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Theology and Interpretation, 1820-1920

Introduction

The bible declares, and its Christian readers have always believed, that history has a divine beginning, salvific purpose, and ultimate end. The interpretation of the bible, and the attempt to derive theologies from it, have therefore always possessed an historical dimension. The first shoots of something approximating to biblical "criticism" in the period of the Renaissance, moreover, meant that, by 1820, attempts had already been made for upwards of three centuries to establish the authentic text of scripture; to determine the biblical chronology; and to account for apparent disparities between the state of the churches and religion as scripture presented it (Cameron 2016). Before the age of historicism began in earnest, therefore, western critics had long known that the biblical history was a complex subject, in which it could be difficult to disentangle the respective provinces of divine and human agency. The period from 1820 to 1920 nevertheless stands out in the history of biblical interpretation for way in which newly differentiated and developmental understandings of history came to possess intellectual primacy, and argumentative intensity, among students of the biblical text. The history of interpretation in the century can thus be written as the story of the encounter between the bible and historical consciousness. This chapter accordingly considers the emergence and history of successive attempts, written from different starting points, to situate the bible in relation to wider conceptions of historical development. It concludes with an examination of the critical and cultural forces which tended to prise understandings of biblical faith and historical evolution apart once again in the early years of the twentieth century.

The story of the role of historicism in transforming biblical understanding is not a new one. Hans Frei, in his brilliant 1973 study, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, offered a highly influential statement of the classical and still standard view that, from the eighteenth to the nineteenth centuries, interpretation more and more became "a matter of fitting the biblical story into another world with another story rather than incorporating that world into the biblical story" (Frei 1973: 130). Whilst this statement contains a large grain of truth, this chapter proposes an alternative reading of the case. Frei's account, written from within the discipline of theology, privileged a tradition of critical exegesis transplanted from English deism to German universities. A cultural history of interpretation must recognise, however, that the nineteenth-century influence of religious revival ensured that, for a greater number of contemporaries, the "biblical story" remained the paramount mode of understanding history, even if what that that story was understood to involve underwent considerable modification. At the same time as advanced biblical criticism issued profound shocks to contemporary religious culture, more conservative understandings of the bible themselves showed a striking degree of cultural dynamism.

Both impetuses drew energy from the prevailing historicist atmosphere. The chapter considers interrelated liberal and conservative trajectories in, first, the historicising of the bible itself; and, second, in the interpretation of the bible as a model, or symbol, for the historical process as a whole. Within the history of exegesis in the narrower sense, upon which Frei focused and where his case has the greatest purchase, the study of the bible led the text increasingly to be treated as a phenomenon within, rather than outside, the history of the ancient world. This could lead the bible to be regarded as a local or transient by-product of the ancient Levant; but—especially owing to the growth of what today would be regarded as uncritical ideas of biblical geography and archaeology—it was not always so. The rise of historicism also intersected with the age's insatiable appetite for biblical study in a second,

much more unremarked way. This was the tendency for biblical interpretation to become the key to understanding historical development as a whole. At the same time as advanced intellectuals sought to marginalise the biblical narrative, or to make it a proxy for an exclusively human history, religious thinkers tried inventively to rescue the primacy of biblical faith for the interpretation of history more generally. Radically Idealist interpretations of the bible, which made it a central stage in the outworking of universal human spirit, competed for attention with prophetic and Johannine ideas of history, which insisted that human history should still be contained and understood within schemes derived from the biblical revelation. Thus the bible offered innovative theologies of history to nineteenth-century theologians, at precisely the same time as its authority became superseded in other quarters. The radical and more conservative approaches to biblical interpretation, as they developed in the high nineteenth century, thus mirrored one another, in the sense that they both sought to tie the bible into different kinds of world-historical synthesis. The crumbling of such attempts to unify faith and history in the years around 1900, partly owing to developments in biblical study itself, thus became part of the wider fading of far-reaching syntheses, and the crisis of historicism, which marked the age. The biblical narrative did not so much experience a nineteenth-century eclipse, as collide with the nineteenth century's swirling historicist atmosphere. The varied hues of the resulting aurora spread widely, before dwindling as the conditions which had once given rise to them passed away.

The bible and revival

The evangelical revival that coursed through and transformed the world's rapidly expanding Protestant denominations prided itself on its rediscovery and elevation of the bible as the rule

of faith. “Let us never forget in all our studies, that there is but one book of supreme, and paramount, and incalculable value – the WORD OF GOD – A book to be constantly studied by all ranks and by all classes”, the evangelical Anglican leader, Edward Bickersteth, advised Christian students in an internationally popular advice manual of 1827 (Bickersteth 1829: 57-8). Such absolute views of biblical authority involved a correspondingly stringent view of scriptural inspiration. Nineteenth-century evangelicals inherited and usually reiterated the belief in the verbal inerrancy of scripture which had solidified among orthodox Protestants during the post-Reformation period. Anglophone evangelicals often admired the Geneva theologian, Louis Gaussen’s insistence that every word of the biblical text was inspired, including in its minutest historical details, as expounded his 1841 treatise, *Theopneustia*. He understood this Pauline term to denote God’s dictation of an inerrant text, through the apostles, which was thus blessed with plenary inspiration (Gaussen 1841: 311). Commentators who argued in this way typically adopted a highly dualistic view of the relationship between biblical revelation and the human reason that required its instruction. Divine revelation was “not only possible and probable, but NECESSARY”, because of “the utter inability of mere human reason to attain any certain knowledge of the will or law of God, of the true happiness of man, or of a future state”, argued Thomas Hartwell Horne, a London-based Methodist and later Anglican biblical commentator, in his 1827 *Compendious Introduction to the Study of the Bible* (Horne 1827: 2).

A relatively ahistorical mode of interpreting scripture followed from these positions. Because evangelicals regarded each part of the bible as equally true, and as having arisen from miraculous divine intervention rather than through the cooperation of reasonable human agency, evangelicals approached the text as the source of a unitary body of teachings. These could be abstracted by means of proof-texts. The American Presbyterian leader, Lyman Beecher, argued in a sermon of 1817 that scripture’s “system of Divine Laws” consisted

essentially of “the doctrines of the Trinity and the atonement, the entire unholiness of the human heart, the necessity of a moral change by the special agency of the Holy Spirit” (Beecher 1828: 160). The bible was an epistemic unity to be quarried for vindications of these doctrines, rather than an evolving historical life which presented a salvation-historical narrative within which the present-day believer could situate himself. Horne’s *Introduction* took the form of a series of theses, counter-arguments, and replies to counter-arguments, with proof-texts from across scripture deployed in support of his exegetical positions.

The proof-text method of scriptural interpretation particularly assumed the integrated meaning and authority of the Old and New Testaments, where later liberals, attached to developmental ideas of history, tended more and more to separate out and demote the old dispensation. On such readings, the Old Testament, though its law had been superseded by that of the New, everywhere prefigured Christ’s completion of God’s purposes. The preeminent biblical commentators in earlier-nineteenth-century German Pietist circles, Heinrich and Wilhelm Richter, defended the Old Testament historical books as the record of God’s covenanted transactions with Israel in the face of Enlightened disparagement. They interpreted its prophecies as clearly anticipating Trinitarian Christology, more than as expressing the particular concerns and aspirations of the ancient Jews (Richter and Richter 1834-40: II, 1-3; IV, 38). More Catholic manifestations of revival also shared aspects of this approach. Edward Bouverie Pusey, Oxford University’s Regius Professor of Hebrew from 1828 to 1882 and a leader of the Catholicising “high church” Oxford Movement within the Church of England, emphasised the unity and inerrancy of scripture. It were fatal to Christianity, he argued, to deny that the Hebrew prophets foresaw, in a detailed and miraculous way, Christ's “Birth of a Virgin, Birthplace, Character, Offices, Life, Death, Divinity, Atonement, Sufferings, rejection by His own, acceptance by us Gentiles, Glory”, and everlasting reign (Pusey 1864: 246-7).

A distinctively evangelical manifestation of this commitment to the dual authority of the Old and New Testaments lay in evangelicals' newly enthusiastic rediscovery of scriptural prophecy as the key to world history. Eighteenth-century writers had tended to adopt a postmillennialist conception of prophecy, which posited that Christ would return at the end of the age of the world's conversion to the gospel which contemporaries believed to be unfolding around them. After the French Revolution, at which a vast historical rupture appeared to have ushered in a tide of unbelief, revival mixed headily with a growing and more general Romantic appetite for vivid historical narrative and learning the secrets of human origins and destiny. This made a different mode of prophetic interpretation, historicist premillennialism, fashionable in evangelical circles between approximately 1820 and 1860. This school of thought, especially prominent among Anglicans and Presbyterians, posited that Christ's return was imminent, following the completion of a timetable of events recorded in scripture. This chronology was intelligible according to various applications of the "year-day" theory, an idea with a lineage stretching back to the Middle Ages, which assumed that a day mentioned in prophetic passages referred to a year of secular time (Spence 2015: 48). Edward Bishop Elliott, a former fellow of Trinity College, Cambridge, powerfully influenced contemporary evangelical Anglican opinion with his 1844 *Horae Apocalypticae*, a four-volume treatise which projected Old and New Testament prophecy, in a concretely detailed way, onto the later sequence of history. Elliott applied the year-day theory with the aid of modern and sometimes surprisingly infidel historians, such as Edward Gibbon (Elliott 1847). Premillennialists' attempts to use biblical history as the inerrant guide to subsequent world history, not just in principle but in application to specifiable temporal events and processes, were influential conservative expressions of the wider appetite to synthesise biblical ideas with increasingly complex understandings of historical movement more generally. More

liberal minds were beginning to find more immanent and self-consciously reasonable ways in which to effect the same integration.

The German epicentre

Exegetes who thought in dualistic and literalist ways about scripture found it ever more difficult to ignore the critical advances and philosophical revolutions in biblical study which had started to emanate from the universities of Protestant Germany during the Enlightenment. Anglo-American biblical scholars of the earlier nineteenth century, writing either alongside their practical work as ministers or in seminaries and ancient universities, were not the credulous bumpkins of liberal caricature. In accordance with their strong emphasis on the dangers of the unaided intellect, they nevertheless tended to regard their intellectual or academic labour as representing a kind of custody for a sacred tradition. In the later eighteenth and earlier part of the nineteenth century, German universities developed a wholly different and, in the end, globally normative model for higher learning. It idealised individual originality, published research, and transformative discovery, in place of the multifariously erudite or safely orthodox standards of the early modern period (Clark 2006). In biblical as in other fields of inquiry, Germany became the intellectual workshop of the world. Theology faculties justified their place in Germany's post-Napoleonic and state-supported universities by defining themselves as belonging, quite as much as other disciplines, to post-Kantian *Wissenschaft*'s pursuit of unified knowledge through criticism (Howard 2006). The new ethic often (though not always) induced scholars to approach the bible less as the rule of faith, than as a network of labyrinths through which the scholar navigated his way for the sake of his vocation and its concomitant plaudits in the public arena. Scholarly apprenticeships and

intense learning bore fruit in arresting displays of critical deconstruction and synthetic reconstruction, upon which promotion, even celebrity, depended.

Post-Kantian reason thus penetrated into biblical interpretation, in ways that fundamentally reshaped the conceptualisation of biblical time and its relationship to human development. German theology tended to divide itself into systematic or dogmatic theology; biblical exegesis; practical theology; and church history; but *Wissenschaft*'s holism encouraged each to inform the rest, and to draw upon the developing permutations of Idealist philosophy. Under the impact of Kantian philosophy at the end of the eighteenth-century, which encouraged critics to reflect on the difference and the distance between the knowing subject and the object of knowledge, Enlightenment-era "neology", or the application of reason and historical criticism to the biblical record, had splintered into a series of more self-consciously differentiated analytical positions. "Rationalists" tended to regard the New Testament as a republication of natural reason, and excluded supernatural agency from it. "Supernaturalists", on the other hand, argued from the inherent limitation of human reason to the necessity, and admissibility, of just such a revelation (Stephan and Schmidt 1973: [11]-81). Both schools of thought lingered long into the first half of the nineteenth century. They were overtaken, however, by the development of post-Kantian Idealism (Rasmussen et al. 2017). Friedrich Schleiermacher, a leading light of the foundation of the pioneering theology faculty at the University of Berlin in 1810, started from Kant's demolition of speculative metaphysics, and grounding of religious truth within the knowing subject's practical reason, to reconstruct theology on the basis of consciousness and feeling. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, building on Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling's turn to developing history as the space within which subject and object might be reintegrated, conceptualised history as the process by which absolute spirit manifested itself in human consciousness through the rational dialectic of

negation, preservation, and supersession. These philosophical dynamics soon inflected and often transformed biblical interpretation.

It was some years, nevertheless, before Idealist philosophy began to work its way into the presuppositions which underlay the varieties of biblical criticism which, germinating during the Renaissance and maturing during the Enlightenment, continued to develop amidst the thickening historical atmosphere of the earlier part of the nineteenth century. Philology constituted an especially fertile source of biblical criticism. Its first major effects arose within Old Testament study. Drawing on the antecedent development of comparative philology, Wilhelm Gesenius, a professor in Halle's theology faculty from 1810, compared Hebrew with other Semitic languages to argue that Hebrew's written form could not have arisen earlier than the time of David and Solomon, and that the language had continued to develop over the period of the Old Testament's composition (Schorch and Waschke 2013). The idea that the Old Testament was a developing text, shaped by processes of linguistic change and priestly redaction, challenged static conceptions of biblical revelation. But a distinctive area of philological interest, myth, proved to be much more inherently subversive. Originating in eighteenth-century classical scholarship, where myth had come to be treated as the mode of expression particular to the childhood of the race, Wilhelm Martin Leberecht de Wette, successively professor at Heidelberg, Berlin, and Basel, from 1807 until his death in 1849, effected the radical importation of mythological analysis into the study of the Old Testament (Hartlich and Sachs 1952). De Wette argued that the Pentateuch could not have been written by Moses, but that it in fact reflected the religious conditions of centuries later, when the Israelites returned from Babylonian captivity. It should therefore be read, not as a record of historical transactions, but as philosophical mythology through which the Jews sought to make sense of their condition at the time of writing. It was, in this sense, "the epic of the Hebrew theocracy" (de Wette 1806-7: II, 31). For all his radicalism, de Wette believed that

his work served a fundamentally constructive religious purpose. A sometime colleague of Schleiermacher at Berlin, and an admirer of the post-Kantian philosopher, Jakob Friedrich Fries, de Wette supposed that religion did not rely on a record of historic events, but on the intuition of eternal truths symbolised in myth and poetry. Myth did not belong to the childhood of the race, which it was the duty of Enlightenment to educate into full reason, but rather to the eternal conditions of human sensibility (Rogerson 1984: 38-9).

It is striking that the pioneers of philological and mythological criticism of the sacred volume first broke their ground in the sphere of the Old, rather than the New Testament. The Old Testament was a text which liberal Protestant writers could, and increasingly did, relegate to a remote, oriental past. Whilst this critical process distanced it from traditionally Christian appropriations of its meaning, it still offered safer ground for performative criticism to state-remunerated scholars than the founding documents of the Christian religion itself. The theologian who first applied radical mythical theory to the New Testament, and paid the price for his political incorrectness, was David Friedrich Strauss. A scholar at the Protestant Tübingen *Stift*, who had heard Hegel's lectures at Berlin in 1831 shortly before the sage's death, Strauss published a two-volume *Leben Jesu* between 1835 and 1836.

Strauss's *Leben Jesu* sought simultaneously to apply de Wette's mythical theory to explain the New Testament, and to use speculative philosophy to determine where such a critical process left Christian belief. Strauss argued that the gospel narratives reflected Jewish messianic expectations. History disclosed enough of Jesus to permit critical posterity to know that he understood himself to be the promised Messiah, proclaiming the imminent arrival of a millennial age of justice and righteousness; but his death marked the failure of his mission. Old Testament predictions, nevertheless, soon overlaid his followers' memory of a great man, and acquired a dogmatic life of their own as the church grew. The narrators of his life, in a mythopoeic process, attributed to Jesus the miraculous powers appropriate to the Saviour of

Israel (Strauss 1835-6). Having taken away, as he frankly stated, “everything which the Christian believes about his Jesus”, at the conclusion of his work Strauss set out to “re-establish dogmatically that which criticism has destroyed” (Strauss 1835-6: II, 686). Strauss argued, in Hegelian terms, that his own dissipation of the *Vorstellungen*, or representations, denoted by the myths attached to Christ, must be succeeded by purer apprehension of the *Begriff*, or concept, of Christology. The conceptual truth underlying the mythic representations, Strauss concluded, was that the idea of the God-man, which the church laid on Jesus as an individual, was growing in the consciousness of the race as a whole. Thus the infinite idea was incrementally realising itself in the finite; God was becoming man (Strauss 1835-6: II, 729-44; Hodgson 2015). This process would become complete in no one individual, but in the common life of humanity.

Strauss’s emphatic rejection of historical Christianity, and the republican tendency to which it seemed to be allied, saw him removed from his teaching position in 1835, and constrained thereafter to a life of personal strain and flickering literary brilliance outside the universities. The influence of Hegelian metaphysics on radical biblical criticism nevertheless continued to manifest itself in the “Tübingen School” under the leadership of Strauss’s former teacher, Ferdinand Christian Baur. Baur united private sympathy for his pupil, underpinned by his shared confidence that Hegelianism represented the highest expression of dogmatic development yet attained by the church, with a more sustained enthusiasm for the textual reconstruction of historical individualities. For Baur, history was a developing unity, intelligible to reason; but that unity had to be discovered through the historical materials through which it was constituted, and so with greater empirical rigour than he felt that Strauss —or Hegel—had displayed (Wendte 2014). Baur’s crucial insight was that early Christianity was not a unity, but a site of conflict. He accordingly wrote the history of the New Testament writings, and of the canon which sealed their authority, as the story of the process by which

particularist Judaisers played out a dialectical conflict with Paul's more universally-minded followers. The ultimate result was Catholic Christianity. Where the Synoptic Gospels had presented a Jewish and human Jesus, John's Gospel—composed not by the apostle, but towards the end of the second century—made him the incarnate *logos*, or Word. In the Fourth Gospel, "Christianity is established as a principle of general salvation, and all the oppositions which it was wont to preserve from Jewish particularism are here taken up into Christian universalism" (Baur 1863: 172).

In positing a process of radical development between the composition of the Synoptic Gospels and that of John, Baur reversed the older view that John's Gospel presented the fullest account of the life of Jesus, and moved the question of the status of John to the centre of interpretative debate. Unlike Strauss, however, Baur still regarded Christianity as the "absolute religion" (Baur 1863: 16). Historical criticism, on Baur's reading, stood at the far end of an ages-long process by which Christianity developed into the full self-consciousness of its own idea. He emphasised the importance of the person of Christ in manifesting the unity of divine and human wills which he made the normative religious type for after ages. History revealed that the most important element of the Christian consciousness, made originally evident in Christ himself, was the moral principle, proceeding from the unity of divine and human wills in Jesus which effected reconciliation with God (Baur 1864: 45-121). The elevating effects of Christ's moral type upon the religious consciousness of believers, an interest disclosing Baur's contact with Schleiermacher, recorded the outward realisation of the inner truth of the Sermon on the Mount within the historical process (Baur 1863: [472]-527).

As Johannes Zachhuber has observed, Baur's commitment to "presuppositionless" history existed in an unstable synthesis with his belief that history confirmed a rationalised version of the faith whose temporal manifestations he analysed (Zachhuber 2013). Though Strauss

removed himself more acidly from church tradition, both he and Baur can be seen as having responded to the impact of history on the bible by making the bible central to the self-development of absolute spirit in history. But they left themselves open to the charge that they had turned the biblical revelation from the ruler into the result of human time: a stance which Strauss avowedly embraced. Whether historical criticism really did demote the authority of the biblical history, and whether a more orthodox understanding of that history might be made an alternative grounds for world-historical synthesis, were questions that animated many of the Tübingen critics' mid-century opponents.

Mediation and containment, 1830-1860

Many Anglophone exegetes, more so than in German-speaking Europe, carried on writing and preaching as though the post-Kantian blaze through historical and theological brushwood had never erupted. But among intellectually engaged religious writers in the Protestant and Catholic worlds, two modes of biblical interpretation became popular among opponents of the increasingly unavoidable Tübingen tendency. The first lay in the remarkable growth of biblical geography and archaeology in the period: subjects which typically came as a pair. The second was the rise of *Vermittlungstheologie*, or "mediating theology", an originally German exegetical tradition which became, for a time, wildly popular far beyond Germany itself. Where radical German critics undermined the historicity of biblical orthodoxy, a panoply of more conservative scholars, subsequently deemed uncritical and so largely forgotten within the discipline of theology, drew on a range of modern cultural resources in order to shore it up again.

From the later eighteenth century onwards, religious revival and the decline of Ottoman power encouraged a growing stream of foreign ministers to pour into the Eastern Mediterranean and the Holy Land to visualise the world of the bible, and to define its relations to the growing fields of Egyptology and ancient philology (Gange and Ledger-Lomas 2013). Edward Robinson, a Congregationalist professor at Union Theological Seminary in New York, and his American missionary guide to the Levant, Eli Smith, went on the trail of Moses and his successors, launching biblical archaeology into the Anglophone world with their resulting 1841 *Biblical Researches* (Robinson and Smith 1841). Robinson wrote up the pair's experience of picturesque scenes, hillside paths, and ancient ruins, for the purpose of verifying and vivifying the biblical narratives. From a premillennialist point of view, Alexander Keith, a Church of Scotland and then Free Church minister, continuously updated his study of the *Evidence of the Truth of the Christian Religion Derived from the Literal Fulfilment of Prophecy*, first published in 1823, to take account of the emerging evidence of biblical geography. He was particularly gratified that the advance of photography enabled him to disprove rationalistic cavils against the truth of prophecy all the more dramatically. With the aid of daguerreotypes of the ruins of the cities against which the prophets had pronounced doom, Keith was confident that "the rays of the sun would thus depict what the prophets saw" (Keith 1873: vii, 533-42, [563]-612).

The fashion for biblical antiquities also touched the Catholic world. In 1877, a priest at the notably scholarly Sulpician seminary in Paris, Fulcran Vigouroux, published a four-volume study entitled *La Bible et les découvertes modernes*. Setting his face against "les excès de l'extrême gauche Hégélienne", which was the child of Luther, Vigouroux collated different kinds of ethnographic and archaeological evidence about the Holy Land and its environs, from Theban inscriptions to correspondences between biblical dress and contemporary Arab fashions, for the purpose of confounding "le plus grande nombre des libre-penseurs"

(Vigouroux 1889: I, 66-72, 97). Pope Leo XIII approved of Vigouroux's *tour de force*, and, through his secretary, graced subsequent editions with his complimentary testimonial (Vigouroux 1889: I, [i]-iii).

Where archaeological and geographical surveys furnished the biblical accounts with a local colour suited to the tastes of the romantic era, *Vermittlungstheologie* gave biblical theology a corresponding inwardness and psychological depth. The term broadly referred to German Protestant theologians' attempts, especially effulgent during the 1830s and 1840s, to integrate modern theological *Wissenschaft* with a continuing commitment to supernatural biblical revelation. Mediating theologians typically built on Schleiermacher's liberation of the autonomy of the subjective religious consciousness by affixing it to a more emphatic emphasis on the reality of objective scriptural revelation than Schleiermacher himself had displayed. They possessed their own journal, the *Theologische Studien und Kritiken*, and showed varying degrees of conservatism towards the biblical text. August Neander, a Jewish convert and professor of ecclesiastical history at Berlin from 1813 until his death in 1850, may be taken as representative. On the basis of one of Christ's parables in Matthew's gospel, Neander's great work, his *General History of the Christian Religion and Church*, conceived of Christianity as a heaven-sent leaven which silently entered into and progressively transformed the Jewish, Hellenistic, and barbarian forms of religious consciousness into which it entered (Neander 1825-52; Bennett 2020). Making a supernatural conception of the biblical revelation the kernel of modern progress, Neander's *History* offered an orthodox yet comparably synthetic alternative to the Tübingen argument which made the bible significant for the way in which it witnessed to the unfolding of absolute spirit. His anti-Straussian *Leben Jesu* of 1837 was soon translated into English, and his home became a pilgrimage destination for scores of Protestant scholars (Neander 1848). Edward Robinson made use of

Neander's library as he was completing his *Biblical Researches* (Robinson and Smith 1841: I, xiii-xiv).

Despite these vigorous and popular attempts to stem the tide of criticism, however, the years around 1860 marked a noted acceleration in the proliferation, and respectability, of attacks on received understandings of biblical orthodoxy across the western world. Romanticism and religious revival encouraged a culture of sincerity, which encouraged critics to state their doubts publicly where once it would have seemed dangerous, or silly, to do so. In Britain, *Essays and Reviews*, written by a group of Oxford dons and clerics dissatisfied with the doctrinal conservatism both of their university and of the wider Church of England, caused a storm upon its publication in 1860 for its plea that the bible should be scrutinised using the same critical and historical methods which would be applied to other texts (Shea and Whitla 2000). A lapsed seminarian of Saint-Sulpice, Ernest Renan, scandalised readers in France and worldwide with his 1863 *Vie de Jésus*. Renan examined the gospel records and found a Jesus who was a charming, charismatic, but fundamentally deluded Palestinian peasant; his story, and the religion he founded, were to be valued for the way in which they expressed values and experiences to which all humanity could relate (Renan 1863). Nor was Scandinavia, not normally drawn into surveys of nineteenth-century biblical criticism, immune. The previous year, the radical journalist and author, Viktor Rydberg, had disturbed ecclesiastical authorities in Sweden with his *Bibelns lära om Kristus*. Denying Christ's divinity, the text conceived of him as the ideal man, a kind of visitor from Plato's world of forms (Rydberg 1862). Though writing, he alleged, to halt the spread of atheistic materialism, Rydberg's interest in German mediating theologians led him, as those theologians would not themselves exactly have wished, to separate the moral value of Jesus' teaching and personality from the supernatural clothing in which official formularies had imprisoned it (Warburg 1900: I, 224-52, [509]-54). What is striking about all three cases is that, for all the outrage the books

caused, none really sought to lessen the bible's centrality as a source of cultural norms, but rather to re-establish it on what these authors regarded as more historically-grounded footings. Although radical critics prised history away from supernatural understandings of biblical authority, they insisted that they did so in order to reaffirm the centrality of the truths which the bible contained to cultural and historical experience.

Themes in interpretation, 1860-1900

The need to secure biblical authority from increasingly public forms of dissent from it, and the independently-originating but overlapping inclination to blend biblical interpretation with immanentist notions of historical progress, incentivised the reconstruction of biblical orthodoxy across the Protestant world. (As will be seen, Roman Catholic engagement with this process came somewhat later.) In these years, an ethic of active biblical inquiry, though still apologetic in purpose, came to supersede the awestruck reserve and protective cautiousness characteristic of an earlier phase of biblical scholarship among orthodox Protestants. This trend itself drew energy from a changing historical sensibility. As Protestants came to recognise that their own religious traditions emerged not immediately from the bible, but from the ways in which the bible had been interpreted in history, the importance of re-examining biblical religion afresh became newly important (Bennett 2019: [150]-98). To do so offered a means of securing biblical fundamentals at the expense of more untenable outward accretions. Biblical scholars, it could appear, followed in the paths first broken by the Reformers in liberating the bible from traditionalist accretions. For the controversially critical Free Church of Scotland Hebraist, William Robertson Smith, "the first business of the Reformation theologian" was "not to crystallise Bible truths into doctrines,

but to follow, in all its phases, the manifold inner history of the religious life which the Bible unfolds" (Smith 1881: 15-16).

The primary task of biblical scholarship, in the new climate, was to vindicate the historicity of the gospels, so as to prevent them from evaporating into mere expressions of mythic consciousness. An apologetic enterprise which began in Germany during the 1830s soon became a widespread industry across the Protestant world. Of particular importance was a Cambridge-centred triumvirate of Anglican clerics and New Testament scholars, active from the 1850s until approximately the final decade of the century. Brooke Foss Westcott, Fenton John Anthony Hort, and Joseph Barber Lightfoot worked intensively to sift patristic evidence, and details of manuscript transmission, to establish earlier dates for the original composition of the canonical writings than Tübingen scholars allowed. Paying close attention to the philological and cultural contexts for New Testament ideas and expressions, they concluded that the New Testament teachings were, in many respects, so innovative that they could not be accounted for on the hypothesis that they expressed pre-existing Jewish or oriental traditions. The only historically satisfying account of the texts must, in their view, proceed from the supposition of a divine revelation through Christ. Lightfoot, for instance, sought to vindicate the authenticity of the writings of Polycarp, a pupil of St John, as well as that of the seven first-century Ignatian Epistles. He argued against Baur, on the basis of this evidence, that there was no real antagonism between the Johannine and Pauline tendencies in the post-apostolic period (Lightfoot 1889: 59-141). Much of Baur's case for a late dating of John's Gospel thus fell away. The post-apostolic fathers, Lightfoot connectedly maintained, were in fact already acquainted with the four canonical gospels (Lightfoot 1889: [142]-216). The status of John's Gospel, especially, was becoming one of the most important questions in biblical criticism. Westcott's edition of the text insisted that it was historically implausible to ascribe the idea of the *logos* either to borrowing from a Greek source, or to a Jewish

development: it was a fulfilment of Christ's own teaching (Westcott 1882). One of F. J. A. Hort's *Two Dissertations* was dedicated to vindicating Christ's divine uniqueness as stated in John's prologue (Hort 1876).

The enthusiasm for John, and for the essential value of the *logos* idea, overlapped with the rising fashion for emphasising that Christianity was the religion of the incarnation. Although the doctrine of Christ's expiatory atonement for sin remained dynamic in this period, the incarnation offered a way of emphasising Christianity's humane and communal dimensions. The idea that Jesus had unveiled a supremely attractive ideal of humanity often survived the rejection of its supernatural clothing, in a culture where the moral consequences of rejecting religion altogether seemed unknown and fearful. Baur and Renan, in their different ways, had demonstrated as much. So too had the proliferation of rationalistic lives of Christ after 1860, which tidied away the miraculous and mythical from the gospels, to leave behind, as it was hoped, the more rationally relatable figure of a conscientious and self-sacrificing moral reformer (Hesketh 2017; Pals 1982). But an emphasis on Christ's earthly works, the emulation of which could build the kingdom of God in human time, equally characterised the writings of orthodox Trinitarians. The latter often made particular use of John's idea of the divine becoming human in order to advance their case. John Williamson Nevin, a leader of the mediating "Mercersburg theology" which the German Reformed Church's Pennsylvania seminary broadcast into American Protestantism, considered that in the words of John's prologue, "*The word became flesh!*", "we have the whole gospel comprehended in a word" (Nevin 1867: [199]). Charles Gore, a high church Anglican and leading light of Britain's Christian Social Union, held similar sentiments. "We are sure that Jesus Christ is still and will continue to be the 'Light of the World'", he explained in his preface to the essay collection, *Lux Mundi*, a work that sought to commend a cautious type of biblical criticism to a doctrinally conservative, Anglo-Catholic audience (Gore 1904: [vii]).

This rediscovery of the incarnation, and the enthusiasm for John's Gospel with which it was often connected, drew energy from yet another permutation of the wider nineteenth-century attempt to use biblical truth to interpret the tangible movements of human time. Especially after 1850, Johannine enthusiasm infused a distinctive kind of historical metaphysics. Mid-century mediating theologians had often understood the *logos* as the divine reason which connected the incarnation in Christ to the completion of God's work in history through the Holy Spirit, the Comforter, of which John also wrote. Neander, mixing admiration of the thirteenth-century mystic, Joachim of Fiore, with Schelling's historical philosophy, had expressed sympathy for the idea that a Johannine age would unfold at the last stage of history. This period would see the inner revelation of the spirit succeed external authority in the consciousness of believers (Neander 1825-52: V, 440-5). Neander's Swiss-German pupil, Philip Schaff, a colleague of Nevin's at Mercersburg, and later a professor at Union Theological Seminary, understood his own work in transplanting German religious historicism to the United States in the same, prophetic terms (Schaff 1890: 416-29). The development of modern thought, it appeared to such writers, harmonised more and more with the divine immanence distilled in the *logos*. J. R. Illingworth, another contributor to *Lux Mundi*, argued that "our Christian creed, that all things were made by the Eternal Reason" harmonised wondrously with the modern knowledge that the world was "an organism, a system in which, while the parts contribute to the growth of the whole, the whole also reacts upon the development of the parts" (Illingworth 1904: 139).

As New Testament exegesis became more personally and philosophically Christocentric in the years after 1860, the interpretation of the Old Testament became notably less so. A text in which early-nineteenth-century revivalists had seen the prefiguration of Christ and Christian doctrine everywhere, became, at least among scholars, more and more particular to the world of the ancient Jews. Though anticipated in some respects by earlier critics, Julius Wellhausen

published a *History of Israel* in 1878 which made an epoch in Hebrew scholarship (Wellhausen 1878). Wellhausen, a professor at Greifswald, proceeded on the basis of the so-called "documentary hypothesis", according to which the Pentateuch had emerged from a process of the combination and redaction of originally independent texts. The intelligibly composite literary structure of the Pentateuch, he argued, expressed the development of Israel's *cultus*, or religious practice, from a relatively eclectic nomadic stage, through the prophets' declamation against idolatry, to the consolidation of a centralised cult governed by religious law. Where orthodox and sceptics alike had once wondered why the Israelites had so often relapsed into idolatry after the delivery of the Mosaic law, Wellhausen showed that the law was not really Mosaic at all. Rather, it had only become fixed after the Exile, following the period in which the prophets, reflecting on a syncretic primitive situation, had sought to free Israel's cult from foreign admixtures. Wellhausen's researches inspired a number of studies of the prophets which treated them as sources for the growth of Israel's religion, rather than as Messianic forecasts. Foreign critics, such as S. R. Driver, Pusey's successor as Regius Professor of Hebrew at Oxford from 1883, soon embraced his conclusions (Rogerson 1984: 247-72).

Ancient Israel's rising historical autonomy exercised ambivalent effects upon wider understanding of the religious significance of the Old Testament. In one vein of treatment, the identification of the Hebrew Scriptures with the world of the ancient orient amounted to a further increment in the demotion of its status which had started to enter into Christian thought since the Enlightenment. "The Old Testament, great as it is, is not so Divine as the New", declared the liberal Anglican, Arthur Penrhyn Stanley, in an essay on the results and conditions of biblical and religious inquiry which he published for a North American audience in 1883 (Stanley 1883: 84-5). In Lutheran circles, the Hebrew scholarship of the period often radicalised the old *evangelisch* opposition between the Christian religion of the

spirit and the Jewish religion of the law. The liberal Lutheran, Otto Pfleiderer, writing before Wellhausen, attacked the Mosaic institutes in a series of addresses which he delivered on the history of religion whilst serving as a lecturer at Tübingen during the 1860s. Seeking, with so many post-Idealist German theologians, to integrate scholarly advances in the historical study of religion with a self-unfolding idea of the development of religion as such, Pfleiderer praised the Mosaic dispensation's integration of religion with the feeling of a nation. It constituted nevertheless not a *Kindes*- but a *Knechtsverhältnis*, a serfdom rather than religion's loving childhood, which Jesus would entirely dissolve (Pfleiderer 1869: II, 281-3, 416). Anti-Judaic disparagement was not, however, the only possible consequence of the application of more thoroughgoing historicism to the Old Testament, especially among doctrinal conservatives. William Robertson Smith antagonised many in his traditionally Calvinist denomination with his acceptance that much of the Old Testament was in fact post-Exilic, and that much of what his co-religionists had once thought infallibly to belong to sacred chronology was, in truth, lost to history. But for Smith, each stage in the mind of Israel – and the very distillation and redaction of its sacred books, emerging from the refreshment of its religious life - represented a scene of fellowship with God, and a preparation for the coming of the gospel (Smith 1881).

After so much churning over of the biblical text, leaving its history ever more closely tied to the evolving needs and variations of human societies, what was left of the old, post-Reformation doctrine of biblical inspiration? The most advanced critics answered: very little. The bible, they averred, could only be said to have been inspired in the same sense as a great work of literature might be. Ralph Waldo Emerson regarded the Psalms as akin to the Iliad; and Job as possessing the dignity of a Norse Edda (Zink 1935: 10). The liberal Anglican unbeliever, Matthew Arnold, sought to rescue the bible from those who would dismiss it entirely by insisting "that the Bible requires for its basis nothing but what they can verify",

and that its language "is not scientific, but *literary*" (Arnold 1970: 155). This kind of categorical redefinition encouraged Joseph Addison Alexander, professor of Hellenistic and New Testament literature at the conservatively Calvinist Princeton Theological Seminary, to insist upon "the essential distinction between *literature* and *scripture*" in his commentary on Isaiah. A defender of plenary inspiration, Alexander affirmed that prophecy fulfilled a specific and predictive, not a literary and diagnostic function. He accordingly condemned those editors who arranged the prophet's words in verse rather than as prose (Alexander 1865: I, 23, 32-3, 43).

Among both evangelical and Catholic critics, nevertheless, writers who believed that the maintenance of intellectual authority required some appeal to modern standards of criticism became increasingly inclined to adopt a position between Arnold's and Alexander's. Philip Schaff's *Religious Encyclopaedia*, published in 1888, contended that the sacred writers were inspired to the extent that they conveyed the Word of God. Geographical and historical detail mattered little in comparison to this (Schaff and Cremer 1888). The English Roman Catholic convert, John Henry Newman, worked out a similar position in his private papers on the subject. For Newman, inspiration did not amount to dictation. Pertaining to writers, more than to texts, inspiration admitted, at least in principle, of incidental errors in the sacred books, which the church had had the wisdom not to make integral to her faith (Newman 1979). Across the western world, writers became ever more conscious that human historical subjectivity had shaped both the bible's original composition and its later interpretation. Whether this awareness weakened or strengthened biblical authority was a question that admitted of a range of answers; but no exegete could ignore it.

The sublation of historicism, 1890-1920

By the end of the nineteenth century, all aspects of human life had come to appear unintelligible except in relation to their courses of historical development. At precisely the same time as history permeated western thought most fully, nevertheless, doubts began to appear over whether historicism, as an intellectual attitude towards the human condition as such, could in and of itself provide the key to unlock the answers to the mysteries of human life. The tension between the continuing imperative to inquire historically, and the ultimate value of history as a way of knowing, expressed itself in biblical studies, no less than in other intellectual fields. The vigorous pursuit of the historical bible continued, in ways that led to a more thorough reconstruction of its cultural and intellectual worlds. But the more that radical historicism tended to anchor the bible in its Near Eastern context, the less obvious did it seem that the bible, rightly understood, could act as a guide to the movements of human temporality as whole. The historicising of the bible could not be undone. But the growing idea, nurtured in historical as also in systematic theology, that the bible was, in fact, radically alien or opposed to the subsequent course of human development became an important starting point for twentieth-century exegesis.

The Göttingen theologian, Albrecht Ritschl, and the "Ritschlian" theology he inspired, helped to propel biblical studies into this new era. In some respects sharing the wider Idealist movement's search for teleology and synthesis, Ritschl also turned biblical history against this impetus: tensions that pointed towards their impending disintegration. A former pupil of Baur at Tübingen, Ritschl firmly broke with his teacher's belief that faith was ultimately one and the same thing as the true understanding of history. He rediscovered Schleiermacher's conviction that religion existed in radical severance from reason and ethics, though it shaped the higher expressions of both; Christianity was properly social and experiential, not intellectual and dogmatic. To him the bible was significant not as a text or as a source of

doctrines, but for its witness to the fact that Christ's mission had been to proclaim and practise the "Kingdom of God", the reign of love and righteousness within a new community. Primitive Christianity was thus to be approached as an historical life, not a set of doctrines, as Lutheran and now Idealist theologians were wont to do. Though this life grew during subsequent epochs, the dogmatic forms into which the church had cast Christianity had prevented the theological apprehension of this truth, which historical criticism was now in a position to enable. Ritschl, whose thought expressed a wider neo-Kantian turn in German intellectual culture, thus continued to use history as the basis for a systematic philosophical theology; but he emphatically rejected the assumption that the bible could be assimilated to the wider progressive unfolding of mind. Rather than supposing, with the Tübingen critics, that the history of theology had dialectically integrated the meaning of the bible with the development of reflective consciousness, Ritschl believed that the latter had radically secularised the bible's teaching (Ritschl 1870-4; Zachhuber 2013: [250]-96). Ritschl's ideas proved vastly influential. They helped to kindle into existence the "History and Religion School" centred on Göttingen during the 1890s, which stressed that biblical teachings and practices acquired their meanings within the particular *cultus* within which their followers invoked them (Lehmkühler 1996). Ritschlianism also encouraged the church historian, Adolf von Harnack, to separate a moralised, neo-Kantian "essence of Christianity" from the supernatural beliefs and Jewish national hopes of the New Testament, which now seemed radically alien to modern consciousness (Harnack 1900).

By 1900, therefore, German liberal Protestants were beginning to see a more acute tension between the religion which the bible in fact proclaimed, and the religion which historical Christianity, with its lack of historical insight, had imagined that it had found within its pages. This disturbed those theologians who continued to interpret biblical doctrines within universal frameworks of historical evolution. Edward Caird, a British Idealist and defender of

Hegelian metaphysics, criticised Harnack for treating Christianity as an "eternal something" removed from the historical process (Jones and Muirhead 1921: 241-2). Writing in the liberal New England periodical, *The New World*, Caird argued that biblical criticism could never construct a picture of the original Jesus that would free the apprehension of Christ from the ways in which mind had, in its successive historical stages, conceptualised his work. Rather, it was both inevitable, and right, that Christ's ideal had to be assimilated anew into the modes of thought particular to each successive historical era (Caird 1897). Alfred Loisy, a leader of the "Catholic Modernism" which sought to apply the fruits of modern biblical criticism to eroding the hold of neo-Scholasticism over Roman Catholic theology, endorsed and adapted Caird's argument in his own reply to Harnack, *L'Évangile et l'église* (Loisy 1903). The essence of Christianity, Loisy argued, lay in the transmission of Christ's teaching in the life of the church. Critical study of the gospels showed that Christ did not, with Ritschl or Harnack, view the kingdom of God as a kind of inner state which the community of believers actualised in time, but rather as a new creation that would arise on the far side of an impending apocalypse, which would totally transform the condition of human affairs. This transformation did not come about, however, in the near-term in which the first apostles expected it. The church responded by subjectively expanding the objective truths of the gospels into a new kind of orthodoxy, as the conditions within which the Christian community expressed its faith changed radically (Loisy 1903: [ix]-x, [35]-46).

Loisy's book, swiftly condemned by the Roman Catholic Church, harked back in some respects to the Idealist quest for the unity of religious knowledge. In its recognition that Christ's teaching was primarily eschatological, however, it expressed a new and distinctive critical impetus which tended to separate biblical theology, as such, from what nineteenth-century divines had become accustomed to regard as the divine forces animating human time. The radical theologian, Albert Schweitzer, explained that the development of gospel criticism

had prepared the ground for a paradigm shift in the understanding of Jesus' mission in his 1906 study, *Von Reimarus zu Wrede*, which was translated into English as *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*. Christ did not work to unveil an ethic of progressive improvement which confirmed the nineteenth century in its leading habits of mind, Schweitzer argued. Reflecting the growing priority which scholars now accorded to Mark's disruptively Messianic Jesus, where a previous generation of liberals had grown lyrical over John's lovingly philosophical portrait, Schweitzer insisted that Jesus had thrown down an apocalyptic challenge to the Jewish world of his day. He expected an imminent outpouring of the spirit, which would sweep away the priestly law, and abolish all natural distinctions, through the creation of the Kingdom of God. When the new dispensation did not materialise, Jesus accepted death, in the mistaken expectation that it would soon follow (Schweitzer 1911). Schweitzer's Anglican translator, Francis Crawford Burkitt, the Norrisian Professor of Divinity at Cambridge, came to very similar conclusions. Jesus was not, he argued, "really and primarily an ethical teacher, or a social reformer", but a stormy Messiah, whom God made manifest in order to rule as his vicegerent on earth (Burkitt 1922: 51, 62-3).

The pivot towards eschatology in New Testament exegesis often took Ritschlianism's supposedly bourgeois and worldly conception of the coming kingdom as its straw man. But the two opposing *fin-de-siècle* fashions shared a fundamental discontent with Christendom's traditional Christology. This critical stance expressed their common scepticism as to whether post-apostolic history, which had given shape to that Christology and its interpretation, really did evince the providential or spiritual purposes which earlier scholars had so often made the bible the key to interpreting. Secular time increasingly appeared to be just that. It is a remarkable fact that conservative evangelicals, though oblivious or averse to the movements of advanced criticism, were simultaneously shifting from a historicist premillennialist to a futurist conception of scriptural prophecy. This anticipated that the fulfilment of prophecy

would be narrowly concentrated around the end-times, rather than in the vale of tears which constituted the ordinary course of history, from which providential action now appeared to be more removed than it had once seemed (Bebbington 2005: 184-8).

The rising tensions between the perceived autonomy of the bible, and the historical metaphysics into the service of which the bible had so often been pressed, found particularly sharp and defiantly neo-orthodox expression in the early writings of the Swiss Reformed theologian, Karl Barth. Barth published a commentary on Paul's Epistle to the Romans in 1919 which offered a meditation on the interaction between divine sovereignty and human history. Barth accepted, as an uncontentious point of departure, that Paul had expressed himself to his contemporaries through the language and ideas of his day. Even the most conservative kind of exegesis, at least if it laid claim to academic respectability, now recognised the bible's historicity. Barth understood Paul's meaning, however, to make clear that the operation of God's grace, from Abraham down the generations, bound salvation history into the kingdom of God. The individualities, periods, and temporal relations which pertained to human history were, in relation to this absolutely higher system of relations, merely the transient expressions of outward being. Thus Barth reached into Pauline theology in order to see beyond history, to apprehend the eternal opposition between God's sovereign revelation and the movements of sinful human time into which that revelation was delivered, but by which it was not constrained. Barth saved the bible from history by defining its truth as a kind of anti-history (Barth 1985: 3-4, 135-45).

Barth, Calvinism's answer to Nietzsche, did not speak for all biblical interpreters. His work nevertheless represented a kind of mirror-image to Schweitzer's and Burkitt's radical liberal critiques, in that it insisted that the conventional apologetic modes of the nineteenth century simply did not recognise the profundity of the challenge which the bible threw down to contemporary culture, and to the historical course through which that culture had evolved. In

one sense, this rejection of nineteenth-century historicism, though not history *tout court*, helped believers to disentangle biblical authority from the souring of western culture's idea of itself before and after the Great War. In another, not less consequential respect, it marked the acceleration of the eclipse of biblical narrative from the centre of that same culture as the twentieth century unfolded.

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