Edwards the Exegete

Biblical Interpretation and Anglo-Protestant Culture on the Edge of the Enlightenment

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I

The Biblical World
of Jonathan Edwards

"This book of the law shall not depart out of thy mouth; but thou shalt meditate therein day and night, that thou mayest observe to do according to all that is written therein; for then thou shalt make thy way prosperous, and then thou shalt have good success." Joshua 1:8

"Thy word have I hid in mine heart, that I might not sin against thee." Psalm 119:11

"Is not my word like as a fire? saith the Lord; and like a hammer that breaketh the rock in pieces?" Jeremiah 23:29

"For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart."

Hebrews 4:12

Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758) lived in a world strangely different from our own, a world imbued, often enchanted, by the contents of the Bible. Most of his family members, friends, congregants, and correspondents, both at home and back in Britain, would have identified the Bible as their most important book, the one they knew and loved the best—indeed, their favorite source of information, inspiration, and insight into the nature of reality. Frequently it frightened them. They took its stories and warnings about the jealousy, wrath, and judgment of God as awesome matters of fact. However, it usually also soothed them. They staked their
very lives upon its promise of salvation, grace, and mercy to the penitent, its words of consolation to the anxious and oppressed, and its guidance for those who sought to live in a way that pleased the Lord.

“The Bible is full of wonderful things,” Edwards attested to his people. It has stood the test of time as the world’s “most comprehensive book.” It is “divine.” It is “uncerr’d.” The splendid light it sheds on our world “is ten thousand times better than [that] of the sun.” The Scripture’s sacred texts, Edwards contended, are “the most excellent things in the world.” In fact, they tower “as much above those things” we study “in other sciences, as heaven is above . . . earth.” Further, the knowledge held in these heavenly texts “is infinitely more useful and important” than the knowledge attained in “all other sciences.” Edwards lauded Scripture as a “great” and “precious treasure.” He pleaded with his congregations to “search for” biblical treasure, “and that with the same diligence . . . with which men . . . dig in mines” for “gold.” He assured them that the Bible “contains enough” within its covers so “to employ us to the end.” Even at death, he said, we “shall leave enough” of the Scriptures “uninvestigated to employ . . . the ablest divines to the end of the world,” or better, “to employ the . . . saints and angels to all eternity.” He found what he called a “greater delight” in exegetical exertion “than in anything else” he did. He confided on many occasions that those who have ever “tasted the sweetness” of God’s Scriptural divinity will live out their days in “longing for more and more of it.”

Despite his reputation as a backward-leaning Calvinist (which has likely been confirmed for some by the statements just quoted), Edwards surely would have jumped at the chance to live with us today. He would have given almost anything for access to the historical and scientific knowledge that has burgeoned so dramatically since the early nineteenth century. His eighteenth-century world seems far away, a distant land. And Edwards was a man of his times. But he was also keenly curious and usually open-minded. He was a forward-looking thinker with an insatiable appetite for information about the Bible, its ancient historical contexts, and the structure of the natural world in which its events, stories, songs, poems, prophecies, morals, and other teachings were—and continued to be—realized. Edwards echoed the well-known adage of the Pilgrim John Robinson: “the Lord had more truth and light yet to breake forth out of his holy Word.” He thought that God would use the future advance of pious scholarship to inundate the church with light as the end of world drew near. As he wrote in his “Miscellanies” during the late 1720s,

’Tis an argument with me that the world is not yet very near its end, that the church has made no greater progress in understanding the Scriptures. The Scripture and all parts of it were made for the use of the church here on earth; and it seems reasonable to suppose that God will by degrees unveiling the meaning of it to his church. It was made obscure and mysterious, and in many places having great difficulties, that his people might have exercise for their pious wisdom and study, and that his church might make progress in the understanding of it; as the philosophical world makes progress in the understanding of the book of nature, and unfolding the mysteries of it. And there is a divine wisdom appears in ordering of it thus: how much better it is to have divine truth and light break forth in this way, than it would have been, to have had it shine at once to everyone without any labor or industry of the understanding. It would be less delightful, and less prized and valued and admired, and would have vastly less influence on men’s hearts, and would be less to the glory of God.

He seldom studied extra-biblical things for secular significance. He nearly always focused on their theological meaning. But this was because he thought the Word of God was that by which the universe began, was sustained, and cohered ontologically. Its record in the Bible was divine speech in writing, given by God as our most basic, proper, and helpful frame of reference for interpreting all else.

Edwards devoted most of his waking life to studying the Bible, its extra-biblical contexts, its theological meanings, and its import for everyday religion. His student and friend, Samuel Hopkins, once remarked of his priorities: “He studied the Bible more than all other Books, and more than most other Divines do. . . . He took his religious Principles from the Bible, and not from any human System or Body of Divinity.” Edwards vowed in his “Resolutions” while a boy in his late teens that he would “study the Scriptures so steadily, constantly and frequently, as that I may find, and plainly perceive myself to grow in the knowledge of the same.” As he penned in the “Personal Narrative” of his early spiritual life, he took “the greatest delight in the holy Scriptures, of any book whatsoever.”
Oftentimes in reading it, every word seemed to touch my heart. I felt an harmony between something in my heart, and those sweet and powerful words. I seemed often to see so much light, exhibited by every sentence, and such a refreshing ravishing food communicated, that I could not get along in reading. Used oftentimes to dwell long on one sentence, to see the wonders contained in it; and yet almost every sentence seemed to be full of wonders.

Edwards’ wonderment and passion for the study of the Bible got him up before sunrise almost every day of the year (between four and five in the morning). Hopkins testified that Edwards had “a tender ... Constitution, yet few Students are as capable of close Application more Hours in a Day than he. He commonly spent thirteen Hours every Day in his Study. ... He had an uncommon thirst for Knowledge,” and “spared no ... Pains to get it.” Edwards’ “Diary” suggests that when “engaged in reading the Scriptures” he would often skip his dinner “rather than be broke off” from study. His devotion to the Bible did waver on occasion. In the main, though, it flourished to an exceptional degree. For he felt that “at those times when I have read the Scripture most, I have evermore been most lively, and in the best of frames."

Edwards encouraged a like devotion in the laity he served. He assured his congregations that biblical learning was for all—not just clergy and “men of learning, but ... persons of every character.” God calls everyone, he said, to hunt the treasure hid in Scripture, both the “learned and unlearned, young and old, men and women.” Not even the brightest Bible scholar will ever begin to find it all. In fact, the ones who “studied the longest, and have made the greatest attainments ... know but little of what is to be known.” The Bible’s “subject is inexhaustible,” for God “is infinite, and there is no end to the glory of his perfections.” Consequently, all should apply their hearts and minds to Holy Scripture, making the study of its books “a great part of the business of our lives.” Edwards drove this point home by recommending that his people give as much of their time to seeking the things of God as seeking Mammon.

Content not yourselves with having so much knowledge as is thrown in your way, and as you receive in some sense unavoidably by the frequent ... preaching of the word, of which you are obliged to be hearers, or as you accidentally gain in conversation; but let it be very much your business to search for it, and that with the same diligence and labor with which men are wont to dig in mines of ... gold.

Or as he put this in another sermon, preached the same year, “He that has a Bible, and don’t observe what is contained [in] it, is like a man that has a box full of silver and gold, and don’t know it, don’t observe that it is anything more than a vessel filled with common stones. As long as it is thus with him, he’ll be never the better for his treasure.”

The Unsung Importance of the Exegetical Edwards

Modern scholars have yet to come close to understanding the ways in which Edwards’ life was animated by Scripture. Three hundred years after his birth, half a century into what some have called the Edwards renaissance, few have bothered to study Edwards’ massive exegetical corpus. While preoccupied with his place in America’s public life and letters—and failing to see the public significance of his biblical exegesis—we have ignored the scholarly work he took most seriously. The lion’s share of Edwards’ time during every week of his life was spent wrestling with the words of holy writ. But though we know a great deal now about his ethics, metaphysics, Calvinism, and aesthetics—not to mention his pastoral labors and his role in the Great Awakening—few know much at all about his exegetical work. Although we know quite a lot about his engagement with the leading philosophical men of his day, we know little of his work with Matthew Poole, Philip Doddridge, Matthew Henry, Arthur Bedford, John Owen, or Humphrey Prideaux—biblical scholars all. Yet they were steady, staple sources of his study day to day—more than Locke, Berkeley, and Newton. They rarely played as great a role in shaping his scholarly agenda, but they played a greater role in its execution. He spent decades, quite literally, poring over their biblical writings, doing his most important work with them at hand.

Edwards scholars often treat this as an awkward family secret, one that would damage our reputations if widely known. And truth be told, this concern is not completely misdirected. Many scholars would prefer to do without the Edwards of history. In the words of Bruce Kuklick, Edwards was far more serviceable to secular intellectuals when portrayed by Perry Miller as “one of us—close to being an atheist for Niebuhr.” But now that Edwards has been ouTed as a biblical supernaturalist—ironically, by Miller’s Yale edition of his Works—his thought “is not likely to compel the attention of intellectuals ever again. Indeed,” claims Kuklick, “it is more likely to repel their attention.” To most disinterested observers this assertion is ridiculous. Plenty of intellectuals remain intrigued by Edwards. Nonetheless, Kuklick’s statement represents a
common perception that the real, historical Edwards may not be fit for polite, academic company.

How peculiar this appears in light of Edwards' hallowed place in American intellectual history, how perplexing given the cultural clout of Scripture in America (not to mention Christian history), a topic often neglected even by specialists in religion.42 As Nathan Hatch and Mark Noll chided long before today's best graduate students were born, as if we needed a reminder, "Scripture has been nearly omnipresent in the nation's past."43 Unfortunately, however, we still know little about this presence. We have acknowledged it for years. But too many have been lulled by its deceptive familiarity.5

Of the thousands of publications devoted to Edwards since his death, only a few, a tiny fraction, deal at length with his biblical writings. A survey of M. X. Lesser's massive Edwards bibliography confirms this point appreciably. Its subject index lacks headings for "Bible," "Revelation," "Scripture," or even "Word of God." It has an entry for "Biblicism." There are scattered entries on topics like "Hermeneutics" and "Typology." To be sure, this enochiridion is not a foolproof indicator. It ends in 2005. Edwards' engagement with the Bible is discussed from time to time in works devoted to other themes. Nevertheless, and overall, it does reflect the relative scarcity of scholarship on Edwards the exegete.44

This scarcity is rooted in the priorities of those who pioneered the Edwards renaissance, most of whom belittled their subject's obvious biblicism in rather tragic, not to say histrionic, terms. Ola Winslow, for example, while ignoring his exegesis, denigrated Edwards' doctrine, beholden as she knew it was to biblical authority. It was an "outworn, dogmatic system," she concluded, one that "needed to be demolished." Perry Miller admired the system but pretended it could be understood without resorting to Scripture. Stressing Edwards' great achievements in the realm of Enlightenment science, Miller lamented that Edwards also wasted time rehearsing the Bible. "Part of the tragedy of Edwards," Miller confessed to his chagrin, "is that he expended so much energy upon an [exegetical] effort that has subsequently fallen into contempt." Alfred Owen Aldridge pulled no punches, rendering Edwards a fundamentalist for his view of the Bible's supremacy. In contradiction to Miller, but while sharing Miller's distaste for Edwards' frequent appeals to Scripture, he complained in an ironic mode that "in vindicating revelation, nearly all of Edwards' inferences tended to depreciate reason." Peter Gay spoke for many when in 1966 he labeled Edwards "the greatest tragic hero ... that American Calvinism produced." According to Gay, Edwards' biblicism was nothing short of "medieval" and "the results were, as they had to be, pathetic." He "philosophized in a cage that his fathers had built and that he unwittingly reinforced." He should have known that "revelation ... can be nothing more than an extension of reason; nearly all religious doctrine is either redundant or superstitious." But he "went right on accepting the testimony of Scriptures as literally true."45

The cumulative effect of such presentist pronouncements proved similar to that described by Berkeley's John Coolidge with respect to Puritan studies:

the one necessary presupposition for any attempt to defend [Puritanism], or even to make it interesting[,] was that the Puritans really derived their convictions from some other source than the Bible, . . . In order to argue that Puritanism had a mind, it has seemed necessary to assume that Puritan writers regularly deluded themselves by a curious ritual, casting a dust of scriptural references over pages where, nevertheless, an ingenious modern investigator can discover traces of thought.46

Or by London's David Daniell with respect to the Great Awakening:

Historians are prepared to allow in the story of the Great Awakening that it was a religious experience of some significance. Yet, even when the religious history is explained over hundreds of pages with many detailed references to sermons, journals, published books and letters, there is visible a curious reluctance even to mention the Bible. A student of the period needs only to turn a few pages of the original documents to see at once that they are full of quotations from and references to the Scriptures. To write American colonial-period history without mention of the Bible is to build a house on sand.47

Much as secularist gymnastics long distorted our view of these movements, so aspersions against, excuses for, and smokescreens erected to hide the biblicism of Edwards have prevented us from understanding his principal occupation.48

The priorities of the pioneers of the Edwards renaissance were also markedly postliberal during and after World War II, which yielded a
tendency to employ Edwards to meet America’s need for what was commonly called an “American Augustine”: a theological founding father who understood original sin, respected the limits of human potential, and promoted social realism along with moral progress. But in nominating Edwards to this vaunted cultural role, they appeared but dimly aware of what it would mean to retrieve Edwards as a spiritual founding father in the wake of deestablishment. Augustine and Edwards worked within a “Constantinian” world, one at the dawn and one at the twilight of the age of Christendom. Their theological pronouncements carried the weight of legal authority and mainstream cultural privilege. Thus their calls for cultural submission to Bible and church were not unreasonable.

But things have clearly changed since the time of Edwards’ death. The age of Christendom has ended and the likes of Augustine and Edwards speak as dissenters now from mainstream Western culture. Ironically, Edwards expedited the dissolution of Christendom with his call for “true” religion and critique of Christian convention. But he feared what he foresaw as its corrosive cultural consequences, worrying that “many men of great temporal knowledge” were becoming self-sufficient. They were “puffed up” with pride regarding the progress of their epoch and could “hardly bear to submit . . . to . . . revelation.” Edwards’ premonition was realized during the early national period. The churches and their sacred texts were legally disestablished. The leading founding fathers felt little compulsion to submit their hearts and minds to revelation. Ever since, the biblical Edwards has actually militated against the spirit of mainstream America. He has contradicted its spirit of liberation from authority, its spirit of independence, self-culture, and self-sufficiency. America’s Augustine has had to be shorn of his biblicalism in order to serve as a significant public symbol.

Not everyone has sought to relieve Edwards of his biblicalism. Several conservative clergymen have championed his exegesis as a model for other pastors and seminarians. Several other, more critical scholars—now informed by the publication of exegetical writings in The Works of Jonathan Edwards—have begun to realize that, in the words of Harry Stout, Edwards’ Constantinian world was “suffused with the Word of God.” We have some good work now on Edwards’ doctrine of revelation. But only a few critical scholars have offered extensive interpretations of Edwards’ work on the biblical texts—most importantly Stephen Stein and Robert Brown, but more recently Glenn Kreider, Stephen Nichols, David Barshinger, and a handful of the editors of the The Works of Jonathan Edwards. In addition to numerous articles on Edwards’ use of Scripture, Stein has undertaken the yeoman’s work on Edwards’ biblical manuscripts. Brown has written on Edwards’ fascination with higher criticism—belying Gay’s claim that the biblical Edwards was benighted. Several others have written sporadically on Edwards’ study of Scripture, some in works of erudition on typology, eschatology, and philosophy of history as these relate to American literature and culture. But no one has written much on Edwards’ exegesis per se—on how he handled biblical doctrine in the texts of Scripture themselves, and on how his interpretations came to matter.

Although it lost its legal privileges soon after Edwards died, Edwards’ biblical theology reverberates today. In fact, in yet another irony, it has enjoyed far more adherents during the past two-hundred years than it ever had in America’s eighteenth century. It continues to attract tens of thousands of admirers, and to interest many others far removed from Edwards’ faith. Indeed, most of the world persists in living by scriptural faith, whether Edwardsian or not. Billions of people around the globe submit themselves to sacred texts, avoiding America’s ardent zeal for self-construction as they do. Perhaps the exegetical Edwards can illumine this behavior. This would seem a most propitious time to pay due attention to Edwards’ lifelong love affair with Scripture.

An Ecology of Edwards’ Exegesis

Edwards’ exegetical world has disappeared from most maps of early-modern cultural life. It is a lost world of preachers and their colleagues in the academy who worked in ancient history and philology. They fit poorly in standard narratives of modern Western thought, shaped as these have tended to be by teleologies of intellectual freedom and secularity, of progress by departure from traditionary, authoritarian modes of Christian thought to unencumbered work in natural and social sciences. But they were enormously important to the construal of reality in the early-modern West, especially by believers—most Christians, Jews, and others—who wanted actionable intelligence about their sacred writings and the cultural and spiritual information they imparted. We need to reconstruct this long-lost exegetical world if we are to make good sense of Edwards’, his biblical frame of reference, and the things he took for granted about the nature of reality. We need to know not only what he did when studying
Scripture but also how he did it, what tools he used in doing it, and why he chose to do it as he did.

The best place to start on such a reconstruction project is with Edwards' own manuscripts, the most reliable portal to his exegetical world. His more than 1,200 sermons, of course, preserve a sizable record of his exegetical method, parts of which are treated later. He preached on almost every book within the Protestant biblical canon, nearly "all the counsel of God" (Acts 20:27), for over thirty-five years. Most of his efforts in the pulpit are preserved in manuscript. But many of Edwards' private notebooks also feature biblical commentary, revealing the vast extent of his exegetical portfolio.

His best-known biblical manuscripts are called his "Notes on Scripture," four volumes of miscellaneous remarks on Scripture texts. Begun in 1724, they were kept throughout his life and cross-referenced with his other private notebooks. His most bulky biblical manuscript is called the "Blank Bible," technically known as "Miscellaneous Observations on the Holy Scriptures." It is a large blank book, given to Edwards by his brother-in-law, the Rev. Benjamin Pierpont, interleaved with the pages of a smaller King James Bible. Beginning late in 1730, Edwards filled the ample margins that surrounded its biblical leaves with a commentary, or gloss, on the whole of sacred Scripture (as defined, again, by Protestants). From Genesis to Malachi, Matthew to the Apocalypse, he left a lengthy record of his engagement with the Word. There are other manuscripts, too, in which he wrote about the Scriptures. Edwards' "Notes on the Apocalypse" compose a large volume on the book of Revelation. "Images of Divine Things" and "Types" contain remarks on much of the imagery—or types—of Christ, the church, and human redemption Edwards found in Scripture and nature. He kept a booklet of "Hebrew Idioms," a notebook in "Defense of the Authenticity of the Pentateuch as a Work of Moses and the Historicity of the Old Testament Narratives," a leaf of "Notes on Books of Moses," a notebook of "Scripture Prophecies of the Old Testament," and a reused letter cover full of "Notes on the Coming of Christ." He drafted hundreds of other sheets on sundry doctrines of the Bible. Altogether, this material fills thousands of manuscript pages in the extant Edwards corpus. It is an understudied treasure trove of biblical exegesis.

Edwards died before he could publish two enormous biblical monographs, both of which had engrossed his mind for years. As he explained to the leaders of the College of New Jersey, who had invited him to serve as the next president of Princeton after Edwards' son-in-law, President Aaron Burr, died late in 1757, he was reluctant to accept because he hoped to finish these projects and he feared that a presidency would only get in the way.

The first of these two books was to be built upon the longest sermon series he ever preached, a thirty-sermon exposition of the history of redemption (preached in 1739). It would be a great [i.e., large] work, which I call A History of the Work of Redemption, a body of divinity in an entire new method, being thrown into the form of an history, considering the affair of Christian theology, as the whole of it; in each part, stands in reference to the great work of redemption by Jesus Christ; which I suppose is to be the grand design of all God's designs, and the summum and ultimum of all the divine operations and decrees; particularly considering all parts of the grand scheme in their historical order.

By the time he wrote this letter, Edwards had filled three notebooks with ideas on how to expand his sermon series into a book. If completed, this magnum opus would have secured his reputation as the Anglo-American world's leading biblical theologian. The second of these two works was even more exegetical. Edwards called it The Harmony of the Old and New Testament.

The first [part] considering the prophecies of the Messiah, his redemption and kingdom; the evidences of their references to the Messiah, etc[,] comparing them all one with another, demonstrating their agreement and true scope and sense; also considering all the various particulars wherein these prophecies have their exact fulfillment: showing the universal, precise, and admirable correspondence between predictions and events. The second part: considering the types of the Old Testament, showing the evidence of their being intended as representations of the great things of the gospel of Christ: and the agreement of the type with the antitype. The third and great [largest] part, considering the harmony of the Old and New Testament, as to doctrine and precept.

Edwards hoped that this work would offer "occasion for an explanation of a very great part of the holy Scripture... In a method, which to me seems
the most entertaining and profitable, best tending to lead the mind to a view of the true spirit, design, life and soul of the Scriptures, as well as to their proper use and improvement.47

He drafted hundreds of manuscript pages for inclusion in this book. For part one, on biblical prophecy, he penned four entries in his "Miscellanies" notebooks, all treating what he labeled either "Prophecies of the Messiah" (mainly in the Old Testament) or "Fulfillment of the Prophecies of the Messiah" (in the New). Two of these entries proved so large that they consumed a whole book.48 For part two, on the biblical types of the Messiah, Edwards drafted another entry in a "Miscellanies" notebook: "That the Things of the Old Testament Arc Types of Things Appertaining to the Messiah and His Kingdom and Salvation, Made Manifest from the Old Testament Itself." In published form, this entry exceeds a hundred pages in length. Edwards wrote it in addition to his "Images of Divine Things" and "Types" mentioned above.49 For part three, on the theological harmony of Scripture, Edwards kept a separate notebook on "The Harmony of the Genius, Spirit, Doctrines, & Rules of the Old Testament & the New." Most of this book is ordered canonically (he made it through the Psalms). Several entries appear topically. All attest to his interest in the doctrinal integrity, or "harmony," of Scripture.50

As these manuscripts reveal, Edwards employed a wide array of both lexical and historical aids when studying the Bible. For help with ancient languages, he frequented the work of the most important early-modern Reformed Protestant Hebraist, the German Johann Buxtorf (1564–1629), who lectured mainly in Basel.51 Edwards plied a well-worn copy of his Manuale Hebraicum et Chaldæicum, which his father, Timothy Edwards, had presented him in college.52 David Brainerd left him another, similar Lexicon Hebraicum et Chaldæicum when he died in Edwards' house late in 1747. Compiled, again, by Johann Buxtorf to assist Christian scholars with the Hebrew and Aramaic sections of the Bible, Brainerd's volume had the advantage of a Native American cover made of painted otter skin. Edwards cited it repeatedly in his exegetical writings.53 Edwards referenced a concordance of ancient Hebrew written by Buxtorf in his book on Original Sin (in a debate with John Taylor).54 For the Bible as a whole, he wielded a copy of Alexander Rowley's book Sedalis Discipulis. The Schollers Companion... Containing All the Interpretations of the Hebrew and Greek Bible.55 He owned Erasmus Schmidt's concordance of the Greek New Testament.56 He mentioned Edmund Castell's polyglot in the "Blank Bible."57

And he listed a number of other philological resources in his "Catalogue" of the books he sought to acquire.58

Edwards also owned a portion of the Antwerp Polyglot, produced originally by the Spanish Roman Catholic orientalist, Benedictus Arias Montanus, in Belgium (1569–1572). Europe's Renaissance had yielded several polyglot Bibles, the first being that of the Spanish Cardinal, Francisco Ximenez, the Complutensian Polyglot, which was published in Alcalá de Henares (1520). An Italian, Sanctus Pagnini, published the first complete translation of the Bible from Hebrew and Greek into Latin since Jerome (1528), parts of which would make their way into subsequent polyglots. Brian Walton would publish the best known polyglot of all, called the London Polyglot, during the British interregnum (1657). But the Antwerp Polyglot remained a popular tool, due largely to the fact that one of its volumes offered its main fruit in reduced, accessible form, which was easily reissued as a single-volume work. In fact, eight different editions of this special streamlined volume were republished in Geneva from 1609 to 1627. One of these was owned and used by Edwards.59

The unabridged Antwerp Polyglot filled eight folio volumes, funded by Philip II of Spain and set by the famous Belgian printer, Antwerp's Christophe Plantin. Its initial four volumes featured the Hebrew Old Testament, the Vulgate Old Testament, the Greek Septuagint with Latin translation, and the Aramaic targums in both Aramaic and Latin (excluding Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Chronicles). Its fifth volume contained the New Testament in Greek and its translation from the Vulgate, as well as from the Peshitta (the Syriac Bible), which was printed in both Syriac and Hebrew characters with a Latin translation (Acts, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, Jude, and Revelation). Its sixth and seventh volumes offered lexicons (Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic/Syriac), a Syriac grammar, philological, archaeological, and other critical notes. The final volume republished both the Hebrew and Greek texts (now in slightly improved form) along with interlinear Latin, the Old Testament Latin being an updated version of the work of Sanctus Pagnini and the New Testament Latin taken again from the Vulgate. This eighth and final volume was repackaged several times and used as far away as New England by the likes of Edwards himself. (N.B.: In some editions of the polyglot it appeared as volume six, preceding the critical apparatus in the final two volumes; at other times it appeared as volume seven.) For reasons of economy, it proved to be the most popular tome in the project.60
Why would a Calvinist like Edwards use a Roman Catholic polyglot, especially after the publication of Walton's London Bible? Perhaps this was simply a matter of access or cost. Surely Edwards would have known of Walton's Laudian, Arminian, and anti-Puritan views. But Edwards also may have appreciated the ways in which the Antwerp Bible undermined the authority of the Roman magisterium, which declared Jerome's Vulgate the official Catholic Bible at the Council of Trent in 1546. Pagnini did his work with the blessing of three popes (Leo X, Adrian VI, and Clement VII), even though his Latin differed from the Vulgate rather markedly and owed much of its difference to rabbinical commentaries. But this was before Trent, which in an anti-Protestant mood decreed all Bibles but the Vulgate inauthentic—and anathematized those who would dissent. Montanus ran afloat of Catholic hierarchs in Spain. An anti-Catholic man like Edwards may have relished, even if secretly, this aspect of his study of the Bible's provenance.

Edwards' skill with biblical languages is difficult to assess. He never published a standard commentary. Nor did he often function as an independent translator. His exegetical manuscripts contain scores of references to Hebrew and Greek terms, with frequent notes on their translation. Given the aids at his disposal, though, one might well conclude that Edwards learned to read the Bible in the original languages but usually leaned on other scholars when he faced technical matters of translation.

Here is what we can say, in sum, of Edwards' work in the languages. He learned Greek and Hebrew as a boy, with his father, who ran a grammar school in the parlor of their parsonage. He tested in Latin and Greek when matriculating at Yale and continued to use these languages—along with biblical Hebrew—throughout his college career. As an adult, he wrote his sermons with linguistic aids at hand, trying his best to interpret the Word of God from the originals. He used his Antwerp Polyglot to work on biblical Hebrew, which was always somewhat weaker than his Greek. (Edwards and his peers rarely expressed much doubt about their competence in Greek.) He took a periodic interest in the Bible's Aramaic. But the bulk of his language tools, as well as most of the marginal comments in his polyglot Bible, focused on Hebrew and, less frequently, on Greek.

Christian interest in ancient Hebrew had increased by fits and starts during the Renaissance and Reformation periods. It was all the rage in England during the Puritan interregnum, when Jews were readmitted after centuries in exile, as many came to believe that their conversion to Christianity would hasten the millennium and second coming of Christ. Some New England Puritan clergyman would study Hebrew earnestly. It was taught at Harvard and Yale. There were always those who balked, of course, and never really learned. As Shalom Goldman avers, even Edwards' biblical Hebrew proved mediocre at best. But he would work on this deficiency to the very end of his life. For as Cotton Mather had pleaded to New England's would-be ministers, the study of ancient languages was vital to sound preaching. "For the HEBREW," he had written, "I am importunate with you...TWILL enable you to penetrate further into the deep Things which the Spirit of God has laid up in His Oracles, than you could possibly do, by seeing them only in some Translation." Even in taking charge of Princeton just months before he died, Edwards continued to seek a way to gain facility with Hebrew. As he wrote to the school's trustees, "It would be now out of my way, to spend time, in a constant teaching of the languages; unless it be the Hebrew tongue, which I should be willing to improve myself in, by instructing others."

To the people in the pews, of course, English Bibles proved far more important than the originals. In Edwards' world, this meant that England's King James Bible (1611), unadorned by annotations, maps, or other critical aids, was the gateway for most into the sacred realms of Scripture. Edwards used it from the pulpit, as did all of his contemporaries. They knew that it was flawed. English printers had emended it conspicuously for decades—modernizing spelling, perfecting punctuation, and improving translations through the end of Edwards' life. Some pined for the footnotes of the old Geneva Bible (1560), or the English Annotations of the Westminster divines (1645fl.). However, the latter notes had never been released in the form of a Bible. And the Geneva Bible undermined episcopacy and monarchy. James I had banned its publication in 1616. Charles I banned its importation in 1650. Beginning in 1642, several King James editions with Geneva notes were printed, primarily in Amsterdam, and shipped back to England. But eventually, the Puritans moved beyond their allegiance to these controversial texts. And during the Stuarts' Restoration, England cracked down hard on all the products of dissent, banning new translations of the Bible into English and ensuring that the King James Bible would prevail. In eighteenth-century New England, where nary a single English Bible would be printed in Edwards' lifetime, at least not legally—they had to be imported, virtually everyone would use a modernized King James. Many new translations of the Bible, biblical testaments, or books appeared in England during the long eighteenth
century. Ministers like Edwards knew of some of these productions. They worked to keep abreast of text-critical developments and philological quarrels. But they preached, taught, and memorized the King James Version, which by Edwards’ day was woven into the fabric of their world.73

Because their Bibles were bereft of any hermeneutical aids, Edwards’ people were more dependent than they would have been before on his scholarship and teaching for their understanding of Scripture. In addition to his study of Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic, then, he also worked with commentaries, maps, ancient histories, and studies of the backgrounds of the Old and New Testaments. His commentarial sources have been limned by Stephen Stein.66 Edwards owned several commentaries on individual books—John Taylor’s notes on Romans, John Owen’s massive, four-volume commentary on Hebrews, Thomas Manton on James and Jude.77 He also worked with multi-volume, whole-Bible commentaries and surveys, or compendia, of multiple commentaries. His favorite was Matthew Poole’s five-folio Synopsis Criticorum Allorumque Sacrae Scripturae Interpretum (Synopsis of Interpreters, Both Critical and Otherwise, of Sacred Scripture, 1665–1676), a more affordable epitome of Bishop John Pearson’s nine-volume Critici Sacri, sive Dictiorum Vironum in SS. Biblia Annotationes et Tractatus (Holy Critics, or Annotations and Treatment of the Men Most Learned on the Holy Bible, 1660). Both compendia had notes on every book of sacred Scripture from a wide array of writers, though Poole’s was much more manageable and offered notes from a greater number of English commentators.78 Edwards also mined Matthew Henry’s six-volume Exposition of the Old and New Testament (1707–1721), an evangelical classic;79 and Philip Doddridge’s six-volume Family Expositor (1739–1756), a more recent best-seller treating the New Testament books.80

Edwards availed himself of scores of shorter aids to exegesis. In the “Blank Bible” alone, he cited 109 sources (some of which were multi-volume, though shorter than the ample works just enumerated).81 In the “Notes on Scripture” he cited thirty-eight publications.82 He used Samuel Mather’s sermons on the Old Testament types and often lent them out to others.83 He looked to leading theologians for help in expounding Bible doctrine, his favorites being Peter van Mastricht, Francis Turretin, and near the end of his life, Johann Friedrich Stapfer.84 He secured a copy of Chambers’ Cyclopaedia (1728) for reference, employing it for help with various intellectual trends, exegetical and other.85 And he pored over the massive learning in several recent summaries of the state of the conversation regarding biblical chronology and ancient Near Eastern/Greco-Roman

history and mythology, especially those by Christians who assimilated all of ancient history to the Bible, “taking biblical chronology, characters and events as the gold standard,” according to Roy Porter’s apt description67. Humphrey Prideaux’s four-volume Old and New Testament: Connected in the History of the Jews and Neighboring Nations (9th ed., 1725); Samuel Shuckford’s three-volume Sacred and Prophane History of the World Connected, from the Creation of the World to the Dissolution of the Assyrian Empire at the Death of Sardanapalus, and to the Declension of the Kingdoms of Judah and Israel, under the Reigns of Ahaz and Pekah (2nd ed., 1731–1740); Arthur Bedford’s Scripture Chronology Demonstrated by Astronomical Calculations (1730); and others.86

As Robert Brown has demonstrated, Edwards swam deeply in a sea of biblical criticism. Most accounts of the rise of higher critical work in America still spotlight nineteenth-century trends in research institutions.88 This tendency derives in part from dated but still common attributions of its European roots to liberal Germans—men like David Friedrich Strauss, F. C. Baur, and Julius Wellhausen, and schools such as the University of Tübingen. However, as recent scholarship has shown beyond the shadow of a doubt, higher criticism took its rise two centuries before, mainly in England and the Netherlands. It also made its way to England’s North American colonies by the late seventeenth century. Thomas Hobbes’ Leviathan (1651) and Benedict Spinoza’s Tractatus Theologico-Politicus (1670) placed its critical methods on the map. Richard Simon’s Histoire critique du Vieux Testament (1678; English trans., 1682) and Jean LeClerc’s Sentiments de quelques théologiens de Hollande (1685ff.) increased its currency in French and throughout the Republic of Letters. In the Anglo-American world, it was associated closely with the work of English deists.89

Edwards knew about them all. In fact, long before Edwards, Cotton Mather interacted with Spinozist criticism.90 Edwards would as well, as we will see in the next chapter. Jean LeClerc appears several times in Edwards’ “Catalogue,” in his copy of Hugo Grotius’ The Truth of the Christian Religion . . . Corrected . . . by Mr. Le Clerc (1719), and in his “Miscellanies,” too.91 And Edwards’ handling of the canon, predictive prophecy, typology, and a host of other matters was refined in response to skeptical claims made by deists and English latitudinarians. Stein says that Edwards’ response was uniformly negative, defensive, and conservative.92 But Brown has shown not only that “the problem of biblical criticism is a ubiquitous feature of Edwards’s work, an aspect absent of which the nature and genius of his entire theological career cannot be adequately understood”: he
has also shown that Edwards struck a “modestly critical” pose in his own exegesis. He never rejected critical arguments completely, out of hand, but rather dealt with them extensively and carried on his own biblical scholarship responsibly.91

**A Demography of Edwards’ Exegetical Interlocutors**

Though Edwards was an evangelical Calvinist—to be sure, one with traditional views of the provenance and dating of biblical books and the historicity of biblical figures and events—he participated avidly in the Enlightenment’s Republic of Letters, taking part in what some have termed the Christian Enlightenment. He was a “both-and” thinker: traditional and modern, puritan and ecumenical, critical and edifying, catholic and anti-Catholic. He undermines—by straddling, combining, even melding—standard categories used to periodize Western thought. His biblical scholarship was shaped by both ancient and modern values, by Renaissance humanism and Reformation dogma, by scholastic orthodoxy and religions of the heart (Puritanism, Pietism, *Nadere Reformatie*), by Old Dissent in its diversity and nascent evangelicalism.

Edwards is best known as a scion of the Puritans, who taught him how to read, study, and preach the sacred Scriptures. In principle, at least, Scripture drove the Puritan movement.94 As Christopher Hill confessed, “The Bible was central to the whole of ... life” in seventeenth-century England.95 John Coolidge defined Puritanism in England, in particular, as a protracted, comprehensive “commentaire vécu” on the Bible.”96 And as James Knight has specified of Puritans in New England, while “Protestantism has often been called a religion of the book[,] nowhere was this truer than in Puritan America, where reading the Bible was not only the legislated obligation but also the deepest desire of every believer.97 Scripture gave structure to New England’s “Bible commonwealths,” whose laws and other mores were derived from the Word of God.98 Scripture stood right at the center of the Puritans’ worship services, symbolically and physically, orienting the faithful to the ministry of the Word. The catholic liturgy was abandoned—even in the form used by England’s Protestant Church—as were visual and musical arts. Puritans dubbed their churches “meeting houses” in order to mark this change. In accordance with traditions learned in continental Europe (mainly Zurich and Geneva), they eradicated crosses, stained-glass windows, statuary, and all other “graven images”—everything they thought distracted people from the Word. They sang the Psalms *a cappella*, banning the use of musical instruments and hymnody in worship. Puritan clergy shed their vestments, preaching instead in academic gowns that signified their calling to learned, biblical ministry (rather than sacramental priesthood). They delivered long sermons. In accordance with the Westminster Directory for worship (1644/45), many also led their people in the public reading of Scripture not treated in their sermons.99

Many leading Puritan writers reinforced these changes frequently, championing the Bible and exhorting the movement’s clergy to be “mighty in the Scriptures” (Acts 18:24) for the sake of the people of God. As William Ames asserted in *The Marrow of Theology* (1627), which Edwards studied in college, “no one is fit for the ministry who is not greatly concerned with the Holy Scripture, even beyond ordinary believers, so that he might be said, with Apollos, to be mighty in the Scriptures, Acts 18:24. He must not put his trust in notes and commentaries.”99 Thomas Manton warned students in his commentary on James, which, again, Edwards owned, “not to adventure upon the preaching of the Word, till they have a good spiritual furniture, or are stored with a sufficiency of gifts: 'Tis not for every one that can speak an hour to adventure upon the work of Teaching.”100 And Cotton Mather queried in his *Monaductio*, another of Edwards’ favorite sources, “Can a Man be a Thorow Divine without Reading the SACRED SCRIPTURES? No, Verily; Not so much as a Common Christian. Read them, child; I say, Read them, with an Uncommon Assiduity. To Dig in these Rich Mines, make it your Daily Exercise.”101

In practice, most Puritans proved proficient Bible readers, turning their base in southern New England into what many have called the single most literate society the world had ever seen. Children had to be taught to read (most were taught to read the Bible). Towns with more than fifty households had to hire a reading teacher. Towns with more than a hundred families had to found a grammar school.102 Parents could be fined for failing to teach their children English. Fathers could be punished for failing to catechize their families.103 Bibles and devotional books—along with almanacs—became the region’s best-sellers.104 People expected ordained clergy to spend the bulk of their time in study, preparing to minister the Word to them in depth and rich detail.105 They were never as parochial as many have presumed. Their clergy, especially, read far more than the Bible. Theirs was a transatlantic world; they had a cosmopolitan mien.106 But theirs was biblical cosmopolitanism—so Edwards’ biblical reading list should come as no surprise. In addition to Manton, Samuel
lands supported nearly 2,000 Dissenting congregations. Most belonged to one of three main nonconforming networks: Presbyterians, strongest in the north and northwest; Congregationalists (Independents), farther south and in East Anglia; and Baptists, who were biggest in the midlands and southeast. Over time, and especially after the Glorious Revolution (1688–1689) and its Toleration Act (1689), Trinitarian and Protestant Dissent won some leeway. England’s Toleration Act eased subscription to the 39 Articles of Religion, waiving assent to clauses on traditions, rites, and ceremonies (Articles 34–36, and parts of Articles 20 and 27). G. V. Bennett summarized its practical significance:

The number of licenses taken out under the Toleration Act was a great surprise. In the first year of its operation 796 temporary and 143 permanent meeting-houses were licensed, and the Quakers set up an additional 239. In the years from 1691 to 1710 no less than 2,336 places were licensed. Many of these would have been private houses or even barns, and the number of specifically constructed chapels was still small, but up and down the land parsons were facing a new and disturbing phenomenon: a local Dissenting congregation meeting openly for worship and competing with them for the hearts and minds of their parishioners. 105

All was not rosy as conventicles increased. Heterodoxy spread rapidly when Quakers, Unitarians, and deists blossomed too, inspiring Anglican conservatives to prune with greater vigor—especially on the eve of what they feared would be a tolerant and thoroughly pan-Protestant Hanoverian dynasty (1714–1901). But overall, and over time, Old Dissent sank roots in Britain’s rich, cultural soil, which would yield a plentiful harvest of revivals and reforms during the later eighteenth century. Its legendary academies competed with Oxford and Cambridge, training students who achieved disproportionate importance in religion and society. 106 Dissenters shared an “interest” in the future of Great Britain, often termed the “Protestant interest” for its stern anti-Catholicism. 107 They fueled Whig politics and won further concessions in the age of Europe’s social and political revolutions. 108

As Edwards came of age, however, Calvinist Dissent, while extant, was on the wane. 109 Prophets cried for revival of “true religion” in Great Britain. Calvinist clergymen combated the spread of heresy in England, often appealing to older sources of Dissenting orthodoxy. 106 Edwards scanned
their work assiduously, with nervous agitation. As he penned to one of his Scottish friends in 1752, “things are going downhill so fast; truth and religion, both of heart and practice, are departing by such swift steps that I think it must needs be, that a crisis is not very far off.” This sympathetic cleric, John Erskine, kept him up with such declension back in Britain, shipping Edwards some of the most important recent publications. Edwards cherished post-Puritan Dissenting authors best, but he read whatever he could from nonconforming British writers, from William Bates to Anthony Burgess, Philip Doddridge to John Evans, John Flavel to John Gill, Nathaniel Lardner to Isaac Watts. In fact, he used these authors more than he consulted Calvin himself, who by the Restoration era was taken for granted more than read by most Dissenters.

Edwards even engaged many of England’s leading (state) churchmen, both conservative and liberal, as he did his exegesis. A faithful English subject with exalted expectations of the spiritual role of Britain in the history of redemption (more on these below), Edwards watched the leading trends within his country’s state Church and interpreted the Word with them in mind. Thomas Preston has amassed an enormous mound of data on the wealth of biblical scholarship in eighteenth-century England, clarifying the central role of Scripture in a culture that is all too often framed in secular terms: “sermons dominated religious publishing from the Restoration to the middle of the eighteenth century,” he explains:

8,500 sermons were published from 1660 to 1751, about 96 a year. In the decades from 1700 to 1750, an average of 230 books on religion (including Bibles and Prayer Books) was published annually. Excluding Bibles and Prayer Books, the Term Registers for 1700–1750 show the publication of 144 new religious works every year. . . . Biblical commentaries . . . went through an astonishing number of editions: there were ten editions of Matthew Henry’s An Exposition of all the Books of the Old and New Testament within the eighteenth century, and one of Bishop Simon Patrick’s Old Testament Commentary. Biblical commentaries covering both Testaments, including Henry’s, totalled 125 editions.

New Testament commentaries enjoyed equal popularity, totaling 141 editions during the course of the century . . . Borrowings from public and cathedral libraries reflect the publishing figures: books on religious subjects and biblical commentaries top the list.

Neither English national culture nor our subject’s own horizons can be apprehended clearly without reference to these numbers. Quite simply, biblical literature pervaded British life. Anglican lights like Richard Bentley, Samuel Clarke, James Hervey, Richard Kidder, Humphrey Prideaux, Thomas Sherlock, and William Warburton, though hardly mentioned today, were household names in Edwards’ England and crucial sources of his exegetical work.

As I hope is clear by now, Edwards always had a voracious intellectual appetite—from his teens to his early death in 1758. He was certainly no provincial. Though he never moved physically beyond what became the northeastern United States, he circumnavigated the globe with his mind’s eye. His “Catalogue” refers to nearly 800 books. He left 837 items written by others in his own, personal library. He cited nearly 400 separate publications, some dozens of times. He participated avidly in Europe’s Republic of Letters, corresponding with friends in Britain regarding intellectual trends, trading scholarship and opinion on those trends with other writers east and west of the Atlantic, staying abreast of news provided in the leading periodicals, and sharing it with colleagues near and far. Though he lived weeks away from London, Edinburgh, and Paris—on the edge, or frontier, of European civilization—he was central to what some now call the religious, or the Christian, Enlightenment.

Paul Hazard, Peter Gay, and a host of lesser lights once depicted the “Enlightenment” in unitary terms as an anti-Christian movement—or at least a movement meant to undermine traditional orthodoxies—and, comparatively, a potent secularizing scheme. Jonathan Israel and his minions still do much the same today, making Spinoza and his radical, or critical, Enlightenment the leading, cutting edge of early-modern Western thought. But as a host of careful scholars have revealed in recent years, such depictions are misleading. On the ground, few participants in eighteenth-century trends would have understood their purposes in anti-Christian terms. Most were Christian. None of them even used the English word “Enlightenment.” They disagreed constantly about the implications of their intellectual trends for the churches and their teachings. Most in Britain, in particular, preferred what we now call a rather moderate “Enlightenment,” a modernizing movement that was cautious, led by clergy (not exclusively, but largely), brimming with biblicism, ardent supernaturalism, and faith. Even Newton, Locke, and Priestley spent as much time interpreting Scripture as experimenting with nature. Many shared Edwards’ combination of Christian orthodoxy, guarded optimism
regarding moral and scientific progress, eagerness to apply human reason to current challenges, earnestness in pleading for genuine virtue in the world, and intercourse with kindred spirits near the north Atlantic. Many also shared his interest in Isaac Newton and John Locke, Thomas Chubb, Hugo Grotius, Francis Hutcheson, Andrew Michael Ramsay, Matthew Tindal, and other major stars in the age of lights.

However, again, for Edwards himself, as for many other scholars in his sizable but long-neglected exegetical world, this capacious curiosity for early-modern learning took its rise and its bearings from the study of the Bible, from the urge of those within that world to apprehend divine things and make them known to those within their care. Edwards pored over the writings of so many other scholars, first and foremost, as a means of understanding revelation, as an aid to exegesis. He deemed it “better...to have divine truth and light break forth in this way, than it would have been, to have had it shine at once to everyone without any labor or industry of the understanding.” The Word exerted a centripetal force at the center of his world, as the sun of his solar system, not as the sole source of energy and light at his disposal but as the one that helped him understand the rest in the right way. Or to modify our metaphor, the Bible was the key to real knowledge of the Creator and His handiwork in history. So let us now examine Edwards’ view of the key itself, and of the character of those who wield it best.

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The Character of Scripture—and of Its Best Interpreters

"Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful. But his delight is in the law of the Lord; and in his law doth he meditate day and night. And he shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that bringeth forth his fruit in his season; his leaf also shall not wither; and whatsoever he doeth shall prosper.”

Psalm 1:1-3

"He that is of God heareth God’s words: ye therefore hear them not, because ye are not of God.” John 8:47

"Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him. But God hath revealed them unto us by his Spirit; for the Spirit searcheth all things, yea, the deep things of God. ... But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned. But he that is spiritual judgeth all things. ... For who hath known the mind of the Lord, that he may instruct him? But we have the mind of Christ.” 1 Corinthians 2:9-16

"For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost.” 2 Peter 1:21