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Scripture and Spirituality in Early-Modern Biblical Interpretation

The church of Christ sets the crown upon Christ's head in the day of his espousals to his bride, i.e., in the conversion of the soul. Christ is crowned as king by God the Father, and not only so, but also by the church, his mother.

—Jonathan Edwards, *Blank Bible*, on Song of Solomon 3:11¹

Marriage signifies the spiritual union and communion of Christ and the church, and especially the glorification of the church in the perfection of this union and communion forever.

—Jonathan Edwards, “Images of Divine Things”²

IN THE BUSY JEWISH quarter of Amsterdam in 1632—just a few steps from the Houtgracht channel, on the Burgwal thoroughfare—Baruch Spinoza was born to the Portuguese businessman Michael de Espinoza. Primarily speaking Portuguese but praying in Hebrew, they were one family among many Jewish-Portuguese immigrants enticed to this republic known for its religious toleration and economic promise. Perhaps it is not surprising that Spinoza, growing up in such relatively diverse circumstances, dared to think differently from his Jewish and Christian counterparts on the nature of Scripture. As free as Amsterdam was, Spinoza's views on the nature of the biblical text and his rejection of key points of orthodoxy, including biblical authority and Mosaic authorship,

1. *WJE* 24:617.

2. *WJE* 11:52.

were met initially with fear and communal shunning, but ultimately transformed the world of biblical interpretation.

Spinoza and others like him were willing to ask forbidden questions. Must we believe that the Bible is God's revelation to humanity simply because it or the church says it is? Who is the privileged interpreter of Scripture? Who is to say that one person's reading of the biblical text is more enlightened by the Spirit than another's? Spinoza and the thinkers encouraged by him were troubled by what they saw as a sacred text that did not stand the test of scientific investigation.

As seen in the previous chapter, ancient and medieval Christians explored the depths of the biblical text with little fear, finding no need to question its authority since any number of possible readings, including the allegorical, were available when a literal reading posed a problem. But the Reformers had challenged these tactics; and in one sense, the Reformation's questioning of the church's authority and allegorical readings of the Bible set the stage for the willful opposition and pre-critical thinking of Spinoza. Scholars of the seventeenth century now had to deal with a serious challenge to the Bible and to their own respective theologies. Among these scholars, Spinoza represents a minority, one that often delayed publication of books for the sake of avoiding persecution, but the majority were visible members of movements like Puritanism and Cambridge Platonism or their progeny, the Latitudinarians.³ These latter groups resisted each other as much as they resisted Spinoza. The Puritans resisted the Church of England because their theology was too "Romanized," the Cambridge Platonists and Latitudinarians because they were too "liberal," and Spinoza and Descartes because they purportedly placed authority in the individual. The Cambridge Platonists and the Latitudinarians resisted Spinoza for throwing out the baby with the bathwater, and the Church of England and the Puritans for being too dogmatic and, consequently, brutal. There was no united front.

Edwards's New England world was far from untouched by these controversies. The changing historical and intellectual climate of

3. Many of these interests can be found in his citations, quotations without citations, but particularly in his "Catalogue of Reading" and "Account Book." Writing on the sources listed in "Account Book," Thuesen notes that, "Of the approximately seventy-seven strictly theological works mentioned in the document [the 'Account Book'], two in seven are 'polite' (Anglican, Latitudinarian, or Enlightenment) volumes, while the rest ['impolite'] may be classified broadly as Nonconformist or Reformed" (Thuesen, "Edwards' Intellectual Background," 26).

seventeenth-century European cultures of the Bible made possible the theological controversies of the eighteenth century, represented by a flurry of books and pamphlets that made their way into European and American universities and colleges, culminating in the first major controversy to hit Yale and coinciding with Edwards's first personal theological crisis. A contextualized perspective on Edwards's theological crisis in the early 1720s, requires some examination of the preceding intellectual issues and historical movements that inform his immediate world.

Post-Reformation Puritanism

Between the 1530s and 1640s, England experienced tumultuous religious and political uncertainty. The Puritans, carrying on the Reformed doctrine of Scripture and conversion, sought (among many priorities) to shed the imposition of ritual from the Church of Rome as it was found in the Church of England and dictated by the monarch. The battle was pursued on economic, political, and ecclesiastical fronts. At the beginning of the seventeenth century, when James VI of Scotland became James I of England (1566–1625), many Presbyterians expected an ally, but he quickly sided with Episcopalianism. With the Millenary Petition in 1603, Puritans of all stripes raised questions regarding ritual, subscription, and discipline. In response, James called the Hampton Court Conference in 1604 to discuss the issues, but at the mention of Presbyterianism—which would end his power to discipline from the throne and his “divine right” to rule the church—James called off the meeting. He was keenly aware that a loss of power over the church would result in the loss of control over church money and property.

Pressure continued to build in subsequent years as Charles I (1600–1649), considered a crypto-Catholic by the Puritans, upheld the positions of Archbishop William Laud (1573–1645). Laud served on the King's Privy Council, whose vision of the church primarily concerned a uniformity of worship. As a result of his attempts to enforce this uniformity, Puritan lecturers were censored and liturgical practices were instituted that were considered by Puritans to be “Roman.” For many Puritan millenarians who eagerly took on the role of watchdogs, looking for indications of the end of the world often focused on any sign of possible “papists” in the Church of England. Laud's efforts to instill

liturgical practices further widened the divide between the Puritans and the Church of England. “In an effort to deter further anti-papal polemics,” writes Jeffrey K. Jue, “from 1633–1640, Archbishop Laud forbade the publication of any material identifying the pope as Antichrist. The Laudians were already suspected of being crypto-papists, and this intolerance therefore unleashed a flood of anti-papal fear.” Parliament had even sanctioned the publication of Joseph Mede’s *Clavis Apocalyptica* as a “timely propaganda piece in attacking the ecclesiastical establishment endorsed by Charles I.”⁴

Continued instability forced some English Puritans to immigrate to the Netherlands, bringing with them their theological contributions.⁵ Evidence of this international dialogue is not hard to find. English books found their way into Dutch Reformed libraries and vice versa; both Richard Baxter and Owen had significant numbers of Dutch books on their shelves.⁶ “The cluster of Puritanical intellectuals in exile had a lively dialogue on polemical and learned topics,” writes Keith Sprunger. “Unorthodox notions flourished alongside scholarly orthodoxy. Freedom of ideas produced ‘Amsterdam Babylon’ and ‘Amsterdam Babel.’”⁷

During these exiles, significant work was done on Protestant biblical interpretation. William Ames (1576–1633), a contributor to the Synod of Dordrecht in 1618 as an unofficial English representative of Calvinism and an advisor to Johannes Bogerman, the presiding officer, was at the front of the discussion.⁸ It is his *Medulla Theologiae* and *English Puritanisme* that helped define Puritan Calvinism. For Ames, the doctrine of Scripture is the heart of all things Puritan. In 1610 Ames republished William Bradshaw’s (ca. 1572–1618) *English Puritanism* (1641) in his own name, editing it and adding an introduction.⁹ According to this volume, Puritans understood the pope to be the “Antichrist,” one who saw his authority as higher than Scripture. But it is Scripture that has the highest authority, according to Ames, a doctrine that unites all Puritans:

4. Jue, “HEAVEN UPON EARTH,” 40, 43.

5. Sprunger, *Dutch Puritanism*, 355, 356.

6. Trueman, “Puritan Theology as Historical Event,” 259; Trueman, *Claims of Truth*, 15.

7. Sprunger, *Trumpets from the Tower*, 47. On this trafficking of ideas, see Schoneveld, *Intertraffic of the Mind*.

8. Sprunger, *Learned Doctor William Ames*, 54.

9. *Ibid.*, 32.

They hold and maintaine, that the word of God contained in the writings of the Prophets and Apostles, is of absolute perfection, given by Christ the head of the Church, to be unto the same the sole Canon and rule of all matters of *Religion*, and the worship and service of God whatsoever. And that whatsoever done in the same service and worship cannot be justified by the said Word, is unlawfull. And therefore that it is a sin, to force any Christian to doe any act of Religion, or Divine Service, that cannot evidently be warranted by the same.¹⁰

For the Puritan, all one needs for life and religious duty are to be found in Scripture, not in the decrees of the monarch or the bishop.¹¹ Scripture is the foundation of the Puritan approach to science, education, capitalism, and charity.¹² Nevertheless, while Scripture is plain enough to be applied to all areas of life, it is not plain to all, and there is a deeper meaning. “It is one thing to say that *all necessary truth* is plainly and clearly revealed in Scripture, which we do say,” argues John Owen, “and another, that *every text and passage* in the Scripture is plain and easy to be understood, which we do not say, nor ever thought . . .”¹³ There is a supernatural layer to Scripture that is sometimes hard to discern. While Scripture is plain, it contains something “mysterious” and “surpassing the comprehension of any man in this world.”¹⁴

This mysteriousness is, however, never a subjective message. Puritan biblical interpretation, in keeping with earlier Reformation interpreters, retains as a fundamental element the clarity of Scripture found in the literal meaning.¹⁵ Like Calvin (and Luther), the literal interpretation—the interpretation proper (as understood by the human authors)—is not the only literal interpretation; a “work-around” exists, made possible by the main author of the Bible, the Holy Spirit. His intended meaning, the typological, is the second literal interpretation.¹⁶ “In interpreting the Scriptures,” writes William Ames, one should be “waying [*sic*] the propriety of the tongue, wherein they are written” and

10. Ames, *English Puritanisme*, 20, 1.

11. Sprunger, *Dutch Puritanism*, 458.

12. Morgan, *Godly Learning*, 14, 18.

13. *WJO* 14:276.

14. *WJO* 14.276.

15. Packer, “Puritans as Interpreters of Scripture,” 191–201.

16. Lewalski, “Typological Symbolism,” 81.

“waying [*sic*] the Circumstance of the place, by comparing one place with another, and by considering what is properly spoken, and what tropically or figuratively.”¹⁷ In another place he explains, “Some things were known by a natural knowledge and some by a supernatural.”¹⁸

As with Calvin, the Puritans also demand a spiritual sense to understand the spiritual message of the Holy Spirit. For example, James Durham (1622–1652) notes in his *Exposition on the Song of Solomon* that Scripture contains a literal meaning, equivalent to the historical sense, but it also contains another literal sense: the sense literally intended by God. Solomon’s book “carrieth the authority of the Holy Ghost engraven upon it,” writes Durham. The text thus has two authors:

This Song must either be attributed to the Spirit, as the chief author of it, (though Solomon was the penman) or we must say, it was not only penned, but indited [*sic*] merely by some man, (Solomon, or whoever he be) led by his own spirit, or some other spirit, without the Spirit of God: but none of these last can be said.

This is what he calls a “two-fold literal sense of Scripture.” Given that he is discussing the book of Solomon, one of the more controversial books in the history of interpretation, Durham cannot resolve himself to see the sexual and romantic overtones as offering any “edification.” “Running in the night through the streets, and slighting him at the door . . . by no means can admit a proper, literal, and immediate sense,” he insists, “but must needs aim at something figurative.”¹⁹ Herein is the logic: Scripture cannot include a book that focuses on such themes, therefore, biblical books like the Song of Solomon must be read differently (overlooking, of course, that such a book’s presence in the Bible might, in fact, support the rejected premise that the Bible can indeed include books with sexual themes.)

Durham is not alone in his conclusions. Other Reformed commentators of his day approach the biblical text with similar attention to literal meanings, applying the spiritual sense when perceived as required by the text. A look at Matthew Poole’s *Annotations Upon the Holy Bible*, for example, reveals this Puritan exegetical ethic in play. The subtitle of

17. Ames, *English Puritanisme*, 10–11; see also Richard Baxter’s statements affirming the same thought in *The Practical Works of Richard Baxter*, 478.

18. Ames, *Marrow of Theology*, 186.

19. Durham, *Exposition of the Song of Solomon*, 26, 28, 30.

the volume, “The Sacred *Text* is Inserted, and *various* Readings Annex’d, together with Parallel *Scriptures*, the more difficult *Terms* in each Verse are Explained, seeming *Contradictions* Reconciled, *Questions* and Doubts Resolved, and the whole Text opened;” promises too much hermeneutically. Poole begins his commentaries on books of the Bible with a brief introduction, describing the content and message of the book using redemptive language. Then, verse by verse, he examines the biblical text, pulling from the historical context as well as the grammatical and contextual framework. The verse appears first with the explanation underneath; the literal interpretation gets the priority. Citing numerous cross-references, Poole guides Scripture in commenting upon Scripture, harmonizing it doctrinally. There is little wonder as to why this was a favorite commentary for many of the Reformed, including Edwards.

Notwithstanding what may be perceived as a tedious handling of the Greek and Hebrew, various translations of texts, and less-than-colorful commentary, Poole rarely fails to indicate the spiritual meaning of the text as well. When Moses and Aaron, in Num 20:10–11, gather the congregation together, Moses lifts up his hand and strikes the rock, causing water to flow out; according to verse 11, “water came out abundantly, and the congregation drank and their beasts.”²⁰ Poole does not shrug off that this was a literal, historical event; but he does immediately focus on a deeper meaning: “To the men it was a sacrament, 1 Cor. 10.3, 4. but to the beasts it was no holy but a common thing.”²¹ As promised in his encompassing subtitle, Poole is harmonizing the Old and New Testaments, explaining that the water pouring out of the rock was more than just flowing water but also a “sacrament,” something spiritual, a foreshadowing of the work of Christ. He inserts 1 Cor 10:3–4 as a cross-reference because this is the New Testament commentary on the Numbers passage, which according to Poole, provides the greater and intended meaning of the Holy Spirit: “And did all drink the same spiritual drink for they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them, and that Rock was Christ” (1 Cor 10: 4). *The Annotations* then follows through with an explanation of the spiritual meaning of the text:

20. When referencing Scripture passages in discussing these English interpreters, I will cite the King James Version to remain faithful to their historical contexts.

21. Poole, *Annotations*, no page numbers (Num 20:10–11). Hereafter all citations for both volumes of this commentary will reference the biblical passage.

And all the Jews, as well those that perished in the Wilderness, as those that were preserved to go into *Canaan*, they drank of the water which came out of the *Rock* . . . which water was *spiritual drink* in the same respects that the *Manna* was spiritual meat, being miraculously produced, and being a figure of Christ. For, [saith] the Apostle, *That Rock was Christ*, that is, the Rock did signifie or prefigure Christ, the Rock was Christ in the same sense that the *Bread in the Lords Supper* is the *Body of Christ*.²²

Like Durham, when Poole approaches the Song of Solomon he resorts not only to a prefigurative or typological interpretation, but also to one that is prejudiced by the allegorical. Noting the outlandish figures of speech and the supposed indecency between the groom and his bride, Poole concludes that “*this Book is to be understood mystically or Allegorically concerning that spiritual Love and Marriage which is between God or Christ, and his Church, or every believing Soul*.”²³ Another popular commentator of the day, Matthew Henry (1662–1714), comes to the same conclusion, arguing that the book is “an allegory, the letter of which kills those who rest in that and look no further, but the spirit of which gives life . . . It is a parable which makes divine things more difficult to those who do not love them, but more plain and pleasant to those who do.”²⁴

Though the Puritans approach Scripture with more freedom than their predecessors to find figures or allegories in the text, their approach remains in the spirit of Calvin, controlled by the text and the belief that the Holy Spirit and their regeneration gives them access to the hidden,

22. Poole, *Annotations*, 1 Cor 10:4.

23. Poole, *Annotations*, “Introduction” to “Canticles.” Poole offers a general description of an allegory in his commentary on Gal 4:24 in *Annotations*. Here Paul describes Sarah and Hagar as representing allegorically both heavenly and earthly Jerusalems. “That is called an *Allegory*,” writes Poole, “when one thing is learned out of another, or something is mystically signified and to be understood further then is expressed. Scripture hath a peculiar kind of *Allegories*, wherein one thing is signified by and under another thing.” Poole notes that Moses did not intend an allegorical meaning when he wrote about Sarah and Hagar. Rather, the Apostle Paul judged that there was not only a literal meaning to the text, but also a mystical sense that could be applied to the historical context. Similarly, Matthew Henry writes, “*These things*, says he, *are an allegory*, wherein, besides the literal and historical sense of the words, the Spirit of God might design to signify something further to us, and that was, That these two, Hagar and Sarah, *are the two covenants*, or were intended to typify and prefigure the two different dispensations of the covenant” (Henry, *Matthew Henry’s Commentary*, 6:699).

24. Henry, *Matthew Henry’s Commentary*, 3:1053.

mysterious, redemptive-historical message that is, in some sense, the metanarrative of the entire Bible. As Matthew Poole writes, commenting on 1 Cor 2:11–12: “but there are deep things of God, Mysteries in Scripture, which till the Spirit of God hath revealed to me, they know not nor understand; for none knoweth them originally, but the Spirit of God, who is himself God, and *searcheth the deep things of God.*” Likewise, Edwards will also later write of 1 Cor 2:11–12 that “in these two verses is contained an invincible argument for the insufficiency of human reason without a divine revelation in things of that nature which the gospel reveals . . .”²⁵ It should be no surprise, then, that the typological interpretation of Scripture popular with Edwards and given so much attention by scholars is founded primarily on an existing Reformed methodology. The Bible is—for Calvin, the Puritans, and Edwards (assimilating and building on his forebears)—the source of all things mysterious in the divine mind. It is, therefore, a divine treasure chest containing hidden gems for those who dig deeper into it. More than simple reading is required, however; one must be guided in this by the Holy Spirit—and therefore be in relationship with God—in order to access the treasures locked in the chest.

The question of who has the Spirit of God, or who can perceive the true voice of the Spirit in interpreting the Bible, then, is a crucial question for seventeenth-century biblicists. Among those quick to challenge, Spinoza is a prime example.

Seventeenth-Century Challenges and Responses

Spinoza

Spinoza’s Amsterdam teemed with business and intellectual pursuits, such as those of Spinoza’s famous neighbor, the artist Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn. As a young man, Spinoza divided his time between his schooling—under teachers like Rabbi Menasseh ben Israel (1604–57), a progressive who promoted Jewish-Christian dialogue by instructing his students in the New Testament—and working in his

25. Poole, *Annotations*, 1 Cor 2:11–12. First Corinthians 2:11–12 reads in Edwards’s KJV, “For what man knoweth the things of a man, save the spirit of a man that is in him? Even so the things of God knoweth no man, but the Spirit of God. Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit which is of God, that we might know the things that are freely given to us of God” (*WJE* 24.2.1038).

father's vegetable import business. His early educational experience and contact with others in his father's business exposed Spinoza to a broad world of ideas. At age fourteen, he left his Jewish schooling altogether and ventured into business fulltime, pursuing training in Latin and exploring the many intellectual and philosophical trends of his day through a secular education.²⁶

By 1656, when Spinoza left his father's business, his beliefs were in a state of rapid flux. Because of his evolving views on the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch, his growing acceptance of pantheism, and his rejection of the immortality of the soul, he was eventually excommunicated from his congregation and community. Now earning his living as a lens polisher, his intellectual transformation led him to publish several books on his new theological outlook, one of the most important being the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, a strong critique of the Bible and politics.

The *Tractatus*, a landmark in the history of biblical interpretation, heralds a change in the treatment of Scripture and the role of the biblical commentator. Spinoza's radical thinking was a significant factor in setting the tone of seventeenth-century European biblical interpretation (especially early Deism) and eighteenth-century American reactions. "While certainly only part of a diverse and very broad culture of critique," writes Robert Brown, "Spinoza's treatise represented one of the most thoroughgoing applications of a demonstrative method to the epistemological estimation of the biblical narratives. In this sense, its appearance was something of a precipitating moment." Or as Leo Strauss says, "from our time, scholars generally study the Bible in the manner in which they study any other book . . . Spinoza more than any other man laid the foundation for this kind of Biblical study."²⁷

From his excommunication until his death in 1677, Spinoza argued that the Jews were arrogant in insisting that they were the only chosen people, and his writing continued to push for social reform leading to freedom from binding religious thought and to a promotion of a pluralistic democracy.²⁸ The Bible was a major obstacle for his agenda and needed to be understood and interpreted outside of the walls of dogma.

26. Nadler, *Spinoza*, 176–79.

27. Brown, *Jonathan Edwards and the Bible*, 34; Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, 35.

28. Harrisville and Sundeberg, *Bible in Modern Culture*, 44.

Western thought, he argued, needed to break away from the presuppositions that held the mind back from using reason to ascertain the nature of being. According to Spinoza, whether Jewish, Catholic, or Protestant, these presuppositions were fortified in their respective institutions. For the Protestant, especially the Reformed, this meant letting go of the doctrine of scriptural authority.

While the Reformers did reject radical allegory and church tradition as merely human authorities, it is clear from Spinoza's work that he sees their doctrine of *sola scriptura* as irrational, placing a human and therefore flawed book above the mind and critical examination. The added notion of being illuminated by the Spirit appears to Spinoza as an elitist and unaccountable form of interpretation, a convenient replacement for the church tradition the Reformers had rejected. In its place Spinoza advocates a scientific approach guided by the light of reason.

Like Descartes, Spinoza's search for certainty requires him to attempt to dismiss his presuppositions. Inspired by the Cartesian *ordine geometrico*, Spinoza seeks to recognize, as obligatory for all as is mathematics, only those self-evident ideas which have necessary corollaries and which may lead to ultimate philosophical truth.²⁹ Known as *infallibilism*, this epistemology judges so-called claims to truth or knowledge as if they are mathematical conclusions, certain and binding.³⁰ Guided by the light of reason, human beings are able to escape the superstitious fears of religion that only lead to engulfing humanity in violence and hatred. Through reason, according to Spinoza, one will be able to analyze the Bible using the same tools used to interpret the text of the Babylonians or any other people group.

If we would separate ourselves from the crowd and escape from theological prejudices, instead of rashly accepting human commentaries for Divine documents, we must consider the true method of interpreting Scripture and dwell upon it at some length; for if we remain in ignorance of this we cannot know, certainly, what the Bible and the Holy Spirit wish to teach.³¹

29. Brown, *Jonathan Edwards and the Bible*, 31–34; Kenny, *Oxford History of Western Philosophy*, 146–51.

30. Brown, "Edwards, Locke and the Bible," 363, 364.

31. Spinoza, *Theologico-Political Treatise*, 1:99. "I may sum up the matter by saying that the method of interpreting Scripture does not widely differ from the method of interpreting nature—in fact, it is almost the same" (ibid.).

With this belief in mind, Spinoza demands that the Bible be treated like any other book, subjected to the reason of human beings and proven through testing and logic.³²

Undermining the idea of the Bible as revelation, Spinoza goes right to the heart of its treatment as the infallible word of God. Spinoza does not want the interpreter to take the claim that it is God's literal word too seriously, since he believes it is the result of a misunderstood idiom. According to him, the Jews do not discern between first and second causes. Rather, he asserts, they "refer all things directly to Deity . . . if they make money by a transaction, they say God gave it to them; if they desire anything, they say God has disposed their hearts toward it; if they think anything, they say God told them."³³ Essentially, Robert Grant explains, "it could be claimed that Hebrew idiom was responsible for [the Bible's] attribution to God."³⁴

Spinoza sees no special need for such supernatural transformation. Ironically, the divine and supernatural light, a source for certitude and clarity in Reformed theology, offers too many individual and unchecked interpretations, according to Spinoza. It provides too much room for any person or institution to justify any dogma or action of intolerance. The truth, he claims, is that when the Bible is understood in its plain language, neither the redeemed nor the reprobate has an advantage over the other.

For as the highest power of Scriptural interpretation belongs to every man, the rule for such interpretation should be nothing but the natural light of reason which is common to all—not any supernatural light nor any external authority; moreover, such a rule ought not to be so difficult that it can only be applied by very skilful philosophers, but should be adapted to the natural and ordinary faculties and capacity of mankind.³⁵

Whether it was his Jewish community or the institutionalized Christian church (Protestant or Catholic), truth in these systems, according to Spinoza, was deemed as the sole property of that institution. The advantage of being the chosen ones made the Scripture a handy tool to beat down anyone with whom they were at odds. But human equity,

32. Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, 35.

33. Spinoza, *Theologico-Political Treatise*, 15.

34. Grant, *Short History of the Interpretation of the Bible*, 106.

35. Spinoza, *Theologico-Political Treatise*, 119.

tolerance, and true democracy occur when everyone realizes they are on an equal playing field.

Spinoza argues that when interpreters claim that “the light of nature has no power to interpret Scripture, but that a supernatural faculty is required for the task,” they give themselves too much credit. “If we look at their interpretations,” he insists, “they contain nothing supernatural, at least nothing but the merest conjectures . . . Let them be placed side by side with the interpretations of those who frankly confess that they have no faculty beyond their natural ones; we shall see that the two are just alike—both human, both long pondered over, both laboriously invented.”³⁶ His point, to paraphrase, is that everyone puts on their pants one leg at a time. Each interpreter may not have the same level of natural faculty, but none of them has a supernatural faculty. Ultimately, no props are needed; only the light of natural reason, possessed by all, is necessary to understand Scripture.

For Reformed Protestant Christianity, Descartes and Spinoza represented the start of a new threat to biblical authority and interpretation. Both Descartes and Spinoza were met with intense opposition from post-Reformation exegetes, especially Dutch and English Puritans who intended to continue the Reformation understanding of Scripture’s sole authority.³⁷ Dutch theologian and professor at Utrecht, Gisbertus Voetius, accused the new philosophy of indirect atheism. Voetius charged his students with the task of taking on Descartes; one student, Dutch theologian Peter van Mastricht, would become Voetius’s successor.³⁸ Van Mastricht’s disagreement with Descartes is focused on Scripture as the source of unequivocal authority.³⁹ He argues that Scripture has eight characteristics, all stemming from its divine authority. Scripture, according to van Mastricht’s explanation of 1 Tim 3:16–17, is God’s word and as such carries his authority. Being divine, it must be

36. Ibid., 114. “The difficulty of interpreting Scripture arises from no defect in human reason, but simply from the carelessness (not to say malice) of men who neglected the history of the Bible” (ibid.).

37. On reactions to Descartes and Spinoza, see Pünjer, *History of the Christian Philosophy of Religion*, 407–45; Preus, *Spinoza and the Irrelevance of Biblical Authority*; see also my “Introduction” in van Mastricht, *A Treatise on Regeneration*, vii–xxxii.

38. For an overview of the Cartesian debate among the orthodox Reformed, see Bizer, “Reformed Orthodoxy and Cartesianism,” 20ff.; and van Mastricht’s *Novitatum Cartesianarum Gangraena*.

39. Bizer, “Reformed Orthodoxy and Cartesianism,” 70.

true, certain, and universal (“*veritas, certitudo & . . . universal*”); it must be sound (“*integritas*”), meaning free from corruption (“*per singularem Dei providentiam, immunis existit, ab omni corruptione*”); holy and pure (“*sanctitas ac puritas*”); clear (“*perspicuitas*”); perfect (“*quâ ei nihil omnino deest*”); necessary; and efficacious.⁴⁰ All of this meant nothing to Descartes and Spinoza; but it meant the world to Christianized Europe.

The Cambridge Platonists

A middle ground between Puritanism and Spinozan rationalism was struck by a vocal minority of English thinkers known as the Cambridge Platonists (1630–1680). At the heart of the movement were Henry More (1614–1687), Ralph Cudworth (1617–1688), John Smith (1618–1652), Nathaniel Culverwel (1618–1651), and their leader, Benjamin Whichcote (1609–1683). These thinkers laid a greater emphasis on the use of reason in determining issues of faith.

Cambridge Platonism began in reaction to political instability and Puritan dogmatism.⁴¹ Culverwel and Smith were under Whichcote’s tutelage, and Cudworth—following Whichcote—was also a fellow and tutor. For Whichcote and his students, human reason is the “the candle of the Lord” and a necessary tool for reining in unfettered dogmatism placed on Scripture by Puritan views of biblical authority and interpretation, while simultaneously avoiding Spinoza’s rejection of special revelation. For these thinkers, Platonism is more about Plotinus than Plato himself and, though philosophical idealism comes into the discussion, it is less about the metaphysics as much as its “religious spirit.”⁴²

As the country went during this time, so did Cambridge; while one might presume a small, tightly knit group within the confines of a university to exist beyond the radar of politics, such was not the case. Laudian policies and the suppression of lecturers at Cambridge, along with Puritan suspicions of their teachings, left the band of Cambridge men trapped between the two. Politically, Cambridge “was engulfed by the upheavals of the time,” as Gerald Cragg puts it.⁴³ When Cromwell’s

40. Van Mastricht, *Theoretico-Practica Theologia*, 1.2.3–21.

41. As exemplified in the debate between Puritan divine Anthony Tuckney (1599–1670) and his student Benjamin Whichcote, discussed in Roberts, Sr., *From Puritanism to Platonism*, 42–65.

42. Powicke, *Cambridge Platonists*, 21.

43. Cragg, *Cambridge Platonists*, 8.

troops passed through, attempts were made to remove those believed to be sympathetic to the crown.⁴⁴ During the tumultuous years of 1643 to 1660, the Cambridge Platonists held their own *via media* between the Puritans and the Anglicans, seeking toleration.⁴⁵ “The situation at Cambridge,” writes G. A. J. Rogers, “especially in 1643, when the parliamentary troops of the Earl of Manchester took over the University and removed paintings and imprisoned members, was one that must have left a very deep impression on Cudworth, and no doubt confirmed his horror of war and militant confrontation generally.”⁴⁶ The ups and downs of the times fostered a search for something different and better balanced, leading the Cambridge Platonists to emphasize the roles of Scripture *and* reason. Spinoza, for them, was the resurgence of materialism, and More resolutely attacked his writings as atheistic.⁴⁷ At the same time, they did not exclude the obligation to understand Scripture in conjunction with solid and sane reason, a facility that appeared to them to be lacking in the day’s conflicts.

Reason is essential, argues Culverwel in *The Light of Nature*, because, based on his reading of Prov 20:27, reason is the “candle of the Lord.”⁴⁸ Whichcote agrees, writing, in “Think on These Things,” that “religion exercises, teaches, satisfies, that which is the height and excellency of human nature”:

Our reason is not laid aside nor discharged, . . . but awakened, excited, employed, directed, and improved by it; for the mind and understanding of man, is that faculty, whereby man is made capable of God, and apprehensive of him, receptive from him, and able to make returns upon him, and acknowledgments to him. Bring that with you, or else you are not capable receivers: unless you drink in these moral principles; unless you do receive them by reason, the reason of things by the reason of your mind, your religion is but shallow and superficial.⁴⁹

44. Ibid., 8; Roberts, *From Puritanism to Platonism*, 7.

45. Cragg, *Cambridge Platonists*, 11; Cudworth was raised Reformed but later became Arminian on the will, providence, and responsibility. This was seen as a “gentler theology” (Colie, *Light and Enlightenment*, 38).

46. Rogers, “Other-Worldly Philosophers and the Real World,” 7; Spurr, *Restoration Church of England*, 1991.

47. For a helpful analysis of More’s critique of Spinoza see Colie, *Light and Enlightenment*, 66–93.

48. Culverwel, *Elegant and Learned Discourse*, 1.

49. Whichcote, *Works*, 4:139–40. All subsequent citations are abbreviated *WW*, with volume number and page.

Scripture verifies the light of nature that God provides through his creation using the so-called candle of the Lord, that is, the human mind. “A man has as much right to use his own understanding in judging of truth,” argues Whichcote in his *Aphorisms*, “as he has a right to use his own eyes to see his way.”⁵⁰ Unlike Spinoza, this approach does not strip revelation of its authority; but unlike many of the Puritans (according to the Cambridge Platonists), neither does it strip reason of its capacity. Human reason can go only so far, they argue, as God ultimately transcends it, leaving the human being to believe where reason cannot prove; nevertheless, the emphasis found in Reformed theology on first being spiritually transformed goes too far.⁵¹

This concept of transcendence emerges from their Neoplatonic idealism and Plotinus’s understanding of ascetic contemplation of the divine.⁵² As Plato wanted to turn the mind away from the material to the immaterial, so did these Cambridge theologians. Being their primary philosophical influence, Plotinus provided them with a hermeneutical tool. Plotinus argues that reality, which is spiritual, is also called Intelligence; this Intelligence corresponds loosely to Plato’s World of Forms or Ideas, in which forms are merely emanations of that Intelligence. By adding the element of Intelligence to Ideas, Plotinus is speaking of the mind of “the One,” making it the ultimate source of all Ideas. This is closer to the Cambridge Platonists’ conception of God: “divine intelligence is the ultimate reality.”⁵³ Human reason (the candle of the Lord) reflects this divine intelligence; it is godlike.⁵⁴ Reason allows one to see beyond the material world and into the immaterial. “Reason,” writes Whichcote, “is the divine governor of man’s life, it is the very voice of God.” The connection of reason with the divine makes reason a moral venture. Reason is a spiritual exercise and “nothing is more spiritual than that which is moral.”⁵⁵ Biblical interpretation, then, is not

50. *WW* 4:147; Whichcote, “Moral and Religious Aphorisms,” 423 (*Aphorisms*, 40). Subsequent references will be to *Aphorisms* and number.

51. Roberts, *From Puritanism to Platonism*, 75.

52. Copleston, *History of Philosophy*, 56.

53. Cragg, *Cambridge Platonists*, 22.

54. Powicke, *Cambridge Platonists*, 23.

55. Whichcote, *Aphorisms*, 76, 969.

based simply on a whim. Their middle ground and pleas for toleration are essentially founded on reason, which had to be free from duress.⁵⁶

The Levellers, an English political party advocating complete religious freedom, wanted to purge the House of Commons and establish a free democratic Parliament.⁵⁷ Their plan, whose text is found in “Agreement of the People,” proposed a government of the people, one that included religious toleration and rights guaranteed in a constitution. The Putney Debates, held in October and November 1647 over a new constitution for England and the “Agreement of the People,” was at the heart of the fight. The discussions were a powder keg, as Cudworth was well aware when he preached before the House of Commons, and he had no plans for taking one side or the other.⁵⁸ “The scope of this sermon,” writes Cudworth, “was not to contend for this or that opinion.” Rather, it is the dogmatist that Cudworth cautions against. “The sons of Adam,” he says, “are now as busy as ever himself was about the tree of knowledge of good and evil, shaking the boughs of it, and scrambling for the fruit; whilst, I fear, many are too unmindful of the tree of life.” Rather than clamoring after knowledge as an object, Cudworth’s sermon calls them to recognize that it is but a shadow, a mangled and disfigured picture of God. One has to be released from “cold theorems and maxims” and “lean syllogistical reasonings” because one never gets the least “glimpse of the true heavenly light.”⁵⁹ Cudworth’s sermon, delivered in this charged political context, is a call to free the mind to be what God made it to be.

It is this light of reason that lays the foundation for certain hermeneutical principles argued for by the Cambridge Platonists. First, Scripture confirms, and is not contrary to, reason. Therefore, reason as an important tool in biblical interpretation must be set free, and not be bound by the institution. Binding up the free use of reason is, for Cudworth, a source of England’s political instability. Second, the biblical interpreter is more humble when he or she realizes that Scripture is nei-

56. Cragg, *Cambridge Platonists*, 21.

57. See chapter 13 of Brailsford, *Levellers and the English Revolution*; Haller and Godfrey, *Leveller Tracts*; Frank, *The Levellers* (1955); Pease, *The Leveller Movement* (1965); Robertson, *Religious Foundations of the Leveller Democracy*; Wolfe, *Leveller Manifestoes of the Puritan Revolution*; Sharp, *English Levellers*; Pease, *Great Restoration*.

58. Cragg, *Cambridge Platonists*, 369.

59. Cudworth, “Sermon Preached Before the Honorable House of Commons,” 370, 373, 383, 375.

ther plain nor simple. Reason must be brought to bear upon it in order to make sense of the divine language. John Smith, in his *Of Prophesie*, argues that “*Divine Truth* hath its *Humiliation* and *Examination*, as well as its *Exaltation*. *Divine Truth* becomes many times in Scripture *incarnate*, debasing itself to assume our rude conceptions, that so it might converse more freely with us, and infuse its own Divinity into us . . . *Nos non habemus aures, ficut Deus habet linguam*.”⁶⁰ Scripture is not, as Smith says, written in the “language of *Eternity*”; rather, it wears “our mantles,” learns “our language,” and conforms “itself as it were to our dress and fashions.” For the exegete to understand Scripture is “not rigidly to examine it upon Philosophical Interrogatories, or to bring it under the scrutiny of School Definitions and Distinctions. It speaks not to us so much in the tongue of the learned *Sophies* of the world, as in the plainest and most vulgar dialect that may be.”⁶¹

Smith takes note of the vulgar attributions to God, the imperfections describing him. His eating, drinking, and riding “upon the wings of the Wind,” have less to do with God and more to do with his accommodation of our limitations. Hell is described as a “great valley of fire like that of *Hinnom*” and heaven is described as a “place of continual *banqueting*,” all of which are for our understanding rather than descriptions of actual places or events. “We are not always rigidly to adhere to the very Letter of the Text,” Smith argues. “We must not think that it always gives us Formal Definitions of things, for it speaks commonly according to the Vulgar apprehension: as when it tells us of the *Ends of the heaven*, which now almost every Idiot knows hath *no ends* at all.”⁶² Smith heavily warns the reader against taking too literal an interpretation of Scripture. What is revealed in prophecy, for example, is not always an actual historical event. Often the events of prophecy detailed in Scripture, though seeming to be a part of actual history, are really effective stage props for dreams or visions and have greater meaning symbolically.

Third, since the literal message is not always the most practical, prompting one to look beyond the letter, the Cambridge Platonists made biblical interpretation largely a moral enterprise. Scripture has the greatest authority, but its role is “to confirm natural truth,” which

60. Smith, *Select Discourses*, 171.

61. *Ibid.*, 171, 172.

62. *Ibid.*, 173, 174.

is primarily a moral message.⁶³ Far from being dry, Scripture is understood to deliver vibrant instruction in godly living. The exegete is not to be fooled into looking strictly for the literal interpretation. “The *Philosophical* or *Physical* nature and Literal veritie of things cannot so reasonably be supposed to be set forth to us,” argues Smith, “as the *Moral* and *Theological*.”⁶⁴ The light of reason could pull these moral messages from nature, but revelation is needed to confirm their truth. Whichcote writes: “unless you drink in these moral principles; unless you do receive them by reason, the reason of things by the reason of your mind, your religion is but shallow and superficial.”⁶⁵ To insist on strict dogma is to miss the heart of biblical interpretation; interpreters are to agree on the clearest principles of morality rather than kill each other over the use of a prayer book.

The latitude in interpretation allowed by the hermeneutics of Smith and his fellows gave them the name *Latitudinarian*, a name that stuck with the second generation of Cambridge Platonists. Like most titles given to a movement, the term was intended to be derogatory.⁶⁶ While the Cambridge Platonists brought a great deal to the stage of biblical interpretation, they did primarily focus on truth as philosophy, as demonstrated by Cudworth’s *The True Intellectual System of the Universe*; the next generation put the emphasis on morality.⁶⁷

The Latitudinarians

The term *Latitudinarian* first appeared in print in 1662 when Simon Patrick (1625–1707) wrote *A Brief Account of the New Sect of Latitude-Men*. The movement, if it could be called that, sported names such as John Wilkins, Lord Bishop of Chester (1614–72); John Tillotson (1630–

63. Powicke, *Cambridge Platonists*, 31.

64. Smith, “Of Prophesie,” 171.

65. WW 4:139–40.

66. Colie, *Light and Enlightenment*, 6; see also, Passmore, *Ralph Cudworth*. For more on the relationship between the Cambridge Platonists and the next generation of Latitudinarians, see Griffin, *Latitudinarianism in the Seventeenth-Century Church of England*.

67. Henry More, more so than Cudworth, used philosophy over the biblical text. Joseph M. Levine writes that “More’s final source of inspiration, then, was ‘from either the open Expression, or else more secret Interpretations of Holy Scripture.’ He had not forgotten revelation, though in emphasizing reason and nature he had nearly lost the need for it” (Levine, “Latitudinarians, Neoplatonists, and the Ancient Wisdom,” 97).

1694), the popular Archbishop of Canterbury and a student of Benjamin Whichcote; Edward Stillingfleet (1635–1699), Bishop of Worcester; and John Locke (1632–1704). The Latitudinarian name was originally derogatory and about as hard to define as Puritanism.⁶⁸ Patrick's book on the movement appears on the heels of the Restoration of 1660, when the monarchy was restored under Charles II and the Church of England was politically restored as Episcopal. Like their earlier Cambridge Platonist teachers, these "polite" thinkers emphasized toleration based on the light of reason and Scripture, and were promoted to high positions in the church.⁶⁹

This second generation continued to interpret Scripture as primarily a moral document (necessary for toleration)—they were dedicated ministers and "practical."⁷⁰ Dogmatism tended to divide, they thought, and reason knew no such thing.⁷¹ Often criticized as theological minimalists, they were actually heavy hitters, whose theological musings centered in different areas. Following William Chillingworth (1602–1644), they complemented their understanding of reason with a sophisticated presentation on epistemological issues, such as "certainty," and as a result they approached their interpretation of Scripture cautiously and openly.

What made Chillingworth—an important Laudian in the Church of England who left Protestantism for the Church of Rome—so appealing? His story is a crisis of epistemological certainty. Henry G. Van Leeuwen explains that Chillingworth's surprising exit from Anglicanism was due to "the lack of continuity of Protestantism with the early Church and the need for a living infallible judge to decide controversies concerning the fundamental articles of faith."⁷² With coaxing he was convinced to return, but his return then led to a reexamination of his epistemology. In a drawn-out debate with Matthias Wilson (who used the pseudonym Edward Knott), Chillingworth wrote his famous *The Religion of Protestants, a Safe Way to Salvation*.⁷³ He went to the heart of Wilson-

68. Patrick, *Brief Account of the New Sect of Latitude-Men*, 5; Marshall, *John Locke*, 39.

69. Edward Stillingfleet's (1635–99) *Irenicum* (1662), for example, promoted understanding between Episcopalians and Presbyterians.

70. Reventlow, *Authority of the Bible and the Rise of the Modern World*, 223.

71. Roberts, *From Puritanism to Platonism*, 228; Spellman, *Latitudinarians and the Church of England*, 3.

72. Van Leeuwen, *Problem of Certainty*, 16.

73. *Ibid.*, 17.

Knott's charge that there is no salvation outside of the Catholic Church, an infallible source of truth, leaving Protestants in a precarious predicament. Chillingworth no longer demanded infallibilism in interpreting Scripture; rather, he writes:

I do heartily acknowledge and believe the articles of our faith to be in themselves truths as certain and infallible, as the very common principles of geometry and mathematics. But that there is required of us a knowledge of them, and adherence to them, as certain as that sense of science; that such a certainty is required of us under pain of damnation, so that no man can hope to be in the state of salvation, but he that finds in himself such a degree of faith, such a strength of adherence; this I have already demonstrated to be of a great error, and of dangerous and pernicious consequence.⁷⁴

Chillingworth rejects an absolute infallible certainty and maintains both conditional infallible certainty and "moral certainty." The first, absolute infallible certainty, belongs only to God; the second, "conditional infallible certainty," belongs to mathematics and logic; and the third, "moral certainty," is, as Van Leeuwen describes, "the certainty a sane, reasonable, thoughtful person has after considering all the available evidence as fully and impartially as is possible and giving his assent to that side on which the evidence seems strongest."⁷⁵ According to Chillingworth, no human institution has had the first category of certainty, though they may believe fallibly that they do. Because this category is exclusive to deity, humans approach Scripture with fallible reason and, therefore, must approach each other with charity.⁷⁶

This is an important hermeneutical principle for Latitudinarians like John Wilkins, John Tillotson, and Edward Stillingfleet, as it says something about their approach to Scripture in the context of the life of the Christian.⁷⁷ "There may be an *indubitable* Certainty where there is not an *infallible* Certainty," wrote John Wilkins in his *Natural Religion*.⁷⁸ The evidence for "Moral Certainty may be so plain, that every man whose judgment is free from prejudice will consent unto them. And though there be no natural necessity, that such things must

74. Chillingworth, *Works of William Chillingworth*, 317 (see Part 1, Chapter 6).

75. Van Leeuwen, *Problem of Certainty*, 22, 23.

76. Shapiro, *Probability and Certainty*, 81.

77. See Tillotson, *Rule of Faith*; Wilkins, *Natural Religion*; see also, Wilkins, *Ecclesiastes*.

78. Wilkins, *Natural Religion*, 95.

be so, and that they cannot possibly be otherwise, without implying a Contradiction; yet may they be so certain as not to admit of any reasonable doubt concerning them.”⁷⁹ John Tillotson puts forward a similar argument, noting that not all things require the same amount of proof. “None can demonstrate to me, that there is such an Island in *America* as *Jamaica*,” he writes, “yet upon the Testimony of credible persons, and Authors who have written of it, I am as free from all doubt concerning it, as from doubting of the clearest Mathematical Demonstration.” In other words, humans, because of their inherent imperfection, are not capable of perfect knowledge. Even when it comes to interpreting Scripture, not all agree as to its meaning. Knowing the pitfalls of certitude, he calls for a belief that is reasonably warranted by the facts, an idea he sees as “moral certainty,” the kind of certainty that satisfies “a prudent man.”⁸⁰ As a result, Latitudinarian sermons are not dogmatic theologies but rather are overwhelmingly centered on morality, and so, not surprisingly, were well received by laypeople wherever they were preached. By many Calvinist academics, however, they were accused of being Arminians, rationalists, or deists in disguise.

While Scripture remained important for these ministers, dogmatic discussions or Athanasian creedal formulations were none of their concern. And not all Calvinists saw them as the enemy. Even in Tillotson’s day, high Calvinist and Anglican John Edwards (1637–1716) wrote in *The Preacher*—his how-to manual for young ministers—of the prominence of moral messages coming from the pulpit. Far from discouraging moral preaching, he argues that ministers who preach morality are helping to reform England’s “scandalous” and immoral society, and it is John Tillotson who comes to his mind as the greatest of these ministers. Preaching the morality of Christianity “hath been excellently performed by some eminent Preachers of late,” writes Edwards, “and by none perhaps better than by the late Archbishop of *Canterbury*.”⁸¹

The Latitudinarian view of the Scriptures was a “halfway” point between traditional Protestant doctrine of Scripture and rationalism.⁸² “Tillotson,” as Gerard Reedy points out, “never forces his readers to choose between reason and revelation”; rather, “he published four ser-

79. *Ibid.*, 7–8.

80. Tillotson, preface to *Works* (1696), preface (unnumbered).

81. Edwards, *Preacher*, 1:65, 69.

82. Cragg, *Church and the Age of Reason*, 71, 72.

mons on the divinity and incarnation of the Word” and other sermons “on the sacrifice of Jesus Christ and on the unity and trinity of God.” Because Scripture works in concert with reason, Reedy says of Tillotson that “these doctrinal interests counter the charge that he was a rationalist concerned only to build a morality of nature.”⁸³ Scripture remains the core of all spiritual knowledge. Tillotson’s sermon, “The Necessity of the Knowledge of the Holy Scriptures” (taken from Matt 23:13 and Luke 11:52), for example, preaches a return to “the knowledge of the *Holy Scriptures*, which is necessary to our eternal Salvation.”⁸⁴ Scripture is the “*Rule of Faith*,” argues Tillotson. It is in the plain sense of Scripture that “numerous Commentators do generally agree.” There are obscure passages over which commentators argue, but that is acceptable “so long as all necessary Points of Faith and matters of Practice are delivered in plain Texts.”⁸⁵ Tillotson’s practicality stood for decades as a model for aspiring ministers. It also took the sting off the theological dogmatists, presenting a gentler side of Christianity to the soul offended in a manner reminiscent of Spinoza.

John Locke

No Latitudinarian stands out as much as John Locke, and it is he, after all, who is often credited—albeit unwillingly—with supplying the rational tools for the formidable deist John Toland (1670–1722). Locke was also charged—inaccurately—with maintaining a modified version of Spinoza’s philosophy. But among Latitudinarians, Locke’s philosophy contains some distinctive enhancements and fine-tuned clarifications, as found in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. The *Essay* was written to engage in the subtle and not-so-subtle distinctions on the topic of morality and revelation.⁸⁶ Central to this discussion are the roles and limitations of faith and reason, and Chillingworth’s *Religion of Protestants*, in the context of the growing prominence of infallibilism,

83. Reedy, “Interpreting Tillotson,” 84; for a look at the background to Tillotson’s sermon style, see Mitchell, *English Pulpit Oratory from Andrewes to Tillotson*.

84. Wilkins, *Works*, 343.

85. Tillotson, *Rule of Faith*, 94, 86, 106.

86. Snyder, “Faith and Reason in Locke’s *Essay*,” 197; for a good look at other influences on Locke’s understanding of the relation of knowledge to science, see Osler, “John Locke and the Changing Ideal of Scientific Knowledge,” 3–16; see also Rogers, “Boyle, Locke, and Reason,” 205–16.

was an important background text for developing his argument.⁸⁷ In doing so, Locke set out to “lay down the Measures and *Boundaries between Faith and Reason*.”⁸⁸

Reason therefore here, as contradistinguished to *Faith*, I take to be the discovery of the Certainty and Probability of such Propositions or Truths, which the Mind arrives at by Deductions made from such *Ideas*, which it has got by the use of its natural Faculties, *viz.* by Sensation or Reflection.

Faith, on the other side, is the Assent to any Proposition, not thus made out by the Deductions of Reason; but upon the Credit of the Proposer, as coming from GOD, in some extraordinary way of Communication. This way of discovering Truths to Men we call *Revelation*.⁸⁹

Reason is a natural faculty using “Sensation or Reflection” to unite different, but connected ideas into what is recognized as knowledge.⁹⁰ Faith cannot be certain and does not rise to the level of knowledge. “For matter of Faith being only Divine Revelation and nothing else,” writes Locke, “*Faith*, as we use the Word, (called commonly, *Divine Faith*) has to do with no Propositions, but those which are supposed to be divinely revealed.”⁹¹ Reason tests the world empirically, but faith trusts in the testimony, which may or may not be true. The witnesses of the resurrection had knowledge because, as the Apostle Thomas demonstrated, they could see and feel the wounds. But subsequent generations, not present at the resurrection, must trust (without definite knowledge) in the testimony of others.

While sharing a high regard for the faculty of reason as did other Latitudinarians, Locke’s great divide between reason and faith does not leave any room for the concept of “moral certainty.” Moral Certainty for other Latitudinarians is knowledge of religion to degrees of certainty, but for Locke it is of the utmost importance to keep reason and faith in their respective roles. This places Locke between the worlds of Spinoza and the Puritan Calvinists.⁹² While Locke sees natural law as fully assessable to the human mind, he sees Scripture as something more than

87. Brown, “Edwards, Locke, and the Bible,” 362.

88. *Essay*, 4.18.1.

89. *Ibid.*, 4.18.2.

90. Snyder, “Locke’s *Essay*,” 203.

91. *Essay*, 4.18.6.

92. Marshall, *John Locke*, 29.

Spinoza since its value is based upon the value of the proposer himself, making it more than just a book and, therefore, not included in the natural sciences.

What does this do for the assurance of the authority and interpretation of the biblical text? Locke proposes a form of assurance when it comes to faith, despite his assertions that faith cannot be certain. Matters of faith are “above Reason,” according to Locke, but not contrary to it. “*Faith* gave the Determination, where *Reason* came short,” he argues. Faith is not the enemy of Reason, but it is given a different “Dominion,” which does not offer any “violence, or hindrance to *Reason*,” in that reason “is not injured, or disturbed but assisted and improved, by new Discoveries of Truth, coming from the Eternal Fountain of all Knowledge.”⁹³ In his approach to Scripture, then, Locke proposes a system that seems insistent upon letting the inevitable contradiction remain. One cannot know for sure that the Scriptures are truly God’s word, yet the Old and New Testaments are “infallibly true,” even if their interpreters are certainly not.⁹⁴ Scripture is infallible, but one can know what the infallible Scripture is teaching only via less-than-certain faith. Therefore, the humble man will tolerate others in society, understanding that all fall short of the certainty of reason. Of course, as Snyder points out, one cannot argue with certainty that the Scriptures are infallibly true either.⁹⁵ John C. Biddle writes in “Locke’s Critique of Innate Principles and Toland’s Deism”:

Locke’s confidence in the truth of the biblical revelation rested not only on the high probability of its divine origin, which he thought reason could provide from external evidence. His assurance also rested upon reason’s ability to confirm certain aspects of the content of Scripture, for he maintained that reason could and must judge the content or parts of a revelation as well as the whole.⁹⁶

Biddle argues that John Toland’s Deism “did borrow, but subtly changed, the epistemology and views on the relation of reason and revelation that Locke had set forth in the *Essay*.”⁹⁷

93. *Essay*, 4.18.9, 10.

94. *Ibid.*, 3.9.23.

95. Snyder, “Locke’s *Essay*,” 209, 212.

96. Biddle, “Locke’s Critique,” 416.

97. *Ibid.*, 418.

Despite the ability of the Deists to accommodate Locke's ideas into their system, and despite the rhetoric blaming Locke for supplying the tools necessary for the rejection of Scripture, Locke himself approaches biblical interpretation with complete confidence in the text. However, true to form, he does not approach the text with complete confidence in himself as its interpreter.⁹⁸ This comes out clearly in *A Paraphrase and Notes on the Epistles of St. Paul*, where Locke declares, "I am far from pretending Infallibility."⁹⁹ Many commentators, he says, approach the interpretation of Scripture by imposing their opinions on the text and pretending that Paul has spoken through them. Yet, despite their confidence in their ability to interpret Scripture, there is far more obscurity than they are willing to admit. As long as the commentator cannot exist in the day of Paul, there is little actual knowledge to work with. What a commentator can do, Locke says, is take current knowledge and apply it

98. Toland does use a rhetoric similar to Locke's. "For as 'tis by Reason," writes Toland in *Christianity Not Mysterious*, "we arrive at the Certainty of God's own Existence, so we cannot otherwise discern his Revelations but by their Conformity with our natural Notices of him, which is in so many words, to agree with our common Notions" (Toland, *Christianity Not Mysterious*, 31). While Locke was finishing up his *The Reasonableness of Christianity* (1695), he received in advance a manuscript, possibly of *Christianity Not Mysterious*, from a friend of Toland. Upon reading Toland's ideas, Locke directed *Reasonableness* toward the end of converting Deists to Christianity. Locke was insistent that he was not responsible for Deism, meaning that he did not recognize himself in that system (see Locke, *A Letter to the Right Reverend Edward Lord Bishop of Worcester* [1697]). For more on the relationship of Locke to Toland and the difficulties with naming Toland's sources see Weinsheimer, *Eighteenth-Century Hermeneutics*. Toland's concept of reason relies more on Spinoza or other early Deists such as Herbert of Cherbury (*De Veritate*, 1695) or Charles Blount (Blount, *Miscellaneous Work*, 1695); see Colie, "Spinoza and the Early English Deists," 30–31; Cragie, "Influence of Spinoza in the Higher Criticism of the Old Testament," 23–32; Champion, *Pillars of the Priestcraft Shaken*; and Sandys-Wunsch, "Spinoza—The First Biblical Theologian," 327–41 for more on this discussion.

99. Locke, *A Paraphrase*, xix. "The Matters that St. Paul writ about, were certainly Things well known to those he writ to, and which they had some peculiar Concern in; which made them easily apprehend his Meaning, and see the Tendency and Force of his Discourse. But we having now at this Distance no Information of the Occasion of his Writing, little or no Knowledge of the Temper and Circumstances those he writ to were in, but what is to be gathered out of the Epistles themselves, it is not strange that many Things in them lie concealed to us, which, no doubt they who were concerned in the Letter, understood at first sight" (ibid., iii–iv).

to the text, leaving the obscure as it is.¹⁰⁰ He prefers the paraphrase for this reason, as it limits human commentary to a minimum.¹⁰¹

The Edwardsian Theological Genome

As these last two chapters show, confidence in both the biblical text and the interpreter historically progresses from bold to skeptical. The *Quadruga* felt the first blow in the Reformation and then a major upset in post-Reformation and Enlightenment periods. Spinoza dismisses any special providence in the Bible and any need for the Spirit and therefore a spiritual sense of the interpreter in understanding the Bible. Generations following him continue this agenda, even building on it, or trying to find a middle ground.

The thinkers examined in this chapter found their way into Edwards's record of reading and reading interest, including those of the Puritan, Cambridge Platonist, and Latitudinarian traditions.¹⁰² All serve as possible contributors to his intellectual evolution. For example, John Smith's *Discourses* (1660) helped Edwards develop his understanding of the emanation of the divine nature into the world, as well as his understanding of sensation and beauty. In *The Religious Affections*, Edwards refers to Smith's "The Shortness of a Pharisaic Righteousness" as "remarkable."¹⁰³ Cambridge Platonism helps Edwards map out the relationship between heaven and earth. And Ralph Cudworth's *The True Intellectual System of the Universe* (1678), from which Edwards heavily cribs his *Miscellanies*, is one of his go-to resources in his later years of combat with Enlightenment naturalism.¹⁰⁴ Cudworth's vast knowledge of ancient philosophers and Christian theologians opens a door to the past for Edwards. Of the Latitudinarians widely read in New England, John Tillotson's sermons are notably listed in Edwards's *Catalogue*;

100. Locke, *A Paraphrase*, ix. Paul's epistles cannot have "two contrary meanings," says Locke; yet one could read two commentators, both respected in their fields, who offer differing interpretations of the text (*ibid.*, x).

101. *Ibid.*, x, xi.

102. To date, the most thorough resource on the relation of Edwards to the Cambridge Platonists remains Watts, "Jonathan Edwards and the Cambridge Platonists."

103. Lee, *Philosophical Theology of Jonathan Edwards*, 162; *WJE* 65–6; 217–19; Fiering, *Jonathan Edwards's Moral Thought*, 124.

104. *WJE* 23:15–16 ("Misc" 1343, 1358, 1359); Sweeney notes that Edwards copied over twenty-five thousand words from Cudworth (*WJE* 23:16); Lee, *Philosophical Theology of Jonathan Edwards*, 103–4.

though he often disagrees with the archbishop, Edwards finds him to be “one of the greatest divines,” and appeals to him as an authority in his sermons on justification in discussing the believer’s union with Christ.¹⁰⁵ As Amy Plantinga Pauw notes, Edwards often appeals to the so-called liberal Anglican divines because he shares “their desire to defend both the reasonableness of Christianity and the need for divine revelation” and is “willing, as always, to borrow good arguments.”¹⁰⁶

Lastly, as many have recognized, Locke’s *Essay* is a significant philosophical resource for Edwards. And beyond the *Essay*, Edwards also owned and used copies of Locke’s commentaries.¹⁰⁷ But to argue, as Bebbington seems to do, that the lion’s share of Edwards’s idea of the “spiritual sense” is derived from his extension of Lockean empiricism is difficult to sustain. Locke is an important contributor to Edwards’s theological world, but he hardly single-handedly lays the foundation for his thought. The evolution of the spiritual sense (or senses) finds important roots in antiquity, that is, in the Christian interpreters before Edwards, including those examined in the last two chapters.

It may be said, then, that in 1703, Edwards was born into the Puritan world of his father and grandfather and identified himself with his Reformed heritage. But as Part Two of this book will develop, he is far more complex than the “typical” Reformed pastor in New England. The web of knowledge available to him and his unmitigated curiosity provide the necessary elements for the flexing of his theological and philosophical muscles. As a result, his reading of Scripture is lively, benefiting from the discussions that precede him and reflecting the spirituality of an ancient past.

105. *WJE* 26157, 263 (entries 206, 568); *WJE* 19:155. For more on Edwards and Tillotson, see Fiering’s discussion on Edwards’s doctrine of hell in *Jonathan Edwards’s Moral Thought*, 227–32. Edwards selectively refers to Tillotson, but he clearly keeps Tillotson as a resource in his studies. For other examples see *WJE* 15:421; *WJE* 18:346–8 (“Misc.” 716); *WJE* 20:273 (“Misc.” 972); Edwards, “Eternity of Hell Torments,” 275.

106. *WJE* 20:13.

107. *WJE* 26:193 (entry 353); for example, *WJE* 20:116, 343, 421, “Misc.” 874, 1011, 1060; *WJE* 23:149, “Misc.” 1217.