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The (Un)Plain Bible

New Religious Movements and Alternative Scriptures in Nineteenth-century America

Lydia Willsky

ABSTRACT: This article explores the phenomenon of nineteenth-century new religious movements as a reaction to the “plain Bible” religious culture of that era. The plain Bible thesis maintained that the Bible was clear in its meaning, persuasive in its message, and authoritative in all matters of truth. Through the examples of Joseph Smith, Mary Baker Eddy and Henry David Thoreau, this article illustrates how three religious innovators reacted against the plain Bible thesis by creating their own versions of scripture which, in turn, aided in creating or strengthening alternative forms of Christianity. With his Mormon scriptural canon, including The Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, and Pearl of Great Price, Smith combated the notion that the Bible was clear in meaning; with her sacred text *Science and Health* Eddy challenged the persuasiveness of the plain Bible; and with his manuscript *Wild Fruits*, Thoreau undermined the plain Bible’s singular authority. This article shows that many new religious movements were not outliers in nineteenth-century Christian culture but were in fact products of that culture, albeit reactionary ones.

KEYWORDS: Joseph Smith, Mary Baker Eddy, Henry David Thoreau, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Mormon, Christian Science, Transcendentalism

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All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all; yet those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed, for salvation, are so clearly propounded and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of ordinary means may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them.

The Westminster Confession of Faith¹

The authors of the 1646 Westminster Confession of Faith sought to dispel the notion that the Bible was somehow mysterious by asserting that its essential truths for salvation could be understood by even the uneducated and simple. In other words, the Bible was a plain text where it needed to be. In nineteenth-century America, particularly among Reformed and evangelical Protestants, the “plain” sense of the Bible had been extended, making assent to the obvious truth of the entire Bible a near prerequisite for salvation. Even the most obscure passage was said to be clear in its meaning, effectively making anyone who did not understand such passages appear ignorant, willful or, at worst, condemned.

The ascendance of the “plain Bible” in the nineteenth century ultimately had the opposite of its intended effect, as interpretations increased and became more dogmatic in tone. If the Bible was in fact plain, then whatever reading appeared “plain” to a given reader was the correct one. Thus, Bible readers could effectively deny their denomination-specific beliefs and make more unilateral claims to truth simply by referencing the plain Bible.

Among the unintended phenomena sparked by a plain Bible culture was the proliferation of new religious movements, particularly those claiming to possess new scriptures of their own. And in the nineteenth century, new scriptures abounded, ranging from *Oahspe: A New Bible* (1882) by American dentist John Ballou Newbrough (1828–1891), to *The Secret Doctrine* (1888) of Helena P. Blavatsky (1831–1891).² Many such movements had Christian, specifically Protestant, roots, which supports the notion that the groups were both new religious movements and alternative Christianities.³ Their Christian origins may also help dispel the common misconception that new religious movements are outliers rather than products of a prevailing culture.

Scholars of new religious movements in nineteenth-century America have examined them as a function of millennial readings of the Bible (Millerites and Seventh-day Adventists) or the influence of Eastern religious traditions and texts (Theosophy); as restorationist (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints) or Christian perfectionist communities (Oneida Community), and more generally, as a result of the disestablishment of Christianity and the proliferation of charismatic religious figures.⁴ No study as yet has explored the possibility that nineteenth-century new religious movements such as Mormonism, Christian

Science and Transcendentalism found root at least in part in a central figure's reaction against the dogmatism of the plain Bible ethos of American Protestantism. This article argues that rather than succumb to the raucous infighting sparked by such dogmatism, Joseph Smith, Jr. (1805–1844), Mary Baker Eddy (1821–1910) and Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862) eschewed the plain Bible by creating their own alternative scriptures, which had the effect of creating (or in the case of Thoreau solidifying) alternative versions of Christianity. I arrange the examples categorically rather than chronologically according to what I call the “trinity of plainness.” The plain Bible thesis rested on three mutually reinforcing assumptions that the Bible was *clear* in meaning, *persuasive* in message and *authoritative* in truth claims.

The most obvious assumption was that the Bible's meaning was immediately *clear* to the reader, no matter the reader's level of experience with biblical language. In this view, there was no room for subjectivity or relativism: the Bible was objectively clear. The strongest challenge to this assumption came from Joseph Smith and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Resting on the assumption of biblical clarity was the belief that the Bible's message was *persuasive*. The plain Bible had an agency all its own and could compel people in the direction of its truth. The best attempt to modify this notion was made by Mary Baker Eddy, for whom the Bible's true message was the Divine Science of mind healing. Her text *Science and Health* (1875) offered a seminal guide for a “new” reading and understanding of the Bible.

Finally, given the assumptions that the plain Bible is clear and persuasive, it also is *authoritative*. It follows logically that on questions of ultimate truth, the plain Bible is *the* authoritative text because it is deemed authoritative by a community of believers who understand it as the divine source of knowledge. Transcendentalists, however, denied the sole authority of the plain Bible, arguing that it maintained an erroneous monopoly on people's minds. People could become unchained from this text only by seeking truth in all quarters and determining for themselves what was authoritative. The best effort to undermine the singular authority of the plain Bible was Henry David Thoreau, who believed that God, best found in nature, could not be contained in a single book. His text *Wild Fruits*, published posthumously in 2000, was to be spiritually authoritative only for himself, albeit perhaps inspiring for other people. Thoreau embodied the Transcendentalist imperative to be one's own spiritual guide, an individual in congress with the divine. Unlike Smith and Eddy, no movement was built around his scripture, but such a movement would have been anathema to everything Thoreau desired and Transcendentalism promised.

To quote theologian Kathryn Tanner, “When a text of concern to a community is designated scripture, that text and its plain sense have

indeed some authority,” and that “scripture, a text and its obvious sense function authoritatively” by regulating “the self-understanding of community members” who appeal to the text for a sense of group identity.⁵ Tautologically, then, the plain Bible maintains a hold on its “imagined community”⁶ because of its plainness. According to Smith, Eddy and Thoreau, however, the “plain” Bible was anything *but* plain, and the three provided vibrant, text-based religious alternatives for fellow seekers.

THE UNASSAILABLE TEXT: SCOTTISH COMMON SENSE, SCIENCE AND THE ADVENT OF THE PLAIN BIBLE

Before exploring the alternative scriptures and Christianities cultivated by Smith, Eddy and Thoreau, it is necessary to explain what these three were opposing. Though the concept of a plain sense of scripture was not new or uniform across history, it reached the pinnacle of popularity between the American Revolutionary War (1775–1783) and the Civil War (1861–1865).⁷ This period was marked by upheaval as old institutions, such as a state-supported church system, were dismantled in favor of a more inclusive, democratic and tolerant religious society.⁸ This democratization had roots in the eighteenth century’s First Great Awakening (c. 1731–1755), when revivalists sought to minimize differences between clergy and laity, and most of all to make preaching of the Bible the central institution of Christianity.⁹

In the post-disestablishment nineteenth century, this emphasis on democratic practices of interpretation became the primary way to be Christian. As previously marginalized religions and new religious movements gained a constitutional foothold in America, Protestants became more insistent that the Bible was the only arbiter of truth and religious authority.¹⁰ Its message had to appeal to the American masses, who could decide to go elsewhere if they did not like—or, more likely in the Protestant view—did not understand the meaning of the Bible. Baptists, Methodists and scores of revival-based Protestant movements all competed using the same market strategy of the plain Bible. Emphasizing the Bible’s plainness as a (if not *the*) defining feature of the text was a practical and strategic means of keeping Protestantism current and palatable to the new culture of religious consumers. The phenomenon of the “burned-over district”¹¹ in upstate New York, due to the revivalism of the Second Great Awakening (c. 1790–1840) was at least a partial if indirect product of this market strategy.

The plain Bible thesis also had deep intellectual roots in the Enlightenment which, according to Henry May, proposed two central ideas: the current age is more enlightened than the previous age(s), and people understand nature and humanity best through their natural faculties.¹² An emphasis on the viability of reason, conscience and the

senses, and a belief that all knowledge both human and divine must be tested against these faculties, was perhaps the Enlightenment's greatest legacy for religious and biblical thought. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Enlightenment provided many tools for engaging the Bible that eventually brought many of its supernatural and "mysterious" elements into question. Scholars were asking the question, "[even] granted the rationality or inherent possibility of revelation, how likely is it that such a thing has actually taken place?"¹³ It seemed to many American Christians that Reason and its more aggressive cousin Science were encroaching on territory traditionally held by Christianity—namely, the way of knowing what was true. Science did not simply claim to know what was true but relied on discernible "facts" to prove its version of truth. In order to compete, Christianity had to become rational and scientific in the type of proof it used to make its claims.¹⁴

Scottish Common Sense offered the scientific means to prove and preserve a set of standard beliefs. Scottish Common Sense was premised on the idea that truth was knowable through the senses, and that inductive reasoning from observation was the best means for gaining knowledge of truth.¹⁵ In this view, God designed the human mind for inductive reasoning, and humans should trust their senses to reveal the factual truth of Christianity.¹⁶ When this philosophical system reached America, Protestant scholars across denominations rejoiced in the idea that Enlightenment thought could be used to prove, rather than undermine, the truth of Christianity via the Bible.

If Scottish Common Sense was the Protestant scientific method, the Bible was its object and proof. Charles Hodge (1797–1878), renowned scholar of Princeton Theological Seminary and arguably the greatest champion of the plain Bible thesis, wrote: "Knowledge is the persuasion of what is true on adequate evidence."¹⁷ Since Scottish Common Sense Realism taught that people should trust their divinely given senses, anything they perceived to be factual most likely was. This meant that things not previously understood as scientific evidence, such as language, could now serve precisely that function. The specific example of language Hodge put forward for scientific study was the Bible, a "store-house of facts" that was "to the theologian what nature is to the man of science." The theologian engaged with the biblical text was like a scientist whose aim was to "collect, authenticate, arrange, and exhibit" various "truths" and "exhibit [their] internal relation to each other."¹⁸ By aligning biblical study with scientific investigation, Hodge hoped to avoid the unthinkable outcome of Christianity becoming a relic of the past, surpassed by its modern epistemological counterpart, science. Equally important was the message (and authentic belief) that accompanied this view: the Bible was plain and its truth easily discoverable simply by trusting one's senses and relying on common sense. This marketing strategy would

appeal to religious consumers often put off by the overt intellectualism of scholarly interpretive methods.

Ironically, the effort to bolster Christianity by strengthening the Bible with claims of its scientific, rational and “plain” qualities inadvertently weakened both. Faith was no longer a leap but a matter of “assent.”¹⁹ Prior to the era of the plain Bible, faith was the necessary key for understanding the meaning of scripture; now, scripture had to prove itself logical and objectively rational to *earn* a reader’s faith. Basing the authority of the Bible on the Scottish Common Sense idea that human senses could reliably produce some uniform, standard version of truth, Protestant Biblicists were unprepared for the myriad ideas, interpretations and voices that arose from reading the “plain” Bible. Eventually, in the final third of the nineteenth century, these multiple Christianities—along with the discoveries of Charles Darwin (1809–1882), numerous geologists and the German Higher Critics—eroded the marriage between religion and science among plain Bible advocates. The Higher Critics in particular made the task of defending the plain Bible more untenable. By subjecting the Bible to tests of historical veracity, many of the “facts” (such as the authorship of the gospels by their eponymous narrators) held so dear by plain Bible enthusiasts were soon found to be not so factual at all.²⁰

The plain Bible thesis eventually would be overtaken by a belief in the literal and inerrant truth of the Bible, and inductive science would be overshadowed by dogmatism and Christian apologetics. If the Bible could no longer “pass scientific muster,” it would become the “unerring, infallible” alternative to science.²¹ Yet for the first two-thirds of the nineteenth century—a time that gave birth to several major new religious movements—the plain Bible was the unwritten credo of a broad American Protestantism.

NEVER AS PLAIN AS IT SEEMS: EXPLAINING THE GENESIS OF THREE NEW RELIGIONS IN PLAIN BIBLE AMERICA

In a culture where the plain Bible was ascendant, Joseph Smith, Mary Baker Eddy and Henry David Thoreau were at once representative of the broader Bible culture and outliers to that culture. In spite of their varying levels of education, they all were Bible readers probing the text for spiritual aid and guidance. They were born into a culture steeped in Scottish Common Sense and the belief that the Bible, serving as its own interpreter, could produce immediate understanding in its reader. The three were akin to most other nineteenth-century Protestants who felt not a little concerned when the Bible’s meaning did not immediately spring from the page or conform to whatever theological conclusion some preacher or pamphlet-writer insisted was correct. Unlike others, however, their general confusion at the Bible’s supposed plainness

would lead them down the less frequently trodden path of alternative Christianity and new scripture. For them, the plain Bible did not shut down the need for further inquiry but rather made further inquiry necessary.

As noted earlier, Smith, Eddy and Thoreau were motivated to action against a different aspect of the “trinity of plainness.” Though varied in their particular complaints about the thesis, they were similar in their responses and in their belief that there must be a better way of discerning truth, even if that better way was a better scripture.

Joseph Smith: Reactionary and Translator

Scripture in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is a living, growing organism. Mediated by the LDS Prophet, revelation not only continues but is recorded, codified and incorporated into its adherents' lives. This “open canon,” initiated by founder Joseph Smith, opposes the plain Bible thesis specifically by denying its claim of clarity. Though Mormon scriptures (including the Bible) are read and interpreted by lay Mormons, their reading is aided by the direct guidance of the living Prophet.²² Smith, the first Prophet, streamlined interpretation and removed the onus from the individual believer to glean the “plain” message of scripture. He accomplished this by initiating an interpretive hierarchy that included a direct channel to divine revelation and an imperative to create new scripture.

Before he became Prophet and founder of a new church, Smith was a confused adolescent adrift in an endless array of Christian traditions claiming to have a monopoly on biblical truth. In a story that has since been elevated to the status of scripture itself, Smith described the depth of his despair and ambivalence toward the religious revivals occurring in New York's burned-over district. He felt put off especially by the “pretended” fervor of both the “priests and the converts,” and he doubted the effectiveness of revival techniques as well as the beliefs and practices of various revivalist sects.²³ Increasingly, he found that little of what they said or did was “contained in the sacred depository” of the Bible they claimed as the source of their traditions.²⁴ Steeped in this Bible-centric culture, Smith sought refuge in scripture.

While I was laboring under the extreme difficulties caused by the contests of these parties of religionists, I was one day reading the Epistle of James, first chapter and fifth verse, which reads: *If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him.* Never did any passage of scripture come with more power to the heart of man that this did at this time to mine. [. . .] [K]nowing that if any person needed wisdom from God, I did; for how to act I did not know, and unless I could get more wisdom than I then had, I would never

know; for the teachers of religion of the different sects understood the same passages of scripture so differently as to destroy all confidence in settling the question by an appeal to the Bible.²⁵

Rather than the balm for all ills and the answer to all questions, the Bible as preached had become the source of Protestant confusion. Each denomination taught that the Bible was clear in its message and was dogmatically convinced of its correct interpretation. Since there was little room for equivocation where the plain Bible was concerned, these multiple versions of truth acted as a deterrent for Smith. The more truth claims he encountered, the less assured he was that reading the Bible alone could provide him with any solace or answers.²⁶ Following this quiet epiphany, Smith determined “that I must either remain in darkness and confusion, or else I must do as James directs, that is ask of God.”²⁷ The Bible itself inspired Smith to seek truth outside its pages, and it was without the plain Bible that he set out for the woods in search of God, spiritual direction and truth.

A series of visions spanning many years resulted in a massive, lifelong project including translation of long-hidden scripture, creation of new scripture through direct revelation, and re-translation of canonical biblical texts.²⁸ Smith’s first task was the transcription of golden plates buried on a hill near Palmyra, where he lived. Equipped with two seer stones called Urim and Thummim (see Samuel 14:41; Exodus 28:13–30), Smith was able to read and understand the plates’ ancient language. At first he undertook the translation alone but eventually dictated from behind a curtain to a willing scribe, Oliver Cowdery (1806–1850), one of his first disciples.²⁹ Though a few privileged souls were able to handle the plates, it was Smith who undertook the translation. The fact that all knowledge of this new scripture—and any subsequent divine revelation—came through Smith was significant in the plain Bible culture. Heretofore mired in competing truth claims, Smith now was the oracle of God’s truth. While theoretically everyone had access to and could uncover the plain meaning of the Bible, Smith alone had access to a particular sacred text and his authority was held in high honor.³⁰ Smith’s status as God’s Prophet became the distinguishing feature of the LDS Church. His translation of the golden plates, which would become *The Book of Mormon* (1830), was only the opening overture to Smith’s new canon. In the years that followed, he came across a set of Egyptian papyrus scrolls that he held to be the *Book of Abraham*, a text he immediately translated and published in 1842.³¹ The *Book of Abraham* later was determined to be spurious; the scroll actually was a manuscript of the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*.³² Smith’s translation subsequently was determined to be a false and fantastical reimagining of the text, but the *Book of Abraham* remained a viable piece of the Mormon canon, bolstering the notion that the veracity of Mormon

scripture derived more from Smith's prophetic stamp of approval than on the text itself.

Most significant for his scriptural project, however, was Smith's evolution from translator to Prophet when he began to record revelations he claimed came directly from God.³³ Smith's biographer, Richard Bushman, argues that the reason the nascent LDS Church survived following Smith's murder in 1844 was because of his meticulous establishment of an extensive system of church institutions and practices reinforced by a cohesive cosmology and system of religious thought, all of which came to him through revelation.³⁴ Whereas *The Book of Mormon*, currently translated into ninety-one languages, established and legitimated the Latter-day Saints' historical past, the compilation of Smith's (and subsequent Prophets') revelations laid the foundation for the Saints' future.³⁵ *The Doctrine and Covenants* (1835) contains the record of nearly all of Smith's revelations (at least those he recorded) and details articles of faith, doctrines for church government, biblical exegesis, matters of theology and cosmology, and ritual practice. This canonical text has had multiple iterations because the fact of continued revelation guarantees that there can and most likely will be new additions to the text.³⁶ Matters that have appeared most bizarre to those outside the Church—plural marriage, for one—have appeared as revelations in *The Doctrine and Covenants* (the qualification of this revelation also appears in the text, because with an open canon God can adapt to situations as they arise).³⁷ Whereas the plain Bible thesis denied there was anything unclear or mysterious in the Bible, Smith allowed for strange, even scandalous doctrines, because they bore the Prophet's *imprimatur* and therefore negated any associated stigma or confusion. Even given this power to distinguish truth from falsity, Smith used the Bible to confirm his revelations. Even the strangest ideas had biblical origins, which one could discover with the proper guidance.

Section 128 of *The Doctrine and Covenants*, for example, contains Smith's directives for and explanations of a decidedly controversial practice—baptism of the dead—a ritual providing “for the salvation of the dead who should die without a knowledge of the gospel.”³⁸ As wrong-headed as this practice sounded and continues to sound to non-Mormons, Smith sought to bolster his revelation against an inevitable backlash by couching it in the familiar language of the Bible, a style of exegesis typical of *The Doctrine and Covenants*. In this particular section, after a quote from the book of Malachi in the Old Testament, Smith wrote in a rather offhand manner, “I might have rendered a plainer translation to this, but it is sufficiently plain to suit my purpose as it stands.”³⁹ It is unlikely that Smith was being purposefully subversive here, but the statement foreshadowed yet another undertaking in his alternative scriptural project that would continue to subvert plain Bible Protestantism.

In 1830 Smith undertook to translate the Christian Bible anew and, in his view, for the final time. He long had taught that though the Bible was “divinely inspired in its origin . . . it had not been transmitted to the nineteenth [century] in its original purity and completeness.”⁴⁰ In fact, he claimed, pieces of the Bible were missing. Referring to the “lost” books, he wrote that there was much

conjecture and conversation concerning the books mentioned, and referred to, in various places in the Old and New Testaments, which were nowhere to be found. The common remark was, “They are *lost books*,” but it seems the Apostolic Church had some of these writings, as Jude mentions or quotes the Prophecy of Enoch, the seventh from Adam.⁴¹

Having a direct channel to God, Smith could fill in those gaps in the extant translations. Thus his translation would diverge in both method and principle from all others. Influenced by plain Bible culture, scholars who translated the Bible aimed for accuracy, making knowledge of ancient languages necessary for the closest possible transcription into the vernacular.⁴² Smith, on the other hand, did not concern himself with precise accuracy or his lack of knowledge of ancient Greek or Hebrew. He was unperturbed by “error” in the sense that scholars meant it, namely as mistranslation. Rather, because of his divine appointment as Prophet, Smith knew that while the words he wrote as he translated were neither infallible nor sacred on their own, he could not actually mistranslate because of the underlying message they conveyed.⁴³ Smith’s greatest affront to plain Bible culture was perhaps this idea that accuracy mattered little when the source of translation was divinely appointed. It followed that Smith’s Bible was a “plainer translation” not because everyone could read it and arrive at the same conclusion, but because it was plainly divine in its source and clear only because of its chosen mediator. Without Smith and future Prophets, there could be no way to know or understand the Bible.

Smith’s translation would also be *complete* in a way no earlier translation could be, given his unique access to the “lost books” and to the divine Revelator. Referred to in the text simply as the Inspired Version (published in 1867 by the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints), Smith’s translation was printed alongside the text of the King James Version so as to create a natural comparison.⁴⁴ From the very first pages, it is clear that Smith had not simply translated the Bible anew but had expanded the biblical cosmos of Christianity. The first lines of Genesis, which traditionally read, “In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth,” now opened with God and Moses discussing the former’s creation project.⁴⁵ With this final translation, Smith firmly bucked the authority of the plain Bible by denying that its words were the correct ones and even shedding doubt on the notion that it was ever inspired at all.

Mary Baker Eddy: Scientist and Exegete

“The time for thinkers has come,” states the preface to *Science and Health*. “Truth, independent of doctrines and time-honored systems, knocks at the portal of humanity. Contentment with the past and cold conventionality of materialism are crumbling away.”⁴⁶ Author Mary Baker Eddy intimated that knowledge would continue to press on with or without the consent of extant institutions like the Church.⁴⁷ Born of the same *zeitgeist* that propelled the plain Bible and steeped in the idea that a marriage between science and religion not only was possible but necessary, Eddy proceeded to do her part for Christianity, the Bible and humankind. Her development of what would become Christian Science arose out of her life experiences and encounters with the Bible. She was convinced that the cure to all physical and mental illness was in the Bible, but it was not presented in a persuasive way. In its current form, the plain Bible caused few people to change, at least not in a way that was most helpful or salvific for humankind, namely in the way of thinking about reality and human capability. The human mind needed some urging and guidance to seek the “science of real being,” her term for the deeper reality underlying our present material reality, something the plain Bible, as it stood, was not equipped to do.⁴⁸ Eddy hoped to remedy the Bible’s lack of persuasiveness by publishing her own treatise on spirituality with an exegetical guide to scripture. She enjoined Christian Science congregations to read *Science and Health* and the Bible side-by-side, but soon her own “guide” began to equal and even surpass the Bible as the source of authoritative truth.⁴⁹ What began as an alternative to the plain Bible transformed into a distinctive Christian sect in which science and Christianity were bedfellows.

Though her life story has not achieved canonical status like that of Joseph Smith, their experiences and encounters with the Bible bear a striking similarity. Both experienced a sustained period of turmoil—spiritually for Smith and physically for Eddy—which was swiftly succeeded by an epiphany of truth that inspired new scriptures. Critics of the plain Bible, they both eventually returned to the Bible: Smith as translator and Eddy as exegete. Their differences lay in their self-appointed tasks vis-à-vis the Bible and their motives. Smith found the Bible murky and unclear and sought to reinvent it. Eddy, following a life-altering experience, sought to redirect the Bible’s readership toward its *true* message rather than retranslate it.

Throughout her life, Eddy suffered from countless illnesses. She tried many remedies, from standard medical treatments to mesmerism.⁵⁰ The various remedies provided some short-lived relief, but in 1866 Eddy fell on ice and suffered a severe and painful spinal injury. As she lay in bed, drifting in and out of consciousness, she asked for her Bible and “to be left alone.”⁵¹ On the third day after the accident, she

opened her Bible to Matthew 9:2: “And, behold, they brought to him a man sick of palsy, lying on a bed: and Jesus, seeing their faith said unto the sick of the palsy: Son, be of good cheer; thy sins be forgiven thee.”⁵² According to Eddy:

As I read, the healing Truth dawned upon my sense; and the result was that I arose, dressed myself, and ever after was in better health than I had before enjoyed. That short experience included a glimpse of the great fact that I have since tried to make plain to others, namely, Life in and of Spirit; this Life being the sole reality of existence.⁵³

The Matthean passage about the paralyzed man, along with the words of Jesus in John 14:6—“I am the way the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Pather, but by me”—revealed to Eddy that all life, including her own, was in God. At the moment of this realization, she was healed.

This revelation, originating with the Bible, was the first of many. Eddy saw herself as a conduit for a new gospel that would illuminate the scientific message of the Bible rather than add to the canon. She had little intention of writing new scripture or creating a new Christianity.⁵⁴ Convinced as ever that Christianity was the way to salvation, she undertook the daunting task of showing why and how this was the case. She withdrew from society for an extended period “to Search the Scriptures, to find the Science of the Mind . . . and reveal the great curative Principle, God.”⁵⁵ Outward cures were ultimately useless because all physical pain was the result of a clouded, sinful mind and therefore illusory. The only true cure, Eddy realized, was through devotion to God via the science of mind healing, or Christian Science.⁵⁶

At the center of this period of discovery was the Bible. Gillian Gill argues that far from weaning off the Bible as she produced further revisions and versions of *Science and Health*, Eddy’s writing became increasingly exegetical.⁵⁷ In the earliest stages of writing, Eddy indicated that her “first volume of a projected work of enormous scope” was to be titled “The Bible in its Spiritual Meaning.”⁵⁸ This manuscript, which would evolve into *Science and Health*, originated at the intersection of Eddy’s scientific and biblical impulses. Reflecting later in life about these earlier writings and their relationship to scripture, Eddy wrote that the “truths of Christian Science are not interpolations of the Scriptures, but the spiritual interpretations thereof. Science [of mind healing] is the prism of Truth, which divides its rays and brings out the hues of Deity.”⁵⁹ The truths that Eddy took down in her scriptural guide; her manual for what would become Christian Science, were those she uncovered in the Bible with the guiding hand of God. Her work stood as a commentary on the text, or as a hermeneutic for reading the Bible based on her divine healing revelations. She hoped that *Science and Health* side-by-side with the Bible would allow for a focused reading of the latter, thereby making

the truths of the Bible easier to attain, understand and believe.⁶⁰ She intended for *Science and Health* to reflect the biblical truths she had discovered.

Science and Health was first published in Boston by the Christian Science Publishing Company in 1875. Since that time it has gone through multiple editions and is now available in seventeen languages. According to at least one reader, however, it is “one of the most repetitious books ever written” and makes the “seemingly simple claim” that “reality is one unified whole.”⁶¹ This “whole,” or God, is comprehensive, meaning that everything is spirit and all matter is illusory. Thus, all supplication, devotion and ritual must be redirected toward understanding and employing this ultimate reality for the betterment of oneself and humanity. In her first chapter, “Prayer,” Eddy admonished her readers: “Prayer to a corporeal God affects the sick like a drug, which has no efficacy of its own but borrows its power from human faith and belief. The drug does nothing, because it has not intelligence.”⁶² Human contrivances like medicine were nothing compared to the miraculous curative power of prayer issued from a mind and heart directed toward God. This passage and others like it evoked the thought of fellow nineteenth-century thinker Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882), who insisted that humans are the miracle-workers needing nothing but their own souls to know truth and produce wonders.⁶³ Eddy, too, rode the cultural wave of self-reliance, though for her (unlike Emerson) the Bible retained its status as the ultimate source of guidance and truth.

Science and Health was replete with biblical references, particularly from the New Testament and more specifically from the gospels and the writings of Paul. Her intent was to reaffirm and point to how the warrants of Christian Science were revealed in the Bible. She offered a road map for Bible readers wishing to follow her along the path of mind healing. Furthering the connection between the Bible and *Science and Health*, “Key to the Scriptures” (added in 1883) was a portion of the text devoted solely to exegesis, specifically of Genesis and Revelation, as well as a glossary to show the scientific and spiritual meanings of biblical words.⁶⁴ In the sections of exegesis, Eddy analyzed individual passages for their relation to Christian Science. For example, in her analysis of Revelation 21:1 (“And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away; and there was no more sea”), Eddy argued that this “testimony of Holy Writ sustains the fact in Science, that the heavens and earth to one human consciousness, that consciousness which God bestows, are spiritual, while to another, the unillumined human mind, the vision is material.”⁶⁵ This biblical passage illuminated the stages of consciousness progressing from matter to spirit. Those whose consciousness was characterized by spirit no longer perceived the “first” (material) heaven and earth, because they realized that all physical matter was a projection of the mind.

Eddy's exegesis in this and other passages provided a clear and distinctive interpretation of the Bible, because the plain Bible alone could not persuade readers of its greatest message, the divine truth of Christian Science. In a twist of fate or providence, her biblical aid gained an authority all its own primarily because Eddy's sense of authority grew alongside, if not wholly outside, Christian institutions.⁶⁶ Following the success of *Science and Health*, in 1879 she founded The First Church of Christ, Scientist in Boston and devoted the rest of her life (much like Smith) to creating a solid church structure based partly on her continuing revelations.⁶⁷ What began as a means of guiding the mind toward the Bible's salvific truth resulted in the founding of a distinctive church and an alternative form of Christianity, grounded in the original scripture of its spiritual leader.

Henry David Thoreau: Prophet and Naturalist

Transcendentalism is not often categorized as a new religious movement, partly because few can determine whether it actually qualifies as a religion. A cacophony of qualifiers—philosophy, literary movement, “symposium of likeminded persons [for] the free discussion of theology & moral subjects”⁶⁸—reveals the ambiguity surrounding the Transcendentalist movement. Further, the absence of standard practice or formal organization—two of Bruce Lincoln's four dimensions of religion⁶⁹—makes it difficult to call Transcendentalism a religion. In fact, many associated with Transcendentalism retained their affiliation with Protestant denominations. Even Ralph Waldo Emerson, the father of Transcendentalism, rarely demanded that others emulate him. His only demand: do not conform.⁷⁰

Henry David Thoreau encompassed all that Emerson envisioned in a practicing, *religious* Transcendentalist. He went to the woods to experience the transcendent mysticism evoked in Emerson's writing and to live the self-reliant, non-conformist, radical life. In other words, he had imbibed Emerson's words and applied them in his everyday life.⁷¹

Perhaps Emerson's greatest legacy, for Thoreau at least, was his perception of the problem and possibility of scripture. In 1838, Emerson informed an impressionable audience of graduating ministers from Harvard Divinity School that the Bible was a dangerous book that had caused spiritual laziness in its readers, who no longer sought greater, deeper truth. After all, they had been taught the plain Bible, which purported to have everything they could possibly need. Instead, what was needed was a “new Teacher” who would record a “new revelation,” because revelation did not stop with the Bible.⁷² In other words, the plain Bible was no longer—indeed never had been—the sole religious authority and source of truth.⁷³

Emerson would not go on to write new scripture.⁷⁴ Thoreau, however, did precisely that. Though his scriptural project began later in life, his thoughts on scripture developed concurrently with his Transcendentalism. Certainly inspired by Emerson, Thoreau became convinced of the power of words to incite religious experience, particularly those that described natural phenomena.⁷⁵ Simultaneously, and perhaps more significantly, he revolted against the assumptions of the plain Bible thesis, particularly those dealing with the singularity of the plain Bible's authority. Thoreau long had been dabbling in foreign scriptures, the Bhagavad Gita for example, which showed him that alternative authority existed in the realm of sacred texts.⁷⁶ Relying solely on "the wisdom of one good book, the Bible" caused people to let "the rest of their lives vegetate and dissipate their faculties in what is called easy reading."⁷⁷ Sole reliance on the Bible had caused spiritual atrophy—the text had become a bane, rather than a boon for the soul.

Equally offensive to Thoreau was the claim that a plain Bible reader could read a text and completely apprehend the thoughts, meaning and message of the inspired transcriber of God's word, as if these words were written without context or personal investment.

Nature and human life are as various as our several constitutions. Who shall say what prospect life offers to another? Could a greater miracle take place than for us to look through each other's eyes for an instant? We should live in all the ages of the world in an hour; nay, in all the worlds of the ages. History, Poetry, Mythology! I know of no reading of another's experience so startling and informing as this would be.⁷⁸

Seeking to replicate the precise mindset of a biblical author was futile and misguided. How could one know what a long-dead writer had thought and intended? How could anything a writer thought or did nearly two thousand years ago be morally and spiritually binding on someone living in the present day? The idea that one person's version of truth was never binding for anyone but that person was a central Transcendentalist principle.⁷⁹ Thus, the plain Bible as a universally binding authority was a dangerous fallacy that had chained people to a particular form of truth when there were innumerable truths to be discovered in and outside the Bible.

When Thoreau first had the idea for *Wild Fruits* in 1859, he very consciously set out to create scripture, calling it "my new testament."⁸⁰ However, unlike Smith or Eddy, he did not intend for his scripture to be morally prescriptive or binding on anyone but himself. This poses a dilemma: can a text be called "scripture" if it has no community to support this claim? Stephen J. Stein, reiterating Wilfred Cantrell Smith, claims that scripture is scripture "only insofar as it is recognized and understood as such by a given community." Certainly this is true in the case of

Smith and Eddy, whose movements would not have gotten off the ground without their followers' consent that their texts were sacred. Yet, does Stein's "bilateral dimension"⁸¹ apply in the case of Transcendentalism, a movement premised on the sacred power of the individual? Each Transcendentalist practitioner represented a religious community of one. So to take Transcendentalism (and Thoreau, for that matter) at its word is to allow for the idea that scripture can and *should* exist only for the individual.

Yet, while *Wild Fruits* had authority for Thoreau only, he did not intend for it to remain unseen by others. He believed himself to be the prophet of Emerson's envisioning, the "new teacher." If not for his untimely death in 1862 at age 44, his book was to be the Transcendentalist text Emerson had called for. Thoreau hoped his text would inspire others to write their own scripture. But unlike the Christian Bible, where all prophesying and revelation culminated and ceased with Jesus, he foresaw a new generation of prophets who would create their own canons that would in turn inspire others, and so on.⁸² *Wild Fruits*, was the rogue pebble that would start an avalanche of new revelation and new Bibles. In this way, Thoreau actualized the lived tradition of Transcendentalism. More than taking Emerson's words to heart, he became the archetype of Emerson's religious vision.

Wild Fruits was born of Thoreau's naturalist and prophetic impulses that met and married in his Transcendentalism. He famously had taken to the woods at Walden Pond in Concord, Massachusetts to live "deliberately" and experience the divine where it rested most readily, in nature.⁸³ His work as a surveyor and his frequent trips to Maine, New Hampshire and Cape Cod provided him with plenty of inspiration and material that filled the numerous published accounts of his experiences.⁸⁴ Yet, none of these books bore the *imprimatur* of scripture in the way that *Wild Fruits* did, primarily because Thoreau actually conceived of the latter as a bible.

Unlike the familiar biblical narrative of Smith's *The Book of Mormon* or the self-help-book-meets-biblical-commentary of Eddy's *Science and Health*, *Wild Fruits* reads like a field journal at some points and the musings of a wayward mystic at others. This admixture is less surprising insofar as the bulk of the text came directly from Thoreau's private journal and field journals, from the Concord woods.⁸⁵ Organized by type of flora and fauna, the book evokes a sense of vicariousness—the reader experiences what Thoreau records. "October 23, 1852. Chestnuts have fallen," begins one passage. The next leaps forward in time: "The chestnuts are about as plenty as ever, both in the fallen burrs and out of them. There are more this year than the squirrels can consume."⁸⁶ A few pages later Thoreau muses:

I find my account in this long-continued monotonous labor of picking chestnuts all afternoon, brushing the leaves aside without looking up,

absorbed in *that*, and forgetting better things awhile. I rebound afterward and between whiles with fresher sense. . . . It is probably wholesomer to look at the ground much than as the heavens. As I go stooping and brushing the leaves aside by the hour, I am not thinking of chestnuts merely, but I find myself humming a thought of more significance. This occupation affords a certain broad pause and opportunity to start again afterward—turn over a new leaf.⁸⁷

When juxtaposed, both passages model for readers precisely what Thoreau wishes for them to do: go outside, observe the many forms of nature and in the process experience spiritual awakening. Rather than read the text and attempt to garner truth from Thoreau's personal experience of the divine—which was the way of reading and interpreting the plain Bible—the reader was to emulate Thoreau, then go and experience nature in reality and record the various revelations that arose from such an encounter.⁸⁸

Unlike Eddy and Smith, who saw the fruits of their labors in their own lifetimes, Thoreau died before completing *Wild Fruits*. The manuscript remained among his papers bearing the title "Notes on Fruits" until Bradley P. Dean transcribed the text, publishing it in 2000 under the name Thoreau intended for it, *Wild Fruits*. It is impossible to assess the impact the text might have had on galvanizing Transcendentalism to a more cohesive and practical religious movement. Nonetheless, like Smith and Eddy, Thoreau was a prophet and rebel who, instead of remaining content to critique the plain Bible, sought to remedy it by re-opening the canon for all to find and create their own authoritative texts.

BEYOND THE BIBLE?

American religious historian Mark A. Noll argues that the plain Bible thesis arising from Scottish Common Sense Realism crashed on the shoals of the Civil War. Leading up to and during the crisis, pro- and anti-slavery advocates alike claimed to know the mind of God because the plain Bible effectively told both sides that God surely was on their side.⁸⁹ Using the example of Abraham Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address delivered on 4 March 1865, Noll illustrates precisely what the war taught both North and South about their knowledge of the Bible and God: "Both read the same Bible, pray to the same God; and each invoke his aid against the other," but the "Almighty has his own purposes."⁹⁰ To assume that one could know the mind of God was the ultimate act of hubris that the plain Bible thesis had instilled in Americans on both sides of the Civil War. The meaning of the Bible on the subject of slavery was clearly not plain to all.

Reinforcing the critique of the Civil War, Joseph Smith, Mary Baker Eddy and Henry David Thoreau tested the idea that the plain meaning of the Bible was plain. For these nineteenth-century figures and their respective new religious movements, such a notion had caused more confusion than it quelled, resulted in needless and foundationless dogma, and chained people to the notion that if they could not understand the Bible then perhaps the problem was with them. For Smith, the plain Bible was not clear; for Eddy, the plain Bible was not persuasive; and for Thoreau, the plain Bible was not authoritative. In their view, the solution was not to succumb to the inertia of an overwhelming plain Bible culture, but to carve out space for innovative, alternative and unplain Bibles of their own.

The Christian Bible was not gone, of course. Smith ensured that the Bible, alongside The Book of Mormon, stood at the head of the LDS canon. After *Science and Health* achieved status as holy writ, Eddy insisted it be read in tandem with the Bible. Even Thoreau, for whom the only canon was what he deemed authoritative for himself, could not dispense with the Bible, expressing praise for its beauty and emulating its language in his own alternative scripture.⁹¹ By extending the canon through their various scriptural contributions, however, they effectively denied that the Bible was a self-sufficient authority for its own truths, which were legion. Inspired to combat the plain Bible's alleged clarity, aid its lack of persuasiveness and qualify its authority, respectively, Smith, Eddy and Thoreau added shades to an already technicolor religious landscape of new religious movements, alternative Christianities and religious experiences. While they further complicated an already splintered American Protestantism, their intentions were to make religious knowledge from scripture more accessible, clear and personally relevant. That, at least, is plain.

ENDNOTES

¹ The Westminster Assembly composed the Westminster Confession as the Reformed confession of faith. See www.reformed.org/documents/wcf_with_proofs/index.html?body=/documents/wcf_with_proofs/ch_I.html, accessed 15 December 2013.

² *Oahspe* was written by John Ballou Newbrough, who claimed to have special, newly revealed knowledge from “angel ambassadors” from heaven. *The Secret Doctrine, the Synthesis of Science, Religion, and Philosophy* was written by Helena P. Blavatsky, co-founder of the Theosophical Society, who claimed to reconcile science with religious thought, particularly Asian religions and Western Esotericism.

³ Transcendentalism is often called “post-Christian,” a designation I dispute. “Alternative Christianity” is more suitable, given its roots in Protestant tradition,

its continued use of Christian and biblical language, and most importantly the fact that Transcendentalists like Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau saw themselves as actualizing the potential introduced by Jesus in the Bible—he was a miracle worker, as they would be.

⁴ Eugene V. Gallagher, *The New Religious Movements Experience in America* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2004); Philip Jenkins, “False Prophets and Deluded Subjects: The Nineteenth Century,” in *Cults and New Religious Movements: A Reader*, ed. Lorne L. Dawson (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 73–88; Philip Jenkins, “Overrun with Messiahs,” in *Mystics and Messiahs: Cults and New Religions in American History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); and Derek H. Davis and Barry Hankins, eds., *New Religious Movements and Religious Liberty in America* (Waco, Tex.: Baylor University Press, 2003).

⁵ Kathryn E. Tanner, “Theology and the Plain Sense,” in *Scriptural Authority and Narrative Interpretation*, ed. Garrett Green (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 69.

⁶ An imagined community is one in which its members, though they may not come into contact very often (or at all), envision connections between themselves and all other members of this community. This “imagined” sense of community enables those involved to participate in a broader national, sometimes global, relationship with others (i.e., Christian understandings of the body of Christ, in that all Christians, though we may not know who they are, are connected through faith in Christ and communion). See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 2006).

⁷ Mark A. Noll, “The Image of the United States as a Biblical Nation, 1776–1865,” in *The Bible in America: Essays in Cultural History*, ed. Nathan O. Hatch and Mark A. Noll (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 39.

⁸ Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1989).

⁹ These revivalists were called “New Lights.” See Richard L. Bushman, *From Puritan to Yankee: Character and Social Order in Connecticut, 1690–1765* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1967); Richard L. Bushman, *The Great Awakening: Documents on the Revival of Religion, 1740–1745* (New York: Atheneum, 1970); and Harry S. Stout, *The New England Soul: Preaching and Religion in Early New England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

¹⁰ William de Burgh, *An Exposition of the Book of Revelation* (Dublin: Hodges Smith & Co., 1857), vi.

¹¹ The burned-over district refers to an area of upstate New York that experienced an overwhelming number of revivals as well as revivals that lasted a significant period of time. The region was said to be “burned over” because none were left standing who had not experienced conversion or inspiration.

¹² Henry F. May, *The Enlightenment in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), xiv.

¹³ Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of the Bible Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1974), 53.

¹⁴ Mark A. Noll, *Between Faith and Criticism: Evangelicals, Scholarship and the Bible in America* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986), 11–31; and George M. Marsden, “Everyone One’s Own Interpreter? The Bible, Science, and Authority in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America,” in Hatch and Noll, *The Bible in America: Essays in Cultural History*, 79–100.

¹⁵ Theodore Dwight Bozeman, *Protestants in an Age of Science: The Baconian Ideal and Antebellum American Religious Thought* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1977), 3.

¹⁶ Bozeman, *Protestants in an Age of Science*, 7–11.

¹⁷ Jack B. Rogers and Donald K. McKim, *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible: An Historical Approach* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979), 289.

¹⁸ Rogers and McKim, *Authority and Interpretation of the Bible*, 293.

¹⁹ Rogers and McKim, *Authority and Interpretation of the Bible*, 295.

²⁰ The Higher Critics were early nineteenth-century German scholars who analyzed the Christian Bible, hoping to determine the accuracy biblical events (particularly events claimed to be “miracles”) by examining them in their given historical context. This meant examining the words of the text to determine their precise meaning, analysis of the recorded history of that time, and an examination of the testimony of biblical authors to determine whether they were actually written by the evangelists and apostles For more on the Higher Critics and their impact in America, see Noll, *Between Faith and Criticism*, 11–31; Jerry Wayne Brown, *The Rise of Biblical Criticism in America, 1800–1870: The New England Scholars*. (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1969); and Horton Harris, *The Tübingen School: A Historical and Theological Investigation of the School of F. C. Baur* (Leicester: Apollos, 1991).

²¹ Jennifer Martin, “The Rise of Premillennial Dispensationalism as the Cornerstone of American Fundamentalism,” in *Biblical Interpretation: The Meanings of Scripture Past and Present*, ed. John M. Court (New York: T & T Clark, 2003), 205.

²² Jan Shipps, *Mormonism: The Story of a New Religious Tradition* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 76.

²³ The denominations competing for Smith’s attention were the Methodists, Baptists and Presbyterians. See “Joseph Smith—History,” www.lds.org/scriptures/pgp/js-h/1?lang=eng, accessed 24 November 2013.

²⁴ Joseph Smith, *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, ed. Dean C. Jessee (Salt Lake City: Deseret Books, 2002), 10; see also “Joseph Smith—History.”

²⁵ “Joseph Smith—History.”

²⁶ David Holland, *Sacred Borders: Continuing Revelation and Canonical Restraint in Early America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 145.

²⁷ “Joseph Smith—History.”

²⁸ For in-depth treatments of the early years of the LDS Church, see Shipps, *Mormonism*; Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984); and Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith, Rough Stone Rolling: A Cultural Biography of Mormonism’s Founder* (New York: Vintage Books, 2005).

²⁹ Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism*, 79–113.

³⁰ In the early stages of translation, Smith loaned his translation to his scribe, Martin Harris (1783–1875), who lost it (or it was stolen under his care). Though bereft at the loss of his work (known as the Lost 116 Pages), Smith determined that he would not attempt to retranslate the work for fear that someone would bring the lost text forward to compare the old and new translations and disprove him as a credible prophet. Though Smith emphasized the mutability of language, even in the recording of divine truths, he believed such a comparison would permanently damage his reputation and movement. Lucy Mack Smith, “History, 1844–1845,” Book 7, available at The Joseph Smith Papers, josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/lucy-mack-smith-history-1844-1845, accessed 26 January 2014. See also Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 67–72, 174.

³¹ The Book of Abraham was published in *Times and Seasons* 3 (1 March 1842), 703, after acquiring the papyrus in 1835. For more on the Book of Abraham, see Hugh Nibley, *The Message of Joseph Smith Papyri: An Egyptian Endowment* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Books, 1975); and Stanley B. Kimball, “New Light on Egyptiana: Mormon Mummies 1848–71,” *Dialogue* 16 (Winter 1983): 72–90.

³² Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 291.

³³ Publication of Smith’s revelations began in earnest in 1831, the first compilation called the *Book of Commandments*. See Grant Underwood, “1831: A Flood of Revelations,” in *Joseph Smith: The Prophet and Seer*, ed. Richard Nietzel Holzapfel and Kent P. Jackson (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2010), 79.

³⁴ Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, xxi, 112, 251.

³⁵ The Book of Mormon has gone through multiple iterations. The first appeared in 1830, with 20-plus official editions as of 2004 and the expectation of more to come. See Paul C. Gutjahr, *The Book of Mormon: A Biography* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2012).

³⁶ Milton V. Backman, Jr. and Richard O. Cowan, *Joseph Smith and the Doctrine and Covenants* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Books, 1992), 4.

³⁷ In 1890 LDS president Wilford Woodruff (1807–1898) made a statement that came to be known as the Manifesto, in which, on the surface, the president agreed to submit to laws banning polygamy. Still, the Manifesto is less an outright prohibition of polygamy than a calculated and very political statement of the current situation of Mormons. Certainly the fact that plural marriage continued after the Manifesto shows that its intent was not to ban polygamy but to deal with the social and political climate. In 1906 the Church did formally change its position on polygamy due in part to the seating of the first Mormon senator, Reed Smoot (1862–1941).

³⁸ Joseph Smith, Section 128, in *The Doctrine and Covenants*, at www.lds.org/scriptures/dc-testament/dc/128?lang=eng, accessed 24 November 2013.

³⁹ Smith, Section 128.

⁴⁰ Robert J. Matthews, “A Plainer Translation”: *Joseph Smith’s Translation of the Bible, A History and Commentary* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1975), 4.

⁴¹ Joseph Smith, Jr., *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, vol. 1 (Salt Lake City: Deseret Books, 1964), 132–33.

⁴² Matthews, “A Plainer Translation,” 4.

⁴³ Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 174.

⁴⁴ Joseph Smith and Paul Wellington, *Joseph Smith's "New Translation" of the Bible* (Independence, Mo.: Herald Publishing House, 1970).

⁴⁵ Smith, *Joseph Smith's "New Translation" of the Bible*, 27.

⁴⁶ Mary Baker Eddy, *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures* (Boston: First Church of Christ, Scientist, 1994), vii.

⁴⁷ When she wrote the first edition of *Science and Health* in 1875, Eddy was still Mary Glover. For the sake of consistency, I refer to her as "Eddy" throughout this article, though she did not go by that name until she married Asa Gilbert Eddy in 1877. She had been married twice before.

⁴⁸ Eddy, *Science and Health*, 129.

⁴⁹ Eddy herself alludes to the evolution of *Science and Health* as a powerful and sacred text in its own right, though earlier she acknowledged, "The Bible was my Textbook. It answered my questions as to how I was healed." Yet, she later described *Science and Health*, particularly the 1890 version, as "adapted to spiritualize thought and elucidate scientific healing and teaching," noting that it had been proven that "this volume is accomplishing the divine purpose to a remarkable degree. The wise Christian Scientist will commend students and patients to the teachings of this book, and the healing efficacy thereof." She said that students were prepared to "receive the infinite instructions afforded by the Bible." See Mary Baker Eddy, *Retrospection and Introspection* (Boston: Allison V. Stewart, 1909), 25, 83. Eddy embraced the success of *Science and Health* and saw it not simply as an accompaniment to the Bible, but as a spiritually effective text with the binding quality of scripture.

⁵⁰ Mesmerism often is linked to the principle of animal magnetism, whereby through hypnotism or the laying on of hands the practitioner was able to move fluids throughout the body, creating equilibrium in mind and body. Phineas P. Quimby (1802–1866), like Eddy, was a practitioner who believed that all disease resulted from dis-eased thinking. There was controversy surrounding how much Eddy adopted from Quimby, though she always maintained that her thoughts were original, albeit influenced by Quimby. Gillian Gill, *Mary Baker Eddy* (Reading, Mass.: Perseus Books, 1998), 115–21, 138–46.

⁵¹ Robert Peel, *Mary Baker Eddy: The Years of Discovery* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966), 197.

⁵² King James Bible version.

⁵³ As recorded in Edward H. Hammond, "Christian Science: What it Says and Does," *Christian Science Journal* 17, no. 7 (October 1899): 464. Originally, Eddy stated she could not remember to which passage she turned. Only later in life did she say it was from Matthew.

⁵⁴ H. A. L. Fisher, *Our New Religion* (New York: Jonathan Cape & Harrison Smith, 1930), 60; and Stephen J. Stein, "America's Bibles: Canon, Commentary, and Community," *Church History* 64, no. 2 (June 1995): 175.

⁵⁵ Mary Baker Eddy, *Historical Sketch of Christian Science Mind-healing* (Boston, self-published, 1888), 8.

⁵⁶ Eddy also used the term "science" to distance herself from "either occult or conventionally Christian forms of healing." Paul K. Conkin, *American Originals*:

Homemade Varieties of Christianity (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 243.

⁵⁷ Gill, *Mary Baker Eddy*, 227f.

⁵⁸ Peel, *The Years of Discovery*, 204.

⁵⁹ Mary Baker Eddy, *Mary Baker Eddy: Speaking for Herself* (Boston: The Writings of Mary Baker Eddy, 2002), 33.

⁶⁰ Ernest Sunderland Bates and John V. Dittmore, *Mary Baker Eddy: The Truth and the Tradition* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1932), 131–32.

⁶¹ Conkin, *American Originals*, 238. Eddy also described her notion of unified reality as ultimate “Mind, Spirit, Soul, Principle, Life, Truth, and Love.”

⁶² Eddy, *Science and Health*, 12.

⁶³ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The Harvard Divinity School Address,” in *The Spiritual Emerson: Essential Writings*, ed. David M. Robinson (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003), 63–82.

⁶⁴ “Key to the Scriptures” officially appeared in the sixth edition of *Science and Health*. See William Dana Orcutt, *Mary Baker Eddy and Her Books* (Boston: Christian Science Publishing Society, 1950), 25.

⁶⁵ Eddy, *Science and Health*, 89.

⁶⁶ Gill, *Mary Baker Eddy*, 367–68.

⁶⁷ Robert Peel, *Mary Baker Eddy: The Years of Trial* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971), 68, 98.

⁶⁸ Letter from Frederic Henry Hedge to Ralph Waldo Emerson, 14 June 1836 (MS 183/1), Letters from Frederic Henry Hedge to Ralph Waldo Emerson, Andover-Harvard Library, Harvard University.

⁶⁹ The four are Discourse, Practice, Community and Organization. See Bruce Lincoln, *Holy Terrors: Thinking about Religion after September 11* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 5–7.

⁷⁰ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Self Reliance,” in *The Spiritual Emerson: Essential Writings*, ed. David M. Robinson (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003), 88.

⁷¹ The relationship between Emerson and Thoreau would eventually sour as Thoreau sought to move into the world of prose, while Emerson thought him best suited as a poet. As well, they ultimately diverged in their view of nature. For Emerson, nature was a means to the soul (albeit a beloved means), whereas for Thoreau nature had a material and divine reality all its own, independent of the soul. For more on their relationship see Dieter Schulz, “‘Walking’ and the Method of Nature: Thoreau, Emerson, Gadamer,” in *Emerson and Thoreau or Steps Beyond Ourselves: Studies in Transcendentalism* (Heidelberg: Mattes Verlag, 2012), 129–52; Robert D. Richardson, Jr., *Henry Thoreau: A Life of the Mind* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986); and Lance Newman, “‘Patron of the World’: Henry Thoreau as Wordsworthian Poet,” in *Bloom’s Modern Critical Views: Henry David Thoreau*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2007).

⁷² Emerson, “Harvard Divinity School Address,” 82, 73.

⁷³ For more on Transcendentalists and the Bible, see Lydia Willsky, “Prophet among Rebels: Henry David Thoreau and the Creation of a Transcendentalist

Bible," *New England Quarterly* 86, n. 4 (December 2013): 625–54; and Holland, *Sacred Borders*.

⁷⁴ Much of Emerson's writing was elevated to the status of literary scripture, reflecting the eponymous phenomenon "literary scripturism," whereby alternative scriptures were treated, read and critiqued as alternative Bibles. Lawrence Buell, *New England Literary Culture: From Revolution through Renaissance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 167.

⁷⁵ Henry David Thoreau, "Walking," in Walden, *Civil Disobedience, and Other Writings: A Norton Critical Edition*, ed. William Rossi (New York: W.W. Norton, 2008), 277–78.

⁷⁶ Alan D. Hodder, *Thoreau's Ecstatic Witness* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2001), 211–13.

⁷⁷ Thoreau, *Walden*, 104.

⁷⁸ Henry David Thoreau, *The Writings of Henry David Thoreau: Walden*, ed. J. Lyndon Shanley (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004), 10.

⁷⁹ Emerson, "Self Reliance," in Robinson, *The Spiritual Emerson*, 86.

⁸⁰ Henry David Thoreau, *The Journal of Henry David Thoreau*, vol. 12, ed. Bradford Torrey and Francis H. Allen (Salt Lake City: Gibbs M. Smith, 1984), 389.

⁸¹ Stein, "America's Bibles," 171.

⁸² Thoreau often used the metaphor of the "mirroring pond" to describe his role as prophet and writer. His goal was not to assign people duties but to reflect nature back onto readers, enabling them to experience nature and reawaken their "primitive" natural and divine selves. See Richard J. Schneider, *Henry David Thoreau* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1987), 63.

⁸³ Thoreau, *Walden*, 90.

⁸⁴ The list of further works includes *Klaadn, A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers, Cape Cod*, and the essay "Walking," among others.

⁸⁵ Schneider, *Thoreau*, 20; Bradley P. Dean, "Introduction," in Henry David Thoreau, *Wild Fruits: Thoreau's Recovered Last Manuscript*, ed. Bradley P. Dean (New York: W. W. Norton 2000), x.

⁸⁶ Thoreau, *Wild Fruits*, 210.

⁸⁷ Thoreau, *Wild Fruits*, 215. Emphasis in the original.

⁸⁸ Dean, "Introduction," xvi.

⁸⁹ Mark A. Noll, *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 422–25.

⁹⁰ Abraham Lincoln, "Second Inaugural Address," 4 March 1865, available at www.bartleby.com/124/pres32.html.

⁹¹ Thoreau once wrote in a letter, "If any soul look abroad even today, it will not find any word which does it more justice than the New Testament." Henry David Thoreau, *The Correspondence of Henry David Thoreau*, ed. Walter Harding and Carl Bode (New York: New York University Press, 1974), 52.



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