



The Watershed of the American Biblical Tradition: The Chicago School, First Phase, 1892-1920

Author(s): Robert W. Funk

Reviewed work(s):

Source: *Journal of Biblical Literature*, Vol. 95, No. 1 (Mar., 1976), pp. 4-22

Published by: [The Society of Biblical Literature](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3265469>

Accessed: 06/04/2012 11:40

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at

<http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



The Society of Biblical Literature is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Journal of Biblical Literature*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

THE WATERSHED OF THE AMERICAN BIBLICAL TRADITION: THE CHICAGO SCHOOL, FIRST PHASE, 1892-1920*

ROBERT W. FUNK

UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA, MISSOULA, MT 59801

THIS paper marks a voyage into waters that are, to a large extent, still uncharted.¹ Such a voyage is fraught with dangers: subsurface reefs of who knows what proportions may wreck the amateur's bark, particularly if her draft has any depth. And the compass may well prove unreliable, since the history being explored is just under our ownmost skins. Nevertheless, the premonition that the preceding period in American theological history may have been decisive for present ambivalence, particularly where Scripture and tradition in biblical scholarship are concerned, makes the risk worth taking. In any case, our history will not wait on larger knowledge, and distance sufficiently great to guarantee impartiality would mean that the reefs were no longer a threat to anything immediately significant.

1. Introduction

1.1 In the Dillenberger-Welch work, *Protestant Christianity*, there is a trio of sentences over which I have now and again paused. The authors have just spoken of the problems posed for Christian thought by the rise of biblical criticism. They continue:

This does not mean, however, that the new conception of the Bible which came to characterize Protestant liberalism originated simply as a reaction to the discoveries of historical criticism. In fact, the situation was more nearly the reverse. It was new conceptions of religious authority and of the meaning of revelation which made possible the development of biblical criticism.²

*The Presidential Address delivered 31 October 1975, at the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, held at the Palmer House, Chicago, IL.

¹ The following special abbreviations are employed in the notes:

HS *The Hebrew Student*
OTS *The Old Testament Student*
ONTS *The Old and New Testament Student*
BW *The Biblical World*

² John Dillenberger and Claude Welch, *Protestant Christianity Interpreted through Its Development* (New York: Scribner, 1954) 197.

They then go on to describe the new conceptions of authority and revelation formulated by Hegel, Schleiermacher, and Ritschl.

My pause owes not so much to the fact that the reverse interpretation has often enough been advocated, especially by biblical scholars, but to an alarm that was triggered somewhere in the recesses of the mind by the implications latent in their bold statement for the history of the biblical tradition in America. Those implications have to do with the impasse into which "biblical science," biblical scholars, theological schools, the churches, and even the "bible beltters" seem to have fallen these latter days. The impasse may be characterized symptomatically as the inability of liberals and conservatives alike to determine what is to be done with and about the Bible, other than to perpetuate dispositions formed early in this century and now reified by more than a half century of repetition. The ambivalence on which the impasse rests is betrayed on every hand by the contradiction between the service of the lips and the actual relations sustained to Scripture in pulpit, theology, seminary curricula, and even the Society of Biblical Literature, so far as Protestants are concerned. (For want of time and adequate knowledge, Jewish and Roman Catholic scholarship has, unfortunately, been left out of account.)

Our present situation is extremely complex. An over-simplified analysis will not and should not satisfy. Nevertheless, I should like to return to what may prove to have been a decisive period in the shaping of the modern American biblical tradition and inquire specifically and narrowly about the destiny of Scripture in that period. In so doing, certain hunches arising out of the present situation, a study of the Chicago School, and my own history are being called into play.

1.2 Dillenberger and Welch assert that a new understanding of religious authority and revelation made possible the development of biblical criticism and not the other way around. First light on the import of this assertion comes with the recognition that both the champions of historical criticism (the liberals, so-called) and its adversaries (the conservatives), around the turn of the century, did in fact share the conviction that *the attack on biblical authority arose in some alien quarter*. It was an assault from without and had, therefore, to be resisted on correlative grounds.

This state of affairs illuminates the repeated liberal reference to what the modern consciousness will and will not tolerate, in the light of, for example, Darwinism, or the scientific method, or progressive thought. W. R. Harper, first president of the University of Chicago, though by no means an announced liberal himself, scores the point forcefully in an editorial of 1889:

The cry of our times is for the application of scientific methods in the study of the Bible. . . if the methods of the last century continue to hold exclusive sway, the time will come when intelligent men of all classes will say, "If this is your Bible we will have none of it."³

This reference to what the modern mind will accept, more recently associated

³ *ONTS* 9 (1889) 1-2.

with death-of-God theology, is thus as old as the latter part of the 19th century in the American tradition. Although the reference has still deeper roots in experiential piety, it came to the fore as a pervasive theological criterion only towards the close of the last century.

The conservatives, on the other hand, were driven to defend the authority of the text in the only way they knew, viz., by means of the conceptual theological frame in which biblical authority had been held in suspension during the preceding period in Protestant Scholasticism. The argument was not always blatant, but in retrospect it seems obvious enough. In his friendly controversies with Harper, W. H. Green of Princeton was often given to the correlation:

No more perilous enterprise was ever attempted by men held in honor in the church than the wholesale commendation of the results of an unbelieving criticism in application both to the Pentateuch and to the rest of the Bible, as though they were the incontestable product of the highest scholarship. They who have been themselves thoroughly grounded in the Christian faith may, by a happy inconsistency, hold fast their old convictions while admitting principles, methods and conclusions which are logically at war with them.⁴

The “old convictions,” of course, were those which had come to expression in orthodox Protestant dogmatics; because he felt no need for “a new theology,” Green did not feel the need for “a new biblical criticism” either.

1.3 It is clear enough that the traditionalists, and later the fundamentalists, defended the integrity and authority of the biblical text on what they took to be internal grounds, but which, from our point of view, and the point of view of the earlier liberals, turns out to be the external grounds of a dogmatic theology extrinsic to the text. But the liberals, too, defended the impingement of historical criticism on biblical authority on equally external grounds, viz., the progressive, evolutionary spiral of human history linked with the emergence of the historical consciousness of modern man. *In both cases and for roughly the same reason, the biblical text was ignored precisely as biblical text.*

It may seem odd to claim that scientific historical criticism, the specific aim of which was to set the biblical text in its full historical context, actually suppressed the text. Yet for the historical critic, particularly those under the influence of Darwinism and related movements, the meaning of the text was taken up into the larger question of the creation and conservation of human values. On the other hand, the meaning of the text did not pose a critical problem for the traditionalist because, in his case, the text was held in solution in dogmatic theology. For neither party did the text and its tradition provide *a* or *the* critical horizon of theological endeavor. In short, what in the older tradition was called the normative function of Scripture effectively disappeared; in more recent parlance: Scripture as text disappeared. Insofar as the question of Scripture was settled, it was settled on external grounds,

⁴ *ONTs* 6 (1886-87) 318.

with the result that the problem posed by the presence of the text itself in the tradition was left unresolved.

1.4 An unresolved question of such import is bound to leave its mark on all subsequent history. The unalleviated tension has been and continues to be a plague on both liberal and conservative houses, in both the church and academic biblical scholarship, precisely because it has been left, like a splinter, to fester in the tradition.

Those who give overt allegiance to the authority of Scripture from a vantage point on the theological right have continued, for more than a half century, to snipe at the indifference of liberal scholarship, but no amount of vituperation has been effective in awakening liberal intelligence to the issue. Even a sophisticated and organized assault on liberalism from the radical left, on the part of one wing of the early Chicago School between 1894 and 1920, has disappeared from the record as though it never took place. During the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the question went underground in middle-of-the-road liberalism and there it remains.

The anomaly in biblical scholarship of the liberal persuasion is that it gave and gives allegiance to descriptivism, historical relativism, and the rejection of theology while claiming the ground once held by the proponents of biblical authority. It has continued and developed specialties associated with the struggle over a sacred text, but necessarily refuses the complicity of those specialties with explicit devotion to that text. It rejects the canonical limits of its body of literature, but in fact enforces canonical boundaries. It holds questions of date, authorship, sources, authenticity, and integrity at objective range, but pursues these questions as though more than relative historical judgments were at stake. In sum, so-called scientific biblical scholarship, by and large, took up arms against traditionalism in the castle of Sacred Scripture and ended by occupying the castle itself, while denying that it had done so. These anomalies make the Society of Biblical Literature a fraternity of scientifically trained biblical scholars with the soul of a church. They also create certain incongruities for biblical studies in the humanities wing of the secular university.

1.5 These introductory remarks perhaps justify the formulation of the theme: The Watershed of the American Biblical Tradition. Watershed refers to that hypothetical point after which the lines in biblical scholarship were drawn very differently than in the preceding period. The lines in biblical study were significantly redrawn during the period, roughly 1890-1920, and our whole subsequent history has been shaped and, to a large extent, tyrannized by the fresh demarcation. It is also my opinion that the organization and development of the early biblical faculty at Chicago is paradigmatic for that remapping of the contours of biblical study which has affected the shape and course of that scholarship down to the present day.

In what follows, I shall endeavor to trace the vicissitudes of the scriptural problem through the first phase of the Chicago School. By way of conclusion,

the significance of this period for the subsequent history of biblical studies in various dimensions may be indicated.

2. *The Problem of Scripture: W. R. Harper and the Chicago School, 1892-1920*

2.1 The point of impact of the new science upon evangelical faith was the evangelical understanding and deployment of Scripture.⁵ The questions being posed of Scripture by the emerging sciences produced a vigorous new interest in biblical study on a broad front.

W. R. Harper was keenly aware of this fresh interest and was prepared to capitalize on it as early as his appointment to the Baptist Union Theological Seminary in Morgan Park, 1 January, 1879.⁶ His success with the summer schools and correspondence school, both begun in 1881, was instant.⁷ In 1882 he launched *The Hebrew Student* to serve the needs of the growing number of students. Between 1881 and 1885 he published the first editions of his various manuals for the study of Hebrew. He organized the American Institute of Hebrew in 1884, involving about 70 professors in the U.S. and Canada,⁸ and moved his work to Yale in 1886, the same year Timothy Dwight moved from a divinity professorship to the presidency.⁹ Harper held chairs in the Graduate Department and the Divinity School, and later a third one in Yale College. It is reported that the undergraduates filled the largest hall at Yale to hear him lecture on the OT.¹⁰

When Harper returned to the Midwest to organize the University of Chicago in 1892, the same interest in and concern for the Bible dictated the shape of the new divinity faculty. Shailer Mathews depicts the situation accurately:

The prevailing theological interest at the time of its organization is to be seen in the size of the various departments in the Divinity School. There were as many in the field of biblical and Semitic studies as in all the other departments combined. Biblical study was the representative of the new scientific interest in religion.¹¹

The original divinity faculty thus mirrored the current situation and Harper's own determination to give evangelical faith the best scholarly representation he could muster. By this time, moreover, Harper was completely confident that a great biblical faculty would be matched by a corresponding widespread and deep-seated interest in the fruits of devout biblical scholarship.

2.2 Harper inaugurated *The Hebrew Student* (1882) at a time when agitation over the critical study of the OT was reaching a crescendo in the U.S. Behind

⁵ Cf. S. Mathews, *New Faith for Old: An Autobiography* (New York: Macmillan, 1936) 60.

⁶ T. W. Goodspeed, *William Rainey Harper: First President of The University of Chicago* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1928) 43.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 50ff.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 55.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 73-74.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 77-78.

¹¹ *New Faith*, 58

and under this agitation, of course, lay the German erosion of the dogma of the verbal inerrancy of Scripture, in the form of an attack on the Mosaic authorship and integrity of the Pentateuch. The ultimate source of the attack was everywhere recognized.¹² Under the circumstances, American religious leaders found themselves largely defenseless, owing to the superiority of German arms.

With characteristic zeal and industry, Harper set to work to even up the odds. He took every opportunity to extol and encourage the study of Semitics and the establishment of Semitics departments. He held out the high standards of German scholarship¹³ and enjoined Americans to emulate them,¹⁴ while occasionally issuing a warning against "destructive criticism." The comparison of American with German scholarship is a persistent if subdued theme in Harper's journals. Harper himself went abroad for a year of study before taking up his duties as president of the new University,¹⁵ and his example appears to have become the model for later Chicago faculty.

2.3 upon his return to Chicago from New Haven in 1892, Harper needed a NT counterpart. He chose a man he had met in Boston during his Yale days, Ernest DeWitt Burton. Burton was NT professor at Newton and came to Chicago to head the NT department, a post he held until 1923, the year he succeeded H. J. Pratt as president of the University.

Burton's most notable works are his I.C.C. commentary on Galatians and his study of Greek moods and tenses. These books leave one with the impression that Burton was to the NT exactly what Harper was to the OT. Closer examination reveals, however, that Burton brought fresh views to Chicago, views that led him to appoint Shailer Mathews to the department in 1894, and later to seek the services of Shirley Jackson Case (1908).

The differences between Burton and Harper can be exposed by reference to their understanding of Scripture. This criterion provides important clues to the way in which the first phase of the Chicago School developed. One might go so far as to say that Harper and Burton stand at the head of the two lines at Chicago, one of which later became marginal at Chicago but continued to predominate in American biblical scholarship, the other of which became dominant at Chicago but then effectively died in biblical scholarship.

The tradition that died a scholarly death has probably proved, over the next half century, to be a more accurate index of the emerging common consciousness than the surviving line. If so, it is ironic that one side of the Chicago School should have anticipated the common mind so accurately, while failing so dramatically to perpetuate itself among biblical scholars. It is

¹² The German origin of critical theories is recognized in almost every issue of Harper's journals. Note especially the article by G. H. Schodde, "Old Testament Criticism and the American Church," *OTS* 3 (1883-84) 376-81, esp. pp. 377-78. Cf. S. Mathews, *New Faith*, 60.

¹³ *HS* 2 (1882-83) 216-17.

¹⁴ *OTS* 6 (1886-87) 225-26.

¹⁵ T. W. Goodspeed, *Harper*, 108; E. J. Goodspeed, *As I Remember* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1953) 58.

equally ironic that the other side, which struggled so hard to capture the common mind, could only maintain its grip on the scholarly tradition. But these remarks are to anticipate.

Editorials in the Chicago journals attributable to Harper with certainty after about 1895 are scarce. However, one published in 1898, on the general theme, criticism and the authority of the Bible, is almost certainly his work.¹⁶ In the same year, Burton published his first systematic statement on the same subject.¹⁷ It will be illuminating to compare the two statements closely.

2.4 If Harper had any fears regarding the destructive consequences of higher criticism, they were mostly submerged in his enthusiastic estimate of its constructive possibilities. In an earlier editorial note of 1882, he quotes C. A. Briggs with hearty approval:

We will not deny that the most who are engaged in it [higher criticism] are rationalistic and unbelieving, and that they are using it with disastrous effect upon the Scriptures and the orthodox faith. There are few believing critics, especially in this country. There is also a widespread prejudice against these studies and an apprehension as to the results. These prejudices are unreasonable. These apprehensions are to be deprecated. It is impossible to prevent discussion. The church is challenged to meet the issue. It is a call of Providence to conflict and to triumph of evangelical truth. The divine word will vindicate itself in all its parts.¹⁸

Harper never quite lost his naive conviction that “evangelical truth” would triumph and the divine word be vindicated.

By 1898, Harper had perhaps become more apprehensive. In his editorial of that year, he goes about as far as he was ever able to accommodate what must have struck him then as the rising tide of the new Chicago School. The fear that criticism has an adverse effect on the authority of Scripture is not groundless, he writes. Authenticity and authority are linked, but not absolutely. On the one hand, criticism has actually corroborated the authority of the Bible, i.e., it has demonstrated authenticity in certain cases, such as those of Jeremiah, Hosea, the real Isaiah, Jesus, and Paul. In these instances, “criticism has largely remade the foundations of confidence.” These teachers are the more credible as the result of criticism, “and if more credible, then more authoritative.”¹⁹ On the other hand, criticism has undermined authority, if authority is taken to be wholly dependent upon authenticity. But authority may also be substantiated by experience; “some teachings are true apart from those who present them. . . . Truths thus established can no more be shaken by the discovery that they were not uttered by the men whose names they bear than the law of gravitation would be affected should it appear that it was discovered by some other man than Newton.”²⁰ What can be said about those portions of Scripture whose authenticity is not confirmed by criticism and whose truth cannot be verified by experience? In such cases one may appeal to

¹⁶ *BW* 11 (1898) 225-28.

¹⁷ “The Function of Interpretation in Relation to Theology,” *AJT* 2 (1898) 52-79.

¹⁸ *HS* 2 (1882-83) 218.

¹⁹ *BW* 11 (1898) 226.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 227.

the experience of other men for whom that teaching is confirmed as true, and then draw the inference that other matters taught in the same document are also true. Very little in the Bible falls outside these three domains; what does can be considered marginal to faith. "If all this is true, it cannot be said that criticism is necessarily hostile to the authority of scripture."²¹

Harper was driven simultaneously by a variety of motives. He was deeply devoted to Scripture and the body of divine truth he never for one moment doubted that it contained. At the same time, he had a respect for scientific investigation that ranked it close to the numinous. He never came to believe that the relentless search for facts, the free exchange of ideas, the scholarly pursuit of truth wherever it might lead, would not in the end produce the desired result. He was thus committed to the authority of Scripture and to the freedom of research and expression, a double allegiance that undoubtedly caused him personal pain at Chicago before his death.

2.5 Burton's programmatic essay of 1898, viewed in retrospect, is epoch-making. While one may discern in the work of Harper, particularly after 1892, some premonitory signs of what was to come, it is to Burton that we owe the first explicit statement of the direction the Chicago School of biblical interpretation was to take.

"Theology," he writes, "by its very definition has to do with *truths*, i.e. with knowledge of things as they are."²² Interpretation, on the other hand, has as its object the discovery of meanings, which by all means must be *true* meanings in the sense that they are really the meaning intended. The truth of interpretation, however, has nothing directly to do with theological truth. The interpreter does not ask whether the testimony of a witness is truth in the theological sense, but only whether his interpretation is true to the intention of the witness. If, in fact, the interpreter raises the question of ultimate truth, "he is in danger of vitiating his own work."²³

The interpreter who seeks to determine not merely the meaning of the Bible but also the truth of the Bible, will almost inevitably test his interpretation by reference to what he, the interpreter, takes to be true, and thus finally by reference to his own opinions and convictions. By thus forcing the truth question upon the text, he is treating the Bible with "gross irreverence" by making it echo his own convictions. The only way to steer clear of this fallacy and so honor the text is to confine interpretation to its legitimate descriptive limit.

In contrast, theology has for its field and source the whole of the universe; nothing is excluded *a priori*. The demand that theology be wholly biblical therefore reflects "a semi-deistical conception of the universe,"²⁴ i.e., the notion that God has expressed himself solely in the Scriptures. The scope of interpretation should be as broad, therefore, as the field of theology: "The field of interpretation is as wide as the field of things that have meaning, i.e. of

²¹ *Ibid.*, 228.

²² *AJT* 2 (1898) 52 (*italics mine*).

²³ *Ibid.*, 53. Cf. the discussion, 59.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 55.

existences back of which there lies thought.”²⁵ Interpretation which limits itself to the interpretation of expression is thus truncated, since the higher mode of interpretation is the interpretation of fact.²⁶

If biblical interpretation is confined to the interpretation of literary documents, the outcome of the process is *thought* and nothing more.²⁷ It is a legitimate function of the biblical interpreter to determine the thoughts of the biblical authors — the systematic result is so-called biblical theology²⁸ — but in this form the interpretation has nothing whatever to do with the truth of these thoughts,²⁹ nor does it provide any material directly for theology.³⁰ Literary interpretation, then, cannot accomplish the whole task; it requires to be supplemented by the interpretation of fact,³¹ and the process by which the facts are determined is called *biblical criticism*.

The end product of criticism is a connected narrative of biblical history, including both the history of biblical thought and the history of external events. It must be a *connected* narrative because “facts can be interpreted only in their relations.”³² When this full, sequential narrative lies before him, the biblical interpreter will then be faced with his highest task. Burton should be allowed to state his own conclusion:

With the facts before him, dealing no longer with records, but with events, searching no longer for thoughts, but for truths, his task will be to find in this unparalleled history the great truths of divine revelation. Then will he be able, on solid and substantial ground, to construct the doctrine of Scripture, the doctrine, that is, of the nature of revelation made in the Bible, and of the character of the books that the Bible contains. On the basis of such a doctrine he will be able to read the complete and solid structure of the truth of God revealed in the Bible. And not only so, but he will also be able to verify the results thus reached by an independent process of investigation. For the same material and the same process by which he will reach *this* doctrine will enable him, in large measure at least, to reach independently the other truths which he seeks concerning God and man in their mutual relations.³³

Biblical criticism first uses the biblical documents, together with such extra-biblical sources as are available to it, to establish the correlative history; it may then employ the correlative history to establish the biblical documents. The interpretation of facts, consequently, produced “an immense confirmation and strengthening of the argument for the divine origin of the Bible, and still more for the divine elements in the biblical history.”³⁴ The Bible is confirmed primarily as a part of history under divine guidance.

Burton is thus not prepared to allow the orthodox understanding of the function of Scripture in theology for two reasons: (1) the orthodox view

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 56; cf. 60ff.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 58.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 68-69.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 58.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 59, 66.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 61ff.

³² *Ibid.*, 67; cf. p. 63.

³³ *Ibid.*, 69.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 71.

excludes the significance of the narrative portions of the Bible and thus of the facts; (2) the didactic portions of the Bible are taken as the direct, unmediated thoughts of God.³⁵ Burton wants to give priority to the narrative history, and to emphasize the human element in the biblical interpretation of that narrative, owing to his own predilections for scientific method. But in assigning these priorities, he in fact reverses the position of Harper and his orthodox predecessors by looking first at the history underlying the biblical documents and only then at the biblical interpretation of that history. In this he anticipates the social history of Christianity so characteristic of Mathews and Case.

The significance of the reversal might best be discerned in his own statement of how theology ought to proceed.³⁶ What is needed, he suggests, is a body of theological truths divided into three categories or three concentric circles. In the first belong those truths "which can be verified, and are verified constantly, in the experience of man."³⁷ In the second belong those truths which are already established on the basis of biblical criticism and interpretation, and those truths furnished by the "non-biblical sciences." And finally, in the larger, outer circle go "all merely traditional theology" and unsolved theological problems. It should be the aim of biblical criticism, science, and theology to transfer the items in the third category to the second as quickly as knowledge permits.

It is thus clear that for Burton Scripture has lost its primary function. It is to play an ancillary role at best. When he comes to additional statements regarding the place of NT study in theology in 1905 and 1912,³⁸ he is looking back, as it were, on the orthodox dogma of the plenary inspiration of Scripture. As he puts it in his essay of 1912:

We shall not in the future ascribe to the affirmations of Peter and Paul the same measure of authority which the preachers of the last generation were wont to impute to them.³⁹

This means that it is our duty

to enact our part in the continuous evolution of that religion and its continuous readjustment of itself in doctrine and life to the needs of successive ages. . . .⁴⁰

By 1920, in an essay on "Recent Tendencies in the Northern Baptist Churches,"⁴¹ he can even speak of the normative character of the Scriptures as a thing of the past for most Northern Baptists.⁴²

On the crucial point of the authority of Scripture, Burton stands in strong

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 63-64.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 77-78.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 77.

³⁸ "The Present Problems of New Testament Study," *AJT* 9 (1905) 201-37; "The Place of the New Testament in a Theological Curriculum," *AJT* 16 (1912) 181-95.

³⁹ *AJT* 16 (1912) 192.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 191-92.

⁴¹ *AJT* 24 (1920) 321-38.

⁴² *Ibid.*, esp. pp. 325-26.

contrast to Harper. His essay of 1898 contradicts an editorial of Harper in the same volume. While George Burman Foster and Shailer Mathews were already on the scene, I can find no earlier considered statement of the direction in which the Chicago School was to move decisively after Harper's death in 1906.

2.6 The mature position of Shailer Mathews on biblical authority is succinctly stated in *The Faith of Modernism*, published in 1924.⁴³ His position needs to be set in the context of his understanding of his own role in the social process, for which his autobiography, *New Faith for Old*,⁴⁴ is readily available.

Despite the fact that Mathews became the front man for the Modernist movement emanating from Chicago, he remained something of a bridge-man between Harper and the more radical elements at Chicago.⁴⁵ It is illuminating to read Mathews' memorial article on Harper, "As an Editor,"⁴⁶ where he describes how Harper had to teach him and others the wisdom of the editorial policy for *The Biblical World*. Like Harper, Mathews had piety not just in his bones but in his fingertips. Technically, he was a radical on the subject of the authority of the Bible. Humanly, he was warmly, even blatantly, evangelical. And he felt virtually no contradiction in the two.

The Modernist, he writes, studies the Bible "with full respect for its sanctity but with equal respect for the student's intellectual integrity."⁴⁷ He affirmed inspiration but denied inerrancy. Modernists believe "in the inspiration of men, not of words. Men were inspired because they inspire."⁴⁸ He thus joins Burton in shifting such authority as the text has from the text itself to the men who wrote the texts.

The Modernist, like the Fathers of the Church, insists "that revelation must conform to the realities of the universe."⁴⁹ "Reality," as established by the historian and the scientist, is thus the final test of any truth allegedly discovered in the Bible. The Modernist also affirms that the Bible is "a trustworthy record of the human experience of God."⁵⁰ The Modernist wants, as a consequence, to resist only the doctrine of the literal inerrancy of Scripture; he by no means wants to shake faith in the value of the Bible, rightly understood, for the religious life.⁵¹

Mathews understood himself as an evangelical in the service of a great religious movement within the church.⁵² He rejected detached criticism of the churches just as he rejected detached scholarship. In view of his understanding

⁴³ New York: Macmillan (reprinted January, 1925; September, 1925) 37-53.

⁴⁴ New York: Macmillan, 1936.

⁴⁵ See esp. *New Faith*, 284, where Mathews says he endeavored to be conciliatory.

⁴⁶ *BW* 27 (1906) 204-8.

⁴⁷ *Modernism*, 37.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 52.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁵² *New Faith*, 72.

of the social process, he had no choice but to give himself to what he termed, "the democratization of religious scholarship."⁵³ In this he was completely one with Harper and thus eminently qualified to assume the deanship of the Divinity School in 1908, a post he held until 1933. The organization of the Hyde Park Baptist Sunday School in Chicago is somehow paradigmatic of the whole development of the divinity faculty: Harper was superintendent, E. D. Burton was superintendent of instruction, and Mathews director of benevolence, in addition to which they had an examiner and a director of public worship!⁵⁴

In sum, Mathews was ideologically akin to Burton but the evangelical progeny of Harper.

2.7 The most radical of the second-generation divines at Chicago turned out to be Shirley Jackson Case. Although he had been trained at Yale by B. W. Bacon and F. C. Porter (B.D., 1904; Ph.D., 1906), he appears to have put greater stock in the historical method than either of his teachers.⁵⁵ Nor does he seem to have become blindly enamored of German scholarship during his brief period of study in Marburg, since he was subsequently severely critical of German thought. In short, Case was his own man, a rigorous, unrelenting scholar and thinker, in pursuit of a distinctive methodology and a grand overview of history.

The radical character of Case's position is confirmed by the fact that he trained his fire on German and American liberals as much as on the orthodox. The burden of his protest was that the history of Christianity was conceived too narrowly as literary history (or institutional history), and not broadly as social process. He points out that the higher critic's interest in the authorship and date of documents, the two-document solution to the synoptic problem, and even form criticism, is highly deceptive, unless this work is clearly understood to be preliminary to the real task of the historian.⁵⁶ As important as documents are to the historian, it is the social context rather than documents that is his focus.⁵⁷ Just as the mere study of documents may maim the historian, the NT itself may hamper the historian of Christianity.⁵⁸ The documentary notion of history, moreover, is closely associated with "the static conception of history."⁵⁹

Case's phrase, "the static conception of history," recalls a battery of terms and phrases he used to characterize deficient conceptions of history. In his

⁵³ Ibid., 72-89.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 246.

⁵⁵ Cf. F. C. Porter, "The Historical and the Spiritual Understanding of the Bible," and B. W. Bacon, "New Testament Science as a Historical Discipline," in the Yale memorial volume, *Education for Christian Service* (New Haven: Yale University, 1922).

⁵⁶ *The Social Origins of Christianity* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1923) 21-32; *Jesus: a New Biography* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1927) 73ff., 94-95, 103-4.

⁵⁷ "The Historical Study of Religion," *JR* 1 (1921) 4.

⁵⁸ *Social Origins*, Iff. At an earlier time, the notion of canonicity hindered the study of the documents: *Jesus*, 58-60.

⁵⁹ *JR* 1 (1921) 4.

1914 work, *The Evolution of Early Christianity*, he surveys the work of Hegel, F. C. Baur, Ritschl, Herder, Schleiermacher, and Troeltsch, with this conclusion:

This survey of opinion shows how generally Christianity has been defined in static and quantitative terms. . . . The question of contemporary influences is wholly secondary, since it relates only to the later history of this given original and never to its primary constitution.⁶⁰

Every effort to fix an "essence" of Christianity inevitably produced distortion,⁶¹ since an "essence" is by definition static.⁶² The notion of essence is related to the belief in a divine deposit of truth, a historic revelation vouchsafed to certain persons in the past.⁶³ This, in turn, is linked to the view that the past has normative significance.⁶⁴ And "the normative function of history rests ultimately upon that pessimistic philosophy of life which interprets the present as a deterioration of humanity, a condition to be remedied only by the restoration of an idealized past."⁶⁵

Case set himself against all this in the name of an evolutionary or developmental understanding of history, and hence of Christianity, with a focus on the social process.⁶⁶ When history is viewed as an evolutionary process, the past is stripped of its normative character.⁶⁷ The modern student of history puts his faith in the future; it is in the present and future that new standards and norms are to be found.⁶⁸

The bearing of Case's systematic position on the Bible would not be difficult to infer, were that necessary. He is quite explicit. He calls into question not only the authority of the Bible as a whole, he rejects the effort to retain certain portions of Scripture and history "as an authoritative guide to the present."⁶⁹ He goes even further in rejecting the normative significance of the men and events that lie behind Scripture. In this respect he is more patently radical than Mathews. Whatever appeals to living men out of the past does so, he argues, not because of its historical attestation,⁷⁰ but because it retains a measure of functional value for moderns.⁷¹ One does not settle the question of religious values out of Scripture, or even out of history, but by some other authority to be independently determined.⁷²

⁶⁰ *The Evolution of Early Christianity* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1914) 21-22.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 22-23.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 24; "The Problem of Christianity's Essence," *AJT* 17 (1913) 542.

⁶³ The connection is made in *Evolution*, 21-22. Cf. *ibid.*, 27-28; *Social Origins*, 33-34; "The Religious Meaning of the Past," *JR* 4 (1924) 578.

⁶⁴ *JR* 4 (1924) 579.

⁶⁵ *JR* 1 (1921) 14; cf. *ibid.*, 15-16.

⁶⁶ E.g., *Evolution*, 1-25.

⁶⁷ *JR* 1 (1921) 14.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 17; *JR* 4 (1924) 589.

⁶⁹ *JR* 4 (1924) 581-82.

⁷⁰ Case tends to link beliefs about the origin of Scripture with inspiration and revelation, as do others in the period: demolish one and the other is also demolished. Cf. *JR* 4 (1924) 580-81.

⁷¹ *JR* 4 (1924) 581-82.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 583.

As a consequence, the student of religion, in his search for facts, will strive to interpret religious movements, and “only incidentally to expound sacred literatures.” The work of higher criticism is only preliminary to the work of the modern historian of early Christianity.⁷³ The student of the NT will abandon the techniques of traditional scholarship as exemplified, for example, by the commentary, with its meticulous, “phrase-by-phrase exposition.”⁷⁴

Case would appear to be a historical relativist pure and simple. After a careful study of the whole Case corpus, however, Paul Schubert concludes that Case never quite made up his mind on this point. Schubert is of the opinion “that Case’s own relativist criteria led him to an absolutist persuasion as regards the prospects of future progress.”⁷⁵ Although Case consistently affirms the neutrality of historical inquiry,⁷⁶ he does not seem to have confined himself to the role he espoused as his ideal.

At all events, Case occupied new ground at Chicago in endeavoring to shake himself entirely free of the “dead hand of the past.” Together with G. B. Smith, he set the stage for the emergence of the second major phase at Chicago, and put a period to the dominance of the biblical question.

3. *The Fate of a Tradition*

3.1 Harper assumed that the battle with science and with religious orthodoxy would be fought on biblical ground. It was an assumption widely shared in his day. He also assumed that a victory for Scripture and for the historical method required the creation of a new high scholarship in America. This scholarship had to specialize in those areas most closely associated with a sacrosanct text, viz., biblical languages, textual criticism, grammar, lexicography, verse-by-verse interpretation, and translation. Such scholarship would be motivated by an evangelical respect for the text — or at least by the memory of it — and by a desire to control the battleground. Textual criticism became the surest means, for example, of combating the verbal inerrancy of Scripture. The victory would come in the form of a new respect for Scripture, in the spirit but not the letter of orthodoxy, and in accordance with the canons of historical science.

It was thus fully deliberate that Chicago sought the highest level of competence in the traditional biblical disciplines. But the new high scholarship also had to compete with German scholarship, and this meant mastery of “higher criticism.” In this domain Chicago, like most other faculties in the U.S. of the period, represented little more than a rehearsal of German theories. Yet it was on this point that controversy with orthodoxy tended to focus, and it was the realm which offered the greatest hope for the reconciliation of science and biblical religion. But the first generation was so preoccupied with assembling primary credentials, catching up, and competing

⁷³ *JR* 1 (1921) 9-10.

⁷⁴ *Evolution*, 8-9.

⁷⁵ “Shirley Jackson Case, Historian of Early Christianity: An Appraisal,” *JR* 29 (1949) 41.

⁷⁶ E.g., *JR* 4 (1924) 585.

for the lay mind, that it had little time for attention to broader theological problems, including the problem of biblical authority.

The rejection of dogmatic theology and the development of ancillary disciplines went hand in hand with the emergence of a new biblical scholarship. Dogmatics had become the enemy personified since it was theology that had brought the Bible to its present state of disrepute by virtue of its tyranny over biblical scholarship. The salvage operation had to begin with the overthrow of theology. The ancillary disciplines, such as biblical archaeology, social history, comparative religions, were involved in the divestment campaign and to support the conclusions of critical scholarship arrived at largely by means of literary criticism. At the same time, these disciplines contributed enormously to the reconstruction of the "biblical world," so crucial to the later years of the first phase of the School.

3.2 It is not accidental that Harper and Burton specialized in the biblical languages, wrote grammars, and produced commentaries. One looks in vain for similar work, at least in the form of publication, among second generation NT scholars at Chicago. E. J. Goodspeed is perhaps the exception. As E. C. Colwell observes, philological expertise died with Burton.⁷⁷ Mathews notes the passing of the commentary genre,⁷⁸ and Case rejected the older forms of scholarship, including the literary critical work of contemporary Germans, who were quite liberal theologically. Such scholarship, on his view, paid too much attention to literary monuments and not enough to social history.⁷⁹

As a consequence, the second generation chose to gird up its scholarly loins in a slightly different fashion from Harper and Burton. Alongside a reduced commitment to philological expertise, they prepared to meet the full thrust of the social and physical sciences. This accounts for the heavy concentration in history, sociology, and psychology. By these means they hoped to compete more fully on the secular terrain of the sciences, without sacrificing the prestige that still attached to philological competence. At the same time, they sought new ground for the faith.

With Burton leading the way, then, Mathews and Case quietly abandoned the primacy of Sacred Scripture, and with it they also gradually abandoned those disciplines that were oriented primarily to the interpretation of Scripture. They gave up the means along with the end. In so doing, they did not think they were betraying the cause for which Christianity stood, but actually promoting it the only way it could be promoted in the modern world.

The Burton wing of the Chicago School could not perpetuate itself in its initial form, if it were to be true to itself. Once Scripture was abandoned as the anchor of the tradition, there was no longer reason to continue biblical scholarship in its traditional mold. Note that Mathews moved, formally, to theology and Case to church history. Their continuing interest in the prophets and Jesus was secondary support for their commitment to the social gospel.

⁷⁷ "The Chicago School of Biblical Interpretation," typescript, 12.

⁷⁸ *New Faith*, 97-98; cf. S. J. Case, *Evolution*, 8-9.

⁷⁹ *JR* 1 (1921) 9-10.

Above all, they looked not to the past, but to the present and future for their notions of “essential” and “normative” Christianity.

The second phase of the Chicago School stands as the legitimate successor to the first. The reason for the ascendancy of the philosophy of religion at Chicago during the 1930s, according to Bernard Meland,⁸⁰ was that “the grounds for belief in the historic truths had given way in the modern age, and a new rationale must be found.” Without a biblical basis for faith, a new basis had to be found, and it was to this continuing issue that the second phase of the School devoted itself.

The line that runs from Burton through Mathews and Case to G. B. Foster, G. B. Smith, and Henry Nelson Wieman — the Burton wing — is a better index to common American consciousness, in my opinion, because it strikes me as evident that the biblical basis of faith was effectively eroded away before the era of the Scopes trial, precisely in that lay mind which Harper and his colleagues sought so desperately to reach. That may be the reason, too, that Chicago abandoned the battle for the lay mind: the issue was dead. In any case, the biblical question was not reopened; on the contrary, it was considered to be out of the running.

3.3 While Burton, Case, and Mathews may reflect the broader drift of cultural history, it is equally evident that the trajectory charted by them has not basically affected the course of biblical scholarship in America. This means, among other things, that W. R. Harper did indeed survive and, in fact, came to prevail nearly everywhere but at Chicago, simply because biblical scholarship elsewhere was largely in league with the same program.

In Harper’s view, a new high biblical scholarship would control the contested terrain of Scripture by virtue of its competencies in those disciplines most closely akin to a sacrosanct text. Moreover, the critical historical method was taken to be the solution to the hermeneutical problem, and thus also to the problem of Scripture. On the other hand, the laity could be taught the fundamentals of the historical method, including the axiom that they had to rely on the scholar-specialist for judgments on larger, higher critical matters.

At the base of the historical method is philological expertise, the immediate issue of which is adequate translation into the current idiom (Harper’s linguistic method correlated with lay communication), and the more remote issue of which is the commentary or surrogate (technical, homiletical, popular). One can almost draw a direct line from Harper’s method through Goodspeed and the *American Translation* to the *RSV*, the *Interpreter’s Bible*, and the *Anchor Bible*.⁸¹ Goodspeed himself confirms the first connection.⁸² This understanding is undergirded by what might be termed a degenerate form of the Reformation doctrine of the clarity of Scripture, coupled with democratic confidence in the essential literacy of the common man. Thus,

⁸⁰ *Criterion* (1962) 25.

⁸¹ I owe this suggestion to Bernard Scott.

⁸² *As I Remember*, 117; cf. p. 302.

lower and higher criticism together would vanquish the orthodox enemy and enlighten the common mind.

The Harper leg of the Chicago School, like the Burton line, was never able to address the scriptural problem on internal grounds. The major reason was, of course, that the problem was taken to have been solved by method. As a corollary, this leg was also deeply anti-theological and for the same reasons. It, too, wanted to divest itself of premodern dogmatic theology and to win academic respectability. And there is another reason. For a time, the rearguard action against fundamentalism devolved upon Harper's heirs and latter day comrades, e.g., Goodspeed's defense of his *American Translation*; but when this battle died away, the liberal victors constituted themselves the new custodians of the biblical tradition in America over the firm resolve never again to allow themselves to be provoked by the question of biblical authority. They have hewed firmly to the line, even over against the minority tradition fostered by the other wing of the Chicago School. Relative to that position and with the passing of fundamentalism, they constitute the new right in American biblical scholarship.

A constellation of factors thus conspired to drive the question of Scripture underground during the critical period, 1890-1920, in the major surviving line of liberal biblical scholarship. No amount of provocation appears sufficient to bring it back to the surface. To do so now, of course, would be to call a half century of work into question and cause us to revert to the issue that prevailed at the turn of the century.

3.4 It remains to inquire whether the issue can be left buried. Or are there reasons why it should be exhumed and faced? Response to these questions must necessarily be only suggestive.

3.5 When last seen, the Chicago School of biblical interpretation was on its way to the open university, i.e., to a secular academic context. That it never quite arrived, or arrived and was subsequently evicted, may be regarded as an accident of history. By contrast, the Harper legacy of liberal biblical scholarship has been sheltered by and large in the theological seminary and church-related college, in more or less close proximity to the church. In this protective atmosphere, the study of the Bible has not had to compete quite as openly for sustenance with the other humanities; furthermore, conservative theological forces have often constituted a certain drag on scholarship. A biblical scholarship, unsupported by special scriptural favors, has thus been retarded on the American scene.

There is evidence that the era of kept liberal scholarship is passing. There has been a perceptible shift in the academic base of biblical studies from the seminary to the university department of religion or Semitics; at the same time, the academic base for biblical scholarship is visibly contracting. It is probably ironic and maybe even a little prophetic that W. R. Harper's university, with a biblical faculty at its heart, may come to be the first major church-founded institution to drop biblical studies altogether.

The Chicago School may have anticipated the necessity with which biblical

scholarship is now faced. At all events, it appears certain that biblical scholars will increasingly have to justify their existence in the secular university without benefit of scriptural ploy. That in itself will cause the question of Scripture to surface once again but in an entirely new form.

3.4.2 The status of Scripture is closely related to the problem of the limits of Scripture. In seminaries and many church colleges it is difficult to justify courses which major in non-canonical Jewish and Christian literature. In the university, on the other hand, a canonical bias must not be too evident. This discrepancy goes together with the Harper legacy: biblical scholarship gives allegiance to the relativistic position of historical science, while maintaining a hidden deference to the Jewish and Christian canons.

To be sure, the Society of Biblical Literature has long entertained papers on Ugarit, Nag Hammadi, and the Early Bronze age at Jericho. But there has been a silent agreement to maintain connections, however remote in some instances, with the canon of Scripture in both the annual meeting and the journal. So long as arbitrary limits — arbitrary from the standpoint of historical science — are imposed upon the biblical scholars, it will be difficult to come entirely clean with colleagues and students in the secular university.

3.4.3 Finally, the continuing anti-theological bias of biblical scholarship should be noted. This bias is particularly ironic in view of the abiding subterranean deference to the status and limits of Scripture.

Biblical scholarship in America has been virtually untouched by developments in Europe, principally Germany, since the First World War. Why, in strong contrast to the *post bellum* period, has this been the case?

The questions posed by Barth and Bultmann — to give a greatly abbreviated answer — were or are felt to be inadmissible on the American scene. They are inadmissible because they raise the forbidden question: The question of Scripture. Barth and Bultmann have been understood, consequently, as mounting an attack on the Bible itself (Bultmann) or on biblical scholarship (Barth). In some quarters the opposite is taken as the case, and they are relegated to the fundamentalist camp. In either case, they are put down as German theological laundry beneath the dignity of Americans to wash.

Because the question of Scripture is just below the surface in American liberal scholarship, it is systematically suppressed in discussion. It is for this reason that the hermeneutical problem cannot be pursued directly. Philological detail and certain ancillary disciplines, such as biblical archaeology, support scholarly “objectivity,” while permitting one to evade the question of meaning. The scholar can present an evening of stereopticon slides on biblical sites without so much as touching on the question of religion. Yet, for those with memories of the tradition, viewing the very ground on which the prophets and Jesus walked can kindle a warm glow. It is a question of whether biblical scholarship can continue to trade on a sentiment it is not willing to recognize.

I am not suggesting that the scriptural issue should be reopened as a

traditional theological problem. I am suggesting that the question of the text as text — whether the biblical text “means” significantly or at all in our tradition — is a question which should be deliberately permitted, perhaps under literary guise (the modes of prophetic speech; the parable as religious discourse) or under the banner of the history of interpretation (how was the Bible interpreted in the American tradition?). To continue to suppress this issue is to blink at the increasingly precarious academic posture of biblical scholarship and to close our eyes to a rich tradition hoary with age. The early Chicago School has taught us that the issue needs to be faced. It has also taught us how painful that facing will be. American biblical scholarship must come to the point at which it can afford full dignity to an ancient and honorable discipline without a scriptural crutch. The transition will not be easy. Yet, we must make it for the sake of ourselves and for the sake of the discipline. And once we have made it to fresh ground, the issue of Scripture as Scripture will surface naturally and without guilt.