

Genesis, Science, and Scriptural Authority at Old Princeton

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Open up a general work on church history, check in the index for “Princeton theology,” and if nothing else you will find a reference to the doctrine of biblical inerrancy. In its most distilled form, the standard treatment will present a virtual syllogism: according to the doctrine of biblical inerrancy, the scriptures are the word of God, and since God cannot lie, the scriptures must convey truth without error in all their affirmations. The classic statement of this view came in an 1881 article by A. A. Hodge and B. B. Warfield entitled simply “Inspiration,” one in a series of pieces in the *Presbyterian Review* on the subject of scriptural authority in the light of modern critical theories.¹

This syllogistic reduction of the doctrine is of course far too simplistic, glossing over the careful nuances and qualifications that the Princetonians, especially Warfield in his extensive writings on the subject, were always careful to state.² More than that, it makes the doctrine seem fundamentally *a priori*—a matter of precommitment or logical requirement—rather than a belief shaped by actual interaction with the text. This is one reason (together with their robust defense of the Reformed creeds) why critics of the Princetonians sometimes charged them with scholasticism.

When particular Bible verses do come into consideration, even the more careful expositions of the Princetonian doctrine of inerrancy tend to focus on those scriptural passages

¹ Archibald Alexander Hodge and Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, “Inspiration,” *Presbyterian Review* 2 (1881): 225-60.

² Revelation and Inspiration.

that served as proof-texts: 2 Timothy 3:16, for example. I propose instead to present several instances of the Princetonians at work with the text of Genesis, giving us an opportunity to observe how their regard for biblical truthfulness operated “on the ground” in the face of the scientific and critical challenges that occasioned their articulation of the doctrine in the first place. What emerges is an understanding and application of biblical authority that differs in several respects from typical fundamentalist uses, and overturns prevalent misconceptions of how a doctrine of inerrancy affects the interaction of theology with science.

Caricatures of Princeton’s doctrine of inerrancy abound. In July 1891 Princeton’s Old Testament professor, “Rabbi” William Henry Green, sent Warfield a newspaper clipping commenting on the controversy raging in the Presbyterian Church around confession revision, biblical authority, and the heresy trial of Charles A. Briggs. It reprinted from the *New Englander* the following statement by Leonard W. Bacon:

The defence by the Princeton divines of their favorite thesis of the absolute inerrancy of Holy Scripture is rested, in the last resort, on the absolute impossibility of determining exactly and beyond question what Holy Scripture originally was and what it meant. . . . [T]he ingenuous young Timothys under training at Princeton for the Holy War, are encouraged to plant themselves boldly on the doctrine of the infallibility of the Scriptures, and bid defiance to the armies of the aliens. In answer to profane allegations of ‘discrepancy’ in the sacred text, they are instructed to hurl into the teeth of the caviler the question, ‘How do you know it was in the original autograph?’ and demand the proof—which it is safe to say that no mortal can give; and if, after such a knock-down as this, the uncircumcised Philistine shall come staggering up to renew the fight, they must be ready and let him have the next right in the forehead: ‘How do you know that that is what it means?’³

This charge—that the doctrine of inerrancy in the original manuscripts amounted to a dodge allowing one to claim perfection for the Bible but to hide behind the lost originals when any unresolvable difficulty arose—would crop up again and again. Ernest Sandeen revived it in

³ Unidentified clipping, attached to William Henry Green to B. B. Warfield, 25 July 1891 (Warfield Papers, PTS).

his *The Roots of Fundamentalism* (date); Donald Rogers and Jack McKim did likewise in *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible* (date).⁴ Once again, the argument seems merely a logical one, as though having made their non-falsifiable claim, the Princetonians had no further need to engage with the text in its relation to science and biblical criticism.

In point of fact, though, the Princetonians' inerrantism led them to serious and creative exploration of the text of Genesis in order to achieve some harmony with modern scientific theories. They are famous—indeed notorious, in fundamentalist circles—for having allegedly betrayed their doctrine of biblical authority by striking a compromise with evolution. On such a reading the Princeton theologians were blatantly inconsistent, seduced by the spirit of the age. Meanwhile, of course, more liberal interpreters fault the Princetonians for an overly scientized doctrine of scripture, yet applaud their openness to reinterpreting Genesis.

The historical record is clear that the very decades that saw the Princetonians articulate an ever more careful doctrine of scripture, also saw them striving mightily to preserve the union of God's works with his word by interpreting Genesis, within bounds, in the light of modern theories. Let us consider some instances of this, using several of the lesser known Princetonians as they addressed the question of the antediluvian genealogies, the relation of the Hebrew narratives to their Assyrian/Babylonian counterparts, the evolution or brute ancestry of human beings, and the historicity of Adam and Eve.

⁴ The dodge came about, they claim, in the 1878 edition of A. A. Hodge's *Outlines of Theology*, where the younger Hodge allegedly departed from his father Charles's likening of biblical errors to mere flecks of sandstone in the marble of the Parthenon. Green, enclosing the clipping to Warfield, wrote, "As it is aimed at your position (not that of Dr. Chas. Hodge & mine) I pass it on to you." This suggests that the Princetonians themselves acknowledged some difference of opinion within their camp—but Green's own later writings show a pretty robust inerrantism.

William Henry Green

At the time of the Briggs and Confession Revision controversies, ca. 1890, Old Testament professor “Rabbi” Green was a venerable man of some 65 years and the senior member of the faculty. Warfield wrote in 1895, “Dr. Green is now our Nestor, & he is a Nestor of whom we are very proud. We are trying to keep abreast of modern scholarship & of ancient faith, at one & the same time: & we find no difficulty in mixing them, when we take good care that each shall be the true thing.”⁵ Green’s final decade would prove his most productive, in terms of publications, as the old man churned out articles for the *Presbyterian and Reformed Review* and several notable books on Old Testament criticism.⁶

Green and Warfield did not see entirely eye to eye, as surviving correspondence in the Warfield papers at PTS attests. When Green sent Warfield the aforementioned clipping of Bacon’s caricature of Princeton’s inerrantism, he wrote, “As it is aimed at your position (not that of Dr. Chas. Hodge and mine) I pass it over to you.”⁷ Apparently Green was referring to the stress laid on the now-lost autographs, an apologetical move he preferred not to emphasize—though he may have been referring to a contrast between the insistence on “absolute inerrancy” and Charles Hodge’s famous comparison of biblical glitches to specks of sandstone in the marble of the Parthenon.⁸ As Green wrote on another occasion, in regard to the Portland Deliverance that made inerrancy a test of fitness for ministry, “I am not as sure as you seem to be of the wisdom of the Assembly pronouncing in so positive a form upon the inerrancy of Scripture and inviting all to leave its ranks who do not accept it.” He hastened to add, however, “That such

⁵ W to Caspar René Gregory, 3/3/1895. Orig in Harvard.

⁶ *The Hebrew Feasts; The Unity of the Book of Genesis; The Higher Criticism of the OT* (2 vols: *The Text, The Canon*). List articles too, esp the one on Briggs and Hi Crit.

⁷ Green to Warfield, 25 July 1891.

⁸ On the abuses of Hodge’s statement, see John D. Woodbridge, *Biblical Authority: A Critique of the Rogers/McKim Proposal* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 129-31.

was the view of the authors of our Standards, and of the Reformers is indubitable. And I rejoice in what you have done and propose to do to make that increasingly clear.” Still, when a candidate is “puzzled and bewildered . . . by having inerrancy of the original Scriptures forced upon him as dogma, when he had no hesitation as to its infallibility in doctrine & duty,” his situation “is world wide removed from that of the man whose critical or philosophical theory discredits the historical truth of the Bible.” Green differed from Warfield on the tactical question of church requirements, not the doctrinal question of biblical inerrancy. He did not wish to see measures like the Portland Deliverance drive non-inerrantist or questioning Bible-believers into the camp of the opposition.

I am sorry to have men, who are in doubt whether the details of Gen. i. are in absolute harmony with scientific facts, or whether every trivial discrepancy in the Bible admits of a satisfactory explanation—I am sorry, I say, to have such men who are without critical or philosophical bias & with whom it is a mere matter of trivial detail, fell obliged to array themselves with those whose principles are utterly subversive of Scripture truth.⁹

Within the Princeton citadel there was room for disagreement over tactical matters, even as Warfield and Green labored side by side on behalf of the truthfulness of God’s word.

Indeed it was the conviction of the Bible’s truthfulness that drove Green and his fellows to work carefully in the text when its reliability was cast in doubt by scientific and critical theories. He wrote, “The Holy Spirit does not persuade the soul to embrace that as divinely true which is evidenced to the understanding as critically false.”¹⁰ When challenges arise,

this is but the providential method of compelling lovers of God’s word to a deeper and more careful study of its contents. They must spoil the Egyptians. They must take the learning of their foes and their results elaborated with hostile intent, and

⁹ Green to Warfield, 25 July 1892.

¹⁰ Green, Briggs’s Higher Criticism, *PRR* 4 (1893): 553, cited in Marion Ann Taylor, *The Old Testament in the Old Princeton School*, 237.

build them into secure defences, or gather from them what shall contribute to a more complete elucidation or a more vivid presentation of heavenly truth.¹¹

A prime example is Green's investigation of the genealogies in Genesis 5 and 11, a move that so relieved Bible-believers in his day that one of them called it "the most important biblical discovery of our time."¹² Back in 1862, when the bishop of Natal, John William Colenso, challenged the historical accuracy of the Pentateuch, Green, then a young man, decided not to close his eyes to Colenso's arguments but to tackle them head on. Reading Colenso carefully in tandem with the Genesis text proved a formative experience, for Green quickly saw many flaws in what had at first had seemed a very threatening book.¹³ Thereafter he had great confidence in "spoiling the Egyptians," and taught generations of students at Princeton not to fear modern scholarship. "Turn on the lights," he said, "—but turn on *all* the lights." Now in 1890, when the Briggs affair brought the issue of higher criticism to a crisis in the Presbyterian Church, Green summarized and updated his old argument in an article entitled "Primeval Chronology." On internal textual evidence, he argued, Ussher's chronology was wrong. The Flood is depicted already as long past in the time of Abraham—yet a face-value calculation from the genealogy would make Noah in old age Abraham's contemporary. The genealogies in Genesis 5 and 11 must contain gaps, as one might expect from the well-known gaps in other biblical genealogies. These were not errors but practices standard in their day and in keeping with the purposes of the text. In later years, when the theory of human evolution was making headway, Warfield would make use of Green's argument to allow even hundreds of thousands of years in those gaps. "The

¹¹ Green, "The Genuineness of the Pentateuch," *Presbyterian Quarterly and Princeton Review* (ck!) (1878), cited in Taylor, 223.

¹² The story is fully told in Ronald L. Numbers, " 'The Most Important Biblical Discovery of Our Time': William Henry Green and the Demise of Ussher's Chronology," *Church History* 69 (2000): 257-76.

¹³ John William Colenso, *The Pentateuch and Book of Joshua Critically Examined* (); Green, *The Pentateuch Vindicated from the Aspersions of Bishop Colenso* (New York: John Wiley, 1863). Taylor notes that Green wrote in the margins of his copy of Colenso's book such remarks as "Whole thing garbled" — "Bah!" — "What outrageous misrepresentation" — "ALL FUDGE! Is it for this we are to give up faith in the Bible?" (218).

question of the antiquity of man,” he wrote, “has of itself no theological significance,” though the unity of the human race and the historicity of Adam emphatically do.¹⁴ Both he and Green believed that scientific advances had prompted a salutary reevaluation of the Genesis text—not to discredit it, but to distinguish its essential doctrinal teaching from misinterpretations of its historical incidentals. This was still inerrantist interpretation: the claim was not the Schleiermachiian one that Bible is correct on spiritual and moral matters while containing errors of science and history. Rather, the Bible is true in what it was intended to teach; people do not have *carte blanche* to tease out of scripture answers to questions it was not given to address. Nevertheless, even on a question like the length of human existence on earth, which Genesis was never intended to answer, the text did not give untruth.

George T. Purves

Warfield’s great friend from college and seminary days, George Purves, joined the Princeton faculty in what had been Warfield’s own specialty, New Testament, in 1891—again during those crucial years of battle in the Presbyterian Church. Before accepting the chair Purves wrote his friend a frank letter laying his theological cards on the table. Declaring himself “in cordial sympathy with the type of theology taught by Dr. Charles Hodge,” Purves added,

I do not feel the necessity always of insisting on as high a minimum of orthodoxy as you do and am more inclined to permit comprehension of different views in the Church. While heartily believing the whole Bible to be historically truthful, I am impressed also with an occasional neglect of accuracy or exactness in its historical statement which does not in my view amount to error (because in such instances exactness is not required) but which does exhibit the extremely natural mode of their composition, and makes me anxious not to have the doctrine of verbal inspiration, until it is clearly explained and rightly understood, pushed into the foreground.

¹⁴ Warfield, “On the Antiquity and Unity of the Human Race,” *PTR* 9 (1911): 1.

As to higher criticism, he confessed he was still “seeking further light.” “And while believing in the inerrancy of Scripture when that term is properly understood, I would not be willing to have inerrancy, without at least further definition, made a confessional term nor test of ecclesiastical standing.” He concluded, “I assume that you & Drs. Green & [Caspar Wistar] Hodge know me—and that without expecting me to agree with you in all things, you think me a proper occupant for the chair.”¹⁵

Once again one observes here a range of opinion (though a fairly narrow one) on the doctrine of scripture within the Princeton fold, and in this case one also sees a perhaps surprising openness on such matters even in the teeth of church controversy. Warfield’s reply may be more surprising still: he said he looked forward to many more such frank discussions when Purves would come to Princeton, together working toward conclusions “so much in common that I at least may hardly know the *meum* from the *teum*.” Of course Princeton had a heritage to keep up, but beyond holding to “‘Princeton theology’ (by which we mean the type of theology taught by Dr Hodge), no one here is inclined to add anything.”¹⁶ Clearly Princeton did not demand perfect accord (though it did expect substantial accord) on the doctrine of scripture. Indeed, as Jeff Stivason has recently shown, Warfield’s own understanding of the mode of inspiration changed over time.¹⁷

Purves did come to Princeton and kept up a fast friendship with Warfield until his untimely death in 1901. His New Testament work was characterized by a profoundly developmental approach, something he had in common with Geerhardus Vos, first professor of Biblical Theology at Princeton. In a book review written in 1892 Purves remarked positively on

¹⁵ George T. Purves to Warfield, 20 May 1891 (Warfield Papers, PTS).

¹⁶ Warfield to Purves, 23 May 1891 (Warfield Papers, PTS).

¹⁷ Jeffrey A. Stivason, “From Inscrutability to Concursus: Benjamin B. Warfield’s Theological Construction of Inspiration’s Mode from 1880 to 1915” (Ph.D. dissertation, Westminster Theological Seminary, 2013).

the value of “realizing the evolution of revelation as God wrought through human media the perfect disclosure of saving truth.” A striking phrase, to be sure: “the evolution of revelation”—meaning not the higher critics’ vision of scripture as an imperfect record in which may be traced the gradual purification of Israel’s religion from polytheism to high ethical monotheism, but the diachronic unfolding of divine truth, itself unchanging but progressively revealed over time through human agency under the superintendence of God. Purves lauded the book under review for its historical point of view, even as he critiqued its yielding, “we think unnecessarily, not a few points in the supposed interests of criticism.”¹⁸ This combination of keen interest in historical process while maintaining the truthfulness of scripture characterized the Princeton theology in the Warfield years. It was especially prominent in the work of Old Testament scholar John D. Davis.

John D. Davis

Green’s successor in 1900, Davis taught Hebrew at Princeton in the 1880s and became Professor of Semitic Philology and Old Testament History in 1892. As the title of his chair suggests, Davis specialized in the Ancient Near East, having studied the hot new field of Assyriology at Leipzig. His book, *Genesis and Semitic Tradition* (1894), was an outstanding example of what Green had called “spoiling the Egyptians”: Davis investigated in depth the remarkable parallels between the stories of creation, the temptation, Cain and Abel, the Flood, and the Tower of Babel as told in Genesis and in the recently discovered Assyrian tablets. What the higher critics took as hard historical evidence of their theory that the Jews compiled the so-

¹⁸ Purves, review of *Messianic Prophecy*, by Edward Riehm, *PRR* 3 (1892): 554.

called books of Moses only after the Babylonian exile, Davis employed to show, even on higher critical principles, the priority and purity of the Hebrew account in Genesis.

One detailed example will suffice. In his chapter on the Creation of Man, Davis compared the Babylonian, Egyptian, and Hebrew versions of the story. “The Babylonian priest Berosus relates . . . that Bel removed his head and other gods (or god) mixed the outflowing blood with earth and formed men; wherefore they are intelligent and partake of divine thought.”

As for the Egyptian account, evidently more recent,

It appears in its most elaborate form in a prayer and not in a formal account of the creation of man. A king is represented as approaching Chnum, the creator, and addressing the god thus: “I draw nigh to thee, holy architect, creator of the gods, builder of the egg, peerless one. At thy will the potter’s wheel was brought unto thee, and on it thou didst model gods and men. Thou art the great, exalted god who in the beginning first formed this world” The words of another inscription are more like the Hebrew transmission: “The great living god, who formed man and breathed the breath of life into his nose”

The third account has been transmitted by the Hebrews. “The Lord God formed man out of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living soul.”¹⁹

The question, Davis argued, was the relationship between these accounts. “Have Babylonian and Egyptian originals been stripped of everything repugnant to worshippers of the spiritual God to yield the Hebrew account, or is it the pure tradition which during transmission by other people became fantastically elaborated and corrupted?” On higher critical terms, favoring the simple over the complex in view of the likelihood that later generations are more likely to add to sacred texts than to subtract from them, the Hebrew account was arguably the purer.

Experience or revelation or both [n.b.] had taught that man’s body is formed of the dust of the earth. The truth was also firmly grasped that God is the creator of all things. The resulting doctrine was that God created man, determining his shape and figure, forming him of the dust and giving to him life and breath. This is the basis of the story, the truth upon which man built. Its formal enunciation

¹⁹ Davis, *Genesis and Semitic Tradition*, 36-37.

has no fascination, does not charm the imaginative mind, does not comport with [the] Oriental mode of expression. Not content with a bald statement of the truth, fervent minds sought to lend life and color to the picture by portraying details and introducing explanations which a vivid imagination furnished.

Thus the Egyptian, familiar with potter's wheels, "conceives of the creator standing before the revolving disk and moulding the forms of gods and men out of earth." And "the speculative Babylonian, knowing that the life is in the blood, wove into the accepted doctrine the theory that the creating god removed his head and had the outflowing blood mixed with earth in order that the man to be might live." But "the Hebrew historian, controlled by his lofty conception of God, refused to give flight to the imagination or to follow the grossness of heathen speculation." The Hebrew account is "nearer to the bald statement of the truth. . . . It is evidently the original stream of the tradition, colored—not discolored—by the nature of the channel through which it courses, but possessing still the character which it had at the fountain-head."²⁰

It is striking how far Davis went to put his argument in terms of the new science of higher criticism. He allowed the possibility that the creation story in Genesis 2 involved human speculation based on the natural order of things. He emphasized the role of cultural traits in shaping texts. He agreed that the similarities of the three accounts strongly suggest a common origin. He used the principle of preferring the simple over the complex as the likely original source. Admit all that, he argued, and the Genesis account stands as likely "the original stream of the tradition."

Elsewhere Davis argued from the progressive development of religious practices to show, again, the historical grounds for disbelieving in the Wellhausen-Kuenen view of the books of Moses. They claimed that those books were not written by Moses at the dawn of Hebrew national history, but assembled by a series of redactors toward the end of that history, after the

²⁰ Ibid., 38-40.

Babylonian captivity. Davis argued instead that the Egyptian milieu better explains the laws of Moses. The rituals of worship God commanded of Moses were tailored to the conceptions and tastes of Near Eastern peoples at an already high stage of religious development—just that situation that obtained in Egypt in Moses’ day. “The formal worship, viewed in each detail and accessory, and the tout ensemble, was a finished product of evolution. . . . The simple and obvious had become complex and recondite. . . . Public worship had reached a state of high refinement. Can it be thought strange that the Hebrew legislator should start the national worship of his people with an elaborate ritual?” So God indeed gave the Law supernaturally to Moses, but prepared the people for it by the evolution of religious ritual in Egypt.²¹

This was the man who taught Old Testament Survey to first-term seminarians at Princeton. Davis went on to assemble a *Dictionary of the Bible*, his most lasting contribution, in the articles of which we may observe an official Princeton line on questions of exegesis and Bible history in Genesis and elsewhere. [Elaborate this in final version.]

Conclusion

Even in these few examples we see the Princetonians considering the text of the Bible in relation to modern historical discoveries and theories. Their response to challenges was far from the caricature the enemies of inerrantism presented. They certainly did not simply hide behind the lost originals. [To be elaborated in presentation.]

²¹ Davis, “Current Old Testament Discussions and Princeton Opinion,” *PRR* 13 (1902): 196-97.