

FROM LOWER CRITICISM TO HIGHER CRITICISM:  
JOSEPH PRIESTLEY AND THE USE OF CONJECTURAL  
EMENDATION<sup>1</sup>

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Meanwhile the industry of the more unprejudiced scholars was applied the more zealously to the increase and sifting of the critical apparatus. It was no disadvantage whatever that the prevailing prejudice [in the 17<sup>th</sup>/18<sup>th</sup> centuries] hindered the more frequent transformations of the text, for they were yet always too hasty; it was thus possible to collect and store up, with more time and care, the treasures with which a freer century, in fresh power, might begin a more enduring work... Here again it was the English who led the way, to the horror of all who clung to custom, but unfortunately too soon and ungraciously forgotten by those who came after them. Several even then hit upon the idea of interrogating the oldest witnesses alone, paying no attention to others. Some, however, continued their reseaches and the announcement of their results, and found, instead of sober judgement and due acknowledgment, only clamour and suspicion.

Eduard Wilhelm Eugen Reuss, *History of the Sacred Scriptures of the New Testament*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed., 1884, pp.423-424; 426.

Everything which I deem to be a corruption of Christianity has been a departure from the original scheme, or an innovation.... And if I have succeeded in this investigation, this historical method will be found to be one of the most satisfactory modes of argumentation in order to prove that what I object to is really a corruption of genuine Christianity and no part of the original scheme.

Joseph Priestley, *An History of the Corruptions of Christianity*, 2 vols. 1782, xiv.

**H**enning Graf Reventlow, in his close study of the impact of biblical criticism in the early modern period, has rightly turned our attention away from nineteenth-century Germany to the eighteenth century.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, he sees Erasmus as perhaps the real progenitor of what would become the

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<sup>1</sup> This essay was a lecture delivered at the Annual Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature before the History of Exegesis Section, San Francisco, California, 22 November 1992.

thoroughly modern approach to reading the Bible.<sup>3</sup> On both these points, I think he is correct. One of his themes is that eighteenth-century English Deism—in some important respects affected by Erasmian lower criticism—did much to awaken nineteenth-century Germans from their dogmatic slumber:

The direct influences of English Deism on the German Enlightenment... are great, especially since the German Enlightenment differed from that in France by sharing the same basically apologetic position as English Deism.... [W]e cannot overestimate the influence exercised by Deistic thought, and by the principles of the Humanist world-view which the Deists made the criterion of their biblical criticism, on the historical-critical exegesis of the nineteenth century.<sup>4</sup>

My interest, however, has been to highlight the unique contribution of yet another dissenting English community—also influenced by Erasmian text criticism—namely, the eighteenth-century antitrinitarian pioneers of Biblical criticism, of which the scientist-historian, Joseph Priestley, following the career of Isaac Newton, was perhaps the most important example.

Not only was it the Deists who influenced the Germans, but the more moderate English Unitarians, who were often more serious Biblical critics. Consequently, not only did the Unitarians pave the way for the Germans in many respects, they were also the most responsive when the nineteenth-century flow of influence changed direction from Germany back to Britain. Dodd rightly assessed this:

[A]s James Martineau noted, the Unitarians were the only Dissenters who could produce a “class of fearless investigators and earnest reformers in Morals and Religion.” That the first work on Strauss in England was connected with Unitarians and with those in touch with a Unitarian tradition of untrammelled inquiry bears witness to the intellectual vigor of the sect.<sup>5</sup>

In his *Harvard Theological Review* essay of 1988, Patrick Lambe brought to our attention the impact of the popular press on the seventeenth-century intellectual community in Europe by communicating the data of biblical criticism to the reading public.

<sup>2</sup> H.G. Reventlow, *The Authority of the Bible and the Rise of the Modern World* (Philadelphia, 1985).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 39-48.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 412.

<sup>5</sup> V. A. Dodd, “Strauss's English Propagandists and the Politics of Unitarianism 1841-1845,” *Church History* 50/1981, 415-435.

One of the results was the emergence of the popular sceptic alongside the serious critic.

This popular press had much to do with the success of the Deists in communicating their profound scepticism about revealed religion to the learned classes as well as to the masses. Priestley, though an Antitrinitarian, does *not* belong to this sceptical class. He was a most devout believer in revealed religion. In his memoirs he confessed:

But I hope that my always avowing myself a Christian, and holding myself ready on all occasions to defend the genuine principles of it, was not without its use. Having conversed so much with unbelievers, at home and abroad, I thought I should be able to combat their prejudices with some advantage, and with this view I wrote, while I was with Lord Shelburne, the first part of my "Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever," proof of the doctrines of a God and a providence, and to this I have added during my residence at Birmingham, a second part, in defense of the evidences of Christianity.... I can truly say, that the greatest satisfaction I receive from the success of my philosophical pursuits, arises from the weight it may give to my attempts to defend Christianity, and to free it from those corruptions which prevent its reception with philosophical and thinking persons...<sup>6</sup>

His view of the Christian faith was well summed up by his most recent biographer:

Priestley wished to make it clear that it was only simple Christianity he was defending, for the corruptions were hindrances. The principal corruptions were "a trinity of persons in the godhead, original sin, arbitrary predestination, atonement for the sins of men by the death of Christ, and (which has perhaps been as great a cause of infidelity as any other) the doctrine of the plenary inspiration of the scriptures." What therefore did Priestley suppose Christian faith to be? His answer is, "a belief of all the great historical facts recorded in the Old and New Testament, in which we are informed of the creation and government of the world, the history of the discourses, miracles, death and resurrection of Christ, and his assurance of the resurrection of all the dead to a future life of retribution; and this is the doctrine that is of the most consequence, to enforce the good conduct of men."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> J.T. Rutt (ed.), *The Theological and Miscellaneous Works of Joseph Priestley*, Vol. I (1817), 199-200.

<sup>7</sup> Ann Holt, *A Life of Joseph Priestley* (London, 1931), p. 140. These points are principally drawn from Priestley's *Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever, containing an Examination of the principal Objections to the Doctrine of Natural Religion, and especially those contained in the writings of Mr. Hume*. Also, *A State of the Evidence*

As a good scientist, Priestley embodied a radical historical consciousness which pushed him to place Christianity on the firmest historical ground possible (e.g., his *Institutes of Natural and Revealed Religion*, first published in 1772, and his *Discourses Relating to Evidences of Revealed Religion* in 1796).<sup>8</sup> It is, therefore, his contribution as a committed believer to the development of an early quest for the *historical* Jesus that I treat in this study.

**I**t is recorded that on a certain day the orthodox bishop, Samuel Horsley, met the freethinker physician, Monsey, in the park: “These are dreadful times!” commented the bishop. “Not only do Deists abound, but, would you think it Doctor—some people deny that there is a *God!*” “I can tell you,” replied the Doctor, “what is equally strange—some people believe that there are *three.*”<sup>9</sup> Such was the common theological discourse in Priestley’s age.

Priestley was not, however, born into the Unitarian tradition. While his parents were non-conformists, they held to typical eighteenth-century, orthodox English Presbyterianism. Nevertheless, they shared in common with other dissenting religious bodies the ignominy of abiding under the marginalizing *Test Act*, passed in 1673 and not repealed until 1828. Like the *Act of*

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*of Revealed Religion, with animadversions on the two last chapters of the first volume of Mr. Gibbon’s History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire; and An Answer to the Letters of Mr. William Hammon* (2 vols., 1780).

<sup>8</sup> I find it therefore quizzical that Ann Holt should suggest that Priestley in his *History of the Corruptions of Christianity* (1782), “scandalizes the modern historian, for he had made up his mind already as to what were the corruptions. He did not read his authorities and then come to conclusions; he first of all arrived at his conclusions and then read his authorities for support” (Holt 133-134). But she herself acknowledged that Priestley originally held to the virgin birth and that only after “collecting material for the *Early Opinions* [1786] that he came to disbelieve the doctrine of the miraculous conception” (Holt, 138). So what merits the statement: “Had he found the evidence he collected contrary to his belief in the humanity of Christ, he would have rejected it as he had his faith in orthodoxy” (Holt, 138). Her criticism is damning beyond repair for Priestley’s reputation. She never seems to have arrived at the question as to why and how he *did* arrive at his opinions, particularly when they entailed his altering his opinion on something as significant as the virgin birth. This would seem to suggest that perhaps *her* mind was made up beforehand. As a scientist Priestley understood the principle of axioms. Once one has discovered an axiom one no longer seeks to disprove it but to draw as many conclusions from it as the evidence will suggest. How he arrived at his axiomatic certainty on various points is what should be treated. This I will attempt to do in what follows, particularly as it concerns the virgin birth.

<sup>9</sup> Holt, *Life*, 136. On Horsley, one of Priestley’s many opponents, see F.C. Mather, *High Church Prophet: Bishop Samuel Horsley (1733-1806) and the Caroline Tradition in the Later Georgian Church* (1992).

*Uniformity* (1559) which demanded whole-hearted and exclusive subscription to the prayer-book in public worship, the *Test Act* was originally intended to exclude Roman Catholics from the public institutions of the state, church, university and government. It, nevertheless, had its effect on those Protestants who were non-conformists.

Priestly was the eldest of six children. His father was a tradesman working in cloth and employed a few others in producing the popular homespun. Priestley learned to repeat the Westminster Catechism by the age of four, and because he was a sickly child he soon learned the friendship of books. This suited his parents who aspired to enlist their eldest son in the ministry.

As non-conformists, excluded from both Oxford and Cambridge, they sent young Joseph off to the new dissenting academy at Daventry, Northamptonshire.<sup>10</sup> To prepare himself beforehand young Priestley sat at the feet of a local dissenting minister who instructed him in Hebrew, Chaldee, Syriac and Arabic. Having early picked up the habit of studying on his own, he found the Academy's curriculum insufficient for his purposes and so supplemented it with his own independent readings in history, philosophy, science, as well as producing daily some ten folio pages of Greek translation.

All of these ingredients put him at a disadvantage once he entered the pastorate in 1755. His congregation soon detected that they had a "Free-Thinker" on their hands. Priestley would soon find the orthodox view of the Atonement unsatisfying and some of Paul's arguments illogical. Because of conversations he had with John Walker (1719-1805), and other Baxterians, by the age of eighteen he was no longer a Calvinist, but an Arminian. When he attempted to gain membership in his home church he was rejected because he confessed feeling no guilt for Adam's sin.

While at the academy he was taught by Samuel Clarke (1727-1769). It was under his tutelage that Priestley then moved from Arminianism to Arianism.

Because of a speech defect and his unabashed Arianism he left his pastorate in 1761. In that year he became tutor of languages at the then newly founded dissenting Academy at

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<sup>10</sup> On the significance and place of this academy, and others amongst the non-conformists, see McLachlan's *English Education Under the Test Acts: Being the History of the Non-Conformist Academies 1662-1820* (1931), and, earlier and briefer, I. Parker, *Dissenting Academies in England: Their Rise and Progress and their place among the Educational Systems of the Country* (1914).

Warrington. In 1767, he then took another ministerial post at Mill Hill Chapel in Leeds and it was here that Priestley's Christological views finally came to rest. A thorough reading of Nathaniel Lardner's *Letter on the Logos* (1759, but written thirty years earlier), an anti-Arian treatise written from a Socinian perspective, finally provided Priestley with what would be the bedrock of his theology—Unitarianism.

What allowed Priestley to so freely evolve to his final position was not just the obviously keen intellect which he possessed. This was combined with the circumstances involved in growing up in a dissenting, non-conformist environment. Furthermore, he was a student of Locke and the Deist, Anthony Collins. One provided him with the new hermeneutic of reasonableness and the other provided him with, among other things, evidence and arguments that exposed the traditionally received view of verbal inspiration to the light of an unrestrained examination of the phenomena of the Biblical documents themselves.

All of this impelled Priestley to the same project that animated many of the Christian humanists during the Renaissance and the Newtonians during the English Enlightenment. Erasmus had taught that Christianity had to be reinvented (or, *recovered* might be the better word) calling on the early fathers and ancient classical wisdom for clues as to how this should be done. A restorationist optimism for recapturing a *primitive, simple* and *tolerant* Christianity provided a high motivation, both in the sixteenth century as well as among many of the non-conformists of the eighteenth century.<sup>11</sup> As Erasmus was the most gifted of the former age, Priestley may well have been of the latter.

Not everyone appreciated Priestley's Christianity because it came with no creed and a radical political vision. If Anglicanism represented a lingering corruption of Christianity—as Priestley had proved to his own satisfaction in his *magnum opus: A History of the Corruptions of Christianity* (1782)—the State that sponsored this was equally to blame. The social democratic impulse of the French Revolution found a warm advocate in Priestley. It was this dimension of Priestley's theology that most insulted Edmund Burke. In Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, he

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<sup>11</sup> On Erasmus's humanistic primitivism see P. Joachimsen, "Humanism and the Development of the German Mind," in G. Strauss, *Pre-Reformation Germany* (New York, 1972); F. H. Littel, *The Origins of Sectarian Protestantism* (1964), and C. M. N. Eire, *War Against the Idols: The Reformation of Worship from Erasmus to Calvin* (1986).

referred to Priestley's threat to "King and Church," grouping him with the French Republicans, who had, in fact, conferred on Priestley French Citizenship in 1792. Burke could not tolerate the fact that Priestley had boasted himself "a Citizen of that Republic of Robbers and assassins" and characterized him in the following terms:

A man amongst them [Priestley] of great authority, and certainly of great talents, speaking of a supposed alliance between church and state says, "perhaps *we must wait for the fall of the civil powers* before this most unnatural alliance be broken. Calamitous no doubt will that time be. But what convulsion in the political world ought to be a subject of lamentation, if it be attended with so desirable an effect?" You see with what a steady eye these gentlemen are prepared to view the greatest calamities which can befall their country!<sup>12</sup>

It was Burke's rhetoric combined with a natural animosity that drove a drunken mob to the Priestley home in the early hours of 15 July, 1791. The Priestleys having been forewarned were able to leave just hours before. Nearby

dimly across that distance [Priestley] could hear the roar of wild voices and the rude shattering blows that a fierce mob were showering upon the walls and crash of falling masonry. He knew that in those moments, the treasures that he had gathered around him in all those years, including those unique scientific instruments that had made his name a household word throughout the world, were all at the mercy of a gang of ruffians and were being destroyed beyond possible recovery. And what he valued much more than his scientific instruments — his manuscript writing on religion and in particular a series of notes on the whole of the New Testament, which in five days time would have been completed and ready for the press, were left to the tender mercies of this fanatical riotery.<sup>13</sup>

A contemporary who stood at Priestley's side while this took place related that he showed no sign of anger and "in this hour of anguish displayed a solemnity of demeanour that she had never seen in him before."

While Priestley is sometimes regarded as someone who attacked the very heart of Christianity, this could not be further from the truth. He saw himself preeminently in the role of an

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<sup>12</sup> *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke*, Vol. 8 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), p. 108.

<sup>13</sup> Bernard Allen, "Priestley and the Birmingham Riots," *Transactions of the Unitarian Historical Society*. 5/1932, pp.113-132.

apologete of *authentic* Christianity.<sup>14</sup> He was convinced that if a pre-Nicene Christianity—a Christianity with late christological corruptions peeled away—could be set forth, then those *real* enemies of the faith—the Deists, and sceptics such as Paine and Gibbon—could be invited to rethink the claims of revealed religion.

What provided him with the certainty that Catholic orthodoxy—Eastern, Western and Protestant—was a vast corruption of primitive Christianity were the dual influences of Lockean and Newtonian canons of reasonableness and the accompanying Newtonian Biblical criticism of the received texts of scripture. Newton had boldly admitted that “*homoousion* is unintelligible... and what cannot be understood is no object of belief.”<sup>15</sup> Newton had discovered evidence, by means of Erasmus’s *Annotationes*, which suggested that such doctrines as the Trinity were late corruptions of Christianity and could be detected by means of textual criticism. Priestley was equally certain that other corruptions could be detected even without the hard textual data of variants.

In the very first volume of the journal founded by Priestley, *The Theological Repository*, we find a very early advocacy of the bold practice of conjectural emendation:

If, then, by only changing the situation of a sentence, or clause of a sentence, in a passage of the holy writers, which appears at present confused and obscure, we can render it regular and easy, and produce a new force and beauty in the sentiments; certainly, it will be no presumption to conclude that this was the original reading, though all the MSS and versions may exhibit the present reading.<sup>16</sup>

In this same article there was an allusion to a significant precedent for the practice of such conjecture on the text of the New Testament as found in a work produced by an important English printer, William Bowyer, *Critical Conjectures and Observations on the New Testament* (London, 1763), which was accompanied by his own recension of the Greek NT. This was greatly expanded by the fourth and definitive edition in 1812 (second ed., 1772, third ed., 1782) which was, however, like the third edition, edited not by Bowyer, who died in 1777, but by John Nichols, a

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<sup>14</sup>Perhaps his most evident work in this apologetic mode against such sceptics as Gibbon was Priestley’s *Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever* (1782).

<sup>15</sup>H. McLachlan, *Sir Isaac Newton’s Theological Manuscripts* (Liverpool, 1950), p. 17.

<sup>16</sup>*The Theological Repository*, Vol. 1 (1769), p. 50.



close associate of Bowyer's. Here Bowyer collected as many important conjectures as he could locate from learned commentators on the Greek NT (Barrington, Landaff, Michaelis, Weston, Wettstein).

Bowyer gave a brief justification for considering conjectures in the preface to his second edition. He begins by noting that corruptions have made their way into the text and cites Wettstein's remarks regarding the intrusion of I Tim. 3:16 and the *comma Johanneum*.<sup>17</sup> These and most interpolations he believed to have originated as marginal glosses. He then poses the question:

But what shall we do for want of older MSS. which might give us the true readings before corruptions crept in? Shall we sometimes trust to versions which are older than any MSS. now remaining? Too precarious, I fear...<sup>18</sup>

The Italic version (*vetus Latina*) was "no sooner...published than Marcion, the heretic, and his followers seized it, and converted it to their own purposes."<sup>19</sup> And the oldest Greek MS in his day, Alexandrinus, was felt by Wettstein to have been "made to conform to the Vulgar Latin," which leads Bowyer to suggest that "I do not know but that a critical sagacity must be our best guide in publishing a Greek Testament at last..."<sup>20</sup>

Although he argues that never should such conjectures be used to replace a reading without further MS evidence of some kind, yet

there are several [pure conjectures] which are highly probable, though the authority for them is lost.... Many of them are taken notice of in the course of this work; but when once pointed out, are left to the reader's disposal, to be rejected or adopted as he thinks fit.<sup>21</sup>

Bowyer's cautious approach was well thought out in light of the criticism he knew he might receive. In a review of his third edition as it was found in the *Monthly Review* of 1782 Bowyer was lectured to posthumously in the following tone:

We observed in the beginning of this article, that conjectural criticism is too hazardous to be ventured on without great caution, and a very distinguished share of natural acuteness,

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<sup>17</sup> Bowyer, *Conjectures*, p. 6.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 12, 13.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

and acquired knowledge. Infidels will avail themselves of this licence when rashly exercised by critics and commentators on the sacred Scriptures; and will question the whole from the freedom taken with the part.... When a person, without such authorities, alters the sacred text at pleasure, to serve a system, or to get rid of a difficulty, he betrays an irreverence for the Divine oracles; and, instead of removing, only increases the cavils of infidelity, and gives some colour to the cautionary pleas of Popery.<sup>22</sup>

When the reviewer mentioned the “service to a system” that such a practice would legitimize, he had as the referent Unitarianism. Earlier he had alluded to “the anti-Trinitarians... confidently availing themselves of the support of ...[a] very antient copy of the Greek Testament.”<sup>23</sup> It was this method of reconstructing a more primitive expression of the original Christian message by way of conjecture that led Priestley to yet one final theological development in his own thought.

While he had moved some distance from the Westminster Catechism that he had memorised and recited as a child, he nevertheless retained a belief in the miracles of the NT, including the virgin birth. After taking up the subject in earnest while compiling early patristic opinion on the “miraculous conception” of Jesus for his journal the *Theological Repository*, Priestley abandoned this doctrine as well, both because it was unreasonable and because of evidence of its emergence as a late tradition. He records how this came about in his *An History of Early Opinions Concerning Jesus Christ, Compiled From Original Writers*, 3 Vols. (1786):

There is one particular subject on which I have much enlarged in this treatise, and about which I had no intention to write at all, when I began to collect materials for it. It is the *miraculous conception* of Jesus, concerning which I had not at that time entertained any doubt; though I well knew that several very eminent and learned christians, of ancient and modern times, had disbelieved it. The case was that, in perusing the early christian writers, with a view to collect all *opinions concerning Christ*, I found so much on this subject, that I could not help giving particular attention to it; and it being impossible not to be struck with the absurdity of their *reasoning* about it, I was by degrees led to think whether any thing better could be said

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<sup>22</sup> *Monthly Review* (1782), p. 123.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 121.

in proof of the *fact*; and at length my collections and speculations, grew to the size that is now before the reader.<sup>24</sup>

The *comma Johanneum* served as a model for how this theologically determinative dogmatic material could have been interpolated into the Gospel narratives:

The famous verse, I John, v. 7, concerning the three that bear record in heaven, has been sufficiently proved to have come into the epistle in this unauthorised manner; and had it been done in an early period, there would have appeared no more reason to have suspected the genuineness of it, than there now does that of the introductions to the gospels of Matthew and Luke.<sup>25</sup>

Furthermore, there was an important apologetic advantage to be gained by dispensing with this corruption of the virgin birth because the Jews make it a serious objection to the messiahship of Jesus, that according to the genealogies of Matthew and Luke, he does not appear to have been descended from David.<sup>26</sup>

The issue of the virgin birth had been raised in a serious manner by John Williams in his *A Free Enquiry into the Authenticity of the First and Second Chapters of St. Matthew's Gospel* (London, 1771). The work was originally published anonymously, but by the second edition in 1789, now "corrected, improved, and much enlarged," Williams was the acknowledged author.

Williams's argument was that Matthew wrote his original edition in Hebrew (Syrio-chaldaic) and that this edition did not contain the genealogy found in the later Greek edition. Hence, the only explicit teaching of the virgin birth was a later addition. To call the section into question was not motivated by a desire to undermine the dogma of the virgin birth. Rather

[T]he chief reason why I contend for an original Syro-chaldaic Gospel by St. Matthew is that unbelievers object to the contents of the first and second chapters of that gospel in our present Greek copies; and it must be owned, that they are the most difficult and discordant parts in all the New Testament.<sup>27</sup>

Moreover,

The author of this publication hath only to add, that he is a Christian upon principle; that he believes in a divine revelation;

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<sup>24</sup> Priestley, *History*, Vol 1, pp, XVII-XVIII,

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 3, p. 105.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 115.

<sup>27</sup> Williams, *Free Enquiry*, pp. 42-43.

and that his sole design in writing, is to clear the sacred volume from inconsistencies and difficulties.<sup>28</sup>

Hence, Williams is no sceptic, but like Newton and Priestley, a believer, motivated by an apologetic concern.

That such a large block of material made its way into the gospel account is not so strange an occurrence. The discipline of lower criticism has firmly established that

there are several additions and interpolations in the sacred volume, which, though they do not weaken the foundation of any doctrine, yet very often disturb the sense. They who are acquainted with Christian antiquity well know that there are several texts, in the present copies of both the Old and New Testament, the authenticity of which cannot stand an impartial enquiry.... It is much lamented, that the printers of these sacred books have, of late years, omitted to distinguish between doubtful texts, and those which were never questioned.<sup>29</sup>

Williams argues that

I John v. 7 is evidently a late interpolation; and when we recollect the controversy about the Trinity, which for so many years destroyed the peace of the church, it cannot be difficult to account for its insertion.<sup>30</sup>

It was Emlyn and Isaac Newton who alerted him to this and "These authors, it is presumed, will convince every impartial enquirer, that the passage is not a genuine part of scripture."<sup>31</sup>

Surprisingly, Williams does not want to draw any theological conclusions based on the assumption of the spuriousness of the material containing the account of the virgin birth. Instead he resorts to Bentley's ideology of harmless engagement, affirming instead

that no one doctrine, or fact in Christianity will be affected by the omission of the first and second chapters of St. Matthew; for as to the genealogy, birth, &c. of Christ, we have, in St. Luke's Gospel, a full and consistent account of them: whereas

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 44.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., pp. 7, 8.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 156.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 14.

these chapters contain scarcely any thing but what is attended with almost inexplicable difficulties.<sup>32</sup>

Priestley, of course, by his very temperment, could never be governed by such subtlety. Too much was at stake.

He approached the subject in his journal the *Theological Repository*, founded by him in 1769 as a popular forum for airing theological debate and issues of Biblical criticism as they touched on dogma. Here one finds several essays suggesting conjectural emendation for various passages of both Testaments, thus placing this journal well ahead of all its contemporaries. In volume four of this series (in 1784), under the pseudonym *Ebionita*, Priestley first raised the issue of the spuriousness of Matthew's account of the virgin birth, in an article titled: "Observations on the Miraculous Conception"—two years before he addressed it in his *History of the Early Opinions Concerning Jesus Christ*.<sup>33</sup> In volume five a *Nazaraeus* attempted a rebuttal of Priestley's arguments, but most replies to the original essay expressed a conviction affirming the unshakable nature of the evidence and the arguments against the genuineness of the first chapter of Matthew, and thus the illegitimacy of the dogma of the virgin birth. So far as I can tell this is the first modern major piece of historical research to explicitly denounce the dogma of the virgin birth based on the argument that it had been interpolated into the text by a later hand than that of the author.

Within the pages of his major treatise *History of the Early Opinions* he makes clear that his desire is to make Christ's messiahship evident to the Jews by dispensing with this bit of fable:

The Jews make it a serious objection to the messiahship of Jesus, that, according to the genealogies of Matthew and Luke, he does not appear to have been descended from David, or even Judah; since it is only the genealogy of Joseph, his reputed father, that is given, and not his own, or his mother's.<sup>34</sup>

He then goes on to quote various Rabbis who, indeed, make just this point.

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<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 163. Whether Williams believed what he was saying, or simply did not want to risk drawing the conclusions that both orthodox and non-orthodox alike would naturally be forced to come to, can only be guessed at.

<sup>33</sup> Birmingham, 4 Vols., 1786.

<sup>34</sup> *Early Opinions*, Vol. 3, p. 115.

That the apologetic concern underlay Priestley's goal to allow a primitive, non-dogmatic Christ (and yet miraculous) to emerge from the pages of the New Testament is never more clearly evident than when we see him actually engage the sceptics of his age. In his *Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever*, Part Two (Birmingham, 1787) he confronts the unbelievers with the same cool rigours with which he dismantles orthodox accretions. To Gibbon and others he puts his case in these terms:

That the history of Christ and the apostles could not have established itself without the most rigid enquiry into its truth, is evident from the persecution of christians, which began immediately after its first promulgation, and in Jerusalem itself, the very scene of the transactions. In these circumstances men had every motive, and every opportunity, for enquiring whether they sacrificed their reputation, their properties, and their lives, for an idle tale, or for a truth of the greatest certainty and importance. All these things being considered, it appears to me that no facts in the whole compass of history, are so well authenticated as those of the miracles, the death, and the resurrection of Christ, and also what is related of the apostles in the book of Acts.<sup>35</sup>

It was Priestley's landmark criticism of the virgin birth, however, based both on his perception of its irrationality as well as on the text-critical appeal to it as a corruption of original Christianity, which furthered the project begun by Newton to strip Christianity of its many late corruptions in order to give it a fresh hearing in a new scientific age. Cragg has noted of the relationship between Priestley and Newton:

He [Priestley] had taken Newtonian physics as his point of departure, and essentially his doctrine of materialism was merely a demand for a theory of human nature in conformity with the principles of science.<sup>36</sup>

Newton's text-critical work on the New Testament, however, was equally influential on Priestley's development of an historical method.

Another Unitarian who took Priestley's project further yet in the early nineteenth century, signalling the onset of a full-scale crisis for Victorian religion, was Charles C. Hennell. Though Hennel's contribution to the advancement of modern Biblical

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<sup>35</sup> *Letters*, p. 62.

<sup>36</sup> G.R. Cragg, *Reason and Authority in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964), p. 233.

criticism has been little noted, Bernard Reardon in his accomplished treatment of nineteenth century religion in Britain has called it “a landmark in the history of biblical study in this country.”<sup>37</sup>

This is because Hennell was perhaps the first in Britain to advocate a thorough-going, naturalistic, or *higher* critical approach to understanding the Bible—independent of German influences—a method directly inspired by Priestley’s work on the New Testament, particularly Priestley’s dismissal of the virgin birth account as spurious. Hennell confessed in the first edition of his *An Enquiry Concerning the Origin of Christianity* (1838) that

The same method of free investigation which led Priestley... to throw doubt upon the truth of the opening chapters of Matthew and Luke, may allow other enquirers to make further excisions from the Gospel history.<sup>38</sup>

And further excisions he did make, resulting in a non-miraculous, naturalistic Christianity. While his arguments did not depend by this stage of development on hard textual evidence of the lower criticism, a sensitivity to earlier forms as opposed to later forms of NT accounts were certainly a significant part of Hennell’s over all historical method and contributed to his arguments for a non-miraculous Christianity. Regarding the resurrection while pointing out the many contradictions involved in the various accounts he did not fail to note that

It is remarkable that, if these verses [in Mark’s longer account of the resurrection] be omitted, as we have seen was generally done in the early copies, *Mark, the follower of Peter, relates neither the miraculous birth, the resurrection, nor the ascension of Christ.*<sup>39</sup>

Appearing only six years after Strauss’s *Das Leben Jesu* (2 vols. 1835), Hennell’s work was produced independently of German influences and as such represents a distinctly English advancement of the same critical impulse but with explicit and perhaps exclusive links with the native English developments in this field going back to Priestley himself.

Hennell was a Unitarian and part of a unique community that included his sister, Sara Hennell, author of *Christianity and*

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<sup>37</sup> Bernard Reardon, *From Coleridge to Gore: A Century of Religious Thought in Britain* (1971), p. 254.

<sup>38</sup> See Hennell, *Enquiry*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (1841), iii.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 247.

*Infidelity* (1857), and *Essay on the Sceptical Tendency of Butler's Analogy* (1859), Charles Bray, a former Methodist, and his wife, Charles and Sara's sister, Caroline, and George Eliot. It would be Eliot who would translate Strauss's monumental work into English from the fourth German edition (1840), to which Strauss himself contributed a Latin preface (3 vols., 1846).

This witnesses to the fact that in the first half of nineteenth-century Britain, nearly alone, Unitarian scholars stood apace with the advance of German higher criticism. Valerie Dodd produced a commendable treatment of this period in her "Strauss's English Propagandists and the Politics of Unitarianism, 1841-1845."<sup>40</sup> Here she points out that yet another English edition of Strauss was produced at this time. This, however, was a cheaper edition produced by "atheistic pamphleteers who, in the 1830s and 1840s, were eager to argue the falsity of the biblical narrative" for purposes of political intent to gain tolerance for religious dissidents.<sup>41</sup> This parallels one of the purposes behind the eighteenth century Antitrinitarian paraphrases.

Dodd, nevertheless, skews things a bit when she generalizes that

Although German higher criticism did not "merely attack the Scriptures" but rather "studied them in a new spirit," it was to be censured, feared, ignored, or misunderstood in the early decades of the nineteenth century in England.<sup>42</sup>

If she had added "and anticipated by English Unitarians" she would have hit her mark in a more comprehensive and informative way.<sup>43</sup> She is correct when she says "In the early nineteenth century their [Unitarians'] religious views, unlike those of any of the other English sects, possessed affinities with the German higher criticism" but nowhere in her otherwise most helpful and insightful essay does she mention that it was specifically Priestley's legacy that formed the very seedbed from which this German/English collusion would emerge in the nineteenth century.

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<sup>40</sup> *Church History* (50/1981), pp. 415-435.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 425.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 415.

<sup>43</sup> She further clouds things a bit when she adds "Just as the whole topic of higher criticism was fading in Germany, it started to surface in England" (p. 416). What she means is among those of the established church. Unitarians had led the field since the days of Priestley.



I believe this to be one result of over periodization in historical writing. To one having devoted a good deal of attention to Priestley and the eighteenth-century developments, Priestley's shadow looms large over the players on the nineteenth-century stage; to one looking only at nineteenth-century developments on their own, he may well not appear at all (unless one took very careful notice of Hennell's note of indebtedness to this theologian-scientist in the preface to Hennell's ground-breaking work).

Like Priestley, Hennell dispensed with *the* barrier to genuine historical inquiry: the dogma of verbal inspiration:

The doctrine of the divine inspiration, or of the unquestionable veracity, of the Gospel writers, has hitherto hindered the full application of this free method of investigation to the New Testament; on the part of believers in Christianity; and unbelievers seem generally to have been more intent upon raising objections and cavils to the narratives as they stand, than in searching out the real truth. Hence it has frequently been observed, that no clear and intelligible account has been given of the life of Jesus Christ on simply natural grounds; whence it has been argued, that no alternative remains but to regard him as the miraculous endowed personage presented to us in the four Gospels.<sup>44</sup>

Hannell, under the direct inspiration of Priestley's conjectural dismissal of the virgin birth (which in turn had been given its rationale based on the phenomenon of the *comma Johanneum* and secondarily by other such variants such as I Tim. 3:16),<sup>45</sup> Hennell took Priestley's direction toward naturalism further than Priestley himself felt it necessary to do. In so doing Hennell properly introduced the *higher* critical method to England as a direct development of the *lower* criticism. In his words:

The reasons given by those eminent critics [Priestley and Belsham] for proceeding so far may appear more valid than any which can be urged for stopping where they did. The right of private judgment in the separation of truth from fiction being once accorded, the precise limits which ought to be assigned to

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<sup>44</sup> Hennel, *Enquiry*, p. v.

<sup>45</sup> I have not, up to this point, drawn attention to Priestley's judgement on I Tim. 3:16. In his *Notes on all the Books of Scripture for the Use of the Pulpit and Private Families* (4 vols., 1804), vol. iv, p. 178, we read: "According to the pointing of some MSS. it may be rendered, *The mystery of godliness is the pillar and foundation of the faith, and without doubt it is great, &c.* There is little doubt but that the reading which our english [sic] translators followed, is a corrupt one; and that instead of the word God, the apostle wrote what we render *who*, saying he who was manifested in the flesh, that is Jesus Christ."

the credible portion of the miraculous narratives are far from being obvious...<sup>46</sup>

Hence, Hennell concluded his account of the *Origin of Christianity* in terms not unlike those of Strauss:

The miraculous birth, works, resurrection, and ascension of Christ, being thus successively surrendered, to be classed amongst the fables of an obscure age, what remains of Christianity? and what is there in the life and doctrine of Jesus that they should still claim the attention and respect of mankind in remote ages? This: Christianity forms a striking passage in the history of human nature, and appears as one of the most prominent of the means employed in its improvement. It no longer boasts of a special divine origin, but shares in that which the Theist attributes to the world and the whole order of its events.<sup>47</sup>

And as Dodd has pointed out, the only difference between Strauss and Hennell is that Strauss's political vision was one very much attached to the status quo as a means for bringing in a new enlightened and tolerant age; whereas Hennell and those Unitarians in his community, including George Eliot, made their appeal for political change to enhance the lot of the English working class and for the tolerance of Anti-trinitarians in particular.

Eliot's role in providing a channel by which Strauss's *Das Leben Jesu* could be Englished, and Hennell's *Inquiry* could be Germanized, with a commending preface by Strauss himself, is a well established point. That she owed her "liberation" from evangelicalism to Hennell's *Inquiry*, which in turn was the fruit of Priestley's textual and historical method, has not received sufficient treatment. Viewed as a continuation of Priestley's eighteenth-century project, the dawning of *higher* criticism in England can surely be understood as the offspring of Priestley's *lower* criticism.

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<sup>46</sup> Hennell, *Enquiry*, p. iii.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 481.