

THE BIBLE, WITH BACON
A NINETEENTH-CENTURY DISCIPLES RECIPE
FOR RESPONSIBLE BIBLE-READING

by
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"The Bible, with Bacon" calls to mind the steady diet of Bible reading among nineteenth-century Disciples—as here I'll call those from whom come the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), the Christian Churches and the Churches of Christ. In these remarks I will focus on an old but not-to-be-forgotten family recipe for interpreting the Bible. The technical term for my topic, then and now, is hermeneutical theory. But the custom among our religious kin was always to use words that were easily pronounced and understood. Simple fare was best.

What I mean by the Bible, I take it you know. It is fair to note one point, however. Zealous in its effort to uplift the Bible over all tradition, the Campbell-Stone movement accepted the Bible of its tradition, the canon of Old and New Testaments formed within the catholic church and reformed a touch during the protestant Reformation.

The Bacon is Lord Francis Bacon (1561-1626), British philosopher, scientist, diplomat and man-about-town. Back in my own high school days Bacon was given brief billing as the founder of the scientific method—observation, hypothesis and testing—which students were to follow as we dissected our crayfish in biology class. Many years were to pass before I came to learn that Bacon had been of more significance to Disciples than to crayfish. I will recount a bit of personal history here only because it just may have something to say about what has happened to the theological memories of Disciples.

That Disciples wanted to be "biblical" was drummed into me from childhood. And I've never doubted

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it. That they were prone to biblicalism was a suspicion that few seminarians, at least, are able to avoid. Despite the textbooks and some readings in our denominational history, what nineteenth-century Disciples were doing with the Bible never fully dawned on me until middle-age was upon me.

The year 1975 took me to Tuebingen, West Germany. My task was to write a dissertation on an obscure topic (Hegel and Schleiermacher) in early nineteenth-century German theology, the area which—God knows why—I had decided to make my life's work. I studied, among other things, the history of modern biblical interpretation and enjoyed the support and sense of community offered by the Christian Gemeinde and Institute, sponsored by the European Evangelistic Society. It was during those months in Swabia that I began seriously to wonder how, if at all, the Campbell-Stone movement fit into its wider theological context.

The first chance to pursue the question did not come until two years later when at the end of graduate study I escaped unemployment by taking a temporary position teaching religious studies at the University of Montana. Since Disciples history was hardly a regular part of the curriculum, I busted myself with other things. But the invitation to participate in a senior colleague's course on "The Bible in the American Tradition" led me to bone up on the way the so-called major figures in American Protestantism tried to interpret scripture. And as I read the Presbyterians especially, like Charles Hodge the patriarch of the Princeton School, the feeling of *deja vu* was overpowering. If one ignored the direct references to the Reformed confessions, the style and much of the content of the discussion read like the latest issue of Campbell's *Millennial Harbinger*. At the time I merely pondered all this in my heart.

A year later I was at Britte Divinity School where I was slated to teach the required course in Disciples history. As I worked with inter-library loan in order to secure rarely-consulted books by nineteenth-century Disciples, I came up with over ten sources on, of all things, biblical hermeneutics. Among them was a curious

title of 1859, *The Organon of Scripture* by J. S. Lamar.² I dutifully put my 3 x 5 card in the box and my pages of notes in a manila folder.

On the side I began a research project for the Society of Biblical Literature which was to issue a set of books on the history of biblical scholarship in the United States. The series was part of the Society's Centennial Celebration. My topic was Horace Bushnell, a Congregationalist pastor and theologian in New England, who was and still is often cited for introducing "modern liberal theology" into the American church. Controversial in his day, he escaped condemnation for heresy mainly because his adoring congregation withdrew from its regional association of Congregationalist churches. Background reading about Bushnell's critics turned up a 1976 book by Dwight Bozeman³ on the thought of Protestants, mainly Presbyterians, in the South before the Civil War.

One of the points Bozeman makes is that this church, routinely termed "Biblicistic," in fact had a highly developed theory of biblical interpretation going by the name "the Baconian method." And the example that Bozeman chose—for his book on antebellum theologians!—was none other than J. S. Lamar's *The Organon of Scripture*. Since then the journal of the American Society of Church History has published an able article on Lamar's hermeneutics by C. Leonard Allen of Abilene College.⁴ In short, one of our ancestors, little-known J. S. Lamar, has now made what passes for the big-time among American church historians.

So it is that something more, or at least other,

²James S. Lamar, *The Organon of Scripture, Or, the Inductive Method of Biblical Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Lippencott, 1859).

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

⁴C. Leonard Allen, "Baconianism and the Bible in the Disciples of Christ: James S. Lamar and *The Organon of Scripture*," *Church History*, 55, 1 (March 1986), 65-80.

than denominational pride leads me to ask that we recall Lamar's *The Organon of Scripture*. My aim is by no means to urge that Disciples readopt his Baconian method. Bible reading has come a long way from where it was in 1859. But perhaps all of us who trace our roots back to the Campbell-Stone movement can benefit from two reminders.

The first is that despite all the blasts against theology in our history, ours is very much a theological heritage. Lamar was a Georgia preacher but also a scholar. Though he would have wrangled at the word, one would have to call him a theologian. The second is that our nineteenth-century forebears did not stand for indiscriminate but for theologically responsible Bible reading. Like other Disciples Lamar held that the conscience of the Christian was bound by the Bible alone. But the lot of them also held that Bible reading had to be conscientious—studious, rigorous and informed by the best methods of scholarship.

Looking over the methods of his time, Lamar's first choice was the scientific method based on Bacon. In this he was merely working out in detail a view widely shared by his contemporaries including Alexander Campbell, Walter Scott (the President of the movement's first college, Bacon College), Robert Richardson, Robert Milligan and J. W. McGarvey, to name but a few. Lamar had "converted" to the Disciples in his twenties. After a year and a half of study at Campbell's school, he was graduated in 1854 as class valedictorian. His ministry was spent in Georgia including service from 1869 on as an associate editor of *The Christian Standard*. He was only thirty years old when his book was published.

The curious title, *The Organon of Scripture*, is lifted straight from Francis Bacon's book, *Novum Organum*, a new system of knowledge published in 1626. In his day, the dawn of the modern world, Bacon had pressed thinking people to move from superstition to science. Lamar wanted to press nineteenth-century readers of the Bible in the same direction.

His concern was a practical one. As he saw it, the United States was awash with religious skepticism. The cause of doubt and indifference was not really that American hearts were evil, or at least any more so than

hearts anywhere. But religious freedom, the separation of church and state, and pluralism had created a highly competitive religious marketplace. Each group of Christians claimed to be Bible-believers. But their inability to agree on the genuine message of biblical Christianity, as well as their self-righteousness, their combativeness and their divisiveness, undermined the credibility of the faith.

What was needed, Lamar thought, was a method of interpreting the Bible which would allow the book to disclose its true meaning to anyone willing to lay aside crass prejudice. Throughout their history churches had claimed that they wanted to do nothing less. But in Lamar's judgment the gap between what the churches said and what they did was too vast for Evel Knievel's motorcycle to cross. The methods in common use were hardly fit for finding the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth of scripture. As varied as they were, they seemed to fall into two classes, mysticism and dogmatism.

By mysticism Lamar meant the claim to see more in the Bible than its language would support. Back in his day Francis Bacon had found that science was at odds with mysticism in just this sense. In search of the hidden meanings and reasons of things, people were prone to confuse astrology for astronomy, alchemy for chemistry, magic mirrors for optics and so on down the line. So it was with the Bible, according to Lamar: the mystical view was at work whenever the text was spiritualized so that it would fit some appealing religious preconception.

To the errors of mysticism were often added those of dogmatism. Dogmatists arrived at their favorite mystical readings and then called them the infallible word of God. All further inquiry was closed off, and inquirers were liable to church discipline and penalties. The sixteenth-century Protestant reformers protested against this twin evil and laid down the principles for a more healthy approach. But as time passed their churches too came up with mystical meanings which they enshrined in their creeds. To these unquestioned obedience was demanded.

Thus Lamar appealed anew to the principles of the Protestant reformation—that scripture alone is the rule of

faith and practice, that every Christian has an inalienable right to search for the truth of scripture and that the search should focus on and do justice to the texts themselves.

Now and again such comments, whether made by Lamar or other early Disciples, have been said to amount to "freedom of individual interpretation." In one sense they do. But only in one sense, for the point is not to free each Bible reader to find there anything that he or she wants to, but to free the Bible from readings which obscure its actual meaning. That meaning is routinely missed by the idiosyncratic readings of mystics and the close-ended readings of dogmatists.

Now this is a tricky *turn*, as Lamar knew full well. The Campbell-Stone movement intended to unite all Christians on the basis of New Testament (i.e., apostolic) Christianity. To do so the Bible itself had to be the highest authority for the church. Christians had to be free to discover its authority for themselves through hands-on experiences with the texts. And their freedom had to be exercised responsibly. They were duty-bound to attend to the "plain meaning" of biblical language. But here of course Lamar found, as does everyone who takes Bible reading seriously, that the "plain meaning" of the text is never all that plain.

Lamar does not blame the Bible in which God's word is given through human language. He blames its readers. The Bible is at their mercy. If their eyesight is poor, e.g., myopic or astigmatic or marred by cataracts, their readings of the plain meaning will be distorted. The Baconian method is neither more nor less than a corrective lens.

Lamar harkens back to Bacon's warnings against the biases that distort human vision of the world. The *Novum Organum* had called people to guard against four sorts of "idols," that is, false appearances or prejudices. The first, idols of the tribe, are those common mistakes to which all human thinking is prone. Our tendency to over-generalize, to see more order in things than there really is, is one example. The second are idols of the den or cavern, by which he means false impressions due to the background, dispositions, experiences and character traits

peculiar to any given individual. Some of us, e.g., are inclined to prefer tradition over novelty; others, novelty over tradition. Third are idols of the forum or the marketplace. These are false conclusions which arise because of popular but thoughtless views current in our times. The fourth are idols of the theater, more or less sophisticated errors based on false philosophies and false reasoning.

Bible readers, beware of the idol! Following Bacon, Lamar recommends a rigorous, disciplined attempt to stick with what the text itself puts before us. The attempt moves through two phases—first induction and then deduction—or, as we might say, in memory of my crayfish, careful observations, cautious hypotheses and constant re-testing. I will spare you an account of the step-by-step rules that Lamar gives. All of them, however, serve a single aim: to protect the meaning of the biblical texts from inept or unscrupulous readers.

Induction works by observing all of the appearances of a word, a phrase or a theme. Each is compared to the other, taking into account the context within scripture and in ancient literature generally. By this means one gains, as it were, the root meaning of the term. From this base of operations one can move out to more difficult passages, and by forming tentative hypotheses one may make cogent judgments about their meaning. The soundness of these hypotheses must be tested out by further study.

Bacon does not promise that upon the use of his method all difficulties with the Bible vanish or all disagreements among Bible readers cease. But he is convinced that God inspired the biblical authors so that they might reveal, not conceal, the good news. Thus he contends that the Bible can and does disclose its essential message to those who are willing to read it in a responsible manner. Moreover, the Baconian method enables readers who come to differing interpretations of the Bible to reason together.

Lamar thought he was the first to apply the Baconian method to scripture. He was right in the sense that no one else had written an "organon" and worked out a series of rules of interpretation called "Baconian." But

he himself realized that his approach was part and parcel of the nineteenth-century Reformation led by the Campbells, Stone, Scott and others. Indeed the Baconian method was very much the product of post-Enlightenment thinking. It was attuned to currents of rational supernaturalism common among the heirs of British and Scottish philosophers. Similar views were to be found among Presbyterians, Methodists, Congregationalists and even Unitarians of the time.

A specialist in church history will also note that Lamar's rules of interpretation were clearly set out almost a century earlier in the work of Johann August Ernesti, a major German theologian who lived on the borderline of pietism and the Enlightenment. Ernesti did not refer to Lamar's Bacon, and Lamar did not refer to Ernesti. But there is a tie-in. Alexander Campbell was altogether familiar with Ernesti, and his own views on scriptural interpretation were bolstered by appeal to the first (and only) English translation of Ernesti's work which had been put out by Moses Stuart of Andover Theological Seminary, the premier biblical scholar in the United States.⁵ Thus, Lamar's "Baconian method" was already well known to scholars before the recent studies of Bozeman and Allen. But what was known went by the name *grammatisch-historische Interpretation*, grammatico-historical interpretation.

In Germany, grammatico-historical criticism gradually gave way to the full-fledged historical-critical method. Lamar himself lived to see the same thing happen in the United States. By 1900 biblical scholars in the leading schools of mainline protestantism were fast becoming not Baconians but historical critics. Baconianism

⁵Campbell refers to the Stuart translation (*Elements of Interpretation*) of Ernesti's 1761 text, *Institutio Interpretis Novi Testamentum*, in, e.g., *A Connected View of the Principles and Rules by Which the Living Oracles May Be Intelligibly and Certainly Interpreted; Of the Foundation on Which All Christians May Form One Communion; and Of the Capital Positions Sustained in the Attempt to Restore the Original Gospel and Order of Things*, rev. ed. (Bethany, WV: M^WVay and Ewing, 1835).

did not change, but views of it did. What had been the latest word in scholarship came to be seen first as rather old-fashioned, then conservative, then anti-intellectual and finally a mindless biblicism.

I end by mentioning one irony and one lesson. The irony is that the historical-critical method would not have been possible had not the groundwork for it been laid by grammatico-historical criticism. Thus both so-called liberals and so-called conservatives in our church have their roots in the same tradition.

The lesson is that it is a disservice to the heritage of the Campbell-Stone movement when its serious theological purpose is ignored. Primitivism, simplicity, reformation and restoration were common themes. But our nineteenth-century ancestors were not as theologically naive as many of us, their descendants, have been led to think. To them a church without sound "theology" was a contradiction in terms. True, they demanded that "theology" be altogether biblical. Precisely for this reason, however, they were devoted to a reading of scripture which was anything but an unbridled, undisciplined, uninformed and uncritical encounter with the texts.

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