

BIBLE MATTERS: THE SCRIPTURAL ORIGINS OF AMERICAN UNITARIANISM

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Dissertation

Submitted to the Faculty of the
Graduate School of Vanderbilt University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

In

Religion

May, 2013

Nashville, Tennessee

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....	3
CHAPTER 1: WILLIAM ELLERY CHANNING AND THE PASTORAL ROOTS OF UNITARIAN BIBLICISM.....	29
CHAPTER 2: WHAT’S “GOSPEL” IN THE BIBLE? ANDREWS NORTON AND THE LANGUAGE OF BIBLICAL TRUTH.....	77
CHAPTER 3: A PRACTICAL SPIRIT: FREDERIC HENRY HEDGE, THE BIBLE AND THE UNIVERSAL CHURCH.....	124
CHAPTER 4: THE OPENING OF THE CANON: THEODORE PARKER AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF BIBLICAL AUTHORITY.....	168
CONCLUSION.....	205
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	213

INTRODUCTION

The New England Unitarians were a biblical people. They were not biblical in the way of their Puritan ancestors, who emulated the early apostolic Church and treated the Bible as a model for right living. They were a biblical people in the way almost every Protestant denomination of the nineteenth century was biblical: they believed that they could interpret the Book and uncover its true message. Like most American Protestants of that century, the Unitarians made the Bible their standard and source of belief. Not with doctrine, nor legalism, nor revival did the Unitarians seek to challenge what they perceived to be religious error, but “with the language of biblical sufficiency [did] they [attack] the traditional theology of their day.”¹ During the years of 1803-1865, Unitarians were not cultural outliers, but active participants in upholding the biblical ethos of the nineteenth century in their desire to preserve the Protestant motto of *sola scriptura*, to make the Bible the only necessary tool for determining truth. Their devotion to maintaining the authority of the Bible was matched in strength by the often competing impulse to involve the Bible in attempts at rational inquiry, scientific investigation, and historical fact-checking, all to assess the Bible’s authority and accuracy on all matters of truth. These dual impulses often competed and therefore became potentially divisive for Protestants. Some chose *sola scriptura* over free inquiry, or vice versa. Some sought earnestly to balance both impulses in order to preserve biblical authority while giving due credit to the perpetual progress of the human mind. Most Unitarians fell into the latter category. They read the Bible closely, even critically at times, while simultaneously

¹ David Holland, *Sacred Borders: Continuing Revelation and Canonical Restraint in Early America*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 66.

maintaining that it was the rule of faith, the source of truth, the clearest evidence of God's love for humanity. For sixty years, the Bible and its interpretation *mattered* to Unitarians.

Born of a tradition (Congregationalism) steeped in devotion to the Bible, the New England Unitarians in general and William Ellery Channing (1780-1842), Andrews Norton (1786-1853), Frederic Henry Hedge (1805-1890), and Theodore Parker (1810-1860) in particular channeled this devotion into an increasingly liberal religious philosophy. They retained Congregationalist institutions and traditional forms, but eschewed the Congregationalist method for interpreting the Bible. This method, according to Channing, Norton, Hedge and Parker, burdened individual passages with the task of carrying the entire weight of complex theological concepts. So, rather than give up their beloved Bible because of these perceived interpretive errors, they devoted themselves to a new way of thinking about, reading, and interpreting the biblical text.

There are several reasons for my selection of these four men as the protagonists in the history of Unitarian Biblicism. Each was intentional and open about his interpretation of the Bible and his use of the particular set of interpretive principles listed below. Furthermore, they all wrote and spoke often on the subject of the Bible and its interpretation, either in public material like sermons or treatises or in private correspondence and journals. They are also representative of the general tenor of Unitarian belief during that time, especially given the fact that they each had a say (and in some cases a guiding hand) in the major disputes involving Unitarians in those first sixty years. Certainly not everyone agreed with the opinions of the Unitarian Biblicists,

however the respect and prominence awarded these four men (with the possible exception of Norton in the 1830s) indicates that most Unitarians believed them capable of speaking for and about the Unitarian cause in public. Finally, in spite of their deliberate use of the same set of interpretive guidelines, these men were all very different from one another. They differed not only in temperament, but in motive. None of them agreed on precisely what shape their movement should take, only that the Bible should be a part of it.

Though their theology and opinions often varied, Channing, Norton, Hedge, and Parker were united in their support of “free inquiry,” a founding assumption of their biblical thought. The Unitarian Biblicists’ devotion to the principle of free inquiry was equal to their devotion to the Bible. They believed firmly that no doctrine, creed, or theological belief should hinder the free pursuit of truth. In their view, truth was variable and appeared differently to different people. They also felt certain that truth was progressive and that individuals’ understanding of truth changed as human beings grew in knowledge. Channing, Norton, Hedge, and Parker each argued that the orthodox had constrained the search for truth with their dogmatism. They believed that savvy Bible readers must rid themselves of such dogma in order to extract truth from its pages

Channing, Norton, Hedge, and Parker were not the first liberal Christians to challenge what Hans Frei refers to as the “realistic” interpretation of the Bible, or an interpretation of the Bible that was premised on the idea that the Bible was literally true and that every biblical word and every biblical story fit into a single cohesive narrative.² A tradition of critical biblical scholarship among liberal religious thinkers existed in England in the seventeenth century and New England in the eighteenth and early

² Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of the Bible Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 3.

nineteenth centuries. The seventeenth century in England was a time of great upheaval, both religiously and politically. The English Revolution precipitated an authoritative vacuum, both in the monarchy and in the English church.³ Orthodoxy was in flux, competing views of toleration and persecution abounded depending upon who was on the throne or in the seat of Archbishop, and in all of this, new, radical theology began to arise from the Bible. It was during this period that seventeenth century English thinkers like Stephen Nye, Paul Best, and most importantly, John Biddle, arrived at certain liberal doctrines, like the unity of God, through their readings of the Bible.⁴ For Biddle and his contemporary Paul Best, years of misinterpretation of the Bible by “Rome,” the eternal culprit, had clouded its message and made certain doctrines orthodox that were matters of conscience only.⁵ Now, in a post-Reformation culture, there was a marked “privileging

³ For historical context on the English revolution see: John Spurr, *The Post Reformation: Religion, Politics and Society in Britain 1603-1714*. (Harlow: Pearson Education Limited, 2006), John Coffey, *Persecution and Toleration in Protestant England, 1558-1689*. (New York: Longman, 2000), and Sarah Mortimer, *Reason and Religion in the English Revolution: The Challenge of Socinianism*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

⁴ This particular period of scholarship on the Bible is best described in Paul Lim, *Mystery Unveiled: The Crisis of the Trinity in Early Modern England*. (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), Philip Dixon, *'Nice and Hot Disputes': The Doctrine of the Trinity in the Seventeenth Century*. (London: T & T Clark, 2003); Mortimer, *Reason and Religion in the English Revolution*; Gerard Reedy, *The Bible and Reason: Anglicans and Scripture in Late Seventeenth-Century England*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), 120-130; and John McLachlan *Socinianism in Seventeenth Century England*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1951). See also the following primary sources: John Biddle, *Twelve Questions or Arguments drawn out of Scripture, wherein...the Deity of the Holy Spirit is clearly refuted*. (1647); Paul Best, *Mysteries discovered, or, A mercurial picture pointing out the way from Babylon to the holy city for the good of all such as during that night of general error and appostasie, 2 Thes. 2.3. Revel. 3.10 have been so long misted with Romes hobgoblin*. (London: s.n., 1647); Arthur Bury, *The Naked Gospel*. (1690); Stephen Nye, *A Brief History of the Unitarians, also called Socinians*. (1687; expanded 1691); Nye, *A Discourse Concerning Natural and Revealed Religion* (London: Printed by T.W. for Jonathan Robinson, at Golden-Lyon, 1696); Nye, *The Doctrine of the Holy Trinity, And the Manner of our Saviour's Divinity*. (London: Jonathan Robinson, 1701).

⁵ Lim, “Rescuing Scripture from Popery, Reclaiming Mystery from Presbytery: Antitrinitarian Theology and Trajectory of Paul Best and John Biddle” in *Mystery Unveiled*, 16-68. In general, Unitarian (or anti-Trinitarian) thinkers maintained that there were certain essential doctrines, namely, original sin coupled with the seemingly incongruous notion of human perfectability, and liberty of conscience. However, most other beliefs were simply differences in understanding or interpretation and therefore matters of conscience, which no other human being could judge. For historical context, see Mortimer, “Anti-Trinitarianism, Socinianism and the limits of toleration” in *Reason and Religion in the English Revolution*,

of scriptural texts” as well as a touting of a “relatively unencumbered individual authority to interpret [these scriptures]” outside of the authority of Rome, which had become “the ideological centerpiece of writers” like John Biddle.⁶ Biddle, Best, Nye, and Arthur Brury took as their theological (and polemical) focus, the doctrine of the Trinity, which for them was both unscriptural and evidence of the corruption of the church.⁷ For many English Protestants, the Trinity was a crucial doctrine for their faith and one that set Christianity apart from other religions.⁸ Some, like Biddle and Best, disagreed, believing that it was by clinging to such mysterious and irrational doctrines that the Bible was made a murky text and Christianity an unsustainable religion. The Trinity stood on precarious ground, but Christianity did not have to by association. By submitting the Bible to the test of reason, “deconstructing the language of the Bible with academic tools,” these English thinkers believed they could restore its “original meaning” previously lost under dross of ecclesiastical accretion and dogma.⁹

For the most part, the relationship of American Unitarians to seventeenth century English antitrinitarians was tangential. On both sides of the Atlantic, they sought to remove the veil between the human reader and the Bible. However, the American Unitarians rarely invoked the work or thought of their seventeenth century counterparts,

177-204 and Dixon, “So Many Wrong Trinities, and More Everyday Increasing” in *Nice and Hot Disputes*, 98-137. See also Bury, *The Naked Gospel*, 1-13; Nye, *A Brief History of the Unitarians*. (1687), 168-172; William Freke, *A Vindication of the Unitarians*. (1690), 3; 26-27; and Valentin Smalcius, *The Racovian Catechism*. (Amsterdam: Brooker Janz, 1652), 14-15.

⁶ Lim, *Mystery Unveiled*, 21.

⁷ *Ibid*, 42; 307. It should be noted that in spite of his initial anti-trinitarian position, Stephen Nye appears to modify his views in *The Doctrine of the Holy Trinity, And the Manner of our Saviour’s Divinity; As they are held in the Catholic Church, and the Church of England*. (London: Jonathan Robinson, 1701). In it he appears to support the Trinitarian stance of a “nominal” or “modal” trinity, whereby God is one in essence and spirit, but distinguished by modes, namely original being, self-knowledge, and self-love. It is not in the scope of this work to speculate as to why his views appeared to change.

⁸ Mortimer, *Reason and Religion in the English Revolution*, 148.

⁹ *Ibid*, 159.

nor is it clear whether all of them even had access to the work of Biddle, Best, and Nye.¹⁰ In addition, the English Unitarians (though the letter would temper this view (see footnote 7)) were Socinian in theology. Socinianism was the eponymous religion sparked by Italian theologian Faustus Socinus (1539-1604). Socinianism was associated with the belief that Jesus was a human man who, because of his obedience, became the Christ. This was in contrast to an Arian Christology which maintained that Jesus Christ was less than God, but more than man, the first creation as well as a direct challenge to Trinitarian Christology, where Christ is God, consubstantial and coeternal with God the Father and the Holy Spirit.¹¹ Though the seventeenth century biblicists found common ground in their Christology and antitrinitarianism, the same parity could not be said of the American Unitarians. Of the fours considered here, only Norton was a Socinian, though not professedly so. Channing was an Arian, Hedge a nominal Trinitarian (discussed further in Chapter 3) and Parker's theology bore too much Transcendentalism to resemble any one Christological model that came before. As I intend to show further in this introduction and throughout the dissertation, their common ground was not theological, but hermeneutical—they all read and interpreted the Bible in the same way. Often, their theology was what separated them, not what joined them.

It is important to note that one American Unitarian *did* share an intellectual linkage to the seventeenth century anti-trinitarians, namely Joseph Priestley. Even after his move to Pennsylvania from England, Priestley was not directly affiliated with the

¹⁰ See Chapter 2.

¹¹ For more on Socinianism in England and that of Biddle, Best, and Nye, see: Lim, *Mystery Unveiled*; Mortimer, *Reason and Religion in the English Revolution*; Dixon, *Nice and Hot Disputes*; McLachlan, *Socinianism in the Seventeenth-Century England*; and Martin Muslow and Jan Rohls, eds. *Socinianism and Arminianism: Antitrinitarians, Calvinists, and Cultural Exchange in Seventeenth-Century Europe*. (Leien; Boston: Brill, 2005).

Boston Unitarians considered here, both in time and in fellowship. In fact, both Channing and Norton (in spite of his own apparently Socinian principles) were quick to deny any connection with Priestley, particularly since critics of Unitarianism often grouped them together (discussed further in Chapter 1).¹² In the case of non-Priestlyan American Unitarianism born in Boston in the nineteenth century, I would argue that what the English antitrinitarians of the seventeenth century offered was precedent for the type of liberal, tolerant, and rational biblical interpretation that the American Unitarians would come to call their own, rather than any specific set of interpretive principles or theological conclusions. In this sense, the seventeenth century Englishmen and the nineteenth century Americans were joined in spirit rather than directly related by intellectual lineage.

Closer to home, predecessors like Anglican James Freeman, Unitarians Henry Ware, Sr. and Joseph Stevens Buckminster, and contemporaries such as liberal Calvinist Horace Bushnell were all active in promoting a biblical hermeneutic that made room for free inquiry. James Freeman and Henry Ware, Sr. were both early contributors to the growing cache of biblical thought arising out of liberal Congregational (and Anglican, in the case of Freeman) churches and institutions.¹³ Joseph Stevens Buckminster was

¹² For more on Joseph Priestley, his work, and his views on the Bible: Charles Carroll Everett, "Joseph Priestley: The Old Unitarianism and the New" in *Immortality and Other Essays*. (Boston: American Unitarian Association, 1902) and Joseph Bowers, *Joseph Priestley and English Unitarianism in America*. (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania University Press, 2007) For more by Priestley: Priestley, *Institutes of Natural and Revealed Religion in Two Volumes, The Second Edition, Vol. I*. (Birmingham: Pearson and Rollason, 1782 and Joseph Priestley, *An History of the Corruptions of Christianity, Volume I*. (Birmingham: Piercy and Jones, 1782).

¹³ For more on James Freeman, his work, and his views on biblical interpretation and the Bible: Henry Wilder Foote, *James Freeman and King's Chapel, 1782-87: A Chapter in the Early History of the Unitarian Movement*. (Boston: Leonard C. Bowles, 1873) and F.W.P. Greenwood, *A History of King's Chapel, in Boston*. (Boston: Carter, Hendee & Co, 1833), 183-197. For more on Henry Ware, Sr. and his use and understanding of the Bible, please see these materials relating to the debate between Ware and Leonard Woods over the biblical soundness of their respective Unitarian and Calvinist-Trinitarian views:

arguably the greatest biblical thinker of his time and the future of Unitarian biblical scholarship. Due to his untimely death from a seizure disorder, his contribution was cut short and it is only left to historians to speculate what his contribution could have been.¹⁴ Even Horace Bushnell adopted a theory of biblical language that had more in common with Andrews Norton than his fellow Calvinists.¹⁵ Of this sampling of biblical thinkers, Buckminster is perhaps the only figure to have had a *direct* influence on the Unitarian Biblicism of Channing, Norton, Hedge and Parker. Some, like Freeman and Ware, acted more as intellectual “fathers” whose actions and thought made possible the later work of the Unitarian Biblicists. Bushnell, himself the father of what Sydney Ahlstrom terms “progressive orthodoxy,” who derived liberal interpretive methods from the same sources

Leonard Woods, *Letters to Unitarians occasioned by the Sermon of the Reverend William E. Channing at the Ordination of the Rev. J. Sparks*. (Andover: Flagg & Gould, 1820); Henry Ware, *Letters Addressed to Trinitarians and Calvinists, Occasioned by Dr. Woods' Letters to Unitarians, Third Edition*. (Cambridge: Hilliard and Metcalf, 1820); and Leonard Woods, *A Reply to Dr. Ware's Letters to Trinitarians and Calvinists*. (Andover: Published by Flagg and Gould, 1821) and Henry Ware, *Answer to Dr. Woods' Reply in a Second Series of Letters Addressed to Trinitarians and Calvinists*. (Cambridge: Hilliard and Metcalf, 1822). Also dealing with Ware's views on the Bible was his Dupleian lecture of 1842, *An Inquiry into the foundation, evidences and truth of religion*. (Cambridge: Published by John Owen, 1842).

¹⁴ For more on Joseph Stevens Buckminster, his work, and his views on the Bible and biblical interpretation: Andrews Norton, “Character of Rev. Joseph Stevens Buckminster,” *General Repository and Review*, 2 (Oct 1, 1812), Jerry Wayne Brown, *The Rise of Biblical Criticism in America, 1800-1870: The New England Scholars*. (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1969), 5-21, Wright, Conrad. *A Stream of Light: A Sesquicentennial History of American Unitarianism*. (Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, 1975), 12-16; 25. For more by Buckminster and the Bible see his posthumously published *The Works of Joseph Stevens Buckminster: With Memoirs of his Life. Volume II*. (Boston: J. Munroe, 1839), 104-114; 265-280.

¹⁵ For more on Horace Bushnell and his work on the Bible: Sydney Ahlstrom, ed. *Theology in America: The Major Protestant Voices from Puritanism to Neo-Orthodoxy*. (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1967), 405-6; 610-613; E. Brooks Holifield, *Theology in America: Christian Thought from the Age of the Puritans to the Civil War*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 452-466; and Donald Crosby, *Horace Bushnell's Theory of Language: In the Context of other nineteenth-century philosophies of language*. (The Hague: Mouton, 1975). For more by Bushnell on the Bible (and its language specifically) see Horace Bushnell, “Preliminary Dissertation on the Nature of Language as Related to Thought and Spirit” in *God in Christ: Three Discourses Delivered at New Haven, Cambridge and Andover with a Preliminary Dissertation on Language*. (London: John Chapman, 1849).

read by Channing, Norton, Hedge, and Parker, highlights the appeal of such methods at a time when biblical interpretation was at its cultural height.¹⁶

Besides being participants in a rich tradition of biblical interpretation among fellow liberal (or liberal-minded) Christians, Channing, Norton, Hedge, and Parker were influenced by a much broader, transatlantic system of thought concerning the Bible. Proponents of this system focused heavily on providing “evidences” for the truth of the biblical story against claims that events like miracles could not be proven, or worse, were irrational. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Enlightenment provided many tools for engaging the Bible, which eventually caused many of the supernatural and “mysterious” elements of the Bible to come under question—as indicated above by Biddle and Best’s disputation of the Trinity. Furthermore, in the eighteenth century the historical accuracy and authority of the biblical narrative became unstable as a result of an influx of radical philosophies and scientific advances that challenged the veracity of biblical events.¹⁷ Suddenly, scholars of the Bible were asking the question, “[even] granted the rationality or inherent possibility of revelation, how likely is it that such a thing has actually taken place?”¹⁸

As a means of combatting such infidel philosophy and cold scientific methods, Christian scholars began to focus their scholarship on the Bible—in particular the New Testament—in order to “prove the authenticity and stability of the Christian Bible.”¹⁹ A potential threat to the Bible was a threat to Christianity. Foundational to this fortification of the Bible was the moral Enlightenment philosophy of John Locke, Richard Price, and

¹⁶ Ahlstrom, ed. *Theology in America: The Major Protestant Voices from Puritanism to Neo-Orthodoxy*. (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1967), 316.

¹⁷ That of Thomas Hobbes and Baruch de Spinoza in particular.

¹⁸ Frei, *Eclipse*, 53.

¹⁹ Sheehan, *Enlightenment Bible*, 28.

Samuel Clarke and the Scottish Common Sense Realism of Thomas Reid and Frances Hutcheson (the latter especially was key to the thought of William Ellery Channing, as indicated in Chapter 1). Among the English moral philosophers, Price introduced an ecumenical theory of theology, believing that all Christians could arrive at a doctrine upon which they could agree, while not specifying what form or what mode this doctrine would take for individual readers.²⁰ Samuel Clarke, the English Rationalist, proved seminal to the thought of Channing and Norton, known to them primarily for his work *The Scripture Doctrine of the Trinity* (1712), where he set about debunking the truth of the Trinity by a “free, impartial and diligent” method of examining Scripture and for “[espousing] a Christianity more attuned to the age of Reason.”²¹ Clarke also channeled a great deal of his energy into defending the evidences of revealed religion against the critical philosophy of Thomas Hobbes and Baruch de Spinoza.²²

Oven overshadowing the influence of Clarke and Price, at least in histories of Unitarianism, is John Locke. This emphasis is not unwarranted, though it should be qualified. In his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding and Reasonableness of Christianity*, Locke argued that human reason was the key to all knowledge of God and

²⁰ Richard Price, *Sermons on the Christian Doctrines as Received by the Different Denominations of Christians*. (1787).

²¹ Henry May, *The Enlightenment in America*. (New York, 1976), 38; Nathan Hatch, “Sola Scriptura and Novus Ordo Seclorum” in *The Bible in America: Essays in Cultural History*, Nathan Hatch and Mark Noll, eds. (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 63. Conrad Wright notes that Clarke saw his exegetical and interpretive methods as a corrective to the orthodox mode of biblical scholarship, which consisted of taking isolated verses out of context to prove a theological point. Instead, Clarke gathered all relevant passages on a given subject and compared them, thereby letting clearer passages explain more ambiguous ones. Wright, *Three Prophets of Religions Liberalism: Channing-Emerson-Parker*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), 15.

²² Specifically Clarke’s series of lectures published under the title, *A Discourse concerning the Being and Attributes of God, the Obligations of Natural, and the Truth and Certainty of the Christian Revelation* (1705) attacked the argument made by both Hobbes and Spinoza that theology and philosophy, and therefore faith and reason must be separated; the Bible belonged to the realm of faith, not to that of reason. Clarke, like many of the other Christian Rationalists of his day, believed that Christianity and the Bible were amenable to reason and not solely the purview of faith. His treatise was representative of the thought of other English Rationalists like himself, but seminal in the sheer scope of exegesis and use of evidence.

human existence, and capable of discerning the real existence of the evidence-of-all-biblical-evidences for Christian truth, miracles. Locke's thought was seminal for the Unitarian Biblicists, both directly and indirectly. Locke was often perceived as a father figure for those concerned with the "evidences" of Christianity, which in the eighteenth century and early nineteenth century was a subject of key importance among Christian theologians. Locke's argument that miracles were rational events meant that miracles could serve as quantitative proof of Christ's life and message, as well as the Bible as a whole. Liberal and orthodox Congregationalists clung to this idea of "miracles-as-evidence." At Harvard, students were bombarded with Lockean evidentialism, until as George Huntston Williams argues, "by the time of the founding of the Divinity School, then, New England had been accustomed to these patterns of thought for so long that they appeared wholly axiomatic, noncontroversial, and nonsectarian."²³ Harvard introduced Channing, Norton, Hedge and Parker to Locke.²⁴

Unquestionably, Locke influenced the thought of these men. However, according to Daniel Walker Howe, the Unitarians read John Locke through the lens of Scottish Common Sense. "The whole purpose of Unitarian epistemology was to sustain proofs of religion," writes Howe, so while "Locke had attempted to maintain the existence of both

²³ Williams, George Hunston. ed. *The Harvard Divinity School: Its Place in Harvard University and in American Culture*. (Boston: The Beacon Press, 1954), 35.

²⁴ For more on the English Rationalists and English moral philosophy: Henry May, *The Enlightenment in America*. (New York, 1976); Nathan Hatch, "Sola Scriptura and Novus Ordo Seclorum" in *The Bible in America: Essays in Cultural History*, Nathan Hatch and Mark Noll, eds., 59-78; Conrad Wright, *Three Prophets of Religious Liberalism: Channing-Emerson-Parker*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), 14-16; Holifield, *Theology in America*, 79-101; 197-217; Richard Price, *A review of the principle question in morals, particularly those respecting the origin of our ideas of virtue, its nature, relation to the Deity, obligation, subject-matter, and sanctions*. (1757); Richard Price, *Sermons on the Christian Doctrines as Received by the Different Denominations of Christians*. (1787); Samuel Clarke, *A Discourse concerning the Being and Attributes of God, the Obligations of Natural, and the Truth and Certainty of the Christian Revelation* (1705); William Paley, *View of the Evidences of Christianity*. (1794); John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. (1690); John Locke, *The Reasonableness of Christianity*. (1695).

ideas and objects,” Reid “finding this unsatisfactory... had dispensed with ideas.”²⁵

Howe notes that both Locke and Reid believed in the ontological reality of the material world, however Reid made this plain by stating simply that this was a fact of common sense, which was the founding intellectual principle of his system of empirical inquiry. What Scottish Common Sense realism offered was a *scientific* means of preserving and proving a set of standard beliefs. T.D. Bozeman traces the roots of Scottish Common Sense to Sir Francis Bacon. Baconian empiricism is premised on the idea that the truth of the world was knowable through the senses and inductive reasoning from observation was the best means for gaining knowledge of truth.²⁶ Thomas Reid and Dugald Stewart were Bacon’s intellectual heirs, carrying his empirical philosophy into the eighteenth century debate on epistemology. Both believed that God had designed the human mind for inductive reasoning.²⁷ When this philosophical system reached America, Protestant scholars of all denominations rejoiced in the idea that Enlightenment thought could be used to prove the truth of Christianity, rather than to undermine it.

Of the many thinkers who arose out of Scottish Common Sense Philosophy, the most important in both the American and the Unitarian context were Thomas Reid and Francis Hutcheson. Following the American Revolution, argues Bozeman, Locke’s philosophy, which had been in ascendance during the eighteenth century, came under increasing scrutiny, making way for the inductive logic of Scottish Sense Realism as the primary epistemological system.²⁸ Reid famously wrote *An Inquiry into the Human Mind*

²⁵ Daniel Walker Howe, *The Unitarian Conscience: Harvard Moral Philosophy, 1805-1861*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970), 35; 37.

²⁶ Bozeman, *Protestants in an Age of Science: The Baconian Ideal and Antebellum American Religious Thought*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1977), 3.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 7-11.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 23-4.

as a critique of both the rationalist system of John Locke and the skeptical philosophy of David Hume. In it, he argued, first and foremost, that the material world existed. Humans could trust their senses to arrive at that fact. From there, humans could discern elements of design and organization that would ultimately lead them to an understanding of God and the connection they had with God.²⁹ Though Scottish Common Sense originated in the thought of Frances Bacon, it was Reid (along with his contemporary Dugald Stewart) that brought Bacon's scientific philosophy firmly into the religious realm.

From Hutcheson, rather than epistemology and metaphysics, the Unitarian Biblicists gleaned an aesthetic and ethical philosophy, for which Hutcheson's *Inquiry into the Originals of our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue* was the primary text. Hutcheson argued in his book that through the use of our sensory and reasoning faculties we could discern the attributes of God in nature and humanity. Our own intuition tells us what nature confirms, which is that harmony and beauty are the outward signs of virtue and discord and disharmony are the markers of sin.³⁰ Together, philosophers like Price, Clarke, Locke, Reid, and Hutcheson composed systems of rational, biblically-based thought intended to neutralize any threat to the Bible, while making the study and interpretation of the Bible rational, and in their view, "scientific." Their philosophy was based on a dual assumption, namely that human Reason was a reliable tool for interpretation and that the Bible was a rational book written for humankind. In their view, the only things

²⁹ Thomas Reid, *An inquiry into the human mind*. (1765).

³⁰ Frances Hutcheson, *An Inquiry Concerning Beauty, Order, Harmony, Design*. (1725).

needed to prove the truth of Christianity was an unbiased, rational mind and the Bible—an idea coveted and incarnated in the work of Channing, Norton, Hedge, and Parker.³¹

A generation or two before Channing, Norton, Hedge, and Parker came across this enlightened thought tradition, New England divines inherited the belief that historical miracles were rational evidence of the truth of Christianity and that biblical testimony was reliable and provable. Jonathan Edwards, channeling Locke (of whom he was a great admirer),³² felt that biblical testimony could be proven to be rational if one accepted the idea that there were events or ideas that were simply out of the range of human comprehension. Such events and ideas could not be disproven, simply because humans did not have the reasoning capability to do so.³³ During the next century, Channing and Norton used this same plea for an expanded use of Reason in defense of miracles as well as for biblical testimony. Simply because miracles and eyewitness testimony could not be definitively proven, did not mean that they could be automatically disproven.³⁴ All

³¹ For more on Scottish Common Sense Realism: Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Thomas Reid and the Story of Epistemology*. (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Terence Cuneo and René van Woudenberg, *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Reid*. (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004); R.J. Peterson, *Scottish Common Sense in America, 1768-1850: An Evaluation of its Influence*. (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University Microfilms, Inc., 1972); Theodore Dwight Bozeman, *Protestants in an Age of Science: The Baconian Ideal and Antebellum American Religious Thought*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1977); George Marsden, “Everyone One’s Own Interpreter? The Bible, Science, and Authority in Mid-Nineteenth Century America” in Hatch and Noll, *The Bible in America: Essays in Cultural History*. (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 79-100; Howe, *The Unitarian Conscience*, Thomas Reid, *An inquiry into the human mind*. (1765); Frances Hutcheson, *An Inquiry Concerning Beauty, Order, Harmony, Design*. (1725).

³² In his *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* and *The Reasonableness of Christianity*, Locke argued that there were three forms of knowledge: knowledge that was accordant with reason, knowledge that was contrary to reason (and therefore false) and knowledge that was above reason (it was true, even though the human mind could not comprehend it). Locke, *Essay*. *Twenty-Seventh Edition*. (London: Printed for T. Tegg and Son, 1836; published originally in 1690), 525.

³³ Robert E. Brown, *Jonathan Edwards and the Bible*. (Bloomington; Indianapolis: Indian University Press, 2002), 66.

³⁴ Channing, “The Evidences of Revealed Religion” and “The Evidences of Christianity” in *The Complete Works of William Ellery Channing Including the Perfect Life and Containing a Copious General Index and a Table of Scripture References*. (London & New York: Routledge & Sons, 1884) and Andrews Norton, *The Evidences of the Genuineness of the Gospels, Volume I*. (Boston: American Stationers’ Company, 1837).

together, these European intellectual forebears, contemporary biblical thinkers, and New England fathers created a cultural and intellectual milieu into which Channing, Norton, Hedge, and Parker were born and, in which their biblical thought adopted its distinguishing characteristics.

The biblical thought of Channing, Norton, Hedge, and Parker was characterized by a set of four interpretive guidelines or rules for interpreting the Bible employed by Channing, Norton, Hedge, and Parker. These guidelines remained virtually unchanged over a sixty-year period and were founded on the principle of “free inquiry.” First, they held the belief that the immediate impressions made by words in the Bible were the basis for reflection and interpretation. In this sense, the words themselves served as objective “facts,” as entities that held a truth of their own prior to any analysis that may take place. This particular presupposition was not unique to them. Trusting the senses and the words of the Bible was a common assumption. Secondly, they maintained a dynamic understanding of language, which allowed for these first impressions of the words to change with each reading. Unlike many of their Protestant contemporaries, the Unitarian Biblicists did not believe any first impression of a word was final. Though a word could serve as a “fact” in that moment, it was only a fact for the person reading it, at a particular moment in that person’s intellectual and spiritual journey. Third, they held the conviction that new revelation was possible when reading the text. Biblical words were not only a source of mutable meaning: they were an entrypoint to the mind of God. Humans connected to the God’s mind while reading the Bible, thus making new revelation, new truth a viable possibility *only* when reading the text (a fact that Parker

would eventually come to dispute). Finally, though the meaning of words might change and revelations might illuminate new truth, such truth would never contradict Reason. Their logic was circular on this point. Since God endowed humans with Reason, created the Bible as a reasonable text, and revealed things through His own rational Mind, no erroneous interpretation could result if they employed their Reason while reading it. However, what they deemed “reasonable” conclusions were highly conditioned by their own beliefs, education, and social location, a fact addressed in later chapters.

As stated, these four principles arose from the intellectual world inhabited by Channing, Norton, Hedge and Parker. This intellectual world was formed by the confluence of a diverse set of scholarly and philosophical influences, an increasingly progressive institution, Harvard, and city, Boston, and an ecclesiastical tradition especially conducive to such a movement, Congregationalism. These four men drew upon the surrounding intellectual universe in the creation and maintenance of the liberal movement that became Unitarianism. In this way Unitarianism did not arise primarily from a theological or socio-ecclesiastical schism—which in many ways were the results of this liberal reading and interpreting of the Bible—but began as an epistemological reformation, a movement of the mind. The distinguishing feature of this early liberal movement born of a series of intellectual and contextual factors was a particular way of reading the Bible. In their work on the Bible, each of the four thinkers emphasized or depended upon certain thinkers and philosophies, while disregarding others. Each chapter deals with the particular preferences of each man as he read and interpreted the Bible, thus, here, I deal broadly with the major trends and patterns of thought and

intellectual lineage. (I consider the particular context of New England and Congregationalism and its relation to Unitarian biblical interpretation in Chapter 1).

Channing, Norton, Hedge, and Parker sought to balance rationalistic and intuitive (sometimes verging on antinomian) impulses in their interpretation of the Bible. By combining such conflicting tendencies in their approach to interpreting the Bible, these four men grounded biblical interpretation in sound, logical thought while still exploring the more emotive and pietistic qualities of their minds. Their first principle of interpretation—that the first impressions of words in the Bible were the basis for analysis—derived directly from the Scottish Common Sense Philosophy described above. America at that time was steeped in Common Sense. The Unitarian Biblicists, like everyone else, absorbed Scottish Common Sense simply by inhabiting the scholarly and ministerial community extant at that time. The belief of the Unitarian Biblicists in the viability of “first impressions,” which according to Common Sense tradition served as empirical facts, was fortified by their incredibly high appreciation of human nature.³⁵ Since the mind was not inherently corrupt, as Calvinists maintained, and was therefore capable of understanding truth, a human being *could* receive truth from these “first impressions” of biblical words.³⁶

The second principle—that these first impressions could change from reading to reading—drew inspiration from the English Romantic writers and Samuel Taylor Coleridge in particular. Words were the starting point for inquiry, but their fuller meaning would become clearer as the understanding and ability of the individual reader progressed. Instead of encouraging ritual bent on fostering mystical experience and

³⁵ Conrad Wright, *The Beginnings of Unitarianism*. (Boston: Starr King Press, 1955), 89-90.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

communion with God, the English Romantics taught that words themselves, *written* words were a viable- and safe- entryway to the divine, mystical realm. Coleridge stated in the Introduction to *Aids to Reflection*, that he hoped in his book “[to] direct the reader’s attention to the value of the science of words, their use and abuse, and the incalculable advantages attached to the habit of using the appropriately, and with a distinct knowledge of their primary, derivative, and metaphorical senses.” Proper knowledge of words was crucial to reading the Bible. “Language,” he wrote, is “not only the vehicle of thought, but the wheels.”³⁷ Words, when properly understood, did not simply convey knowledge but changed perceptions and altered the experience of the reader. Biblical words, especially, accomplished this. Intended to inspire the mind and soul by their high poetry, biblical words brought the reader closer to experiencing God.³⁸ Thus, “first impressions” of biblical words were exactly that: *first* impressions that would change with further readings. Such “changes” in understanding came about via direct revelation from the mind of God via the Holy Spirit to the mind of the human reading the Bible. It was of crucial importance to the Unitarian Biblicists that new revelation occurred within the Bible. This allowed them to avoid the stigma of antinomianism, or the claim of direct, unmediated revelation from God.³⁹

Even with this caveat, their acceptance of new revelation was radical. This third principle reflected two primary philosophies: Neoplatonism and German Idealism.

³⁷ Coleridge, *Aids to Reflection*. (London: William Pickering; New York: Swords, Stanford & Co, 1839), xlv.

³⁸ *Ibid*, 72.

³⁹ For more on the English Romantics and their use among Unitarians: Samuel Taylor Coleridge, “Preliminary Essay.” *Aids to Reflection*. (Burlington: Chauncey Goodrich, 1829), vii-lxi; Octavius Brooks Frothingham, *Transcendentalism in New England*. (Boston: American Unitarian Association, 1903), 76-95; Rene Welleck, “The Minor Transcendentalists and German Philosophy,” *The New England Quarterly*, XV (1942), 652-680; Frederic Henry Hedge, “Coleridge’s Literary Character,” *The Christian Examiner and Religious Miscellany*, XIV (1833), 109-129.

Channing and Norton were both students of the Neoplatonists (or Plato in the case of Channing). According to Daniel Walker Howe, the Cambridge Platonists were reborn in the New England liberal Christians. In the seventeenth century, the Cambridge Platonists were the Christian ecumenists of their day.⁴⁰ The Cambridge Platonists, like the Unitarian Biblicists and many nineteenth century Biblical thinkers of their ilk, believed that reliance on the Bible alone for truth would breed tolerance rather than division.⁴¹ The resemblance between the Unitarian Biblicists and the Cambridge Platonists did not end there. Cambridge Platonists like Ralph Cudworth and Benjamin Colmon held a “rational-intuitionist ethical system.”⁴² They drew upon the Platonic notion that the human mind was an echo of the divine mind. Essentially this meant that all sensory data and all rational thought were based upon an intuitive connection to the mind of God. Furthermore, humans could discover the truth of this divine-human connection by employing their own reasoning faculties. Reason and intuition met and married in Cambridge Platonism. Several of the Unitarian Biblicists—namely Norton and Parker—were quite familiar with the work of Cudworth and the Cambridge Platonists.⁴³ However, more notable are the parallels between the Unitarian Bible movement and Cambridge Platonism *without* their having been much intellectual interchange between the two. According to Howe, the Unitarians derived much of their Platonism directly

⁴⁰ The English Latitudinarians were their Oxford counterparts, similarly ecumenical and concerned with toleration over doctrine.

⁴¹ Henning Graf Reventlow, *The Authority of the Bible and the Rise of the Modern World*. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 171-2.

⁴² Daniel Walker Howe, “The Cambridge Platonists of Old England and the Cambridge Platonists of New England,” in *American Unitarianism: 1805-1865*. (ed. Conrad Wright; Boston: The Massachusetts Historical Society; Northeastern University Press, 1989).

⁴³ Norton mentions his reading of Cudworth in a letter to Ephraim Peabody, Cambridge November 16, 1831 (Andover-Harvard Library, Harvard University) and references him multiple times in his *Statement for Not Believing the Trinitarians* (1819); John Weiss, *The Life and Correspondence of Theodore Parker, Minister of the 28th Congregational Society, Boston, in Two Volumes*. (New York: D. Appleton & Company, 1864), 74

from Plato and also through the intuitive-empirical system of Scottish Common Sense. Much of the similarity between Cambridge and New England Platonism was coincident, not linear.⁴⁴

The possibility for further revelation also found intellectual resonance and reference in the work of German Idealists. To say that the Unitarian Biblicists read widely among the German Idealists is an understatement. Still, a great portion of American scholars and clergy were ambivalent or even hostile toward this “infiltration” of German thought—Andrews Norton being one of them. German Idealism was more amenable to the thought of Hedge and Parker, who both adhered to the transcendental philosophy of Immanuel Kant and other German philosophers, than to the more English and Scottish-Enlightenment inclined Channing and Norton. From the German Idealists and Kant especially, the Unitarian Biblicists gained a synthesis of rationalism (knowledge attained by reason *a priori*) and empiricism (knowledge attained by the senses *a posteriori*); a system referred to by Kant as “transcendental idealism.”⁴⁵ Kant argued that all knowledge is always a mixture of sense data and humans’ mental categories.⁴⁶ In other words, humans learn particular facts about the world via their senses and the working of the Spirit, however humans know the *form* these facts must take prior to such sensory experience. We know implicitly how we will encounter things in the world, but we cannot know precisely what we will encounter until we experience it. Building on

⁴⁴ For more on Neoplatonism, its relationship to biblical interpretation, and its uses among Unitarians: McLachlan, *Socinianism in Seventeenth Century England*, 97-101; Daniel Walker Howe, “The Cambridge Platonists of Old England and the Cambridge Platonists of New England,” in Conrad Wright, ed. *American Unitarianism: 1805-1865*; Andrews Norton, *Statement for Not Believing the Trinitarians respecting the nature of God, and the person of Christ occasioned by Professor Stuart’s Letters to Mr. Channing*. (Boston: Wells and Lilly, 1819), 32-33; and John Weiss, *The Life and Correspondence of Theodore Parker, Minister of the 28th Congregational Society, Boston, in Two Volumes*. (New York: D. Appleton & Company, 1864), 74.

⁴⁵ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*. (1781).

⁴⁶ Doreen Hunter, “Frederic Henry Hedge, What Say You?” *American Quarterly*, 32 (1980).

this idea of the Spirit acting on the mind, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel argued for the “historical movement of the Spirit” or the “Absolute Spirit (Geist) unfolding itself in world history with the Spirit of the Old Testament and the Holy Spirit of the New Testament.”⁴⁷ Ideas were not absolute entities that sprang up intact and *sui generis* from the mind. Rather, Hegel contended, ideas were products of an historicized Spirit, which worked on the minds and hearts of historical actors to produce different effects.⁴⁸

As a whole, the Unitarian Biblicists appreciated Hegel’s model of the spirit-driven thrust and counterthrust of history. However, Hedge and Parker, in particular, were too impressed with the concept of *a priori* knowledge presented by Kant to allow history credit for all ideas and notions of truth. The Spirit in history progressed humanity to a better, fuller understanding of God, but only by revealing what was already present in the human mind. The facts presented themselves in various aspects across history, but as the Kantian synthesis went, the original forms remained the same. Thus, what Transcendental idealism introduced to the Unitarians was the idea that there was untapped, intuitive knowledge embedded in the mind that only needed the Spirit to reveal it. For all but the later Parker, the revelation of such new knowledge by the Spirit would need to be mediated by the Bible, of course, to retain its Christian flavor.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ George Huntston Williams. *Rethinking the Relationship with Protestantism: An Examination of the Thought of Frederic Henry Hedge*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1949), 15.

⁴⁸ Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit (Phänomenologie des Geistes)*. (1807)

⁴⁹ For more on the German Idealists: Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*. (1781); Welleck, “Minor Transcendentalists and German Philosophy”; Keith W. Clements, *Friedrich Schleiermacher: Pioneer of Modern Theology, The Making of Modern Theology Series*. (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1991); Schleiermacher, “Philosophical and Miscellaneous Works” in *Gesamtausgabe der Werke Schleiermachers in drei Abteilungen*, III. (1835-1864); Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling, *Philosophical Inquiries into the Nature of Human Freedom*. (Peru, IL: Open Court Publishing, 1992; first published, 1809); and Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit (Phänomenologie des Geistes)*. (1807).

Nevertheless, while new revelation was always welcome, it could never (or arguably, would never) contradict reason. This final principle was ostensibly a constraining force, though none of the Unitarian Biblicists allowed that God could provide false information in one of his revelations. Thus, this was less of a restrictive warning than an assurance that there was a scientific, rational, and historically-sound mode of reading the Bible. “Rationalism” or “Reason” proved to be a rather broad category. This principle in particular arose from two seemingly odd intellectual bedfellows, namely the English Rationalists and moral philosophers, like Locke, Price, and Clarke—discussed above—and the German higher critics, like Johann Gottfried Eichhorn and Johann David Michaelis, who analyzed the historical origins of the Bible in order to discern its accuracy. As noted, Locke and his contemporaries believed that revelation would never contradict reason and that rational means could prove that seemingly fabulous events like miracles were reasonable. Unitarian Biblicists’ adaptation of the higher critics was a bit more complex than their eager acceptance of English moral philosophy. For the most part, the goals of Unitarians like Channing, Norton, Hedge, and Parker were different than those of the Higher Critics. The Unitarian Biblicists were far more concerned with preserving the essential truth of the Bible than the higher critical methods allowed. Their reactions ranged from Channing’s mild disinterestedness, Norton’s qualified opposition (discussed in Chapter 2), Hedge’s deep, albeit scholarly, interest (discussed in chapter 3), and Parker’s whole-hearted approval (discussed in chapter 4). Thus, the higher critics were less of an intellectual force in New England than the English Rationalists, however, their insistence on historical validation and careful, critical analysis of the Bible certainly influenced the impulse of Channing,

Norton, Hedge, and, especially, Parker to check biblical interpretation with sound, historico-critical knowledge.⁵⁰

As I try to show here and in this work, this great variety of intellectual sources and the variability men of the four figures themselves was a defining feature of the American Unitarian movement. Unitarianism began as a loose affiliation of like-minded Congregationalists, most of who subscribed to the dual principles of Biblical authority and free inquiry. They had no standard set of beliefs, nothing around which they could create a proper Church or denomination.⁵¹

I argue that for the first sixty years, Unitarians were content to rally around the Bible as the primary source of their identity. Channing, Norton, Hedge, and Parker knew that having the Bible as their primary source of authority enabled Unitarians to remain Christian. Just as important, maintaining a set of interpretive guidelines founded on principles of free inquiry and a rich philosophical and interpretive tradition enabled them

⁵⁰ For more on the Higher Critics: Mark Noll, *Between Faith and Criticism: Evangelicals, Scholarship and the Bible in America*. (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1986), 11-31; Brown, *The Rise of Biblical Criticism in America*; Horton Harris, *The Tübingen School: A Historical and Theological Investigation of the School of F.C. Baur*. (Leicester, UK: APOLLOS, InterVarsity Press, 1990); William Martin Leberech De Wette. *Beiträge zur Einleitung in das Alte Testament* (2 vols, 1806-1807); De Wette, *Orientalische and exegetische Bibliothek*; De Wette, *Bibliothek and Mosaisches Recht*; Johann Gottfried Eichhorn, *Einleitung in das Alte Testament* (5 vols., Leipzig, 1780-1783); Eichhorn, *Einleitung in das Neue Testament*. (1804-1812); Eichhorn, *Einleitung in die apokryphischen Bücher des Alten Testaments*. (Göttingen, 1795); Eichhorn, *Die Hebraien Propheten*. (3 vols., Göttingen, 1816-1819); David Friedrich Strauss, *Life of Jesus for the German People (Das Leben Jesu für das deutsche Volk)*. (1864).

⁵¹ I define Church as a formal Christian institution with a standard set of beliefs, structured system of polity and established set of rituals and traditions. In the Unitarian context, I use a slightly modified version of Sidney Mead's six-pronged model. Mead, *The Lively Experiment: The Shaping of Christianity in America*. (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 103-133. Thus, a denomination is a body of Christians (namely, Protestant), freely joined by a common consensus that its beliefs and traditions are the right ones and that these beliefs are worth protecting and disseminating. One denomination is separate from other denominations in name, structure and the identity of its members. I use both of these over against the concept of a Christian "movement," which is a far looser term. A movement can exist within a Church or a denomination and can really describe any particular cause supported by a group of people. I argue that for the first sixty years, Unitarianism resembled a "movement" in form. After 1865, Unitarianism formalized most of its beliefs, practices, polity, and membership, which until that time had been only loosely (if at all) defined.

and their liberal brethren to be the forward thinking, champions of progress they believed themselves to be. After 1865, the equilibrium ruptured. The end result of a period of crisis (discussed at the end of this work) was a shift in focus away from the Bible toward more formal institutional organization. After 1865, the Bible ceased to be the “safe place” to test the limits of truth while still remaining Christian. The galvanizing principle in the latter years of the nineteenth century was “Church,” rather than Bible. The Unitarianism prior to 1865 was something different than the Unitarianism afterward, even while retaining the same liberal and ecumenical mindset of Channing, Norton, Hedge, and Parker. Still, the story of American (specifically Boston) Unitarians for the first sixty years is very much the story of how Unitarians dealt with the Bible.⁵²

⁵² Traditionally, there have been three modes of telling Unitarian history: through the “controversies,” through theological disputes and through ecclesiological disagreements. The controversies model tells the story of Unitarian origins through two controversies. According to this version, Unitarianism became a denomination in 1805, when the seating of Henry Ware in the Hollis Chair caused a split in Congregationalism. This event came to be known as the Unitarian Controversy. In the 1830s came the Transcendentalist controversy, at which time Ralph Waldo Emerson and his fellow Transcendentalists threatened the Christian identity of Unitarianism with anti-formalism and anti-institutional rhetoric. This stage of controversy forced the more liberal and conservative factions to draw lines and entrench; both sides believed themselves to be true representatives of the new liberal faith. While this version of history evokes certain crucial moments in Unitarian history, the problem with this model is that it depicts the Unitarians as reactionaries. From this perspective, the Unitarians were not agents in the formation of their denomination and their identity. They simply responded to the circumstances around them. In this version, the controversies, and not the Unitarians, created the Unitarian denomination. For examples of the controversies model, please see Conrad Wright, *The Unitarian Controversy: Essays on American Unitarian History*. (Boston: Skinner House Books, 1994); Wright, *Three Prophets of Religious Liberalism: Channing-Emerson-Parker*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), 3-46; E. Brooks Holifield, “Unitarian Virtue” in *Theology in America*, 197-217, and Sydney Ahlstrom, “The Emergence of American Unitarianism” in *A Religious History of the American People*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 388-402. Telling Unitarian history through theological disputes was the method of choice for the first wave of Unitarian historians. George Willis Cooke and Earl Morse Wilbur, the two most prominent historians of this first grouping, argued that Unitarianism was born out of its split from Calvinist theology. George Willis Cooke, *Unitarianism in America: A History of its Origin and Development*. (Boston: American Unitarian Association, 1902) and Earl Morse Wilbur, *Our Unitarian Heritage: An Introduction to the History of the Unitarian Movement*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1925). Wilbur, in particular, claimed that the nineteenth-century New England Unitarians were the intellectual heirs of the sixteenth century Polish Socinians and seventeenth century English Unitarians. It should be noted however that though the bulk of Wilbur’s book argues that a specific set of doctrines set the stage for American Unitarianism, Wilbur makes the claim that Unitarianism was primarily the promotion of a way of thinking rather than a set of specific doctrines. Thus the bulk of his analysis does not support this final conclusion. In this way he predicted the critique of the next generation of Unitarian historians who argued that a theology-specific model contradicted the ethos of

The narrative I trace begins with William Ellery Channing. In Chapter 1, I explain how Channing set the precedent for much of the interpretive work undertaken later by Norton, Hedge and Parker. In particular, I examine how Channing's theory of "Mind" informed his reading of the Bible. I analyze the precise nature of the Unitarian movement under Channing, who desired it to bring about pastoral renaissance rather than a schism.

Andrews Norton is the subject of Chapter 2. Norton's agenda was different than Channing's. In this chapter, I shift from the Bible as a pastoral tool to the Bible as a scholarly endeavor. What Channing postulated in his sermons, Norton sought to make academically sound. I examine closely Norton's interpretive work, but also his aesthetic understanding of biblical language. The latter especially helped to shape his understanding of the Bible, biblical interpretation and a Bible-based Unitarian movement.

the movement. In this version of Unitarian history, anti-trinitarianism is the central tenet of the movement. Though considerable for the great degree of work that went into crafting a linear history of Unitarianism, from the sixteenth through the nineteenth century, this version of Unitarian history is too narrow. By shunting the Unitarians into a particular lineage, early historians ignored the myriad differences between the New England Unitarians and the anti-trinitarians of two centuries prior. The doctrine of the Trinity was never the defining feature of New England Unitarianism. Nor were New England Unitarians even of one mind on this subject (as shall be shown in later chapters). Their theology was not what bound them together. The theological model of Unitarian history has already come under scrutiny in recent years for precisely the reasons just stated. In lieu of this method of telling, Conrad Wright argued instead for an ecclesiological mode of explaining Unitarian origins. Wright placed the onus for the Unitarian split from Congregationalism on the many disagreements about Christian fellowship and church property rights occurring within Congregationalism at that time. As individual congregations began to adopt liberal principles, questions of affiliation between liberal and orthodox congregations began to plague the denomination. Furthermore, when individual congregations divided among the orthodox and liberal members, there occurred heated dispute over who retained the rights to the church building and property. Orthodox and liberal congregations found it increasingly difficult to coexist, especially as more and more liberal congregations arose. Conrad Wright, *The Liberal Christians: Essays on American Unitarian History*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970) and Conrad Wright, ed. *American Unitarianism, 1805-1865*. (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society and Northeastern University Press, 1989). However, this account of Unitarian history illuminates the results, not the causes of schism. *Why* congregations were fracturing goes beyond simple ecclesiology. Widespread change occurred much later and was the result of a shift in emphasis away from the Bible as the primary source of authoritative truth.

In Chapter 3, the narrative moves from the scholarly to the practical. Though an impressive scholar of the Bible himself, Frederic Henry Hedge was more concerned with how reading and interpreting the Bible could be translated into the foundation for a universal Christian Church. In this chapter, I focus on how Hedge sought to transform the Unitarian Bible movement into a practical reformation of Unitarianism and Christianity, more generally.

Chapter 4 represents a shift in the momentum of the Unitarian movement and the dissertation itself. Theodore Parker adopted the interpretive principles of his three predecessors only to eventually supplement the Bible with alternative sources of inspiration, authority, and truth. In other words, Parker moved from a belief in biblical authority to a belief in the Bible as a source of inspiration only. Thus, I examine what I perceive as the volatility of the Unitarian movement in order to explain why a person like Parker could move from belief in the complete authority of the Bible to a critical view of all textual forms of authority. In the final pages of this work, I briefly examine the legacy of Channing, Norton, Hedge, and Parker and their work on the Bible and what remained of their work on the Bible after the Bible lost its primacy. Though primacy it certainly had for sixty years—it is to this story that I now turn.

CHAPTER I:
WILLIAM ELLERY CHANNING
AND THE PASTORAL ROOTS OF UNITARIAN BIBLICISM

During 1822-23, William Ellery Channing journeyed through Europe. Through his travels, he sought better health, but more earnestly, he desired to commune with some of the great minds of the nineteenth century. He was most anxious to meet with William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, men whose writing had greatly influenced his thought. After meeting Channing, Coleridge wrote to Washington Allston, the mutual acquaintance who had arranged the visit, expressing his pleasure at meeting such a lover “of wisdom.” Coleridge, who had come to repudiate the more liberal-minded views that he earlier held, now subscribed to high Church Anglicanism. Yet, he respected Channing’s own religious liberalism, not just because Coleridge had once held such views himself, but because Channing had so obviously matured his beliefs through a strenuous exercise of his mind. At one point in Coleridge’s letter to Allston he wrote, “I feel convinced that the few differences in opinion between Mr. Channing and myself not only are but would by him be found to be, apparent, not real—the same truth seen in different relations.”¹ Coleridge could not have known how germane this statement was to the tenor of Channing’s own thought.

In the vast corpus of Channing’s writings, two key themes were evident. Firstly, he argued for the necessity of remaining true to one’s own conscience and secondly, he stressed the notion that truth rarely appeared the same to any two people, but manifested

¹ Samuel Taylor Coleridge to Washington Allston, Highgate, 13th June 1823 printed in William Henry Channing, *The Life of William Ellery Channing, D.D.: The Centenary Memorial Edition* (Boston: American Unitarian Association, 1899), 343.

itself in an infinite number of forms, words, and ideas. The ease at which Channing and Coleridge could discuss and amicably disagree on various topics arose from the fact that they both appealed to the same source, the Bible, and approached it in the same way, as a text that was dynamic, ever-changing, and variable in its meaning. Neither seemed concerned that they came to such opposite theological positions. Of course, the fact that it was Coleridge's *Aids to Reflection* from which Channing learned about the inherent ambiguity of language, especially in texts as historically poetic and layered with meaning as the Bible, may explain much of their mutual willingness to allow the other his opinions. Whatever the case, the purpose of their conversation was not conversion but discussion. They could argue with impunity about theological differences because, they both believed that God had intended his Word to speak to each person individually, to gradually bring a person to truth. Channing wrote, "It is one of the most interesting and beautiful features of the Sacred Writings, and one of the strong evidences of their truth, that they reveal religion as a growing light, and manifest the Divine Legislator as adapting Himself to the various and successive conditions of the world."² Truth appeared clearer and brighter with each new reading of the Bible.

When Unitarianism began to grow as a movement in the first quarter of the nineteenth century, Channing's reluctance to recommend a full break from Congregationalism arose in part from the comfortable position of his home denomination in Standing Order Massachusetts. More importantly, his reticence found root in his view of Scripture. To draw battle lines along issues of doctrine was an attack on the ecumenical tone of the New Testament. He felt that Christians must disabuse themselves

² William Ellery Channing, "Remarks on Associations" in *The Complete Works of William Ellery Channing*, 152.

of the notion that anyone but God could have a monopoly on truth. Why then has Channing been called the “Father of Unitarianism”? Why did he pen the manifesto of this movement, the 1819 Baltimore Sermon “Unitarian Christianity,” if he so fervently avoided controversy?

In this chapter, I focus on Channing’s thought, giving special attention to the practical purpose of his biblical interpretation. As a pastor, he used the Bible to enliven the intellectual and spiritual lives of his parishioners. As a participant, albeit often an unwilling one, in the battle between orthodox and liberal Congregationalists, he made the Bible his platform. Channing used the Bible as a source of rhetoric not theological systemization, as the subject of sermons not exegetical tomes, as a means of quiet persuasion not confessional compulsion. Most importantly, Channing saw the Bible as a means of ensuring that liberal Christians, like himself, remained Christian.

Channing the Congregationalist, Channing the Calvinist

Channing never formally dropped the label “Congregationalist.” Instead he added qualifiers, “liberal” or “catholic,” or simply reverted to calling himself a “Christian.” In an aside to his nephew William Henry Channing, Channing commented that “By a liberal Christian, I understand one who is disposed to receive as his brethren in Christ all who, in the judgment of charity, sincerely profess to receive Jesus Christ as their Lord and Master.” Highlighting the anti-creedalism that became a hallmark of the Unitarian movement, Channing noted that a liberal Christian “rejects all tests and standards of faith... but the word of Jesus Christ and of his inspired apostles.” Furthermore, such a liberal Christian, “thinks it an act of disloyalty to his Master to introduce into the church creeds of fallible men as bonds of union, or terms of Christian fellowship. He calls

himself by no name derived from human leaders, disclaims all exclusive connection with any sect or party, professes himself a member of the Church Universal on earth and in heaven, and cheerfully extends the hand of brotherhood to every man of every name who discovers the spirit of Jesus Christ.”³

In general, Channing was not especially concerned with denominational labels, so long as they did not interfere with fellowship between liberals and orthodox in Congregationalism. “Unitarian” was a label he employed only after others ascribed it to him; he did not fight such a distinction, but rather resigned himself to the reality that it was an inescapable moniker. “I am little of a Unitarian,” Channing wrote, “have little sympathy with the system of Priestley and Belsham, and stand aloof from all but those who strive and pray for clearer light, who look for a purer and more effectual manifestation of Christian truth.”⁴ For most of his life and career, Congregationalism, because of its particular brand of polity and its status in the culture of the Massachusetts’ “Standing Order,” had allowed Channing to “strive and pray” for this truth with little care for the squabbles over labels and definitions.

The New England religious culture in which Channing was raised shaped his biblical thought as strongly as the many philosophers and theologians he drew upon. In particular, Massachusetts upheld a system of governance based on mutual support of the Congregational church and the state government. All of the oldest and most established families were benefactors of the Standing Order, many of whom had become liberal in

³ Quoted in a footnote (available in the digital version of the text) in William Henry Channing’s *The Life of William Ellery Channing*, 382.

⁴ Letter to Mr. W. Trevilcock, August 29, 1841, printed in William Henry Channing’s *Life of Channing*, 426.

their theological beliefs. So long as Congregationalism remained in power, the burgeoning liberal elite could control the shape of Christianity in Massachusetts.

Additionally, Congregationalism was structured in such a way as to satisfy the growing support for liberal religion. Dispensing with the parish system, in which everyone from a given town attended the town church, the earliest New England settlers, the Puritans, sought a Church more stringent in its standards of membership. The original intention behind such a system was to expel the spiritually unregenerate and ensure that each individual congregation was comprised only of “visible saints.”⁵ Upon this premise, the Puritan founders designed congregations to be functionally autonomous. Each town selected a group of elders, comprised of those people of considerable rank in the community, who had each provided oral testimony of their faith. Once the elders were in place, a congregation was assembled. Full membership was only given to those who gave a relation of grace.⁶ Those who achieved full membership could participate in communion and equally as important, could help elect ministers and offer membership to new parishioners. There was no governing body to match ministerial candidates with churches nor was there an outside authority to regulate membership: each congregation was an island unto itself.

⁵ Visible saints referred to the Puritan ideal wherein the invisible church (comprised of those elected by grace) and visible church (comprised of those who made up the earthly church body) were synonymous. For more on this, see Edmund S. Morgan, *Visible Saints: The History of a Puritan Idea*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1963).

⁶ A “relation of grace” was oral testimony delivered before a congregation describing the candidate’s own individual spiritual history, his or her struggles with obeying God, avoiding the devil and his or her experience of the Holy Spirit in the moment of conversion. Due to the ever-growing problem of how to deal with churchgoers who had NOT delivered such a testimony, Congregational churches began employing “the Halfway Covenant.” The Halfway covenant was a compromise wherein those people who were baptized but had never delivered a relation of grace could have their own children baptized, in the hope that the latter would eventually seek to become full members themselves. This practice was controversial, some feeling that it undermined the premise on which the Congregational Church was built, which was namely to have a church made up entirely of visible saints, those who had made open profession of their faith. However, there were others who felt that the survival of the church depended on the Halfway Covenant, as it ensured that future generations would be brought up within the church.

This final aspect enabled Unitarianism to flourish as a movement within Congregationalism. Since there was no formal hierarchy, no system of checks and balances in place, an individual congregation controlled its own theological and spiritual direction. The pastor elected to a given church was often at the mercy of the congregation, as its members could dispose of him should he prove lacking in any of his ministerial duties (or simply because they did not like him). In the seventeenth century, Congregationalism required spoken adherence to the Cambridge Platform (1648). A synod of Puritan ministers composed the Platform as a statement of belief for all Congregational churches in America. It was essentially a reiteration of the Westminster Confession in terms of belief; however it included a section detailing the importance of congregational autonomy, a unique facet of New England church polity.⁷ This addendum proved crucial in the burgeoning years of the Unitarian movement. Since there was no governing body that could effectively depose or excommunicate them (save their individual congregations), liberal minded or radical thinkers could test new ideas without serious repercussions. As the Unitarian Biblicists began to experiment with an alternative set of interpretive techniques, they could do so with the knowledge that their jobs were essentially secure, so long as their congregants were pleased with them.

Furthermore, all Congregationalists, including the more liberal-minded, benefited from another source of job security. Until 1833, Congregationalism was the state church of Massachusetts. This is an easy fact to forget when considering the history of

⁷ Drawn up by the 1646 Westminster Assembly, the Westminster Confession was an exposition of Calvinist orthodoxy for that time. It held doctrines commonly held by most Christians (including the Catholic Church) like the Trinity, those held by Protestants like *sola scriptura*, alongside more controversial Calvinistic doctrines like double predestination. There was also evidence of Puritan influence, such as strictures for minimalistic worship and a mention of the idea that assurance of salvation was not necessarily a consequence of faith.

Unitarianism. Freedom of conscience, a foundational principle of liberal Christians and the concept of a “State Church” appear to be antagonistic when viewed from a traditionally American standpoint. For this reason, the marriage of liberal Congregationalists like the Unitarians to the State seems oxymoronic. However, as Conrad Wright noted, the “defenders” of the Standing order did not see it as an “establishment of religion nor as an infringement on freedom of conscience.”⁸ According to Massachusetts’ tradition, Congregational ministers were integral to the moral well-being of both the church and the state. They held a prophetic and prescriptive role that no other governmental figure could possibly hold, or would hold, ever again. As Massachusetts society began to turn to schools to fulfill the duties once performed by the church (implementing common moral values, for example), the connection between church and state became untenable. It became increasingly clear that Congregational ministers could no longer accurately speak for everyone, but only for their own denomination.⁹ With disestablishment, Congregationalism went from “state church” to “denomination.”

It is difficult to speculate on how greatly Massachusetts’ disestablishment affected the Unitarian movement. On one level, of course, disestablishment shaped the course of the Unitarian movement and later Unitarian denomination. Unitarianism was a movement that rose out of Congregationalism. From a ministerial perspective, there is evidence that disestablishment had an impact on the movement. For example, “Church”

⁸ Wright, “Piety, Morality and the Commonwealth” in *The Unitarian Controversy*, 27.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 31.

meant a very different thing to Channing and Norton than it did for Hedge and Parker.¹⁰ Channing and Norton were at their most involved with the Unitarian movement when Congregationalism was still the State Church. For Channing especially the prospect of breaking from Congregationalism was unnecessary. In his view, the Unitarian movement should exist within the State Church. Hedge and Parker on the other hand had careers that flourished after disestablishment.¹¹ Both were far less committed to upholding the traditions and forms of the Congregational church than either Channing or Norton (Hedge wished to phase them out gradually, whereas Parker felt they should be done away with immediately). More than likely, the ideas born of Unitarian study of the Bible would have forced a schism regardless of the status of Congregationalism as the state church, a fact discussed further in Chapter 4.

Bolstered by the support of the state, Congregationalism's lack of formal denominational hierarchy enabled ministers and congregations to diverge in opinion without serious repercussion. The Massachusetts State Church allowed an almost unchecked degree of local autonomy. Diversity of opinion was inherent in the very fabric of Congregational polity. This was a primary reason why the liberal movement within Congregationalism was able to remain within its mother denomination for as long as it did. Besides their adherence to this form of polity, Congregationalists were not rigid in their enforcement of a standard of orthodoxy. Most assumed that a majority of New England ministers were Calvinist in their doctrine and therefore took for granted the adherence of ministers and laity to the Cambridge Platform. In Channing's time,

¹⁰ Norton was not a minister, but a scholar. Still, he trained ministers at Harvard Divinity School, so he was never very far removed from the Unitarian ministry and whatever questions may have besieged its ministers. For more, see Ch. 3.

¹¹ Hedge also pastored a Church in Bangor, Maine from 1835-1850. Maine had been disestablished from the moment it became an independent state (apart from Massachusetts) in 1820.

statements of obedience to the Platform were almost non-existent. For the purposes of Congregationalists, the only actual standard of faith was the Bible. But, *how* religious thinkers used the Bible as the standard of faith varied from the seventeenth century Congregationalism of the Puritans to the Congregationalism of William Ellery Channing.

The Puritans, as Theodore Bozeman notes, “faced backward rather than forward.”¹² They sought in the Bible (the New Testament specifically) a model for how to live their lives. They wanted to recreate the apostolic Church on American soil. This was not the aim of Channing and the liberal Congregationalists. Channing did not seek to restore ancient times, but to live in the present, according to the religion of Jesus. The Bible contained Jesus’ moral code. In Channing’s view, it was the only standard of faith anyone needed. In spite of their divergent conclusions, the Puritans and the liberal Congregationalists were able to find in the Bible, and the Bible alone, precisely what they needed in behalf of true belief and holy living.

Bearing in mind that “searching the Bible for truth” was nothing revolutionary in the history of Protestantism, in American Congregationalism it produced a unique situation. Theoretically and in practice in other Protestant denominations—particularly those with more stratified systems of hierarchy—elected officials, creeds or established doctrines (or the example of the apostolic Church represented in the Bible) could check erroneous readings of the Bible. In Congregationalism, doctrines certainly existed against which both ministers and laity could measure themselves. For a time, ministers could take for granted that their parishioners believed in the orthodox view of the Trinity, original sin and election to salvation. Over time, such homogeneity broke down. Pockets

¹² Theodore Dwight Bozeman, *To Live Ancient Lives: The Primitivist Dimension in Puritanism*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1988), 19.

of unorthodox belief were to be expected, but when entire congregations began declaring their allegiance to a Unitarian God, to an Arian Christology, and to an Arminian view of human capacities, the mistaken hopes of the Puritan became clear. What had begun as an effort to escape the control of a governing ecclesial body, had resulted in a rather colorful, variegated sea of churches, in tentative fellowship with one another. The strength of this fellowship would be tested vigorously at the time when Channing's star began to rise.

One of primary features of Congregational fellowship was the pulpit exchange. Ministers would exchange pulpits with their fellow ministers as a sign of fealty and mutual respect. It was a way of saying, "I agree with your principles enough to let you tend my flock for the day." Though Channing did not participate in pulpit exchanges with orthodox ministers in his later career, he never bore the stigma of a "radical" preacher, as would Theodore Parker. Some of this was due to his prominence and his renown as a captivating preacher. Equally important, Channing never did or said anything radically controversial or confrontational enough to provoke opposition from his fellow Congregational ministers.¹³ Furthermore, Channing openly praised his mother denomination. About the great foresight of its founders he wrote, "Our fathers maintained the independence of Christian churches. This was their fundamental principle. They taught that every church or congregation of Christians is an independent community, that it is competent to construct its own government, has the sole power of managing its own concerns, electing its own ministers, and deciding its own controversies, and that it is not subject to any other churches, bishops, synods or

¹³ Even in his most heated exchanges between himself and Jedediah Morse and Samuel Worcester, respectively, Channing was careful to acknowledge the beliefs of his opponents. His goal was never to disparage, but to state plainly his beliefs, while offending as few as possible.

assemblies, or to any foreign ecclesiastical tribunal whatever.” Further, he argued, this form of polity was biblically sound. “In the Scriptures,” wrote Channing, “we find not one word of a national church, not an intimation that all the churches of the same country should link themselves together, should give up their independence and self-control, and subject themselves to a common master and a few prelates... That such congregations are to submit themselves to one common head or pope, as the Catholics teach, or to a national head, as the English church teaches, or to any power or tribunal distinct from that which subsists in each, is nowhere even hinted in the Scriptures.”¹⁴ From the Gospels, Channing gleaned through negative deduction that difference of opinion was accepted and expected among Christians. Since nowhere did Jesus explicitly state plans for one supreme church, the other option was multiple churches making up one global, multi-faceted Christian body.

“Unity in variety” became a common trope in Channing’s writings, especially in his more polemical writings during the Unitarian controversy.¹⁵ Channing never outgrew his belief in the possibility of a universal, liberal church, edified rather than undermined by diversity of opinion in its congregants. Congregationalism furnished him with this ideal, along with several other foundational elements of his developing worldview, including the belief that the Bible was the benchmark of Christian identity. But before examining Channing’s relationship to the Bible, it is necessary to consider one other important element of the Congregationalism of Channing’s New England: its Reformed theology.

¹⁴ W.H. Channing, *Life of Channing*, 223.

¹⁵ For example his sermons, “Preaching Christ,” “Unitarian Christianity,” “Unitarian Christianity More Favorable to Piety,” “The Church,” and “The System of Exclusion and Denunciation in Religion Considered” all take “unity in variety” of belief as their theme.

In popular accounts of Channing, his biographers and admirers portrayed him as the champion of free and liberal thought, battling the theological Leviathan that was Reformed or Calvinistic theology.¹⁶ From such accounts, Calvinism appears to be a shady past Channing wished to shed. As a general rule, the doctrines of election and depravity perturbed liberal Christians. Both were doctrines they felt painted an unflattering picture of God and portrayed humanity as helpless creatures. In fact, these were the only two issues *essential* to the Unitarian dispute with Calvinism. Unitarians like Channing and Norton understood doctrines like the trinity and the dual nature of Christ to be byproducts of a different mode of biblical interpretation, but not the crux of their dispute with Calvinism. Certainly, many liberals believed in the unity of God and a fully human Jesus Christ, but these were not absolute tenets of faith. Rather, they were matters of conscience. Such doctrines were certainly not enough to warrant a split from Congregationalism, nor even a split from Calvinism as an intellectual source, a fact on which Channing was emphatic.

The interpretation of Channing as anti-Calvinist comes from reading his life story backward, beginning with his mature thought rather than examining his intellectual roots. At the end of his life, Channing may at times sound more like Ralph Waldo Emerson than Jonathan Edwards, though he reflected elements of both from the beginning to the end of his life. The story of Channing as a boy driving back from a revival meeting with his father, trembling at the fiery prospects of hell has become the symbol of Channing's

¹⁶ For the first century after Channing's death and even during his life, various Unitarian biographers and historians, along with his contemporaries, both those antagonistic and supportive of his claims, memorialized Channing as anti-Calvinist. For figures like Andrews Norton, Theodore Parker, Elizabeth Palmer Peabody, Ezra Stiles Gannett and Orville Dewey, he had brought Congregationalism out of the darkness of Calvinism into the light of Unitarianism. Historians like George Cooke and Earl Morse Wilbur portrayed the shift from Calvinist to Unitarian as incredibly stark and abrupt, as a movement created out of its reaction to Calvinism, rather than the evolution of one man's thought within a denomination that allowed for such variety.

anti-Calvinism. Channing was beside himself with fear after the revival sermon, but upon seeing his father's nonchalance afterward, Channing determined that the sermon was not to be believed and he subsequently parted ways with Calvinism.¹⁷ This narrative conflated the whole of the Reformed theology with ideas of election and fatalism. Channing rejected those ideas, not all of Calvinism.

Recent historians have rightly noted that there was much in Channing's thought that echoed his Calvinistic roots.¹⁸ These roots, of course, were tempered with his liberal sensibilities. He never lost his belief in human depravity, though he rejected the idea that humans inherited the guilt of Adam's sin at birth. Humans were sinful because they were created and all created beings were fallible and liable to sin. In spite of this, Channing believed firmly in the infinite potential for good of human nature. He felt that humans could improve, and could continue to improve until death and even after death, their progression toward perfection continued. Jesus was the example of perfection that humanity had to keep in mind at all times. Though Calvin and Channing would have parted on the source or depth of human sinfulness, Channing retained a Calvinistic strain in his view of human nature: he always saw humans as far beneath the Christ. After all, Jesus had achieved perfection on earth, a task Channing did not believe humans could achieve while alive.¹⁹

Historians have often focused on Channing's relationship with Samuel Hopkins, the friend and intellectual protégé of Jonathan Edwards, who was a minister in Channing's native Newport. Channing found himself unaffected by his own more liberal

¹⁷ W.H. Channing, *Life of William Ellery Channing*, 15-16.

¹⁸ See, for example, Patterson, *Philosophy of William Ellery Channing*; Conrad Wright, *Liberal Christians*; Wright, *American Unitarianism*; and Wright, *A Stream of Light*.

¹⁹ For more on this see Robert Leet Patterson's Chapter on "Christ" in his *Philosophy of William Ellery Channing*

minister, William Patton, who presided over the Second Congregationalist Church he attended. Though reputedly sound in doctrine (he was liberal in his views), Channing found Patton to be very dry in his delivery and an ineffective preacher as a result. Thus, Channing gravitated toward Hopkins, as well as Ezra Stiles, both of whom held different theological views than those he entertained (even as a boy).²⁰ At first, Channing found little to praise in Hopkins doctrine and preaching ability. It was only after he had graduated from Harvard and spent an additional two years tutoring in Richmond, Virginia (during which time he amassed a great library of modern philosophy) that he sought out Hopkins again, this time with an avid and open mind. He was greatly moved by Hopkins' notion of disinterested benevolence, something that informed his own later theological views.

Hopkins developed this concept of disinterested benevolence in his essay, *An Inquiry into the nature of true holiness* (1798). In it he argued that the true nature of holiness consisted in love, by which love is defined as universal love of Being, or disinterested benevolence. Hopkins drew upon this notion that true happiness or true and perfect morality arises only out of love of all creation, which comes from the freely given grace of God. This grace enables human beings to see their fellow humans as God sees them. One loves others for God's sake and because of God's grace. Though Channing did not wholly adopt Hopkins theology, it was this type of agape love, God's love infused into the human mind and then outward onto every other living creature to which

²⁰ Stiles pastored the Second Congregational Church in Newport from 1755-1777 (he resigned the pulpit three years before Channing was born). He went on to become president of Yale, but maintained ties with Newport, a fact which allowed him to forge an acquaintance with a then, very young, Channing. Stiles instilled in Channing the importance of fighting against any attack on human rights, a fact which, Andrew Delbanco, notes influenced Channing's later views on coercion or intolerance in the church. Delbanco, *Always Young for Liberty*, 45.

Channing adhered. It would come to fit with his views on the divine-human connection in the human mind; just as God revealed his love for humanity through the human mind, so did He help humanity to reason and reveal biblical truth in and through their minds as well.

In discussing Hopkins' influence on his theology, Channing shared an anecdote about the elder clergyman's willingness to look beyond the *literal* word of the Bible. "I remember [Hopkins] once telling me that he did not consider the last part of 1 Cor. xiii.²¹ as referring to a future life; and I think that by the 'perfect' which was to 'come,' he understood the revelation of disinterested love under the Gospel. One day, a relative of mine, talking with him about the text Rom. ix. 3 ('I could wish myself accursed') observed that the passage should be rendered, 'I *did* wish.' Dr. Hopkins replied, that if Paul did not say what our version ascribes to him, he *ought* to have said it. The idea of entire self-surrender to the general good was the strongest in his mind."²² Though Paul had not spoken it, he had meant it. What this memory reveals is that Hopkins may have been one of the earliest to model for Channing the concept of "meaning behind the words." Channing also saw Hopkins disagree with the standard interpretation of a text, indicating that Hopkins gave him insight into the multiplicity of biblical interpretations. Channing admired Hopkins for his tolerance of the views of others, even if they differed from Hopkins' own Calvinism. Later in life, Channing expressed his own belief that different readings of the Bible were inevitable and divinely intended.

Channing's biblicism bore an ecumenical quality, even when he took part in polemically-charged exchanges. His view of the Bible, instilled in him at so early an age,

²¹ 1 Corinthians 13:1-13.

²² W.H. Channing, *Life of Channing*, 81.

enabled him to see the possibility for truth in all opinions, even if he disagreed with the conclusions. The ultimate check for truth and falsehood was whether it conformed to the underlying truth of the Bible, which Channing rather naively believed was available to everyone—but more on that later.

Channing's First Intellectual Preoccupations: The Mind

When Channing entered Harvard at the tender age of 15 in 1795, he came as a Congregationalist with an open mind. He would leave unchanged in this sense. However during those years he spent at Harvard, graduating in 1798, the major thematic center of Channing's thought shifted and shaped him for his future profession. The school itself was evolving at the time he was there.²³ For a time, certain books were unavailable to students due to their unorthodox content, even if they were held at the Harvard library. Tracts by anti-trinitarian writers like Socinus, John Bidle or even Stephen Nye were allowed use by ministerial students writing *against* such opinions who had need of such texts to serve as a teleological opponent. The powers-that-be at Harvard also believed that certain thinkers, like Hume and Gibbon were equally dangerous and, thus, were to be checked out sparingly.²⁴ However, by the time Channing arrived, library policy had relaxed some, and he was able to read philosophers with views that were decidedly less than orthodox. Of course, even though these books pointed in the direction of certain liberal theological views, they were not necessarily those that led Channing to liberal

²³ For more on the Harvard of Channing's day see Samuel Eliot Morison, *Three Centuries of Harvard*. (Cambridge, Mass., 1936).

²⁴ David Hume (1711-1776) was a Scottish thinker known for his brand of skeptical philosophy, wherein he denied the absolute reality of matter, arguing that all outward things were merely concepts in the mind, taking Locke's postulate of "innate ideas" to its logical conclusion. It was Hume that Thomas Reid responded to in his *Inquiry*, precipitating much that would become Scottish Common Sense Realism. Edward Gibbon (1737-1794) was an English historian and member of British Parliament who denied the supernatural origins of the Christian Church, arguing instead that the church rose as a result of historical and political causes.

Christianity. More than likely it was authors like Frances Hutcheson, Samuel Clark and Richard Price who did that—all of whom were far less controversial than Hume, for example.

Changes in library policy were one thing, but the religious culture of the school was also beginning to shift. Though it would not become apparent until the school broke out into controversy over the Hollis Chair election of 1805, Harvard was moving away from its orthodox Calvinist origins.²⁵ The student body itself was changing. Harvard was drawing students like Channing, who were ripe for new ideas and modes of thinking. In this environment, Channing's nascent liberalism grew, nurtured by the relationships he formed with fellow classmates, like Judge Joseph Story and Joseph Tuckerman, and later, in 1802 when he returned to study theology, by those he developed with his tutor David Tappan and President of the College, Joseph Willard.

The most important conversation partners Channing had, however, were inanimate. Books were Channing's axis mundi. He read widely, checking out titles ranging from Leland's *Demosthenes* to Reid's *Inquiry into the Human Mind*, Hume's *On Human Nature*, the Sermons of William Sherlock, Price's *Morals*, to Priestley's *On Necessity*. He pored over the entire collected works of writers like Bacon, Reid, Cicero, Shakespeare, Rousseau, Hippocrates, Pliny, and Hume.²⁶ Notably absent from his

²⁵ The Hollis Chair controversy involved the election of Henry Ware, Sr., a liberal-minded candidate over several orthodox candidates, Jesse Appleton and Joshua Bates. Orthodox Congregationalists viewed this as the liberal takeover of Harvard and responded in kind by breaking from Harvard to create their own seminary, Andover-Newton. See, Conrad Wright, *A Stream of Light: A Sesquicentennial History of American Unitarianism*. (Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, 1975).

²⁶ Arthur Brown, *Always Young for Liberty: A Biography of William Ellery Channing*. (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1956), 19-23.

reading list were the giants of German philosophy like Kant or Schleiermacher,²⁷ who were just then gaining prominence in American scholarly circles. For this reason, later generations of Unitarians accused Channing of being uncritical in his thought. Following his death, both Theodore Parker and Frederic Henry Hedge accused him of critical laxity (the latter in a eulogy delivered at Channing's memorial). Parker chided Channing for ignoring the German biblical critics who informed so much of Parker's thought and who represented the future of philosophy in Parker's view. He did admire Channing for his work in the pulpit, where Channing earnestly sought to "help men forward" out of darkness and into the light. However, Parker was disappointed that Channing did not go beyond simply developing an ethos of open-mindedness and freedom of inquiry and did not seek to use such an ethos to knock down what Parker perceived to be defunct religious forms. To Parker, Channing was "not eminently original, either in thought or in the form thereof; not rich in ideas," a lapse that Parker tried to remedy in his own work on scripture.²⁸ Hedge said that Channing was not a "profound thinker" and that no one

²⁷ German Idealism was not yet ubiquitous in New England Academic circles or at Harvard during Channing's time there (Channing attended Harvard from 1795-1798). His granddaughter Grace Channing notes that "it was with intense delight [in 1813] that he made the acquaintance of the great German thinkers, Kant Schelling and Fichte," *Biography of William Ellery Channing*. (MS 100/2 (47), Andover-Harvard Library, Harvard University). Thus, Channing had certainly read among the German Idealists, albeit later in life than his fellows Unitarian Biblicists. In truth, Channing may have received more of German Idealism indirectly. First of all, German Idealism began to gain an audience among Channing's contemporaries, therefore he was certainly familiar with their ideas. Secondly, his reading of Coleridge certainly introduced some German ideas. As Channing's biographer Andrews Delbanco writes, "[Channing] did not roll up his sleeves and fight the good fight against German subversion, but through the fellowship of literate New Englanders like Charles Follen, the appreciative pages of Mme de Stael, and possibly Coleridge's *Aids to Reflection* (1825), he absorbed at least some of the impact of German thought. He shows, moreover, an explicit awareness of the epistemological dead end to which Hume had led the Western mind, and his response is especially revealing. Partly a return to comforting old ground, it is also a tentative move toward a position not unlike the transcendental one; this simultaneous retreat and advance expresses something of the depth of his dilemma." *William Ellery Channing: An Essay on the Liberal Spirit in America*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), 46.

²⁸ Theodore Parker, "William Ellery Channing" in *The Critical Writings of Theodore Parker. Part Ten Volume II*. London & Trübner, date unclear), 38; 47.

would call his thought “scholarly,” but that he was a brilliant preacher and writer and knew how to speak right to the heart of his listeners.²⁹

In general, both Hedge and Parker were right in their critique of Channing as being content to remain convinced of his own opinions without having tested them critically. Channing inclined toward thinkers who told him what he already believed to be true: that human reason would prove Christianity true. For this reason, Channing could not see that he held certain things to be true, *a priori*, namely that God existed, that Jesus was his Son, that the miracles happened. His own theology cast a shadow over his thought. He was simply too convinced that these facts were both true and rational to ask himself whether he believed these things to be true because they were rational or whether he believed they were rational because he already held them to be true. Nor would he have thought to parse the two in the first place. It is important to remember this when Channing—as well as Norton, Hedge, and Parker—spoke of Reason as if it were a divine gift, unfettered by presuppositions and previously held beliefs.

Among the group of thinkers he did read, it appears there was little consistency in Channing’s selection of books and authors. He favored Richard Price, Frances Hutcheson, Adam Ferguson,³⁰ John Locke and Bishop Berkeley³¹ on the philosophical end, and William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and Thomas Carlyle on the literary side. When I examined this edited list of intellectual sources, I found a pattern. Channing read a great deal of Enlightenment thought, particularly that of the

²⁹ Frederic Henry Hedge, “Address of Rev. Frederick H. Hedge, D.D.” in *Services in Memory of Rev. William E. Channing, D.D. at the Arlington-Street Church, Boston on Sunday Evening, October 6, 1867*. (Boston: Press of John Wilson and Son, 1867).

³⁰ Adam Ferguson (1723-1816) was an eighteenth century Scottish Enlightenment thinker and ethicist.

³¹ Bishop George Berkeley was an early eighteenth century English philosopher best known for his theory of immaterialism. He took Locke’s theories to their extreme and denied the materiality of all external objects. The Scottish Common Sense Realists like Reid disputed much of Berkeley’s philosophy.

philosophers from the school of Scottish Common Sense Realism, and he also read much in the genre of English romanticism. Combining these two strains of thought was precarious, because to do it he had to conflate both rationalist and intuitionist impulses. Channing managed a unified blend of both strains, however. From the rationalists like Locke and the Scottish Common Sense Realists, he borrowed a reliance on the senses and an exceedingly high view of human capacity, and from the intuitive romantics he developed a dynamic and poetic understanding of language. Furthermore, Channing infused his intellectual outlook with Neoplatonism, which he absorbed primarily from the Romantics and Plato. From Plato, he derived the belief that all things on earth were shadows of greater ideas, the greatest example being the human mind, which was an emanation of the Great Mind.³² Humans were innately divine in nature; though they were not God, they were Godlike. The influence of his Calvinist upbringing made him unwilling to ascribe total creative control to humanity. Humans could not generate new revelation on their own; all revelation, both old and new, came through God. Fortunately for humanity, God had provided a source of revelation, one that would enable humans to progress gradually toward an understanding of God. The Bible was the human-created, yet divinely inspired conduit for God's message to humanity. To read the Bible was to interact with the Divine Mind.

Channing crafted his theory of the mind from this admixture of rationalist and intuitive sources. Nor was he reticent to share his thoughts on this subject. When

³² Daniel Walker Howe has written much on the Neoplatonism of the Unitarians, particularly Channing. Countering Perry Miller, who in his article "From Edwards to Emerson" argues that Platonic intuitionism skips a generation from eighteenth century Congregationalism to nineteenth century Transcendentalism, Howe argues that Unitarians were a continuation of this element of Jonathan Edwards' thought. See Howe's article "The Cambridge Platonists of Old England and the Cambridge Platonists of New England" in Conrad Wright's *American Unitarianism*, as well as Howe's book *The Unitarian Conscience*. See also Perry Miller's "From Edwards to Emerson" in *Errand into the Wilderness*. (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1956), for the alternative view.

reading Channing, one is never at a loss for his point. Each sermon or treatise tends to echo the one before, and the meaning most often repeated is one of cultivating the mind, the end for which is always to know God. “Every man’s elevation is to be measured first and chiefly by his conception of this Great Being; and to attain a just, a bright, and a quickening knowledge of Him, is the highest aim of thought. In truth, the great end of the universe, of revelation, of life, is to develop in us the idea of God.”³³ For Channing, it followed then that “[to] know God we must have within ourselves something congenial to Him. No outward light, not the teachings of hosts of angels, could give a bad man bright conceptions of God.”³⁴ Though not prone to a literal reading of the Bible, Channing took literally the biblical statement that man was created in God’s image. Channing also believed that God accounted for human immaturity and did not create man with full knowledge of Himself. However, humans, even in their spiritual infancy, were equipped with the tools to aspire to such levels of knowledge. Even so, Channing was an intellectual elitist. While every human being was born with something of the Divine Mind inside, some had quantities of mind (or educational advantages) in greater measure than others. His theory of mind presumed a level of education and mastery that Channing took for granted. Channing did not make explicit this qualification of his theory, perhaps

³³ William Ellery Channing, “The Labouring Class” in *Complete Works*, 90. Robert Leet Patterson contends that Channing contradicts himself in his thought on his belief in the ultimate end of mankind. Patterson argues that on certain occasions Channing states that the end of human life is infinite perfection, that heaven is perpetually present in the interminable progress of the human mind and then at other points Channing notes that the end of humanity is perfection. In one instance, infinite progress is the end, in other, finite achievement of perfection. Patterson leaves this contradiction unresolved, unsure as to whether Channing was oblivious to this contradiction or knew of it, and held on to the dual views all the same. Patterson does concede, and I agree with him on this point, that this is a common occurrence in the thought of Channing: he shows a miraculous capacity to hold together seemingly opposite strains of thought in one cohesive system. For more on this, see Patterson’s *Philosophy of William Ellery Channing*.

³⁴ Channing, “The Religious Principle in Human Nature” in *Complete Works of Channing including the Perfect Life*, 5.

not even to himself; such a distinction was something that Andrews Norton would later bring to light.

Intellectual (or really, demographic) blind spots aside, Channing pursued the betterment of mind, both his own and that of his listeners and readers. He was adamant that religion was the greatest, if not the only, means of achieving such betterment. “Religion gives life, strength, elevation to the mind, by connecting it with the Infinite Mind; by teaching it to regard itself as the offspring and care of the Infinite Father, who created it that He might communicate to it his own spirit and perfections who framed it for truth and virtue.”³⁵ Yet, even more specifically than religion, study of the Bible—meaning study of the text itself, not study of commentaries—elevated the mind in a way that other intellectual activities could not. “Do you ask by what means this end of entering into living communion with God can be attained? I answer first: Let us each put forth our best force of Intellect in gaining clearer and brighter conceptions of the Divine Being. We must consecrate our loftiest powers of thought to this sublime reality. We must not leave to others the duty of thinking for us. We must not be contented to look through others’ eyes. We must exercise our own minds with concentrated and continuous energy. One chief source of truth for us in regard to God is Revelation; and this, accordingly, should claim our most serious and devoted study.” To this, a caveat: “But when I thus speak of Revelation, I meant the Christian Religion. In the Jewish Scriptures, though many sublime passages are found in relation to the Supreme Divinity, yet in many others the image given of God is adapted to a rude state of society only and

³⁵ Channing, “Spiritual Freedom” in *Complete Works*, 168.

to a very immature stage of the human mind.”³⁶ The New Testament, especially the Four Gospels, was the testing ground of the mind, where each individual consciousness was formed.

Channing’s Second Intellectual Preoccupation: Freedom of Conscience and the Bible

Every person gained a personalized meaning when reading the New Testament. Level of readiness and mental preparedness factored into this, as well as the fact that truth revealed itself progressively and in different forms to each person. Channing insisted that finding personal meaning was an intended feature of the text. During his youth, Channing’s family instilled in him the importance of freedom of conscience in all matters of opinion.³⁷ His time in school and after only reinforced this conviction. In the “Note-book” his granddaughter Grace filled with Channing’s various aphorisms, the most common subject was the necessity of an unencumbered conscience. “My conscience is a rule to myself only. My will has no province but my own mind. I am responsible for no others. I may desire others’ virtue, but must not interfere with their freedom. Each is to act from his own inward law, each to be turned on his own soul.”³⁸ Though Channing would shudder at the insinuation, there was an antinomianism inherent in his thought and, as will be shown later, his reading of the Bible. Freedom of conscience to Channing meant unrestricted access to the divine, an assertion that indicated that the specter of

³⁶ Channing, “The Religious Principle in Human Nature,” in *Complete Works and Perfect Life*, 4.

³⁷ Notably, Channing’s grandfather William Ellery endowed William with a love of free inquiry. For more on Channing’s relationship to his grandfather, see William Henry Channing’s *Life of Channing* as well as Grace Ellery Channing’s *Biographical Notes of William Ellery Channing* (MS 100/2 (49), Andover-Harvard Library, Harvard University).

³⁸ Grace Ellery Channing, *Channing’s Note-Book: Passages From the Unpublished Manuscripts of William Ellery Channing*. (Boston: American Unitarian Association, 1902), 58.

Anne Hutchinson was by no means erased from New England.³⁹ All humans had such a connection to the divine in their minds. The existence of doctrines and dogma had the effect of chaining or even silencing this direct connection to God. By dispensing with such restrictive regulations, humans could reopen this link to God and rely on His mind and their own to determine truth and reality for themselves.

It was not only external doctrines that prevented humans from realizing the extent of their reasoning abilities, but their own, stale opinions. Channing felt that past opinions often restricted an individual's progress even more than outside opinions. "We cannot chain our future selves. This is well. We might obstruct growth, fix permanently our present weaknesses or narrow views. But in following present conscience as conscience, we are doing much towards determining our minds to the future following of it. The true loftiness is a feeling that there is a divinity within us, a law superior to outward authority, a self directing, according to the voice of God within."⁴⁰ The worst kind of blasphemy was to disobey this voice within. Therefore, if one's conscience said one thing and a denominational creed or confession of faith said another, the former must always serve as the greater authority. This, as Channing was well aware, could lead to fissures within a congregation or an entire denomination. However, Channing felt that congregational polity negated the necessity for schism. Divisive theological battles stifled the ecumenical spirit among believers that Jesus intended. Churches were not supposed to be

³⁹ Ann Hutchinson was a seventeenth century figure known for her part in the Antinomian Controversy. Hutchinson and John Cotton (who would eventually distance himself from her) accused their fellow Massachusetts ministers of preaching a covenant of works versus a covenant of grace. In the trial that followed in 1636, Hutchinson admitted openly to hearing the voice of God directly. She was thereafter banished from the colony in 1637 and moved to Roger William's settlement (which would soon become Rhode Island). For more see Michael P. Winship, *Making: Militant Protestantism and Free Grace in Massachusetts, 1636-1641*. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2002).

⁴⁰ Grace Channing, *Channing's Notebook*, 58.

seedbeds for controversy, but havens of the Word. Channing noted that in the New Testament Jesus did not establish a Church in any formal way. Any power the apostles had over such an institution was peculiar only for the time immediately following the death of Christ.⁴¹

The possibility of a universal or “catholic” Christianity was far too attractive to allow Channing ever to declare himself the leader of any particular sect. By his own understanding, he was a Congregationalist in polity and a Christian in belief. However, the label he cherished the most was that of preacher of the Gospel. Not the Gospel according to Channing, but the Bible, unadulterated, uncensored. The best preacher would not make his interpretations of biblical passages a rule, but would allow his parishioners to do their own interpreting. “The church and the minister can do little for us in comparison with what we must do for ourselves, and nothing for us without ourselves. They become to us blessings through our own activity. Every man must be his own priest.”⁴² Channing the minister set himself the task of awakening people to their own innate abilities, to the divine light internal to their mind, to everyone’s inner prophet. “Whether teachers are to continue in the brighter ages which prophecy announces is rendered doubtful by a very striking prediction of the times of the Messiah. ‘After those days,’ saith the Lord, ‘I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts, and will be their God, and they shall be my people. And they shall teach no more every man his neighbour, and every man his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord;’ for they shall all

⁴¹ He credits Paul, citing 1 Cor 12:28, with laying down the idea that the apostles had authority only for a time and that it did not transfer to later generations. Channing argued from this passage that apostolic power was time-specific and historically bounded. Channing, “The Church” in *Complete Works*, 317.

⁴² *Ibid*, 319.

know me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them.”⁴³ The greatest tool at the hands of humanity, as the children of God, and Channing, as a pastor, was the Bible, which was the binding tie that held all professing Christians together.

Channing, Preacher of the Bible

Channing’s approach to understanding and reading the Bible was pastoral before it became scholarly under Norton, reformatory under Hedge, and critical under Parker. Channing did not wish to study the Bible solely for his own edification, but to use it in the spiritual betterment of God’s people. Reading and interpreting the Bible was a devotional act. First and foremost, then, Channing’s ministry developed a pietistic zeal for the Book itself. Too often, Channing felt the Bible had been lost in the polemical rhetoric of Christian sects who used the Book as a weapon to prove their various points, rather than as a source of inspiration for its readers. Speaking against what he felt were the damaging effects of Bible Societies (the British and Foreign Bible Society being a particular target of his disdain), Channing preached, “We wish some pledge that [the Bible] will be treated with respect, and we fear that this respect has been diminished by the lavishness with which it has been bestowed. One cause of the evil is, that societies, like individuals, have a spice of vanity, and love to make a fair show in their annual reports; and accordingly they are apt to feel as if a favour were conferred, when their books are taken off their hands. We think that to secure respect to the Bible is even more important than to distribute it widely.”⁴⁴ Selling Bibles should not be the measure of missionary societies; having a Bible did not necessarily mean comprehending it. Channing argued that the only way to nurture respect and understanding of the Bible was

⁴³ *Ibid*, 318, Jeremiah 31:33-4.

⁴⁴ Channing, “Remarks on Associations” in *Complete Works*, (150-1).

by reading it. Only by reading the book frequently would its words have maximum impact on the mind of the reader.

In 1812, for his work on the Bible, the Harvard administration offered Channing the Dexter lectureship, a position left open when its intended incumbent, Joseph Stevens Buckminster died. Samuel Dexter endowed the lectureship for the purpose of promoting interpretation and criticism of the Bible. Channing initially accepted, but after a short time declined to take the position, which eventually went to Andrews Norton. Jack Mendelsohn credits Channing's ill health as the primary reason for this *volte face*.⁴⁵ Channing was sickly for almost his entire life and tended to overexert himself by taking on too many responsibilities, so it is certain that his well-being played a part in his decision. But, it is also true that, while the distinction of such an exalted scholarly position flattered Channing, he never saw himself as a scholar. The world of the academic was too narrow for his taste.⁴⁶ He wanted to aid in the priming of minds of all kinds of people. His vocation was the ministry. In his treatise "Ministry for the Poor," Channing spoke of the potential for the Bible to serve as the leveling agent among people of different classes, ages and educational backgrounds. He helped found the Bible Society of Massachusetts in 1810, which distributed Bibles primarily to those who could not afford them. It was "that book which contains more nutriment for the intellect, imagination, and heart than all others."⁴⁷ The culture of New England (and the United States at large) generated a love for the Bible. In this sense, Channing's ministerial work was done for him; respect for the Bible was a byproduct of the era.

⁴⁵ Mendelsohn, *The Reluctant Radical*, 94.

⁴⁶ Brown, *Always Young for Liberty*, 81.

⁴⁷ Channing, "Ministry for the Poor" in *Complete Works*, 103.

Channing also felt it was the minister's duty to explain how to uncover meaning in the Bible, which was where most Bible Societies fell short. Not everyone was immediately aware that they came equipped with internal tools designed specifically to reveal the layers of meaning beyond the words themselves. In his sermon "On Preaching the Gospel to the Poor," he said, "Whenever you catch a new glimpse of God's character, of human nature, of human perfection, of life, of futurity, of the Christian spirit;-- whenever a familiar truth rises before you in a new aspect; whenever a new principle dawns on you from a number of facts, which had before lain without connection in your minds; whenever a sentence in a human work, or a text of Scripture, reveals to you, as by a flash, some depth in your own souls, or scatters suddenly the mist which had before hung over some important doctrine; whenever a new light of this kind gleams on you, prize it more than volumes or libraries." These "flashes," Channing argued, were the work of God. They were further evidence God intended to work through the given human faculties. Humans simply had to learn to listen to God's internal voice and to trust in their ability to find truth in the Bible. "Be no man's slaves. Seek truth for yourselves. Speak it from yourselves," he wrote.⁴⁸

In contrast to sermons that stressed the depravity of human nature, in his own orations Channing emphasized the divine origins of his hearers. Furthermore, no one modeled this innate divinity better than Channing himself. Elizabeth Palmer Peabody recalled how after hearing a Mr. Dantworth preach at a revival, her mind immediately leaped to compare him with the great Dr. Channing. She wrote upon further reflection how, "I seemed for the first time to understand the meaning of the word *gospel*, as I saw

⁴⁸ Channing "On Preaching the Gospel to the Poor" in *Complete Works*, 112.

how the unholy spell of an autocratic unsanctified selfism was dissolved by a single individual's expression of the reasonable self-respect of *a man*, in the presence of an audacious Pharisee."⁴⁹ These dual beliefs in the sole authority of the Bible and in an elevated human nature were mutually reinforcing concepts: the Bible revealed the dignity of human nature and relied upon the human faculties to decipher its message. Further, though the Bible was a plain text, an un-mysterious text, its meaning varied from reader to reader; there was never one, standard meaning or message of the Bible.

Part of this potential for infinite interpretations derived from the way God had related the text of the Bible to its transcribers. Channing rejected the concept of plenary inspiration, believing instead that the Bible was written by inspired men, not that God dictated the Bible to these writers, letter by letter. The Bible was not to be taken as literal truth, but rather as doorway to deeper meaning and inspiration. It was not God's intention to end revelation with the creation of the Bible, Channing thought. To claim that revelation was over was tantamount to imprisoning God by his own words. Channing did not believe that new revelation from God occurred outside the Bible, however. He would not allow that a person unfamiliar with the history of Jesus or the Bible could receive spontaneous inspiration. Rather, revelation occurred through the interaction of the means God had already provided human beings: the Bible and the human mind. When reading the Bible, a phrase or a word in the Bible might impress the reader with one particular meaning. Channing urged that it was Christian duty not to stop there. In an ordination sermon of 1839, he noted that, "It is a common notion that it is no great task to acquire religious truths in a country which enjoys as we do, a revelation

⁴⁹ Elizabeth Palmer Peabody, *Reminiscences of Rev. William Ellery Channing, D.D.* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1880), 47.

from God. The revelation is thought to save us the trouble of research—to do our work for us. But this is a great error. You should learn that the very familiarity of a revelation hides its truths from us, or is an obstacle to clear comprehension... revelation is not given to deliver us from the toil of seeking truth.”⁵⁰ Channing reminded his readers that new truth was constantly revealing itself in the words of the Bible. Reading a passage once could never reveal all that God wanted humans to know about Himself and his Mind. Only by returning again and again to that same passage could humans hope to come closer to full knowledge of God.

The nature of language being what it was, Channing also believed that revelations received through the Bible were innumerable. God was a respecter of persons and knew that each individual reader would respond and react differently to the words of the Bible. For God, to reveal truth was to impart a personalized message to every soul. The words themselves did not change; they remained always the same combination of letters. It was the meaning that changed from reading to reading and person to person. Disagreements over the means of salvation, the nature of God, or the exact state of the afterlife all arose from different readings of the Bible. Such differences were, to return to Coleridge’s terminology cited at the beginning of the chapter, only “apparent.” In Channing and Coleridge’s view, one could disagree with a person over a doctrine like the Trinity, without causing a breach in Christian fellowship. There were of course certain eternal truths – like the existence of God – that transcended individual interpretations. Disagreements on a fundamental belief like God’s existence constituted a “real” (also

⁵⁰ Channing, “Charge for the Ordination of Mr. Robert C. Waterston, as Minister at Large (Nov 24, 1839)” in *Complete Works*, 116.

Coleridge's coinage) conflict in belief. Disagreement on essential truths such as this indicated a rift that went much deeper than comparatively petty theological disputes.

Channing took the distinction between "apparent" and "real" quite seriously, applying it often to disagreements he had with fellow clergymen and public figures. Even at the highest level of frenzied exchange during the Unitarian Controversy, he still believed that his orthodox opponents and he were disputing over words, not principles. In a sermon aptly titled "Spiritual Freedom," Channing articulated this urgent principle, "We must not demand a uniformity in religion which exists nowhere else, but expect and be willing, that the religious principle, like other religious principles of our nature, should manifest itself in different methods and degrees. Let us not forget that spiritual, like animal life, may subsist and grow under various forms. Whilst earnestly recommending what we deem the pure and primitive faith, let us remember that those who differ in word or speculation may agree in heart."⁵¹

In the same sermon Channing remarked that "the spirit of Christianity, though mixed and encumbered with error, is still divine; and that sects which assign different ranks to Jesus Christ, may still adore that godlike virtue which constituted him the glorious representative of his Father."⁵² What every Christian church or sect had in common was a commitment to follow the message of Jesus Christ. This message may have been corrupted over time or drowned in doctrinal accretions, but at its base, it bespoke the common ground upon which all Christian souls found solace. The point of Jesus' earthly mission was to apprise humans of their duty to love God, through obedience to His laws and love of His creation, especially other human beings. No

⁵¹ Channing, "Spiritual Freedom" in *Complete Works*, 170.

⁵² *Ibid.*

individual text in the Bible could offset this greater truth. This was the underwritten law of Channing's biblicism. God could not contradict Himself; therefore, if a reading of a particular passage in the Bible seemed in conflict with the teachings of Jesus, such an interpretation arose from human error. "We read the Scripture to little profit, if in passages relating to local or temporary events, we do not discover Universal Truths, equally applicable to all places and times. The language of the text admits of a spiritual translation."⁵³ Pointilistic exegesis was anathema. Taking individual passages out of context, comparing multiple texts from all over the pages of the Bible, had been a technique used (and equally disparaged) for centuries.⁵⁴ The effect of such exegesis was to show that anyone could prove anything they wanted in the Bible if they looked diligently enough. This type of exegesis was the inherent danger of interpreting the Bible. In the wrong hands, the Bible became a text that could provide the most deprived and debased people with precedent for their beliefs.

Perhaps even more frightening for Channing was the prospect of persons reading the Bible who were not prepared mentally and spiritually to receive its message. This is why Channing preached repeatedly on the necessity of relying on human Reason or conscience, or more specifically, an *educated* reason or conscience. Channing believed that the human faculties needed to be trained to function properly. This view went against Theodore Parker who believed that the conscience needed no education to serve as a reasoning tool. Parker described a meeting between Channing and himself in one of his journals, during which they discussed their opinions on the subject of conscience.

Parker recalled a visit with Channing, when the two spoke on the subject of "educating

⁵³ Channing, "The Universal Father" in *Complete Works including The Perfect Life*, 13.

⁵⁴ Jack B. Rogers and Donald K. McKim, *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible*. (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1979) 77; 214.

the conscience,” an idea that Parker admitted he “ridiculed.” Channing on the other hand believed that the conscience “must be educated, like the understanding.” Describing the details of their exchange, Parker noted that, “To me it seems that conscience will always decide right, if the case is fairly put, and old habits have not obscured its vision...

[Channing] said conscience was like the *eye*, which might be dim, or might see wrong.”⁵⁵

Thus, proper education, either by reading the Bible or through formal schooling, acted as curative lenses to the “eyes” of the conscience. Channing further punctuated his insistence on proper education for reading the Bible in his sermon “Preaching Christ.” He wrote, “Every man who reads the Bible knows that, like other books, it has many passages which admit a variety of interpretations. Human language does not admit entire precision. It has often been observed by philosophers. That the most familiar sentences owe their perspicuity, not so much to the definiteness of the language as to an almost incredible activity of the mind, which selects from a variety of meanings that which each word demands, and assigns such limits to every phrase as the intention of the speaker, his character, and situation require.” A human mind that is unprepared to read the biblical text will ascribe narrow meanings to the words, rather than allow the many meanings of the words to reveal themselves gradually. Such it was for the great majority of Bible readers. Narrow, rigid interpretation was one hazard to be aware of and avoid when reading the Bible. Furthermore, the Bible was an ancient book, so readers should avoid rushing to ascribe modern meanings to its words. Modern meanings did not cancel out the ancient ones. Channing believed that it was important for readers to remember that “the Scriptures were written in a distant age, in a foreign language, by men who were

⁵⁵ Quoted in Weiss, *Life and Correspondence of Parker*, 109.

unaccustomed to the systematic arrangements of modern times, and who, although inspired, were left to communicate their thoughts in the style most natural or habitual. Can we wonder than that they admit a variety of interpretations?”⁵⁶ Readers must allow for the truth of past interpretations of the text, just as they allowed for contemporary interpretations of the Bible that diverged from their own.

However, there existed a means of checking extreme, rogue interpretations. Trained interpreters of the Bible would “favour those explications of obscure passages which are seen to harmonise with the moral attributes of God, and with the acknowledged teachings of nature and conscience. All those interpretations of the Gospel which strike the mind at once as inconsistent with a righteous government of the universe, which require of man what is disproportioned to his nature, or which shock any clear conviction which our experience has furnished, cannot be viewed with too jealous an eye by him who, revering Christianity, desires to secure to it an intelligent belief.”⁵⁷ Channing would not have dreamed of impugning any singular passage of Scripture—it was all from God. Instead of asking the reader to ignore a difficult passage or disregard it, he admonished the reader to remember the ambiguity of language. Instead of attempting to resolve the tension of seemingly obscure or contradictory passages, he petitioned the interpreter to allow for the many meanings of the passages to reveal themselves naturally and gradually. One could not squeeze truth out of the Bible by excising individual passages or overemphasizing others, but had to earn it through consistent reading.

The task of reading through a difficult passage was far easier in the New Testament than in the Old. In the New Testament, readers could reconcile those texts

⁵⁶ Channing, “Preaching Christ” in *Complete Works*, 257.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

that spoke of the wrath of God or divinely sanctioned violence against humans by other humans with their belief that God was merciful and loving, because these moments of violence were isolated incidents in the text. However, in Channing's view, the Old Testament was primarily a violent history of the Hebrew nation. Channing would not dream of imitating Marcion and surgically removing the Old Testament from the sacred canon.⁵⁸ His scriptural references, though they are overwhelmingly from the New Testament (with the Four Gospels making up most of that), are also drawn from the Old Testament, with Isaiah, Psalms and Genesis serving as the books most quoted.⁵⁹ Channing's solution then was not to dispense with the Old Testament, but to circumscribe its significance to a particular time and place. "For ourselves, we are followers of Christ, and not of Moses, or Noah, or Adam. We call ourselves Christians and the Gospel is our only rule. Nothing in the Old Testament binds us, any further than it is recognized by; or incorporated into the New."⁶⁰

Channing adopted the parts of the Old Testament that blended seamlessly with the message of the New. Historian Andrew Delbanco refers to the desire to "knock down the Jew who confounds Channing's view of Christian history" as "genteel anti-Semitism."⁶¹ The problem with this interpretation is that it aligns Channing with the historical Christian anger at the Jews for misreading the signs of the Old Testament. While the culture of genteel anti-Semitism may have influenced him, Channing's concern over the place of the Old Testament was precipitated by the disparity in tone between the Old and

⁵⁸ Marcion of Sinope was a second century bishop who eschewed the idea that the deity of the Jewish Scriptures was the same deity of the Christian scriptures. For this reason, he argued, the Jewish Scriptures, the Old Testament, should be removed from the biblical canon.

⁵⁹ For a list of Scripture references (non-comprehensive for his unpublished sermons) in the Appendix of his *Complete Works*.

⁶⁰ Channing, "Remarks on Associations" in *Complete Works*, 152.

⁶¹ Delbanco, *William Ellery Channing*, 78.

New Testaments. Though he agreed that the “Christian dispensation is a continuation of the Jewish, the completion of a vast scheme of providence,” Channing never lost sight of the fact that Christianity and Judaism were different religions.⁶² Christ was NOT the Messiah the Jews were expecting, made obvious by the fact that they rejected him. The Old Testament was important primarily because it contained the history of the Jews and Christ was a Jew. However, simply because the Old Testament did not measure up to the New Testament as far as significance and meaning went, did not mean that it was not true. In fact, Channing believed that the whole of the Bible was true and he had the evidence to prove it.

The greatest debt Channing owed to John Locke was the philosopher’s assertion that Christianity was founded on the truth of Christ’s miracles. Channing believed that humans had knowledge of the existence of God through their own consciousness, but Christianity, the historical religion, they knew to be true because of its miraculous origins. In 1821, Channing gave as the Dupleian Lecture at Harvard, *The Evidences of Revealed Religion*. His chosen topic was a popular one in the nineteenth century. As E. Brooks Holifield shows in his masterful work, *Theology in America*, almost everyone was searching for “evidence” of truth, both internal and external to the Bible. What varied was *where* they found such evidence and *how* they found it.⁶³ For instance, Deists like Thomas Paine found the Bible superfluous, because all the evidence one needed to prove God’s existence could be found in the external world. Miracles were neither provable nor relevant. For others, evidence for Christianity found in nature was only

⁶² Channing, “Unitarian Christianity” in *Complete Works*, 279.

⁶³ I do not include the full list of those participating in this search for “evidences,” due to space and relevance. However, for a fuller picture please see Holifield’s chapters included in Part II of his book *Theology in America*.

supplementary, even inferior, to that found in the Bible. Both Locke and the Scottish Common Sense Realists supported the idea that it was possible to accept miracles as empirically sound, scientific facts.⁶⁴ The miracles involved data discoverable through inductive reasoning and based on the *a priori* assumption of the truth of biblical events—a tactic seemingly contradictory to their insistence on *a posteriori* means of investigation.⁶⁵ Given this, the Bible became a source for all types of data, religious and scientific, a fact that many orthodox Christians would tout when natural and scientific methods seemed to challenge established belief.⁶⁶

Channing believed the Bible to be the primary source of truth, but did not see biblical truth as antagonistic to truth derived from nature. The purpose of the Dudleian lecture series, endowed originally in 1750 by Paul Dudley, was to relate natural religion and revealed religion. For this lecture, Channing presented his thesis that miracles were in no way incongruous to natural religion, but in fact reinforced it. “The great purpose of God, then, I repeat it, in establishing the order of nature, is to form and advance the mind,” Channing asserted, “and if the case should occur in which the interests of the mind could best be advanced by departing from this order, or by miraculous agency, then the great purpose of the creation, the great end of its laws and regularity would demand such departure; and miracles, instead of warring against, would concur with nature.”⁶⁷

The Bible was the written record of God’s instruction to mankind; it confirmed what God

⁶⁴ Theodore Bozeman, *Protestants in Age of Science*, 139.

⁶⁵ Bozeman notes that those who used these particular means of “induction” believed their type of *a priori* belief in the truth of events in the Bible were a common occurrence among scientists. All scientists proceeded on knowledge that had come before; it would be imprudent to ignore hundreds of years of scientific knowledge, just as it would be imprudent for biblical “scientists” (for that is how they wished to see themselves) to ignore centuries of knowledge of religious truth. *Ibid*, 150.

⁶⁶ Mark Noll, *Between Faith and Criticism: Evangelicals, Scholarship and the Bible in America*. (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1986).

⁶⁷ Channing, “The Evidences of Revealed Religion” in *Complete Works*, 196.

had written already in Nature, but augmented it at the same time. In the Bible, the story of Christ was the actual testimony of God's workings in humanity and the human mind. Nature was one access point to God, but one could not fully actualize the divine potential in humanity without the Word.

Channing expanded on his earlier Dudleian Lecture when in 1832 he wrote the treatise, *Evidences of Christianity*. This represented the culmination of his earlier biblical thought, combining his more mystical and romantic strain of thought—the divine-human connection in the mind, the variability of language—with a critical discussion of the rational evidences of Christianity. He stated this explicitly in the first page of the discourse, arguing that “[in] the Scriptures, which use language freely, and not with philosophical strictness, faith and unbelief are mental acts of this complex character, or joint products of the understanding and heart; and on this account alone they are objects of approbation or reproof.”⁶⁸ For him, the Bible was always the meeting place of the pietistic and the intellectual. This adhered to his pastoral philosophy of introducing the Bible, the plain truth of God, both as place of worship and as a divinely crafted teaching tool for the individual mind. In its pages, a novice and a seasoned veteran had everything they needed to develop their knowledge of God and the history of Jesus.

Channing could make such broad and sweeping statements about the accessibility of the Bible because he believed that the Bible was a rational creation. Its premises were rational, its commandments were rational, and its *miracles* were rational. This did not mean however, that grasping the Bible's evidences required no effort. Channing was an empiricist in the vein of Reid and Hutcheson, believing that the first impressions of any

⁶⁸ Channing, “Evidences of Christianity” in *Complete Works*, 203.

given words were to be trusted. However, Channing did not believe that the first impressions were ever the *final* impressions. They were shadows of the greater truth, the truth to come. Humans could not absorb the whole truth of the Bible at once; it would overwhelm them. God knew this. Further, God, in all of his wisdom, knew that for humanity to actualize their full potential, they would have to attain to the full knowledge of His Glory through their own intellectual and moral exertion. He had provided humans with the necessary faculties to do so. In his sermon, “Christianity a Rational Religion,” Channing wrote, “I know of no process by which the true sense of the New Testament is to pass from the page into my mind without the use of my rational faculties. It will not be pretended that this book is so exceedingly plain, its words so easy, its sentences so short, its meaning so exposed on the surface, that the whole truth may be received in a moment and without any intellectual effort. There is no such miraculous simplicity in the Scriptures.”⁶⁹ Again, here is evidence of Channing’s double-sided argument. This inadvertent elitism is a factor that would ultimately make Channing’s view of the Bible over the heads of many of his hearers. The Bible was at the same time accessible to all and, yet, fully accessible only to those intellectually prepared to work at understanding such a task. Channing saw this gap in his own views on the Bible and the understanding of his readers as further reason to convince his hearers that by continued training of the mind, anyone could uncover truth in the Bible. Channing wrote, “In truth, no book can be written so simply as to need no exercise of reason. Almost every word has more than one meaning, and judgment is required to select the particular sense intended by the writer. Of all books, perhaps, the Scriptures need most the use of reason for their just

⁶⁹ Channing, “Christianity a Rational Religion” in *Complete Works*, 225.

interpretation; and this, not from any imperfection, but from the strength, boldness, and figurative character of their style, and from the distance of the time when they were written.”⁷⁰ The Bible was a living text, even though it was written long ago in a place and time far different from nineteenth century Boston. The mind was never passive when reading and interpreting the Bible, because the Bible was not a passive text. The possibilities were endless for what the interaction of the Bible and the mind could produce.

Of course by claiming that God interacted directly with humans only in the Bible, Channing circumscribed the pursuit of truth safely within the confines of Christianity. Though Channing argued that difference of opinion was the natural state of humanity, he believed that the proper use of Reason would always show that *Christianity* was true. The Bible was proof of that. The Scriptures left the guesswork out of determining whether Christianity was truly a Revelation from God. “I say, then, that we not only know in general what Christianity was at its first promulgation, but we know precisely what its first propagators taught, for we have their writings. We have their religion under their own hands. We have particularly four narratives of the life, works and words of their Master, which put us in possession of his most private as well as public teaching. It is true that without those writings we should still have strong arguments for the truth of Christianity; but we should be left in doubt as to some of its important principles; and its internal evidence, which corroborates, and, as some think, exceeds the external, would be very much impaired.”⁷¹ One did not have to waste time worrying about whether Christianity was true. Reliance on the testimony of the Gospel writers, an idea Channing

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ Channing, “Evidences of Christianity” in *Complete Works*, 209.

gained from Locke, was something that Channing took for granted. Nonetheless, Channing was assured of the truth of the Bible as he was assured that God had created him in His image or that God spoke to him through the Word and his own mind.

From Preacher to Bible Warrior

For the first third of his ministerial career, Channing had been content to espouse his Bible views from his own Federal Street pulpit and nowhere else. Every one of his biographers (and they are numerous) has made note of his distaste for controversy.⁷² In spite of his reticence, many, including both his fellow liberals and his opponents, saw him as the most eloquent spokesperson for the nascent liberal movement in Congregationalism. For those who wished to coax him into open debate, they would have to hit precisely the right nerve, deliver a parry that Channing could not help but return with a swift retort. In 1815, such a parry occurred in the form of Jedediah Morse's *American Unitarianism*.⁷³

Of course, Morse did not actually write *American Unitarianism*. Thomas Belsham, an English Unitarian, was its original author. In it, Belsham described the trend of Unitarian—meaning Socinian—thought in England. Morse read the treatise and felt that its conclusions were also those of the liberals in his own denomination, Congregationalism. Thus, he reprinted Belsham's work, adding his own editorial comments as an introduction. The printing of this work had exactly the effect for which

⁷² To name a few of Channing's biographers: W.H. Channing's, *Life of William Ellery Channing*; John White Chadwick, *William Ellery Channing: Minister of Religion*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1903), William Henry Furness "William Ellery Channing" in William Ware, ed. *American Unitarian Biography: Memoirs of Individuals who have been Distinguished by their writings, character and efforts in the cause of Liberal Christianity, Vol. II*. (Boston and Cambridge: James Munroe and Company, 1851) and Charles Brooks, *William Ellery Channing*. (Boston, 1880).

⁷³ Morse's *American Unitarianism* was actually a reprinting of a chapter from Thomas Belsham's book *Life of Theophilus Lindsey* (1812). The chapter was also titled "American Unitarianism." Morse added an introduction in which he directly implicated the liberal Congregationalists as practitioners of the same Unitarianism put forth by Belsham.

Morse had hoped. Published in his own periodical, *The Panoplist*, the piece accused the liberals of hiding their Unitarianism, their Socinianism, while remaining hypocritically inside Congregationalism. He pointedly asked them to account for their heretical reading of the Bible. Secret Socinians. Hypocrites. Bible blasphemers. One could not have picked language more apt to draw Channing from his quiet reverie and take pen to paper. Instead of responding to Morse directly, he did what often occurred in such public, heated exchanges: he wrote a letter to a friend and then had it published. *The Letter to the Rev. Samuel C. Thacher on the Aspersions contained in a late number of The Panoplist on the ministers of Boston and the vicinity* was printed and published shortly thereafter and had the effect of permanently identifying Channing as a Unitarian of the variety of the Socinian, Joseph Priestley. He knew this would be the result, which was why he had avoided coming forward for so long: Not because he disagreed with many of the principles laid out in Belsham's treatise, but because he did not wish to disassociate Unitarianism from Congregationalism. That being acknowledged, Channing recognized his role as a leader among liberal Congregationalists and was genuinely stung by the unfair and unwarranted (he felt) slings of Morse's *American Unitarianism*.

The main objective of Channing's argument in the *Letter* was to accuse Morse of unchristian feeling. The intention behind Morse's *American Unitarianism*, Channing thought, was not to promote scholarly debate but to "rank us under a denomination, which the people of this country have been industriously taught to abhor."⁷⁴ He accused Morse of having a hidden propagandistic agenda in the same way that Morse had accused the liberals of having a hidden theological agenda. Channing took particular issue with

⁷⁴ William Ellery Channing, *Letter to the Rev. Samuel C. Thacher on the Aspersions contained in a late number of The Panoplist on the ministers of Boston and the vicinity*. (Boston: Printed Wells & Lilly, 1815), 9.

this, stating that though Socinianism was not a personal belief of his, if he believed Christ was a mere man, he would have admitted it openly. He conceded that there were those who subscribed to the same liberal principles of free inquiry that he held who *did* hold a Socinian Christology, but that this was a matter of individual conscience.

The even greater issue for Channing was, not surprisingly, Morse's ascription of infidelity to the liberals in their reading of the Bible. By labeling them as "heretics" or "infidels," Channing felt Morse was attempting to cut them off from the body of Christ and from God. "Why is it that our brethren are thus instigated to cut us off," petitioned Channing, "It is, because after serious investigation, we cannot find in the Scriptures, and cannot adopt as instructions of our Master, certain doctrines, which have divided the church for ages, which have perplexed the best and wisest men, and which are very differently conceived even by those who profess to receive them... This is our crime, that we cannot think and speak with our brethren on subjects the most difficult and perplexing, on which the human mind was ever engaged. For this we are pursued with the cry of heresy, and are to have no rest until virtually excommunicated by our brethren."⁷⁵ Again, Channing turned Morse's own argument against him by drawing on the fact that Unitarians disbelieved the Trinity because they could find nowhere in the Bible any mention of "three persons" sharing in divinity. It is the Trinitarians who were the unscriptural ones, not the Unitarians, he argued.

Following the publication of this letter, Samuel Worcester joined the fray. Worcester's brother, Noah, was a friend of the liberal cause and of Channing personally. In fact, Channing had written to Noah Worcester in 1813 in the hopes of beginning a

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, 20.

liberal periodical that could respond to the orthodox vehicle, *The Panoplist*, and would be “adapted to the great map of Christians, and the object of which shall be to increase their zeal and seriousness, to direct their attention to the Scriptures, to furnish with that degree of Biblical criticism which they are capable of receiving and applying to illustrate obscure and perverted passages, and though last not least, to teach them their Christian rights, to awaken a zealous attachment to Christian liberty, to show them the ground of Congregationalism, and to guard them against every enemy, who would bury them into bondage.”⁷⁶ Thus, Samuel Worcester had long been aware of the liberal cause, feeling a personal stake in the matter since his brother was party to such unorthodox beliefs. He published a letter in response to Channing’s *Letter to Samuel Thacher* and reiterated the unscriptural nature of liberal belief.⁷⁷ Another set of letters followed, a response from Channing followed by another, an even more exasperated response from Worcester.⁷⁸ In his final response, after which point he withdrew from the public exchange, Channing’s tone softened. Drawing on his pastoral nature, Channing wrote in his *Remarks on the Rev. Dr. Worcester’s Second Letter to Mr. Channing* that, “the differences between Unitarians and Trinitarians lie more in sounds than in ideas.”⁷⁹ Again, Coleridge’s distinction between “apparent” and “real” differences arose in an instance in which Channing was exchanging opinions with someone who held an opposing view. His

⁷⁶ Letter from Channing to Noah Worcester, Boston Jan 11, 1813 (MS 100/2 (25), Andover-Harvard Library, Harvard University).

⁷⁷ Samuel Worcester, *A letter to the Rev. William Ellery Channing, on the subject of his letter to the Rev. Samuel C. Thacher: relating to the review in the Panoplist of American Unitarianism*. (Boston: Printed by Samuel T. Armstrong, 1815).

⁷⁸ William Ellery Channing, *Remarks on the Rev. Dr. Worcester’s letter to Mr. Channing: on the ‘Review of American Unitarianism’ in a late Panoplist*. (Boston: Printed and published by Wells and Lilly, 1815); Samuel Worcester, *A second letter to the Rev. William E. Channing, on the subject of Unitarianism*. (Boston: Printed by Samuel T. Armstrong, 1815).

⁷⁹ William Ellery Channing, *Remarks on the Rev. Dr. Worcester’s second letter to Mr. Channing, on American Unitarianism*. (Boston: Printed and published by Wells and Lilly, 1815), 26.

initial anger dissipated as the exchange continued and his love of peaceful debate once again took hold. What began for him as a defense of his honor and that of his fellow liberal ministers had reverted to a friendly debate among colleagues about different interpretations of the Bible. At least for Channing it had.

The fervor certainly had not died in 1815. Eventually, Channing was drawn back in to the fracas. His greatest contribution was yet to come. Finally, it came in 1819 at the ordination of Reverend Jared Sparks, when he delivered what would be referred to thereafter as the “Baltimore Sermon.” The actual title was “Unitarian Christianity” and in the hour and a half it took for Channing to deliver, the sermon managed to cover every point of Unitarian epistemology and theology. The event itself was staged and its backers had a clear agenda. Liberal Christianity had a stronghold in the Northeast, especially in the environs of Boston, but it was having difficulty taking root in other places around the country. Liberal Christians needed a means of fastening the liberal message into the minds of those outside Boston or of showing those people with liberal sensibilities that there were others like them, who thought like them. Who better to deliver such a message than the greatest and most respected preacher of their time? Therefore, on May 5, 1819, Channing delivered the sermon set to galvanize the liberal Christians and begin the liberalizing of American churches.

Not surprisingly, the sermon caused a stir. It was one of the most widely circulated publications in that year and one of the most-read and well-known sermons of the nineteenth century.⁸⁰ The sermon itself was divided into two parts. In the first part,

⁸⁰ George Burnap, a Unitarian Clergyman, stated in a sermon of 1848 that “[The Baltimore Sermon] made a profound impression. No one who heard it will ever forget that day. Its publication, which took place immediately after, was followed by still more important results. It spread over the country with wonderful rapidity, was printed and circulated by the thousands, and no pamphlet, save one, and that a political

Channing delineated the liberal approach to reading and interpreting the Bible. Though it was a proportionately smaller segment, it was the topical center of the entire sermon. Every theological conclusion that appeared in the sermon, Channing had arrived at by using the interpretive principles he introduced in those first opening paragraphs. Channing condensed his biblical thought into a few short statements, stating most basically that the Bible was a book written for the human mind and that the human mind had the rational and sensory means of interpreting it. The second, much larger part of the paper, listed and unpacked the key theological doctrines of liberal or Unitarian Christianity, which had grown out of Channing's encounter with the biblical text: the benevolence and Fatherhood of the One God, the singular (not dual) nature of Christ (more than a man, less than a God), the moral perfection of God in His love for His creation and the necessity and possibility of human virtue. No one who heard the sermon or read it in the coming days was left with any doubt as to the beliefs of the Boston liberals or that Channing was anything other than a man of the Book.

CONCLUSION

William Ellery Channing initiated a long Unitarian engagement with biblical interpretation. He served as the model for many of the methods followed by Norton, Hedge, and even, Parker. Channing committed himself to the possibility that a liberal understanding of the Bible could exist comfortably within Congregationalism.

Channing's approach to the Bible reflected a catholic, pastoral movement based upon the principle that diversity of opinion was the natural result of reading the Bible. Truth never

publication, ever attracted in this country such wide and universal attention." Quoted in Charles Lyttle's, *The Pentecost of Unitarianism: Channing's Baltimore Sermon*. (Boston: The Beacon Press, 1920), 21-22. Lyttle makes note of the fact that even prior to the delivery of the sermon, preparations were being made to print two thousand copies of the anticipated sermon (p. 12).

appeared in the same aspect or at the same time to any two people, but revealed itself gradually and in a personal matter, according to the readiness and ability of that person.

Central to his belief in the multifaceted and gradual nature of discovering truth from the Bible was his belief in a connection between the Divine and human mind. Reading the Bible was the primary means of activating this connection, for Scripture acted as a conduit for God's past and continued revelation to humanity. One read the Bible in order to cultivate the mind, which in turn enabled a person to attain closeness to the Divine mind, the ultimate end of spiritual progress. The Bible was the beginning point for spiritual progress. For Channing, reading the Bible was both a pietistic and intellectual exercise and activated both the intuitive and rational faculties in the human mind at once. Biblical interpretation always involved both faculties, a potentially unstable combination reflected not only by Channing, but also, by Norton, Hedge and Parker.

The Baltimore Sermon represented the full maturity of Channing's biblical thought and provided him with the greatest stage he would ever know for disseminating it. There was a flurry of activity among the orthodox following the event. Moses Stuart, the greatest orthodox Bible scholar of his day, was the first to try and engage Channing in a verbal exchange. Stuart penned and published *Letters to the Rev. Wm. E. Channing*.⁸¹ In it he invoked the arguments of Morse and Worcester, while at the same time pleading with Channing to return to the Bible and read it again to better result. His letters were far more scholarly and well-informed than either of his predecessors, even those of Channing himself. Seeing this and also determining that his role in the controversy was over in any

⁸¹ Moses Stuart, *Letters to the Rev. Wm. E. Channing: containing remarks on his sermon, recently preached and published at Baltimore*. (Flagg and Gould, 1819).

formal way, Channing did not respond to Stuart directly. Instead, he left it to another representative of Unitarian biblical understanding. His name was Andrews Norton.

CHAPTER II:
WHAT'S "GOSPEL" IN THE BIBLE?
ANDREWS NORTON AND THE LANGUAGE OF
BIBLICAL TRUTH

It is difficult to feel neutral about Andrews Norton. Both his contemporaries and historians have relegated him to the role of bombastic ideologue, spewing vitriol at any who differed from him in his views. Portrayed as a fastidious scholar, well read, and diligent in his pursuit of knowledge, Norton bore a combination of traits that made him suspicious of the academic efforts of those less trained than he, including (or especially) his own colleagues. Harvard President (1853-1860) and one time editor of the *Christian Examiner* James Walker once said about Norton that he approached his teaching "not as one in the act of seeking after truth, but as one who had found it."¹ Norton taught at Harvard for nearly two decades, first as the Dexter Lecturer on Biblical Criticism (1813-1819) and then following the founding of the Harvard Divinity School in 1819, as the Dexter Professor of Sacred Literature (1819-1830). Over the course of these years, Norton cemented his place as the greatest liberal Bible scholar of his generation, as well as the most vocal.² After he left the school in 1830 in order to pursue his own biblical research, Harvard's Theological School foundered in its search for his replacement. There was simply no one (until George Noyes³ arrived in 1840, at Norton's suggestion³) who could match Norton in command of both the material and the students. For a time, the Board of Directors and the Fellows of the Corporation considered the possibility of

¹ William Sprague, *Annals of the American Pulpit; or, Commemorative notices of distinguished American clergymen of various denominations, from the early settlement of the country to the close of the year eighteen hundred and fifty-five, Volume VIII.* (New York: R. Carter and brothers, 1857-1869), 433.

² Williams, *Harvard Divinity School*, 26-27.

³ Letter from Andrews Norton to President Josiah Quincy, May 1839. (MS 474/9 (19), Andover-Harvard Library, Harvard University).

asking Norton to resume his duties as Dexter Professor. However, in every conversation surrounding Norton, his skills as a Bible scholar were always juxtaposed with his capacity for controversy.

In a letter of 1839 to Walker, Channing spoke with praise of Norton's scholarship, albeit underscoring these words of affirmation with allusions to Norton's potential for divisiveness. "In regard to Mr. Norton," Channing wrote,

I shall see if he can be induced to give instruction in the criticism of the NT [New Testament]. In that department he has no rival in the country. But I do not wish him to sustain any other relation to the theological school... We both know, that he is not particularly better to communicate the spirit of the ministry or to prepare young men for the exigencies of our times. I also doubt whether it is proper so to arrange the relations between Mr. N and the corporation to satisfy him or to prevent mutual discontents and I am very desirous, that the healing process, which seems to be going on in his feeling toward the College may not be interrupted, for which purpose no very close connection should be formed. What I desire, is that the corporation should invite Mr. N in the most cordial terms to undertake the instruction of the classes in the criticism of the NT, it being understood that this department shall be left wholly to his discretion... His character is a full pledge of his fidelity and as he will give his services very much to the college, the confidence shared in him will be no dangerous precedent.⁴

Several things are immediately apparent from this excerpt. First of all, we are again privy to the diplomatic skill Channing wielded in keeping the many disparate opinions in liberal Christianity bound together. Secondly, there had been a recent breach in relations between Norton and the Divinity School, one, which a timely appointment to a respected Harvard chair seemed likely to heal. The breach, which will be discussed in greater depth in Chapter 4, occurred as a result of Ralph Waldo Emerson's 1838 commencement address at the Harvard Divinity School and the 1839 publication of Norton's *A Discourse on the Latest Form of Infidelity*. Third, and finally, Norton's voice held great sway over the minds of liberal Christians, especially those of the novice ministers populating his

⁴ Letter from William Ellery Channing to James Walker, August 2, 1839. (bMS 480/1 (2), Andover-Harvard Library, Harvard University), emphasis Channing

classes. At this volatile juncture, Channing needed both to appease and tame Andrews Norton. The Unitarian movement was threatened by the infighting between those who wanted to move religious authority outside of the Bible, like Emerson, and those who wished for it to remain firmly within the Scriptures, like Norton.

Norton had already proven himself a formidable opponent in the world of ideas, especially when the future of his religious ideals lay on the line. In 1812, he procured the editorship of the *General Repository and Review*, a periodical that effectively lost its readership after two years because of the open radicalism of its editor. Norton cited “lack of support” as the reason for the periodical’s demise. However, in a letter written to the benefactors of the *General Repository* on behalf of Norton, Samuel Eliot, Samuel Dexter, John Lowell, Dudley Tying and Joseph Hall allude to the fact that the reason for terminating the journal related more to the fact that “certain religious tenets” were generally not well received by most of the readership.⁵ Perhaps naively, Norton had hoped that the journal would provide liberal Christians with a forum to express their views and make themselves known to one another, an opportunity of which Norton took full advantage when he published “A Defence of Liberal Christianity” in the journal. In the article, he took the time to parse orthodox and liberal Christianity, two modes of belief primarily divided, Norton believed, by their different modes of interpreting the Bible. Of the orthodox he wrote, that “believing the writings of the Evangelists and the Apostles to have been composed under God’s immediate and miraculous

⁵ They argued for its continuation on the grounds that it went against liberal Christian principles to suppress opinions, even those that were unpopular. About Norton, they wrote that “in acquaintance with the ancient languages and that erudition which is applicable to the illustration of the sacred records, the editor of the Repository and Review is equaled by few.” Letter to Samuel Norton, April 1813 written on the back of a letter to the benefactors of the Repository and Review, March 1813. (MS AM 1089, Box 2 (197), Andrews Norton Papers, Houghton Library, Harvard University).

superintendence, for the immediate purpose of being used and easily understood by all Christians in all countries and in all ages, of course apply to writings of so peculiar a character a mode of interpretation very different from what is applied to another,” and therefore that “no allowance is to be made for the inadvertence of the writer, and none for the exaggeration of strong feeling... [They] pay little attention to that use of language, common in all human composition... They do not expect to find the meaning much disguised by peculiarities of expression characteristic of the writer, or of the age or country to which he belonged.” Contrarily, liberal Christians “believe that attention should be paid to all these particulars; and, while they regard the Christian Scriptures as the writings of men instructed by Christ himself, or by immediate revelation, in the nature and design of Christianity, they yet consider that the same modes of criticism and explanation are to be applied to these Scriptures as to all other ancient writings.”⁶ From the beginning, the dividing of liberals from the orthodox was a *Bible* issue, first in the mode of interpreting the Bible and then in the conclusions arrived at out of this interpretation.

Norton approached the Bible like he approached most things of heavy significance: with a scholar’s eye to method. However, this should not lead to the conclusion that his motives for teaching were not religious. Every time Norton took up his pen to contribute a line to a journal or offer an opinion on a controversy, his means and mode of attack were always geared toward furthering the Unitarian cause. Norton’s primary motive in entering his name as a contender in a variety of pamphlet wars, first in 1819 and then in the years to come, was to ensure the protection of liberal Christian

⁶ Andrews Norton, “A Defence of Liberal Christianity” printed originally in *The General Repository and Review*, 1, January 1812, reprinted in Norton’s *Tracts Concerning Christianity*. (Cambridge: John Bartlett, 1852), 17-18.

views and values. Proving that liberal Christianity, or Unitarianism, was biblical and then, consequently, that the Bible was genuine and authoritative was the great purpose of his life and the underlying theme in every lecture he delivered and every article he wrote. He used his platform as a Professor of Harvard to promote knowledge of the Bible and proper technique for biblical interpretation. In doing so, he sought simultaneously, to prove that liberal Christianity was just as biblical, just as *Christian* as every other contemporaneous Christian movement. What Channing had initiated in an intellectual sense in the pulpit, Norton put into practice in his classrooms and in his writings. He applied Channing's trust in God-given human reason and the senses to his belief in the dynamic nature and poetical characteristics of biblical language. Norton, like Channing, believed that divine truth emerged from the interaction of the human mind and the biblical text.

The similarities in their understanding of the Bible bound Norton and Channing together in Norton's view. So when he came to Channing's defense in 1819, responding to Moses Stuart's *Letters to William Ellery Channing* (introduced in the previous chapter), Norton felt he was defending Channing's legacy and putting into practice the methods that Channing had preached. In his *Review* of Stuart, Norton both articulated and extended the scope of Channing's views on the Bible.⁷ Stuart had accused Channing of misrepresenting the orthodox, of twisting their doctrines to make it seem as if they were tri-theists and nihilists.⁸ Norton responded in his article by asking Stuart to state

⁷ Norton, *Review of* "Letters to the Rev. Wm. E. Channing, containing remarks on his sermon, recently preached and published at Baltimore. By Moses Stuart, Associate Professor of Sac. Literature in the Theological Sem. Andover." (Boston: Wells & Lilly, 1819).

⁸ Tri-theism refers to a belief in three Gods, rather than belief in a triune God or Godhead, which is premised on the idea of a singular, unified God, in which three equal and consubstantial divine beings coexist. The nihilism that is referred to here refers to the fact that liberal Christians accused Calvinists of

plainly what the orthodox believed, so that he could compare this with what Dr. Channing had said of the orthodox. He pushed his critique a step further by asking Stuart to define his interpretive principles for the Bible, something Norton felt Stuart had only addressed in the most obscure of terms. According to Norton, Stuart claimed orthodox views were found in the Bible, which was exactly what the liberal Christians claimed about their views. Thus, in Norton's view, it was not inappropriate to ask Stuart to clarify his methods. Yet, for all of his respect for Stuart, all of Norton's questions were rhetorical. He already believed orthodox methods of interpretation to be inherently flawed, a fact he emphasized in "A Defence of Liberal Christianity." About this, Norton wrote, "We wish to know how Professor Stuart can be so confident that language, the use of which it is necessary to guard with commentary, in order to prevent it from conveying erroneous ideas; and which must, without such commentary, be almost necessarily understood in a certain sense, was not meant by those who have employed it, to be understood in this sense. We do not ask for any such license in interpreting the language of scripture, as Professor Stuart has assumed in interpreting the creed of the Institution with which he is connected; that creed which he has so solemnly professed to believe, and promised to maintain and inculcate."⁹ The orthodox had to add countless disclaimers and prescriptive doctrines onto the text of the Bible itself, Norton noted, whereas liberal Christians did not. It was the liberals, then, who were the protectors of the Bible and its truth. Perhaps without knowing the full scope of the task he had set himself, Norton had already begun the process of defining not just how the Bible was to be read, but what the Bible was for liberal Christians.

making God the author of evil. Liberal Christians like Channing argued that Calvinist doctrine maintained that God created mankind as sinful beings and then punished them for their inborn sin.

⁹ Andrews Norton, *Review of 'Letters to the Rev. Wm. E. Channing,'* 17.

This chapter examines the progression of Unitarian biblical interpretation through the life, thought and work of Andrews Norton, as he began to apply the Unitarian interpretive principles preached by Channing into his classroom and his written work. For Norton, it was not simply good enough to read the Bible. Every reader of the Bible must come equipped with certain essential tools to uncover its meaning. The most important tool at a Bible scholar's disposal was an understanding of the variable nature of words and language. Norton believed that once scholars had the proper linguistic tools at their disposal, they could parse the essential truth of the Bible, generally found in the New Testament, especially the Gospels, from that which was historically important, but arbitrary in a spiritual sense. Much like another radical thinker who would come later (namely, Theodore Parker), Norton was concerned with sweeping away the spurious and superfluous elements of the Bible in order to truly get at the underlying meaning that hid just below the written words. When even this essential meaning came under attack, Norton reacted in kind, turning his attention from the language of the Bible to historical evidence of its truth. Even as his focus shifted from teaching biblical language to protecting biblical authority, his self-appointed task of making the Bible the basis of Unitarianism remained the same.

Shortly after Norton's death, Norton's eulogist William Newell said the following about Norton and the Bible, "The Gospel,--the Gospel of Christ, and not the Gospel of Calvin,--the Gospel, as it came fresh from heaven in its own native beauty and power was in his eyes the most precious gift of the Good Father. And under this conviction, he felt it to be the work of his life, the work to which God called him, to defend the Christian revelation, and to set forth the heavenly character, with all the power which his Maker

had given him, not only against the assaults of infidelity and skepticism without, but against the undersigned yet perilous treachery within...[He] threw new bulwarks around the faith that he loved with a strength of feeling proportioned to his strength of mind.”¹⁰ Though flowery, indeed, Newell’s assessment of Norton is accurate. Norton set himself the simultaneous tasks of delineating the proper methods of interpretation, separating the extraneous from the foundational books and passages of the Bible, and publicly fighting the good liberal fight because, theretofore, no one else had done so. Norton did not mince words or over-flatter his audience, but spoke plainly, even abruptly. The message was more important than the mode of delivery;¹¹ and after all, the message of liberal Christianity as biblical truth was too important a topic to waste any time.

Roots of a Radical Mind: Norton, Calvinism and the Poetry of Biblical Language

For two men who felt so similarly about the Bible and its centrality to the progress and future of liberal Christianity, Channing and Norton were quite opposite in most everything else. As will be discussed in greater detail later, their choice of profession reflected their different temperaments. Channing was a nurturer by nature, who believed change should occur peacefully and gradually, with the aim of guiding people seamlessly into a new way of thinking. Norton was more concerned with proper technique and articulation of correct opinions than the effects they produced; if he knew the truth and the ways of getting at it, why should he wait to make it known? Calvinism

¹⁰ William Newell. *Notice of the Life and Character of Mr. Andrews Norton*. (Cambridge: Metcalf and Company, 1853), 21.

¹¹ In his memorial article following the death of Joseph Stevens Buckminster, Norton noted that Buckminster possessed one of the crucial characteristics of a scholar, a clergyman and a professor, namely that he “made no sacrifices of honesty to acquire favor” by others, while still remaining respectful of the person holding wrong opinions. This was something Norton felt he was doing as well in his critique of others’ thought and work, though his motives for doing so have often been ascribed by his contemporaries and early Unitarian historians to his narrow-minded character. Andrew Norton, “Character of Joseph Stevens Buckminster,” 310.

was a destructive and harmful theology, in Norton's view. Allowing such a system to continue unchecked was criminal at best and damning at worst.¹² The readiness of his audience was not his concern.

However, there is another important point of difference between Channing and Norton, which explains a great deal, both in terms of their difference in tack and their relationship to Congregationalism. Channing was raised a Congregationalist and Norton was not. Though Channing's family was not particularly strict in their obedience to Calvinist doctrine, his family attended a Congregationalist church and he was reared among many of the leading minds of American Calvinist thought, like Samuel Hopkins. Conversely, Norton's father Samuel Norton had rejected Calvinism in his youth, finding that "the character and government of God were so revolting, [that] for a time he was almost driven into utter disbelief,"¹³ until he discovered the preaching of Ebenezer Gay, considered as one of the founders of Universalism.¹⁴ Samuel had his youngest son, Andrews, baptized by Gay, thus formally integrating him into the tradition of liberal Christianity.¹⁵

Unlike Channing, Andrews Norton had neither loyalty to nor any personal memory of orthodox Congregationalism. There was no cognitive dissonance for Norton when he confronted the ills of Calvinism, as there had been for Channing. Norton never

¹² Andrews Norton, *Statement of Reasons for not Believing the Trinitarians*.

¹³ *Ibid*, 4.

¹⁴ Universalism is often viewed as the counterpart of Unitarianism in the nineteenth century. Both grew out of Congregationalism and both disputed specific Calvinist doctrines. Unitarianism, disputed the doctrines of total depravity (as well as the doctrine of the trinity) and Universalism, disputed the doctrines of election and limited atonement, arguing that the death of Christ had already atoned for humanity's sins, thus everyone was saved.

¹⁵ Norton once wrote to his father thanking him for instilling him with "correct notions of religion and duty," as well as the conviction in both "the paternal character of God" and the connexion [*sic*] between virtue and happiness." Letter to Samuel Norton, Nov 3, 1817 (MS AM 1089, Box 2 (235), Andrews Norton Papers, Houghton Library, Harvard University).

had to make the transition from orthodox Congregationalism to liberal Christianity, since he was born and baptized into the liberal faith. With this in mind, it becomes clearer why Norton was adamant that those who were liberal-minded should cast off the shackles of Calvinism. He saw the hesitance of Channing and others like him as evidence of timidity, not as true loyalty to their parent tradition. Norton urged them that steeping themselves in liberal views and liberal methods of reading the Bible would serve only to make them *better* Christians and better servants of God. “The more directly the few simply and most important truths of Christianity can be made to act on the minds of men without being impeded in their operation,” Norton wrote, “the more men’s attention is directed to these without being distracted and occupied by the false doctrines with which they have been connected; the more they can be taught to value themselves upon being Christians, not upon being Christians of a certain sect.”¹⁶

Norton’s chosen means of “directing men’s attention” was proper instruction in the Bible. If a man must become a clergyman (not all could be scholars, he conceded), then “the first study of a Christian clergyman should be the New Testament.”¹⁷ All theological and doctrinal errors stemmed from faulty readings of the Bible, so, before theologians and clergymen could evoke truer doctrines from the Bible, methods of interpretation had to be streamlined. Norton felt himself equal to the task, devoting his life to the project. He was certainly well suited for it, based on a set of intellectual resources he discovered while at school. During his time at Harvard (from which he graduated in 1804), he avidly pursued both of his primary interests: study of the Bible and literature, especially poetry. In fact, Norton was a published poet, contributing not an

¹⁶ Norton, “Defence of Liberal Christianity” in *Tracts of Christianity*, 55.

¹⁷ Letter from Andrews Norton to Frederic Huidekoper, June 6, 1840 (HUG 1614.10, Harvard University Archives, Harvard University).

insignificant number of his own verses to various periodicals.¹⁸ However, he exerted his literary muscle primarily in the form of critique and review, an exercise that would develop in him his particular perspective on language and meaning.

In his most well known literary critique, a review of contemporary poet Mrs. Heman's collection of poems entitled *The Forest Sanctuary; and other Poems*, Norton spent the majority of the fifteen-page article detailing his views on poetry rather than discussing the work at hand. To him, poetry at its best was an expression of moral perfection and sublimity. Thus, a reader must approach the text with a well-trained and "disinterested" mindset, as one would when reading a religious text.¹⁹ To properly read poetry, one had to divest oneself of all improper passions and approach the text anticipating a close, spiritual encounter with the "highest excellencies" of "truth and moral beauty." About this approach to reading, Norton wrote, "[Poetry] or eloquence is most excellent, which is most adapted to give pleasure to him, who apprehends and feels most justly as a moral and intellectual being. To this end, it must discover truth of perception, showing a just and full apprehension of the nature and relation of things. It must be characterized by truth of imagination... It must have truth of sentiment; and expressing throughout a conformity of the judgment and taste of the writer, to the laws of the moral universe in their numberless bearings." To read poetry, however, one must come equipped with "a full knowledge and mastery of language, an acquaintance with the

¹⁸ Newell notes that Norton submitted poems primarily to the *Christians Disciple* and the *Christian Examiner*, appearing in the two periodicals between 1826-8.

¹⁹ Disinterested was a term often used by men of this time, especially liberal Christians. It means unclouded by passion or "affections" (unguarded, often improper feelings toward something), rather than apathetic, the definition most associated with it today. When a person was said to be disinterested, it was a high compliment to their abilities and character, meaning they acted and approached religious things without any improper attachment to or bias against such things, but with an honest and clear head and heart. This did not mean they approached religious ideas and things without any emotion, they simply aimed to control these emotions, so that nothing could distract them from the building up of the mind by increased religious knowledge and experience.

true meaning of words, and with the various associations which throw on them a reflected coloring; a command of imagery, and of the other modes of speech in which feeling and emotion express themselves; and in general, a control of all the means with which language furnishes us, of directly, or indirectly communicating to the minds of others the very thoughts and affections of our own.”²⁰

Reading poetry was always a scholarly, philological endeavor; proper knowledge of language was necessary. It was also a religious exercise. Norton understood poetry to convey truth at a level deeper than the words themselves. “When resolved into their elements, perfect poetry and perfect eloquence are only perfect truth, perceived and felt in all its relations. Their object is to make known to us in its real nature and power what exists, or what it is possible may exist. Fictions, images, figures, the boldest and most imaginative, are, in their proper use but means of expressing what is essentially true, in a manner more delightful or impressive, that is, in a manner better corresponding to its actual character. They are beautiful hieroglyphics, teaching wisdom and virtue.”²¹

Poetry always had the ability to evoke an emotional response in the reader. However, if the reader had heartily conditioned the intellect by familiarizing him or herself with poetical language, then this emotional response would be accompanied by a deeper understanding of moral and spiritual truth. This was precisely how he described the task of the biblical scholar as well.

For Norton, every minister was essentially a theologian, and every theologian a Bible scholar. When discussing the necessary characteristics of a theologian, Norton

²⁰ Andrews Norton, “Review of Mrs. Heman’s ‘The Forest Sanctuary; and other Poems,’” *The Christian Examiner and Theological Review*, III (1826), 404-5.

²¹ *Ibid*, 405.

listed “poet” as the trait second in importance only to “philologist.”²² In his view, the young men he was training to be ministers must, first and foremost, have a thorough understanding of language. The mastering of *biblical* language especially was an intensive and multi-faceted task. In a lecture delivered at his installation as Dexter Professor of the Divinity School on August 10, 1819, Norton, ever the instructor, gave a comprehensive explanation of the task of a biblical scholar or theologian. “The meaning of Scripture,” Norton said, “is controverted in every part, and [the biblical scholar] must therefore be acquainted with the art of interpreting language, an art, of the very existence of which many of those, who have decided most confidently respecting the sense of the sacred writings, appear to have been wholly ignorant. To this end he must study the nature and constitution of language, generally, and as it appears in different particular forms in which it has existed.”²³ He goes on to explain the necessity of reading the text in the original language, of establishing the context in which the various authors wrote the text and the authors’ motives in composing it. He believed that proximity to the true meaning embedded in the text had everything to do with precise knowledge of the original words themselves.

However, as mentioned, it was not enough for the minister, the theologian, to read the text in original language. Norton felt that a serious interpreter of the Bible also must approach the text with the proper pietistic intentions. Every book in the Bible had in common the fact that it was poetry. Scripture was the highest form of poetry, to be exact, as it was written with the acknowledged intent of bringing humanity closer to God.

²² Andrews Norton, “A Discourse on the Extent and Relations of Theology; delivered before the University in Cambridge (New England), August 10, 1819 on assuming the duties of Dexter Professor of Sacred Literature” in *Tracts Concerning Christianity*. (Cambridge: John Bartlett, 1852), 73.

²³ Norton, “Discourse on the Extent and Relations of Theology” in *Tracts Concerning Christianity*, 71.

Norton drew a line between books of the Bible that were *authoritative* for Christians and books of the Bible that were good for Christians to read for their historical knowledge and for the beauty of their language. What books fell into the former category will be discussed in a later section, however, in the latter category fell every book of the Bible, even the books of the Old Testament and Apocrypha.

In one of the few sermons he delivered, Norton revealed how a book from the Old Testament, Isaiah in this instance, was to be approached and understood. “The expressions of the prophet Isaiah considered by themselves are bold and striking and sublime; ‘It is He, that sitteth upon the circle of the earth and the inhabitants thereof are as grasshoppers, that spreadeth out the heavens as a curtain and stretcheth them out as a tent to dwell in;’ But bold and striking and sublime as these expressions are, they do not elevate they do not equal; they do not distantly approach to the idea, which reason teaches us to form of God.”²⁴ Like all biblical books, Isaiah should have an emotional impact on the reader, however this did not mean that Isaiah should be read to better understand God and His will for humanity. Books like the Gospels had both characteristics of being emotionally resonant and instructive in the authority of their message to live as Jesus did.²⁵ Norton’s understanding of poetry and language were

²⁴ Norton, “Undated Sermon, Acts 8:30-31: And Philip ran thither to him and heard him read the prophet Esaias; and said; Understandest thou what thou readest? And he said; How can I except some one should guide me.” (MS 382/1 (18), Sermons of Andrews Norton, Andover-Harvard Library, Harvard University), para 13.

²⁵ Writing about the Gospels, Norton writes, “The actions of our Saviour are re-recorded by the evangelists with a sincere and interesting simplicity, which finds its way directly to the heart, and with regard to all that may be imitated, impress the feeling; ‘go there and do likewise.’ Their narration at once circumstantial and artless, everywhere discovers the features of truth and engages us in every scene, which they describe with an involuntary conviction of reality... We see everywhere the same uniform character, the same attentive benevolence toward men and the same submissive piety toward GOD. There is no artificial glare cast around his actions; there are no disguises of eloquent language, but the unadorned loveliness of moral excellence every where [sic] appears and every where solicits our invitation. Norton, “Undated Sermon, Matthew 14:23: And when he had sent the multitudes away, he went up into a mountain apart to pray, and

central to decisions he made about the Bible as a rule of faith versus the Bible as the pinnacle of moral beauty and divine sublimity. For Norton, the liberal Christian Bible was a canon within a canon.

So it was crucial that besides a thorough knowledge of ancient languages, a theologian needed to be equipped with a poetic sensibility when reading the Bible. Norton insisted that “the expositor of Scripture must be a philologist in the most extensive sense of the word. In order to [become] this, he must have the feelings and imagination of a poet. Without these poetry cannot be understood. Its interpreter must have the power of sympathizing with [the author] by whom it is composed. The images and emotions of the writer must excite corresponding images and emotions in his own mind.” All of Scripture was poetry, even the most legalistic Old Testament passage, Norton argued. “The Old Testament is full of poetry; and, in the New Testament, the Oriental and popular style which prevails, often requires no less than poetry itself, an acquaintance with all the uses of language, and with all the forms in which feeling, passion, and imagination express themselves, in order to distinguish and disengage the mere literal meaning from those images and ideas with which it is associated.”²⁶ As is apparent from this passage, Norton felt that a proper reading of the Bible, and any given passage therein meant stepping into the place of the original authors. To read the Gospels was to feel the emotions that the Evangelists felt as they witnessed the Sermon on the Mount and later, the death of their Lord. Reading the Bible should have a somatic as well as an intellectual response. Those who approached the Bible with a scientific eye

when the evening was come he was there alone.” (MS 382/1 (13)), *Sermons of Andrews Norton*, Andover-Harvard Library, Harvard University), para 1.

²⁶ Norton, “Discourse on the Extent and Relations of Theology” in *Tracts Concerning Christianity*, 73-4.

only missed the original purpose for which the Book was intended: to bring humanity closer to God.

The Scholar and His Bible: Norton, Dexter Professor of Sacred Literature

As a man who saw the practical necessity of understanding the historical and linguistic characteristics of the Bible, Norton felt his talents were best suited to a position as a professor of theology at the Divinity School. He had held the position of Dexter Lecturer for six years and felt he had accrued a base of knowledge that would serve to prepare future clergy as better theologians, better poets and better Bible scholars (all of which were essential in a clergyman). Of course, Norton was well aware of the unflattering opinions others held of him.²⁷ Besides the fact that Norton's personality was abrasive, most often his critics directed their pejorative opinions of Norton at the rapidity with which Norton forwarded liberal Christian views, believing, perhaps too hastily, that his theological beliefs and epistemological methods were those of all liberal Christians. Channing, the spokesperson for moderation, was quite vocal about his opinions of Norton, as seen in his letter of 1839. However, Channing expressed concern at Norton's outrightness in print nearly a quarter century prior in 1815, in his *Letter to Samuel Thacher*. Channing was primarily concerned with the effects Norton's (and, for the most

²⁷ Writing to George Bancroft in 1818, Norton described a letter he had sent to "Mr. Palfrey" a member of the Corporation, where he had pleaded his case for the position of full professor. "In order to produce the effect which I wished, it did not seem to me quite proper to address the Corporation directly. I accordingly wrote a long letter on the subject to Mr. Palfrey, that he might show it to Mr. Channing, and to any other gentlemen whom he pleased. In this I stated my own conviction, that I could be much more useful to the University, and to the public as a theological instructor; and endeavoured to obviate the objection which might be made to me, as having been too open and decided in the expression of unpopular opinions; not by extenuating, but by stating fairly and justifying the course of conduct which I had pursued. I at the same time declared that a change of situation would produce no change of conduct in this respect." Letter from Andrews Norton to George Bancroft, September 11, 1818. (MS AM 1089, Box I, (18), Andrews Norton Papers, Houghton Library, Harvard University). Norton knew that his unpopularity would be the thing that cost him the professorship, not his scholarship.

part, Channing's own) liberal views would have on the delicate religious sensibilities of his readership.²⁸

Channing's critique was disappointing to Norton, to say the least. Writing retrospectively about Dr. Channing's opinion of him, Norton wrote rather dispassionately, "[The General Repository] was too bold for the proper prudence, or the worldly caution, or for the actual convictions, of a large portion of the liberal party. Mr. Channing, in a defence of those who were then among us beginning to be called Unitarians, in his 'Letter to Mr. Thacher,' published in 1815, said of it, 'As to the General Repository, I never for a moment imagined that its editor was constituted or acknowledged as the organ of his brethren; and, while its high literary merit has been allowed, I have heard some of its sentiments disapproved by a majority of those with whom I conversed.'" Norton continued on, admitting at one point that Dr. Channing's concerns about openly associating the College with a man of "such opinions" caused President Kirkland to hesitate in granting Norton the position of Full Professor.²⁹ Norton wrote with characteristic scholarly detachment, even though the subject was his own plight. Of course, his concerns, however stoically reported, were unfounded. Kirkland awarded him the Professorship, a fact he acknowledged nonchalantly in a letter to George Bancroft.³⁰

From this account, two Nortons are evident. First is the Norton seemingly indifferent to the damaging opinions of others. Then there is the Norton who sent the likes of Channing protesting in despair at the passionate and virulent power of his tongue.

²⁸ William Ellery Channing, *Letter to the Rev. Samuel C. Thacher*.

²⁹ Norton, "Introductory Note" in *Tracts Concerning Christianity*. (Cambridge: John Bartlett, 1852), 8-9.

³⁰ Letter from Andrews Norton to George Bancroft, May 24, 1819 (MS AM 1089, Box 1 (24), Andrews Norton Papers, Houghton Library, Harvard University).

At times it seems that Andrews Norton is a paradox. However, much is explained about Norton if one fact is understood: Norton was first and foremost, a scholar. It is sometimes easy to forget that the task of Norton was different from that of Channing, Hedge, and Parker. As pastors, the latter three had responsibilities to shepherd their flock toward God, toward righteous living and heartfelt belief. They could not make assumptions as to the motives, intentions, and abilities of their congregants, but had to speak to each person on an accessible level, nurture each individual mind according to what it needed and in so doing, reach as broadly as they could across the demographic lines of their congregations. It was different for Norton. Whether speaking to his students or to the general public, his goal was always the same. Norton spoke not to access the religious sentiment of his hearers, but to educate their minds. What they did with the information afterward should ultimately lead to spiritual elevation, but his role in this process essentially stopped after he stepped down from the podium or put down the pen. Norton did not feel it was his job to nurture in the way that a pastor would, but to instruct and inform and to develop interpretive skills. When he spoke and wrote, it was as an expert in a field in which a certain degree of scholarly distance was to be expected. Norton's primary concern in publishing his views was not the effect that they would have on the souls of his hearers (or the effect such views would have on his reputation), but of the argumentative impact this would have on well-informed minds.

As pastors, Channing, Hedge, and Parker were expected to draw from their own experiences in order to connect with their congregants. On the other hand, it would have seemed out of place for Norton, as a teacher, to draw upon his personal life. Perhaps for this reason, Norton's personality was *particularly* conducive to scholarship. He hated

talking about himself to begin with (in all of his letters, he rarely provided insight into his personal feelings on things, but reports on the events in his life as if he were an objective observer) and always seemed more comfortable speaking with people of learning or similar scholarly interests. He had at one time considered entering into the ministry, even taking steps to procure a church appointment, but eventually determined that he could direct his skills and knowledge to better use elsewhere.³¹ He made clear his opinions on the effectiveness of the clergy in a letter written to the father of a young man considering the ministry as a profession. To the young man, he wrote, “The clergy have within my day fallen greatly in estimation and influence. I suspect that more good is to be done at the present day by a layman interested in the cause of religion and humanity, than by a clergyman, unless he have very peculiar qualifications for his office adapted to the times.”³² This letter, written in 1840, was both critical and nostalgic. Norton lamented the plight of the clergy, while simultaneously staking his own claim in the history of liberal Christianity, as exactly the sort of religiously minded layman he described.

Norton the religious layman and Norton the professor ultimately had the same end in mind for reading and teaching the Bible: preparing people for the divine-human encounter in the text. This encounter would vary from person to person. However, such was the intention behind the composition of the Bible. Written by human hands in human language, God intended the Bible to be a book that evoked multiple interpretations and understandings. At his inauguration as Dexter Professor in 1819, Norton stated that “The interpretation of language is a subject which will lead [the

³¹ Allen R. Clark, *Andrews Norton: A Conservative Unitarian*, (Unpublished Thesis, Harvard University, 1943(?)) 16.

³² Letter from Andrews Norton to H.J. Huidekoper, August 27, 1840 (HUG 1614.10, Harvard University Archives, Harvard University).

scholar of the Bible] to one of the most curious and important branches of inquiry, one embracing the whole history of the revolutions and development of the human mind, and of the changes and accidents of human opinions and sentiments.” The Bible scholar had to “learn to mark with a practised eye the varying composition and changeable coloring of human ideas, which are continually forming new combinations of meaning, while the old disappear, to be expressed by the same unaltered words while the same language remains in use, or by words apparently correspondent in the languages which may succeed it. Words, as well as coins, change their value with the progress of society. By studying the character of language, the philologist and theologian will discover its intrinsic ambiguity and imperfection.”³³ God had not, as some believed, used the bodies of the Evangelists as mere conduits for the Word. The book was commissioned and written by humans for other humans. Any argument for believing the words of the Bible as literal or inerrant transcriptions of God’s own thoughts was absurd.

Both Norton and Channing believed that had God wanted humanity to have perfect knowledge of Himself, He would have provided such information. Instead, God had provided humanity with the faculties to attain to the mind of God. God intended for humanity to progress toward Him, through the exercise of their minds. Receiving instantaneous and full knowledge of God was inadvisable and implausible. The Bible was a safe and accessible means of gaining such knowledge at a pace conformable to the human mind. Furthermore, Norton believed that truth was achieved through strenuous work. This was an argument that Norton would use against dogmatic readings of the

³³ Norton, “Discourse on the Extent and Relations of Theology” in *Tracts Concerning Christianity*, 72-73.

Bible (something he perceived as lazy interpretation),³⁴ enthusiasts (those who made religious truth instantaneous, non-strenuous, and fleeting),³⁵ and the new or “infidel” theology of the radical liberals (certainly the Transcendentalists, but moreso the German thinkers who inspired them).³⁶ All of these groups, Norton felt, claimed they could discover the true meaning of the Bible without proper training or an appropriate degree of mental exertion. In an article (expanded from a note in his famous treatise “A Discourse on the Latest Form of Infidelity”) entitled “On the objection to Faith in Christianity, as resting on Historical Facts and Critical learning,” Norton wrote that philosophical and religious knowledge had the character common to “all higher departments of knowledge” in that it “required strenuous and long-continued efforts of intellect to effect their gradual development, their exposition, and their general reception”³⁷

Norton’s insistence on the necessity of “strenuous” effort in matters of religious knowledge translated to his pedagogy. As noted earlier, those like President Walker remembered Norton as someone who behaved as if he were the mouthpiece for Christian truth, having little patience for the “ignorance or the error of other people.”³⁸ Norton was certainly blunt in his assessments of the skills and abilities of others. He rarely dissembled in order to spare feelings, a feature that could make him seem callous. To his own detriment, then, Norton’s manner often belied the motive or sentiment behind his

³⁴ Norton attacked the interpretive techniques of the orthodoxy, which relied overly on creeds to do the interpreting, most directly in his *Statement for Not Believing the Trinitarians* and the Introductory Note to his *Tracts Concerning Christianity*.

³⁵ Norton, “Thoughts on True and False Religion” in *Tracts Concerning Christianity*, 129-30.

³⁶ Norton addressed this problem directly in his famous treatise, *A Discourse on the Latest Form of Infidelity, Delivered at the Request of the ‘Association of the Alumni of the Cambridge Theological School’ on the 19th of July, 1839*. Cambridge: Published by John Owen, 1839). His later works, in general, were geared toward combatting German “infidelity.”

³⁷ Andrews Norton, “On the Objection to Faith in Christianity, as resting on Historical Facts and Critical learning” (published as a note to *Discourse on Latest Form of Infidelity*) in *Tracts Concerning Christianity*, 378.

³⁸ Clark, *Norton: Conservative Unitarian*, 15.

comments and critique. Norton believed that plain, unaffected speech was something lacking among Unitarians.³⁹ Affectation, use of lofty or obscure language and ostentatious shows of learning were distracting character traits at best and at worst, evidence of European infidelity. Norton feared for the minds of his students should German philosophy be introduced without censor or disclaimer. Incredibly well versed in the literature (as College Librarian from 1812-1821 he set himself the task of reading most everything he ordered for the library, including works by German thinkers), Norton had firsthand knowledge of its corrosive qualities.⁴⁰ If the malleable minds of his students encountered German “infidelity” without a guiding hand, the result would only be imprecision in scholarship and a grandiose view of humanity.

When Norton’s friend and former student George Bancroft returned from Germany after studying at Göttingen for several years, Norton wrote him a letter chiding him on the unattractive changes in his demeanor. To Bancroft, whom Norton had written previously with glee about his early return, he wrote, “You have disappointed me. Your manners are unpleasant; and have those faults, which to me, particularly, are more unpleasant than almost any other... You make use, even on very trifling subjects, of too strong expressions of feeling, which have not the air of being natural, and which are wholly foreign from the tone of our society. There is a good deal of peculiarity in your conversation, which appears in talking of persons and books, concerning which the greater part of those whom you meet with, feel no interest, and in using expressions from

³⁹ Letter from Andrews Norton to James Walker, April 16, 1834. (MS 478/1 (49), Andover-Harvard Library, Harvard University).

⁴⁰ Norton sent many letters to George Bancroft (then living in Germany) with requests for German books. (Box I, Andrews Norton Papers, Houghton Library, Harvard University). He exhibited his vast knowledge of German books and philosophy in a letter to Elizabeth Palmer Peabody, who had written to him requesting information on the subject. Letter from Andrews Norton to Elizabeth Palmer Peabody, November 16, 1831. (MS 539/1 (58), Andover-Harvard Library, Harvard University).

foreign languages. You speak too much of yourself, and are too obviously ready to produce yourself to notice, without sufficient reserve and modesty.” Going on to advise Bancroft in the correction of his manners, Norton said, among other things, “You must talk less in mixed society about German writers, or books, or anything you may have seen or known abroad, concerning which the greater part of those who hear you will feel no interest. You must not introduce German or French into common conversation.”⁴¹ Norton was plainly concerned at the changes he saw in his former pupil. However, the palpable anxiety apparent in this letter arose out of Norton’s greater fear that German infidelity was finding inroads into America.

What is evident here and what becomes even more apparent in his later exchange with George Ripley (discussed in Chapter 4) is that Norton felt a personal stake in the opinions of these men, having been their teacher and in the case of Bancroft, a real mentor. How then, had the blasphemous philosophies of German idealogues so easily seduced his former students? Norton was certain that he had trained them properly and equipped them with proper critical and interpretive skills. He could not understand where he had gone wrong. In truth, little that Norton could have done would have stopped the inevitable arrival of German philosophy and biblical criticism on American soil. In the nineteenth century, German thought was in ascendance and available in multiple quarters, not only in the halls of Harvard.

It is also true that Norton *did* play a part in preparing the minds of his students for the ideas arriving out of Germany. First of all, in a direct sense, he introduced students to the subject material, either in his classroom or through the books he procured as College

⁴¹ Letter to George Bancroft, September 15, 1822 (MS AM 1089, Box 1 (37), Houghton Library, Harvard University).

Librarian. “The sending of Edward Everett and George Ticknor to Europe in 1815 has been recognized as the first important step in bringing German scholarship to America, but the importance of Andrews Norton in that process has not been recognized. If Everett and Ticknor were the [ambassadors] in Germany, Andrews Norton was their supply-base and liaison officer; for it was he who examined the content of the library and pointed out its gaping lacunae, and he who received request from graduate students for more German books.”⁴² Though he disavowed much of what the Germans said, Norton set a precedent in allowing them to sit on the library shelves.

Norton also led his students, indirectly, down the path toward the more intuitive and transcendental methods of biblical interpretation favored by the Germans, through the modeling of his own method of reading the Bible in his classroom. Like Channing, Norton was open about his use of interpretive methods when reading the Bible, while being adamant that his theological conclusions were ultimately correct. In many cases, the students absorbed the methods rather than the conclusions. Norton hoped that through proper training, each one of his students could become capable of interpreting the Bible without recourse to standard opinion. He always had respect for the opinions of others if they had been arrived at through the methods of which *he* approved. Still, he was sure that his conclusions were correct. In the “Introductory Note” to *Tracts Concerning Christianity*, Norton spoke rather wistfully about the fact that in all of the years since he had been writing and teaching, there were still those who would defend religious error to the end. Though ultimately, he knew that he could not change their minds, since he believed that an individual must come to his or her own religious

⁴² Clark, *Norton: Conservative Unitarian*, 19.

convictions. He wrote, “What is now wanting to the progress and influence of rational religion among us is a revival of the feeling of the importance of religious truth,--a practical conviction of the fact, which, however obvious and indisputable, does not seem to be generally recognized, that it is only by religious truth that religious errors, with all their attendant evils, can be done away; and of a fact equally obvious, that, in the present conflict of opinions, minds disciplined in habits of correct reasoning and informed by extensive learning, minds acquainted with the different branches of theological science, which embraces or touches upon all the higher and more important subjects of thought, are required for the attainment and communication of religious truth. In one word, it is learned and able theologians that are wanted.”⁴³ Liberal Christians, in Norton’s view, had lost their grasp on truth. For that reason, Norton devoted the latter part of his life to revealing this truth anew and showing it to be irrefutable.

Norton and the Canon within a Canon

Since Norton had arrived at his conclusions through a process of logical, historically-grounded deductions, he assumed that the same methods would lead, eventually, to his own set of beliefs. If it could be proved through the same means he employed that he had been mistaken, he would gladly bow to those conclusions. However, he did not believe that he was wrong *because* of his mode of interpretation. A confidence he brought to bear in his critiques of those unlucky enough to incite his ire through wrong opinion. Prior to his critique of Ralph Waldo Emerson and George Ripley during the “miracles” controversy (discussed in chapter 4), Norton was best known through his Bible-based attack on orthodox Trinitarian doctrine in his famed *Statement of*

⁴³ Norton, *Tracts Concerning Christianity*, 14.

Reasons for not Believing the Doctrines of Trinitarians. Beginning his treatise by calling the orthodox Trinity little more than “tritheism,” Norton revealed that he had little intent of ingratiating himself with the orthodoxy and their Calvinism. Logically, Norton argued, a doctrine like the Trinity, which put a great deal of strain on the human reasoning faculties should have resounding support throughout the text. Yet, no such support existed and attempting to find a rationale by piecing together lines of Scripture was quite simply the *wrong* way to read Scripture. Even the passages the Trinitarians determined to use in support of the doctrine did not appear to support any clear sense of a Trinity, argued Norton. He unpacked John 1, Colossians 1:15 Philippians 2:5-8, Hebrew 1:8-9, Romans 9:5, and Hebrews 1:10, 12 to show that any interpretation of these passages with a Trinitarian bent was imposed by someone with a certain theological agenda and not by a well-prepared, rational, and unbiased mind. Punctuating this seemingly debilitating exegesis against the Trinitarian cause, Norton asked, “Do you think that we should be left to collect the proof of a fundamental article of our faith, and the evidence of incomparably the most astonishing fact that ever occurred upon our earth, from some expressions scattered here and there, the greater part of them being dropt incidentally?”⁴⁴ If it were such an important truth it would be easily discernible in the Bible, because, after all, the Bible was a rational book.

Further, argued Norton, God did not hide true meaning behind layers of “mystery,” but used words and concepts familiar to humanity so that they could discover His meaning through the use of their own faculties. As he said in the treatise, “a

⁴⁴ Norton, *Statement for Not Believing the Trinitarians*, 28-29.

revelation from God cannot teach absurdities.”⁴⁵ Both Channing and Norton were guilty of propounding a belief in the variability of meaning and interpretation of biblical language, while, implicitly or explicitly, assuming that Reason would lead readers to their own liberal beliefs. The fact that Channing was open to alternative theological beliefs as true, in a relative or “apparent” sense, mitigated this discrepancy. Norton, who upheld a poetic belief in language but still maintained that there were patently wrong ways of reading the Bible, remained a paradox, though never in his own self-understanding. He did offer a clue however, as to how one could champion the ambiguity of biblical language while maintaining that there was always an ultimate, liberal meaning for every biblical passage. In his view, as interpretive skills sharpened, so did one’s ability to avoid the poor interpretations and move toward the right one. On this he wrote,

It is, then, to the intrinsic ambiguity of language, that the art of interpretation owes its origin. If words and sentences were capable of expressing but a single meaning, no art would be required in their interpretation... The object of the art of interpretation is to enable us to solve the difficulties presented by the intrinsic ambiguity of language. It first teaches us to perceive the different meanings which any sentence may be used to express, as the different words of which it is composed are taken respectively in one sense or another; as it is understood literally, or figuratively; strictly and to the letter, or popularly and in a modified sense; as the language of emotion, or as a calm and unimpassioned expression of thoughts and sentiments; and it then teaches us, which is its ultimate purpose, to distinguish among *possible* meanings, the *actual* meaning of the sentence, or that meaning which, in the particular case we are considering, was intended by the author.⁴⁶

Norton believed that reaching the truth was a gradual process, supported by the interpretive principles that he, Channing, Hedge, and Parker all shared. That many aspects and “possible meanings” abounded did not negate the reality of ultimate or absolute truth.

⁴⁵ Andrews Norton, *Statement for not believing the Doctrine of Trinitarians*, 16.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 40-2.

In many ways, Norton was an academic, but still held a clergyman's sensibility about right and wrong religious belief. This was not uncommon or even unexpected. What is important about this fact is that Norton seemed unaware that there was any discrepancy between teaching the Bible as an academic subject and teaching Norton's conclusions about what constituted biblical truth. Nonetheless, whatever the intended effect, Norton the Dexter Professor of Sacred Literature taught the Bible with the intention of instilling his students with an historical and rational understanding of the Book, its language, its history and its evidence.

In the corpus of Norton's work, including his lectures, four themes dominate. They are: the dynamic nature of biblical language, canonicity, evidence for Christianity from reason and revelation, and the genuineness of the Gospels. In truth, Norton's understanding of language, discussed above, is less a theme than a basic assumption of how he understood the Bible and thus, informed each of the other three themes. First of all, Norton was concerned with the question of the biblical "canon." He defined the canon as "the rule of faith and practice contained in the Scriptures."⁴⁷ More to the point, Norton determined which books adhered most closely to the Gospel of Christ and thus, to which books Christians were beholden. In the most general sense this involved the parsing of the Old and New Testaments. Norton believed that the matter of the truth or authenticity of the Old Testament was ultimately a non-essential issue for Christians. The coming of Jesus Christ had seen to this. Norton acknowledged that the Old Testament was invaluable for the beauty of its language in addition to the rich history of the Hebrews it provided. However, studying the Old Testament as a scholarly text was

⁴⁷ Andrews Norton, "Canon of the Old Testament, Lecture 1" delivered at Harvard while Dexter Lecturer on Sacred Literature. (HUG 1614, Lectures of Andrews Norton, Harvard University Archives, Harvard University), 2.

very different from believing the full truth of all its content. As Norton stated, “I will accept Moses as an instructor, but not as a lawgiver, except where he agrees with the New Testament, or the law of nature.”⁴⁸ For this reason, Norton did not feel particularly threatened by German biblical criticism that focused primarily on debunking the historical “myths” of the Old Testament. Rather, it was the intuitive epistemology and philosophy of German Idealists that concerned him. In fact, Norton felt that much of the Higher Criticism actually strengthened the cause of Christianity. For those like Norton, who felt the Old Testament was non-binding for Christians, Higher Critics actually aided the cause of Christianity since they directed their major criticism at the Old Testament and not the New. In an additional note in the second volume of his greatest work, *Evidences of the Genuineness of the Gospels*, Norton addressed what he felt were the unwarranted fears of liberal Christians at the danger of the Higher Critics’ conclusions about the Bible. Norton argued that while the Old Testament bore the mark of “divine origin,” there was equal evidence that the Hebrew Scriptures had much in it that did “not approve itself to our understanding and moral feelings.” This was “a fact with which Christianity is not concerned.”⁴⁹ Christianity was not responsible for the content of the Old Testament, since it did not derive its identity from the Old Testament but from the New.

The fact of the Old Testament’s secondary relevance to Christianity went “far to remove those difficulties which not only embarrassed the early Christians, but which have continued to embarrass Christians of every age.” Furthermore, even if the objections made against the Old Testament by the Higher Critics were true, Christianity

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 13.

⁴⁹ Norton, Andrews. *The Evidences of the Genuineness of the Gospels, Volume II*. 2nd edition. (Cambridge: George Nichols; Boston: Wm. Crosby and H.P. Nichols, 1848), xlvii-xlix.

would not suffer as a result. “The most popular and effective objections of unbelievers have been directed,” wrote Norton, “not against Christianity, but against the Old Testament, on the ground that Christianity is responsible for the truth, and for the moral and religious character, of all its contents; and, instead of repelling so untenable a proposition, believers have likewise assumed it; or rather they have earnestly affirmed its correctness, and proceeded to argue upon it as they could.”⁵⁰ With this one passage, Norton took aim at Jewish claims to the validity of their canon, while neutralizing the threat of the Higher Critics. For example, the question of Mosaic authorship of the Torah was of little concern to him. That fact affected only those who considered the Old Testament canonical, which Norton—and all proper Christians, in his opinion—did not.

Like Channing, Norton felt that the New Testament was of an entirely different character than the Old. The message of Jesus was antagonistic to much of the message of the Old Testament, the former favoring love over law, forgiveness over punishment. “[Jesus] was not a lawgiver; he assumed no temporal authority; his kingdom was not of this world,”⁵¹ wrote Norton. Jesus’ life and his words were the narrative centerpiece of the New Testament. However, even within the New Testament there were questions of canonicity. When listing the books of the Bible he perceived as binding for Christians, he included the Gospels, the book of Acts, the thirteen Epistles of Paul (excluding the Epistle to the Hebrews⁵²), the first Epistle of Peter and the first Epistle of John.⁵³ From

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, xlix.

⁵¹ Andrews Norton, “Undated Sermon, Matthew 24:54: Truly this was the son of GOD.” (MS 382/1 (15), Andover-Harvard Library, Harvard University, MS 382/1 (15)).

⁵² The actual authorship of the Epistle to the Hebrews is unknown. However, Norton attributes the Epistle to Paul in his “Review of Moses Stuart’s ‘A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews in Two Volumes,’” *The Christian Examiner and Theological Review*, IV (1827), 495-519. Stuart’s commentary dealt primarily with the authorship of the Epistle to the Hebrews, often attributed to Paul. Stuart’s conclusion supported the idea that the Epistle was Pauline and that there was sufficient evidence to that fact. In his review of

this list, a pattern becomes clear. Norton was only interested in ascribing canonicity to those books that could be *proven*, by both internal and external means, to be written by an Apostle or a Disciple of Jesus. Books written by those not present at the events they dutifully recorded had a certain value, primarily for what they revealed about the culture of the time and the progress of Christ's message during that time. Such testimony was invalidated, however, by the fact that the author had not actually been witness to the events at hand. Hearsay was not an appropriate source of evidence. For Norton, establishing which books qualified as eyewitness testimony was crucial to determining what was authoritative in the Bible and what was simply poetry.

This brings us to the second major theme of Norton's lectures and works: the importance of evidence. If there was one principle that Norton wished for his students and the general public to understand, it was that truth must be determined by both reason and revelation. It was the combination of the two that was crucial. Reason alone could not uncover divine truth. Centuries of heathen religion prior to the advent of Christ's Gospel message proved that humanity could not come to the height of religious knowledge (Christianity) without divine intervention.⁵⁴ Nor could revelation be properly understood without exercise of the reasoning faculties. The Bible was a victim of centuries of misinterpretation, primarily due to lack of proper training for interpreters.⁵⁵ Biblical interpretation had been ruled by dogma, rather than reason; people had found in

Stuart's commentary, Norton does not critique singular points of Stuart's analysis, but instead delineates exactly why there is no evidence to support the idea that this Gospel was by Paul. Neither, however, does Norton claim that the Epistle was necessarily a spurious book of the New Testament, as the author does not pretend to be Paul. Thus the discrepancies of language and tone between the accepted Pauline epistles and the Epistle to the Hebrews became negligible, since Paul is not the author.

⁵³ Norton, *Genuineness of the Gospels*, Vol. I, 145.

⁵⁴ Andrews Norton, "Thoughts on True and False Religion" in *Tracts Concerning Christianity*.

⁵⁵ Norton, "Introductory Note" in *Tracts Concerning Christianity*, 46-49.

the Bible what they wished to find. Such had been the unfortunate plight of Calvinism, a tradition, Norton believed, whose followers had historically defied reason in their interpretation of the Bible, making humans damnable for actions not their own and God an arbitrary tyrant doling punishment at whim.⁵⁶ Thus, reason and revelation must be used in tandem in confirming what was true and what was false.

Norton reiterated the importance of this test even more adamantly when faced with the prospect of popular religious movements or groups who put a premium on the more mystical, intuitive faculties over revelation *and* human reason.⁵⁷ Truth gleaned from intuition, untethered from both the Bible and Reason, was truth gotten irresponsibly. Writing against his sparring partner of choice, German philosophy, Norton wrote, “Consciousness or intuition can inform us of nothing but what exists in our own minds, including the relations of our own ideas. It has no cognizance of external facts. It is, therefore, not an intelligible error, but a mere absurdity, to maintain that we are conscious, or have an intuitive knowledge, of the being of God, of our own immortality, of the revelation of God through Christ, or of any other fact of religion. That such a faculty belongs to the human mind, that men have within them such a sure guide to religious truth, is a doctrine that stands in direct opposition to the whole history of the working of men’s minds on the subject of religion.” The myriad religious errors “that have prevailed throughout the world,” were proof enough that humans did not come to truth entirely unaided.⁵⁸ Making claims to authoritative truth apart from the Bible and

⁵⁶ Norton, “Views of Calvinism” in *Tracts Concerning Christianity*, 218.

⁵⁷ For the most part, the threat arose from two quarters: evangelical (revival-based) denominations, on the one end, and the Transcendentalists, on the other.

⁵⁸ Andrews Norton, “Remarks on the Modern German School of Infidelity,” originally a note to *A Discourse on the Latest Form of Infidelity* (1839) reprinted in *Tracts Concerning Christianity*. (Cambridge: John Bartlett, 1852). 294.

unchecked by reason was a dangerous endeavor. Doing such could ultimately lead to licentiousness or nihilism. If every person was only responsible to his or her own conscience in determining Truth, then Truth became relative. Revivalists and transcendentalists alike would certainly have argued that this was not the intention of their message. However, Norton warned against the probability that such spiritual anarchy would occur if liberal Christians did not check this truth against the Bible and Reason. In this sense, he would prove to be right.

For Norton, the rational evidence for the truths of the biblical revelation was present both inside and outside the Bible. The sources of “internal evidence” were the testimony of eyewitnesses and miracles. Norton’s name has become synonymous with the latter of these two sources, which is ironic given that he spent a far greater portion of his energy proving the former. Norton believed that the truth of New Testament miracles depended upon the reliable testimony of the Apostles. Much of the association of Norton with the defense of the biblical miracles has stemmed from the narrow focus by historians on Norton’s most infamous pamphlet, *A Discourse on the Latest Form of Infidelity*. The pamphlet and the controversy surrounding it will be discussed at length in chapter 4, not here. This was one of the few instances in which Norton talked explicitly about miracles. In it Norton argued for the historicity and necessity of the biblical miracles, stating famously that to deny that the miracles in the Bible were capable of proof was to deny the existence of God.⁵⁹ However, miracles were not the most persistent theme of Norton’s work. He, like many other professing Christians, simply took for granted the truth of the miracle accounts, at least until they were threatened.

⁵⁹ Andrews Norton, *Discourse on the Latest Form of Infidelity*.

Determining the truth of testimony was Norton's more persistent preoccupation when it came to his use of internal evidence. Doing so was crucial to proving the singularity of Christianity as an historical religion. Like all things worth doing in Norton's view, proving the truth of biblical testimony involved a great amount of scholarly preparation. However, Norton was a faithful Christian himself and demonstrated that belief in testimony involved a certain degree of faith. After all, he asked in his article, *On the Objection to Faith in Christianity*, did not people allow themselves to believe scientific truths based on the work, the *testimony*, of others? "This reliance on the knowledge of others may be called *belief on trust*, or *belief on authority*," Norton wrote, "but perhaps a more proper name for it would be *belief on testimony*, the testimony of those who have examined a subject to their conviction of the truth of certain facts."⁶⁰ If you could trust the testimony of the apostles, you could trust the miracles. Most of all, if you could trust that God would not lead you astray as you strove to know Him better, you could trust the truth of the New Testament.

Of course, testimony was not just proven on internal evidence and faith alone, but was also corroborated by external evidence as well. This included knowledge of the historical context, the writings of the church fathers, and the general reception of the message by the public. In truth, Norton rarely distinguished internal from external evidence, but used them together to corroborate the truth of the Bible. However, as his thought evolved and his work along with it, Norton spent more time developing such external evidence. For the latter half of his life, Norton embarked upon a project intended to show through external evidence that the Gospels were genuine and true.

⁶⁰ Andrews Norton, "On the Objection to Faith in Christianity," 382, italics authors.

“The Genuineness of the Gospels,” *A Lifetime of Biblical Thought*

Norton, and Unitarians as a whole, believed the Bible was not only true in its message, but historically accurate. Channing had little concerned himself with the particulars of this claim; he was far more concerned with internal proof than canonicity and external evidences. It fell to Norton to elucidate what Channing had only assumed. Given the previous analysis, it is clear that Norton was not compelled to defend the genuineness of the Old Testament or even all the books of the New Testament. Christianity could survive without them.

What his beloved religion could not do without were the Gospel narratives, especially those of Matthew, Mark and Luke. Liberal Christianity was the religion of Jesus. Therefore Norton felt it was his Christian and scholarly duty to ensure that the evidence for the authenticity of the Gospels was unassailable. In this sense, *Evidences of the Genuineness of the Gospels* represented both the culmination of his thought and a defensive maneuver intended to insulate Unitarian Christianity from the infidel philosophy of Germany. Eventually, Norton’s interest in pursuing this work overtook his desire to teach future Unitarian ministers. Norton had become disillusioned with Harvard; he felt it had reneged on its promise to serve as an institution intent on furthering the liberal cause. When he wrote to the Directors of the Theological School announcing his intention to retire, he noted that his professorial duties were hindering his own work.⁶¹ In another letter to Richard Sullivan and J.G. Palfrey (members of the Corporation), Norton revealed that in spite of his passion for the Theological School, or even because of it, he felt he must relinquish his office. He wrote, “I shall continue to

⁶¹ Letter from Andrews Norton to the Directors of the Theological Institution at Cambridge, March 23, 1830. (MS 474/9 (19), Andover-Harvard Library, Harvard University).

feel the strongest interest in the School, and in the cause, which it is intended to promote. It is only the hope of serving the latter more effectually which would have led me to wish a change of my relations with the former.”⁶² The way of furthering the cause of the School *and* the Unitarian movement was through the composition of something he simply referred to as “my book” or “the book.”

Norton began work on “the book” in 1819. But the first volume did not appear in print until 1837, and the second and third volumes, not until 1844. There was to be a fourth volume, one never completed because Norton’s health deteriorated, eventually leading to his death in September of 1853. The books that were published, however, represented the nexus of a lifetime of work on the Bible and were in every sense of the word, Norton’s *magnum opus*. As to the purpose of the volumes, Norton wrote the following in the introduction of the first book, “The object of the following work is to prove the genuineness of the Gospels. In asserting their genuineness, I mean to be understood as affirming, that they remain essentially the same as they were originally written; and that they have been ascribed to their true authors.”⁶³ Here, Norton revealed that his intention was different than many of his contemporaries. He had no desire to prove that the book had been passed down through the years intact and pristine, that the words themselves had not shifted in the process, but remained exactly as they had in the beginning (words were never final, after all, but were portals to deeper meaning). It was the originality and authenticity of the essential message for which Norton cared. This was the overall goal of the collection.

⁶² Letter from Andrews Norton to Richard Sullivan and J.G. Palfrey, Cambridge, April 19 1830. (MS 474/9 (19), Andover-Harvard Library, Harvard University).

⁶³ Andrews Norton, *Evidences of the Genuineness of the Gospels, Vol. I*, 10.

More minutely, each volume of *Genuineness* dealt with a different matter and means of proof. The first volume explored the writings of the early church fathers to see what could be determined about the presence or absence of the Gospels during the second century. The second and third both dealt with the history and writings of early Christian heretics, the later volume going into detail on the Gnostics.⁶⁴ In the second two volumes especially, Norton's work dealt primarily with external means of proof. The second and third volumes were crucial case studies for Norton's argument that the Gospels could be proven through an examination of the history and culture of the first and second centuries. These volumes revealed the scope of Norton's learning and the magnitude of his research. However it is the first volume that is of primary concern in this chapter. In the first volume, Norton's goal was to establish *how* precisely he knew that the Gospels were genuine via both internal and external sources of proof.

Only sentences into the first chapter of the first book, Norton conceded that like "all other ancient writings, [the Gospels] have been exposed to accidents to which works preserved by transcription are liable."⁶⁵ As noted above, Norton indicated at the outset of the book his belief that the Bible was the same in essence during his time as it was when first written. He was unconcerned with maintaining that the Gospels had been literally passed down. Word for word transcription was not a measure of the Gospels' authenticity. Words had multiple meanings; Greek and Hebrew were constantly being

⁶⁴ In the third volume, he analyzed what was then known of the Gnostics and what was said by them about the Gospels. The analysis in these latter two volumes is in many ways more creative and extensive than in the first, but in the first Norton's methods, reasoning, and theories about external and internal proof of the Gospels is clearly stated. The latter two represent further case studies to bolster the arguments he made in the first book.

⁶⁵ Norton, *Genuineness of the Gospels*, Vol. 1, 22.

intermingled, retranslated and then transcribed into the text of these narratives. For this reason, language could *not* be used to prove the spuriousness of the Gospels.

Conversely, language could serve to prove beyond a doubt the Gospels' authenticity. Norton argued that the linguistic style of each Gospel writer was distinctive enough that they could not have been copied from the same source. Further, the overall consistency of language within each Gospel revealed that each was the work of a single author. "When we examine the Gospels themselves, there is nothing which discovers marks of their having been subjected to such a process of interpolation as has been imagined. On the contrary, there is evidence which seems decisive, that each is the work of an individual, which has been preserved as it was written by him. The dialect, the style, and the modes of narration in the Gospels, generally, have a very marked and peculiar character. Each Gospel, also, is distinguished from the others, by individual peculiarities in the use of language, and other characteristics exclusively its own... A diversity of hands would have produced in each Gospel a diversity of style and character."⁶⁶ Norton acknowledged that there were several lines or passages from each Gospel that were very evidently not written in the style of the Apostolic author in question. However, he argued that the incongruity of the lines in question was so pronounced in each instance that this merely put into starker relief the singularity and consistency of the rest of the Gospel. "With the exception of a few short passages which have been transferred from one Gospel to another, of the doxology at the end of our Lord's prayer in Matthew, and of the story of the woman taken in adultery, as inserted in a very few modern manuscripts at the end of the twenty first chapter of Luke, there have

⁶⁶ *Ibid*, 77-79.

been found but three undisputed interpolations of any considerable length among all the Greek manuscripts of the Gospels; and every one of the three betrays itself to be spurious by its internal character,--by a style of thought and language, clearly different from that which characterizes the Gospel in which it has been introduced.”⁶⁷ If each Gospel were the product of a multiplicity of authors, would not the whole of each narrative read like a patchwork construction of different grammatic and linguistic styles? Since this was not the case for the Gospel narratives, it was clear that these specious passages were the exception and not the rule. Through this examination of the language of each narrative, Norton responded to the argument that the Gospel narratives had been corrupted by successive transcriptions. Norton did not dispute this, but again reiterated that it was irrelevant to the greater question of authenticity. Of course corruption occurred, but once the interpreter removed the corrupted elements, the original message would reappear unmarred.

In the body of the first volume, Norton also took time to address an issue that had long disturbed Christian Bible scholars like himself. For this segment, Norton chose Johann Gottfried Eichhorn as his partner in debate. Eichhorn had argued against the authenticity of the four Gospels, contending that none of the Gospel authors are mentioned by name (in the texts themselves) and only *after* the second century were they each attributed to the Apostles to lend the books weight.⁶⁸ In fact, Eichhorn argued, there was evidence for something he referred to as “the Original Gospel,” a master narrative from which all of the other four were derived. So, not only was Eichhorn arguing that the Gospels were corrupted over time, but that they were not the original products of each

⁶⁷ *Ibid*, 79-80.

⁶⁸ Eichhorn, *Einleitung in das Alte Testamente*.

Apostle, but rather copies from an earlier text. Eichhorn had argued that the close agreement between the Gospels, namely the first three (it was generally agreed upon that the Gospel of John had differences⁶⁹ significant enough to indicate that it could not have come from the same source as the Synoptics), was proof that they were copied from an original Gospel or potentially that Mark and Luke were copied from Matthew. Against the notion of an original Gospel, Norton argued that if such a Gospel had existed, there would certainly be evidence for it, especially since this original gospel would have to have had to have enough authority to warrant three different authors making copies from it. If such a seminal master narrative had existed, why was there no mention of it? Or even more to the point, why would a book of such weight have fallen out of favor as quickly as it had when these three subsequent Gospels came into being?⁷⁰ The answer, for Norton, was simple: such a gospel never existed.

Still, in Eichhorn's view, the correspondence of the three Gospels needed explanation. The possibility that the Gospel writers copied from one another was another way to account for their similarity. Norton found this argument particularly laughable, given the distinctive tone and vocabulary used by each author. It was clear from the texts, Norton contended, that these were men who lived with each other during the momentous events of Christ's life and who each saw the task of their ministry clearly. Matthew, Mark, and Luke wrote with the intention of spreading the Gospel of Jesus, thus each account bolstered and strengthened the case of the other. However, each author

⁶⁹ The differences are too numerous to list here, but, as an example, one of the primary points of difference between the Gospel of John and the Synoptics is that John's Gospel is the Gospel most often cited in support of the doctrine of the Trinity; it is the one Gospel where there is mention of the divine nature of Christ.

⁷⁰ Norton, *Genuineness of the Gospels, Vol. I*, cxlviii.

added his own individual style to the writing and chose which events to emphasize and which to pass over. The events rarely varied, the mode of telling did.

“The evangelists,” argued Norton, “in their striking correspondence in the representations of his character, miracles, and doctrines, must be considered as strongly confirming each other’s testimony. Nothing but reality, nothing but the fact, that Jesus had acted and taught as they represent, would have stamped his character and story so definitely and vividly upon the minds of individuals ignorant of each other’s writings, and enabled them to give narratives, each so consistent with itself, and all so accordant with one another.” Norton maintained that a “fictitious story” would have varied far more in the telling, depending upon the “the different temperaments and talents, the conceptions and purposes, of its various narrators.” Thus, the uniformity of the Gospels was either the product of a “concerted, steady purpose of deception” or, the far simpler possibility, that these were truthful tellings of all the Evangelists saw.⁷¹ The language of the texts explained everything. Each narrative was similar enough in the recording of events to prove that the Apostles had all seen the same thing, but different enough in style of writing to prove that each was the production of a different mind, a different pen.

With the internal evidence in place, Norton spent the next part of the first book establishing further proof of the Gospels genuineness through the writings of the early church fathers. The history of the reception of the text was as important as the proof of apostolic authorship in terms of what both said about the authority of the four Gospels. The church fathers represented the richest examples of how the Gospels were perceived during their time. “In estimating the weight of evidence, which has thus far been

⁷¹ *Ibid*, clxxi-clxxxii.

adduced, for the genuineness of the Gospels,” Norton wrote, “it is important to keep in mind what has not always been sufficiently attended to; that it is not the testimony of certain individual writers alone, on which we rely, important as their testimony might be. These writers speak for a whole community, every member of which had the strongest reason for ascertaining the correctness of his faith respecting the authenticity, and consequently, the genuineness of the Gospels. We quote the Christian fathers, not chiefly to prove their individual belief; but in evidence of the belief of the community to which they belonged.”⁷² The church fathers were representative of the broader Christian body, Norton argued; what can be adduced from their opinions about the Gospels, spoke for all Christians at the time.

The list of church fathers is lengthy and Norton chose to focus primarily on those who wrote in the latter half of the second century or first quarter of the third. Irenaeus, Justin Martyr, Tertullian and Origen were all figures one or two generations removed from the time of Jesus and the Apostles. Thus, their testimony was valuable for two reasons. First of all, they still lived close enough to apostolic times to have had chances for conversing with those who *had* known the apostles and could give accurate account of what had occurred. Secondly, and more important to Norton, writing in the late second-early third century, these four figures spoke of the Gospels as works that were already established. This was a crucial point in Norton’s argument that the Gospels had been composed in an earlier time (apostolic times to be exact) and not compiled later, as was the contention of German writers like Eichhorn.⁷³ In their writings, each of these four figures attested to the fact that the Gospels were widely accepted by early Christians as

⁷² *Ibid*, 133.

⁷³ *Ibid*, 10-11.

authoritative and attributed to the authors for which they were named. For this reason, the church fathers were most important for an accurate dating of the Gospel narratives.⁷⁴

It would be imprudent to list every turn of Norton's argument in this nearly 1,000 page collection. In truth, his objectives and assertions were simple, in spite of the fact that he supported each point with a veritable arsenal of internal and external evidence. His scholarship was widely praised by his contemporaries. The logic of his argument and the breadth of his research moved even radicals like Theodore Parker.⁷⁵ Former sparring partner, Moses Stuart commended him on his accomplishment.⁷⁶ Convincing as his conclusions were, Norton always seemed to encounter some resistance. His contemporaries' distaste for Norton often eclipsed his thesis, even if it was incredibly well argued and well cited. For all the weight of his arguments and the precision of his methods, many of Norton's fellow liberals still viewed him as the bombastic and tactless figure who made Channing seem a weakling and later, Emerson a heretic.

A Unitarian Jeremiad

Norton's desire to focus his mental energies on what would become *The Genuineness of the Gospels* was not his only reason for resigning his post at Harvard. In multiple letters to the Corporation, Norton berated the utter lack of power the faculty had in the determination of their course of study, in the distribution of interdepartmental funds, and in the procurement of books. In 1823, Norton, along with fellow faculty members George Ticknor and Henry Ware, got into an administrative scuffle with the Corporation, known as "The Great Rebellion," over the proper running of their

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, Irenaeus 62-3; Justin Martyr, 184-234; Tertullian 258-262; Origen, 68-70.

⁷⁵ Letter from Parker to De Wette, September 28, 1845 in Weiss, *Life and Correspondence of Theodore Parker*, 259.

⁷⁶ Letter from Moses Stuart to Andrews Norton, 1838. (MS 500/7 (3), Andover-Harvard Library, Harvard University).

classrooms. The faculty lost, to Norton's obvious dismay. Norton had always felt that the managing of the academic side of the school should be the purview of the faculty, so as not to curb the genuine process of free inquiry.⁷⁷ When asked again in 1839 by President Quincy to return to Harvard as Dexter Professor, Norton cited the notable want of pull by the faculty as evidence for his lack of enthusiasm.⁷⁸

Norton also felt unappreciated. Though his scholarship was lauded, his fellow Unitarians desired that he save his views for the classroom. Norton was not the ideal spokesperson for liberal Christianity. He was too rash, too willing to break connections with the orthodox when so many of his fellow Unitarians were not ready to do so. It was better for someone like Channing to speak for them. Channing's instincts were conciliatory. It was Channing who could hold a struggling liberal movement together, especially as it faced further hostility from orthodox Congregationalists and tremors of schism from within. Norton's solution to this was to have his fellow liberal Christians state plainly what they believed, thus firmly joining them to one another. This would not happen in earnest for another thirty years.

Nine years before he published *A Discourse on the Latest Form of Infidelity*, Norton foresaw troubled times ahead. His subsequent resignation from the school drew little protest at the time, though as noted in the introduction to this chapter, the Corporation would have great difficulty finding a replacement who equaled him.⁷⁹ When

⁷⁷ Morison, *Three Centuries of Harvard*, 231-234.

⁷⁸ Letter from Andrews Norton to President Quincy, May 1839. (MS 474/9 (19), Andover-Harvard Library, Harvard University).

⁷⁹ From the time of Norton's initial letter to the Directors of the Harvard Divinity School on March 23, 1830 (MS 474/9 (19), Andover-Harvard Library, Harvard University) to his actual relinquishing of the chair, (Letter to one of the Directors, Richard Sullivan on April 19, 1830. (MS 474/9 (19), Andover-Harvard Library, Harvard University), less than a month had passed. At the time he resigned, he was already providing insight into his replacement, as the second letter to Director Sullivan showed.

asked again to return, he stated in no uncertain terms that he felt the school had deteriorated since he left and had been deteriorating for some time. Sounding somewhat conspiratorial, Norton indicated that he felt that the power in the school had always been in the hands of those sympathetic to the German thinkers and therefore, to the Transcendentalists. He wrote about Harvard Divinity School, in a letter to James Walker, John Savage and Ezra Stiles Gannett, stating “If this or any other institution for learning is to be made what it might be and should be, it must be put into the hands of those, whose studies, and habits of minds qualify them to judge of the proper manner of conducting it, and who from principle, feeling and personal interest are deeply concerned in its prosperity.” Until this point, Norton argued, Harvard Divinity School had not made “any arrangements [to] effect these objects, or that anything is to be done that will give so good a prospect of usefulness as existed ten years ago, and has since been blasted. In these more disastrous times, disastrous as regards the avowed opinions of one portion of the Unitarian clergy (so called) and the inertness of a large majority of the other portion, the school, I fear, will be useless, or worse than useless, if there be not an essential change in its condition.”⁸⁰ The bitterness Norton felt at the passing over of his opinions was clear from this passage. However, even more evident was the pain Norton felt at watching helplessly as his beloved liberal Christianity, his Unitarian movement began to crumble.

CONCLUSION

Andrews Norton, more than Channing, Norton, and Parker, made biblical interpretation a scholarly endeavor. He intended to show by his work as a teacher and an

⁸⁰ Letter from Andrews Norton to James Savage, James Walker and Ezra Stiles Gannett, May 25, 1840. (MS 474/9 (19), Andover-Harvard Library, Harvard University).

author that the Bible could be read and understood not only by scholars trained in interpretive methods, but by anyone with the proper understanding of biblical language and biblical history. Such interpretive skills were needed by anyone who called him or herself a liberal Christian. To be a liberal Christian was to be a Bible student, in Andrew Norton's view.

Yet hindered by his irascible personality, Norton's often found his biblical scholarship regulated, while Channing's work was applauded. It was Norton who articulated much of what Channing took for granted. While Channing presumed the Bible to be "true," Norton set about the task of defining precisely what the Bible was, what books were spiritually binding, and determining how much of the New Testament was historically true.

This task was begun while serving as a teacher and brought to fruition in his years as a writer. During his Harvard years, Norton insisted that the first step to understanding the message of the Bible was proper philological and poetical knowledge of biblical language. Norton emphasized to his students that biblical words were both historical and rational facts of religious truth. They were also the entrypoints to deeper meaning and understanding of God. Proper knowledge of biblical language enabled the Bible-reader to have both a scholarly and rationalistic, as well as an emotional, pietistic and aesthetic, experience.

Following his resignation from the Dexter Professorship, Norton focused his energies on writing a book that would model the proper interpretive techniques he emphasized in his classroom. Norton, in responding to what he perceived to be the needs of the Unitarian movement, switched from teaching biblical language to proving the

authenticity of the Bible, specifically the New Testament. At this time, German philosophy was becoming increasingly popular among liberal Christians, as well as at Harvard. Though always informed by his work on biblical language, Norton's work now focused on questions of canonicity, biblical evidences, and the Bible's genuineness. Through meticulous exegetical, philological and historical work, Norton composed *Evidences of the Genuineness of the Gospels*, in which he set about proving that the Gospels were historically true, proven both by internal (testimony and miracles) and external (historical context and language of the Gospels) evidence. Through this work, Norton felt he had cemented a firm basis for the Unitarian movement and for Christianity more broadly.

During Norton's time, the Unitarian beliefs about the Bible began to fracture. Channing was too concerned with reconciliation to attempt to openly support Norton's conclusions about the Bible, for fear of widening the gap between those who wished for the Bible to remain central to liberal Christian belief and those who could do without it. Norton was simply too controversial to be seriously heard. The task then fell to Frederic Henry Hedge, a "Christian transcendentalist" to preserve the legacy of biblical interpretation left by Channing and Norton.⁸¹ Hedge had particular insight into the minds of both liberal Christians and Transcendentalists as well as a practical *and* conciliatory means of uniting the two factions. After 1830, Hedge became the spokesperson for biblical interpretation and left Andrews Norton to what he loved best: the private study of his Bible.

⁸¹ Ronald Vale Wells, *Three Christian Transcendentalists: James Marsh, Caleb Sprague Henry, Frederic Henry Hedge*. (New York: Columbia University, 1943).

CHAPTER III:
A PRACTICAL SPIRIT:
FREDERIC HENRY HEDGE, THE BIBLE
AND THE UNIVERSAL CHURCH

William Ellery Channing, Andrews Norton and Frederic Henry Hedge all had the dubious distinction of seeming both radical and conservative during their respective lifetimes. Ezra Stiles Gannett chided Channing, the “Founder” of Unitarianism, for renegeing on his liberal methods in favor of reconciliation with orthodox Congregationalists.¹ Conservatives feared Norton for his vocal touting of Unitarian principles in the first third of the nineteenth century. Later, radicals berated him for his stubbornness in defense of the authoritative foundations of the Bible. In the case of Hedge, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Theodore Parker, and Margaret Fuller, members of the eponymous “Hedge’s Club” (better known as the Transcendental Club), applauded him for his promising debut as a Transcendental reformer, but then admonished him for his seeming withdrawal into the safety of established traditions and forms of “the Church.”

Hedge described his definition of Church most explicitly in his Phi Beta Kappa Address of 1841 entitled “Conservatism and Reform.” It deserves to be quoted in its entirety:

By the Church is not meant the particular communions which are usually designated by that name, but the whole circle of ideas and influences within which the spiritual culture of an age or people is comprised, as Islamism, Mosaism, Christianity. And when I say that man belongs to the Church, I do not mean that the individual may not in some cases feel himself more at home without it; as in some cases he may please himself by withdrawing from the State and shutting himself out from all communion with his kind. The rule is that the

¹ Gannett, “Address of Rev. Ezra S. Gannett, D.D.” in *Services in Memory of Rev. William E. Channing, D.D. at the Arlington-Street Chrch, Boston on Sunday Evening, October 6, 1867* (Boston: Press of John Wilson and Son, 1867).

individual finds in Church, as in State, his most congenial sphere. Within this sphere, in the Church as in the State, authority is the regulative and even constitutive principle, without which no society could exist. But here, too, authority is not to be conceived as a hostile, compulsory force, but as a necessary reference in the uncertainty of clashing views and minds, as an appeal of the Spirit from itself to itself, from its lower instances to its higher, from its morbid states and wild wanderings, its inconsistencies, doubts, and errors, to the standing monuments of its own inspiration- old Tradition, and the written Word of those prophetic souls whom the Church reveres as ‘foremost of her true servants.’”²

In Hedge’s understanding, the Church was not, as the Transcendentalists saw it, a cold place hostile to new ideas and unyielding to reform, but a place to seek refuge against critics and guidance from the authorities of the Bible and the Spirit. Still, Hedge’s apparent shift in focus from transcendental reform to church reform (discussed later in this chapter) gave Hedge the reputation among Transcendental-Unitarians like Emerson as “the most disappointing—and among the most disappointed.”³ According to someone at one time or another, Channing, Norton, and Hedge were all backpeddlers. In this respect, all three men were wrongfully accused and for the same reason: their principles did *not* change, but the wants of their cohort and the historical circumstances did.

Channing never faltered in his belief that spiritual advancement was possible within Congregationalism, a denomination that enabled free and continual discourse between the human mind and the Bible. Yet, his ecumenism turned stale after a while for those who felt that Congregationalism still bore too much of its Calvinist heritage to suit the burgeoning liberal views of Channing’s followers. From his student days into his elder years, Norton remained adamant that the Bible was the foundation of all liberal Christianity and that proper interpretation of the text itself was the primary means of

² Hedge, “Conservatism and Reform” (1841) in *Martin Luther and Other Essays*. (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1888), 137.

³ Joel Myerson, “Frederic Henry Hedge and the Failure of Transcendentalism,” *Harvard Library Bulletin*, 23 (1975), 396.

accessing the Divine. For many of Norton's students, the idea of a "radical" Professor Norton was a foreign concept. As German Idealism and Higher Criticism gained a greater audience in New England academic circles, Norton seemed to reformers like George Ripley, like a relic of the past rather than a man desperate to sustain his beloved Unitarian movement, which appeared to be disintegrating in front of him.

Much of the frustration with both Channing and Norton arose as a result of a false categorization. Orthodox Congregationalists saw Channing as a radical, but still one of their own, and whose liberal Congregationalists viewed him as the veritable messiah of a new Church. In the case of Norton, he was too liberal to be an Orthodox Congregationalist and too conservative to be a proper Unitarian; neither side would claim him, so both relegated him to their opponents. Frederic Henry Hedge experienced the same fate. Emerson and Ripley claimed him for the radical cause and fellow Unitarian preachers, Convers Francis and Henry Ware, Jr. identified him as conservative. Both sides believed his views to be aligned with theirs, and both would experience periods of disappointment, feeling Hedge had betrayed them by reneging on his "true" or "original" views.⁴ In truth, Hedge was always an enigma. He defied any one means of definition—a characteristic common to all four of the figures examined in this work. For his part, Hedge felt he had always straddled both worlds and felt no urgency to remedy this fact. Writing about his views on the precipitousness of the Transcendentalist campaign for a "new church," Hedge recalled, "I had no belief in ecclesiastical revolutions to be accomplished with set purpose; and I seemed to discern a power and meaning in the old, which the more impassioned would not allow. I had even then made up my mind, that

⁴ Doreen Hunter, "Hedge, What Say You?" *American Quarterly*, 32 (1980), 188.

the method of revolution in theology is not discussion, but development. My historical conscience, then as since, balanced my neology, and kept me ecclesiastically conservative, though intellectually radical.”⁵ Hedge was a moderate and, if one looked closely enough, had never promised to be anything else.

Hedge’s moderateness arose from the practical motives behind his thought, which were the result of his scholarship and his ministry. Unlike Channing, Norton, and Parker, whose early lives played an important role in their development as biblical thinkers, little is said of Hedge’s religious upbringing. For a man so dedicated to the preservation of the Church, this lacuna seems incongruous. On his father’s side, Hedge was descended from a long line of ministers (Congregational), but his father was a scholar, a professor of logic at Harvard.⁶ His father, Levi Hedge, had wanted him to become a doctor. At one point, Hedge even began the course of study necessary for the medical profession, but instead decided to become a minister.⁷ While he was raised in the Congregational tradition, much of his training and his home life centered around academics. Thus, his ministerial persona was decidedly scholarly. For example, one of the primary tenets of his thought, the belief in a “Spirit-centered” relationship to God is derived, as I argue in this chapter, more from German Idealism (the Spirit in the mind and in the world) than from traditional Christian notions of the Spirit (the Holy Spirit). For this reason, his devotion

⁵ Frederic Henry Hedge, “The Destinies of Ecclesiastical Religion,” *The Christian Examiner and Religious Miscellany*, LXXXII, 3 (January, March, May 1867), 12.

⁶ Levi Hedge’s *Elements of Logick* (1818) was used as a standard textbook at Harvard. For more on Levi Hedge, see Peter King Carley, *The Early Life and Thought of Frederick Henry Hedge, 1805-1850*. (University Microfilms, Ann Arbor Michigan, Syracuse University, Ph.D., 1973); Daniel Walker Howe, *The Unitarian Conscience: Harvard Moral Philosophy, 1805-1861*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970).

⁷ Orrie W. Long, *Frederic Henry Hedge: A Cosmopolitan Scholar*. (Portland: The Southworth-Anthoensen Press, 1940).

to the Church was as much intellectual as it was religious and sentimental; he felt the Church was a place to house different *ideas* of religious truth.

As a result of these intellectual convictions, Hedge was firmly convinced that a “Broad Church”—one that could contain all Christians—was possible. This Church was premised on two things: the Spirit and the Bible. The Spirit, unchained from the Church and the Bible, could be a reckless entity. However, when channeled through the medium of ecclesiastical traditions and the written Word, the Spirit directed the mind in the proper direction, toward the divine and not away from it. Doreen Hunter argues that Hedge believed a full spiritual life could never be attained without divine revelation. That the “moral and religious truths” were always of God and never arose from the minds of “the Eclectics” nor “Emerson and Alcott” without the aid of his Spirit. Human beings rely on God to provide information about Himself, because He is ultimately, “unknowable” and would otherwise remain so without “heavenly condescension” to the needs of humanity.⁸

Thus, Hedge did not believe anyone could discover the “innate laws of the soul” without the aid of divine revelation. Revelation or inspiration (both past and present) was necessary in order to discover religious truth. On this he and his more mystical brethren could agree. Hedge was wary of the willingness of Emerson and Ripley, and later Parker, to cast off the binds of church and tradition. Hedge’s tolerance of all opinions was seriously tested by the spiritual anarchy toward which he felt Transcendentalism was tending. He even admitted that unchecked innovation was often more dangerous to faith than the cold dogmatism of Orthodoxy. In a paradigm-shattering sermon delivered as the

⁸ Hunter, “Hedge, What Say You?,” 194.

commencement address to the graduating class of Harvard Divinity students in 1864, Hedge made clear his stance that pure intuition was not a viable authority without the aid of the Bible or tradition. He stated firmly, “I anticipate the plea that may be urged against the position I here assume. Once yield to tradition, it may be said, and you place yourself at the mercy of tradition; you become a debtor to all the past, you render yourself liable to all the superstitions and irrationalities that have ever worn the pretence [*sic*] of orthodoxy; you sink into a weak Bibliolatry, or you let go your hold of Protestantism, and land in the Church of Rome. I deny that any such conclusion is deducible from my position in theory or is likely to flow from it in fact. I am far enough from counseling a blind and unqualified surrender to tradition or any renunciation of reason in religion. Tradition is one factor, and Reason is another; they are not antagonistic, but complementary the one of the other.”⁹

Still, Hedge focused the majority of his mental energy on the belief that all opinions, even those of the orthodox Congregationalists and the radical Transcendentalists, could be reconciled. It was through his exegetical and interpretive work on the Bible that Hedge was able to develop a practical scheme for a truly catholic Church. Like Channing, Hedge was unwilling to believe that Christianity could not house the myriad opinions present among all contemporary Christian groups. Unlike with Channing, and even unlike with Norton who was more concerned with reforming Congregationalism than Channing, Unitarian Biblicism under Hedge used his biblical scholarship in behalf of an ecclesiastical and moral reformation.

⁹ Hedge, “Antisupernaturalism and the Pulpit” (1864) reprinted in Sydney E. Ahlstrom and Jonathan S. Carey, eds. *An American Reformation: A Documentary History of Unitarian Christianity*. (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1985, 427.

In this chapter, I examine the practical means and ends of using the interpretive methods of the Unitarian Biblicists through the life and work of Frederic Henry Hedge. Hedge, in many ways served as link among the four figures discussed throughout the course of this work. Like Channing, he venerated tradition and felt that retaining an open and intuitive relationship to the Word would allow the flexibility needed for individual, moral growth within an already established Church. Like Norton, he believed that the Bible was poetical; its rich language could suggest new meaning upon each reading and also in each new age of the Church. Hedge and Norton both felt it necessary to adapt to new revelation, even though they differed on how such “adaptation” should occur. Norton believed that new revelation, in the case of the liberal Christians, warranted greater changes to the Church than many of his liberal contemporaries were willing to allow. On the other hand, Hedge believed that any revelation that occurred between the mind and the Bible occurred on the individual level and therefore should not be projected onto any holistic changes for the Church—a feature of Hedge’s thought discussed later. Hedge, like Theodore Parker (whose thought shall be analyzed in full in Chapter 4), felt that the critical and philosophical work coming out of Germany was crucial to a progressive understanding of the Church. However, Parker and Hedge were attracted to different aspects of German thought, which affected their use and understanding of its purpose for the Unitarian movement. Parker incorporated many of the conclusions of the Higher Critics in his thought, which ultimately led to his eschewing of established religious authority, like the Bible and the Church. Hedge, though he was highly trained in the Higher Critics, was more attracted to the philosophy of Kant and Schleiermacher, whose focus on “Spirit,” Hedge believed, made possible the growth of a universal church

based on the Bible. In every sense, Hedge's use of the Bible had ecclesiastical and moral ramifications. His work on the Bible always had the dual ends of turning the Church into a godly institution and men and women into a Godly people.

Since so much of Hedge's thought was steeped in German philosophy, I begin this chapter by examining Hedge in his role as the purveyor of German thought and German language among his contemporaries. His contemporaries and historians granted him this role because of his vast knowledge of all things German, which he was privy to as a result of the childhood years he spent at school in Germany. What he absorbed in Germany became key to Hedge's understanding of the Bible as well as his idealization of a "broad" or "catholic" Church. As I will show, Hedge's work on the Bible led naturally into his practical ministry, guided his published writings, as well as his life as a popular minister, a one-time President of the American Unitarian Association, a Professor of Ecclesiastical History (and later of German) at Harvard and an editor of the *Christian Examiner*. As his influence grew within liberal Christianity, so did his message of a practical and reformatory Biblicism. Traversing the different worlds of the Unitarian pulpit, the halls of ministerial administration, and the Transcendentalist meeting room, Hedge preached his views of Church and moral reform, ever equipped with a passage from Scripture to punctuate his point.¹⁰

Mr. Hedge Goes to Berlin... and The Spirit Brought Him Back Home Again

It was in Germany that Hedge first received the knowledge that would become foundational to his later work with the Bible. In 1818, believing his son to be too young

¹⁰ As will become clear, several of the books and articles published by Hedge occurred after 1865, and therefore outside the stated scope of this book (1803-1865). However, it is my contention that the genesis of Hedge's thought occurred during these years and that the ideas he put forward in some of these later articles were ones he had already spoken about in earlier pieces or discovered while in Germany, at Harvard or during his first years as a minister.

to enroll at Harvard, Levi Hedge opted instead to send “Henry” (as he was called by those closest to him) to Germany alongside his tutor George Bancroft. As a thirteen-year old, Hedge found himself thrust into the world of the German gymnasium. During his five years abroad, Hedge attended two schools in quick succession. As he was under the minimum age for the prestigious Schulpforta in Göttingen, he first attended Ilfield (a school established in a town of the same name), which he described with little fondness.¹¹

Hedge depicted his experiences in Germany in a brief memoir, which was printed, posthumously, in Joseph Henry Allen’s *Sequel to Our Liberal Movement*. Hedge described the living quarters at Ilfield as severe and incredibly cold, the food bland and minimal. He also noted that the discipline, while doled out regularly was “not searching and not quickening.” George Bancroft wrote to Levi Hedge on several occasions, noting young Henry’s penchant for getting into trouble, a characteristic that would eventually force his removal from Ilfield and his transplantation into Schulpforta.¹² After a short time, he left for Schulpforta, which left a much different, lasting impression on Hedge. The environment of the school was more to Hedge’s liking, as were the relationships he built with his classmates and teachers.¹³ Yet, the most important connections Hedge forged during that time were intellectual. It was there that he discovered Goethe, who led to Hedge’s greatest and most persistent intellectual infatuation. Poetry, German poetry in particular, and especially that of Goethe, were to Hedge the most indelible evidence of the work of the Spirit on the human mind. Hedge greatly prized the creative faculties.

¹¹ Both schools were Lutheran in orientation, though nowhere does Hedge or his tutor, George Bancroft make clear whether the denominational orientation of the school had any affect on his own personal faith or theology. More than likely, they did make an impression, but Hedge himself does not speculate on it, so it is not my intention to do so here.

¹² Allen, *Sequel to Our Liberal Movement*. (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1897). 63.

¹³ *Ibid*, 73.

He criticized Samuel Taylor Coleridge (another one of his major intellectual influences) for his lack of creativity, for adopting the overly speculative, overly scientific elements of German philosophy at the expense of the mystical, the spiritual, and the transcendent.¹⁴ This aversion to the “coldness of science” was an element of Hedge’s thought that would remain with him throughout the whole of his life and one, which distinguished him from some of his fellow “Transcendentalist-Unitarians,” like Theodore Parker.

In one important sense, Hedge was decidedly in sync with his radically liberal brethren. He was incredibly well-versed in German philosophy. Hedge was at Schulpforta when he came across Kant, Fichte, Schelling, Schleiermacher and all the great minds of nineteenth century German philosophy. Historian Peter Carley argues that it was unlikely that Hedge’s acquaintance with such writers came as a result of any “deliberate” inquiry on his part, but rather arose from the suggestions of one or more of his professors.¹⁵ Unlike contemporaries, like Emerson or Parker, who actively sought knowledge of German philosophy to bolster their burgeoning radical views, Hedge had engaged the same thinkers without any personal agenda. As a result, Emerson and Parker appropriated German philosophy whole-heartedly as a curative to what they perceived as the stale Unitarian devotion to the miraculous evidences of the Bible. On the other hand, Hedge, who did not approach German philosophy with an eye to cure anything, was not willing to adopt speculative and critical methods for the sole purpose of challenging the Christian Church—an institution he loved deeply—but rather, studied them because he

¹⁴ Frederic Henry Hedge, “Coleridge’s Literary Character,” *The Christian Examiner and Religious Miscellany*, XIV (1833), 109-129.

¹⁵ Peter King Carley, *The Early Life and Thought of Frederick Henry Hedge, 1805-1850*. (University Microfilms, Ann Arbor, Michigan, Syracuse University, Ph.D., 1973), 30.

knew that familiarity with German philosophy was important for any well-informed individual.

What did Hedge learn in Germany? He most clearly showed the influence of his German education, in particular the philosophy of Kant, in one of his earliest articles for the *Christian Examiner*. Seemingly a review of the works of Coleridge, Hedge actually spent the majority of the article discussing Coleridge's translation of German philosophical works into English and analyzing the thought of Kant, Schelling and Fichte. Hedge was disappointed with the "meager information on German philosophy in Coleridge" and thus, used this article as an opportunity to express his own views.¹⁶ This article appeared during a time when German philosophy, in particular German idealism, was becoming a topic of debate among the scholars and ministers of Boston, many of whom, like Andrews Norton, were wary of what such philosophy boded. In it, Hedge criticized those "New England scholars" whose "discomfort" with Kant derived from the fact that his ideology was simply different than theirs. For Hedge, Kant—and, more tentatively, Coleridge—represented an attack against the "tendency" of modern scholars to rely on the principles of Scottish Common Sense—namely those that made "sensually verified data [the] definition of reality." New England scholars had become too dependent on sense data as a measure of truth. Hedge argued that if these scholars continued to rely solely on only what they could perceive with their senses, they ran the risk of ruling out much of what they claimed to believe, like the Spirit and God. In Coleridge, Hedge found a kindred spirit whose inclination was likewise to move beyond the simply sensual, to the spiritual and supernatural. "As a warrior for the cause of a

¹⁶ Welleck, "Minor Transcendentalists and German Philosophy," 656.

broader definition of reality than that which could be perceived by the senses, then Coleridge was an ally, and a brilliant ally at that.”¹⁷ Hedge’s use of Coleridge to explain his views on German philosophy was a diplomatic move in many ways. By introducing German idealism through Coleridge, Hedge engaged liberal Congregationalists like himself on familiar ground. Coleridge was already an established intellectual source among Hedge’s cohort. Appearing innocuous, the article actually provided a course on German idealism and its American interpretation.

In his capacity as a translator of German idealism, Hedge conceded that the works of German idealists would be difficult to replicate word-for-word. However, the merit of their work was not in the prose itself, but in the transcendental philosophy presented therein. As to Kant in particular, Hedge felt that there was only one point that must be gleaned from the philosopher, namely that “the interior consciousness [is] distinguished from the common consciousness, by its being an active and not a passive state. In the language of the school, it is a free intuition, and can only be attained by a vigorous effort of the will.”¹⁸ In other words, for Hedge the intuitive consciousness is an inborn faculty, accessible only by those who consistently tap into it; it must be *trained* to be useful, but once trained, it offers access to a different, higher level of knowledge. To critics of Unitarianism like Moses Stuart, such language reeked of antinomianism and was proof that they had been right in their critique of Unitarianism as a dangerous, unorthodox movement. For Stuart, the influx of German philosophy into liberal Christian institutions was inevitable, as was the Transcendentalism that formed as a result. However, Hedge

¹⁷ Carley, *Early Thought of Hedge*, 111.

¹⁸ Hedge, “Coleridge,” 119. It is important to note that Kant was not *technically*, a German idealist. However, his thought inspired the thought of those like Schleiermacher, Fichte, and Schelling whose work became known as German Idealism

felt that, “[it] is from an ignorance of this primary condition [of an active consciousness], that the writings of these men have been denounced as vague and mystical” rather than intellectually, spiritually, and biblically sound.¹⁹

In spite of his critique of the ignorance of orthodox critics, Hedge took a rather narrow view of Kant as well. In his *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant argued that there were two faculties of the human mind: Reason and the Understanding. Both acquired and synthesized information in a different way. Reason dealt with knowledge attained *a priori*, meaning the ideas and thoughts innate in the mind. The Understanding managed all knowledge attained *a posteriori*, through observation and use of the senses. When both the knowledge of the Reason and the knowledge of the Understanding combined, this information combined to form the basis of further, higher level analysis.

Hedge conflated Kant’s two terms, Reason and Understanding, into a single consciousness that was at once innate and intuitive (Reason) yet molded and educated by increasing knowledge of the world (Understanding). In this way, the mystical and the rational were different, albeit symbiotic operations of the same intellectual faculty. The connection between these dual operations was the Spirit. For Hedge, the Spirit was God’s “self-manifestation—the revelation of himself in rational minds” which was the “end of all God’s doing.”²⁰ Hedge believed that all “a priori” ideas were not a priori in the purest sense, meaning they were not fully formed in the mind. He believed that ideas like the existence of God, humans learned of by looking inward, certainly. Yet, God had implanted these ideas there and they were subsequently brought to light not by one’s unaided intellectual faculties, but by the aid of the Spirit. The Spirit was, by definition,

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Hedge, *Reason in Religion, Second edition*. (Boston: Walker, Fuller, and Company, 1865), 285.

both extrinsic and intrinsic to the human mind: working in the human mind and in the outside world, all for the sake of revealing God, gradually, to the individual human consciousness. “All knowledge,” Hedge asserted, “partakes more or less of inspiration.”²¹ Thus even the most unenlightened individual may possess insight into the mind of God.

Hedge believed that the Spirit acted on human faculties both directly and indirectly. When the Spirit engaged the mind directly, this qualified as direct inspiration. Hedge wrote, “There are motions of the Spirit in us which are not to be ascribed to any external influence: they are the Spirit of God acting on the instinct of goodness in the soul. There is this instinct in every soul. It is not the most patent, but the deepest, of all our instincts. Often neutralized by other propensities, it needs the quickening of the Spirit to give it life.”²² This is the closest that Hedge, or any of these four men considered herein, would get to a doctrine of irresistible grace. Like Channing and Norton, Hedge would never concede that the human will did not play an active role in discerning truth from falsehood. He did however grant the Spirit much more power in the way of persuasion. Never, he avowed, does God turn from his creatures, even if they reject Him or His Spirit, but they “cannot avert his grace.”²³ With statements such as this, Hedge sounded more Calvinist than Transcendentalist. Channing, Norton, and Hedge all believed that the connection between the divine mind and human mind was crucial to understanding both the nature of human faculties and how humans interpreted biblical texts. However, on the spectrum of spontaneous intuition, Hedge was more progressive

²¹ *Ibid*, 286.

²² *Ibid*, 289.

²³ *Ibid*, 290.

in his appropriation and use of philosophy than either Channing or Norton. Hedge sounds particularly antinomian when, in detailing the possibility of continued revelation, he asked, “What is [the Spirit], in fact, but the hidden life, the self of our self, which now and then bursts into consciousness and amazes us with a foreign presence in our private thought? Those lucid intervals in our experience, those clear spaces in our life, when the roar and rush of the world’s torrent ceases, and the cloud-rack lifts, and a bit of the blue sky struggles through, with revelation of immortal deeps;--these are momentary realizations of the presence of the Holy Spirit, from which at no time we are otherwise sundered than by the wanderings of our own thought and will.”²⁴ These glimpses of the divine inserted directly into the consciousness were characteristic of the operation of the Spirit.

The Spirit, however, also operated indirectly: through and in the Word, or the “letter.” Before Hedge was able to fall off the precipice into total reliance on intuition and thus, full-fledged Transcendentalism, the Bible brought him back. The Word, in Hedge’s view, was the external evidence or output of the workings of the Spirit. In this way, the Spirit was bounded by its own doings. It could progress and evolve in its manifestations, always with the goal of moving humanity toward communion with God, but it could never contradict itself. Therefore, Scripture was always an appropriate measure of the Spirit and the Divine Mind. “[Divine] as [the Spirit] is in possibility,” Hedge wrote, “it is nothing in reality, until it is embodied.... As yet, it is a mere breath: shall it end so? [A] passing wind whence coming you heed not, nor whither going? Or shall it become actual, and a fact of life? Express it, actualize it in some way, and

²⁴ *Ibid*, 296.

straightway it becomes life, a thing, a fact; insignificant in appearance, obscure in place, evanescent in time; but still, life, and a fountain of life to others, an influence in the world, and so an actual, constituent part of the world, inseparable, indestructible.”²⁵

Hedge believed that the Spirit must produce tangible proof in the form of letters and words. Truth was not fully revealed until written down.

The written words of the Bible were not inflexible in meaning. Hedge shared the same poetic sensibility when it came to language as Channing and Norton. He argued that since the Spirit was dynamic, so were the words the Spirit produced. By reading the Bible, the direct influence of the Spirit met with the indirect influence of the Spirit: the Spirit-infused human mind met with the Spirit-infused Bible. Needed to interpret the Word were those intuitive capacities of the human mind, guided by the Spirit. “This also must be conceded,” wrote Hedge, “that in the letter is the spirit fully and perfectly expressed, and that the letter still requires the spirit to interpret its import, and to make it available and edifying to those who would use it. It is a medium of spiritual life to those only who come to it with and in the spirit... No manipulation can make it work to that end without the touch of the electric fluid which develops its secret virtue. Nevertheless, that metallic wire is a necessary condition of the communication desired; no other medium can supply its place, nor can the communication take effect without a medium. So is the letter without a medium. So is the letter without the spirit, and still an indispensable mediator of spirit.”²⁶ In Hedge’s view, the Bible was useless without the aid of the Spirit and the Spirit was reckless without the grounded reality of the Bible.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 302.

²⁶ Hedge, *Reason in Religion*, 305.

In this moment, Hedge was certainly speaking, at least in part, to those with orthodox leanings, those who regarded truth gained by intuition with suspicion. The intuitive functions of the human mind were inherently dangerous, he agreed, but not when disciplined by the Bible. However, it was to his Transcendentalist brethren that he directed these words most pointedly. He feared for the dissolution of the Unitarian movement as much, if not more, than Andrews Norton. However, Hedge had the gift of diplomacy, something for which Norton had little patience (a difference that harkens back to the distinction in temperament, as well as differences between the duty of a pastor versus a scholar). Nonetheless, the intention behind his words is clear: the Transcendentalists would go too far if they placed the Spirit above, and not beside, the Bible. “The test of a true spirit is its productiveness,” wrote Hedge. “The spirit that can originate a letter in which men shall find their oracle and comforter and life, or that can interpret such a letter when it has grown dim, or re-animate it when it is old—the same is of God. In advocating the claims of the letter in religion, I am advocating the cause of the spirit... Not letter and spirit are opposed but literal views and interpretations... ‘The letter killeth’ in doctrine and rite, when doctrine and rite are held and interpreted as letter alone, in slavish subjection to a formula which should be regarded as a servant of thought, and not as a law... It is always on the letter, and not on the spirit, that sects have split.”²⁷ This last line bore a warning for those, like Emerson, who were concerned with the hold the Bible had on the minds of humanity. ‘Continue to focus on refuting the authority of the letter,’ Hedge seemed to say, ‘and we are doomed for the same sectarian strife as every other historical tradition.’

²⁷ *Ibid*, 309-10.

What is equally apparent in the previous excerpt is that Hedge felt reconciliation was possible between the more radical and the conservative factions within Unitarianism. Hedge believed that a Church could exist that housed the religious needs of all liberal Christians (something he would later extend into *all* of Christianity), no matter if they desired a more traditional adherence to “historical evidences” and miraculous proof like Norton or an emphasis on personal experience and experimentation like Parker. Furthermore, he felt that founding such a Church on the interdependent relationship between the Spirit in the human mind and the Spirit in the letter of the Bible was the way to do so. The one could not exist without the other. To desire communion with the Spirit meant to desire communion with the Bible as well.

Of course his pleas to heal the schism between Transcendentalists and the conservative faction of the liberal Christians were also personal. Hedge felt beholden to both camps for different reasons and both sides still claimed him for their own cause. He was bound to disappoint one or the other while they continued to battle each other in various public forums. So it was in his best interest to seek a compromise between the warring factions. His moderation was often wearying for others. He seemed to walk an impossibly thin line between two seemingly irreconcilable worldviews. Thus, many of his contemporaries found themselves asking: if forced to choose between the radicals or the conservatives, to which would Frederic Henry Hedge pledge allegiance?

Transcendental Bibliocist? The Many Hats of Frederic Henry Hedge

Frederic Henry Hedge had promised Margaret Fuller several pieces for *The Dial*. As editor of the radical periodical, she was determined to get them. Perturbed by his silence, she wrote to him time and again, pleading for the pieces he had sworn to write.

In the end, Hedge would only submit two pieces to a magazine for which he had had the original idea.²⁸ This was not the first instance where it became clear that Hedge had put some distance between himself and his more radical friends. Why, wondered Fuller along with Ralph Waldo Emerson, had Hedge suddenly grown cold on the whole Transcendental project?

Hedge's interest *had* cooled as far as the Transcendentalist project was concerned. Yet, if looking carefully at Hedge's work and his correspondence from 1836, when "Hedge's Club" first met and 1841, when *The Dial* was first published, his views had not suffered any great or alarming change, though the climate of Transcendentalism had changed in his view.²⁹ In fact, it was Hedge who had proposed originally the idea for a "symposium" of "likeminded persons" to discuss all manner of topics dealing with the current state of things. In a June 1836 letter to Emerson, Hedge began by describing a discussion that occurred between himself, George Putnam³⁰ and George Ripley and the subsequent fruits of that discussion.³¹ He wrote, "The plan is namely this, to have a meeting, annual or oftener if possible, of certain likeminded persons of our acquaintance for the free discussion of theological & moral subjects. By likeminded persons I mean not such as agree in opinion but such as agree in spirit—men who earnestly seek the truth and who, with perfect freedom in the avowal of their own opinions, however abhorrent

²⁸ His two contributions were a poem called "Questionings" in the January 1841 issue and an essay entitled "The Art of Life- The Scholar's Calling" in the October 1841 issue. Hedge proposed the idea of a journal for Transcendental philosophy as early as 1835. Myerson, "Hedge and Failure of Transcendentalism," 396.

²⁹ The Transcendental Club that met in Ripley's sitting room was originally called "Hedge's Club." This eponymous epithet referred to the fact that the club generally met when Hedge descended to Concord from his pastorate in Bangor, Maine. The title "Transcendental Club" was imposed from the outside and was not one with which its members felt comfortable, for the sole purpose that, at least in the beginning, they did not wish to be associated with any one religious or philosophical movement or set of influences.

³⁰ A well-known publisher who founded the publishing house "Wiley and Putnam." Putnam also had a periodical, *Putnam's Magazine*, which eventually merged with *Scribner's Monthly*.

³¹ The club met for the first time on September 19, 1836.

from the general faith, unite perfect toleration of other men's freedom & other men's opinions... The idea is perfect toleration of opinion, of which, [Putnam] complains, that there is none in the land."³² Hedge did not have an agenda when proposing the club, other than a gathering of minds devoted to the pursuit of truth. The concept of creating a new Church or a schismatic movement was furthest from his mind and his intentions. Hedge did not, or perhaps could not foresee that such a group would contemplate the creation of a formal, religious institution like a Church. Hedge desired such a forum because free inquiry was necessary to the survival of truth, without which it would fossilize and die away.

Therefore, he did not anticipate that in 1840, the Club would broach the idea of a new, autonomous Church built on the ideals put forward in their meetings. On September 2, in the parlor of Theodore Parker's West Roxbury home, many of the founding members of Hedge's Club, including Hedge himself, found themselves gathered to discuss the possibility of a new Church. Lines were quickly drawn between those who, as Parker put it, were "wedded to the past"³³ like Hedge and Convers Francis and those like Emerson, Parker, Ripley and Fuller, who wished for a new Church.³⁴ It was clear that somewhere along the way, there had been a serious miscommunication in agenda.

For his part, Hedge was adamant that such an endeavor was misguided from its conception. Not only had history shown that sects unattached from any traditional

³² Letter from Frederic Henry Hedge to Ralph Waldo Emerson, June 14, 1836. (MS 183/1 (3), Letters from Frederic Henry Hedge to Ralph Waldo Emerson, Andover-Harvard Library, Harvard University).

³³ 1-2 September 1840, Theodore Parker, "Journal," I, 442. (MS 101/1 (2), Andover-Harvard Library, Harvard University).

³⁴ Myerson, "Hedge and Failure of Transcendentalism," 404.

Churches were destined to fail (his favorite example of this was the Quakers³⁵), but he had always understood Transcendentalism as a philosophy, a way of approaching and reforming traditional rites and forms.³⁶ In 1841, Hedge used the opportunity provided him as a guest speaker at the Harvard chapter of Phi Beta Kappa to express his growing concern at the direction Transcendentalism was tending, as well as to remind both conservatives and radicals that there were merits in each of their ways of thinking. In the oration, Hedge admonished hasty reformers who were so concerned with creating something new in place of the old, that they forgot the reasons why such traditions were created in the first place. “Unbounded license is equally an evil and equally incompatible with true liberty, in thought as in action,”³⁷ he wrote. And later, “We want not only liberty, but *direction*; not movement only, but method.”³⁸ The most important source of such direction *and* method was the Bible. Of course, Hedge admitted that over-reliance on the past could lead to stultification and spiritual death for any church or religious tradition. To those who called themselves conservatives, who held firmly to tradition, Hedge advised not to hold so tightly as to “deny the existence of errors and need of reform” which would ultimately “repeat the folly and renew the evils of past centuries.”³⁹

Though Hedge tried to be even-handed in his treatment of conservatism and reform, it was clear from his conclusions that Hedge came out on the side of the former, on the side of caution versus boundless innovation. In the final paragraphs of the Phi

³⁵ Hedge, *Reason in Religion*, 306.

³⁶ Specifically, his understanding of Transcendental philosophy came from Kant. Therefore, the term “Transcendentalism” always had a particular philosophical connotation for him. The philosophy and the movement that grew out of “Hedge’s Club” were never firmly associated in his mind. For him, the club was a place for free inquiry where the subject of Transcendentalism certainly arose as a topic for conversation.

³⁷ Hedge, “Conservatism and Reform,” 134.

³⁸ *Ibid*, 135.

³⁹ *Ibid*, 147.

Beta Kappa Address, Hedge spoke openly about transcendental philosophy, something he had not done to that point. At the start, Hedge offered the caveat that no philosophy is ever entirely true and none entirely false. He moved quickly into his critique thereafter. “It is from this point of view that we are to judge of the *transcendental philosophy* (so called), on which the mind of this century divides, and which though very different views are included in that name, may in some sort be regarded as one system.” Until this point, Hedge noted, transcendental philosophy had been solely deconstructive, offering much in the way, “method and its critique,” but “nothing as yet which after ages can quote as discovery; but these may be regarded as an actual advance on ages past. As a science of the *Absolute* it has failed to redeem its high promise, and to place itself on a footing of equality, in point of demonstration, with the exact sciences.” What Transcendentalism had accomplished was the reiteration of the “true purpose of metaphysical inquiry,” free inquiry, with, “a new impulse to thought, and enlarging, somewhat, the horizon of life.”⁴⁰

Transcendentalists like Emerson, Ripley, and later, Parker, were attempting to revive and release free inquiry from—what they perceived to be—an increasingly static liberal movement. Though this may have been true, Hedge conceded, he worried that the good in Transcendentalism was being sacrificed in its efforts at ecclesiastical reform. Hedge felt that it was the duty of reform not to build something new on the ruins of the old, but to sheer off the archaic and rotting traditions of the Church, to make it like new once again.

Hedge’s views had not shifted over a quarter century later when he wrote an article entitled “The Destinies of Ecclesiastical Religion.” In it, he asked, “What is the

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 157.

lesson of history and private experience concerning revolutions in religion?

Ecclesiastical continuity—that we are under tutelage. The Church does not exist by the will of man, but by his constitution. It cannot be abolished by the will of man; it cannot perish by disaffection. Only a new Church can supplant the old. And the new Church will not be an association of thinkers and critics, with correct and rational theories of God, discarding supernaturalism, and planting themselves on abstract theism. Such associations exist under all dispensations; but they have never succeeded in planting a Church, or supplanting one.”⁴¹ Further down in the same article, Hedge wrote in his full measure as a mediator urging his radical and conservative listeners to see the value in the other. A well-balanced church was one that saw the wisdom in conservatism and the potential for disciplined and innovative thought in radicalism. Hedge believed reconciliation was possible. He was ever the optimist in this way.

Others were less optimistic for the possibility of a reunion of radicals and conservatives. Emerson was flummoxed as to how this man, whose knowledge of German philosophy was so broad, who had introduced so many of the methods being used regularly by Transcendentalists in the construction of their thought, could so firmly refuse to consider the possibility of a new Church. When Hedge submitted “Conservatism and Reform” to Emerson for publication in *The Dial*, Emerson roundly rejected the piece and chose to publish something of his own composition instead. Though Emerson and Hedge would remain friends until the former’s death in 1882, it was around this time that Emerson relinquished hope of Hedge ever becoming a leader in Transcendentalism. Writing in his journal after hearing Hedge deliver the Phi Beta

⁴¹ Hedge, “Destinies of Ecclesiastical Religion,” 14.

Kappa Address, Emerson complained, “It was the profoundest of superficiality... The sentence which began with an attack on the conservatives ended with a blow at the reformers: the first clause was applauded by one party & and the other party had their revenge & gave their applause before the period was closed.”⁴² Emerson felt Hedge was playing the politician more than the preacher. Hedge’s sermon felt like pandering to him.

Was Emerson right? *Had* Hedge reneged on his earlier views? Or had Emerson been so enamored of Hedge’s knowledge of the German language and German philosophy to notice the strain of conservatism in Hedge’s ecclesiology? It was his “love for Germany” that “kept Hedge from becoming a quiet parish preacher who rarely left home except for the yearly ministerial conferences.”⁴³ Without delving too deeply into the realm of speculation, it is a viable question to ponder, whether Emerson would have aligned himself with Hedge in the first place had Hedge not been a veritable well of information on all things German. The two became acquainted while Hedge was at Harvard. In a school still steeped in Locke and Thomas Reid, nascent radicals like Ripley and Emerson (graduated by that time) often sought out Hedge specifically for his knowledge of those dangerous Germans and their speculative and dialectical methods.⁴⁴ Hedge, though “committed to idealistic philosophy,” was “doctrinally conservative.”⁴⁵ Emerson overlooked this fact.

So when Hedge’s article on Coleridge came out in 1833, his contemporaries could rejoice in his championing of German philosophy. What they missed was Hedge’s criticism of Coleridge as a translator of German idealism, because “he was not qualified

⁴² August 1841, Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Journals*, VIII, 31. (Box 2, Folder 7, Journal G, 1841, Ralph Waldo Emerson Journals and Notebooks, 1819-1875, Concord Library, Concord, MA).

⁴³ Myerson, “Hedge and Failure of Transcendentalism,” 397.

⁴⁴ Carley, *Early Life and Thought of Hedge*, 47.

⁴⁵ Williams, *The Harvard Divinity School*, 110.

in point of biblical learning for an undertaking like this. Many of his assertions, we are persuaded, would not have been hazarded, had he not taken his understanding of the New Testament for granted, but studied that book with the same diligence and perseverance which appears to have bestowed upon other works.”⁴⁶ Hedge had always maintained, even in this earliest of publications, that the intuitive philosophy from Germany must operate in and out of the Bible.

In his *Review of Edward Everett*, Hedge showed further evidence of the early roots of his disagreement with the Transcendentalists, specifically, on the viability of Christianity as a religious institution. Yes, he contended, no institution is ever *fully* adequate to the wants and growth of the mind, and if left to stagnate, will do more harm than good. “The institutions of this country have sometimes been represented as an experiment, on the issue of which the cause of universal improvement, and all the best interests of humanity, in some measure depend. If these fail, it is said, then farewell all farther hope of liberty and social progress. We love not to believe that a stake so precious is pending on a cast so doubtful. These institutions may fail, they certainly will fail, whenever, in the course of our advancement, they shall cease to be faithful expressions of the wisdom and the power of the age.”⁴⁷ If an institution had become obsolete, certainly, Hedge would contend, let it pass away. However, if one read further back in the *Review*, it was clear that Hedge did not think this was the case for Christianity. “The foundation” for all successful institutions, wrote Hedge, “is given in Christianity—it is Christian *liberty*, and Christian *charity*. In truth, the very idea of society as a conscious union of individuals, and not a mere juxtaposition of individuals,

⁴⁶ Hedge, “Coleridge,” 128.

⁴⁷ Frederic Henry Hedge, “Review of Edward Everett’s *Address delivered before the Phi Beta Kappa Society in Yale College, New Haven, August 20, 1833*,” *The Christian Examiner*, XXXI (March, 1834), 20.

was first generated under Christianity; and, until this idea has been brought into being and into vigorous action, no permanent improvement in the condition of man was possible... [The] progress of man is no other than the progress of Christianity, in other words, the progress of truth, and since truth is boundless also, an interminable course of improvement, an advancement, without end, in knowledge, civilization, and happiness. It is the privilege of each generation to contribute something toward this advancement.”⁴⁸ Christianity was not done yet, argued Hedge. “Obstructing” the progress of Christianity was equivalent to obstructing the advancement of truth. Truth was born and molded in Christianity and thus it was not necessary to search for it outside the nurturing arms of the Church. Reform was intended to mend the Church not destroy it. Though this passage is clearly intended to have rhetorical impact, it is unclear whether Hedge could already foresee the trouble to come, whether in fact this review was a subtle warning to the Transcendentalists.

What is clear is that Hedge’s conservative views of authority and ecclesiology, most often attributed to the latter half of his life, was evident in his earlier years as well. In truth what the Transcendentalists and Emerson failed to ascertain in Hedge’s worldview was the traditionalist bent he brought to his reading of all the radical philosophies he studied. Hedge’s primary goal in adapting the thought of Kant and other German thinkers to his own worldview was the furtherance of a Spirit-driven ecclesiology based upon the Bible and its interpretation. Whether he was a traitor to their cause or simply misunderstood, Hedge was never wholly one of their own. His adherence to the idea that the Church and the Bible were the only proper conduits of the

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 16.

Spirit inherent in human nature made him, even at his most Transcendentalist moments, only an interloper in the radical cause. He was in, not of their world.

The Bible, the Church and Practical Reform

After Hedge's death in 1890, George Crosswell Cressey, pastor of the Independent Congregational Society in Bangor, Maine, delivered a sermon in honor of Hedge, who had been the pastor at that very church from 1835-1850. It was clear from Cressey's words that Hedge had been more than simply a liberal Christian minister to his flock, but a beloved spiritual leader. Hedge's time there was often marked with controversy, though he still bore the respect of that particular congregation. At various points throughout his time in Bangor, Hedge came up against the congregation for certain of his views they deemed "too radical." Essentially, his relationship with the Transcendentalists colored his relationship to his congregants: a fact, which does explain his reticence to publish anything in *The Dial*. In a letter to Fuller, he mentioned fearing that he would be ejected from his post for being "an atheist in disguise" should he prove himself to be what everyone already suspected him of, namely, a sympathizer of the Transcendentalism.⁴⁹ Cressey acknowledged the controversies, noting that Hedge had always straddled two worlds. "If we accept the division of Unitarian thought of the past half century into the two schools, the transcendental and historical, Dr. Hedge belongs doubtless so usually classed, to the former; yet he was imbued, it seems to me, with the meritorious spirit of the latter."⁵⁰ Though I think Cressey was wrong in weighting Hedge's Transcendentalism more heavily than his "historicism" or conservatism, he is

⁴⁹ Letter from Frederic Henry Hedge to Margaret Fuller, 24 March 1840 described in Cabot, "Notebook." (Cabot Papers, Houghton Library, Harvard University).

⁵⁰ George Crosswell Cressey, *Frederic Henry Hedge; Pastor of the Society 1835-1850*. (Bangor, 1890), 5.

right to note the role of both in the man. This combination made Hedge, not only, pastor, philosopher and preacher (all thing Cressey said Hedge was), but also “prophet.”⁵¹

Hedge was a prophet of things to come in liberal Christianity. He initiated much of the discussion about the possibilities for liberal Christianity as a formalized and institutionalized Christian Church. Every argument for the “Broad Church,”⁵² as he came to call it, grew out of his work on the Bible and his understanding of biblical interpretation. As noted earlier, Hedge saw the Bible, the Word, as the product of the Spirit. Since the Spirit was dynamic, it was impossible that the words in the Bible could bear only one true meaning. It was the interaction between the Spirit in the human mind and the Spirit in the Word that clarified truth for the person. But truth could take on different aspects for each person who sought it in the Bible. “Right belief” should never be the measure of a Christian, Hedge felt, because to know exactly what was right and true in the Word was to know God, who was unknowable. A Christian should be measured by his or her adherence to the Bible as the source of truth and his or her adherence to God’s moral code. As long as these two prerequisites were met, a person could call him or herself a Christian.⁵³

Obedying moral law was a key for coming closer to God. The Bible was the key to moral law. Unlike his Transcendentalist cohort, Hedge felt that the moral law was not knowable without the aid of revelation. Those like Emerson and Ripley tended to align themselves more with natural religion, which held that the moral code in the Bible could be discerned, unaided, in Nature itself. Natural religion, Hedge felt, was mistaken,

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁵² Frederic Henry Hedge, “The Broad Church,” *The Christian Examiner*, LXIX (1860), 53-66.

⁵³ Frederic Henry Hedge, *Practical Goodness the True Religion, A Sermon, Preached at Union-Street Church, March 1, 1840*. (Bangor: Samuel S. Smith, 1840), 7-8.

because all religious knowledge, whether in nature, the human mind or a Book, was revealed at some point. In his delivery of the Duddleian Lecture in 1851, Hedge argued that any separation between natural and revealed religion created an antagonism that was not truly there. “[If] by this distinction it is intended to designate different methods by which religious ideas have been obtained or might be obtained, then the distinction is futile, because it is impossible to ascertain with precision what ideas in this sense are natural to man, and what are not, what might have been attained without the successive dispensations of religion which have hitherto passed upon mankind, and what would have proved unattainable. And not only so, but, if we attempt to define ourselves by what we mean by a natural discovery in religion, as distinct from divine communication, we shall find it impossible to draw a line of demarcation which shall satisfy ourselves and the common judgment of mankind.”⁵⁴ Determining the provenance of knowledge was “futile,” and distracted from the fact that all truth was from God.

All truth received from nature, the human mind, or the Spirit, according to Hedge, was unintelligible without the aid of the historical revelation in the Word. Nature and the human mind certainly bore revelatory truth, but they needed the direct intervention of the Spirit as recorded in the Bible to make this truth clear. In a sermon entitled “Practical Goodness,” Hedge wrote, “Very few minds, without the light shed abroad by the gospel, would have been sufficiently enlightened to apprehend the moral law in all its extent—and, secondly, that the knowledge of the law alone is not sufficient to secure its observance, without the motives, sanctions, and helps which the gospel affords to our wavering will.” Quoting Scripture, Hedge continued, ‘Who shall deliver me,’ Paul asks,

⁵⁴ Frederic Henry Hedge, “Natural Religion” (1851) in Sydney E. Ahlstrom and Jonathan S. Carey, eds. *An American Reformation*, 404.

‘from the body of this death?’ and then adds, ‘I think God, through Christ Jesus, our Lord!’ It is precisely in these conflicts, and because of these conflicts between the law of the mind and the law of sin, that the aid of revelation is needed and felt. Nor would it be possible to state the object and operation of Christianity, more concisely than the apostle Paul has stated it, in the words just quoted.”⁵⁵ Hedge’s use of Paul’s words in the New Testament may have made his argument seem tautological to the likes of Emerson or Theodore Parker. After all he was using Scripture to prove the viability of Scripture as the ultimate source of truth. However, the circularity of the argument was not an issue for Hedge, and for most of his contemporaries trying to bridge the gap between the natural and the supernatural world. For Hedge, Scripture was historical proof that God had acted in the world and that he was still acting in the world.

It was because of the correspondence of human intuition and biblical truth that Hedge believed that Christianity was ultimately meant to be THE universal religion. Every human mind harbored certain universal truths—namely, the existence of God, the importance of a moral code, and the immortality of the soul, which for most, were not activated until the coming of Jesus and the advent of the Bible. Since every human was born with the capacity to discover truth, the element missing was most often the Bible. Hedge was not naïve enough to believe that simply introducing someone to the Bible would beget some immediate change in worldview. He did maintain that if a person approached the text without an agenda other than the pursuit of truth, then reading the Bible would activate those truths present in the mind and lead this person to the conclusion that the Bible was essentially true. Hedge understood and expected different

⁵⁵ Hedge, *Practical Goodness*, 7.

interpretations to occur, many of which could result in dogmas or creeds. Speaking to a group of Unitarian ministers and laypeople in Washington, D.C., Hedge reminded his audience that “[all] religions have something in them of divine import,” and that the “best-prepared missionary is he who adds to zeal and purity of purpose a knowledge of the mental condition, the way of thinking, the ideas and beliefs of those whom he seeks to convert, a disposition to learn, and the feeling that it is his business to learn, as well as to teach, that one important end of his mission is to gain new light for the illustration of the gospel from other dispensations.”⁵⁶ Therein lay the role of liberal Christianity for the spread of universal religion and the universal Church. Hedge believed that the key to creating a universal Church was not by spreading particular doctrines and beliefs, but by spreading the knowledge on how to properly read and interpret the Bible.

Hedge’s motive for creating a universal Church was not to blur or blend all differences in belief. Hedge would never deny a place to any view that bore the name of Christianity, even Trinitarianism. In fact, Hedge more of a Trinitarian (or modified Arian), far more than a Unitarian, in doctrine. He believed that each member of the Godhead, the Father, the Son and the Spirit, were all God, distinguished by modality, by action, not by substance. He thought it a fault of all permutations of anti-trinitarian or Unitarian theology, that they attempted to parse the Father from his Son and the Spirit or attempted to divorce the divine and human elements in Jesus. Hedge wrote in his sermon “The Historic Atonement” that over history there had many failed attempts to explain God, all which had failed on some level (though all bore some truth). Hedge felt that what theology had been unable to determine, “the consciousness of Christ” had. “I am

⁵⁶ Frederic Henry Hedge, “The Universal and the Special in Christianity” (1879) in American Unitarian Association, *Unitarian Affirmations: Seven Discourses Given in Washington, D.C. by Unitarian Ministers*. (Boston: American Unitarian Association, 1882), 6, 4.

the Father, and the Father in me.’ ‘He that hath seen me hath seen the Father.’ ‘I and the Father are one.’ Here is no doctrine, but a human experience. To make theological capital of such language, to coin this high utterance into dogma, is almost a sin against the Holy Ghost. It is no dogma, but the ecstasy of religion, which, as we saw, having begun with the widest separation of the human and divine, ends with declaring the absolute union of the two.”⁵⁷ Just like the orthodox Trinitarians who they accused of codifying doctrines that were spurious interpretations only, the Unitarians were also guilty of magnifying an individual experience of the text to a grand and final fact. Hedge saw the problem in all efforts to dogmatize individual experience, because it denied other people of future generations from experiencing a biblical passage in their own way.

Hedge believed that each age called for different interpretations amenable to the historical situation at hand. “[The] word of God acting on the human mind, has different sides, different views and motives, adapted to the different wants of his subjects. For all minds are not the same... This difference arises partly from original constitution, partly from education and external influence. Whatever its origin, it demands different manifestations of the Spirit and a different application of the word of truth. Accordingly, God has appointed modes and manifestations suited to all the diversities of the human mind... And not only does Christianity, in this way, meet the wants of different minds, it adapts itself, also, with equal facility to different stages in the progress of the same mind, and to different epochs in the history of man.”⁵⁸ At some time, Athanasius had derived

⁵⁷ Frederic Henry Hedge, *The Historic Atonement, A Sermon Preached at the Conference of Unitarian and Other Christian Churches at Syracuse, N.Y., Oct, 9 1866.* (Boston: American Unitarian Association, 1866), 10.

⁵⁸ Frederic Henry Hedge, *Christianity Confined to No Sect, A Sermon Preached at the Dedication of the Church, Presented to the Town of Stetson by the Hon. Amasa Stetson of Dorchester, MA, February 22, 1844.* (Bangor: Samuel S. Smith, 1844), 7.

his doctrine of the Trinity from the words of the Bible, as had Calvin with his doctrine of predestination. At one point or another, the words of the Bible had revealed—to one person or another—views that seemed erroneous during Hedge’s time. Since such views were the product of earnest interpretation of the Bible, Hedge felt, no one could ever truly deny the truth of these doctrines, since they existed for many as true on a personal level. The Gospel was comprehensive of all views, past and future. “It’s not pretended by [those who seek an ecumenical view of Church] that this comprehensiveness lay in the conscious thought of the apostles and first teachers of Christianity- but enough to suppose that it lay in the mind of the spirit in each, [who] edited the gospel out of the deep of its own idea.”⁵⁹

Even more importantly than the Bible’s comprehensiveness, for Hedge, was the idea that “the doctrine of the New Testament is onward, and forever onward.”⁶⁰ Certainly, it was important to venerate the past for what it taught us of past ages and of past periods of Christianity. However, with each new age, with each new interpretation, humanity drew closer to God. Of course, this view did not go unchallenged, particularly by those who felt adherence to doctrine was the key to religion, rather than freedom of conscience done in the name of boundless progress. The conflict between loyalty to past tradition and forward progress in religion was far more complex than the past versus the present, stasis versus progress. Debates over the interpretation of the Bible raised questions of freedom, conscience, and authority. “Two truths, of last importance to the spiritual well-being of man, are involved in the Protestant Reform. One is the right of private judgment, the right to form our own faith from such materials as are given us, and

⁵⁹ Hedge, “Historic Atonement,” 4.

⁶⁰ Frederic Henry Hedge, “The Churches and the Church,” *The Christian Examiner and Religious Miscellany*, XLI (1846), 196.

especially from the Christian Scriptures. The other is intimately connected with it, and may be considered as a necessary inference from it, namely, that religion is not stationary, but progressive. And these are precisely the two points on which the Christian world is at this moment divided.”⁶¹ Hedge asserted that these “two points” would decide the future of a universal Church. Further, Hedge felt only by adopting elements of both radical and conservative methods and beliefs could Christianity progress. The Bible and free inquiry were crucial to a universal Church, built out of and not against Christianity.

Though repudiated by his more radical friends, others with a similar ecumenical (or even more conservative) agenda admired Hedge’s ability to forge the gap between conservatism and reform. So renowned and appreciated was Hedge’s moderateness, that at one time Hedge had the fourfold distinction of being minister to a prominent congregation in Brookline (1857-1872),⁶² Professor of Ecclesiastical History at Harvard Divinity School (1857-1881),⁶³ Editor of the *Christian Examiner* (1857-1861), and President of the American Unitarian Association (1859-1862), all at the same time. Though Hedge did not play a primary role in the main events that would shape Unitarianism as a denomination, he was already a contributor through his work on the Bible and the practical reform of the Christian Church.⁶⁴

Hedge, like Channing before him, took issue with schism among Christian brethren. As he emphasized in the majority of his work, Hedge saw no need for

⁶¹ *Ibid*, 199-200.

⁶² An immediate suburb of Boston. The Congregational Church in Brookline was his fourth pastorate, having served in West Cambridge from 1829-1835, Bangor, ME from 1835-1850 and Providence from 1850-1857. He would serve as minister in Brookline until his retirement in 1872.

⁶³ In 1872, he would also become Professor of German literature, a position he held alongside his Ecclesiastical History Chair until 1881.

⁶⁴ Hedge attended the first meeting of the National Conference in 1865. However, during the following years, he was often busy with multiple of his other ministerial, academic and administrative posts, thus his attendance was infrequent and after a time, nonexistent.

Christians to separate themselves as long as there remained a balance between free inquiry and the Bible. Hedge, like Channing and Norton both, took for granted the delicacy of such a balance. Not everyone was privy to the intellectual sources or the training in philosophy and biblical interpretation needed to grasp what Channing, Norton, and Hedge could. Also, not everyone had the same goals as these three men. For his part, Hedge urged against schism on principle. Schism, to Hedge, revealed the limitation of human faculties, rather than the onward march of truth and knowledge. Questioning one's beliefs was a natural part of spiritual advancement. Criticism and reform were helpful when performed in the hope of improving, not eradicating, traditional forms. "There is a stage, a period of skepticism, in the history of almost every active and inquiring mind... It indicates a more sound and hopeful state of mind than its opposite,--a fond and undiscerning acquiescence in the letter, with an utter absence of spirit. It matters not, as long as you are a seeker, and honestly endeavor, with patient investigation, in a docile and reverent temper, to know the truth. Be skeptical, question if you please, admit nothing without questioning, weigh, examine, prove!" Rather than balk at the challenge, Hedge argued that Christianity was designed to withstand the strongest scrutiny. "[Christianity's] sublime truths do not rest on any thing which inquiry the most rigorous can overthrow... The Spirit of God is their ever-living witness and interpreter. Look at them thus witnessed and confirmed. Read the gospel as expounded by the heart."⁶⁵ Criticism or skepticism was a natural product of free inquiry done in the name of spiritual progress. Calling for reform of opinions and belief was not necessarily proof that an institution was rotten. Even in the greatest renovations of church

⁶⁵ Frederic Henry Hedge, *Gospel Invitations*. (Boston: Wm. Crosby and H.P. Nichols, 1846), 8-9.

tradition—the Protestant Reformation being the prime example—the reformers did not dispense with Christianity as a whole nor did they even drop many of the forms they deemed corrupted. They built upon existing institutions, removing only what was superfluous to the cause of a truly “catholic” Christianity.

Furthermore, a top-down organizational change implied a mistrust of the ability of human beings to arrive at the truth by using their own minds. As indicated throughout this chapter, Hedge firmly believed that truth arose in the mind of each individual gradually, through continued engagement of the Spirit and by reading the Bible. No institutional change could expedite this process; God intended it to occur at the pace required for each individual mind. Both Hedge and Norton knew that if change were to occur, the best way of guiding it was to spread knowledge about proper methods and modes of interpretation. They felt that change, which began on an individual level, would ultimately lead to change at the institutional level. Once enough people had adopted the Bible and learned the proper methods for interpreting it, a universal Church founded on “a conscious union of individuals”⁶⁶ became possible. From liberal Christianity would grow the ultimate, catholic Church.

In his 1849 Address delivered before the graduating class of Harvard Divinity School, Hedge expressed his wish that the word “Unitarian” no longer stand only for the unity of the Divine nature, but the unity of the Spirit in all churches.⁶⁷ He urged his listeners to seek the betterment of their minds and not to fret over differences of opinion that would arise as result of such betterment. Progress in knowledge of truth was the goal of every minister, every person. However, Hedge urged Unitarians as a whole to seek

⁶⁶ Hedge, “Review of Everett’s Oration on Progress,” 16.

⁶⁷ Hedge, *An Address Delivered Before the Graduating Class of the Divinity School in Cambridge, July 15, 1849*. (Cambridge: Published by John Bartlett, 1849).16.

progress, without doing so at the expense of their unity. A balance must be sought. “I hold it heresy to believe that any past time was better than any present. But in this one thing, that I have mentioned, I suppose that it was better, and that we have lost in sanction what we have gained in freedom. The enfranchisement of the intellect was not too dearly purchased with the rending asunder of the Christian world. But now, to knit the severed parts, to restore the broken communion, to reconcile liberty of individual thought with unity of wills and authority of wills united, is a problem which the Church has got to solve, if ever she is to recover the power she has lost.”⁶⁸ The Christian world had originally broken apart to make way for better, more progressive views. Now that a great many accepted such views, Hedge believed it was time to bring the disparate pieces of the Christian body back together. Since liberal Christianity in Boston had proven that multiple views could exist in one church tradition *without* splintering, there was nothing to stop Christians from all parts of the globe and all manner of doctrinal positions from joining hands as one, universal church.

The Limits of a Moderate Mind

Unfortunately for Hedge, his belief that his fellow liberal Christians had somehow survived the war of conflicting opinions was premature at best, naïve at worst. Splintering was occurring. The movement he believed could contain all opinions could barely contain *two* different sets of views. Of course, these two sets of views were divided on the precise belief that Hedge insisted could hold all Christians together: the authority of the Bible as the source of divine truth. This was no longer the “simple” issue of interpretive differences. When Moses Stuart sparred with Norton, they could assume a

⁶⁸ Frederic Henry Hedge, *The Leaven of the Word, A Sermon Preached at the Ordination of Rev. Joshua Young as Pastor of the New North Church in Boston, Thursday, Feb. 1, 1849.* (Boston: Dutton and Wentworth, 1849), 14.

certain common ground even in their conflicting views, because they both derived their opinions from the Bible. Now the Transcendentalists were dispensing with the Bible as the main source of truth and authority.

The situation was both perplexing and perilous to Hedge. Perplexing, because he could not see how Emerson and Ripley could accuse the Bible of rigidity. Hedge felt the fault was with Emerson and Ripley and their misconceptions and mistakes in interpreting the text, not with the Bible. Christianity, in his view, welcomed the possibility of new revelation by upholding the Bible as the source of truth. Hedge asked, ““Who shall say of any one of these manifestations, ‘It is another Gospel?’ Who shall say that it is not a new birth of the same divine Word, a new utterance of the same myriad-voiced Spirit? I find in this a new evidence of the Gospel’s divineness, that it cannot be chained to a creed, or shut up in a system, that it comprehends all times and minds, and meets each on its own ground.”⁶⁹ New ideas and interpretations should not beget new Gospels, new religions. The purpose of the Bible was growth and its nature was dynamic. Why could not the Transcendentalists see this?

The times were perilous. Like Norton, Hedge traced the breach to the overuse and misuse of Higher Criticism and scientific inquiry. Hedge welcomed many of the editorial impulses that German philosophy and German Higher Criticism brought with it. He was startled, however, at the lengths to which men like Theodore Parker were taking the critical methods of the Higher Critics. Hedge believed that Higher Criticism, in its dissection of the Old Testament, had strengthened the truth of the Bible and pared away its superfluous aspects, not undermined it. Increasingly, the critiques of Strauss and Baur

⁶⁹ Frederic Henry Hedge, *On the Use of the Word ‘Evangelical,’ A Discourse by the Pastor of the Westminster Congregational Society*. (Providence: Knowles, Anthony & Co., 1854), 8.

on the evidences of Christianity, namely the historicity of the miracle stories of the New Testament, began to cast a more formidable shadow on biblical interpretation of that time. Hedge was adamant that ridding the Bible of its miracles lost more of truth than it gained. "I distinguish," Hedge wrote, "in the so-called miracles of the New Testament, between the essential fact and the manner in which it is presented in the record. I conceive that a nucleus of historic truth, in a credulous age, may gather to itself a mystic embodiment which is questionable. Intelligent criticism must separate, if possible, the one from the other. For criticism has its legitimate function in relation to these as to other parts of the Sacred Writings, and to all writings. But legitimate criticism has also its limitations, and must not assume to rule out in the mass whatever conflicts with the critic's prepossessions, and only because of those prepossessions. It must not reject, on the ground of imperfect evidence, what does not admit, in the nature of things, of any other."⁷⁰ 'Know your place,' Hedge admonished the purveyors of Higher Criticism, or risk bringing down the Church alongside the spurious accretions you target.

The developing cracks within the Unitarian movement come into high relief as a result of events that occurred in the mid-to-late 1830s with the debate about miracles. Most famously, the voices involved were Emerson, Ripley, and Norton, and later Theodore Parker. Hedge was not a major contributor to this particular debate. He was in Bangor during the years of greatest foment in the so-called "Transcendentalist Controversy." Hedge did not feel that the truth of Christianity hinged on the veracity of the miracle stories or historical evidences. Norton did believe this and so threw himself into the issue with every ounce of polemic he had in him.

⁷⁰ Hedge, *Reason in Religion*, 275.

Hedge, unsurprisingly, took a more moderate tack, one that reflected his views. Truth was truth, in his eyes, whether it was bolstered by miracles or not. He knew the Bible to be true, not because it was rife with the miraculous and other-worldly, but because he knew it to be so through the working of the Spirit in himself and the working of the Spirit in the Bible. “There is no such connection between supernatural power and spiritual truth, as would make a miracle a sufficient and infallible test of divine revelation. A man may work wonders before my eyes. I know not by what means he operates, nor whence he derives his wonder-working power. But, without other evidence, I shall not therefore consider him a divine person, or divinely commissioned prophet. I shall not receive his doctrine, if it contradicts the voice in my heart.”⁷¹ The means of communicating truth meant little, whether written plainly in a book or accompanied with extraordinary acts. Again in another work, he wrote, “However much we emphasize miracle and revelation, let us remember still that they are the mere utterance, not the essence, the form, not the contents, of the Divine communication. They are the post and index, not the road and journey. Which is better, to worship the Paternal Providence itself, which lets no sparrow fall unnoticed, or to worship Christ’s declaration of that Providence? The Bible at the best is but the verbal expression of religion: the receptacle, home, and substance of religion itself are in man and the world.”⁷² Focusing solely on the question of the literal truth of the miracles stymied the actual purpose of the Bible, which was to strengthen humanity’s divine faculties in pursuit of union with the divine mind.

⁷¹ *Ibid*, 266.

⁷² Frederic Henry Hedge, “The Religion of the Present,” *The Christian Examiner and Religious Miscellany*, LXVII, 5 (V) (1859), 65.

All of this infighting was exactly what Hedge spent the majority of his career as a minister, teacher and public figure trying to prevent: formal and complete schism between Unitarianism and other Christian groups. Try as he might, Hedge was unable to stop it. However, when Henry Whitney Bellows convened the National Conference in 1865 (discussed briefly in the Conclusion), the spirit of Hedge's work was there. Bellows and Hedge were convinced that conservatives and radicals could find common ground again. Bellows was searching for a universal religion, something to which all Christians or at least all liberal Christians could adhere. Hedge had hoped it would be the Bible on which they could meet, but this seemed impossible given the events that had transpired in the two decades that preceded the Conference, primarily due to Theodore Parker.

The Transcendentalist controversy, though bubbling under the surface for some time, did not really explode until Theodore Parker joined in the fray. Hedge and Parker had interacted quite often during their time as co-members of Hedge's Club and certainly held a mutual respect for each other. Parker felt enough of an affinity for Hedge to write him for advice on what to read in German philosophy and Higher Criticism—influences that would come to define much of Parker's own burgeoning thought.⁷³ The two shared a great deal in common, both in terms of their choice of sources and in their views about the continuity of revelation, the divine nature of the intuitive faculties in the human mind, and their belief that progress was a necessary and inevitable part of the Church.

⁷³ Though the original letter Parker sent to Hedge asking for such recommendations was not preserved, Hedge's reply was. In it Hedge responds with a lengthy letter to Parker listing the best sources he knows on all topics of German history, philosophy, politics, language and Higher Criticism. Letter from Frederic Henry Hedge to Theodore Parker, August 9, 1838. (MS 101/18 (6), Andover-Harvard Library, Harvard University).

Where Parker and Hedge differed was in their various degrees of reliance on scientific and historical-critical methods in reading the Bible. Hedge used these methods, but only to a point, choosing to leave them aside when they threatened to undermine his faith. In this way, Hedge was always closer to Norton, even Moses Stuart, than to Emerson and Parker. Parker, on the other hand, felt that all biblical truth should be subjected to the scrutiny of the Higher Criticism. Only the parts of the text still standing after such examination were true and if this undermined much of Christian tradition as a result, then so be it. Historian Peter Carley said it best; “[It] was a case of Hedge agreeing with Parker on some issues, and disagreeing with him on others. The most serious differences were theological. Hedge never broke from the orthodox Unitarian (and Congregational) veneration of the Testaments as divinity inspired works, nor from the view that the miracles demonstrated Jesus’ divinity. Parker took the rationalist view that the Testaments were humanly created and therefore subject to human error, and that the miracles were wrongly perceived or simply moral demonstrations.”⁷⁴ Hedge feared that men like Parker sought progress for progress sake rather than for the edification of Christianity.

CONCLUSION

Associated with both Transcendentalists and conservative Unitarians during his lifetime, Hedge held to a particular mission that defied party lines. Under Hedge, the Unitarian movement was a practical, moral, ecclesiastical, while still biblical effort. Through his work on the Bible and in the Unitarian movement, Hedge became convinced that a universal Church, inclusive of all Christians, was a viable possibility. The two

⁷⁴ Carley, *Early Life and Thought of Hedge*, 252.

founding and mutually reinforcing principles of this universal Church were the Bible and the Spirit. The Bible represented the concrete output of the Spirit and thus, could only be interpreted via the aid of the Spirit innate in the human mind. Conversely, there existed many “truths” embedded in the human mind, which needed the Spirit inherent in the Bible to reveal them. Thus, in order to bring truth into the world, Christians needed both the revelatory and rational aid of the Bible and the intuitive help of the Spirit. A Church based upon these two ideas would be ecumenical in nature. Since truth arose from the interaction of the individual mind with the Bible, truth was always relative and variable. Myriad opinions could exist within one Church, tied together by adherence to the Bible and similar interpretive principles. Any Church needed both liberty and structure to succeed. The Unitarian movement provided both the liberty in the form of its hermeneutical principles and the structure in the form of the bible and system of Congregational polity out of which it grew.

Through Hedge’s work on the Bible, we also see the growing threat of Transcendentalism to the Unitarian movement. In many ways, Hedge introduced the methods of biblical interpretation to the Transcendentalists through his knowledge of German philosophy. Hedge was still trying to hold together the Bible and the Spirit, the traditional and the innovative, the rational and the mystical, while the Transcendentalists were trying to break apart these apparent dichotomies. Though the discussion would ultimately become unavoidable during Parker’s time, the debate about a Unitarian “Church” truly began with Hedge. When Hedge looked at the state of affairs during the tumultuous years of the 1830s and 1840s, he asked whether a universal Church could survive without the Bible. When Parker looked out at the same sea of opinions and

philosophies, he asked whether a universal Church could survive *with* the Bible. With that, a new era of the Unitarian movement had begun.

CHAPTER IV:
THE OPENING OF THE CANON:
THEODORE PARKER AND THE TRANSFORMATION
OF BIBLICAL AUTHORITY

The Boston Association had a problem: Theodore Parker simply would not *leave*. No matter how pleadingly they spoke, how admonishing or soothing their tone, Convers Francis, Nathaniel Frothingham, Samuel K. Lothrop, and other members of the Association could not force Parker to resign his West Roxbury pulpit. They had no creed to wave in his face and they could not point to any doctrines he was betraying because they had eschewed such things as contrary to the nature of Christianity. Religious principles and doctrines were to be determined only via the encounter of an individual mind and the Bible. Even though Parker had dispensed with the idea of the Bible as the primary source of truth and authority, they could not force him out. They had pledged their fellowship to him at his ordination, so they could not, on principle of conscience, excommunicate him.¹ At least they could not do so without changing the shape of Unitarianism itself.

Yet, the nature of Unitarianism *would* change after Parker. On May 19, 1841, he delivered the innocuously titled sermon, “The Transient and the Permanent in

¹ Given the nature of Congregational polity, churches existed in fellowship with each other rather than through any formally regulated infrastructure or creed. In this way, churches were associated with one another, but not directly able to influence that church without the consent of that congregation. This was a major problem during the Parker controversy, as they could not actually excommunicate him. Though they could not cut him off formally, they could hope to drive him away indirectly. One aspect of church fellowship involved pulpit exchanges between ministers. Ministers would speak at the congregations of their fellow ministers- an act, which was meant to show their respect for the other ministers’ beliefs. On a more practical level, it relieved the ministers from work. Instead of composing a sermon every week, along with the myriad ministerial duties required of a pastor, they could use already-written sermons during pulpit exchanges. When Parker came under scrutiny, a vast majority of his fellow ministers denied him pulpit exchanges. The vain hope of the Boston Association and conservative ministers was that this would both demoralize Parker and overwhelm him with work, ending with his resignation from the pulpit.

Christianity” at the ordination of Reverend Charles C. Shackford. Those in attendance responded politely to the sermon, offering Parker few insights as to its effect. Parker left feeling as though his work was well received, and thought nothing more on it. Until the newspapers and periodicals came out declaring Parker a dangerous infidel and his message anti-biblical. His “seemingly innocuous” sermon had sent the Unitarian churches of Boston into paroxysms of fear and despair. Every minister, Unitarian and non-Unitarian, with a pen or a voice was sharing, forcefully, his opinion of Parker. For every minister that thought Parker was right or that his message was not exceptionally radical, there were those who thought he was muddying the name of Unitarianism. (They were not Deists, after all!) Unfortunately for Parker, the latter party comprised the majority of the most powerful and respected ministers of Boston. The voices of those who supported him, at least initially, were drowned out either because they came from radical thinkers (like Emerson or George Ripley) or because they simply withheld their opinion out of the fear of being associated with Parker and all for which he appeared to stand (Channing).

So, what was so terrifying about “The Transient and Permanent”? The sermon itself summarized Parker’s views on what was crucial to Christianity and what was superfluous. The forms, doctrines, institutions, even the *words* or THE Word associated with Christianity, or the Church, were ephemeral. The moral code, love of the Creator and benevolence toward fellow human beings were what was permanent in Christianity, or what Parker termed “Absolute Religion.” Parker’s theological convictions were anathema to a movement struggling to retain its Christian identity.

Equally frightening however, was the way Parker had arrived at these convictions. The Unitarian movement's privileging of the human senses, the dynamic nature of words, and the possibility of continued revelation, were all things that Parker found amenable to his own burgeoning radicalism. Ultimately, it was this new way of reading and interpreting the Bible that led him to dispense with the belief that the Bible was the sole, or even the primary, source of truth. In fact, Parker was convinced, given the progressive nature of such an approach that liberal Christians would arrive eventually at his conclusions. Parker believed he was stating the obvious. When he delivered the sermon, he assumed that he was speaking to people whose opinions aligned with his own. He was mistaken in this. It would seem that for most Unitarians, free inquiry was free only insofar as it occurred within the safe walls of the Bible.

Parker was responsible for precipitating the move away from the Bible; a move that played a major part in the crisis of identity that occurred within Unitarianism in the mid-nineteenth century. Initially, Parker took up the work begun by Channing, Norton and Hedge, which in turn earned him the reputation as one of the most widely read and knowledgeable Bible scholars within Unitarianism. Yet, in his sermon of 1841, he argued that, "the Bible or the New Testament is not the sole and exclusive foundation of Christianity, but simply its historical form. Christianity at this day does not rest merely on the New Testament. Its essential truths were before Abraham, when there was no Bible. It is the word that was in the very beginning, the true light which has always shone, enlightening every man, so far as he was enlightened at all; for all the true religious light of the world has only come from true religion, which is essentially the

same with Christianity.”² When Parker said these words, the liberals feared they were losing their Christian identity. Parker was not some bombastic iconoclast directing easily dismissible, albeit stinging, remarks at proper Christian folk. He was an ordained Unitarian minister, installed in a Unitarian pulpit, speaking to a Unitarian congregation and ostensibly, claiming his beliefs in the name of Unitarianism. Parker seemed to be forcing Unitarians to give up at least one of their foundational tenets: either limitless free inquiry or the sole authority of the Bible had to go.

Parker did play a pivotal role in bringing one era of Unitarianism to a close, at least as it had existed under Channing, Norton, and Hedge. Before Parker, Ralph Waldo Emerson had begun to publicly question the direction of Unitarianism. Yet, after delivering his infamous “Harvard Divinity School Address,” Emerson had retreated back into the comfort of his own home, leaving others to sort out the chaos left in his wake. Emerson was still very much a private-minded individual, devoted to speaking his conscience but not to acting out its practical conclusions. Parker deeply admired Emerson and his message and sought to enact it in his own ministry.

Even before he came under the influence of Emerson, Parker’s radicalism continued to grow during his childhood, his school years, and through his entrance into the ministry, an event that marked the beginning of the end for the original Unitarian views of the Bible. As Parker grew in his understanding of his pastoral duties, his ministry became infused with scientific and historical views about the Bible as well as a pietistic understanding of human nature. It was during these early years as a minister that Parker discovered German Higher Criticism (introduced to him at Harvard, but not yet

² Theodore Parker, *The Transient and the Permanent in Christianity, Address Delivered at the Ordination of Rev. Charles C. Shackford, May 19, 1841, Centenary Edition* (Boston: American Unitarian Association, 1908), 60.

fundamental to his biblicism until later). Then in 1841, he delivered the “Transient and the Permanent,” which had a polarizing effect on the minds and opinions of his hearers. He was no longer just Parker the pastor and preacher, but Parker the infidel or Parker the prophet. Arguably, Parker’s writing and thinking on the Bible only increased in volume after he divested it of its singular authority. As this chapter will show, Parker was always a scholar of the Bible. After 1841, however, the Bible meant something different to him than it did to Channing, Norton, and Hedge. During the period of crisis in the Unitarian movement beginning in the 1840s, the question of “what to do with Theodore Parker” was always synonymous with the question of “what to do with the Bible.”

The Making of the Radical Mind of Theodore Parker

In describing his childhood to his congregants at the 28th Congregational Society in a letter entitled “Theodore Parker’s Experience as a Minister,” Parker illustrated three indispensable components of his intellectual development: the rationalism and science-mindedness of his father, the pietism and Biblicism of his mother, and books. He wrote, “I had an original fondness for scientific and metaphysical thought, which found happy encouragement in my early days: my father’s strong, discriminating, and comprehensive mind also inclining that way, offered me an excellent help. Nature was all about me; my attention was wisely directed to both use and beauty.”³ So from his father came the irrepressible desire to know everything: to observe, catalogue and respect all of the data that came through the senses or the mind. His father was also deeply ambivalent about maintaining a single denominational affiliation. He took his wife and young children to the Congregational church in Lexington, a church with pronounced Unitarian leanings.

³ Theodore Parker, “Theodore Parker’s Experience as a Minister” in *The Life and Correspondence of Theodore Parker*. (Boston, 1864), 450.

However, Parker's father did not couple attendance at church with an insistence on keeping a Unitarian household, whatever that may have meant. In other words, young Parker did not grow up with any strong sense of allegiance to any Christian sect. Unattached to any set of church traditions or theological doctrines, Parker was always something of a religious seeker, a characteristic that would certainly influence his later decisions as a minister and thinker.

From his mother, he inherited a love for poetry and prose, both of which he found in the Bible, the text most frequently read and quoted in his home. His mother read regularly from the Old and New Testaments, but infused her readings with no dogmatism or prescriptions for belief. Instead, from his boyhood on, Parker was taught to see in the Bible the possibility for all forms of truth. Religion was defined as love and good works, not fear and right belief. Of his mother he wrote, "[Her] spiritual sense knew to perceive the things appropriate to it, and it never occurred to her to question the soul's capacity for this immediate perception, or to be content with its mental and social simulations."⁴ Whereas Channing, Norton, and Hedge combined various strains of rationalism and intuitionism from a vast cadre of intellectual sources (mainly those found in books), Parker seems to have absorbed them from his parents even before he picked up a book.

Of course, pick up a book he did. Many, in fact. Parker, like the other three, was an avid reader. Yet, he did not censor his reading list for linguistic, theological, or political reasons, but sought to read everything he possibly could, from boyhood on. "Good books by great masters fell into even boyish hands; the best English authors of prose and verse, the Bible, the Greek and Roman classics—which I at first read mainly in

⁴ John Weiss, *Life and Correspondence*, 14.

translations, but soon became familiar with in their original beauty—these were my literary helps. What was read at all, was also studied, and not laid aside till well understood.”⁵ As a boy, Parker was already primed for his later studies. From a very early age, Parker bore a zealous desire to know every fact, historical and literary, of each text he read. All of this is to say that much of what made Parker a formidable thinker in his adulthood was present at a very early age.

However, the most important early influence, one that Parker admitted openly, albeit with some qualification, was the Bible. The Bible was a constant in Parker’s thought, from the beginning of his life until the end. His views of the Bible in terms of its status, authority and historical accuracy evolved over time. However, Parker was very hesitant to admit that he ever was convinced by any elements of the Bible that were “above reason” or miraculous. Parker tended to read his later radicalism into his early life. In some ways, he allowed himself little of the potential for progress that he awarded his fellow human beings. To read Parker as he would have himself be read is to read a story of a boy who exited the womb equipped with tools for discerning the truth within Scripture. His later reminiscences paint a picture of a boy already critical of the stories of the Bible, of the problems of its authorship and the spuriousness of its miraculous origins. There is no doubt that Parker was far more willing than Channing, Norton and Hedge to dispense with the traditional evidences of the Bible, but there was a significant period of his life when his reverence for the Bible was matched only by his belief that there were elements of Christianity and of the life of Jesus that were truly miraculous.

⁵ Parker, “Experiences as a Minister” in *Life and Correspondence*, 450.

When describing the initial years of his theological education, Parker indicated the ease at which he was able to dispose of doctrines such as the supernatural birth of Christ, prophecy and miracles in both Testaments, and the plenary inspiration of the Bible.⁶ However, this was not an entirely honest assessment. Responding to his nephew's queries about his religious views, Parker wrote in a letter of 1834 (the same year he entered Harvard Divinity School incidentally),

You enquire about my belief. I believe in the Bible. Does that satisfy you? Now you will say: all Christians profess to the same and how different they are. To commence then, I believe there is *one* God, who has existed from all eternity, with whom the past, present, and future are alike present; that he is almighty, good, and merciful, will reward the good and punish the wicked, both in this life and the next. The punishment *may be* eternal; of course, I believe that neither the rewards nor punishments of a future state are corporal. Bodily pleasures soon satiate, and may God preserve us from a worse punishment than one's own conscience. I believe the books of the Old and New Testament to have been written by men inspired by God, for certain purposes, but I do not think them inspired *at all times*. I believe that Christ was the Son of God, conceived and born in a miraculous manner, that he came to preach a better religion by which many may be saved.⁷

This passage reveals Parker's burgeoning radicalism (his mention of the men of the Bible not being inspired "at all times" being one indicator). However, it is also evident that much of what he believed would have been considered standard orthodoxy at that time. Parker would eventually deny any kind of miraculous birth or that Christ was rightly the Son of God. When he reacted to these views later, he was reacting as much to his innocence in believing them as he was to Norton's insistence on their reality. Parker became radical; he was not born with a radical set of beliefs. What ultimately radicalized him were the principles instilled in him in his youth, reinforced by the ethos of Unitarian Bible scholarship, and his expanding well of knowledge on German philosophy and

⁶ *Ibid*, 451-2

⁷ Letter from Theodore Parker to Columbus Greene, April 2, 1834 in Weiss, *Life and Correspondence*, 67.

textual-critical techniques. Throughout the course of his intellectual development, the Bible never lost its place as the centerpiece of his thought. What the Bible did lose was its singularity. Nature and the self joined the Bible as primary sources of authority.

When Parker arrived at Harvard College in 1827 at the age of 17, he had yet to openly question the status of the Bible. Following his graduation in 1831, he took a teaching assistantship at a Boston-area private school, where he set himself the task of deciding between pursuing the law or the ministry as his future profession. While this internal debate continued, Parker read copious books on every subject imaginable and added to his already prodigious knowledge of languages. He added German and later Hebrew and Syriac to the list of languages he read fluently, all of which would play a significant part in his later critical study of the Bible.⁸ Convers Francis, a lifelong friend (in spite of his later role in Parker's shunning) and early aficionado of German writers, provided him with copies of Hegel and Kant. Parker's career ambitions were already tending toward the metaphysical and the religious when he determined to teach a Bible-class, wherein he tested his first critical views of the inspired nature of the Bible.⁹

Thus, it was the Bible that ultimately inspired Parker's choice of the ministry for his future profession. His serious study of the Scriptures had barely begun at that point and yet, his thought was already years in advance of many of his fellow ministerial candidates. Like Channing—and this is not the only time where a direct comparison can be made between the two—it was at Harvard that many of the intellectual influences of his youth began to converge and forge themselves into a system of biblical thought. Unlike Channing, however, the Theological School (Harvard Divinity School) now

⁸ Weiss, *Life and Correspondence*, 61.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 60.

existed as a place specifically devoted to the development of Unitarian ministers. The difference is significant. Channing, as a liberal Congregationalist at Harvard College, was primarily interested in perfecting a methodology, a mode of reading the Bible that was accessible to clergy and laypeople alike. Parker was a student of this methodology while at the Harvard Divinity School. Channing was the founder, Parker the practitioner.

Could Channing have foreseen the possibility of a Theodore Parker when he preached his liberal hermeneutic? The tentative answer is yes. When asked to comment on Parker's South Boston Sermon (the common epithet for "The Transient and the Permanent"), Channing lauded Parker's willingness to openly proclaim the opinions of his conscience, though he did express his disappointment that Parker had neglected to speak clearly as to any belief in Christian miracles. Channing was fond of Parker, the two having formed an acquaintance, meeting often in Channing's sitting room to discuss matters of theology.¹⁰ He saw in Parker a keen mind, which was something he valued above theological orthodoxy in a person. Channing, ever private in his opinions particularly when it came to public controversy, never deserted Parker and refused to speak an unkind word about the young man (or at all, during the height of the controversy).¹¹ Perhaps he felt somewhat responsible for Parker's radicalism. After all, Parker had drank from the fountain of Channing during his years at Harvard, both at the College and the Theological School. It was "Channing Unitarianism" being taught in ministerial, theological and Bible classes. Channing did not found a denomination per se, but he did inspire an entire curriculum and system of thought, one that spoke most particularly to the mind of Theodore Parker.

¹⁰ Brown, *Always Young for Liberty*, 216-7.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

Indeed, in Parker's later work *Lessons from the World of Matter and the World of Man*, it is often hard to tell whether it is Parker or Channing speaking. On the subject of "The True Idea of Inspiration," Parker wrote, "[Man] studies the history of mankind, or his own nature, and learns yet other thoughts of God, which become his thoughts, communicated from God to us on this condition of intellectual toil, and by this medium of our own nature and history, and so we are inspired by God. Now just as men cultivate their mind, scholastically or practically, so do they receive communication of God's thought, and are inspired with the intellectual power of God. Human nature is one medium of communication with God. So as the mind becomes cultivated we get new thoughts from Him in two ways; first from the things about us, and from things that have been and still are taking place; and next from the nature within us." Each person understands and assimilates these new ideas differently, thus truth will always exist under countless aspects. "New ideas flash upon us, coming we know not how; they are the result of our mind's action, and are controlled by the constitution of our individual mind. The poet gets them poetically, the philosopher philosophically, the practical man in the form of business; because one cultivated his imagination, the other his reflective reason, and the other his practical understanding, each after its own kind. Now as each does this faithfully, he grows wiser and wiser, and has more intellectual power to get wisdom from within and without. So is it with the human race."¹² Parker's understanding of inspiration is rife with Channing's own Neoplatonic principles concerning the divine-human connection. He shared Channing's belief that inspiration or new revelation was a present reality and not the relic of an historical past.

¹² Theodore Parker, *Lessons from the World of Matter and the World of Man*, Vol XIV in *The Collected Works of Theodore Parker*. (London: Trübner & Co., 1872), 291.

Yet Parker would take steps that Channing never did or desired to take. Parker located inspiration not in the interaction between the Bible and the human mind as Channing had, but in the interaction between the human mind and the Divine, the human mind and Nature, as well as the human mind and sacred Scripture. Thus, the section directly preceding “The True Idea of Inspiration,” aptly titled “The False Idea of Inspiration,” effectively brought to a close any further comparison between Channing and Parker. The opening lines read as follows, “The old ecclesiastical idea of inspiration, although not so powerful as once, still retards the progress of mankind. It is an exceeding great wrong to begin with, for it makes us worship the Bible as a master, not use it as a servant to help.” How far Parker had moved from Channing is apparent in these first few words. Once the entrypoint of the Spirit, the Bible had become a barrier to spiritual enlightenment. Parker continued, “We are told that [the Bible] contained the writings of men miraculously inspired; that it is the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, and we must accept its doctrines, not because they are true, but because they are Biblical. The Bible is not to be merely a quickener of men’s thought, it is to be a substitute for thought; not a staff that we are to walk by, but to be legs for us to walk upon. We can no longer come to the great fountain whence Esaias and Jesus drew their living water; they drew the well dry and put the living water into Biblical troughs, whence we are to drink as we see fit.”¹³

Parker alluded to the idea that the Bible was intended to be a “quickener of men’s thought,” but had become ossified over time. Christian sects that maintained that the Bible held only ONE truth lost their power to inspire spiritual progress in humanity.

¹³ *Ibid*, 286.

This, Parker believed, had happened in Unitarianism, a fact which eventually forced him to give up his beloved Bible as his primary source of truth. The Bible had become the dead letter rather than the living spirit. Channing had attempted to revive study of the Bible by championing a new way of reading and interpreting the text. Parker recognized the value in such an attempt, but felt that the Bible *itself* ultimately shackled the potential of Channing's new hermeneutic. The principles of the Unitarian biblical interpretation, Parker felt, should be applied more broadly, beyond the bounds of the written Word.

In place of the Bible, the greatest source of new revelation was the self.¹⁴ The reason human beings had clung to the Bible in the past was because they believed the canon to be closed, the age of revelation to have ceased. The Bible was the closest evidence of God's voice. Parker, like Channing, Norton, and Hedge, believed God was much more proximate and in no way silenced, but speaking all the time through the Bible and in the human mind. Parker parted ways with Channing, Norton, and Hedge by claiming that a person needed only him or herself, not a book, to activate such a connection.

Parker had retained the interpretive principles of his predecessors, while dispensing with the object of interpretation, the Bible. Suddenly Unitarianism, with Parker as its mouthpiece, tottered dangerously close to becoming post-Christian or even, un-Christian. For Channing, the Bible made possible a way of being liberal in Congregationalism, with Norton, it was a way of proving the viability of liberal theology, and with Hedge, it was a means of changing the Church. Under Parker, the study and interpretation of the Bible had become scientific and scholarly. Biblical passages still

¹⁴ Weiss, *Life and Correspondence*, 131-132.

infused Parker's sermons, published works, and letters until the day he died and he maintained an aesthetic attachment to the Bible, but the Bible had lost its primacy as the sole source of authority and the sole point of connection with God. By opening up the soul, Parker had made the Bible begin to fade into the background at the same time that other, newer sources of truth began to come forward.

The German Philosophy Invasion: Parker, Higher Criticism, and Emerson's Address

What happened to make Parker change from Bible devotee to biblical scientist? We have already seen how elements of Parker's childhood and young adulthood molded him. His science-mindedness, his ambivalence toward religious denominational (even, Christian) affiliation, his pietistic devotion to the God found in nature, in poetry, in the self, and his insatiable thirst for knowledge were all encouraged in his youth and further strengthened during his time at school. Yet all of these influences combined still did not make him an iconoclast. Potentially, Parker could have continued as a mild-mannered minister of Unitarianism had two particular events never happened. The first was Parker's introduction to the German Higher Critics and the second was Emerson's delivery of the Harvard Divinity School Address in 1838. Both of these events merged to propel Parker into the limelight as a radically forward thinker and a vocal defender of unmitigated free inquiry.

Parker had little intention of becoming a lightning rod. Before he was the mouthpiece for Transcendentalism, he was just a young man with a thirst for new ideas. During his years at Harvard, all types of German thought and philosophy were rapidly becoming the most avant-garde and the most controversial subjects for study. It is hard to say who was the first German thinker Parker encountered or what German book he

read first, but soon his reading list seemed overwhelmed by German names. But not just names like Kant and Schleiermacher, who were commonly read and referenced by many Unitarians, but those of De Wette, Eichhorn, Michaelis, even Strauss, now populated the shelves of Parker's library. The German Higher Critics had found a comfortable resting place in the home and the mind of Theodore Parker.

By the time he took a post as minister of the Congregational Church in West Roxbury in 1837, Parker was already a regular contributor and by 1835, editor, of the *Scriptural Interpreter*. He shared co-editing duties with William Silsbee and George E. Ellis, all three of whom were devoted to introducing German Higher Critical methods to a broader American public. Parker's anthologist and biographer, John Weiss, wrote of the *Interpreter* that "It was a little in advance of the average Unitarianism of the time on the question of Messianic Prophecy, and of the Pentateuch, and gave the views of De Wette, Eichhorn, Astruc, and others. The subjects of miracles and inspiration were hardly yet deployed upon the field. It was occasionally denied that the facts of miracles lent any authority to the truths of Christianity. The controversy upon the Trinity and Atonement had subsided, and discussions upon the element of Divinity in Christ had not commenced." Parker and his fellow editors represented the vanguard of Unitarian thought, among a group of Unitarians who still had a "desire to be recognized as a truly Conservative and religious body, with positive faith enough left to serve the soul in living and dying... to refute practically the grave objection that they were upsetting the Bible and society with their negative criticism," a desire that "prevailed so strongly that vigorous investigation nearly ceased."¹⁵

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 75-76.

Parker expressed distress on numerous occasions that the progress of biblical criticism seemed to languish among the general public, but even more disturbingly, among American theologians and ministers. He wrote to De Wette, whose *Einleitung die Alte Testamente (Introduction to the Old Testament)* he had translated into English in 1837 and had published in 1843, critiquing the lack of critical nerve among American biblical thinkers. “The Liberal party, in fact, are weak,” Parker lamented, “the *so-called* Liberal party, the Unitarians, are partly afraid and partly hypocritical... Here is a small party who think that Christianity is the Word of God; but the documents connected therewith, like the institutions connected with it also, are to be treated like other documents, criticized, studied, and believed only when they are *probable*. None of our conspicuous theologians belong to this class; a traditionary [*sic*] theology is the curse of the Church in America.” Parker ended his letter on a hopeful note, writing “In a country where the mind is in general so free as it is here, theology cannot always be kept from becoming a science. I hope much from the introduction of German thought into America, especially from your own writings.”¹⁶ Parker made clear that his reasons for translating De Wette’s *Einleitung* were primarily practical in nature. He could read German, whereas the majority of Americans could not. He wanted the words of the German Higher Critics to speak for themselves. Parker would ultimately write and publish a great deal of his *own* exegetical and interpretive work on the Bible, a fact discussed further on in this chapter. For the time being, he hoped that a direct infusion of German thought through English translations would have the invigorating effect on the American mind that he desired.

¹⁶ Letter from Parker to De Wette, September 28, 1845 in Weiss, *Life and Correspondence of Parker*, 259.

Parker was also keen to introduce certain German thinkers that even his most progressive contemporaries, most notably Hedge, felt had gone too far, like Strauss. Strauss, Hedge felt, had stripped Jesus of his particularity by stripping him of his miracles.¹⁷ Parker, however, felt Strauss's methods melded perfectly with his own views. He first read *Das Leben Jesu* in 1837, and its immediate effect on him became evident in a number of sermons he preached shortly thereafter. In one sermon, he described a particular conversation he had held with a few of his church's deacons about the Bible, stating, "Another [of you] said: All difficulty lies in 'rightly dividing the Word of Truth;' there are things in the Bible in the New Testament, that I am sorry to find there. But there are so many good things, that we all love it, spite of the bad. Now, if you can 'rightly divide the Word,' so as to leave all the truth on one side and all the rest on the other, then you will do a great service to the Church and the World."¹⁸ Strauss had divided the mystical Jesus from the historical Jesus and in doing so, Parker argued, raised humanity higher. If human beings saw Jesus a *man*, they would be able to see the potential for their own progress in Jesus' example.¹⁹

Yet, Parker, in his 1840 review of Strauss's book, took issue with Strauss's reluctance to award Jesus credit for his extraordinary character and actions in the face of persecution and death. He saw Strauss's task as primarily "negative, destructive and unsatisfactory."²⁰ Though he could not agree with Strauss's conclusions, Parker

¹⁷ Letter from Frederic Henry Hedge to Convers Francis, January 26, 1842. (AUA Letterbook, Andover-Harvard Library, Harvard University).

¹⁸ Parker, "Undated Sermon" in Weiss, *Life and Correspondence of Parker*, 103.

¹⁹ Parker, *A Discourse of Matters Pertaining to Religion: The Collected Works of Theodore Parker*. (London: Trübner & Co, 1863), 188.

²⁰ Parker, "Strauss's Life of Jesus" was first printed in the *Christian Examiner*, April 1840 and was reprinted in *The Critical Writings of Theodore Parker: The Collected Works of Theodore Parker, Vol IX*. (London: Trübner & Co, 1863), 72.

emulated Strauss's method for dividing truth from falsity, Christianity from the Church, Absolute religion from human inventions. More than anything else, what Strauss gave Parker was precedent. At the same time he hoped to avoid the pitfall that he felt Strauss and his fellow Unitarians stumbled upon, namely the act of tearing down without building up. Parker hoped his work would be constructive. He would not strip the Bible of its spurious parts without offering a viable alternative.

This viable alternative, Absolute Religion, was something he first saw fully articulated in Ralph Waldo Emerson's "Harvard Divinity School Address." In 1838, Parker was a recently ordained minister presiding over his West Roxbury congregation. He had never made a secret of his more progressive views and his congregation did not seem concerned with the fact that their young minister was well versed in books and ideas that prominent Unitarian scholars like Andrews Norton deemed blasphemous (they offered him a call to the pulpit, after all). Yet, up until then, there had been no event to force the more radical of Parker's views into public view. Then on July 15, 1838, Emerson gave the commencement address to Harvard Divinity School's graduating class. The address forced both Theodore Parker and Unitarians as a collective group to face certain of the implications of their own belief system.

Though Emerson had left his pulpit in 1832 following his crisis of conscience over the administration of the Lord's Supper, he was still an important presence in many Unitarian circles (and continued to preach for many years). Further, many still thought of Emerson as a spokesperson for Unitarianism. This, added to the fact that he gave the address from a Unitarian platform in front of the newest generation of Unitarian ministers, made many of Emerson's remarks seem more shocking. If Emerson was the

mouthpiece of Unitarians, had they gone too far? In the Address, Emerson encouraged the future ministers of liberal churches to be more than reciters of Scripture. He urged them to seek the divine in their own souls and to accept nothing at secondhand but to trust their own intuition.²¹ None of this was particularly revolutionary (given that Channing, Norton, and Hedge had each argued a version of the same idea), though it did certainly threaten the status of the Bible. Yet Emerson did not stop at that, stating that “Jesus Christ belonged to the true race of prophets. He saw with open eye the mystery of the soul... He spoke of miracles, for he felt that man’s life was a miracle, and all that man doth and he knew that this daily miracle shines as the character ascends. But the word Miracle, as pronounced by Christian churches, gives a false impression; it is Monster.”²² After delivering this blow to the foundations of Unitarianism, he continued by stating “We have contrasted the Church with the Soul. In the soul then let the redemption be sought. Wherever a man comes, there comes revolution. The old is for slaves. When a man comes, all books are legible, all things transparent, all religions are forms. He is religious. Man is the wondermaker. He is seen amid miracles.”²³ Emerson tore down the foundation of Christianity, namely its historically miraculous evidence as recorded in the Bible, and made human beings the miracleworkers.

The Address sent shockwaves throughout the Unitarian churches of Boston. Historian Dean Grodzins notes that much of the astonishment at Emerson’s views resulted from a collective belief among Boston liberals that Transcendentalism was a harmless philosophy, “a more ‘spiritual’ and ‘philosophical’ form of Unitarian

²¹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The Harvard Divinity School Address” in *Selections from Ralph Waldo Emerson*, Stephen Whicher, ed., 104.

²² *Ibid*, 105.

²³ *Ibid*, 112.

Christianity.” In the Address, Transcendentalism asserted itself much more aggressively. “Emerson’s attack on miracles carried special force, that they had not happened at all. More important, he explicitly denied supernatural inspiration, claimed we could all be Gods like Jesus, and anticipated a modern and better revelation than the Bible. Suddenly Transcendentalism began to appear to some of its sympathizers as an alternative to Christianity.”²⁴ This was exactly the effect that liberals like Norton feared from such an address. Channing, Norton, and Hedge foresaw use of the Bible as a means to keep liberal-minded folk like themselves within the fold of Christianity. Now out of their own circle had arisen a plausible alternative to the Christian religion and one that had seemed to adapt the principles of free inquiry, trust in human faculties, and belief in continuous revelation, to serve its purposes.

This is certainly reading a great deal into Emerson’s motives in delivering the address. In his essay “Emerson, Barzillai Frost and the Divinity School Address,” Conrad Wright attributes the genesis of the Address to Emerson’s despair at the cold and monotonous preaching style of his own pastor in Concord, Barzillai Frost. Wright sees Emerson’s Address as prescriptive rather than prophetic: the intent behind it was to warn a new generation of preachers to be *unlike* Frost, more than to be like the prophets of old.²⁵ Of course, Emerson’s more radical assertions that all humans could be like Jesus, be God and perform miracles overshadowed any reference to Frost’s preaching style. Even if Emerson had not intended to cause a breach between Transcendentalism and Unitarianism, the effect was the same. Battle lines were drawn and remaining neutral on the subject was no longer an option, especially for Boston’s liberal clergy.

²⁴ Dean Grodzins, *American Heretic: Theodore Parker and Transcendentalism*. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 124.

²⁵ Conrad Wright, “Emerson, Barzillai Frost, and the Divinity School Address” in *Liberal Christians*.

For those opponents of Unitarianism, the Address seemed to prove Jedediah Morse and Moses Stuart right. Unitarian belief had ultimately led to irreligiousness or so it appeared from the outside. Internally, the matter was much more complicated. Emerson wrote and delivered the Address to counter what he perceived to be the lack of religious feeling among Unitarian clergy (Parker emphatically agreed with him).²⁶ He truly believed his Address was corrective, a balm for liberal woes caused by the fossilization of religious affection. The more conservative Unitarian ministers felt Emerson was giving their opponents ammunition. While they could agree that much of what Emerson said was crucial for young ministers to hear (the importance of sentiment and passion in a minister, for example), they feared that his views would be taken as standard Unitarian belief. Thus, these more conservatively-minded folk within Unitarianism, who incidentally wielded the most power in Boston, sought to disassociate themselves from Emerson and Emerson's views. Luckily for them, Emerson had made this an easy feat since he resigned his pulpit. They would have no such luck three years later with Theodore Parker.

However, before Parker himself became the target of scorn and animus, he quietly entered the fray in support of Emerson. Hastening Parker's entry into the debate was none other than Andrews Norton. A year and a month after Emerson gave the Divinity School Address, Norton delivered an attack on the principles Emerson had espoused. However, Emerson was not his primary target. He aimed *A Discourse on the Latest Form of Infidelity* at a force far more sinister in Norton's view, namely German thought and ideas as well as philosophers like Hume and Spinoza. Europe was the enemy,

²⁶ Grodzins, *American Heretic*, 115.

Norton contended. In his discourse, he attempted to deflect the criticism of Unitarianism as the source of irreligiousness onto the systems of European thought infiltrating American intellectual circles. The most terrifying thing about this latest form of infidelity, Norton thought, was that it assumed the Christian name, a falsehood that had to be corrected in the public mind. After naming the source of the infidelity, Norton went on to defend the true and historical nature of the miracles revealed in the Bible stating most firmly that to deny the miracles of Christianity was to deny the truth of Christianity.²⁷ With that statement, Norton hoped to stifle a Transcendentalist uprising within Unitarianism, as well as to respond decisively to the attacks made by opponents of Unitarianism on the Christian identity of the liberal movement.

The *Discourse* accomplished neither of these objectives. If nothing else, it created a forum for Transcendentalist sympathizers to articulate their opinions. Norton's *Discourse* made the internal debate among liberals a matter of public fodder. The first response to Norton came not from Emerson, but from George Ripley.²⁸ Ripley penned the aptly titled *'The latest form of infidelity' examined*.²⁹ Ripley was exactly the sort of thinker Norton was addressing in his treatise. Ripley was quite well read in German thought and criticism, thus he took the attack by his former professor rather personally. In historian William Hutchinson's words, Ripley's primary complaint with Norton was that the latter insisted, that, "miracles [were] the only possible proof of Christianity."³⁰

²⁷ Andrews Norton, *Discourse on the Latest Form of Infidelity*.

²⁸ In fact, Emerson rarely commented on it and never publicly (or in print at least). He only ever addressed the issue in his journals and occasionally in his assorted correspondence.

²⁹ George Ripley, *'The latest form of infidelity' examined: a letter to Mr. Andrews Norton, occasioned by his 'discourse before the Association of the alumni of the Cambridge Theological School,' on the 19th of July, 1839*. (Boston: James Munroe and company, 1839).

³⁰ William Hutchinson, *The Transcendentalists Ministers: Church Reform in the New England Renaissance*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), 84.

Ripley went on to refute what he perceived as Norton's singular reliance on miracles by providing a seemingly comprehensive list of Christian fathers and theologians none of whom claimed any such doctrine. In his refutation of Norton, Ripley tried to make clear that he did not deny the possibility of Christian miracles, but only the belief that they served as the only way to prove the truth of Christianity. He seemed to be prodding his teacher to remember his past assertions about humanity's capability of discerning the true and the miraculous even within their own souls.

Never being one to remain silent when criticized, Norton responded in kind with his *Defence of 'Latest Form of Infidelity.'*³¹ In it, Norton wrote that he never intended for miracles to serve as the sole proof of Christianity. Rather, he argued, essentially, that miracles served as "the only means of authenticating a revelation and proving that it is actually from God."³² Norton, by stating that miracles punctuated and proved all *true* revelation, relegated all new revelation to the historical past. Since instances of revelation that occurred when reading the Bible in modern day were not accompanied by miracles like those in the Gospels, they could not qualify as true, God-given revelation. With this, Norton appeared to renege on his own, more radical views on interpretation. In effect, Norton chose the Bible over the liberal method of interpretation.

Until this point, Parker had not yet added his voice to the Norton-Ripley debate. Then, in 1840, a pamphlet appeared in print by Levi Blodgett. Why Parker chose to take on a pseudonym is a moot point, because if he was hoping for anonymity, he did not achieve it. In the pamphlet, Parker reinforced what Ripley had said about Norton's view of miracles as the sole evidence of Christianity (even though Norton had qualified this

³¹ Published in 1839

³² Hutchison, *Transcendentalist Ministers*, 84.

view by that time) and also came to the defense of his beloved German thinkers. Parker's most valuable contribution in the Letter added something new if not entirely original to the conversation. After stating that miracles could not be the sole evidence of Christianity, he argued for the existence of a religious principle in human nature, thus sounding much like Channing in the process. "The existence of these truths," he wrote, "and this religious nature, may be shown philosophically *by an analysis of the powers of the soul*. You may find the *belief* in God as an indestructible element of the human soul. You come back to this fact as you examine and analyze any faculty of our nature... Take the Beautiful; you come to the idea and arche-type [*sic*] of infinite Loveliness, the altogether Beautiful. Take the moral emotions, you come immediately to the eternal Right as it speaks through Conscience. Take the affections, you return to him who is Love. Thus in these, and in all other departments of the soul (so to say), you come back to the primal Truth; the light of all our being; to God."³³ The religious principle was an alternative to historical (or miraculous) revelation; in fact, it allowed for daily revelation from God. In this sense, Parker not only criticized an element of an historical tradition, but also offered something in its place.

Parker, like Channing, Norton, and Hedge, was not simply negative theologians or reactionaries, but were in fact helping base the Unitarian movement on an interpretation of the Bible. Channing, Norton, and Hedge each contributed a different element to the belief that God was ever active in the human mind and that the Bible allowed for a structured means of tapping into the divine-human connection. As for

³³ Theodore Parker (Levi Blodgett), *The Previous Question between Mr. Andrews Norton and His Alumni, Moved and Handled in a Letter to All Those Gentlemen*. (Boston: Weeks, Jordan, & co, 1840), pamphlet reprinted as an appendix in John Edward Dirks, *The Critical Theology of Theodore Parker*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1948), 140, italics author's.

Parker, he believed the Unitarians were hiding behind the Bible and its miracles, that they were afraid to meet God in their own souls. Therefore, when he wrote the Levi Blodgett letter, when he preached the South Boston Sermon, Parker was making a break, albeit unknowingly at first, from the men who had come before. Parker was mistaken in his belief that he was simply speaking aloud the tacit opinions of his colleagues. They held different beliefs than he, the most important one being their retention of the Bible as the singular source of authoritative truth.

Parker was right to highlight the volatility inherent in balancing an authoritative, historical text with a belief in free inquiry and perpetual revelation. Parker's very public pronouncements about the nature of biblical versus intuitive truth forced Boston liberals to examine their own belief system and determine whether it was truly sustainable. Nor did Parker's assault on traditional Unitarian beliefs stop there.

Parker, the Biblical Scientist

Because Parker had chosen free inquiry over the Bible did not mean that he dispensed with the Book. The Bible still influenced much of his religious thought. Furthermore, his South Boston sermon had made him somewhat of a celebrity in the world of biblical thought. His knowledge of Higher Criticism as well as the Scriptures themselves was so apparent that he became a sought-after figure in Bible discussion in Boston. So much so that Parker received an invitation "from a group of the leading citizens" of Boston to give a lecture series on the topic of the Bible and religion in general.³⁴ He declined at first, but eventually accepted the invitation and delivered a series of five lectures in the late fall of 1841.

³⁴ Henry Steele Commager, *Theodore Parker: Yankee Crusader*. (Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, 1947), 79.

Parker titled these lectures, “Discourses of Matters Pertaining to Religion,” intending for each lecture topic to build on the next. In the first lecture, he discussed the concept of the religious principle in humanity. Then followed two separate lectures on the relationship of the religious principle to God and Jesus of Nazareth. The fourth and fifth lectures discussed the human religious principle and the Bible and the religious principle and its connection to the Church, respectively. Effectively, the Discourses were an expansion of the ideas introduced in the Levi Blodgett letter and the South Boston Sermon. Thematically, what threaded these five lectures together was the question of inspiration: how much “revelation” do humans derive from historical sources and how much “revelation” do they learn through our own minds and senses? Parker believed that historical revelation lost any of its intrinsic value or persuasive power without the possibility of future revelation. He argued no human beings could recognize the reality of miracles or the truth of revelation in the Bible if they could not have such miraculous and revelatory experiences themselves. “If man have not a religious element in his nature, miraculous or other ‘revelations’ can no more render him religious than fragments of sermons and leaves [*sic*] of the Bible can make a Lamb religious when mixed and eaten with its daily food.”³⁵ Religion did not arise out of biblical texts, but rather, out of human beings and their “irresistible tendency” to refer outward things to a Higher Power.³⁶ The Bible provided written testimony of what humanity already knew internally or unconsciously. When used correctly, the Bible inspired readers to seek inspiration, not solely in its pages, but in themselves.

³⁵ Theodore Parker, “Book I: Of Religion in General; Or a Discourse of the Religious Element and its Manifestations” in *A Discourse of Matters Pertaining to Religion* (London: Trübner & Co, 1863), 13.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 5.

Through the internal religious principle, human beings knew God existed, that He loved them, and had created them in His image. As for Jesus as a moral and religious figure, Parker wrote about him much in the same way as did Channing, Norton, and Hedge. Jesus was the best example (to date) of an individual who optimized the potential of his religious faculty. He demonstrated to humanity its own capacity for improvement. As for Jesus the historical and biblical character, Parker was far more critical. Parker believed that there were four sources of knowledge: perception through the senses, intuition through the intellect, reflection or the mental processes that synthesize and unpack the implications of various perceptions and intuitions, and testimony. Since human beings could not perceive Jesus with their senses nor intuit knowledge of him via the intellect, they must rely on the testimony of the Evangelists who claimed to be firsthand witnesses of Jesus. Sounding much like Norton but for the last sentence, Parker wrote “To speak of the four Evangelists—admitting, for the sake of argument, we have their evidence, and the books in our hands come really from Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, and that they bore the relation to Jesus which they claim; the question comes:--Are they competent to testify in the case? Can we trust them to give us the whole truth and nothing but the truth? Admitting they were honest, yet if they were but men, there must be limitations to the accuracy of their testimony.”³⁷ He moved away from Norton by claiming that *because* there was no way of verifying the truth of testimony except at secondhand, testimony could never be fully trusted. The Evangelists’ testimony must be judged against what is known to be true according to the religious principle in human nature. Parker accepted (and encouraged others to accept) the message of Jesus’s life

³⁷ Theodore Parker, “Book III: The Relation of the Religious Element to Jesus of Nazareth, or a Discourse of Christianity” in *Discourses of Religion*, 160.

because it corresponded with precepts arisen from the religious principle. For this reason and for this reason alone, he considered the testimony of the Evangelists viable.

Reiterating one of the more radical assertions of his South Boston Sermon, Parker wrote, “Yes, if [Jesus] never lived, but the New Testament were a sheer forgery from end to end, these doctrines are just the same, absolute truth.”³⁸ Christianity in its essence could have existed even without Jesus and the Bible.

Note that in saying this, Parker was not calling the Bible untrue or even unnecessary, though it is easy to see why many could take such a statement in that way. Parker believed there was a great deal that was essentially good about and in the Bible. He wrote in an 1838 letter to fellow editor of the *Scriptural Interpreter*, William Silsbee, “I dwell on the character and providence of God, and the exactness and beauty of his laws, natural, moral and religious. My confidence in the Bible is increased.”³⁹ Then years later in 1852, in the midst of his tenure as minister of the Twenty-Eighth Congregational Society, he said to his congregation, “I reverence the Scriptures for every word of truth they teach,- and they are crowded with truth and beauty from end to end.”

However, this last statement was itself an added caveat to the passage directly preceding it; a passage that most clearly articulated Parker’s mature thought and mindset. He stated firmly that he did not believe “there ever was a miracle, or ever will be: everywhere I find law,- the constant mode of operation of the infinite God.” The universe was entirely of God and therefore entirely miraculous or entirely natural; to say both the miraculous and the natural could coexist was to divide the nature of God. As a result of this, argued Parker, the Bible could not be miraculously inspired. All the claim

³⁸ *Ibid*, 174.

³⁹ Letter from Theodore Parker to William Silsbee, August 10 1838 printed in Weiss, *Life and Correspondence*, 110.

of miraculous inspiration had done for the Bible was to stymie its potential by placing the age of miracles in the past. "I do not believe in the miraculous inspiration of the Old Testament or the New Testament. I do not believe that the Old Testament was God's first word, nor the New Testament his last. The Scriptures are no finality to me. Inspiration is a perpetual fact. Prophets and Apostles did not monopolize the Father: He inspires men to-day as much as heretofore. In nature, also, God speaks for ever [*sic*]." Since revelation was a present reality, and not an historical relic claimed by Christians as their sole purview, all religions, all churches, all individuals were privy to the revelatory tradition. "I do not believe the miraculous origin of the Hebrew Church, or the Buddhist Church, or the Christian Church; nor the miraculous character of Jesus. I take not the Bible for my master, nor yet the church; nor even Jesus of Nazareth for my master. I feel not at all bound to believe what any church says is true, nor what any writer in the Old or New Testament declares true; and I am ready to believe that Jesus taught, as I think, eternal torment, the existence of a devil, and that he himself should ere long come back in the clouds of heaven."⁴⁰ Miracles had become "monster," just as Emerson thought, by denying humanity the same capacity for the extraordinary. Throughout Christian history, miracles were taken as proper evidence and in the process, truth lost its inherent conviction. Wrong interpretation of the Bible had made it so truth needed unverifiable mysteries to be convincing. It was the improper use of the Bible as a source of proof for the mythical, irrational and the miraculous that had turned the Bible into something indecipherable.

⁴⁰ Theodore Parker, "Some Account of My Ministry: Two Sermons preached before the Twenty-Eighth Congregational Society in Boston, on the 14th and 21st of November, 1852, on leaving their old and entering a new place of worship, Sermon I" in *Autobiographical and Miscellaneous Pieces: The Collected Works of Theodore Parker*, Vol. VIII. (London: Trübner & Co, 1865), 200.

Therefore, the danger Parker saw in a book such as the Bible was that it easily became an idol. People treated it as an object of worship, of divine infallibility, rather than as *one* source of divine truth. It was this type of veneration that allowed much that was bad in the Bible (for example the violent and wrathful God of the Old Testament and the brutality of the Second Coming in the New Testament) to be esteemed as essential truths alongside precepts like “love thy neighbor as thyself.” Parker feared that the dangers of the Bible had begun to outweigh the good in the text, especially when much of what was “good” could be ascertained from sources other than the Scriptures.

Of course, Parker did not want to remove the Bible from Christianity. What he did wish to do was introduce some of those other sources of truth and authority alongside the Bible. “We think it a sad thing, and surely it is,” wrote Parker, “that every man should not have a Bible in his house, and power to read it; and great-hearted Christians make large sacrifices to put the words of Esaias, and Amos, and Paul, and Jesus into the hands of every man. But should we not also be ashamed that the greater, diviner Scriptures of God are not in every Christian’s understanding, before his eye, and in his consciousness! That also is a reproach.”⁴¹ Nature and human nature were equal to, if not greater than the Bible as resources for God’s Word. God had equipped human beings with the faculties to discover Him and His work both inside and outside themselves. Through these sources, Nature, the Bible, and the self, God enabled every person to find Him in variegated ways, each supplementing and supporting, never contradicting, the other sources.

⁴¹ Theodore Parker, “Of the Delights of Piety” in *Discourses of Theology: The Collected Works of Theodore Parker Part Three*. (London: Trübner & Co, 1875), 159.

Sole dependence on the Bible was in fact the cardinal sin of Christianity, as it caused spiritual laziness. It caused people to cease in their pursuit of greater truth, and therefore, to stop seeking God. The Protestant Church had made the Bible its “Pope” claimed Parker, by awarding it the qualities of infallibility and literalism. In this tradition, “Men must take the Bible as master; it is Divine in origin, function and responsibility; nay, it is only an expansion of God... The Bible contains all that man needs in theological matters, now and hereafter, all he can ever get- for it is not only God’s word, but his last word, his last will and testament, for though living elsewhere He is now seceded and deceased from all direction communication with man. There is no inspiration now; it is all ended, the stream run dry. The Bible is signed, sealed, and delivered as and for the last will and testament of Almighty God.”⁴² In no starker terms than these, Parker effectively stated that the Church declared God dead when it declared the Bible closed.

From Accused to Accuser

Parker spoke these words in 1855 long after the “The Transient and the Permanent” had first caused rumblings among the Unitarian elite of Boston. Since that time, his message had become progressively more radical, as the latter statement shows, and more sociopolitical as he became increasingly involved in the ongoing anti-slavery and temperance movements of the time.⁴³ In the interim years, he had left his parish in

⁴² Theodore Parker, “Of the Relation between the Ecclesiastical Institutions and the Religious Consciousness of the American People delivered at the Opening of the Progressive Friends’ Meeting-House, at Longwood, Chester County, Pennsylvania, May 19 1855” in *Discourses of Theology: The Collected Works of Theodore Parker Part Three*. (London: Trübner & Co, 1875), 183.

⁴³ Parker became a well-known figure in the anti-slavery movement especially. Abolitionists such as William Lloyd Garrison and Lydia Maria Child were frequent attendees at the Melodeon Theater (where Parker preached when he became the chosen pastor of the Twenty-Eighth Congregational Society) on Sundays and both were good friends of Parker as well. Parker was a vocal opponent of the Fugitive Slave Bill and published multiple treatises and sermons that he preached on the subject of anti-slavery, most of

West Roxbury in 1846 to pilot the Twenty-Eighth Congregational Society,⁴⁴ a nineteenth century mega-church of sorts for its non-denominational focus and its seating of over a thousand bodies every Sunday. In other words, his status had risen rather than diminished as the members of the Boston Association had hoped. This was especially troubling since he had still not renounced the title of Unitarian minister, even though he no longer ministered to any formal Unitarian body. The irony of this, of course, is that if Unitarianism had established some kind of formal ecclesiastical institution or formal creed, this would not have been a problem- a fact that Parker pointed out in an 1846 letter to his accusers. In his, “Letter to the Boston Association of Congregational Ministers, Touching Certain Matters of Their Theology,” Parker attempted to force the members of the Association to admit their hypocrisy or to openly admit that they actually bore certain theological doctrines that were closer to orthodox than to liberal beliefs. He wrote that he had little inclination to deny his “theology, nor shelter it beneath the authority of your association. Let it stand or fall by itself. But still, I do not know that I have transgressed the limits of Unitarianism, for I do not know what those limits are. It is a great glory to a liberal association to have no symbolical books, but a great inconvenience that a sect becoming exclusive should not declare its creed. I cannot utter the *Shibboleth* of a party till I first hear it pronounced in the orthodox way. I shall presently proceed to beg you to point out the limits of scientific freedom, and tell the *maximum* of theological belief which distinguishes you from the ‘orthodox’ on the one side, and the *minimum* thereof,

which are reprinted in two volumes *Discourses of Slavery Part I* and *Discourses of Slavery Part II*, both are published as part of the fourteen volume series *The Complete Works* by Trübner & Co, comprising volumes V and VI, both published in 1863.

⁴⁴ Weiss, *Life and Correspondence*, 262.

which distinguishes you from the ‘infidels’ on the other side.”⁴⁵ Effectively, he asked them to accuse him of some real crime against Unitarianism, which would mean going against their principles of creedlessness, or to admit they were trying to be nominally Unitarian while harboring illiberal feelings and orthodox doctrines.

The Boston Association did not answer Parker’s letter directly; that task fell to the American Unitarian Association seven years later. On May 24, 1853, the Executive Committee of the American Unitarian Association published its Twenty-Eighth Annual Report, reporting on the status of liberal Christianity at the time.⁴⁶ Included in the pamphlet was an explicit profession of Unitarian doctrine as well as an attempt to explain why Unitarianism was not spreading as quickly as it should. One of the reasons it listed as a factor for its lack of popularity was that there were certain people who stood within their ranks claiming to be nominally Unitarian, while at the same time professing views that were far more radical than any true Unitarian held. Parker took this remark rather personally, as he should have. The Report was in many ways a thinly veiled effort at distancing Unitarianism from Parkerism.

Shortly thereafter, Parker issued a reply. His letter to the various members of the Association was entitled “A Friendly Letter to the Executive Committee of the American Unitarian Association touching their new Unitarian Creed or General Proclamation of Unitarian views.”⁴⁷ Though the letter bore the word “Friendly” in the title, Parker did

⁴⁵ The Letter was reprinted in *Autobiographical and Miscellaneous Works: The Complete Works of Parker*, 181.

⁴⁶ American Unitarian Association, *The twenty-eighth report of the American Unitarian Association, with the addresses at the anniversary, May 24, 1853*. (Boston: Crosby, Nichols, and Co, 1853).

⁴⁷ Theodore Parker, *A Friendly Letter to the Executive Committee of the American Unitarian Association touching their new Unitarian Creed or General Proclamation of Unitarian views- To Messrs Rev. Samuel K. Lothrop, D.D., Rev. Calvin Lincoln, Isaiah Bangs, Esq., Hon. Albert Fearing, Rev. Henry A. Miles, D.D., Rev. George W. Briggs, and Rev. William A. Alger, Late ‘Executive Committee of the Unitarian*

little to ingratiate his intended readers when he referred to the contents of the Twenty-Eighth Report as a “creed.” As was shown in Chapter 1, “creedlessness” was one of the original tenets of liberal Christianity and one which Unitarians still held with pride fifty or so years later. Thus, in using the term “creed” instead of a synonym, Parker was making no qualms about the message of his letter or its intended effect. If its recipients still had any uncertainty as to the tone and intention of the letter from the title, they were left in little doubt after reading it. The letter reads like a cross-examination- and if the letter were any indication, Parker would have made a formidable lawyer. He spent most of the letter quoting the Committee back to itself and then firing a litany of questions requesting clarification as to what was really meant by each statement in the Report, the precise nature of the terms employed, and an accurate account of the Committee’s theological views.

At least a part of Parker’s agitation reflected his perception that the Report verified that Unitarians were doing precisely what his accusers had charged him with doing. He noted that in their list of “positive Unitarian beliefs” that ‘man has a ‘natural capacity’ and ability to find out and perform his moral and religious duties without a miraculous revelation.”⁴⁸ He juxtaposed this statement with an earlier one where they stated their disdain for any who denied the supernatural in Christianity. He continued to push them on their apparent hypocrisy. What precisely did they believe, he asked? “What,” he wrote, “is the ultimate standard by which you determine what is true and what is false, what right and what wrong, what religious and what not religion?”⁴⁹ He

Association.’ (Boston, 1853) reprinted in *Autobiographical and Miscellaneous Works: Collected Works*, 235-252.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 246.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 241.

gleaned from the Report that they made such determinations based on the content in the Bible. Parker pressed further, employing his considerable knowledge of the Bible and Historical Critical methods, asking, “When you say, ‘we receive the teachings of Christ as infallible truth from God,’” Parker asked, “do you mean in general, that you believe that all the ‘teachings’ ascribed to Christ in the four Gospels, are the infallible truth of God,’ or do you pick over those Gospels, and from the various ‘teachings’ therein ascribed to Christ, cull out ‘the infallible truth of God?’ Since the Gospels are in some respects contradictory to each other... how do you determine what are ‘the teachings of Christ,’ - and what are ‘foreign admixtures and later accretions;’ and do you believe these teachings merely because they seem to you true, or because they are ‘the teachings of Christ,’ - that is, are you led to believe thus by your own ‘human reason’ or by his ‘divine authority?’”⁵⁰ Parker continuously asked them to clarify what they believed and to define what the Bible meant to them. Was the Bible an infallible source of God’s divine Truth? An historically constructed text? Certainly, it seemed the Bible could no longer properly serve as a “safe space” to ground all one’s religious beliefs. Biblical ground was too contested and too unstable. Before Unitarians could search for truth in the Bible, they had to define what the Bible was. And by determining what the Bible was, the members of the Boston Association and the AUA would ultimately have to define who they were: members of a creedless, liberal movement or a Church with a liberal confession of faith?

Again quoting them, Parker wrote in his letter, “In conclusion, I ask attention to a ‘subject of the greatest practical importance.’ To the charge, ‘Nobody can tell what Unitarianism is,’ you say, ‘We can give, and ought to give, a candid answer to the

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 243.

question, *What is Unitarianism?* Which greets you on all sides?’ So you offer such a statement as seems to be demanded at your hands, adding, ‘If it be accepted by the body whose servants we are, it will be a record for authoritative reference;’ though you say we do not propose ‘anything like a creed to be signed, or to have authority over individual minds.’ I do not know exactly what is meant by a document ‘for authoritative reference,’ which is yet not designed to ‘have authority over individual minds;’ but I will not delay upon such minor matters.”⁵¹ Yet as Parker certainly knew, this was a *major* matter. For fifty years, the Unitarian movement had enabled liberal Christians to exist without a formalized identity or doctrine. This is not to say that Unitarians never broached these questions, only that before Parker, there had been less urgency about finding the answers. Prior to this, Unitarians had been able to rely on the Bible as the touchstone of their Christian identity. With the Bible now destabilized, suddenly such questions as “What is Unitarianism,” “Who are the Unitarians,” and “What do they Unitarians believe” were no longer avoidable.

CONCLUSION

Though Parker was a Bible scholar in the manner of Channing, Norton, and Hedge during his years at Harvard and even into his early ministry, his thought had already begun to change when he became familiar with the Higher Critics and in 1838, when Emerson delivered the Harvard School Divinity Address. His delivery of the South Boston sermon simply reflected the way his thought was tending (which was the way he believed the Unitarian movement’s thought was going). Where Hedge saw the potential

⁵¹ *Ibid*, 243-4.

of a universal Church based on the Bible and the Spirit, Parker envisioned Absolute Religion.

Because of Parker and what he represented, the Unitarian movement had a crisis of identity. How Unitarians responded would chart the future of Unitarianism and its relationship to the Bible. The issue for Parker was personally pressing. If the leaders of Unitarianism decided to found Unitarian identity on a creed that placed the Bible above the self as the sole source of authoritative truth, Parker could not remain a Unitarian. By establishing a creed, the Unitarians would solve their fellowship dilemma, as they would finally have a standard of faith by which to measure the Parker-sized thorn in their side. If however, they determined that Unitarian identity was founded on a promise of unbounded free inquiry, an historico-critical view of the Bible and a commitment to seeking truth at all costs, then Parker would happily retain the title of Unitarian minister. In his letter, he seemed to recognize that the latter outcome was no longer a viable possibility for the men whom he addressed. He had refused to leave Unitarianism, but it appeared that Unitarianism was leaving him. Parker had ushered in a new era of identity construction and denomination making, as he simultaneously closed the door on the sole supremacy of the Bible.

CONCLUSION

After the Parker controversy and the years of crisis in the mid-nineteenth century, Unitarianism underwent a shift in identity. Though the Bible did not disappear from Unitarianism, it lost the primacy it retained during the nascent years of the Unitarian movement under Channing, Norton, Hedge, and early Parker. This shift in identity had been occurring gradually, essentially since Parker delivered the South Boston sermon in 1841 and was eventually formalized in a dialogue among Unitarians attending the new National Conference of Unitarian Churches between the years of 1865 and 1894.¹ These latter years of the nineteenth century dealt primarily with how to transform Unitarianism from a loose affiliation of ministers to a formal, substantive Church with a covenant on which all factions, both radical and conservative, could agree.²

After the crisis involving Theodore Parker, it was clear that Unitarianism could no longer sustain a movement based on the Bible and free inquiry and still remain within Christianity. The implications of Parker's appropriation of Unitarian biblical methods for other, transcendental ends led Unitarian leaders like National Conference founder Henry

¹ Prior to 1865, "[there] were Unitarian churches, and there was a Unitarian movement; but such a thing as a Unitarian denomination, in any clearly defined meaning of the words, did not exist." (Cooke, *Unitarianism in America*, 159). During the two decades leading up to 1865, Unitarians had struggled to define themselves and what they wished for their movement. As a result, the progress of missions and proselytization had ground to a halt. "[To] the extent that Unitarianism was becoming polarized [through controversy]," wrote Conrad Wright, "it was also becoming paralyzed." (Conrad Wright, "Henry W. Bellows and the Organization of the National Conference" in *The Liberal Christians*, 84).

² For more in depth studies of the National Conference and Unitarian history during the latter third of the nineteenth century, see the following secondary works: Cooke, *Unitarianism in America*; Conrad Wright, "Henry W. Bellows and the Organization of the National Conference" in *Liberal Christians*; Sydney E. Ahlstrom, "Francis Ellingwood Abbot and the Free Religious Association," *The Proceedings of the Unitarian Historical Society*, XVII, II, (1973-1975), 1-21; Allen, *Our Liberal Movement in Theology*, 114-123; 203-211. You may also wish to consult the subsequent reports of the first, second and third National Conference, published in 1865, 1866, and 1868. Annual reports were published sequentially, but these (along with the Report from the Conference in 1894) contain information the most germane to the formation of a Unitarian denomination.

Bellows,³ to move away from a movement based on the Bible and toward a movement that focused on church tradition, belief, and church “work.”⁴ In 1882, Joseph Henry Allen wrote of those pivotal time, that “In short, Unitarianism, so far as it is destined to survive at all, must understand that it has outgrown its old theological limits; and, as it was once the liberal side of the old Congregational body, so now it must know itself as the Christian side of the broader scientific movement of our time. As a part of this broader movement, it may still retain its intellectual dignity and its interest for thinking men, whatever its denominational strength or weakness. Apart from that, it has but a feeble life of its own, and will be soon scattered to pieces, or else merged in the superior energy and the increasing liberality of the larger bodies around it.”⁵ Allen wrote these words during the zenith of Higher Criticism and Darwinian thought. He felt Unitarians represented a part of the intellectual *Zeitgeist*, which at the time was anchored in the

³ A fellow middle-of-the-roader and personal friend of Hedge, Bellows was synonymous with the period of Unitarianism known as “the denominational awakening.” (Cooke, *Unitarianism in America*, 187.) Bellows had originally risen to prominence through his work with the Sanitary Commission, which he established as an supplement to the medical and hospital branches of the war effort. Bellows was also a Unitarian minister. It was the combination of the two halves of Bellows professional life that led him to certain conclusions about the future of Unitarianism and of Christianity in America. For more of Bellows views on the future of a Unitarian Church, see Henry Whitney Bellows, “Popular Creeds and the Nation’s Life,” *The Christian Examiner*, LXXX, I (January 1866); *The Suspense of Faith, An Address to the Alumni of the Divinity School of Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass, given July 19, 1859*. (New York: C.S. Francis & Co., 1859), 10.

⁴ James Freeman Clarke gave the opening sermon of the National Conference. In it, he emphasized the importance of Christian “work” as the central galvanizing principle for a new movement, now unsettled because it could not longer rely on the Bible for its identity. “We wish to prove,” said Clarke, “that Christian union can be found in work as well as in opinion. Differing from each other on many points, giving perfect freedom of opinion to all men, we are to try an experiment never before attempted in the history of the Church- of union on the basis of Christian action instead of Christian thought... Can those who differ in theology unite in a Christian Church, for Christian work?... [As] long as we have work to do, in which we both agree, we can cordially unite; so long as they wish to bring men to God by the teaching and life of Jesus, let us be glad to cooperate, and not be afraid of compromising ourselves thereby.” (“Sermon” in *Report of the Convention of Unitarian Churches held in New York, on the 5th and 6th of April, 1865 and of the Organization of the National Conference with the sermon preached on that occasion and a Register of the Churches*. (Boston: Alfred Mudge & Son, Printers, 1866), 17-18).

⁵ Joseph Henry Allen, *Our Liberal Movement in Theology, Chiefly as shown in Recollections of the History of Unitarianism in New England being a closing course of Lectures given in the Harvard Divinity School*. (Boston: American Unitarian Association, 1882), 116.

scientific method. He believed that Unitarianism was the modern religion. Whether Allen's description is accurate or simply hopeful, the precedent for this optimistic view of Unitarianism arose out of the work of Channing, Norton, Hedge and Parker. Thus, the biblical work of Channing, Norton, Hedge, and Parker did not simply lose its relevance when the Bible lost its venerated seat as the sole source of truth and authority.

There are a number of reasons why Channing, Norton, Hedge, and Parker's work on the Bible is both relevant and significant to Unitarianism as a movement and to Unitarian history. Here I consider two of them, the greatest two, in my opinion. First of all, the work of these four men indicates that the Bible was as central to Unitarian identity as it was for most other nineteenth century Protestant denominations. The zeal with which Channing, Norton, Hedge, and Parker undertook to read and interpret the Bible was matched only by their *zeal* in *talking* about how they read and interpreted the Bible. For each of them, either for the duration of their lives or for some period, the Bible was central to their identities as Unitarian Christians. They represented the tenor of Unitarian thought during its infancy and revealed a deep love for the Bible as the primary source of authentic truth. And for the first sixty years, Unitarianism was defined by their biblicism.

Yet, the influence of the biblical work of Channing, Norton, Hedge, and Parker lasted far longer than sixty years. The study of the Bible undertaken by these four individuals had a sustained effect on the thought of the Unitarian movement and Unitarian identity from the nineteenth century into the present. The interpretive principles themselves reflected the idea that many different elements, often those that seemed to be diametrically opposed (like rational and intuitive impulses), when held together, created balance, rather than friction. Furthermore, these four men built into

these principles a belief that difference in opinion was a natural part of religious faith and that truth is never monolithic, but variable, dynamic, and ever-revealing itself anew. From the start, Channing, Norton, Hedge, and Parker venerated freedom of conscience as greatly as the Bible. In their work on the Bible, they sought to dispel the idea that Christians could not retain fellowship if their interpretations of the Bible somehow diverged. As George Willis Cooke noted, “Through all of this controversy what was sought for [during these early years] was a method of reconciling fellowship with individuality of opinion, of establishing a church in which freedom of faith for the individual shall have full recognition. In a word, the Unitarian body had a conviction that tradition is compatible with intuition, institutions with personal freedom, and co-operation with individual initiative. The problems involved were too large for an immediate solution; and what Unitarians accepted was an ideal, and not a fact fully realized in their denominational life. The doctrinal phase of the controversy have always been subsidiary to this larger search, this desire to give the individual all the liberty that is compatible with his co-operation with others.”⁶ Unitarianism did not falter in its commitment to give equal measure to all opinions, even as it changed from Bible-based movement to a covenant-focused denomination. How these opinions arose or, more to the point, from what source they arose from, were what had changed after 1865.

This liberal sensibility, born of Bible study, was the lasting legacy of the era of biblical interpretation epitomized by the four men discussed in this work. William Ellery Channing had preached on the Bible and aided in the development of a particular Unitarian hermeneutic in order to retain fellowship with the orthodox of the

⁶ Cooke, *Unitarianism in America*, 211-212.

denomination, as well as to allow those with more liberal tendencies room to grow. His goal was religious progress through the interaction of the individual human mind with the biblical text. This could be accomplished without breaking from Congregationalism, Channing believed. As long as liberals returned to the Bible as their source, whatever their theological conclusions or telos may have been, they retained their connection to the broader corporate body of Congregationalism.

Though he was far less concerned with retaining a connection to Congregationalism, Andrews Norton agreed that the Bible was the crucial ingredient to a reformation of Christian thought. Norton sought a revolution in methods of biblical interpretation and in the understanding of the Bible itself. He decried the literalism of the orthodox and evangelicals. The Bible was comprised of words and words were dynamic, living things. Certainly the most misunderstood of the four gentlemen presented herein, Norton often appeared to sacrifice liberality and fellowship in favor of proper technique. He held himself, as well as his students, to an incredibly high intellectual standard. Norton expected them to arrive at truth through rigorous work, and having arrived at their truth, to defend it. He encouraged his students to resist categorization and heed their Conscience. Writing in the Introduction to his *Tracts Concerning Christianity*, he wrote, “There are times in which religious truth is exposed to particular persecution and obloquy, when it may be well for its defenders to combine into a sect for mutual encouragement and support... The combination implied in the formation of a religious sect at the present day, with a distinctive name, is attended with great evils... But religious truth, the great means of improving the condition of mankind, is not to be ascertained and made efficacious through the combination of men into religious parties,

though its influence may be greatly impeded by such combination.” For too long, sectarianism had halted the onward progress of Christian truth. “What is now wanting to the progress and influence of rational religion among us,” wrote Norton, “is a revival of the feeling of the importance of religious truth,- a practical conviction of the fact, which, however obvious and indisputable, does not seem to be generally recognized, that it is only by religious truth that religious errors, with all their attendant evils, can be done away; and of a fact equally obvious, that, in the present conflict of opinions, minds disciplined in habits of correct reasoning and informed by extensive learning, minds acquainted with the different branches of theological science, which embraces or touches upon all the higher and more important subjects of thought, are required for the attainment and communication of religious truth. In one word, it is learned and able theologians that are wanted.”⁷ Sectarian schism, doctrinal strife were distractions, Norton thought. In spite of his reputation as a Unitarian pundit, he was more concerned with teaching proper methods for truth-seeking. Norton believed that if he taught proper reading of the Bible and he would teach his hearers how to believe and be Christian.

The work of Frederic Henry Hedge foreshadowed much of what was to come in the post-civil War years in Unitarianism. He, along with his friend Henry Whitney Bellows, subscribed to the “Broad Church” ecclesiology coined by Hedge himself. Of the two, Hedge had greater faith in the Bible as a means of gathering Christians together. Individualism was simultaneously allowed for and checked through reading the Bible. The Spirit working in the mind enabled new insight to arise when it connected with the Spirit manifest in the written Word. The possibilities for truth were endless, yet still held

⁷ Andrews Norton, *Tracts Concerning Christianity*. (Cambridge: John Bartlett, 1852), 12-14.

firmly in place by devotion to the Bible. At the first National Conference, Hedge attended as one of the more conservative delegates, though he always spoke with a calculated moderation on even the most trying of subjects. His hopes for a universal church based on and out of the Bible were soon destroyed. It was clear that the Bible had become too contested to serve as a viable foundation for the new denomination. Nonetheless, he participated in the Conference and sought compromise along with the rest of the delegates. Though the “new” Unitarianism would not be a Bible-based movement per se, this did not preclude him from maintaining his own belief system as one centered on the Bible.

Theodore Parker was never fully a part of the Unitarian movement made popular by Channing, Norton, and Hedge nor of the more organized Unitarian Church that followed. His name was associated with Unitarianism- often preceded by some choice epithet- but neither the Biblicists nor the denominationalists truly counted him as one of their own. This would prove to be a bane for Theodore Parker. Parker desperately wished to remain within Unitarianism, so long as Unitarianism was moving in the direction he deemed best. For Channing, Norton and Hedge, the Unitarian movement would lose its initiative if it lost the Bible. For Parker, the Unitarian movement would fail if it clung to biblical authority. Ultimately, it was Parker’s side that would win out, but not for many more years and not at his behest. Unitarian leaders called the National Conference in part to serve as a corrective to the perceived nihilism of Parker or Parkerism. It would become clear as time wore on that Parker was prescient in his view of the inevitable direction of Unitarianism. If the denomination wished to retain liberality and fellowship, the Bible could no longer serve as the sole source of authority.

For sixty years, liberal Christianity had been characterized by the delicate balancing act between the Bible and free inquiry. The Bible and boundless free inquiry were like magnets of the same polarity, when held together by strong and guiding hands. But at the moment those hands loosen their grip, they repelled each other. Parker, the heir apparent of Channing, Norton and Hedge, allowed his hands to slacken, letting the Bible spring out of his reach and, in the end, holding only free inquiry in his grasp. He no longer wished to bind together two pieces that, by nature, seemed to strain against each other. Parker made his choice and the rest of Unitarianism would soon follow suit. Joseph Henry Allen said it best when he wrote, “There is always a temptation to try our hand at some ideal theory of reconciliation and mental harmony among the widely diverse elements of our experience. But history makes very light of all such ideal theories. We are not responsible for the beginning of things, or for the end of things; though by a sort of generous illusion we are apt to feel so. For us, the only answer of any value to any of the great questions respecting God, Life, Destiny, is the answer we find—very slowly and late in life perhaps—by doing our own best work in our own best way; and in keeping mind and heart always open to the whisper of the Spirit of all Truth. And that is, after all, the best contribution we can make to the larger result—perhaps the only one.”⁸ So even with the Bible gone, the Unitarians persisted in their allegiance to a vision held by Channing, Norton, Hedge and Parker: that of seeking truth as far as the mind, the conscience and God would allow.

⁸ Allen, *Our Liberal Movement*, 144.

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