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"Recourse Must Be Had to the History of Those Times"

Two deaths gave life to American biblical criticism: the demise of former Massachusetts congressman Samuel Dexter in 1810 led to the execution of his will, which directed his testators to give $5,000 to Harvard "for promoting biblical criticism."[1] A year later, Dexter's trustees elected Unitarian minister Joseph Stevens Buckminster as Harvard's inaugural Dexter Lecturer, an appointment dedicated to biblical criticism.[2] The young Buckminster died of epilepsy before he could deliver his first lecture. His death, however, propelled the spread of biblical criticism in ways that his lectureship might not have. After Buckminster's passing, America's biblical scholars journeyed to Boston for the public sale of his library, which included works of biblical scholarship known for "their rarity in our country."[3] The sale placed these works into the hands of those who became America's foremost advocates of biblical criticism. Unitarians, such as William Ellery Channing and Edward Everett, attended the event, but so did Congregationalists, including Jeremiah Evarts and Moses Stuart. Stuart outbid his friend Everett for Johann Gottfried Eichhorn's five-volume introduction to the Old Testament, *Einleitung ins Alte Testament* (1780–83), an important text by a leading scholar in biblical criticism. This event indicated that orthodoxy's defenders would join advocates of liberal religion on the historical grounds

[1] "Biographical Notice of the Late Hon. Samuel Dexter," *The Monthly Anthology, and Boston Review* 9 (July 1810): 7.
[2] "Intelligence," *General Repository and Review* 1 (January 1812): 205.
[3] "Sale of the Library of the Late Rev. Mr. Buckminster," *General Repository and Review* 2 (October 1812): 392–94, quotation on 392.

prepared by biblical criticism and challenge them on questions of canon and doctrine on those grounds.[4]

Important doctrinal and canonical differences separated antebellum Unitarians, Congregationalists, and Presbyterians, and the biblical scholars among them promoted unique modes of historical explication. The liberal Unitarians accepted as canonical the New Testament texts that they believed could be authenticated through internal and external evidence and illuminated with interbiblical and extrabiblical knowledge. Unitarians denied plenary inspiration and emphasized the historical situatedness of authors, texts, and audiences to better understand the scriptures and to guard against ahistorical applications. This approach allowed for distinct approaches among Unitarians. While Buckminster upheld the chosen canon as uniquely accurate historical texts, Andrews Norton received the canon as occasionally flawed historical texts, in part because of the writers' accommodations and inability to fully transcend the characteristic ideas and notions of their times. The orthodox Congregationalists and Presbyterians affirmed, with some exceptions, the traditional canon and often appealed to internal and external evidences to assert its unity, historicity, and accuracy. They emphasized the historical situatedness of authors to better comprehend the Bible's universal meaning. While rejecting the idea that Jesus and the Gospel writers had accommodated to their audience, figures such as Moses Stuart and the Presbyterian Charles Hodge believed that God had accommodated to human language. Stuart privileged interbiblical knowledge over extrabiblical knowledge, and both he and Hodge approached biblical criticism with deep suspicion, but both accepted historical insight from extrabiblical sources.

In short, thinkers across the antebellum religious spectrum, from Hodge's orthodox Calvinism to Norton's liberal Unitarianism, accepted history as the favored battleground for rhetorical conflicts about the canon and religious truth. While most American Protestants remained oblivious to this development, biblical criticism led these and other prominent religious thinkers to defend their canonical choices with historical arguments, base their hermeneutics in historical analysis, and center their epistemologies in historical knowledge. Even those who rejected aspects

[4] For more information on the auction, see Jerry Brown, *The Rise of Biblical Criticism in America, 1800–1870: The New England Scholars* (Middletown, CT, 1969), 27–29; see also E. Brooks Holifield, *Theology in America: Christian Thought from the Age of the Puritans to the Civil War* (New Haven, 2003), 191.

of historical interpretation recognized the need to address these kinds of readings. Whether in using historical readings or in dismissing them as dangerous or problematic, biblical interpreters' efforts highlighted crucial contextual differences between their world and the biblical world they looked to for guidance. Unlike most of their hermeneutical predecessors, many nineteenth-century American interpreters came to realize that the Bible's authors did not always write "for the instruction of all succeeding time."[5] To be sure, a priori assumptions about the word of God shielded readers from biblical criticism's threat of textual and moral relativism; most readers continued to rely on the Bible's perceived atemporal truths despite the attention to its time-bound features. But the process of using the historical tools of biblical criticism began to show that a sacred text from a favored past was also a set of historical documents from an ancient era. In short, the stress on historical difference in biblical interpretation carried with it the threat of raising questions about the Bible's relevance.

In this chapter, I demonstrate that a broad range of antebellum religious thinkers used the historical tools of biblical criticism, and in doing so I argue that such efforts signaled a growing awareness of historical distance from biblical times. The history of biblical criticism in America, when explored in terms of its contribution to contextual interpretation, suggests that European biblical scholarship had a greater influence in antebellum America than previously thought. While casting aspersions on European thinkers, including English deists and German liberals, American biblical scholars also incorporated a number of European hermeneutical lessons, especially in the use of historical reasoning to determine the authenticity and meaning of biblical passages. The next two chapters show that historical explication became standard among a wide variety of religious thinkers; thus, these chapters challenge our perception of both orthodox and liberal thinkers, who used contextual interpretation to cultivate faith in atemporal truths.

This chapter details a variety of interpretive approaches used by a range of readers from different religious denominations. Discussing these approaches in close proximity can create confusion, but such discussions provide the reader a window into actual historical conversations. This narrative decision also allows me to highlight the biblical readers' distinctive interpretive approaches as well as their shared emphasis on historical explication. The Unitarians, Congregationalists, and Presbyterians

[5] Joseph S. Buckminster, "Philemon," in *Sermons by the late Rev. Joseph S. Buckminster*, 2nd ed. (Boston, 1815), 84.

discussed herein differed on crucial canonical and theological issues and varied in their level of engagement with European biblical criticism, but each of them incorporated aspects of biblical criticism's emphasis on contextual interpretation. In tracing this emphasis, this chapter prepares the way for the examination of a series of interpretive battles over the issue of slavery. While it took a civil war to resolve a question that theologians could not – whether American slavery was indeed anachronistic – these prewar rhetorical engagements along religious lines nourished an emerging historical consciousness while also creating the conditions for a constitutional debate with similar implications.

HISTORICAL KNOWLEDGE IN SEVENTEENTH- AND EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY HERMENEUTICS

The rise of biblical criticism in early nineteenth-century America followed developments in European biblical interpretation. Christianity had originated as a faith grounded in historical texts and figures, but the shakiness of those foundations began to appear only in relation to seventeenth- and eighteenth-century epistemological and methodological transformations that privileged historical explanations of the Bible. The Reformation's major thinkers, including Martin Luther and John Calvin, had believed that the Bible's content corresponded to actual historical realities and that substantive religious truths bound its two testaments together. In both literal and figurative interpretations, readers assumed that the words of the Bible reflected historical truths. Those readers received it as the sole source of divine revelation and trusted it as an authentic, accurate, and inclusive historical account of God's dealings with humankind.[6]

In the seventeenth century, a few thinkers began to challenge some of these underlying suppositions. This development corresponded with the rise of the term *hermeneutics* – the methodology of interpreting texts – which was quickly applied to the project of biblical interpretation. Practitioners of biblical hermeneutics included English philosopher Thomas Hobbes. In *Leviathan* (1651), Hobbes denied the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch and distinguished between the original writings of the apostles and the books that made up the New Testament. Furthermore, Hobbes supplanted the laws of God with the laws of nature.

[6] See Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven, 1974), 18–37.

He still accepted the biblical texts as accurate historical accounts, based on the determinative word of the civil sovereign, but his reading demonstrated how using historical analysis to scrutinize the Bible could undermine traditional tenets.[7]

Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza went even further. In his *Theological-Political Treatise* (1670), he also rejected the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch. Spinoza dismissed affinities between Israelite wars and Dutch struggles for independence, just as Hobbes had disassociated Israel's theocratic government from both Puritan and Catholic rule in England. Rather than assume that past prophets spoke to people in all ages – an assumption that produced anachronistic readings – Spinoza contended that biblical texts must be understood in relation to the historically conditioned intentions of their authors. In contrast to Hobbes, who placed the power of interpretation in the civil sovereign, Spinoza aimed to wrest authority from public purveyors of biblical understanding and exalt individual readers as interpreters. He did not mean to suggest that the Bible contained no truth or that all truth was relative; instead, he suggested that all truth, including biblical teachings, should be subjected to reason. Spinoza allowed that historical and religious truth might align but did not believe religious meaning depended on the historicity of biblical texts.[8]

Oblivious to these isolated discussions, most biblical readers assumed that the Bible faithfully recounted historical occurrences, conveyed a cumulative story, and embraced all of human existence. But thinkers continued to challenge these views. In the late seventeenth century, English philosopher John Locke incorporated narrow biblical narratives into an expansive human story rather than cramming world history into a presumably all-encompassing Bible. In the next century, deism, empiricism, and historical criticism posed new challenges to traditional readings. Deist Anthony Collins dismissed typological interpretations of the Old Testament as meaningless and literal readings as false. In response, inheritors of the figurative approach used providentialist readings to establish a bridge of religious meaning across the chasms of historical difference that divided the Old and New Testaments. Meanwhile, successors to the literalist approach strove to capture the original sense of

[7] Paul D. Cooke, *Hobbes and Christianity: Reassessing the Bible in Leviathan* (Lanham, MD, 1996), esp. chaps. 6–7.

[8] Samuel J. Preus, *Spinoza and the Irrelevance of Biblical Authority* (New York, 2001). See also Frei, *Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, 42–46.

scriptural passages and to determine their relationship to historical facts. Increasingly, hermeneutics revolved around the relationship between religious meaning and historical referent. While conservative interpreters read biblical narratives as factual sources of revealed truth, their liberal counterparts read them as dubious accounts of questionable inspiration. In either case, efforts to discern religious meaning became a question of understanding historical contexts. In short, historical reasoning began to control biblical interpretation.[9]

Historians often assume colonial America was isolated from the more dangerous undercurrents of these developments, but recent scholarship shows that Calvinist preacher and theologian Jonathan Edwards was drawn into those undercurrents.[10] In contrast to deists and Quakers, who derived religious knowledge from a priori understandings, he looked to scripture for religious instruction. Drawing on Locke's sensationalism, Edwards posited a kind of *divine* intuition, which he believed the Bible cultivated. And yet, deist critiques of an epistemology based in revelation led him to conclude, as Robert Brown notes, that "historical religious knowledge was the only source of *human* ideas about religion."[11] Aligning religious understanding with historical knowledge made it paramount for Edwards to defend the Bible and the Christian religion on historical grounds.

Writing in a notebook in the mid-1750s, Edwards upheld Hebrew scripture with historical arguments. Like earlier interpreters, he accepted the Bible's authenticity simply because it presented itself as historical. For example, because "some of the STATUTES of the Law [of Moses] are delivered in the FORM OF HISTORY," Edwards read those statutes as accurate accounts of past events. But Edwards also used profane knowledge to confirm the truth of the Bible.[12] He cited the history of pagan religions, for instance, to verify the accuracy of the Pentateuch and to favorably compare its contents. This kind of historical apologetic shows up throughout Edwards's "Notes on Scripture" and his early

[9] See Frei, *Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, 66–104; see also Lee, *Erosion of Biblical Certainty*, 11–24.

[10] Michael Lee has shown that Cotton Mather also selectively appropriated new interpretive methods. Lee, *Erosion of Biblical Certainty*, 26–51.

[11] Robert E. Brown, *Jonathan Edwards and the Bible* (Bloomington, IN, 2002), 27–87, quotation on 55 (emphasis mine).

[12] Jonathan Edwards, "Defense of the Pentateuch as a Work of Moses," in *Works of Jonathan Edwards Online*, *Volume 28*, *Minor Controversial Writings* (Jonathan Edwards Center at Yale University, 2008).

"Miscellanies." The latter, for example, includes the entry "History of the Old Testament from Moses' time confirmed from heathen traditions and records."[13] His catalogue of books, which references both ancient and contemporary historical sources, also shows Edwards's commitment to historical reasoning.[14] Although he remained apologetic in his reasoning and still prioritized divine intuition, he waged much of his biblical defense on the historical grounds that had been prepared by figures such as Hobbes, Spinoza, and Locke.[15] Indeed, precisely because Edwards believed the Bible to be the primary repository of divine revelation and the gauge of religious truth, sometimes he seemed to value historical reasoning even more than the Bible's critics.

In his "Work of Redemption," a collection of sermons he first delivered to his Northampton congregation in 1739 and then revised during the remainder of his life, Edwards contended that the historical nature of the Bible confirmed its revelatory status. In his sermons, he focused on Christ's salvific providences in the form of revivals. Rejecting the enlightenment-inspired mechanical philosophy of time and its anthropocentric view of progress toward a millennium, Edwards argued that God maintained sovereign control over historical development through continual redemptive workings. He believed that divinely directed revivals effected change toward a Christian culmination. This holistic historical view influenced Edwards's reading of the Bible.[16]

Even though he used extrabiblical sources and acknowledged human experience outside of the Bible, Edwards maintained that all human existence, past and present, fit within the biblical framework. Thus, he held that "the Bible is the most comprehensive book in the world."[17] In his first sermon, he noted that the work of redemption "'tis all but one work, one design. The various dispensations and works that belong to it are but the several parts of one scheme."[18] In his tenth sermon, Edwards again

[13] Jonathan Edwards, *Works of Jonathan Edwards, Volume 20, The "Miscellanies," 833–1152*, ed. Amy Plantinga Pauw (New Haven, CT, 2002), 351–53.

[14] Jonathan Edwards, *Works of Jonathan Edwards, Volume 26, Catalogues of Books*, ed. Peter J. Thuesen (New Haven, CT, 2008).

[15] See Brown, *Edwards and the Bible*, 88–163; see also Lee, *Erosion of Biblical Certainty*, 71–85.

[16] Avihu Zakai, *Jonathan Edwards's Philosophy of History: The Reenchantment of the World in the Age of Enlightenment* (Princeton, NJ, 2003). On "Work of Redemption," see also Brown, *Edwards and the Bible*, 164–96.

[17] Jonathan Edwards, *Works of Jonathan Edwards, vol. 9, A History of the Work of Redemption*, ed. John F. Wilson (New Haven, 1989), 291.

[18] Ibid., 9:118.

explained that the Bible contained "an account of how the Work of Redemption is carried on from the beginning to the end." Aware that new historical information attested to extrabiblical peoples and settings, he admitted that "the Scripture don't contain a proper history of the whole," but taught that "there is contained the whole chain of great events by which this affair has been carried on from the foundation soon after the fall of man to the finishing of it at the end of the world."[19] In cases where the Bible did not offer a "proper history" of its own subjects, Edwards believed God "took care that there should be authentic and full accounts . . . preserved in profane history," which, he argued, "wonderfully agree with the many prophecies that we have in Scripture of these times."[20]

While using extrabiblical historical sources to confirm the Bible's factuality, Edwards felt a need to account for its historical nature and distinguish it from other historical sources. He set out to do this in his thirteenth sermon. In response to readings that placed the biblical texts alongside other histories and thus threatened to desacralize them, Edwards posited that "though they are histories, yet they are no less full of divine instruction . . . than other parts of the holy Scriptures that are not historical. To object against a book's being divine merely because it is historical is a silly objection."[21] Indeed, Edwards continued, the notion was "so far from being a weighty objection against the historical parts of Scripture being the word of God that 'tis a strong argument" in its favor. If reason led "all civilized nations to keep records," he wondered, "how much more may we expect that God gives the world a record of the dispensations of his divine government."[22] Edwards insisted that revelatory eras deserved historical accounts. And these accounts offered unique insight into the ancient past: "the times of the history of the Old Testament are times that no other history reaches up to."[23] While observing that the Bible provided historical depth, Edwards believed that its unmatched narration "of the grand scheme of divine providence" was what distinguished it and ensured its continued relevance.[24]

The lens of redemptive workings provided Edwards with an answer to the problem of distance that historical research had begun to expose. "Some," he bemoaned, "are ready to look on the Old Testament as being, as it were, out of date and as if we in these days of the gospel had but little to do with it." While some Christians perceived an insurmountable

[19] Ibid., 9:242. [20] Ibid., 9:243. [21] Ibid., 9:284. [22] Ibid., 9:285.
[23] Ibid., 9:285–86. [24] Ibid., 9:284.

distance between modern Americans and ancient Hebrews, Edwards insisted that "both Old Testament and New, is filled up with gospel, only with this difference, that the Old Testament contains the gospel under a veil."[25] This typological reading protected the relevance of the Hebrew scriptures. While acknowledging extrabiblical sources and using them to confirm the authenticity of biblical texts, Edwards incorporated both the Bible and extrabiblical sources into God's all-encompassing work of redemption. This approach ensured the present era's hold on the biblical past. In the short term, this reading guarded against the threat of historical distance as an interpretive problem. However, by meeting his opponents on historical grounds, Edwards helped set the stage for new developments in historical readings of the Bible. Within a few generations, some American exegetes began to argue that the Bible's divinity rested on its historicity and insisted that a proper interpretation required contextual readings. This placed the sacred biblical texts in a precarious position, threatening to further expose the archaism behind the veil.

Much of this development depended on advances in European biblical scholarship. As deism directed America's preeminent theologian to prize historical knowledge, so it also contributed to the rise of biblical criticism as an autonomous academic discipline. In the 1770s, German enlightenment scholar Gotthold Ephraim Lessing published portions of a work in which deist Hermann Samuel Reimarus denied the historical accuracy of the New Testament texts and dismissed Jesus's miracles. In response, Johann Salomo Semler, a professor of theology at the University of Halle, defended the miracles' factuality by appealing to historical context. One of Semler's students, Johann David Michaelis, who became a professor of history at the University of Göttingen, embraced the historical approach to the Bible, as did his student Johann Gottfried Eichhorn. Halle and Göttingen provided nourishing institutional seedbeds in which German biblical criticism flourished. In their historical introductions to the New and Old Testaments, Michaelis and Eichhorn provided the first thorough treatments of the anticipatory questions that had been raised by Spinoza, Hobbes, and Locke.

Acknowledging the historical nature of the Bible's content, these German critics used philological and historical tools to ascertain the origin, context, and factual veracity of biblical narratives. Rather than draw a straight line from historical content to religious meaning, as had their predecessors, they sought to recover historical conditions to

[25] Ibid., 9:290.

determine the enduring religious value of biblical passages. In their view, religious meaning was distinguishable from historical facts and could not be wholly explained through reference to historical contexts, but facts provided a basis for belief, and context acted as a gauge of truth. In championing contextual interpretation of biblical and also classical texts, these moderate German scholars demonstrated awareness of historical distance from ancients such as Plato, Homer, and Moses.[26] Johann Gottfried Herder, in particular, assumed historical distance in viewing each era, including the biblical pasts, as unique. He argued that because each past period and people had distinct value, historians must approach them sympathetically.[27] Such attention to historical distinctions raised questions about the canon's unitary meaning. Even before Lessing published Reimarus's work, Semler had divided up biblical books based on what contextual investigation indicated about their religious value. Unlike Edwards, Semler did not think each biblical text preached of Christ. These varied uses of historical reasoning opened the door to Johann Philipp Gabler's biblical theology. Gabler contended that religious meaning depended on textual referents in the form of facts authenticated through historical research.[28] In these ways, German biblical critics made contextual reading central to the project of biblical interpretation.

Within a few decades, these developments began to shape American biblical scholarship, which had already begun leaning toward an emphasis on historical reasoning. In general, American biblical scholars were less critical than their German counterparts, but the Americans became even more invested in the historical nature of biblical texts during this period. Scottish realism encouraged that investment. In revising Locke's sensationalist epistemology to combat David Hume's skepticism, Glasgow native Thomas Reid asserted that ordinary human experience laid bare the universal presence of internal first principles. According to Reid, these principles revealed the self and attested to the reality of objects perceived via the senses. American proponents of evidential Christianity used this bolstered sensationalism, along with the empiricism of Francis Bacon, to marshal internal and external evidences in defense of the reasonableness of the Bible. This provided them with a viable response to radical deists such as Thomas Paine, who battered the Bible as irrational. Orthodox

[26] Michael C. Carhart, *The Science of Culture in Enlightenment Germany* (Cambridge, MA, 2007).
[27] Beiser, *The German Historicist Tradition*, 110–20.
[28] See Frei, *Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, 60–65, 105–64.

belief guarded most of America's biblical scholars from the undermining potential of biblical criticism, but as with Edwards before them, their strenuous efforts to evidence the truth of Christianity drew together historicity and religious meaning. Historical reasoning became a principal concern for American exegetes, which created the conditions for the qualified introduction of biblical criticism in antebellum America.[29] Thus began the exegetical march toward reading the Bible as a historical text and the resulting sense of historical distance, two developments that challenged assumptions of easy transference between biblical past and American present.

JOSEPH S. BUCKMINSTER'S "HISTORICAL EXPLICATION"

The same sources that shaped biblical criticism in Europe informed its institutional arrival in America. Convinced that "deistical publications" obscured Christian truths, Samuel Dexter set aside $5,000 in his will for Harvard to promote "that most useful branch of learning, the critical knowledge of the holy scriptures."[30] He directed the testators to acquire scholarly works, purchase and support the production of new translations, and fund learned lectures "for the purposes of *critically* explaining either the *history*, *doctrines*, or *precepts*, of the gospel." History figured prominently in Dexter's plans, as in his emphasis on the "usefulness of explaining idioms, phrases, and figures of speech, which abound in the scriptures; and the usages and customs therein referred to; and of clearing up the difficulties in sacred chronology and geography."[31] Dexter understood that biblical criticism was often a historical endeavor.

In 1811, the year after his death, Dexter's trustees elected Joseph Buckminster as Harvard's Dexter Lecturer of Biblical Criticism, the first American academic appointment of its kind.[32] When notified of his election, the New Hampshire native wrote to Harvard President John Thornton Kirkland of the "unexpected appointment." The young Unitarian minister expressed his conviction that perhaps the lectureship

[29] See Holifield, *Theology in America*, 174–95.

[30] "Intelligence," *General Repository and Review* 1 (January 1812): 204, 205. The *Repository*'s Unitarian editors introduced readers to biblical criticism, providing them with an English translation of Eichhorn's biography of Semler, discussions about critical editions of the Bible, and reviews of histories and geographies of the New Testament.

[31] Ibid., 205, emphasis in original.

[32] Ibid., 208–9. For more on Buckminster's role in propagating biblical criticism in America, see Brown, *Rise of Biblical Criticism*, 10–26.

should be "entrusted to some one whose age and acknowledged merits in theology will gain for them more consideration than will probably be secured by the present appointment." If the trustees were set on Buckminster, however, he stood ready "to execute as well as the time allows and my own health will permit."[33] Neither time nor his health complied. In 1812, before beginning his lectureship, the promising twenty-eight-year-old died of epilepsy. Nonetheless, Buckminster had already contributed to the development of American biblical scholarship. As minister of the prominent Brattle Street Church and as Boston's foremost orator, he had displayed a respectable grasp of German biblical criticism and put it to use. While he upheld the Bible as the final authority on religious truth, Buckminster called upon historical insight to explain its teachings.

Buckminster developed an interest in both history and biblical scholarship at an early age. He learned Greek and Latin as a child and graduated at the age of sixteen from Harvard with both a bachelor's and master's degree. As a student, he wrote an essay entitled "Biblical Criticism." It contained passages copied from Herodotus and Thucydides, extracts from evidentialist Samuel Clarke's writings on Homer, and notes on Hebrew grammars. While the essay reflected the period's overlapping interest in classical works and the Bible, it contained little of what Buckminster learned in subsequent years from German scholars.[34]

In a more illuminating essay titled "Study of History," Buckminster demonstrated a youthful fascination with the utility of the past. Allowing that metaphysics offered delight, and that poetry and oratory provided ornamentation, he proposed that "to History alone can we resort in circumstances the most intricate and situations the most hazardous. Here is collected in one vein the universal experience of human nature." Buckminster's idea of history as a guide to human endeavor echoed the axiom, famously expressed by Lord Bolingbroke and repeated throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, that "history is philosophy teaching by examples."[35] History gifted the present the collective wisdom of generations past. According to Buckminster, the universality of human nature ensured history's continued usefulness: "the utility of the study of

[33] Joseph S. Buckminster to John Thornton Kirkland, n.d., Joseph Stevens Buckminster Papers, Boston Athenæum (hereafter BA).

[34] Joseph S. Buckminster, "Biblical Criticism," Joseph Stevens Buckminster Papers, BA.

[35] Bolingbroke attributed the idea to the Greek historian Dionysius of Halicarnassus. See Henry St. John, Viscount Bolingbroke, *Letters on the Study and Use of History* (London, 1752), 1:15.

history results from the truth of this principle, viz. that human nature remains throughout all ages essentially unaltered." While acknowledging that "precisely the same circumstances can never twice occur, and consequently precisely the same line of conduct can never be wisely attempted," he believed that "where a strong analogy or resemblance can be traced we are justified in similar conduct of sentiment." While exhibiting a traditional belief in human nature as static, this short student essay also displayed a more modern awareness of distinct historical contexts. The recognition of particular circumstances in a search for universal truths became a central component in Buckminster's approach to biblical texts.[36]

In 1806, two years after Buckminster became minister of the Brattle Street Church, he made a trip to Europe, as Harvard graduates often did, and amassed a huge library of biblical studies. An 1810 letter from Buckminster to Herbert Marsh, an English bishop who had studied with Michaelis and had translated his mentor's introduction to the New Testament, shows that Buckminster obtained works such as the manual edition of Johann Jakob Griesbach's two-volume study of the New Testament, *Novum Testamentum Græce* (1774–75).[37] In 1809, Buckminster published the first American edition of Griesbach's study.[38] Buckminster's sermons suggest that he not only bought and published such works but also read and used them in preaching to his Boston congregants, who heard him articulate a historical approach to the Bible.[39]

A passage from a set of Buckminster's undated sermon notes "On Studying the N.T. as a historical record" encapsulates his approach to the Bible as a historical text. Buckminster wrote,

> To many xtns [Christians] it appears superfluous and vain to insist so much as we do on the study of the books of the N.T. as historical records. We do this however not only because the importance of the facts there recorded justifies and demands the closest attention, but because this is the only method by wih [which] we can arrive at the understanding of the primitive simplicity of xtnity [Christianity], and correct there mistakes into wih [which] we are continually led by the sound of words and phrases taken out of their connexion, and by the misapplication of

[36] Joseph S. Buckminster, "Study of History," Joseph Stevens Buckminster Papers, BA.
[37] Joseph S. Buckminster to Herbert Marsh, May 13, 1810, Joseph Stevens Buckminster Papers, BA.
[38] See Lee, *Erosion of Biblical Certainty*, 130–36.
[39] On the European influences of Buckminster's emphasis on contextual readings, see Lee, *Erosion of Biblical Certainty*, 144–53.

phrases appropriate to certain times and circumstances to the all ages, and all the world.

Understanding the historical nature of biblical texts and the contextual nature of biblical language, Buckminster aimed to avoid anachronistic readings and applications as he strove to recover religious truth. He exhibited a historicist confidence that once the interpreter recognized historical distance, he could use research to overcome that distance for himself and his contemporaries. In writing that "it is only so far as his hearers take an interest in the same inquiries and are furnished with similar information that his discourses can be truly profitable," Buckminster hoped his congregants would join him in recognizing the importance of a historical exegesis of the New Testament. Because he believed "the circumstances of the first chhs [churches] of xt [Christ], to wih [which] Pauls epistles are directed, make a very interesting and profitable subject," Buckminster made those circumstances the focus of his historical explication.[40]

Buckminster's mode of historical explication assumed the canon's authenticity. He followed Michaelis in drawing distinctions between the two testaments, and he received the Gospels as canonical based on apostolic authorship, which he believed was confirmed by internal consistency and external evidences such as miracles and fulfilled prophecies. For Buckminster, intertextual analysis ensured historical accuracy, and extratextual historical evidence confirmed, but could not unsettle, the canon. Using textual evidence alone to authenticate the canon limited the extent to which extrabiblical evidence could shape Buckminster's views. Even still, he advanced a contextual approach that drew attention to the historical differences among biblical pasts and, especially, between those pasts and his American present.

In a sermon on Philemon, probably delivered sometime between February 1809 and August 1810, Buckminster described biblical exegesis as a historical endeavor. He used the Gospels to authenticate other New Testament texts, and Paul's epistle to Philemon passed the test. After a quick verse-by-verse analysis of the text, wherein Paul returns Onesimus, a slave, to his master, Buckminster proposed that "an historical explication of the writings of the New Testament" provided "the most interesting and satisfactory mode of studying them."[41] What did

[40] Joseph S. Buckminster, "On Studying the N.T. as a historical record," Joseph Stevens Buckminster Papers, BA.

[41] Buckminster, "Philemon," 78–92, quotation on 83.

"historical explication" signify? He explained: "instead of looking into every text, separated from its context, to find something which may bear upon a favourite system, we should be content to understand the apostles, as they meant to be understood by those to whom they wrote." Challenging conventional understandings, Buckminster insisted that the apostles "were not, on every occasion, delivering a system of dogmas for the instruction of all succeeding time."[42] This approach paralleled the arguments of figures such as Herder. To avoid the pitfalls of conventional readings, which often ignored historical differences and collapsed historical distance, Buckminster stressed the need for contextual interpretation; he insisted that historical context rather than present concerns should direct analysis. This attention to temporal disjuncture marked a departure from readings that assumed the timelessness of biblical words.

In emphasizing context, Buckminster suggested that readers focus on the intentions of historical authors and the reception of historical audiences. A similar emphasis on original intent and meaning also developed in legal interpretation, where constitutional interpreters began to stress the need to understand Madison's founding-era context. Focused on Paul's context, Buckminster wrote that the ancient apostle "consulted the circumstances of his correspondents, reasoned with them sometimes on their own assumptions, and sometimes upon prevailing hypotheses, now according to their peculiar habits of interpretation, and then upon suppositions and accommodations of his own."[43] Buckminster hoped his audience would adopt the view that Paul inhabited a different world. Acting as a guide in a foreign country, Buckminster used works such as Michaelis's studies on the New Testament to help orient readers during their sojourn. Buckminster's emphasis on context as determinative, and his efforts to illuminate that context, indicated that the New Testament past was distinct and unfamiliar.

This approach raised a difficult question: if the Bible's writings were subject to the same constraints as other texts, how could one be sure it taught eternal truths? Buckminster rejected the popular notion of plenary inspiration: he believed apostolic writings constituted the word of God but that God did not inspire his authors in every particular. Still, Buckminster held that God "would not suffer them, in writing on any occasion in which his revelation was even remotely concerned, to give a false or mistaken statement of his truth."[44] While at pains to ground the texts in local circumstances, he assured his congregants that an eternal

[42] Ibid., 83–84. [43] Ibid., 84. [44] Ibid., 85.

God guarded his temporal servants from error. Like Edwards's appraisal of the Old Testament, Buckminster believed the apostles' writings held unique historical value. They throw "light upon the early history of the gospel," he proposed, and assist "us in judging of the probability of the principle facts mentioned ... in one word, they are documents which awaken an interest in, and add confirmation to the wonderful history of Jesus and his apostles."[45]

While using the apostolic epistles to confirm the message of the Gospels, Buckminster continued to caution against assuming affinities between past and present. He acknowledged that Christians would like to know "what the apostles thought upon some subjects of modern speculation," but he cautioned that "it is likely that few [of those modern subjects], perhaps none of them, ever once entered their minds." In focusing on differences in thought, Buckminster noted that the apostles' writings must be read as historically situated records, written "in a popular style, influenced ... by the prevailing notions of their own age and nation; a style by no means nicely accommodated to the metaphysics of our times."[46] Buckminster told his congregants that in most instances, ideas specific to the apostles' own distinct era – one distant from the present age – shaped their teachings.

Buckminster's historical explication alternated between emphasizing context and authenticating text. Turning his attention to the content of Paul's letter, he demonstrated how comparing New Testament texts could confirm their histories and religious truths. He asked his audience to imagine the following: the executor of Philemon's estate reads the book of Acts, peruses Paul's letter to Philemon, and listens to a public narration of his correspondence to the Colossians. Such experiences, Buckminster suggested, would verify the "history of the apostle."[47] Buckminster contended that intertextual analysis authenticated New Testament texts.

In a move reminiscent of Edwards, Buckminster also appealed to a contemporaneous nonbiblical text to elevate Christianity above other belief systems and to confirm the plausibility of Paul's decision to return the slave Onesimus to his master, Philemon. Noting that the Roman author Pliny the Elder "lived in the same age with the apostle," Buckminster cited an extant letter that Pliny had "addressed to one of his friends, upon an occasion precisely similar to this of Paul,

[45] Ibid., 86. [46] Ibid. [47] Ibid., 88.

interceding for the pardon of a runaway slave."[48] According to Buckminster, the affinities between the sources corroborated Paul's account. In comparing the accounts, Buckminster noted that Pliny's epistle, though written by a man of literary learning, "is altogether inferiour."[49] Buckminster used remainders of the classical past to attest to both the factuality and the superiority of the New Testament past. Given the text's historical accuracy and superior literary value, the author's magnanimity, and Christianity's greatness, he wondered "what ideas would the reader of this letter [to Philemon] form of the nature and spirit of christianity?"[50]

Christian universalism was among the religious truths that Buckminster extracted from Paul's letter. Here the reader "would learn, that the soul, even of a fugitive slave, is not unworthy of being rescued from the tyranny and misery of sin; that the gift of eternal life ... is no less important to Onesimus, than to his master." But freedom from sin did not signify freedom from slavery. "In remarkable coincidence with the doctrine of the apostle in other epistles," the reader "would find, that Christianity made no alterations in the civil or political relations of the converts."[51] Buckminster had highlighted congruencies among apostolic texts to authenticate Paul's letter, marshaled extrabiblical historical evidence to confirm its history, and then made Paul speak for "all succeeding time" on slavery and *fugitive slaves* – a contemporary term applied to an ancient figure.[52]

Buckminster's contextual interpretation of Philemon itself demands further contextualization. Providing a historical explication of a text in which Paul returns Onesimus, a slave, to Philemon was not an arbitrary choice. In 1808, a year or two before Buckminster's speech, Congress used section 9 of article 1 of the Constitution to pass an act prohibiting the importation of slaves. Illegalizing the transatlantic slave trade made southern slaveholders more dependent on the domestic slave trade and more reliant on the enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1793, which had bolstered the Constitution's fugitive slave clause. In this context, Buckminster wrote of Paul's return of Onesimus to Philemon: "how unlike the customs and the spirit of modern society!"[53] His reading, which paralleled a conventional constitutional reading urging the

[48] Ibid., 89, 89–90. For similar uses of nonbiblical sources see, for example, Joseph S. Buckminster, "The Fitness of the Time of the Introduction of the Gospel," in *Sermons by the late Rev. Joseph S. Buckminster*, 3–4.
[49] Buckminster, "Philemon," 90. [50] Ibid., 91. [51] Ibid. [52] Ibid., 91–92.
[53] Ibid., 92.

maintenance of the status quo, condemned those antislavery contemporaries who failed to collapse historical distance and live as Paul had.

Buckminster believed that certain human relations – including that between enslaver and enslaved – remained constant despite profound changes in thought, language, and custom. His reading of Philemon would echo loud and clear in subsequent decades, culminating in defenses of the Fugitive Slave Law (1850), and finding a legal corollary in constitutional readings that also acknowledged and then set aside historical change. Nineteenth-century concerns constrained biblical readers' views of Christian freedom – as they would later inhibit constitutional readers' ideas of American freedom – and encouraged individuals in both groups to ignore historical distance in the application of original proslavery biblical and legal truths.

Buckminster's biblical criticism was synonymous with his historical explication, which he used to uncover universal truths. He began with the acknowledgment that New Testament Christianity "is conveyed to us in the historical form" and built from an assumption of the biblical texts' historicity.[54] Arguing for the need to understand the historical situation in which these texts were produced, Buckminster proceeded to extract timeless religious truths from transient temporal facts. His emphasis on the need to recognize the historical situatedness of an apostolic author, his text, and his audience and the historical distance between said author, his text, and the present yielded to the idea that on crucial issues, such as the relationship between enslaver and enslaved, the canon transcended time. In this way, Buckminster conceived of historical understanding and religious truth as allies.

However, in making religious truth epistemologically dependent on "an historical explication," Buckminster's reading had the potential of arming historical understanding against religious truth. What happened, for example, when historical insight undermined the authenticity of a biblical text or the permanence of its teachings? Buckminster believed attention to historical differences would yield more accurate readings and make it easier to understand and apply universal truths, but his contextual emphasis laid bare the temporal nature of biblical eras and drew attention to distance from those favored pasts. The realization of historical distance could complicate assertions of the Bible's relevance.

[54] Joseph S. Buckminster, "Acts 10:34–35, February 1812," Joseph Stevens Buckminster Papers, BA.

At this point, biblical interpreters such as Buckminster seemed unaware of the interpretive challenges their attention to historical differences might pose. And indeed, as an alternative to a firmly entrenched ahistorical approach to scripture, Buckminster's historical explication stood little chance of spreading awareness of historical distance in ways that might challenge the Bible's moral authority. Buckminster worried about winning over audiences who were skeptical of his approach rather than warning them about the skepticism that might follow historical exegesis. And yet, his version of historical explication marked the beginning of a broad development toward reading the Bible in ways that drew attention to the temporal and transient nature of the sacred text's content. Such historical readings opened the door for later interpreters to use a newfound sense of historical distance to question the modern relevance of ancient scriptures.

Over the next few decades slavery maintained and then increased its hold on the national consciousness, fueling efforts to provide historical readings of the Bible and thus increasing the potential for readers to recognize the problem distance posed to their interpretations. Using historical facts to confirm religious truths made the interpretive challenge of temporal distance difficult to ignore. Before that challenge was drawn out into the open, however, an array of biblical scholars began to adopt and promote the same kind of historical explication that Buckminster had advanced.

RELIGIOUS LIBERALS IN THE BATTLE FOR THE ELEVATED GROUNDS OF HISTORY

The influence of Buckminster, America's foremost proponent of biblical criticism in the first decade of the nineteenth century, remained mostly limited to his Brattle Street congregation. His appointment as Dexter Lecturer promised to spread his principles to a more engaged audience. Death robbed him of the opportunity, but it also gave life to biblical criticism in the United States. The public sale of his library brought together some of America's most prominent and promising biblical scholars, and when they parted ways, they left with works of European biblical criticism. While they approached biblical criticism in distinct modes and used new insights to different ends, most of them began to privilege a form of what Buckminster had called "an historical explication" of scripture.

Although Unitarianism was a newer feature of the American religious landscape, and while Unitarians were relatively few in numbers, they

figured most prominently in promoting historical explication in the antebellum era. American Unitarianism had emerged gradually from the divide that had developed between conservative and liberal congregationalist churches in New England. In the eighteenth century, liberal ministers such as Jonathan Mayhew had valued reason over enthusiasm and had called into question the creedal belief in the Trinity. Despite Jedidiah Morse's later claims, American Unitarians did not adopt the views of English Unitarians such as Joseph Priestley, who relegated Jesus to the status of a human teacher. However, they did set aside a belief in God's meddling providence in favor of an emphasis on his paternal benevolence and replaced the idea of original sin with human virtue. They also insisted that a reasonable reading of the New Testament would highlight these truths.

The Unitarian emphasis on reason usually carried with it an attention to context, as demonstrated in the sermons of figures such as Buckminster and Samuel Cary. In January 1809, Cary became the pastor of King's Chapel in Boston. A few years earlier, he had served as the assistant minister at King's Chapel, a position Buckminster had turned down. In July 1809, Cary was present with Buckminster at the founding of the Massachusetts Bible Society (MBS). Cary and Buckminster had similar associations and advocated the same brand of biblical criticism.

In an 1814 sermon given first at King's Chapel and then at the Brattle Street Church, Cary promoted historical explication. Accepting the Bible as "an authentick record of what God has revealed to mankind," he outlined the historical nature of the biblical record.[55] He attributed scriptural ignorance to the idea that "most christians are but imperfectly acquainted with the facts ... which have been brought to light by the researches of biblical criticism."[56] According to Cary, in order to understand "the works of men who lived at a very remote period, and who wrote with particular objects in view, and are known to have accommodated themselves to the circumstances of their own time; it is manifestly necessary, that we should know something of the state of the world at that period."[57] In this era, biblical scholars frequently used the term *accommodate* to describe how God or biblical speakers and writers used the language and ideas of their own times to be understood by their contemporary audiences. With this in mind, Cary emphasized that readers

[55] Samuel Cary, *Ignorance of the True Meaning of the Scriptures, and the Causes of It* (Boston, 1814), 5.
[56] Ibid., 14–15. [57] Ibid., 15.

must recognize the "particular" nature of the Bible's contents, which, he explained, often "can have no reference whatever to any circumstances now existing in christian societies." As with Buckminster, Cary insisted on the need to separate "the mere local precepts from those which are of universal and perpetual obligation."[58] This practice of dividing the particular from the universal promised to bring religious truths to the fore, but in the process it also began to draw new attention to just how different the biblical pasts were from the present.

Like Buckminster, Cary died young. He passed away in 1815 at the age of twenty-nine, leaving the work of promoting biblical criticism to other Unitarians, including William Ellery Channing, who had been the pastor at Boston's Federal Street Church since 1803. Channing was another Harvard graduate who attended MBS meetings, and he succeeded Buckminster as Dexter Lecturer from 1812 to 1813. Channing's most successful efforts to publicize the Unitarian approach to scripture came not during his time as Dexter Lecturer in Cambridge but instead through a sermon he gave at the ordination of fellow Harvard alumnus Jared Sparks in Baltimore. On that occasion in 1819, the thirty-nine-year-old Unitarian luminary prioritized apostolic texts and upheld the reasonable use of historical knowledge as indispensable in interpretation.

Channing asserted that because God conformed to human language, "every word and every sentence must be modified and explained according to the subject . . . the purposes, feelings, circumstances and principles of the writer, and . . . the genius and idioms of the language which he uses."[59] Not even the Holy Spirit, he explained, suspended "the peculiarities of their minds."[60] One hears Buckminster and Cary in Channing's caution that "the different portions of this book . . . refer perpetually to the times when they were written, to states of society, to modes of thinking, to controversies in the church, to feelings and usages which have passed away, and without the knowledge of which we are constantly in danger of extending to all times, and places, what was of temporary and local application."[61] Like the first Dexter Lecturer, Channing encouraged readers to avoid anachronistic applications and insisted that they must recover and use the historical context in which the apostles operated to

[58] Ibid., 16.
[59] William Ellery Channing, *A Sermon Delivered at the Ordination of the Rev. Jared Sparks* (Boston, 1819), 5. On Channing's role in propagating biblical criticism in America, see Brown, *Rise of Biblical Criticism*, 28–29, 60–74.
[60] Channing, *Sermon*, 7. [61] Ibid.

successfully separate general timeless truths from particular temporal facts. That insistence indicated historical difference.

As explained later, Channing's emphasis on context and his insistence on historical difference would allow him to posit that the apostles had taken expedient measures in addressing slavery's evil: rather than damn the institution outright, he would argue, the apostles had sowed abolitionist principles. Believing in the progress of those principles also led Channing to insist that the Constitution must be brought into accord with the antislavery spirit of the times. In both interpretive instances, Channing's readings implied that historical distance required the interpretive use of historical knowledge and reason.

But historical distance became an interpretive problem before it became an interpretive force, and both developments followed from biblical debates. In 1813, Andrews Norton, another Harvard graduate, replaced Channing as Dexter Lecturer. About six years later, around the same time as Channing's sermon, the Dexter Lectureship became the Dexter Professorship of Sacred Literature, and Norton filled the position. His appointment ensured the continuing spread of a historical approach to the Bible, as well as the deepening of religious divides. Whereas Channing had healthy exchanges with conservatives such as Moses Stuart and radicals such as Theodore Parker, the contentious Norton often engaged in more heated debates with his Christian contemporaries. In working to position Unitarianism against Calvinism on the right and Transcendentalism on the left, Norton went further than most American interpreters in advocating for a historicist approach to the scriptures.

Norton began by upholding what he described as the liberal approach to scripture over and against his understanding of the orthodox approach. In 1812, he opened the *General Repository* with an attack on orthodox interpreters, who, he argued, "pay but little regard to the circumstances in which [the author] wrote, or to those of the persons, whom he addressed."[62] In contrast, Norton posited, liberals rightly attend "to all these circumstances."[63] Like Buckminster before him, Norton insisted that interpreters must consider the circumstances of the ancient authors and their ancient audiences. As a Unitarian, he

[62] Andrews Norton, "A Defence of Liberal Christianity," *General Repository and Review* 1 (January 1812): 2. On Norton's role in propagating biblical criticism in America, see Brown, *Rise of Biblical Criticism*, 29–35, 69–93; see also Lee, *Erosion of Biblical Certainty*, 153–72.

[63] Norton, "Defence of Liberal Christianity," 3.

believed the New Testament to be the source of Christian truth and stressed the importance of historical explication in attempts to grasp the meaning of its texts.

While Norton articulated the liberal approach to scripture in relationship to more orthodox American interpreters, his emphasis on contextual readings developed in relationship to a foreign foe: the German critics. Norton's journal shows that in early 1818, perhaps in anticipation of his new appointment, he began reading and taking notes on works by Eichhorn and other German scholars. The depth of German criticism threatened Norton's beliefs and those of his American contemporaries. Rather than use contextual reasoning to better understand the religious truths of the Bible, German critics often applied such reasoning to explain and dismiss biblical texts as factually inaccurate products of their time. In light of this threat, Norton told a young George Bancroft that "there is nothing more abhorrent to our natures than German sentiment."[64] Bancroft had recently graduated from Harvard and was pursuing his doctorate under the tutelage of German scholars at Göttingen. Bancroft and a number of other Harvard graduates attended German universities with plans to begin a career in the ministry, but upon their return, they opted for other occupations, in part because of the cracks German biblical criticism had exposed in their Christian foundations. Norton had sensed the danger the Germans posed and warned Bancroft. Now Norton also began preparing a robust response.

Even as Norton started to formulate an answer to the threat of biblical criticism, he embraced much of its emphasis on historical reasoning and turned it to his own purposes. Late in 1818, he "commenced a work on the genuineness of the Gospels."[65] The next May, he notified Bancroft of Channing's recent sermon and explained that he, Norton, had been elected "Professor of biblical literature."[66] In subsequent letters, Norton sought clarification on the state of biblical scholarship in Germany and asked Bancroft to send German-authored works. In his journal, Norton continued to take notes on such works and tested his own arguments. This marked the beginning of an effort that culminated in his three-volume

[64] Andrews Norton to George Bancroft, December 29, 1820, Andrews Norton Papers, MS Am 1089, Houghton.
[65] Andrews Norton, Journal, December 31, 1818, Andrews Norton Papers, MS Am 1089, Houghton.
[66] Andrews Norton to George Bancroft, May 24, 1819, Andrews Norton Papers, MS Am 1089, Houghton.

Evidences of the Genuineness of the Gospels (1837–44).[67] In this mature work, Norton would marshal historical evidence to defend the Gospels as authentic.

In the earliest stages of this project, Norton focused less on answering the critics and more on convincing students of the correctness of the historical approach. If America's rising biblical scholars were going to beat the skeptics, they first had to learn how to play the game. Norton thus spent much of his time and energy emphasizing the importance of attending to circumstance and context in interpretation.

In this effort, Norton, like Buckminster, did not lose sight of the faith-affirming purpose of scriptural interpretation. He privileged historical understanding to highlight transcendent truth. In his "Materials for Lectures on Biblical Criticism," Norton even suggested that Jesus sometimes articulated ideas meant to be understood not "by his hearers at the time, but only afterward."[68] This indicated that Jesus, unlike his audience, sometimes transcended the limits of his immediate context and spoke across the centuries. The idea that some historical actors addressed future audiences bore some semblance to the antislavery biblical and constitutional readings later advanced by Channing and others, who argued that the Christian founders and the founding fathers had planted the seeds of abolition for their Christian and American descendants to cultivate. Before that development, Norton used the idea to signal the transcendence of Christ's message.

While Norton allowed that Christ sometimes taught in anticipation, he seemed intent on making sure his students understood the ways in which context constrained the teachings contained in the Bible. Citing various scriptures, he aimed to demonstrate that biblical teachings are best "explained by a consideration of circumstances."[69] Norton fleshed out these ideas in his lecture notes, in which he held that "the fundamental principles of religion and virtue are always the same" even as he affirmed that "the particular rules derived from these vary with the varying circumstances of men." He outlined three kinds of information needed to understand scripture, including "a knowledge of the circumstances under which the discourses of our Saviour were delivered, and the writings of

[67] Andrews Norton to George Bancroft, April 29, 1820, Andrews Norton Papers, MS Am 1089, Houghton.
[68] Andrews Norton, "Materials for Lectures on Biblical Criticism," Notebooks of Andrews Norton, Andrews Norton Papers, MS Am 1089, Houghton.
[69] Ibid.

the evangelists and apostles [were] composed," an understanding of the biblical writers' style, and a knowledge of the meanings behind their words and phrases. Norton indicated that all of this interpretive information had to be obtained through historical reasoning.[70]

In Norton's view, the particular revealed the eternal, which readers might miss if they assumed the Bible's relevance. He thus taught his students to read New Testament writings in relation to their authors' circumstances, explaining that "we must know the situation and character of those to whom any particular rules are addressed, before we can judge ... of the extensiveness of their application to others." Norton warned, "We shall interpret all these [scriptures] very erroneously if we neglect their original application, and suppose them to have a direct relation to ourselves." He wanted his students to understand that failing to take note of controversies "which have become long since wholly obsolete" and supposing that the apostles wrote "with the express design of affording instruction to all Christians in all ages" obscured original and universal truths. So, again and again Norton emphasized that readers "must be careful to understand" a text's "words in their original sense, and not that which they have acquired in modern times."[71] In most cases, he explained to his pupils, Christ and his apostles addressed the specific needs and problems of specific audiences. Norton's students learned to assume historical difference in and distance from the New Testament past.

Student notes on Norton's lectures confirm his insistence that readers use historical reasoning and indicate that he taught this approach as the corrective to enduring traditional readings. Alexander Young attended Harvard Divinity School from 1821 to 1824 and took Norton's course on biblical criticism. His notes are replete with references to the need for interpreters to take into account "particular" and "peculiar circumstances" and to avoid substituting "the modern for the original" meanings. Young recorded that "the fathers did not attend to these things ... they were inattentive to the peculiarities of the style of the N.T." While referencing prior generations, Norton's incessant instruction that "external circumstances ... should qualify the meaning" of scripture suggests that he also had in mind his contemporaries, including some of his students, who – like their fathers – imagined "a general and permanent state of things" and assumed that each passage was "intended for all men"

[70] Norton, Lecture 5, Notebooks of Andrews Norton, Andrews Norton Papers, MS Am 1089, Houghton.
[71] Ibid.

and "miraculously inspired for the use of all future ages."[72] In Norton's lectures, students such as Alexander Young, Jared Sparks, John G. Palfrey, and Samuel J. May learned to resist the universal application of particular teachings and instead assume historical distance from the biblical past.

Norton's adoption of historical reasoning at Harvard preceded a similar development among other biblical scholars at other universities. Such reasoning also became bound up with debates about the relationship between biblical and American slaveries. Furthermore, the emphasis on original meanings later emerged as a central component in the constitutional debate over the peculiar institution, in which figures such as Palfrey and May were very involved. In the meantime, the stress that figures such as Norton placed on "temporary and transient circumstances" and "particular incidents and situations" suggested that historical differences set off biblical pasts from the present.[73]

In proposing that "the whole preaching of our Saviour and his apostles must have been accommodated to the understandings, to the character, and to the situation of those whom they addressed," Norton was entering a popular interpretive debate. While some damned the German-born "theory of accommodation," which insisted that Jesus and the Gospel writers had accommodated to their audience, a growing group of American scholars accepted and advanced aspects of that same theory. Norton suggested that "we have . . . no reason to believe that the minds of the apostles themselves were unaffected by the intellectual character and prevailing opinions of the age."[74] As an example, Young heard Norton teach that "the apostles held the common opinions of demoniacal possessions."[75] Norton spent more time teaching that the apostles must have "conformed themselves as far as possible to the apprehension of their disciples." He emphasized that the "great truths of our religion . . . are of permanent and universal interest" but maintained that "the manner of their exhibition was conformed to temporary and local circumstances." The sacred writers, he repeated, "had in mind no readers but their contemporaries" and anticipated "none of those difficulties which would occur to other men than those in their own age." Like Herder, Norton believed that the interpreter must "forget our modern doctrines, and prejudices, and associations. He must make himself familiar and

[72] Alexander Young, Notes on Professor Andrews Norton's Lectures, Andrews Norton Papers, MS Am 1089, Houghton.
[73] Norton, Lecture 5. [74] Ibid.
[75] Young, Notes on Professor Andrews Norton's Lectures.

contemporary with" historical actors.[76] Norton exposed the foreign nature of the biblical characters' past and then posited that historical research allowed the scholar to inhabit the biblical characters' mental world.

Norton's approach contained a historicist sensibility. In highlighting the historical situatedness of New Testament authors and audiences, he placed distance between Christian Americans and New Testament Christians. Then, once he had severed the assumed connection with biblical times, he suggested that the modern reader could build a bridge to the ancient past. The shift from assuming a fluid relationship with a familiar biblical past to the belief that one could construct a link to an ancient historical era indicated a profound transformation in historical awareness. The assumption of historical distance and the belief that one can shed modern sensibilities and use historical knowledge to bridge that distance is a central assumption of modern historical research. Even more than Buckminster, Norton expressed the optimism of the historicist position.

Norton did not appear worried that historical distance might pose an interpretive problem. Indeed, in a period when many still viewed the favored biblical past as familiar, he focused on its foreignness, spending most of his time lecturing on the particular nature of the Bible's content. He believed that the Bible's "meaning appears more distinctly" through his approach, ultimately giving readers "more reason to admire the simplicity, the purity, and the sublimity of it's [*sic*] moral precepts and it's [*sic*] religious doctrines." Norton maintained that rigorous historical research revealed simple eternal truths, but his emphasis on the historical nature of biblical pasts had the potential to complicate efforts to recover such truths. In other words, Norton's repeated stress on the distance from biblical periods threatened to undermine his familiarizing project.

When Norton did worry about historical research, his worries centered on arguments that might challenge the authenticity of the Gospels rather than ideas that might call into question the relevance of their teachings. He answered those worries with historical arguments, contending that the historical peculiarities of New Testament texts reinforced their genuineness; their archaic components, he asserted, signaled their historicity. Norton knew that many of his contemporaries still assumed that the canon had been written for "Christians in all ages and countries; and . . . should contain little or nothing of a merely local or temporary

[76] Norton, Lecture 5.

nature," but he explained that if a presumed historical text lacked historical peculiarities, it would raise questions about its authenticity. So God, in his providence, allowed the sacred writer to have "nothing in view, but to be understood by the person or persons whom he is addressing." Norton observed that historical distinctions authenticated other ancient texts as well, such as Cicero's letters, and, like Buckminster, Norton compared biblical and classical texts to authenticate New Testament writings. Norton seemed unaware that this comparative approach could demote the Bible, making it one of a number of historical texts. More significantly, he did not see how his appeal to the canon's historical peculiarities could call into question the relevance of its teachings. When the issue of slavery imbued the biblical debate with new relevance, some figures, including Theodore Parker, would use historical distance to dismiss the Bible as outdated.[77] In the meantime, liberal and conservative biblical scholars competed on the new grounds of historical reasoning.

RELIGIOUS CONSERVATIVES IN THE BATTLE FOR THE ELEVATED GROUNDS OF HISTORY

In the period after Norton's appointment, religious liberals and conservatives remained focused on issues of canon and interpretation. Although the raging Missouri Crisis gave new life to political conversations about slavery, the biblical debate over slavery remained subdued. Channing's 1819 ordination sermon fueled interpretive debates between Harvard's Unitarians and their religious competitors at Andover Theological Seminary, which a group of orthodox Congregationalists, including Jedidiah Morse, had founded in 1807. The founding of this new seminary came as a partial response to Harvard's appointment of the liberal Henry Ware as Hollis Chair of Divinity two years earlier. To further stem the Unitarian tide, those at Andover promptly appointed New Haven pastor Moses Stuart – a Yale graduate who would quickly become the nation's most competent Hebrew and Greek grammarian – as Professor of Sacred Literature.

While Stuart's brand of biblical criticism focused on its more benign principles, he too began to emphasize the need to attend to context. As with the Unitarians, his qualified embrace of historical reasoning occurred in connection to an engagement with German scholarship and through dialogue with his religious opponents. In his published response to

[77] Ibid.

Channing's 1819 sermon, Stuart demonstrated a keen awareness of German scholarship, an interest in which had led him to learn German. Andover's studied appointee did not shy away from the doctrinal differences and canonical distinctions he perceived among his contemporaries; he worried that Channing too easily dispatched the Old Testament, which Stuart believed the Gospels authenticated. Even still, Stuart prized parts of the Unitarian's rules of interpretation; "with all [his] heart" he embraced the directive to interpret biblical passages according to the authors' specific subjects, motivations, and "special circumstances."[78] For example, Stuart noted that he interpreted John "just as I do any other author, ancient or modern, by the general rules of interpretation modified by the special circumstances and dialect in which he wrote."[79] In short, Stuart agreed with the Unitarians that interpreters should read the Bible as a historical text and that its words needed to be understood in "relation to the context."[80]

Stuart maintained that a close grammatical analysis mattered most; this view drew criticism from some quarters. Distinguishing general interpretive rules from the use of extrabiblical knowledge, he wrote that "whatever aid I may get from other sources . . . must be that which is superadded to the explanation that these rules will afford."[81] The move to privilege an examination of the Bible's words over the use of extrabiblical sources found a close parallel in constitutional interpretation. Some later antislavery writers valued a strict reading of the Constitution's words over the use of extraconstitutional sources. The new stress on contextual readings in biblical interpretation made Stuart's distinction subject to critique; Norton believed that Stuart ignored historical circumstances in emphasizing a grammatical interpretation.

In printed responses to Stuart, Norton criticized what he understood as the orthodox inattention to context. Airing ideas he had scribbled in journals and presented in lectures, Norton promoted a liberal attention to historical circumstance. He argued that an interpreter must account for "the general state of things in which [the writer] lived, the particular local and temporary circumstances present to his mind while writing, [and]

[78] Moses Stuart, *Letters to the Rev. Wm. E. Channing, Containing Remarks on His Sermon Recently Preached and Published at Baltimore* (Andover, 1819), 23. On Stuart's engagement with biblical criticism, see John H. Giltner, *Moses Stuart: The Father of Biblical Science in America* (Atlanta, 1988); and Brown, *Rise of Biblical Criticism*, 43–59, 64–73, 94–110.

[79] Stuart, *Letters to the Rev.*, 143. [80] Ibid., 50. [81] Ibid.

the character and conditions of those for whom he wrote."[82] Implying that biblical pasts were unfamiliar places, Norton seemed to value learning unique cultural languages more than he valued learning Greek in the effort to understand biblical passages. In a note, he drew attention to Stuart's use of certain German scholars whom Norton found "defective" in their failure to address historical circumstances. "*It is necessary*," he emphasized, "*to have just notions of the intellectual and moral character of our Saviour and his apostles, and of the circumstances under which they spoke or wrote*."[83] In deriding Stuart for his apparent neglect of context, Norton failed to notice that Stuart and the German critics he had referenced also stressed the historical situatedness of biblical texts.

Norton's critique belied the similarities between the Unitarian modes of interpretation he cherished and the German modes of interpretation he considered dangerous. Indeed, his awareness of the similarities might have directed his effort to disassociate them; Norton's contempt for all things German might be attributable to an intellectual "narcissism of small differences." Sigmund Freud posited that "it is precisely the little dissimilarities in persons who are otherwise alike that arouse feelings of strangeness and enmity between them."[84] This might explain Norton's effort to contest the claim that Channing was traveling down a heretical path staked out by figures such as Semler, Eichhorn, and Wilhelm Martin Leberecht de Wette. It also might account for the rhetorical darts Norton later directed at Theodore Parker, whose German-inspired religious beliefs seemed to confirm everything that conservatives feared liberal religion would lead to and everything Norton assured them it would not. Regardless of the reasons, Norton distrusted German scholars. He failed to acknowledge that he was indebted to them for his approach and proceeded to fault them, as well as Stuart, for neglecting context in emphasizing grammar. But as Norton well knew, grammatical issues were bound up with historical questions.

While privileging a grammatical approach, Stuart protected himself against critiques of inattention to context. In the third edition of his response to Channing, he added a few sentences that further exhibited his appreciation for historical knowledge. In place of his statement about

[82] Andrews Norton, *A Statement of Reasons for Not Believing the Doctrines of the Trinitarians Respecting the Nature of God and the Person of Christ* (Boston, 1819), 42. Norton first responded to Stuart in two articles published in the *Christian Disciple*. He published an expanded edition of *Statement of Reasons* in 1833.

[83] Norton, *Statement of Reasons*, 43, emphasis in original.

[84] Sigmund Freud, *Sexuality and the Psychology of Love* (New York, 1997), 66.

"aid ... from other sources," he wrote, "I may obtain aid from many sources, to throw light upon the meaning of words and sentences. From a knowledge of the geography of any country ... as well as of the manner, customs, laws, history, &c. of its inhabitants, I may obtain assistance to explain its language, and must obtain it, if I mean to make out a satisfactory interpretation." Stuart signaled his belief that a correct interpretation required the use of available historical knowledge. "But," he interjected, "I can never dispense with the laws of grammatical analysis."[85]

Stuart granted primacy to grammatical rules in part because he felt confident in uniformly applying them independent of extrabiblical findings, which were relatively scarce and often unverifiable. "Admitting these rules to be the best and surest guide to the meaning of language," Stuart wrote, "we cannot supersede them, by *supposing*, or *conjecturing* peculiarities in a writer. It is only when these peculiarities are proved, or, at least, rendered probable, that they can be admitted to influence our interpretation."[86] Even as interpreters began to stress contextual readings, some of them pointed out the difficulties involved in recreating contexts. This was also true in the development of historicism in historical writing; even Herder was skeptical about historians being able to achieve historical understanding.[87] Stuart's caution matched that of some other biblical scholars, including Parker. This caution also foreshadowed later constitutional debates in which some antislavery interpreters highlighted the conjectural nature of historical research to cast doubt on proslavery contextual readings, including the one Stuart himself provided amid the uproar over the Fugitive Slave Law. But Stuart's 1850 reading was not a stark departure from his earlier statements on interpretation. As the period's preeminent popularizer of the grammatical–historical method, Stuart did not privilege ahistorical grammatical rules over historical explication. Instead, he was prizing a demonstrable interbiblical and language-based historical explication over a dubious extrabiblical one.

Stuart articulated his approach against a presentism he had observed in his contemporaries. He associated this presentism with the theory of accommodation advanced by Semler, who had proposed that Jesus and the Gospel writers had accommodated their teachings to the ignorance of the Jews. Stuart held that critics such as Semler, Eichhorn, and Ferdinand

[85] Moses Stuart, *Letters to the Rev. Wm. E. Channing, Containing Remarks on His Sermon Recently Preached and Published at Baltimore*, 3rd ed. (Andover, 1819), 57.
[86] Ibid., emphasis in original. [87] Beiser, *German Historicist Tradition*, 116–18.

Bauer relied on this approach to explain away the Genesis account of the Creation and the Fall as poetical, to naturalize the Gospel's miracles, and to dismiss doctrines that failed to align with their own philosophical and theological positions. But, as far as Stuart could tell, "*accommodation* . . . itself [had been] *accommodated*" and was being put to new uses.[88] Now, rather than assigning distasteful teachings and supposed miracles to Jewish ignorance, some critics explained them according to "the idiom and ignorance of antiquity in general, and . . . of the sacred writers themselves."[89] Norton himself had accepted this view in part; he taught that, in some cases, historical circumstances influenced the apostles' teachings. According to this idea, New Testament audiences *and* authors held outdated beliefs. Parker later made similar claims about both New Testament and founding-era audiences and authors. This reading depicted entire historical periods, rather than portions of them, as bound up in time. The temporal threatened to engulf the eternal.

Stuart observed and dismissed this deep historicist threat. He believed that if one accepted the theory of accommodation, then one had to be willing to grant its application to both audiences and authors as the more sound historical approach. But he rejected the theory, finding it more telling of modern views than ancient beliefs. Studying the Germans left him even more convinced "that we need nothing more than the simple rules of exegesis, and a candid, believing heart, to see in the Scriptures . . . all the substantial and important doctrines, which have commonly been denominated *orthodox*."[90] While admitting he could no longer "rely for the proof of doctrines on some texts which I once thought contained such proof," Stuart still believed that "the real truth and importance of evangelical doctrines . . . are greatly strengthened" by the grammatical–historical method.[91] Like Edwards, his denominational and theological forebear, Stuart held that history sanctioned the Christian canon. Returning the critique of presentism, he charged Channing with using the principle of accommodation to twist ancient and authoritative writings in support of newly propounded ideas. The Unitarians, Stuart held, neglected the Germans' redeeming interpretive methods while embracing their damning liberal sentiments. Such efforts threatened to banish the sacred canon to a dark past.

While departing with Channing in the application of scripture, Stuart shared the Unitarian's focus on historical explication. He maintained that

[88] Stuart, *Letters to the Rev.*, 155, emphasis in original. [89] Ibid., 151–52.
[90] Ibid., 158, emphasis in original. [91] Ibid., 159.

"we are agreed as to *principles* of interpretation, in most things that are of importance."[92] In Stuart's lectures, he insisted that history "must come in to the aid of the grammatical principle." His instruction at Andover stressed the presence of historical distance. Like Norton, he urged ascription "to every sacred writer, views on such subjects consonant with his character and his age – and to reject the monstrous exegesis which explains him as though he spoke but yesterday and with all our feelings and prejudices."[93] Stuart's attention to grammar and language corresponded to his interest in promoting historical consciousness. In this period, the effort to learn languages such as Greek opened up ancient worlds.[94]

To be sure, Stuart articulated a qualified historicism, but it nonetheless contributed to a rising sense of historical distance. His orthodoxy informed his belief in the Bible's primacy and unity, his defense of plenary inspiration, and his move to assign accommodation to God rather than his scribes. Stuart indicated that "on all subjects, *not pertaining directly to the development of moral or religious truth*, you find in the sacred writers, the common views of their age & time." On certain issues, he set aside his own instruction to not assume nineteenth-century relevance and wrote of Paul "as though he lived at the present day."[95] As noted earlier, Stuart later echoed Buckminster's reading of Philemon to criticize those opposed to the Fugitive Slave Law. In upholding historical explication as the premier exegetical mode while also insisting on static meanings of certain biblical passages, Stuart and his liberal counterparts inadvertently backed into an awareness of historical distance from biblical times. In turn, that distance became difficult to ignore in their applicative efforts; their general emphasis on historical readings undercut their insistence on the enduring significance of specific passages. This armed more radical readers, including abolitionists who were willing to question the contemporary value of an ancient text.

Other conservative religionists also valued historical explication. Stuart's engagement with German scholarship did draw suspicion from colleagues, many of whom preferred to read the Bible without engaging German heresies, but Stuart was not the only Congregationalist who read the scholarship coming out of Europe. Yale graduate Jeremiah Evarts was

[92] Stuart, *Letters to the Rev.*, 3rd ed., 56, emphasis in original.
[93] Moses Stuart, Lecture 6, Lectures on Hermeneutics, Moses Stuart Papers, Franklin Trask Library, Andover Newton Theological School.
[94] See Winterer, *The Culture of Classicism*, 77–98. [95] Stuart, Lecture 6.

present at the landmark auction of Buckminster's library, where Evarts purchased works on the New Testament by Göttingen scholar Johann Friedrich Schleusner and Semler disciple Johann Jakob Griesbach. While suspicious of biblical criticism, figures such as Evarts valued the use of historical information to understand the Bible.[96]

As editor of the *Panoplist*, a religious monthly magazine created to challenge Unitarian influence, Evarts acknowledged the need to use historical research in reading the Bible. While he gave little space to biblical criticism except to counter its unsettling historicization of the canon's creation and transmission, in 1811 – the same year that Buckminster became Dexter Lecturer – the *Panoplist* diverted attention from its evangelical emphasis to praise Englishman Thomas Scott's *Commentary on the Whole Bible*.[97] "Scott's Family Bible," introduced to the American market in 1804, anticipated a bourgeoning book trade of new Bible translations; Bibles buttressed with commentaries, introductions, illustrations, and maps; and geographical studies such as William Thomson's *The Land and the Book* (1858). The deepening of historical awareness in this period depended on the publication and dissemination of historical knowledge about America's sacred texts. While intended to expand the Bible's reach and appeal, these works also contributed to its historicization. As historian Paul Gutjahr puts it, "While many still believed it to be 'the book of books,' it was equally true that the Bible was increasingly a book among books."[98]

Orthodox figures such as Evarts and the *Panoplist*'s publisher, Jedidiah Morse, upheld the Bible as "the standard, and only standard, of truth," but they recognized "that the Bible abounds with allusions to manners, customs and facts," the explication of which requires "knowledge, drawn from other sources, of the general history of the ages and countries in which the Scriptures were written."[99] Morse, who was a major figure in the divide between religious conservatives and liberals in New England,

[96] For an example of the *Panoplist*'s response to biblical criticism, see "On the Canon of Scripture," *Panoplist* 2 (May 1810): 559–60.

[97] See Lee, *Erosion of Biblical Certainty*, 132–36. As Lee demonstrates, antebellum biblical scholars sometimes attended to the Bible's textual history, but I am more interested in their emphasis on contextual explication.

[98] Paul C. Gutjahr, *An American Bible: A History of the Good Book in the United States, 1777–1880* (Stanford, 1999), 2. On "The Threat and the Promise of History" in the early republic's canonical debates, see David F. Holland, *Sacred Borders: Continuing Revelation and Canonical Restraint in Early America* (New York, 2011), 104–14.

[99] "Reviews," *Panoplist, and Missionary Magazine* 4 (September 1811): 161–69, quotations on 162 and 163.

agreed with the Unitarians on at least one point: the peculiarities of biblical pasts necessitated the use of historical guides. While America's biblical interpreters varied in their responses to biblical criticism, their exposure to it and debates about it demanded that they attend to and account for the particularities of the biblical past.

Even Orthodox Calvinists contributed to the growing emphasis on contextual interpretation. Charles Hodge, described as "the Pope of Presbyterianism" by his biographer, was more leery of biblical criticism than either the Unitarians or the Congregationalists.[100] He was among the first cadre of students to attend Princeton Theological Seminary when it opened in 1812. At the seminary, which was more conservative than the Congregationalist institution of Andover, Hodge learned biblical languages and came to appreciate the importance of historical readings. In 1820, before he began teaching at his alma mater, he traveled to New England, where he visited with Stuart. Stuart encouraged his Presbyterian counterpart to learn German to combat the Unitarians. Hodge obliged and, the next year, formed a society for the improvement of biblical literature. As president, he presented and published the society's first dissertation. In addressing the interpretation of biblical texts, Hodge stressed the need to understand "the character and history of the several sacred writers, with the state of opinion in the age in which they lived. . . . [And] the manners and customs, laws, character, and circumstances of the persons to whom the sacred writings were addressed."[101] Not unlike Norton and Stuart, Hodge instructed his audience to attend to the sacred authors' "peculiar circumstances," explaining that they addressed audiences "whose situation, habits, laws &c. were so different from our own."[102] While urging caution in reading German works, some of which approached the Bible as a purely human production, Hodge nonetheless accepted their interpretive emphasis on context as crucial.

In an effort to both counter writings coming out of Cambridge and "excite a spirit for Biblical Studies," Hodge formed the *Biblical Repertory* in 1825 and edited it for nearly five decades. He envisioned the quarterly "as a substitute, for the possession or perusal of works, which . . . it may

[100] Paul C. Gutjahr, *Charles Hodge: Guardian of American Orthodoxy* (New York, 2011), 3.
[101] Charles Hodge, *A Dissertation, on the Importance of Biblical Literature* (Trenton, 1822), 25–26.
[102] Ibid., 32–33.

neither be easy nor desirable to put into general circulation."[103] While Unitarians engaged the broad spectrum of new biblical scholarship issuing from Germany, more conservative figures, such as Hodge, thought it best to selectively disseminate "interesting articles on the manners, customs, institutions, and literature of the East – on various points in Biblical Antiquities – and on the Literary History of the Sacred Volume."[104] Hodge hoped to extract faith-affirming content and distill it for his readers. He aimed to use biblical criticism's harmless principles to counter its lethal lessons. While engaging biblical scholarship in this conservative way, Hodge maintained the essential neutrality of critical study and, like his religious counterparts, valued the use of historical knowledge in interpretation.

The articles published in the *Biblical Repertory* demonstrated Hodge's commitment to using historical information. The opening issue included partial translations of German philologist Christian Daniel Beck's work on the New Testament, *Monogrammata Hermenuetices Novi Testamenti* (1803), and German theologian Charles Christian Tittmann's commentary on the Gospel of John, *Meletemata Sacra* (1816). Both of these works grounded biblical exposition in historical explication. Hodge wrote that the Beck selection gave "an account of the character, age, origin, and history of each particular book."[105] Beck himself informed readers that "those passages which are inconsistent with the Christian religion or history ... are to be regarded as spurious" and the content and style of the texts are to be judged "according to the opinions and manner of writing prevalent in the times of the sacred penmen."[106] Because "much belongs to the means of determining the *historical sense*," he encouraged the acquisition of "the knowledge of history and antiquities of the Jews, Greeks, and Romans, especially of the age in which the Sacred Writers lived."[107] All of these insights illuminated the language and teachings of the New Testament authors, who, Beck explained, accommodated themselves "in some measure, to the character of their readers."[108] Although he did not advocate the radical theory of accommodation – which posited

[103] Charles Hodge, "Proposals for the Periodical Publication of a Collection of Dissertations, Principally in Biblical Literature," *Biblical Repertory: A Collection of Tracts in Biblical Literature* 1, no. 1 (1825): 1.
[104] Ibid., 1–2.
[105] Charles Hodge, "Introduction," *Biblical Repertory* 1, no. 1 (1825): vi.
[106] Christian Daniel Beck, "Outlines of Hermeneutics," *Biblical Repertory* 1, no. 1 (1825): 53, 54.
[107] Ibid., 77, 99, emphasis in original. [108] Ibid., 19.

that notions prevalent during the time of the apostles had shaped the apostles' understanding of gospel truth – Beck proposed that of necessity the "Sacred Writers" had to conform to the views of their historically situated audiences.

In the second selection, Tittmann sought to dismantle the theory of accommodation that aimed to discover "not what [the New Testament authors] taught, but what the measure of light then in the world, and their own talents, enabled them to teach."[109] Similar to Stuart, Tittmann upheld the grammatical mode of interpretation as the best and recognized that it "is for the most part Historical." He explained that the interpreter must attend to the *usus loquendi*, or the customary manner of speaking, which revealed "the import of every expression, at every different period . . . with each particular author and nation . . . all which are historical facts, which history only can teach us."[110] Tittmann asserted that in deciphering both doctrinal and historical passages, "recourse must be had to the history of those times . . . and in this way, and in no other, can the true meaning of the passages be evinced." Like Stuart, he renounced the purely "historical mode of interpretation" as presentist but granted "that the Sacred Writers . . . so accommodated themselves to the genius of their age, as to use a style and language which they would not have used, had they written for different people, and at another time."[111] Allowing accommodation in form rather than content, Tittmann directed the interpreter to "discover in what instances Sacred Writers have accommodated themselves to the genius of their age."[112] Hodge's Beck and Tittmann selections indicated that regardless of just how the New Testament authors had accommodated, they lived in a different world. And the historical comprehension of that world was a prerequisite to understanding their words.

In the years after publishing the first issue of the *Biblical Repertory*, Hodge remained abreast of scholarship – he even traveled to Europe to study at Halle – and continued to answer the threat of biblical criticism by making apologetic use of scholarship. In works such as his *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (1835), for example, Hodge drew heavily on historical sources to back his reading of that text.[113]

[109] Charles C. Tittmann, "C. CHS. Tittmann, on Historical Interpretation," *Biblical Repertory* 1, no. 1 (1825): 136–37.
[110] Ibid., 130. [111] Ibid., 131. [112] Ibid., 132, 133.
[113] Charles Hodge, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (Philadelphia, 1835). See also Gutjahr, *Charles Hodge*, 143–45.

Hodge's clearest articulation of historical explication came much later in his magnum opus, *Systematic Theology* (1871–73), in which he echoed the translations that he had included in the first issue of the *Biblical Repertory* decades earlier. As a believer in plenary inspiration, Hodge continued to reject the idea that the cultures of the sacred writers had shaped the content of their writing and that the role of the interpreter was to use reason to "separate the wheat from the chaff."[114] Hodge nonetheless valued historical context even as he condemned the move to confine the Bible's meaning to that context. While affirming that the words of the Bible reflected God's mind, Hodge insisted that God did not suspend the sacred writers' "self-consciousness" and that they "impressed their peculiarities on their several productions" and used their own "language and modes of expression."[115] In short, he granted that the "words are to be understood in their historical sense. . . . We must not interpret the word or the fact," he explained, "according to our theories of the relation of God to the world, but according to the usage of antiquity."[116] Hodge repeated this point at various places in the text, where he indicated that the first and "fundamental principle of interpretation of all writings, sacred or profane, is that words are to be understood in their historical sense; that is in the sense in which it can be historically proved that they were used by their authors and intended to be understood by those to whom they were addressed." Hodge's historical approach stressed the importance of original audiences. "We are bound," he wrote, "to take [the sacred writings] in the sense in which those to whom they were originally addressed must inevitably have taken them."[117] Like Stuart, Hodge believed proper interpretation demanded that readers recognize the ways in which God, as the final author of sacred scripture, had accommodated to the language of the sacred writers and their audiences.

Hodge, a Presbyterian, displayed much of the same historical awareness that Unitarians and Congregationalists exhibited, while similarly ignoring historical distance when it came to core truths. He often echoed Tittmann's criticism of the idea that scriptural truth "is not to be considered as pertaining to all Christians, and that the doctrines thus revealed are by no means common, and necessary to every age, in such a manner as to be a perpetual rule of faith and practice."[118] And, with Tittmann, Hodge insisted that religious truth "is equally applicable to all men, in

[114] Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. (New York, 1871–1873), 1:40.
[115] Ibid., 1:157. [116] Ibid., 1:158. [117] Ibid., 1:376, 377. See also 1:187.
[118] Tittmann, "C. CHS. Tittmann, on Historical Interpretation," 131.

every age."[119] While fully acknowledging the differences between biblical pasts and American present in terms of language and modes of thought, these conservative interpreters strongly objected to the idea that the Bible could simply be set aside as a human creation of ancient pasts. In the short term, they were largely successful in warding off the complete historicization of the Bible. However, their attention to historical differences began to reveal historical distance as an interpretive problem. Efforts to ignore the distance in application highlighted its presence. The consistent emphasis on context, circumstance, and accommodation contributed to a new understanding that the sacred religious text to which Christians looked had been produced in a very different time and among a very different people.

In the antebellum United States, a range of liberal and conservative biblical scholars recognized the need for a historical exegesis. While these thinkers varied in how to best explain and apply scripture – and though many of their coreligionists were unaware of their engagement with biblical criticism – it is important to emphasize that each of them accepted history as the grounds of debate. Jonathan Edwards's affirmative answer to the question of whether the Bible could be historical and divine had been replaced by the assumption that its divinity rested on its historicity. More than ever, America's pious biblical scholars valued the canon as historical texts in need of historical illumination.

While their qualified engagement with biblical criticism cultivated an understanding of interpretation as a historical endeavor, their unprecedented focus on the historical nature of the biblical texts drew new attention to the distance separating their ancient setting from their modern audience. As David F. Holland notes, "both sides committed themselves to careful examinations of the Bible's history – and in the course of their conflict, they drove the historical distance of the ancient scriptures deeper into the center of Americans' religious thought."[120] Questions about eternal truths inspired greater interest in the historical facts that had become the foundation for knowledge about those truths, and the recognition of historical distance that resulted reinforced the value of and desire for historical knowledge. Even when interpreters believed their efforts could overcome the distance their readings revealed, their historical search for universal truths exposed the vastness of the Bible's transient past.

[119] Ibid., 132. [120] Holland, *Sacred Borders*, 105.

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Biblical scholars were most responsible for cultivating a perception of historical distance, but this perception also grew among Americans with little or no direct exposure to biblical criticism. Early followers of Joseph Smith, for example, highlighted the distance between biblical pasts and American present to prioritize new scripture and new revelation. As Reverend Benton Pixley observed in an 1832 letter to the *Christian Watchman*, Sidney Rigdon, a prominent Mormon preacher, proclaimed that "the Epistles are not and were not given for our instruction, but for the instruction of a people of another age and country, far removed from ours, of different habits and manners ... and that it is altogether inconsistent for us to take the Epistles written for that people at that age of the world, as containing suitable instruction for this people at this age of the world."[121] The correspondent quoted Rigdon without comment – the absurdity of the belief did not need to be explained. And yet, while some scoffed at the idea that biblical texts were no longer relevant and that new times called for new revelations, a range of biblical scholars had begun to read the Bible in ways that pushed biblical times further into the past. In succeeding decades, as the slavery debates brought increased attention to the meaning of biblical passages, historical readings were drawn out into the open, which increased the potential for Americans to sense historical distance from the biblical pasts.

The growing perception of distance encouraged some biblical interpreters to do just what Hodge forbade: "separate the wheat from the chaff." In other words, some interpreters used the lessons learned through biblical criticism to reject the historicity of certain biblical texts and, in the case of the more liberal minded, to dismiss certain teachings as antiquated. This process of separating out specific biblical books and principles expanded the sphere of the temporal and shrunk the sphere of the timeless.

The subsequent biblical debates over slavery further encouraged interpreters to make canonical distinctions and to differentiate transient from permanent teachings. A similar development soon emerged in constitutional debates over slavery, when some appealed to the Declaration of Independence rather than the Constitution or aimed to extract permanent truths from transient legal precepts. In both debates, those involved aimed to rescue and apply universal ideas. In the biblical discussion, even attempts to challenge certain texts and teachings most often prefaced

[121] B. Pixley, "Intelligence Respecting Mormonites," *Christian Watchman* (November 9, 1832): 177.

a more urgent effort to establish a canon and present its timeless truths. History was more often used to reveal rather than question a text's meaning. Once the Unitarian, Congregationalist, and Presbyterian expositors had established their versions of the canon, historical knowledge assisted them in recovering God's eternal verities. Even those who believed that most of the Bible's content described a now-irrelevant past also asserted that the canon's universal truths were just as applicable in the present. Rational supernaturalism was, in many ways, historical supernaturalism. The temporal revealed the eternal. But, as Transcendentalist Theodore Parker soon made clear, the transient could also undermine the textual source of the permanent.