater influence. By
century’s end, empirical science had made a credible claim as the sole arbiter of truth.²

In that intellectual climate, those who sympathized with historical criticism
frequently justified the newer theories of the Bible on the grounds of empirical science.
For example, at least a dozen articles by William Rainey Harper, the great popularizer of

concept de science dans l'Amérique du XIXe siècle,” Annales: Histoire, sciences sociales
57 (May-June 2002): 753-772.

² See espec. Theodore Dwight Bozeman, Protestants in an Age of Science: The
Baconian Ideal and Antebellum Religious Thought (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North
Carolina Press, 1977); and Turner, Without God, Without Creed: The Origins of Unbelief
in America (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), espec. 179-202. See also
Walter H. Conser, Jr., God and the Natural World: Religion and Science in Antebellum
America (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1993); and Herbert
Hovenkamp, Science and Religion in America, 1800-1860 (Philadelphia: University of
the higher criticism, asserted the historical method as the only authentically scientific approach to biblical study. In one example, he blamed the “rubbish” of older views on scripture as the source of “all” contemporary religious skepticism. The remedy to modern unbelief, he argued, was a “scientific” approach to the Bible, one that included, at its heart, the new historical methods.3 Newman Smyth, a theologian at Andover Seminary, similarly admonished biblical scholars to “keep, if possible, open eyes for all the facts.” A proper empirical science of the Bible would encompass not only “the religious experience of the soul,” but also the “facts of nature and history . . .”4 And Charles A. Briggs, the convicted Presbyterian heretic, defended biblical criticism as “the test of the certainty of knowledge. . . .” Criticism “tests” our understanding of the Bible according to the “laws of thought and of history,” and it thereby “eliminates the false, the uncertain, [and] the unsubstantial from the true, the certain, [and] the substantial.” Criticism was the means to truth.5

Proponents of biblical criticism such as Harper, Smyth, and Briggs were convinced the historical critics stood on the solid ground of empiricism. But detractors of historical criticism clung to an empirical model of knowledge, as well. Some of the most ardent defenders of the conservative position, the theologians at Princeton Seminary, championed the Baconian model of inductive science, a holdover from the old Common Sense philosophy — though even supporters of historical criticism frequently invoked inductive science, as well. Conservatives’ views on science, tenacious grasp on the Scottish

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4 Newman Smyth, Old Faiths in New Light, 2d ed. (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1879), vi, 47.

philosophy, and firm adherence to theological orthodoxy conspired to force them into increasingly defensive postures during the final decades of the nineteenth century. And whether or not intellectuals lived out inductive principles in practice, all who put their faith in empirical science as a means to truth, conservative and liberal alike, found themselves constrained to take the new biblical scholarship seriously.

It is not surprising, given all the attention, that science served as the touchstone of debate in the growing controversy over biblical scholarship. The clash between A. A. Hodge and Charles A. Briggs, among the earliest and most important outbreaks of controversy over biblical criticism, centered on several questions having to do with science. A. A. Hodge was a widely known theologian at Princeton Seminary, the son of Charles Hodge, and a defender of conservative Reformed orthodoxy. His opponent, Charles A. Briggs, was the Old Testament scholar at Union Seminary whose support of biblical criticism resulted in the heresy conviction. The clash between these two men exemplified the importance of science as a central term of debate in the controversies over historical biblical criticism during the late nineteenth century.

On the surface, Briggs and the younger Hodge had much in common. Each believed firmly in the power of empirical science as a means to truth, and each articulated a commitment to the inductive method. Also, the practice of “scientific theology” occupied a primary place in their respective understandings of their work, and their respective commitments to it entailed a common opposition to the ever-widening influence of scientific naturalism. Moreover, each one championed Westminster theology, described

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6 See the Introduction for a discussion of Briggs’s heresy trial.
himself as “evangelical,” and experienced the crisis of historical criticism firsthand. A casual glance would not necessarily suggest they would end up as rivals over historical biblical scholarship.

At least part of their rivalry can be traced to a schism, dating from 1837, between the New School and Old School factions of the Presbyterian Church. A. A. Hodge had cut his teeth in the Old School tradition, Briggs in the New School. There were significant differences between the two parties. Old School church leaders generally treated church polity as an article of faith, and they made church order a matter of divine law. On the whole, they were also fairly cautious about evangelical revivalism. While Old School thinkers believed in the new birth and the power of the Holy Spirit, many feared that a growing emphasis on conversion and religious experience was leading to the de-emphasis of doctrine and a dilution of Westminster theology.

New School leaders, by contrast, placed less stock in the organization of the Presbyterian Church, preferring often to cooperate across denominational lines for the higher purpose of evangelism. New Schoolers often practiced an emotional form of revivalism more like their Methodist and Baptist peers, often stressed conversion over doctrine, and sometimes called for the simplification of the Westminster catechism. The historian Lefferts Loetscher suggests that these two wings of the church became loosely linked to different attitudes toward biblical studies later in the century. The New School tradition, with its greater emphasis on emotion and personal experience, was more inclined

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to accept new views of the Bible. The Old School’s emphasis on reason and demonstrative
logic lent itself to a more rigid theology and made its adherents less likely to accommodate
an historicist understanding of the Bible.⁸

These two factions had patched up enough of their differences by 1869 to reunite
into a single denominational polity. To help this marriage thrive, Briggs conceived of a
theological review that would unite theological opinion in the denomination. But his
hopes were quickly dashed. Biblical criticism was already on the minds of Briggs and
Hodge, the Review’s first managing editors, by the time the Presbyterian Review began to
take shape in the late 1870s, and they disagreed on the topic from the start. Hodge wanted
to air their differences in the pages of the Review, but he was not at all certain what the
outcome would be. “I have no fears as to [our] differences,” Hodge wrote in a personal
letter to Briggs, “except at the point you frankly opened yourself. We do not agree on the
Robinson [sic] Smith case, nor on the line of which that case is sample. . . .”⁹

Although Hodge got the name wrong — it was William Robertson Smith — the
Smith case had become important to American Presbyterian theologians and Bible
scholars. As mentioned in the introduction to this dissertation, Robertson Smith was a
professor of Old Testament in the college of the presbyterian Free Church of Scotland at
Aberdeen whose published works, most notably his 1875 “Bible” article in the
Encyclopedia Britannica, mediated to the English-speaking world some critical theories of

⁸ Lefferts A. Loetscher, The Broadening Church: A Study of Theological Issues in
the Presbyterian Church since 1869 (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1954),
21, 27.

⁹ Archibald A. Hodge to Briggs, November 16, 1879, Briggs Transcripts (BT), vol.
5, 335-336, Burke Library, Union Theological Seminary, New York.
German scholars on the Old Testament. Robertson Smith was subjected to a protracted series of judicial proceedings in the Free Church from 1876 to 1881 because of his views; although the General Assembly ultimately acquitted him of heresy, Smith was stripped of his professorship. The trials of William Robertson Smith attracted the attention of the American religious press and thrust the issue of biblical criticism to the fore in the American Presbyterian Church.¹⁰

Hodge wanted a Review discussion of biblical criticism in connection with a survey of the Robertson Smith case, in particular. “It is the living question, & its discussion is demanded . . . ,” he reminded Briggs, and he underscored his point by speculating that the topic “would make the Review famous & prosperous more than any other possible plan.”¹¹ Briggs, likewise, saw the issue of biblical criticism as “a great, difficult & timely subject,” and he agreed to its discussion, though it be “a most difficult & anxious task.”¹² The result was a series of articles between 1881 and 1883, evenly split between conservative and more


¹¹ Archibald A. Hodge to Briggs, January 14, 1881, BT 5, 478. Apparently, Hodge cared at least as much about the viability and prestige of the Review as he did about historical biblical criticism.

¹² Briggs to A. A. Hodge, December 8, 1880 and May 18, 1881, Hodge Papers (HP), Box 21 #50, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Libraries.
liberal views. That discussion made northern Presbyterians the first evangelical denomination to give such attention to the new critical theories of the Bible. More than that, as the historian Mark S. Massa has pointed out, this ecumenical publication provided the primary arena in which American evangelicalism as a whole wrestled with the challenges of historical criticism.

Hodge and Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, then a professor of New Testament at Western Seminary, co-authored the first article, entitled simply “Inspiration.” In it, Hodge offered a positive statement of the doctrine of inspiration and a delineation of the proper limits of biblical criticism, both of which Briggs rebutted in his article on “Critical Theories of the Sacred Scriptures in Relation to their Inspiration,” which appeared later that same year.

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Hodge assumed a calm but defensive tone on the question of biblical inspiration. He repeatedly affirmed the infallibility of the sacred texts as penned by the sacred writers. God was “pleased to give us . . . an infallible record of [His] revelation absolutely errorless, by means of Inspiration,” he wrote. This same affirmation resounded throughout Hodge’s “Inspiration” article, his other published works, and his private correspondence with Briggs. Hodge simultaneously established narrow limits within which the results of modern criticism would be “in equilibrium” with the doctrine of inspiration. That is, Hodge was willing to grant the validity of the critical project as long as its conclusions did not overturn the doctrine of the Bible as the Word of God. There were some boundaries that biblical criticism could not rightly cross.

Foremost among these boundaries in Hodge’s mind was the supernatural component of Scripture. He yielded no ground to critics who denied that the Scriptures were a supernatural product. “Every naturalistic theory . . . of the evolution of Scripture,” he wrote, “is necessarily opposed to any true version of the Catholic doctrine of Inspiration.” Also, Hodge disallowed any theory of biblical criticism that ascribed to any book of the Bible a date or authorship inconsistent with the book’s own claims or with assertions that appear in other parts of the Bible. This proscription was based on a fairly

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16 A. A. Hodge and Warfield, “Inspiration”: 227. The word His is implied in the immediate context of the passage.

17 See, for example, A. A. Hodge, A Commentary on the Confession of Faith (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1869), espec. his ch. entitled “Of the Holy Scripture”; and Outlines of Theology, 2d ed. (New York: Robert Carter and Brothers, 1878), espec. his ch. entitled “The Inspiration of the Bible.”


19 A. A. Hodge and Warfield, “Inspiration”: 236.
straightforward line of reasoning: First, the Church received the Old Testament books on
the direct example and authority of Christ. Second, the Church received the New
Testament books based on their authorship by the men whom Christ commissioned and to
whom he granted special authority to teach — namely, the Apostles and their companions.
Thus, any critical theory that denied the Apostolic origin of any New Testament book, the
truth of Christ’s specific claims about the Old Testament and its contents, or the
“truthfulness” of any book authenticated on these grounds was necessarily in conflict with
the Bible’s own claims about itself. And to deny the claims that Scripture made for itself
would be to deny that Scripture is the inspired Word of God, the only infallible rule of
faith and practice.20 As for other limits that biblical criticism could not rightly exceed,
Hodge went even further in a private letter to Briggs shortly after his Presbyterian Review
article appeared and voiced his doubt as to whether biblical criticism truly could be “within
the proper bounds of ecclesiastical toleration when it overturns the historical reliability of
the books of the Canon.”21 Hodge even expressed his disapproval of “the more liberal
school of Christian scholars” who held that the Scriptures “are, while for the most part
reliable, yet limited by inaccuracies and discrepancies.”22 Any “inaccuracy” in the Bible, be
it small or great, would undermine its credibility and trustworthiness, he believed. None of
these things would Hodge concede.

20 See, for example, A. A. Hodge, Confession of Faith, 50 ff.; A. A. Hodge and
Warfield, “Inspiration”: 235-236.


22 A. A. Hodge and Warfield, “Inspiration”: 237.
This is not to suggest a kind of intellectual philistinism on Hodge’s part. Although he believed that even inaccuracies and discrepancies in the Bible would undermine its divine authority, he never suggested that the Scriptures resulted from some kind of divine process of dictation. No, these were historical documents, penned at various times in history by real men, who in a very real sense reflected the times in which they wrote. Thus, the biblical authors were in no wise omniscient, and the Scriptures themselves displayed certain limitations in the knowledge of their authors. As Hodge put it,

The information [the Scriptures] convey is in the forms of human thought, and limited on all sides. . . . They are written in human languages, whose words, inflections, constructions, and idioms bear everywhere the indelible traces of human error. The record itself furnishes evidence that the writers were in large part dependent for their knowledge upon sources and methods in themselves fallible; and that their personal knowledge and judgments were in many matters hesitating and defective, or even wrong.23

Thus, he acknowledged with most other biblical scholars of his day the limitations in the knowledge of the biblical authors, not to mention the limitations inherent in language itself. But Hodge did not consider this acknowledgment to be in any sense a concession to the biblical critics. He gave two reasons why. First, he noted that the Bible never claimed for itself absolute literalness or comprehensive exactness in any of its narratives. There is a difference between a strict understanding of exactness, on the one hand, and accuracy, on the other, he asserted. Second, Hodge took refuge in the biblical texts as they had been originally written. He posited that all affirmations of Scripture were completely errorless “when the ipsissima verba of the original autographs are ascertained and interpreted in their natural and intended sense.”24 Hodge proposed to ascertain and interpret the

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24 Ibid.: 238.
ipsissima verba of the original texts through the use of biblical criticism, primarily textual criticism, within the proper limits that he set out. As Hodge put it elsewhere in the “Inspiration” article, God’s intent with the Bible was “a record without error of the facts and doctrines [that] He had commissioned His servants to teach.”25 The Bible, according to Hodge, was found to be absolutely errorless when its texts, in their original form, were interpreted in the way their authors (or Author) intended. It was found to be absolutely errorless when its books were held liable only for what they meant to teach, not for incidental points that touched on other areas of knowledge.

This is all by way of adding nuance to Hodge’s understanding of the source and nature of the Bible. Several questions remain to be answered regarding Hodge’s thought on the relationship of the divine and human elements in the inspiration of the biblical texts; his emphasis on the “original autographs” of the Bible; and his framing of his task as an effort to set limits in order to achieve equilibrium between modern criticism and the doctrine of inspiration. However, Hodge’s nearly complete rejection of the higher criticism of the Bible should not be lost. The Bible was the infallible Word of God. Biblical criticism threatened that view, and he remained staunchly opposed to its methods and presuppositions. As Hodge wrote to his antagonist, Briggs, “We can & do heartily respect you as a Christian brothers [sic.], while we honestly & persistently believe that the doctrines of Prof. Smith’s article (endorsed by you) are false & dangerous.26 Briggs, though a fellow Presbyterian and evangelical, presented a position that stood in sharp contrast to Hodge.


26 A. A. Hodge to Briggs, April 13, [1882], BT 6, 139-140.
Briggs’s printed response to the Hodge-Warfield article appeared a few months later. In his essay, Briggs answered the objections to the critical project raised in the Hodge-Warfield article. He staked out both an interpretation of the doctrine of inspiration and a position toward biblical criticism that were fundamentally different than Hodge’s. Briggs did affirm Hodge’s claim that any purely naturalistic theory of the origin of the various scriptural texts was inconsistent with the Church doctrine of inspiration, as was any theory that posited authors and dates of books of the Bible that contradicted the Bible’s own internal claims.27 He articulated a similar position in a letter to Hodge, assuring him, “On this common ground we can stand firmly.”28 Yet, Briggs claimed in his Review essay that the theory of inspiration that Hodge propounded was not the doctrine of inspiration as stated in the Westminster Confession of Faith. It was, Briggs argued, merely the doctrine shared by a large number of theologians, the product of an unnecessary and unfortunate obsession with biblical infallibility, and it wrongly forced its adherents into a dogmatic opposition to critical theories of the Bible.29 Such a position was simply un-Protestant to Briggs, and it ought never to be conceded. On the contrary, he wrote, “Biblical Criticism bases its right on the principles of the Reformation over against the Roman Catholic principle of the supremacy of Tradition and Dogma.”30 Briggs was


28 Briggs to A. A. Hodge, January 13, 1881, BT 5, 474-478.


30 Ibid.: 556.
arguing here against Hodge’s efforts to establish limits within which biblical criticism
would be “in equilibrium” with the doctrine of inspiration. The Reformation had been
itself a critical movement, Briggs implied, and it had replaced the rule of tradition and
dogma with freedom of conscience and inquiry. Briggs believed that biblical criticism
embodied the essence of that Protestant critical spirit.

Thus his position on the role of the higher criticism entailed two ideas. First, he
wanted no less than “to establish the Higher Criticism on a permanent basis in relation to
the Church doctrine of Inspiration,” as he wrote in a personal letter to Hodge.31 Criticism
was a Protestant right and held equal importance with the Christian church’s affirmation of
the divine authority of the sacred texts.

Second, Briggs believed American scholars of the Bible had for decades been
asking fundamentally the wrong questions of the texts. Briggs urged theologians to leave
behind their petty preoccupation with questions of the “errors” and infallibility of the
Bible. For one thing, he argued, the questions related to biblical infallibility were largely
beside the point. They encouraged readers to miss the forest for the trees, to neglect the
grand sweep and divine significance of the biblical narrative in favor of a too-particularistic
scrutiny of the texts. For another thing, Briggs implied, this preoccupation with the
question of biblical “errors,” ironically, placed conservative defenders of the Bible in
uncomfortably close proximity with the rationalistic biblical critics of Europe. Both
approaches to biblical interpretation wrongly indulged in their own kinds of overly
particularistic scrutiny of the biblical texts. The approach of straightforward historical-
scientific literalism, associated in large part with the old Common Sense apologetic, and the

31 Briggs [to A. A. Hodge], n.d. [early 1882], HP, Box 21 #50.
approach of rationalistic historical criticism, associated with liberal European biblical scholars, were not as different as most had assumed. The very implication would have vexed most conservative evangelical theologians in America, who were used to thinking of the Bible largely in terms of propositional assertions, and who were used to thinking of liberal European critics as fundamentally different than them. But Briggs urged that the recognition of this similarity was a necessary condition for moving forward out of the deepening morass of confusion and controversy over the Christian revelation.\textsuperscript{32}

Connected to this idea, Briggs urged theologians to embrace a “more profound” criticism of the Bible. That “more profound” criticism entailed a holistic appreciation of the literature, history, and religion of the Bible’s contents. This holistic approach, alone, would preserve the recognition of the voice of God speaking in the Scriptures, whatever else it might reveal about factual deficiencies in the biblical material or the composite nature of the biblical texts.\textsuperscript{33} Thus, Briggs argued for the end of the propositional approach to biblical truth that the Common Sense approach to theology had encouraged.

Related to that task, he labored to undo the binary opposition between rationalistic historical criticism, on the one hand, and historical and scientific literalism, on the other. Briggs personally assured Hodge of his deeply felt passion to “strike at” the “illegitimate” type of criticism steeped in rationalistic presuppositions.\textsuperscript{34} His words testified to one point of deep agreement with his opponent Hodge: both men agreed that biblical scholars and theologians must not allow the ideas of scientific naturalism completely to determine the

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\textsuperscript{32} Briggs, “Critical Theories”: 579.
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid.: 579.
\textsuperscript{34} Briggs to A. A. Hodge, January 24, 1881, HP, Box 21 #50.
\end{flushright}
methods of biblical study. Indeed, Americans who otherwise stood apart from one another in their willingness to accept the methods of European historical criticism nearly always stood together in defining rationalism or scientific naturalism as their common foes in the controversies over the Bible in the late nineteenth century. The historian Mark S. Massa has argued that Briggs rightly perceived the “fragility and vulnerability of the evangelical world view in light of historicist claims. . . .” Both Briggs and his opponents had dedicated themselves to preserving the older American Protestant outlook.35 Whereas his opponents rejected the new criticism of the Bible because of its potentially corrosive power, Briggs endeavored to baptize the new criticism as a means of preserving the older vision.

One might expect that similar affirmations of “scientific theology” and a similar opposition to scientific naturalism would entail a fundamental agreement on the question of science and the Bible. Yet, in debating the higher criticism, this was clearly not the case. The points of contact between Hodge and Briggs on science were real; however, their differences on a few key points drove them to their different basic stances on the question of the historical criticism of the Bible. Thus, the window of science opens up on one of the main areas of contention, negotiation, and controversy during the late nineteenth century in regard to the issue of the historical criticism of the Bible. This is true in regard to at least three points: the meaning of inductive science as a model for theology; the expanding reach of scientific naturalism; and the question of what constitutes the ultimate ground of authority — the ultimate test of the truth. Comparing Hodge and Briggs in

35 Massa, Charles Augustus Briggs, 22.
these ways helps reveal both what united American theologians and what drove them apart as they debated all the questions raised by the historical-critical method of Bible study.

First, the meaning of inductive science as a model for theology became a significant point of difference within the question of the higher criticism. Though both Briggs and Hodge held out inductive science as the best means to epistemological certitude, each one conceived of inductive science in subtly different ways. These subtle differences led to large disagreements over the question of biblical criticism. By definition, the notion of inductive science entails attention to the facts: one examines the facts in any given field of knowledge, makes generalizations and draws conclusions, and thus attains genuine knowledge. The facts or phenomena come first, and they determine the shape of whatever knowledge results.

Hodge articulated a particularly clear vision of theology as an inductive science. He defined the Bible as a source of facts about God and religion. This was not just an analogy or metaphor; so strong a commitment did he hold to the notion that he went so far as to define the Bible essentially as a series of assertions and propositions. These assertions and propositions formed a collection of biblical facts and discrete biblical phenomena. For example, Hodge once wrote to Briggs that he would hold to the theory of verbal inspiration “until the phenomena of Scripture are proved to be inconsistent with it.”

Throughout his Presbyterian Review article, Hodge referred to the facts, phenomena, and discrete elements of Scripture. He claimed, for example, that “a candid inspection of all the ascertained phenomena of the original texts” would vindicate his view of inspiration.

36 A. A. Hodge to Briggs, [December 9, 1880], BT 5, 468. Emphasis added.

This kind of particularistic understanding of the biblical texts is evident throughout his published works and private correspondence.

Hodge’s method of handling the biblical texts went hand-in-hand with his preoccupation with the question of errors and infallibility. The Bible was comprised of assertions and propositions that, theoretically, could be true or false, correct or incorrect; thus, to Hodge, the entire question of biblical criticism was a question of the truth and accuracy of particular biblical assertions and propositions. So strongly did this understanding of the Bible’s contents shape Hodge’s thinking, he even framed the whole debate over biblical criticism in terms of the infallibility, accuracy, and errorlessness of particular biblical assertions. For instance, Hodge’s Review article asserted of the Scriptures, “all their elements and all their affirmations are absolutely errorless.”38 He also wrote that the position maintained within the Church doctrine of inspiration was one of an “accuracy . . . which secures a correct statement of facts or principles [that were] intended to be affirmed. . . . Every statement accurately corresponds to truth just as far forth as affirmed.”39

Moreover, Hodge believed that this collection of infallible “facts” and discrete phenomena in the Bible was to be studied “scientifically.” His position represented his commitment to inductive science in the realm of religion and theology. Theology was to Hodge an inductive science: the “laws” of theology — ideas about God, conclusions about the nature of Christ’s resurrection — built from the study of the raw data of

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid.: 238.
Scripture. In an address some years earlier on the proper place of doctrine in the Christian ministry, Hodge admonished his hearers,

As no man can emancipate himself from the laws of nature, so none can safely ignore them nor remain ignorant of them. In like manner and to the same extent is it impossible for any one of us to emancipate himself from the doctrines of the Bible, which are revelations of the laws of the spiritual world.40

That is, Hodge thought of the Bible as the field within which the spiritual laws are discovered. He clearly implied a powerful analogical relationship: biblical doctrine is to theology as natural law is to natural science. His revised Outlines of Theology drew the parallels even more strongly: “Theology . . . is the science of religion.” The Christian religion, Hodge explained, consisted of the events, principles, and institutions presented by the supernatural revelation of the scriptures. Therefore, he reasoned, “Christian Theology is the scientific determination, interpretation, and defence of those Scriptures . . .”41

Theology’s relationship with the Bible was not merely similar to science’s relationship with nature, it was fundamentally the same. This is the same claim that A. A. Hodge’s father, the legendary Charles Hodge of Princeton Seminary, made for theology in his ponderous Systematic Theology.42 A. A. Hodge, no less than his theological forbears, thought of his work in terms of a simple view of inductive science.

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40 [A. A. Hodge], Address of Dr. A. A. Hodge of Western Theological Seminary, Delivered by Request before a Synodical Institute Held by Synod of Cleveland (Cleveland: Fairbanks, Benedict and Co., 1873), 11.

41 A. A. Hodge, Outlines of Theology, 15. Emphasis added.

42 See, for example, Charles Hodge, Systematic Theology, vol. 1 (New York: Charles Scribner and Co., 1871), 1-17.
This position, though strange-sounding to many twenty-first century ears, enjoyed widespread currency in nineteenth-century America, particularly among the conservative adherents of the Common Sense-based theological apologetic. Yet in all of his published works and correspondence with Briggs on the question of inspiration, the body of data that Hodge emphasized was the “facts” of the Scriptures themselves — it was not facts garnered from outside sources or other departments of knowledge. Though perhaps small seeming, this stipulation constituted a crucial distinction from his Presbyterian opponent, Briggs; indeed, it made all the difference for their fundamental disagreement in the debate over historical biblical scholarship. Hodge, in effect, thought of theology as an inductive science, but he did not think of all inductive science as theology. He essentially declined to extend the “scientific” method beyond the Bible itself when it came to questions of religion, doctrine, and biblical interpretation. This was a crucial stipulation.

This is not to suggest that Hodge disregarded or denigrated the scientific enterprise in other fields of knowledge. Such a position would have been fundamentally un-Reformed in his mind, and it would have been wholly out of the character of the Princeton theological tradition of which he was a part. Even in the field of theology and biblical studies, he was eager to utilize evidence from archaeological finds, textual studies that aided in determining the “true text” of the Bible, and other forms of “scientific” knowledge that corroborated the historical reliability and authenticity of the biblical texts. Moreover, A. A. Hodge showed the same belief in the unity and compatibility of scriptural truth and scientific truth as did his father, the eminent theologian Charles Hodge. And this even extended to some forms of the “scientific” criticism of the Bible. As noted previously, A.

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43 See, for example Noll, Princeton Theology, 211.
A. Hodge valued textual criticism as a means of establishing the “true text” of the canonical books. But he also thought “ordinary” historical criticism was a “perfectly legitimate” way to shed all the light of history and literature on the question of the genuineness and integrity of the texts. By ordinary, readers may presume he meant “conservative.”

Hodge’s attitude toward inductive science, then, entailed two commitments. On the one hand, it entailed the affirmation of the powers of inductive science. On the other hand, it entailed the strict limitation of theology’s field of facts to the original texts of Scripture. While Hodge was happy to have theologians make use of archaeological discoveries and credible facts of linguistic research to illuminate the biblical facts, these extra-biblical facts remained secondary to the biblical text for providing the determinative facts of theology. Ironically, it was Hodge’s recognition of the validity of inductive science in all fields of inquiry that required him to consider seriously any perceived threats to the Faith that claimed to rest on “scientific” bases. Thus Hodge and the rest of the conservative party put themselves in a perpetually defensive position: if certain claims and phenomena of Scripture were found to be incompatible with scientific conclusions in other fields, that would spell trouble for their views either on the unity of all truth or on the inspiration of the Bible as they understood it. Similarly, Hodge was quick in the public lecture just cited to point out the dangers of the “arrogant phase” of the higher criticism:

... [I]t is very plain that this process of ‘Higher Criticism’ is liable to be colored, and even wholly controlled, by the subjective conditions of the critic — by his sympathies, by his historical and philosophical and religious

44 A. A. Hodge, Popular Lectures on Theological Themes (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1887), 74.
theories, and by his a priori judgments as to what the sacred writer ought to say.45

The higher criticism of the Bible, then, amounted to a kind of counterfeit inductive science. It all too often amounted to a subversive project based on the critics’ spurious assumptions and philosophies. Hodge’s mistrust of the higher criticism was deep-seated, his position fundamentally defensive. He had one possible shelter in his emphasis on the original texts of Scripture that might shield him from potentially insurmountable critical findings. If a biblical critic ever produced an undeniable “error” in the current text of the Bible that affected some aspect of Christian doctrine, Hodge could counter that the purported error could not have resided in the original text and thereby conserve his strict theory of verbal inspiration. He placed the burden of proof for any critical theory that threatened his understanding of the Bible squarely on the biblical critics’ shoulders.

Thus, while Hodge admitted in his Review article that “the question between ourselves and the advocates of the [more liberal] view . . . is one of fact, to be decided only by an exhaustive and impartial examination of all the sources of evidence,” he added a crucial qualification. The sources of evidence to be examined were none other than “the claims and the phenomena of the Scriptures themselves.”46 Hodge advocated an inductive theology, but the inductive method for him was circumscribed within the limits defined by the proper field of theological investigation in the first place — the Bible itself.

It might be noted that, in practice, it could appear as if Hodge and his fellow conservatives were merely defending themselves against theories they thought were

45 Ibid., 74-75.

incompatible with their pre-determined doctrines of the verbal inspiration of the Bible. Yet, they believed that the Scriptures had been revealed by God and that the Scriptures alone constituted the basis of genuine religious knowledge. These were positions shaped by both the Protestant Reformed tradition and their own experience of studying the text. Thus, they honestly believed that the Bible defined the entire field of study for theology from the outset. So, Hodge was speaking truthfully when he said that he welcomed the critical investigation of the Scriptures; however, the practical effect appeared as if most of his conclusions were tightly constrained and largely predetermined. Thus he could heartily advocate “a candid inspection of all the ascertained phenomena of the original texts of the Scripture” — a position that few, if any, American theologians would have found disagreeable — all the while maintaining with confidence that such study “will leave unmodified the ancient faith of the Church.”47

Similar views on science, the scientific method, and the Bible found expression in many other contexts by dozens of theologians, Bible scholars, church leaders, and polemicists. The views of A.A. Hodge reflect his training at Princeton Theological Seminary, where his father, the famous Charles Hodge, was perhaps the most capable and well-known exponent of both Old School Presbyterian theology and the Christian apologetic based on the Common Sense philosophy. Indeed, Archibald Hodge was certainly a much less prolific, and arguably a much less capable, scholar than his father Charles. By the time of A. A. Hodge’s admittedly significant “Inspiration” article, most of his ideas had already been articulated by his father and other Princeton theologians who

47 Ibid.
had preceded him. Archibald clearly appears to have moved little, if at all, from the
territory his father had previously staked out, and the example of Charles Hodge shows the
deep connections with A. A. Hodge’s ideas during his debate with Briggs.\textsuperscript{48}

Because of the great influence of Charles Hodge’s theology, his writing about
theology as a science helps develop the picture of the importance of “inductive science” in
late nineteenth-century theology. Hodge the senior gave a fuller, clearer articulation of the
Princeton school’s idea of science and theology in the second half of the nineteenth
century. For example, his \textit{Systematic Theology}, published in 1871, claimed the ground of
science for theology. As one of the principal exponents of the Common Sense apologetic,
he emphasized the notion of theology’s systematic approach to knowledge. Indeed, the
existence of Systematic Theology as a field in itself, distinct from other fields of theology,
gives articulation to the notion of science as systematic study. His magnum opus opens
with a discussion of these very themes, showing they were foundational to his work as a
theologian. A simple survey of Hodge’s section headings in his \textit{Systematic Theology} is
instructive: “Theology a Science,” “The Inductive Method,” “Theologian to be governed
by same Rules as a Man of Science,” “The Scriptures contain all the Facts of Theology.”\textsuperscript{49}
Each testifies to the way he closely modeled theology on the inductive sciences.

\textsuperscript{48} Compare, for example, A. A. Hodge and Warfield, “Inspiration,” with Charles
See also John W. Stewart, “The Tethered Theology: Biblical Criticism, Common Sense
Philosophy, and the Princeton Theologians, 1812-1860,” Ph.D. dissertation, University of
Michigan, 1990.

\textsuperscript{49} Charles Hodge, \textit{Systematic Theology}, vol. 1, v.
In defining theology as a science, Hodge made a distinction between knowledge and science. Knowledge, he argued, entailed the mere ascertainment or demonstration of the facts; it implied a knowing subject who had been persuaded of what was true. Science, by contrast, built upon mere knowledge. It dealt with the interpretation of the facts, the drawing of inferences and conclusions. Likewise, knowledge sought to gather and work with facts as they were; it involved the sorting, ordering, and classifying of data. Science, by contrast, rose above the mere apprehension and classification of facts to seek out causal relations and predictable patterns among the facts. To borrow Charles Hodge’s examples, the mere knowledge and arrangement of the facts of astronomy, chemistry, or history failed to rise to the level of science; likewise, “[h]istorical facts arranged in chronological order, are mere annals.” However, the “philosophy [or science] of history supposes those facts to be understood in their causal relations.” 50 The same distinction applied to other fields of knowledge: “In every department the man of science is assumed to understand the laws by which the facts of experience are determined; so that he not only knows the past, but can predict the future.” “If, therefore, theology be a science,” Hodge concluded, “it must include something more than a mere knowledge of facts. It must embrace an exhibition of the internal relations of those facts, one to another, and each to all.”51 By way of application, then, the only true theological science was one that dealt with internal relations among the facts of theology. This determination of internal relations among theological facts constituted the *raison d’être* for systematic theology, in particular.  

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50 Ibid., 1. Hodge used the terms *philosophy* and *science* interchangeably, a common convention through the first half of the nineteenth century. Hodge was showing his age in this usage of *philosophy* as late as 1871.

51 Ibid.
theology — an example of knowledge — simply ascertained and exhibited the facts of Scripture, but systematic theology — an example of science — “take[s] those facts, determine[s] their relation to each other and to other cognate truths…, vindicates[s] them[,] and show[s] their harmony and consistency” with one another — “not an easy task, or one of slight importance,” Hodge added. Thus, systematic theology, Charles Hodge’s specialty, occupied pride of place as the only true theological science per se. Like the philosophy of history and science of astronomy, systematic theology made generalizations about its subject matter based on a study of the facts. Just as the philosophy of history and science of astronomy understood historical details and cosmological phenomena in their causal relations, so, too, the science of theology — defined as systematic theology — generalized from the facts of theology and understood them in their relationship to one another.

Thus, the science of theology built a system of relationships from the facts of theology. Borrowing Hodge’s terms, systematic theology operated in a realm of ideas about relationships discovered from knowledge of the data of theology. The need for systematization in the field of theology, as in all fields of knowledge, assumed paramount importance. The realm of ideas about theology — as opposed to mere knowledge of the discrete facts of theology — constituted the only genuine understanding of theology. Hodge developed his analogy with other departments of knowledge further, strengthening his claims for theology’s scientific potential. “As the facts of nature are all related and determined by physical laws,” he continued,

52 Ibid., 1-2.
so the facts of the Bible are all related and determined by the nature of God and of his creatures. And as He wills that men should study his works and discover their wonderful organic relation and harmonious combination, so it is his will that we should study his Word, and learn that, like the stars, its truths are not isolated points, but systems, cycles, and epicycles, in unending harmony and grandeur.53

As Charles Hodge defined it, generalization and systematization constituted the **sine qua non** of science. Hodge the senior and Hodge the junior, then, each defined science not so much as its own field of knowledge as an **approach** to knowledge applicable to any number of fields. Science entailed generalization and systematization, the drawing of logical conclusions in order to determine relationships and causality from within the data of the field. Thus, to both Hodges, the very definition of **scientific** theology was **systematic** theology, and systematic theology, as such, represented a much “higher” or “elevated” knowledge of theology than the mere knowledge of the facts.54

By way of clarification, statements like these have often led later readers to interpret Hodge and other theologians of the late nineteenth century as attempting to maintain prestige for their own craft by borrowing from the rising cultural prestige of natural science.55 Though Hodge’s example in this case makes an analogy with the physical sciences, astronomy in particular, he by no means thought of the natural sciences as the paragon of scientific legitimacy. Such was not the case, as evidenced by Hodge’s inclusion of history as one of his primary examples of “scientific” or “philosophical” endeavor.56

53 Ibid., 3.

54 Ibid., 2.


The Baconian method stood at the center of both Hodges’ definition of science. Like their theological forebears in the philosophical tradition of Common Sense Realism, both emphasized the necessity of inductive investigation based on the facts and phenomena of experience as the basis of all scientific knowledge. Charles Hodge defined two great methods of scientific investigation (science, again, being defined in its broad sense): the a priori and the a posteriori. The a priori method reasons from cause to effect; for centuries, this was the approach to higher, systematic knowledge that predominated nearly all realms of Western thought. Thus, even investigators into the realm of nature, until the early modern era, “sought to determine what the facts of nature must be from the laws of mind or assumed necessary laws.”57 The real triumph of the scientific method occurred as the a posteriori method displaced the a priori. Instead of reasoning from presumed causes to logically necessary effects, the a posteriori approach reasoned in the reverse direction, from effects to inferred causes. The former is the method of deduction, the latter the method of induction. Real progress in knowledge has come with the triumph of the inductive approach, and “[e]very one knows how much it cost to establish the method of induction on a firm basis,” Hodge wrote.58

This inductive approach to science, established only at the traumatic loss of older deductive ways of thinking, depended on two assumptions: that laws of nature form the proximate causes of natural phenomena, and that those laws are universally uniform. Such is the case in all realms of inquiry. As Hodge put it, the laws of nature “may be assumed to be forces inherent in matter,” as in the natural sciences, he implies. Conversely, “they may

57 Ibid., 3.

58 Ibid., 3-4.
be regarded as uniform modes of divine operation,” as in the realm of theology. Whatever
the field of inquiry, the inductive method stands on the presumption that “there must be
some cause for the phenomena which we perceive around us, and that cause must be
uniform and permanent.”59 Theology has engaged in various approaches in the past,
ranging from the speculative to the mystical. The inductive, however, is the only approach
that leads to a genuine understanding of the things of God in theological study.60

James Turner argues that the term science in the nineteenth century often referred
to a much broader range of subject than it did during the twentieth century. Indeed,
Charles Hodge clearly used the term to apply to a wide variety of fields that twenty-first-
century readers would find counter-intuitive.61 Nevertheless, Hodge muddied the waters in
his Systematic Theology by singling out natural science as his particular model for
theology. Hodge acknowledged his debt to natural science as a model, and this is where
the notion of theology’s comparison to natural science, in particular, finds support. The
proper or best method of theology is rightly called inductive, Hodge argued, “because it
agrees in everything essential with the inductive method as applied to the natural sciences.”
Continuing, he argued, “The Bible is to the theologian what nature is to the man of
science. It is the store-house of facts; and his method of ascertaining what the Bible
teaches, is the same as that which the natural philosopher adopts to ascertain what nature

59 Ibid., 4.

60 See ibid., 4-13.

61 For a general discussion of this point, see Turner, “Le concept de science”: 753-
772.
teaches.”  

A. A. Hodge might as well have been quoting from his father’s statement here when he made a similar pronouncement on the analogy of natural science to theology in a public address the same year, cited previously.

The natural scientist, then, must necessarily assume that natural law both governs the causality of events and remains constant in time and space. If either one of these principles proved false, we could have no rational basis for understanding the physical universe. Likewise, predictability, the hallmark of natural science, would be impossible. This, the theologian argued, necessarily assumed the “laws of belief which God has impressed upon our nature.” These “laws of belief” included such ideas that right and wrong stand fundamentally distinct and opposed to one another; that God can author nothing but that which is good; that sin deserves retribution. Such theological first-truths as these, like the first-truths of natural science, found confirmation in experience (so Hodge is not advocating an Aristotelian conception of the universe or a deductive approach to knowledge). The operation of the universe demonstrated to us that these principles are both necessary and universal: without their functioning at all times in all places among all people, we could not function as rational, moral creatures.

Charles Hodge continued to deepen the analogy between theological and natural science. Once these theological first-principles were established as true, the theologian, like the natural scientist, searched for “laws” that explain the facts or phenomena of the field. The search for laws, thus, entailed first the discovery of the phenomena or facts of

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63 See [A. A. Hodge], *Address of Dr. A. A. Hodge*, 11.

64 Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, 10-11.
experience in order to draw conclusions and determine patterns within the data. The duty of any scientist was to understand and interpret the facts germane to his particular field of study. Theology, by definition, considered the nature of God and humanity’s relationship to God; thus, “the duty of the Christian theologian is to ascertain, collect, and combine all the facts which God has revealed concerning himself and our relation to Him.”

One may ask how Charles Hodge defined the facts of theology, given his analogies between theology and other fields of knowledge. Just as the public and private statements of A. A. Hodge reveal, the answer for Charles Hodge also resided in the text of Scripture itself. The data of theology, to Charles Hodge, consisted only of the divine revelation itself. As Hodge stated the point, “What is true of other sciences is true of theology. We cannot know what God has revealed in his Word unless we understand, at least in some good measure, the relation in which the separate truths therein contained stand to each other.”

Theological science sought to discover the relationships among the facts of theology; the facts of theology are the texts of the Bible themselves. This assumption of the proper field of theology had enjoyed a long standing in Protestant theological traditions; indeed, the doctrine of sola scriptura formed one of the major tenets of the Protestant Reformation itself. Hodge was walking on well-trodden, familiar paths in making such an assertion. It is true, Hodge conceded, that “the truths which the theologian has to reduce to a science . . . are revealed partly in the external works of God, partly in the constitution of our nature, and partly in the religious experience of believers”; yet, “everything revealed in nature, and in the constitution of man concerning God and our

65 Ibid., 11.

66 Ibid., 2.
relation to Him, is contained and authenticated in Scripture” — which provides a surer, “clearer revelation” of each these things. Hodge, thus, left little ambiguity as to where one may properly “discover” the “facts” of theology: it was the Bible, and only the Bible, itself.

This point became an important part of the controversy about biblical scholarship in America soon after Hodge wrote these words. Indeed, Hodge the younger debated critical biblical scholarship with Briggs on this particular point: which “facts” belonged to the field of theology, and which did not? Just what was the nature of the “data” that the Bible contained? How did the discoveries of history, archaeology, literary analysis, and philology color the “phenomena” of Scripture’s contents? All these issues came out in A. A. Hodge’s debate with Charles Augustus Briggs in 1881.

Finally, the investigator into theology, just as in natural science, must derive principles pertaining to the field from the facts themselves, not impress principles upon the facts. “The investigator sees, or ascertains by observation, what are the laws which determine material phenomena; he does not invent those laws” by some power of the mind. He simply sees what is. Likewise, the proper handling of the facts of theology was important, as in any realm of science. “There is in every department of investigation great liability to error”; thus the collection of facts from the Bible “must be made with diligence and care.” The theologian, like any man of science, must be certain first of what the facts really are, for “[a]lmost all theories in science and false doctrines in theology are due in a

67 Ibid., 11.

great degree to mistakes as to matters of fact.”

Thus, the collecting of the facts must be careful, accurate, thorough, comprehensive, even exhaustive. To borrow one of Hodge’s examples,

The Scriptures teach that Christ’s death was designed to reveal the love of God, and to secure the reformation of men. Hence Socinus denied that his death was an expiation for sin, or satisfaction of justice. The latter fact, however, is as clearly revealed as the former; and therefore both must be taken into account in our statement of the doctrine concerning the design of Christ’s death.

So too, the theologian, as any man of science, must be careful to avoid a natural tendency to “pervert facts which militate against their favorite theories . . .” This was particularly important for learning what God had actually revealed in the Bible.

Unfortunately for the sake of truth, men in every department of theology have formed their own philosophies independently of the Bible and made the facts of the Bible bend to them. Hodge calls this “utterly unphilosophical.” The fundamental principle of all sciences, including theology, is that “theory is to be determined by facts, and not facts by theory.” Continuing, he writes, “As natural science was a chaos until the principle of induction was admitted and faithfully carried out, so theology is a jumble of human speculations, not worth a straw, when men refuse to apply the same principle to the study of the Word of God.”

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69 Ibid., 11.

70 Ibid., 11-12.

71 Ibid., 12-13.

72 Ibid., 14-15.
Though Hodge began his *magnum opus* with a broad definition of science that included many different fields of knowledge, he went on to narrow his reference of science to natural science, making natural science the most apt model for scientific theological study. By doing so, he reflected the shifting meaning of the term *science* in the later nineteenth century; no less importantly, he also contributed to the narrowing of the definition of science by using it in a narrow way. For reasons like these, later historians have argued that Hodge and other intellectual figures of the later nineteenth century borrowed from the prestige of science — natural science — to bolster the standing of their own disciplines. Indeed, it is difficult to argue that Hodge did not have that in mind here. Yet Hodge pointed primarily to the natural sciences as the model for theology because these fields of knowledge were so clearly empirically-based. The natural sciences were easily definable as the exercise of induction from the facts, and their conclusions were easily definable as the laws discovered by the observation of the phenomena of nature. The tradition of Common Sense realism had been strong in nearly all fields of American thought in the nineteenth century. Though its influence was less universal and persistent late in the century than it once had been, its assumptions and approach to knowledge remained a prominent strain in much of American intellectual life, even through the end of the century. Particularly ubiquitous was its exaltation of the inductive approach to knowledge. Science, in the tradition of Common Sense realism, always entailed induction, was always empirically-based.

Charles Hodge, then, carried forward the tradition of Common Sense Realism in theology when he exalted the empirical method in theology. He defined science in broad
terms, referring to the disciplined study and search for patterns in many different subject matters. However, he singled out the natural sciences as particularly good models for theology. They offered a clear representation of the inductive method of study. So firm was Hodge’s commitment to the Reformation principle of sola scriptura that the inductive method became his firm ally: the Scriptures were to determine the shape of religion; the facts of the Bible were to determine Christian theology. Thus Hodge argued, “The Bible is to the theologian what nature is to the man of science. It is his store-house of facts; and his method of ascertaining what the Bible teaches, is the same as that which the natural philosopher adopts to ascertain what nature teaches.”

A. A. Hodge operated within the parameters of the intellectual universe that his father and other American theological forebears defined. All the evidence suggests that Hodge the younger understood the term science in the way his father and others meant it.

When A. A. Hodge, Charles Hodge, and other American conservatives argued positions like this, some other American theologians remained less persuaded. Charles Augustus Briggs differed explicitly with A. A. Hodge on the point of what inductive science meant in their controversy over the inspiration of the Scriptures in the Presbyterian Review. In upholding the verbal inspiration and complete infallibility of the Scriptures, A. A. Hodge wrote to Briggs, “This I am sure is & has been the doctrine of the Church. To this I have been brought up & this I must affirm until the phenomena of Scripture are proved to be inconsistent with it.”

That is, the “phenomena of Scripture” determine the

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73 Ibid., 10.

74 A. A. Hodge to Briggs, [December 9, 1880], BT 5, 468.
doctrine of inspiration — Scripture is the only field of facts that determines religious doctrines. Briggs, on the other hand, in his “Critical Theories” article and subsequent publications, accused Hodge and the Presbyterian conservatives of using a priori definitions and deductive logic to justify their own views on inspiration and biblical criticism.

Briggs recognized this as a key point of difference between the conservative and moderate-liberal theological camps. In a personal letter to A. A. Hodge, written as they planned their series in the Presbyterian Review, Briggs stated his position bluntly:

You represent a compact system of thought, the more conservative element in the Church. I represent the progressive element which must be comprehensive. . . . Remember that my convictions force me to this comprehension & that the section of the Church whose managing editor I am, demand this comprehension. . . . [T]he question for us to settle is how far shall this comprehension go?75

Briggs recognized that Hodge’s system of thought was more compact. That is, he argued that Hodge was willing to consider only a much narrower set of facts in his effort to construct theology as an inductive science. Briggs’s own conviction of the right and duty of critical thinking, free from the shackles of dogma and tradition, necessarily led him intellectually farther afield than Hodge believed was warranted.

This constituted a crucial difference between the two theologians. Each affirmed the model of inductive science as a means of attaining certitude, yet they defined the field of facts from which to generalize differently. In effect, Briggs was willing to cast his inductive net farther from the boat of knowledge than Hodge. In a position that was largely unthinkable to A. A. Hodge and American conservatives generally, Briggs saw facts

75 Briggs to A. A. Hodge, December 6, 1881, HP, Box 21 #50.
external to the Scriptures as vitally important for interpreting doctrine. The critics who “demand a revision of traditional theories of the Bible, on account of a large induction of new facts from the Bible and history,” Briggs wrote, “must be met with argument and candid reasoning as to these facts and their interpretation, and cannot be overcome by mere cries of alarm for the Church and the Bible which in their last analysis usually amount to nothing more than peril to certain favorite views.”

Though he acknowledged that they may wish to oppose many of the new conclusions of the sciences bearing on theology, Briggs presumed that the new facts must be assimilated in some manner. The facts were simply the facts. Continuing, Briggs admonished,

[W]e should not fear as evangelical Biblical scholars to accept the challenge of our [rationalistic] adversaries and go forth from the breastworks of our symbols to meet them in fair and honorable warfare in the open field with the Biblical material itself on the principles of Scientific Induction.

Thus, Briggs here lifted up a broad banner of inductive science that he and other moderates carried forward into battle against enemies who would destroy the Bible.

The facts reigned supreme in Briggs’s thinking about theology and biblical study. Although he took a step toward Hodge in his Review article by writing that he was unwilling to admit errors in the original autographs of Scripture until they could be proven, Briggs added straightaway that “[i]t is difficult on the one side to demonstrate an error, as it is on the other side to demonstrate that the Scriptures must be absolutely errorless.” The solution to all questions of error in the Bible for Briggs was simple: “It is a question of fact

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77 Ibid.: 558.
to which all theories and doctrines must yield.”  This statement captures the most fundamental difference in the thought of the two men. Whereas for Hodge the authority represented by the divine inspiration of the Scriptures was not open for discussion, for Briggs the authority of critical inquiry was not open for discussion. To Briggs, all theories about the Bible and all doctrines of the Faith must yield to critical inquiry, as long as that inquiry did not proceed from rationalistic or naturalistic presuppositions. The inductive science of the facts in any and all fields was the final arbiter of truth in all matters.

Briggs’s written work bore out the same essential position years later, showing his depth of conviction for it. “[T]he study of Holy Scriptures is beset with difficulties on every hand,” he observed in 1899. “It is hard to decide at present whether the Conservatives or the Liberals are its worst foes.” He insisted on a truly “scientific study of Holy Scripture,” over against partisan radicalism and conservatism. “We are aiming as students of the Bible to find out exactly what the Bible gives us,” he wrote, “no more, no less.” His commitment to the careful inductive study of the Bible remained firmly fixed. As in his exchange with Hodge years earlier, he argued again that genuine inductive science demanded an open-minded attention to all the facts that bore on the understanding of the Bible, not just those facts that theologians preferred to look at. As he put it,

We study the Bible with the same open mindedness with which the astronomer studies the heavens, the geologist the rocks and the physician the science of medicine. We use principles and methods which have been verified and approved as truly scientific, and use them without fear or favor in the confidence that they will yield us results upon which we may depend.”

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78 Ibid.: 552.

Briggs went so far as to blame the long centuries of “loose and unscientific” Biblical study for the current predisposition against modern biblical criticism. Even the most broadminded Americans were disinclined to see it as anything but a collection of unverified theories. But these people had been blinded to the truth. If they would put their habitual views aside, Briggs argued, they would see that biblical criticism yielded results which were “as definite and as reliable as those obtained in any other department within the range of Historical study.”

It is true, Briggs allowed, that many biblical scholars “have taken a short cut to their results and have occasionally jumped to conclusions. . . .” Such errors did, indeed, bring discredit to biblical criticism. Yet, many of his contemporaries, he argued, simply exaggerated the number and severity of such errors. Moreover, they also failed to see that the biblical critics, themselves, often corrected the mistakes of other biblical critics. The scientific work of modern biblical scholars, in these regards, resembled scholars in other departments of knowledge.

Thus, Briggs continued to uphold the model of inductive science at the turn of the century no less than he did in the early 1880s. Indeed, science for Briggs reigned even more supremely over the Bible and the crises it was enduring by century’s end. The contest at hand was not a contest between conservatives and liberals, old theology and new theology; instead, it was a contest between proper study of Scripture and the improper study of Scripture,

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80 Ibid.

81 Ibid.
not between new theories and ancient traditions, but between unverified traditions and a Criticism whose very definition is that ‘it is the test of the certainty of knowledge and the method of its verification.’ There is no necessary war between tradition and Criticism. Criticism tests tradition, and verifies it as far as possible. It wars against Traditionalists, who claim unimpeachable authority for traditions which cannot be verified, and even for those which have been proved false by testing them. [But] Biblical Criticism opposes new theories just as sturdily as old theories whenever these new theories propose hypotheses that cannot be verified, or whenever they can be detected to be in error.  

While not an exhaustive survey of the theological world in America at the close of the nineteenth century, these examples testify to the pervasive drive toward inductive science among American theologians. They also testify to the differing definitions of inductive science that ran through theological circles in America in the later nineteenth century and which helped divide the Protestant denominations into liberal and conservative camps over the question of biblical criticism.

Charles Hodge’s discussion on science and theology in his Systematic Theology in 1873 gives clear evidence of one persistent feature of late-nineteenth century discourse: the fear of an encroaching materialism and scientific rationalism in the intellectual life of the nation. After inductive science, this represents the second major point of discussion on the question of science and higher criticism in the late nineteenth century. The fear of encroaching scientific naturalism was especially pronounced among American theologians and biblical scholars. Indeed, many theologians during the last thirty years of the nineteenth century specifically identified “materialism,” “rationalism,” and scientific “naturalism” as key threats to theology and Christian life in America. This fear of creeping

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materialistic philosophy helps explain much of the concern about the increasing arrogation of the term science to the theories and assumptions of the natural scientists in particular. This was true of American theologians ranging from liberal to conservative in many denominations. Thus, the so-called “liberal” theological ground in the battle over biblical scholarship in the United States was occupied mostly by men who would be considered moderate in a trans-Atlantic context, for even the American “liberals” of this period stood together with the most conservative theologians against the encroachments of materialistic, naturalistic approaches to the world, especially as the latter were embodied in the more radical theories of the Bible from Europe.

Despite the deep differences between Briggs and Hodge on their question of the relationship of “inductive science” and the Bible, then, they remained united on this crucial point. Like nearly all American theologians during this time period, they agreed that scientific naturalism posed a serious threat to any notion of divine revelation. Regardless of their orientation on the critical theories of the Scriptures, nearly all American theologians saw great dangers in the naturalistic philosophy that underpinned many of the theories of the historical biblical critics of Europe. Thus, Briggs and Hodge, in their debate over the historical criticism and the inspiration of the Bible, agreed that they were united in battling against the foe of rationalistic philosophy and the reach into their field of scientific naturalism.

It was not so much their fundamental attitude on these problems that separated them as it was their response to the perceived threat. Hodge and other members of the conservative party rejected historical criticism nearly altogether as an example of naturalistic assumptions at work in the realm of theology. Hodge, in his debate with
Briggs, articulated a clear position against rationalism in biblical scholarship. When he, for example, criticized the “arrogant phase” of historical criticism, he had scientific naturalism in mind to a large extent. As Hodge complained,

\[\ldots\] [I]t is very plain that this process of ‘Higher Criticism’ is liable to be colored, and even wholly controlled, by the subjective conditions of the critic — by his sympathies, by his historical and philosophical and religious theories, and by his a priori judgments as to what the sacred writer ought to say.\cite{5}

By contrast, Briggs, along with other American moderates and liberals, rejected only the naturalistic aspects of historical criticism, for not all historical criticism represented an illegitimate science, they believed. Moderates like Briggs advocated, instead, a “believing criticism” — one that affirmed the reality of God’s supernatural work in and through history but also accepted the fundamental premises of the historical-critical method.

Nevertheless, Briggs, no less than A. A. Hodge, opposed naturalistic presumptions in biblical science. In his letter to Hodge in 1882, Briggs underscored his conviction that the critical investigation of the Bible, informed by all the tools of modern learning, was equally legitimate with the doctrine of biblical inspiration.\cite{3} A commitment to both criticism and inspiration, he elaborated more fully elsewhere, had infused the principles of the Protestant Reformation.\cite{5} But Briggs was careful to avoid opening the floodgates to the whole field of contemporary biblical scholarship. While the historical investigation into the Bible did not necessarily threaten evangelical religion — something that Hodge and

\begin{itemize}
  \item See A. A. Hodge, \textit{Popular Lectures}, 74 ff.
  \item Ibid., 74-75.
  \item Briggs [to A. A. Hodge], n.d. [early 1882], HP, Box 21 #50.
  \item Briggs, “Critical Theories”: 556-558.
\end{itemize}
other conservatives were reluctant to admit — the type of criticism that ruled out the reality of the supernatural or the possibility of divine revelation did, indeed, present a grave threat to Christianity. Briggs defined the contest of his day, then, not as one between faith and criticism, but as a contest between the evangelical, Protestant spirit of investigation and the rationalistic spirit of unbelief. As Briggs summarized his position for readers of the Presbyterian Review, “this is a conflict after all between true criticism and false criticism; between the criticism which is the product of the evangelical spirit of the Reformation, and critical principles that are the product of deism and rationalism.”

Briggs, therefore, wrote passionately about the need for evangelical Bible scholars to engage with the critical project, not avoid it, in order to defend evangelical religion. As mentioned previously, Briggs argued that a “more profound critical interpretation of the Literature, the History, and the Religion of the Bible” would allow biblical scholars to escape a focus on the narrow, often painstakingly minute questions related to the composition and accuracy of the texts; it would allow scholars, instead, actually to hear the voice of God speaking in the Scriptures. This “more profound critical interpretation” would also have at least one other salutary effect, one that Briggs held dear: it would enable American evangelicals to mount a credible defense against the corrosive elements of European historical criticism. The best hope for American evangelical religion, he argued, was for American biblical scholars to join together with the “evangelical critics of Europe against the Rationalistic critics, and conquer the latter” through this more profound

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87 Ibid.: 558.

88 Ibid.: 559.
appreciation of divine revelation.\textsuperscript{89} The matter was of deep personal importance to Briggs, as evidenced when he promised Hodge, “In distinguishing between legitimate & illegitimate Criticism I will strike at the latter with all the energy I can command. . .”.\textsuperscript{90} Evidence of similar concern over scientific naturalism abounds in the late nineteenth century.

The case of Andover Theological Seminary demonstrates further how theologians’ desire to combat scientific naturalism animated much of the discussion about biblical criticism during the late nineteenth century. The Congregationalist school of theology at Andover had its beginnings as a generally conservative theological voice within the Calvinist tradition. And although the institution remained within the pale of evangelicalism by common American reckoning for most of the nineteenth century, Andover had embodied a growing bent toward social and theological innovation almost from its inception. By the late nineteenth century, the Andover faculty were grappling with the same questions of scientific naturalism and historical biblical criticism as were the Presbyterians at Union and Princeton Seminaries. The appointment of several faculty who were sympathetic toward the new scholarship of the Bible helped bring the issue of naturalism to the forefront of theological discussion in that institution.\textsuperscript{91}

\textsuperscript{89} Ibid.: 579.

\textsuperscript{90} Briggs to A. A. Hodge, January 24, 1881, HP, Box 21 #50.

\textsuperscript{91} Andover had been known for a certain amount of theological innovation, though still within the realm of evangelical, Calvinist orthodoxy, since its founding in 1808. By the 1880s, Andover and its publication, The Andover Review, were known as principal voices in the development of the New Theology or Modern Theology, which emphasized the historicized understandings of the Bible and religious ideas and sought to alter theological understandings to bring them in line with the results of the natural sciences and other fields
Egbert Smyth’s historical approach to theology furnishes one example of the increasing concern about historical scholarship there. Smyth assumed a professorship in ecclesiastical theology at Andover in 1863. He argued that Christianity could only properly be understood by giving attention to its origins in historical context. In a speech to the graduating class of 1874, for example, he argued that no Christian doctrine could be understood apart from its historical context. He traced this position, a departure from previous approaches to theology, to Henry Boynton Smith and others who had in recent years been introducing German thought to the seminary. All theology, Smyth was arguing by 1874, represented a growth from ideas that had come before it. Furthermore, all doctrine possessed a kernel of eternal truth, the essential aspect, and an external husk, the non-essential aspect. Finally, church history must be understood as a part of the general history of humanity, not in isolation from the rest of human history, as had been the case with church history in the past. These all represented a shift toward the historical, modernistic theology associated with biblical criticism.

The theologian John P. Gulliver, a contemporary of Smyth’s at Andover, was the first Andover theologian, according to one historian, to address publicly the increasingly problematic relationship between natural science and theology. Gulliver occupied the newly created chair dedicated to “The Relation of Christianity to the Secular Sciences.” At his inauguration to that chair in 1878, Gulliver declared that he accepted the methods and results of the natural sciences, and he praised Darwin’s work by name. The conclusions of

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92 Williams, *Andover Liberals*, 27.
the natural sciences did not represent a threat to Christianity, he argued. Like his Presbyterian contemporary Charles A. Briggs, he argued, rather, that it was the philosophy of “materialism” that represented the genuine danger for Christianity — the philosophies of Tyndall, Spencer, and Haeckel, rather than the scientific investigations of Lyell and Darwin. A. A. Hodge and the Princeton conservatives, by contrast, could not accept Darwin, in part because Darwin’s theories so clearly seemed to violate the historical reliability of the book of Genesis and overturn the role of God in creation.

The “materialistic” philosophies of the nineteenth century attracted criticism from both liberals and conservatives in America, not so much because these systems sought to explain social and natural phenomena in terms of natural laws, but because they provided totalizing explanations that had little or no need for God. Spencer’s philosophy, for example, attracted particular criticism from the liberal theologians at Andover on just these grounds. Spencer presented progress as the necessary result of natural laws that governed the operation of the social and physical worlds. Progress was something that “just happened,” and neither the conscious reform of the individual or society, nor the action or guidance of God, played any significant role in the process of history. Thus, Spencer’s philosophy reduced the realm of moral considerations to a question of natural law and, many worried, made Christianity unnecessary. Andover liberals, like many other American theologians, both liberal and conservative, reacted by labeling Spencer’s philosophy

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93 Ibid., 27-28.
“materialistic,” as they did with other systems that reduced morality to the inevitability of natural law and that rendered God unnecessary in the realms of human affairs.  

In general, Andover theologians in the last decades of the nineteenth century battled against the growing claims of naturalistic philosophy. The methods of natural science were valid ways to knowledge in sciences from biology and physics to psychology and history. But material causes must not define the scope the reality or limits of knowledge.

Thus, advocates of historical criticism in America did not like the naturalistic presumptions they saw in much of German biblical criticism. On this point at least, they believed firmly with the American conservatives in the need to oppose bad philosophy in the realm of biblical scholarship and theology. Interestingly, both groups of theologians, conservative and liberal, recognized the real influence that scholars’ presumptions played in forming their conclusions; in distinction to similar-sounding positions of the later twentieth century, however, both sides believed the question of the supernatural was a question of evidence. In this, nearly all American theologians sounded themes that had been present in American theology since the forging of the Common Sense apologetic late in the eighteenth century. Any “impartial” biblical critic, they believed, must admit the supernatural character of the Bible. Conservatives held this position regardless of what other sciences indicated, while liberals and moderates sought to integrate this position

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94 Ibid., 158. See also Charles D. Cashdollar’s discussions of the reactions of Protestant intellectuals to Spencer’s “materialism”; Cashdollar, The Transformation of Theology, 1830-1890: Positivism and Protestant Thought in Britain and America (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989).

95 Williams, Andover Liberals, 172.
carefully with the conclusions of other sciences. Both camps, nevertheless, upheld the notion that an openness to evidence of the supernatural was essential, by definition, to any study of religion, Scripture, or theology.

Yet even this insistence on “evidence” — their repeated invocations of empirical or inductive science — belied an additional fundamental difference, this time in their understanding of certainty in knowledge. This difference became striking on the question of how one could know that the Bible was, at least in some sense, a revelation from God. How could we know the Bible to be divine revelation, rather than simply a human concoction, an accident of history? Hodge’s ultimate authority, the final word by which he judged this question, rested on his ability to demonstrate the supernatural character of the Bible by objective evidence. Briggs’s ultimate authority, on the other hand, rested in his ability to hear the voice of God in the text of the Scriptures, a determination dependent on his internal experience. This constitutes, then, a third term of debate between Briggs and Hodge, and it represents a fundamental difference in approach of epistemological certitude between proponents and opponents of historical biblical scholarship, generally.

Throughout his debates with Hodge and other conservative opponents in the latter decades of the nineteenth century, Briggs continually appealed to the “Protestant principle of criticism.” For example, he claimed that he was writing his “Critical Theories” article in order “with an assurance of the absolute authority of the Word of God, a conviction that Truth is mighty and will prevail over our prejudices, [and] a trust that the currents of Criticism since the Reformation have not flowed up to the present crisis in vain. . . .”96 He had a similar point in mind when he wrote to Hodge, “I want to establish the Higher

Criticism on a permanent basis in relation to the Church doctrine of Inspiration and I am sure that can do it without disturbing the Westminster doctrine of the Scriptures in the slightest degree.”⁹⁷ As noted previously, Briggs claimed in his Review essay that the theory of inspiration that Hodge and other America conservatives propounded was not the true Westminster doctrine of inspiration; it was, rather, a misconception of the true doctrine, one which forced the theologians who held it into a dogmatic opposition to critical theories of the Bible.⁹⁸

Against this, Briggs asserted that the true Protestant position was one of criticism — critical inquiry — from the outset. In his Review article, Briggs recapitulated the history of the Protestant Reformers in order to demonstrate that unfettered critical inquiry animated their study of the Bible. Erasmus, though he never departed the Catholic Church, seemed to Briggs an excellent example of the Protestant spirit. Erasmus, he argued, was pre-eminent among the sixteenth-century men who “took their stand as one man for the critical study of the Sacred Scriptures . . . [,] investigated the original texts . . . [,] and laid down what must be regarded as the fundamental principle of Biblical Criticism.” Erasmus and the Protestant Reformers did not hesitate to apply the critical principle even to the determination of the Canon and the text of Scripture, he asserted.⁹⁹ He thus found an authoritative model for his vaunted claims to “inductive science” in the Protestant reformers. Criticism by means of a “comprehensive” inductive science paved the road to true biblical understanding.

⁹⁷ Briggs [to A. A. Hodge], n.d. [early 1882], HP, Box 21 #50.


⁹⁹ Ibid.: 559, 560, 562.
And yet, there was a bit of irony in all of Briggs’s clamoring for the right and duty of a critical, inductive approach to knowledge and doctrine. On the one hand, Briggs sounded like the consummate believer in objective, evidence-based knowledge. On the other hand, Briggs also believed in the divine inspiration of the Scriptures (though he rejected Hodge’s strict definition of verbal inspiration). At the heart of Briggs’s Protestant principle of criticism lay a thoroughly subjective test of the very doctrine of the inspiration that he and Hodge contested. “. . . [T]he critic,” wrote Briggs, “appeals to history against tradition, to an array of facts against so-called inferences, to the Divine Spirit speaking in the Scripture against external authority. History, facts, truth, are all Divine products, and must prevail.”

Thus, critical inquiry and scientific induction were important sources of truth: “True Criticism . . . reverently and tenderly handles every letter and syllable of the Word of God, striving to purify it from all dross, brushing away the dust of tradition and guarding it from the ignorant and profane.” But it was the Spirit of God who was the final arbiter and guarantor of the inspiration of the Scriptures. As Briggs ultimately asserted, “. . . While other testimony is valuable and important, yet, the evangelical test of the canonicity and interpretation of the Scriptures was, God Himself speaking in and through them to His people. This alone gave the fides divina. This was the so-called formal principle of the Reformation. . . .” Hence, at the center of the critic’s thought on the entire question of the inspiration of the Scriptures and the proper function of biblical criticism was an evangelical encounter with God Himself. The quintessential irony is that

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100 Ibid.: 557. Emphasis added.

101 Ibid.: 574.

102 Ibid.: 559.
Hodge, the upholder of the compatibility of science and Scripture and the exponent of scientific theology, yet felt compelled to defend his doctrine, guard the Scriptures, and narrowly proscribe the project of criticism at all costs. And Briggs, the champion of “history, facts, and truth,” the advocate of the historical-critical method, scientific induction, and the Protestant principle of free inquiry — in the final test — clung to his subjective sense of the work of the Holy Spirit as the final guarantor of religious truth.

Later interpreters of the debates over the higher criticism often characterized the moderate and liberal proponents of historical criticism as clear-thinking, open-minded seekers after the truth, the only side of the controversy that maintained a position of intellectual credibility and honesty. They have also often characterized the opponents of historical criticism as tradition-bound and reactionary, clinging desperately to the false certainties of the past rather than embracing the less familiar certainties of the present. Yet there is irony in such an interpretation because it was the proponents of historical biblical scholarship, like Briggs in his exchange with Hodge, who advocated most strongly for the need to read the texts of the Bible with spiritual eyes. It was the more “scientific” advocates of the historical-critical method of Bible study who stressed the importance of the heart in testing divine revelation.

Thus, inductive science loomed large in the debates of the late nineteenth century over historical biblical criticism. Indeed, it formed a crucial aspect of the context within which many American theologians considered the issue. Charles Augustus Briggs and Archibald Alexander Hodge offer an instructive example of how leading men in the same denomination could see the historical critical theories in basically different lights. Hodge
was more apt to emphasize the importance of the Bible as the sole basis for religious understanding, and so he limited his inductive science of theology more narrowly to the texts of the Bible themselves. Briggs, on the other hand, was more apt to emphasize the need for critical scholarship on the origins of the biblical texts themselves, and he was more apt to accept the theories of modern “inductive” scholarship in all fields as his gospel. He affirmed what was itself a traditional stance in the American theological tradition, that of the compatibility of biblical truth with other kinds of truth; thus, he labored to reconcile the Bible with the theories of critical biblical scholarship. Ironically, Hodge’s limitation of his field of inquiry to the biblical texts themselves made his theology a matter of propositions and assertions. The theologian merely read the texts — or the best possible determination of the original texts — and arranged and interpreted the facts to produce theological knowledge. Briggs’s opening up of the field of inquiry to a broad range of modern thought outside of the Bible made his theology more subjective than Hodge’s, for Briggs’s test of genuine religious knowledge rested on the theologian’s ability to discern the voice of God from among the dross of the texts. Thus the liberal, “more scientific” biblical scholar advocated a more subjective, less definite theology than the conservative, “less scientific” theologian. In this sense, Hodge and Briggs stand as emblems of the moderate-liberal and conservative wings of American Protestant theologians, respectively, during the debates over biblical criticism during the late nineteenth century.
CONCLUSION

This dissertation has journeyed across some eighty years of the nineteenth century in an effort to explain the origins and meaning of late-century controversies about the criticism of the Bible. The shape of late Victorian discourse about the Bible, by circling around the concepts of “science” and “scientific theology,” retained many of the same concerns as early Victorian discourse. Early in the century, American theologians nearly universally believed in the literal truthfulness of the Bible and in the compatibility of the sciences with that biblical truth. Late in the century, American theologians, even if they had left behind the ideas of earlier generations, still orbited in a universe defined largely by these same questions. The empirical model of knowledge, once supported by the Common Sense philosophy and the Baconian ideal of science, continued to exert a strong influence on American theology. Even as Common Sense was eclipsed as the nation’s unofficial intellectual creed, commonsensical and empirical approaches to the Bible remained powerful. These ideas, all related to “science,” proved pivotal in the debate between Charles A. Briggs and Archibald A. Hodge. They also influenced many other intellectuals on different sides of the issue of biblical criticism: William Henry Green,

In a broader sense, arguments about the historical criticism of the Bible near the end of the nineteenth century reflected the waning of the older conceptual universe that had once defined much of American intellectual life. The waning of that older conceptual universe entailed, to a great extent, the passing of the ideas, assumptions, and values associated with both the Common Sense philosophy and literalistic readings of scripture. The Common Sense approach to theology had once supplied Protestant theologians with an effective apologetic by which to defend Christianity from the potential dangers of German “neology” and other threats to religion. But its assumptions, ironically, had become a stumbling block to many intellectuals near century’s end, for they appeared to pit the modern disciplines against the old science of the Bible.

Protestant intellectuals during the middle decades of the century had grappled with theories of biblical inspiration in light of modern knowledge, but Darwinism provided the proverbial straw that broke the camel’s back. It is no accident that controversy over historical biblical criticism moved toward the center of the American intellectual stage only after Darwin’s controversial theories had made their appearance. American theologians had viewed German biblical scholarship with a studied ambivalence since at least the 1820s, and there is nothing to suggest that developments in Germany were to blame for the growing sense of alarm. Instead, Darwinism, whatever else it did, dealt a severe blow

¹ For introductions to several of the figures listed here, see Mark A. Noll, ed., The Princeton Theology, 1812-1921: Scripture, Science, and Theological Method from Archibald Alexander to Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1983).
to the Bible’s literal accuracy; more devastating, it caused intellectuals to question their
need for supernatural explanations of the world, altogether. Darwinism, and worries about
the encroachments of philosophical naturalism it encouraged, pushed concerns about
historical biblical criticism forward in ways that earlier developments had not.

Therefore, this dissertation helps to answer why controversies over the historical
criticism of the Bible exercised American theologians and biblical scholars during the
1880s, but not the 1850s or 1820s. In a broad sense, this dissertation shows that many
American intellectuals gravitated toward the new assumptions of historicism as the
limitations of the older biblical hermeneutic associated with the Common Sense
philosophy became increasingly apparent. Thus, while theistic Common Sense won over a
larger proportion of Anglo-American thinkers early in the century than did the
assumptions of historical-literary analysis late in the century, both sets of ideas served a
similar function: they helped to interpret the ancient Hebrew and Christian scriptures to
contemporary readers. Common Sense provided a welcome answer to several social and
intellectual challenges to scripture perceived by American Protestant thinkers during the
late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; the historicist conception of human culture and
religion did the same for many American theologians and biblical scholars during the late
nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In a word, the American theologians who gave the
historical criticism of the Bible a sympathetic hearing did so because it seemed to offer the
best hope for interpreting and presenting the Bible to the modern world. As these few
American theologians took their first steps in the direction of historical criticism, other
Protestant intellectuals recognized — and reacted to — the fundamental changes that the
move toward historicism entailed.
This dissertation, therefore, also shows one of the chief ways in which historicist assumptions about human culture infiltrated American intellectual life. Because American theologians maintained a steadfast devotion to the Bible, and because the Bible remained ubiquitous and influential in nineteenth-century American culture, the historical critics of Germany can be credited with helping to introduce the assumptions of historicism into the American conversation. It was in the realm of theology and biblical criticism that large numbers of Americans, both the educated and ordinary, encountered the claims of historicism most directly or for the first time.

There is much left for future scholarly work. The treatment of writers and scholars at additional institutions and in additional periodicals would provide an even more thorough understanding of the history described by this dissertation.

More than that, at least a few additional lines of study have suggested themselves to this author. The specific resonances of biblical study with nineteenth-century philology, theories of language, and epistemology stand out. These themes, alluded to at several points in this dissertation, appear to have cropped up in discussions about biblical scholarship, in one way or another, throughout the century. For example, a debate about meaning, language, and truth gave added impetus to the discussions about science in the famous clash between Charles A. Briggs and A. A. Hodge, treated in the preceding chapter. And in an episode not included in this dissertation, William Henry Green, a conservative Old Testament scholar at Princeton Seminary, debated William Rainey Harper about the relationships among history, text, and meaning in an extended discussion about biblical
criticism during the 1890s. These late-century discussions touched on issues also considered by Andrews Norton and Charles Hodge as early as the 1830s. The changing understanding of relationships among meaning, language, history, and text may open up fruitful lines of inquiry for future scholars.

The messianic vision shared among late-century advocates of the historical criticism stands out as a second line of future investigation. William Rainey Harper, nearly all of whose papers and articles this author has read, springs immediately to mind in this context. Though he was given short shrift in this work due to practical considerations, Harper was an important figure in the intellectual and religious culture of late Victorian America. One of his overriding passions was to “save” the Bible, especially the Old Testament, for modern civilization. This passion appears to have animated much of his work as a Hebrew scholar, journal editor, popular lecturer, and university president. And it motivated his strong support for the historical criticism of the Bible. The project of historical criticism, Harper believed, held tremendous power to span the ages and present the Bible afresh, in all its divine life and historical color, to modern readers.

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A similar animus motivated Charles A. Briggs and several other theologians during the late nineteenth century. There were extremely few, if any, radical critics in late-Victorian America. Instead, there were many intellectuals who advocated historical criticism for thoroughly evangelical aims — just as there were many intellectuals who opposed historical criticism for thoroughly evangelical aims. The aspirations of these early advocates of “believing criticism” merit further study.

There are many other possible topics for future inquiry related to the study of the Bible during the nineteenth century; these simply stand out as ones this author wishes he could have explored further. But this particular race has been run, and these are questions for another day.

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4 See Ch. 8 for a discussion of Briggs’s hopes for the benefits of historical criticism to modern readers of the Bible.
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