

# A PEOPLE OF ONE BOOK



THE BIBLE AND THE  
VICTORIANS

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TIMOTHY LARSEN

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# Introduction

The eighteenth-century leader of the evangelical revival, John Wesley, famously described himself as ‘a man of one book’.<sup>1</sup> He did not mean, of course, that he only read or valued one book—the Bible. Indeed, displaying his respect for classical learning, Wesley actually made his comment in Latin (*homo unius libri*), and he edited a series of fifty volumes of vital texts from across the centuries as a way of commending a starter library to his lay preachers. What Wesley meant was that one book—the Bible—was the Alpha and Omega of his life and thought—the foundation stone and the unrivalled pinnacle. In the same way, although the Victorians were awash in texts, the thesis of this volume is that they were a ‘people of one book’—that the Bible loomed uniquely large in Victorian culture in fascinating and underexplored ways. The extent of the Bible’s dominance, presence, and reach has to be encountered in the specifics of Victorian lives to be grasped fully, and thus this claim is supported by offering detailed, textured accounts of the lives, words, and thought of a range of Victorians from E. B. Pusey to Annie Besant, from Florence Nightingale to C. H. Spurgeon, from Catherine Booth to T. H. Huxley, from Grace Aguilar to Charles Bradlaugh, from Cardinal Wiseman to Elizabeth Fry, and more.

In short, this book explores the remarkable extent to which the Bible was a dominant presence in Victorian thought and culture. Numerous volumes—all mining different veins—could be written on the rich theme of the Bible and the Victorians. One approach would be to examine how the

<sup>1</sup> For a study of Wesley and Scripture, see Donald A. Bullen, *A Man of One Book? John Wesley’s Interpretation of the Bible* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2007).

Scriptures were the foundational textbook in schools and the main volume through which people gained basic literacy skills. For much of the nineteenth century many children learned to read at Sunday schools or at schools sponsored by churches or non-denominational religious organizations. The Scriptures were central in such contexts as a matter of course. Even in independent, working-class schools the Bible was still the standard book used ‘for learning to read and for reading practice’.<sup>2</sup> This scriptural rite of passage to literacy was common for those educated at home as well. Even after universal state education was enacted in 1870 the Bible retained a fundamental place in schooling throughout the Victorian age. No less a figure than the polemical agnostic T. H. Huxley voted for the London School Board resolution on the core curriculum for elementary school children that named the Bible first, and only thereafter listed reading, writing, and arithmetic. Another approach would be to study the circulation of the Scriptures in the nineteenth century. Leslie Howsam, for example, has written an important study focused on the British and Foreign Bible Society.<sup>3</sup> Howsam’s book takes the reader into a culture with organizations such as the Society for Reading Aloud the Word of God in Open Air—a title that it would be hard for even Charles Dickens to improve upon.<sup>4</sup>

Dickens serves to remind us that the centrality of the Bible in the Victorian age is amply revealed in its literature. The Scriptures were the common cultural currency of the Victorians. There are only two kinds of eminent Victorian authors—the kind who have had a whole book written about their use of Scripture and the kind who are ripe for such attention. The making of such books was begun by the Victorians themselves. For example, the influential art critic, John Ruskin, although he did not hold dogmatic religious views, nevertheless warranted a 303-page work entitled *The Bible References of John Ruskin* (1898).<sup>5</sup> Extraordinarily, this is an exploration of his work in the genre of a Bible dictionary. The first entry is ‘Aaron, Death of’ and the last one is ‘Zedekiah’. An appendix arranges this

<sup>2</sup> Phil Gardner, *The Lost Elementary Schools of Victorian England: The People’s Education* (London: Croom Helm, 1984), 177.

<sup>3</sup> Leslie Howsam, *Cheap Bibles: Nineteenth-Century Publishing and the British and Foreign Bible Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

<sup>4</sup> Howsam, *Cheap Bibles*, 180.

<sup>5</sup> Mary and Ellen Gibbs, *The Bible References of John Ruskin* (London: George Allen, 1898).

material in canonical order by chapter from the fourteen references in Ruskin's works to Genesis chapter 1 to the nine references to Revelation chapter 22. Christina Rossetti is one of the most celebrated poets of the Victorian age. A scholar has produced a 256-page concordance of biblical allusions in her poetry.<sup>6</sup> A rather substantial such concordance could be compiled for any major Victorian poet, I suspect. The poet P. B. Shelley was one of the first public atheists in nineteenth-century elite culture. Irreligion and biblical illiteracy, however, do not correlate in this period and therefore there is an Oxford monograph entitled *Shelley and Scripture*.<sup>7</sup> Lord Byron is likewise not known for his piety or faith. One of his most famous poems is 'She walks in beauty', but few who admire it today are aware that it was originally published in a volume of his verse that had as its unifying theme the Old Testament, *Hebrew Melodies*. Many of the very titles of the poems in that collection are simply pure scriptural quotations.<sup>8</sup> Recently, my colleague Jeff Barbeau has published a book on the poet and philosopher S. T. Coleridge's use of Scripture.<sup>9</sup> The poet and critic Matthew Arnold's interest in Scripture is readily apparent. As Stefan Collini has observed: 'certainly no single text engaged his critical energies to anything like the same extent as did the Bible.'<sup>10</sup>

There is, of course, a book on the Bible and Dickens.<sup>11</sup> This premier Victorian novelist took his religion in his stride, disliked zealous and doctrinaire Christians, and left his wife for a mistress. Nevertheless, Dickens so assumed that every Victorian should know the contents of the Bible that he even created his own harmony of the Gospels as a tool for the education of his children.<sup>12</sup> In his last will, Dickens exhorted his offspring not to be bound by any dogmatic scheme but to take their rule of life directly from

<sup>6</sup> Nilda Jiménez (compiler), *The Bible and the Poetry of Christina Rossetti* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1979). For a study of her handling of Scripture, see Timothy Larsen, 'Christina Rossetti, the Decalogue, and Biblical Interpretation', *Zeitschrift für Neuere Theologiegeschichte*, 16, 1 (2009), 21–36.

<sup>7</sup> Bryan Shelley, *Shelley and Scripture: The Interpreting Angel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994).

<sup>8</sup> Lord Byron, *Hebrew Melodies* (London: John Murray, 1815).

<sup>9</sup> Jeffrey W. Barbeau, *Coleridge, the Bible, and Religion* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

<sup>10</sup> Stefan Collini, 'Arnold, Matthew (1822–1888)', in H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Harrison (eds), *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 60 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 2, 487–94.

<sup>11</sup> Janet L. Larson, *Dickens and the Broken Scripture* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1985). See also, Robert C. Hanna, *The Dickens Christian Reader: a collection of New Testament teachings and Biblical references from the works of Charles Dickens* (New York: AMS Press, 2000).

<sup>12</sup> Charles Dickens, *The Life of Our Lord* (London: Associated Newspapers Ltd, 1934).

the New Testament.<sup>13</sup> Pick up an annotated edition of any Victorian novel and the notes will include biblical allusions that it never occurred to the author would ever need explaining. The Bible provided an essential set of metaphors and symbols. Scriptural knowledge is a required pre-requisite for entering into a Victorian author's imaginative world; it is what Northrop Frye called 'the great code' for understanding their works.<sup>14</sup> Literary scholars therefore have provided much of the scholarship that maps the vast terrain of the Bible and the Victorians. A recent, useful introductory text on nineteenth-century literature and religion, for example, is attuned to interactions with Scripture, and numerous specialized monographs have been published.<sup>15</sup> A particularly satisfying and stimulating volume which underlines that the Victorians were a people of one book is *Victorian Interpretation*. In it, Suzy Anger uncovers how the interpretation of all texts in the Victorian age was deeply indebted to scriptural hermeneutics and avers that this genesis has left a permanent mark on literary studies.<sup>16</sup> Likewise, this study, *A People of One Book*, reveals how the Bible provided an irreplaceable linguistic register not only for novelists and poets, but for the Victorians in general.

The content of the Scriptures also loomed large in nineteenth-century visual arts. The older school of Academy painters was comprised of artists who pursued biblical subjects as part of their work such as Charles Lock Eastlake's *Hagar and Ishmael* or William Dyce's *Joash shooting the Arrow of Deliverance*. The most significant new school of painting was the quintessentially Victorian art of the Pre-Raphaelites. Iconoclasts that they were in other ways, the Pre-Raphaelites were even more scriptural than their predecessors.<sup>17</sup> Not content with merely a biblical theme and title, Holman

<sup>13</sup> Rowland E. Prothero, *The Life and Correspondence of Arthur Penrhyn Stanley, D.D.*, 2 vols (London: John Murray, 1894), II, 317. (Stanley read from Dickens's will in a memorial sermon for the novelist at Westminster Abbey.)

<sup>14</sup> Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982).

<sup>15</sup> Mark Knight and Emma Mason, *Nineteenth-Century Religion and Literature: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006). A recent volume with a wider chronological sweep is Rebecca Lemon, Emma Mason, Jonathan Roberts, and Christopher Rowland (eds), *The Blackwell Companion to the Bible in English Literature* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009). As to the monographs see, for example, Sue Zemka, *Victorian Testaments: The Bible, Christology, and Literary Authority in Early-Nineteenth-Century British Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997).

<sup>16</sup> Suzy Anger, *Victorian Interpretation* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005).

<sup>17</sup> Michaela Giebelhausen, *Painting the Bible: Representation and Belief in Mid-Victorian Britain* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006).

Hunt even had the frames of his paintings inscribed with scriptural texts. *The Finding of the Saviour in the Temple* has Malachi 3: 1, ‘And the Lord, whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to his Temple,’ written out in the painting itself in both Hebrew and Latin, while the frame adds the New Testament reading, Luke 2: 48–9, in English. *The Scapegoat* has Isaiah 53: 4 written out on the top of the frame, balanced by Leviticus 16: 22 on the bottom. The third version of his most famous painting, *The Light of the World*, has Revelation 3: 20 in capital letters at its base: ‘Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me.’<sup>18</sup> George P. Landow’s classic study of the contours of Victorian biblical allusions combined both literature and the visual arts.<sup>19</sup>

Still other approaches would include examining the ordinary reader and the Bible, along the lines of Jonathan Rose’s work, or the Victorian commitment to the Bible in relationship to race—as in the work of Colin Kidd—or to imperialism, as R. S. Sugirtharajah has done.<sup>20</sup> The approach taken in this study, however, is particularly in line with the emphasis on understanding the varieties of spiritual communities and schools of thought used by historians of religion. Moreover, it does not follow the well-trampled path of chronicling the Victorian encounter with modern biblical criticism. An early example, *The Bible in the Nineteenth Century*, was already being written before the Victorian age was over.<sup>21</sup> Willis B. Glover’s mid-twentieth-century monograph is likewise typical of the scholarship that has come after it in that although he observes that ‘the English became “the people of a book” to a degree that was rare in the rest of Christendom’,

<sup>18</sup> For photographs of Hunt’s frames, see Judith Bronkhurst, *William Holman Hunt: A Catalogue Raisonné*, 2 vols (New Haven: Yale University Press for the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, 2006).

<sup>19</sup> George P. Landow, *Victorian Types, Victorian Shadows: Biblical Typology in Victorian Literature, Art and Thought* (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980).

<sup>20</sup> Jonathan Rose, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001); Colin Kidd, *The Forging of Races: Race and Scripture in the Protestant Atlantic World, 1600–2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); R. S. Sugirtharajah, *The Bible and Empire: Postcolonial Explorations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005). A recent cultural history with a wider chronological and geographical sweep is Lori Anne Ferrell, *The Bible and the People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).

<sup>21</sup> J. Estlin Carpenter, *The Bible in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1903). (Carpenter wrote in the preface that he had begun the project in 1900.)

his interest is not in displaying this Scripture-saturated culture, but rather in presenting the sources of its dissolution.<sup>22</sup>

Again, the unique and extraordinary centrality of this one book could be documented and explored in many ways. The structure of this volume is to show that it holds true across the religious and sceptical traditions. One book—the Bible alone, *sola Scriptura*—is a Protestant principle that, when the Victorian age is thought of, is particularly associated with evangelicalism in the minds of many. This study will indeed show what such a commitment looked like for nineteenth-century evangelical Protestants, but it will demonstrate furthermore that the Scriptures were also a preoccupation in the other varieties of belief and unbelief, and thus across the whole range of Victorian thought. Victorian atheists gave their best and most sustained labours to wrestling with Scripture; Victorian Unitarians commended their faith as more biblical than orthodox; Victorian Quakers experienced the inner light as a text prompter; Victorian liberal Anglicans weakened their doctrine of Scripture without loosening their grip on it; and so one could go on. This study will also bring back into view the Bible's place in marking the rhythm of life (most notably through morning and evening private and household devotions) and how it was the lens through which people saw their own experiences.

The aim of displaying the Victorians as a people of one book in this way is pursued through case studies of representative figures from the diverse traditions. As to the variety of traditions, the desire has been to be as comprehensive as possible within the limits of the space available. Therefore, it is hoped that this monograph will also serve as a useful tour of Victorian religion generally. While a common preoccupation with Scripture is a unifying theme, care is taken in each case study to show how this tradition thought about the nature of the Bible differently and pursued distinctive interpretative habits so that the diversity of Victorians' interactions with 'the book' is also underlined, elucidated, and explored. The common currency of the Bible is set in contrast to the distinctive theological views and practices of each tradition which are also carefully presented:

<sup>22</sup> Willis B. Glover, *Evangelical Nonconformists and Higher Criticism in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Independent Press, 1954), 16. John Rogerson has been a leading scholar in this field: see, for example, his *Old Testament Criticism in the Nineteenth Century: England and Germany* (London: SPCK, 1984). The Bible in the eighteenth century has likewise recently been rethought: Jonathan Sheehan, *The Enlightenment Bible: Translation, Scholarship, Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

many of the figures in this volume had such divergent views that they publically denounced one another as heretical, erroneous, or dangerous. Admittedly, the notion of an individual being ‘representative’ of a tradition is problematic and contestable. Nevertheless, an effort is made toward the start of each case study to commend the choice of this particular figure as defensible.

It is regrettable that accounts of religious history traditionally have so often focused overwhelmingly on men—and particularly so for studies of the Victorian age when we know that at most worship services a majority of those in attendance were women. Therefore, I committed from the beginning to design this volume so that at least half of the case-study figures would be women. Some readers might wonder if this goal has sometimes been a little in tension with the desire for a figure to be representative given that official representatives (bishops, for example) were more often—if not invariably—men in most traditions, but the author at any rate is satisfied that both aims have been sufficiently achieved. Moreover, choosing women subjects for many of the case studies has provided a deeper and richer connection to the lived experience of faith and doubt in the Victorian era and generated stimulating results that recast some set-piece assumptions and generalizations about various traditions in fruitful ways.

It should also be noted that the geographical scope of this study is confined to England due to the limitations of both space in the volume and stamina in the author (who felt able to have a go at Lake District peaks, but was daunted by Snowdon, let alone the Munros). The order of the chapters is simply the order in which they were researched, and this has no relationship to any internal logic of the subject matter, but rather was determined by external factors such as when I gained access to relevant sources. It seemed invidious to arrange the chapters—thereby asserting that certain traditions had particularly strong affinities with others—as the Victorians were so often concerned to dispel an outsider’s assumption that their religious or sceptical group was similar in ilk to another one. The goal has been to allow each tradition to stand on its own and speak for itself rather than to colour the reader’s perception by implying, for example, that a particular tradition was a weaker or strong version of another one.

Throughout this book I have followed my instincts about inserting biblical citations, trying to strike a *via media* in which the text did not become unduly cluttered, but readers are enabled to track down a crucial or quirky quotation or allusion and thereby assess or pursue the connection

themselves. The quotations densest with biblical allusions I particularly tended to despair of and they therefore often end up with no citations at all. It should also be kept in mind that the same, exact, distinctively scriptural phrase can often recur in multiple places in the Bible, and the reference I give might therefore be simply an arbitrarily chosen example from among them. Citations in square brackets are always my addition and not part of the quotation.

Scholars have too often ignored what Victorians wrote about the Bible on the assumption that these are the least interesting of their works. Moreover, when they have examined their comments on the Scriptures it has often been in order to mine these sources for Victorian views on other matters. In this volume I have sought to attend to what the Victorians themselves were interested in rather than primarily to interrogate them about our interests. When this is done, one finds a strong, consistent, and pervasive preoccupation across the religious and sceptical spectrum with engaging with the contents of one book—the Bible.

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I have never before thought to acknowledge my editor and have sometimes been bemused when I have read other authors doing so, but I now understand fully: it has meant a great deal to me in recent years that Tom Perridge at OUP has been so interested in my scholarly efforts. I am so pleased to be able to work with him.

I am profoundly grateful for the help and friendship of many of my colleagues, only a few of whom are named here. The intellectual nourishment I derive from the conversation of Alan Jacobs, Dan Treier, Brett Foster, Rick Gibson, and the Café Padre crowd has been one of the greatest benefits and joys of my professional life in recent years. Other colleagues who have kindly shared their expert knowledge in the field of nineteenth-century British studies with me include Christine Colón, Jeff Barbeau, and Andy Tooley. John Walton is remarkably accessible for any random biblical question I might have, and Dan Master has made a real mark on my thinking. In a class of his own is another biblical studies colleague and friend, Michael Graves, who read every chapter in draft as they were researched and written each in turn, catching numerous minor errors, and commenting insightfully on more substantial matters. Michael, I am deeply grateful for your wide-ranging intellectual curiosity and generosity of time and spirit. Postgraduate student research assistants who have helped

with this project and who are fine historians and scholars in their own right include Thomas Breimaier, Lindsey Eckberg, Amber Thomas, and Eric Brandt. The students in the autumn 2008 offering of my postgraduate seminar, ‘The History of Evangelicalism’, worked with zealous industry on transcribing Elizabeth Fry’s Bible annotations. The Wheaton College administration—not least our Provost, Stan Jones—has also been very supportive of my work in numerous ways, including a generous Aldeen Grant to aid my sabbatical research in spring 2007. Jeff Greenman is not only a valued friend and a supportive Associate Dean, but he has even consistently allowed me to route our *Reading the Bible through the Centuries* series through Victorian Britain.

This project also benefited from a CCCU Scholarly Networking Grant. I am thankful for the insights of my primary collaborators, Stephen Alter, Sarah Miglio, and Tommy Kidd, and for those scholars we consulted who commented on my work: Bruce Kuklick, Stephen Shoemaker, and David Bebbington. Various scholars at other institutions have graciously answered questions or read a draft chapter of this work, including Pamela Walker, Roger Green, and Christian George. Numerous librarians and archives have helped to make this book possible, not least Mark Greenberg, Director, Special Collections Department, University of South Florida, and Richard Bernardy of that same department, and Katy Hooper, Special Collections and Archives, University of Liverpool Library.

This book began when I was on sabbatical in Cambridge. I am heartily thankful for the welcome I received from many members of the university, including Peter Mandler, David Gange, Michael Ledger-Lomas, Jeremy Morris, Mary Laven, Eugenio Biagini, David Thompson, Jon Parry, Michael Ward, and Jeremy Begbie. I take particular delight in the ongoing scholarly collaboration that has resulted from that time, especially with Peter Mandler, David Gange, and Michael Ledger-Lomas. Finally, and most of all, a word about the dedication: I have greatly admired Boyd Hilton’s scholarship ever since I was a postgraduate student. I am still amazed that he sponsored me to be a Visiting Fellow, Trinity College, Cambridge, for the Lent and Easter terms 2007, and I am deeply grateful for this extraordinary act of assistance and thoughtfulness. Likewise, Trinity College was very supportive and generous and everyone there treated me with kindness. I hope that the dedication of this book—my project when I was at Trinity—serves as a token of my sincere gratitude.

# 3



## Atheists

### Charles Bradlaugh, Annie Besant, and 'this indictable book'

Annie Besant first met Charles Bradlaugh on 2 August 1874. Early in his public freethinking career, Bradlaugh had adopted the pugnacious *nom de plume*, 'Iconoclast'. Overcoming her initial assumption that he was too 'rough' a speaker for her more refined tastes, Besant had come to hear him lecture in London's freethinking stronghold, the Hall of Science.<sup>1</sup> His address over, Bradlaugh was distributing membership certificates to those in attendance who had recently joined the National Secular Society. Besant was one of these new members. Bradlaugh engaged her in conversation, advancing the argument that she was really an atheist already who was not admitting this to herself because of the unpleasant associations and misconceptions she had regarding that label. Annie Besant (1847–1933) had been impressed with his lecture that night. It had been on 'The ancestry and birth of Jesus'.<sup>2</sup> In other words, it was essentially an anti-Bible lecture. If the biblical nature of the contents of this address is not self-evident from its title, it is from Bradlaugh's extant writings.<sup>3</sup> It is not just a happy coincidence for

<sup>1</sup> Annie Besant, *Autobiographical Sketches* (London: Freethought Publishing Company, 1885), 86.

<sup>2</sup> Besant, *Autobiographical Sketches*, 89.

<sup>3</sup> Bishopsgate Institute, Bishopsgate Library, London, Bradlaugh Papers, 19, 'Examination of the four Gospels according to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John with Remarks on the life and death of the meek & lowly Jesus', handwritten manuscript dated May 1850; (slightly) revised June 1854. This early anti-Bible effort has an index listing eighteen themes covered in it. One is the genealogy of Jesus, another is the birth of Jesus, and another is a comparison of Chrishna (Krishna) and Jesus, a subject that Besant mentions that Bradlaugh had included in his address.

the theme of this chapter that Bradlaugh's subject when Besant first heard him speak was a biblical one. The odds were distinctly in favour of this. It would have been more surprising if Besant had happened to come to the Hall of Science on one of the rarer occasions when Bradlaugh's oration was not a denunciation of the contents of the Bible.

At the time of this initial meeting with Besant, Charles Bradlaugh (1833–1891) was already the most eminent leader of organized atheism in Britain. He was the editor of the nation's leading atheistic newspaper, the *National Reformer*, and had been at its founding in 1860. In 1866, he had become the founding president of the National Secular Society and he would be its animating spirit until his final illness in 1890. Iconoclast also toured the country giving freethinking addresses and, by 1874, he was widely considered the most popular speaker in the Secularist movement. His reputation would continue to grow thereafter, not least through his long and eventually successful campaign to sit in Parliament as an avowed atheist.<sup>4</sup> Whether they admired him or detested him, if asked to identify an atheist leader, most Britons for much of the second half of the nineteenth century would have named Bradlaugh. Charles Bradlaugh is the most obvious and defensible choice for an example figure to represent Victorian atheism.

Bradlaugh was born in 1833 and grew up in Bethnal Green, London. His father was a solicitor's clerk and, in regards to his financial position, Bradlaugh was content to say flatly that he was poor.<sup>5</sup> Bradlaugh's formal schooling, begun when he was seven years old, ended before he reached his eleventh birthday. This education was steeped in Scripture. Indeed, extraordinarily, everything that has survived of his school work is explicitly biblical, although these works were clearly retained merely as examples of his achievements rather than because of their theme. They are samples of his developing handwriting sent home as Christmas pieces. These school projects started with a pre-printed page. Each of these pages has as its theme a biblical narrative and the top and both sides have biblical texts accompanied by illustrations printed on them. In the middle of the page, there was blank space in which the

<sup>4</sup> For this campaign, see Timothy Larsen, 'Charles Bradlaugh, Militant Unbelief, and the Civil Rights of Atheists', in Caroline Litzenger and Eileen Groth Lyon (eds), *The Human Tradition in Modern Britain* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006), 127–38; Walter L. Arnstein, *The Bradlaugh Case: Atheism, Sex, and Politics among the Late Victorians* (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1983).

<sup>5</sup> Charles Bradlaugh, *The Autobiography of Mr Bradlaugh. A Page of his Life* (London: Austin and Co., 1873).

schoolboy has dutifully written. The first one, produced when Bradlaugh was just aged seven, is on 'The Life of Samuel'. His main writing sample is the words of 1 Samuel 3: 3–4, written out in cursive.<sup>6</sup> The second one, from when he was nine years old, is on 'The Death of Ahab', and his writing sample is a standard piece of sampler advice about not being a bad example (presumably, the connection being, as Ahab was).<sup>7</sup> The final one, when he was aged ten and thus toward the end of his formal education, is on the 'Death of Absalom'. For it, Bradlaugh's main writing sample is 2 Samuel 18: 14–15. This is all we have from his formal education. His day schooling completed, Bradlaugh continued to attend Sunday school and eventually became a Sunday school teacher—a context that, if possible, would have presumably been even more immersed in the Bible than his day school had been.

The turning point in Bradlaugh's life came when he was around fifteen years old. In good Anglican, coming-of-age manner, the bishop of London was scheduled to visit the area in order to confirm a group of candidates, of which Bradlaugh was one. His own local clergyman, John Graham Packer, incumbent of the Church of St Peter's, Hackney Road, instructed Bradlaugh to prepare himself to make an impression as a bright, well-informed lad. Perhaps going beyond the call of duty, Bradlaugh began studying the gospels. This research resulted in his being unsettled by the apparently irreconcilable discrepancies he found there.<sup>8</sup> Bradlaugh wrote to Packer asking for his explanations for these conundrums. Packer responded by banning him from teaching Sunday school and informing his father that Bradlaugh was becoming an atheist. This became a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy. No longer involved in the Sunday school, Bradlaugh used that time to listen to and join the open debating and speechifying in Bonner's Fields. He held to Christian orthodoxy initially, but abandoned it, tellingly, after being bested in a debate on 'The Inspiration of the Bible'.<sup>9</sup> Bradlaugh's father responded by adorning the house with apt biblical quotations. The most prominent one, hung so as to be directly in front of Bradlaugh whenever he sat down to a meal, was: 'The fool hath said in his heart, There

<sup>6</sup> Bishopsgate Institute, Bishopsgate Library, London, Bradlaugh Papers, 18/B, 'The Life of Samuel', 1840.

<sup>7</sup> Bishopsgate Institute, Bishopsgate Library, London, Bradlaugh Papers, 8/C, 'The Death of Ahab', 1842.

<sup>8</sup> Hypatia Bradlaugh Bonner, *Charles Bradlaugh: His Life and Work*, 2 vols, second edition (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1895), I, 8.

<sup>9</sup> Bonner, *Bradlaugh*, I, 12.

is no God' (Psalms 14: 1; 53: 1). This biblical text seems to have haunted Bradlaugh for the rest of his life. As a self-avowed atheist, he was always careful to clarify that he did not assert that there was no God and therefore he did not fall under this text's censure. Here is an example of Iconoclast's standard definition of his atheism in which he makes the connection with this passage of Scripture explicit:

I do not stand here to prove that there is no God. If I should undertake to prove such a proposition, I should deserve the ill words of the oft-quoted psalmist applied to those who say there is no God. I do not say there is no God, but I am an Atheist without God. To me the word God conveys no idea . . .<sup>10</sup>

On another occasion, he put it this way: 'He did not deny that there was "a God," because to deny that which is unknown was as absurd as to affirm it. As an Atheist he denied the God of the Bible'.<sup>11</sup>

His resolute freethinking stance and the resulting clash with his father prompted Bradlaugh to leave home at the age of sixteen. Also in his sixteenth year, Charles Bradlaugh wrote his first substantial composition as a freethinker. It was an explicitly anti-Bible work: 'Examination of the four Gospels according to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John with Remarks on the life and death of the meek & lowly Jesus'.<sup>12</sup> Bradlaugh added a few marginal notes to this manuscript in 1854 when he was twenty years old. The later additions are easily distinguishable, and they show that he had grown more radical in his views. Most notably, Bradlaugh inserted a note observing that he would no longer concede that Jesus of Nazareth even existed. In other words, when what was untenable in the gospels was stripped away, there might be no historical residue left at all. Bradlaugh's fundamentally scriptural frame of mind was such that—in good Protestant, biblicist fashion—his manuscript includes a proof-text justifying his project on the title

<sup>10</sup> *Discussion between Mr Thomas Cooper and Mr C. Bradlaugh* [in 1864] (London: Freethinking Publishing Company, 1888), 9.

<sup>11</sup> This is from an 1859 debate. It was standard practice at that time to change reported speech from the first person to the second person: Bonner, *Bradlaugh*, I, 87. Bradlaugh added that he also denied the God of 'the Koran, of the Vedas', but this did not preoccupy his thinking, while the God of the Bible most certainly did. As John M. Robertson put it, in his sympathetic, official review of Bradlaugh's life: 'Bradlaugh did not go about lecturing against witch-burning or the Koran. He attacked an aggressive and endowed superstition'. Bonner, *Bradlaugh*, II, 147.

<sup>12</sup> Bishopsgate Institute, Bishopsgate Library, London, Bradlaugh Papers, 19, 'Examination of the four Gospels according to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John with Remarks on the life and death of the meek & lowly Jesus'. Marked: 'Written May/50 at the age of 16 years 7½ months Altered & Amended, June 54/at the age of 20 yrs 9 months'.

page: “‘Prove all things & hold fast that which is true.’”—“Paul”” (1 Thessalonians 5: 21). Even more strikingly, the genre of Bradlaugh’s first freethinking work is that of a biblical commentary. He actually wrote out by hand in full numerous passages of Scripture as the text upon which to comment. His standard approach is to put related texts from the four gospels side by side in four parallel columns, thus a whole page might be taken up with just Scripture. After this, he would provide a section entitled ‘observations’, that is, the commentary. His intent, however, is to discredit the veracity of the gospels. As Bradlaugh acknowledges in the preface, the manuscript also includes lengthy quotations from popular British freethinkers: ‘I have quoted largely from Revd R. Taylor & Thomas Paine as well as from Thomas Cooper.’ Robert Taylor was an ordained Anglican priest who had left the church and become a freethinking lecturer. Bradlaugh frequently quotes from Taylor’s *The Diegesis: being a discovery of the origin, evidences, and early history of Christianity, never yet before or elsewhere so fully and faithfully set forth* (1829).<sup>13</sup> Taylor argued that the gospels were not historical but rather an expression of ideas borrowed from the religious traditions of other places, notably Egypt and India. Thomas Paine’s influential *Age of Reason* (1795), its grand title notwithstanding, was actually an (anti-)biblical commentary that worked its way breezily through the whole canon denouncing the contents of each book or section of the Bible in turn. Thomas Cooper is particularly interesting as his series of articles entitled ‘Critical Exegesis of Gospel History, on the basis of Strauss’s “Leben Jesu”’ had only begun to appear in January 1850 and it was still in progress when Bradlaugh wrote his manuscript in May 1850.<sup>14</sup>

Bradlaugh declared in the preface what his approach would be: ‘I will demonstrate to any one that the 4 Gospels as we have them are a jumble of nonsense & contradiction.’ He asserts repeatedly that orthodox Christians think that they must believe that every detail of the Bible is truth or that ‘they’ll be damned’. Therefore, to show even a trivial discrepancy is, in his reckoning, to demolish the Christian religion—a high view of Scripture indeed. Occasionally, his malice is palpable. Not content to deny the Virgin Birth, he asserts that ‘Mary had a number of gallants’.

<sup>13</sup> Robert Taylor, *The Diegesis: being a discovery of the origin, evidences, and early history of Christianity, never yet before or elsewhere so fully and faithfully set forth* (London: R. Carlile, 1829).

<sup>14</sup> For an examination of these articles by Cooper, see Timothy Larsen, *Contested Christianity: The Political and Social Contexts of Victorian Theology* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press), 43–58.

Drawing on Taylor, he develops the theory that Jesus was trained in Egypt as a therapeutan monk. This theory seems to have been especially attractive to Bradlaugh as having the double punch of reducing Christianity to borrowed paganism and labelling Jesus as a monk, a pejorative term for most Victorians. Nevertheless, the basic structure of a gospels commentary must be kept in view. The headings of Bradlaugh's sections such as 'Healing the Sick', 'Raising the Dead', 'The Death', and 'The Resurrection' would serve equally well in an orthodox volume.

The fact that Iconoclast's lecturing was primarily on anti-Bible themes may be illustrated by a handwritten list of his which records every time—twenty-four in total—he spoke at the Hall of Science, London, in 1865.<sup>15</sup> The first occasion was fittingly 'A Review of the Last Year. Our progress—church progress—scientific progress'. The theme is not clear for two items listed—one was apparently a reply to something Joseph Barker had said in a lecture, the other is just recorded as 'Short address at a Soirée'. Another was a benefit for a widow. There was one truly secular subject in the sense of not on a religious theme at all. Delightfully, it was a lecture given in reply to the question: 'Why do men shave?' A few of the rest were on generally theological or anti-Christian themes such as 'Atonement' and 'Supposed effects of Christianity on the World'. The overwhelming category, however, is explicitly (anti-)biblical addresses. For example, 'Prophecies before Jesus & by Jesus, the morality & concord of the four Gospels', 'Woman & the Bible', 'The child Jeremiah & his lamentations', and 'Bible account of Creation tested by itself & Science'. When the freethinking faithful assembled on New Year's Eve they were treated to an address by Bradlaugh on 'The Twelve tribes in the desert'. The one debate that Bradlaugh held at the Hall of Science that year was with a Christian minister and on the theme of 'Bible History of Creation'. Indeed, the list is so biblical that, reminiscent of Christian sermons, lectures are repeatedly identified simply by a text: for example, 'St Paul's Epistle to the Romans', 'St Paul's Epistle to the Corinthians', and 'Revelation of St John the Divine'. The one occasion listed where Bradlaugh was not the speaker, change did not extend to the subject matter. For July 2, Bradlaugh records that he was the chair. The speaker was Harriet Law and her theme is reported as 'On Bible'. This list provides a thorough and convenient snapshot, but it is not atypical. The consistent preoccupation of Bradlaugh with biblical themes across his

<sup>15</sup> Bishopsgate Institute, Bishopsgate Library, London, Bradlaugh Papers, 142.

lecturing life is amply confirmed by paging through the titles of his addresses as noticed in the *National Reformer*. To give just one additional example, when in 1861 Bradlaugh attempted to give an outdoor lecture under the auspices of the Plymouth and Devonport Secular Society the animus of local authorities prevented it. The only words he had managed to speak before he was arrested were: 'Friends, I am about to address you on the Bible'.<sup>16</sup>

After that first meeting in 1874, the relationship between Besant and Bradlaugh quickly ripened into a close friendship. When she promptly followed up by writing to Iconoclast inviting him to her house, he did not initially accept, but rather warned her that a friendship with a notorious atheist such as himself would do her considerable damage in society. She replied, echoing biblical teaching, that she 'had counted the cost' (Luke 14: 28).<sup>17</sup> The risk proved to be mutual. In Bradlaugh's fight to take his seat in Parliament, Sir Henry Tyler offered this objection: 'The fact was that Mr Bradlaugh could not come into the House without bringing Annie Besant with him.' Another speaker in the debate, implying that it was Besant who was the bad influence, referred to 'Bradlaugh's Besantine doctrines of morality or avowed Atheism'.<sup>18</sup> (Ironically, when in 1886 Bradlaugh did finally take his seat in Parliament he did so by taking the standard oath which included the act of kissing the Bible.) Both Bradlaugh and Besant were already married when they met, but separated from their spouses—she because of religious incompatibility (her husband was a clergyman), he because his wife was an alcoholic. Even Bradlaugh's daughter, who did not like Besant, admitted that the couple would have undoubtedly married if they had both been free.<sup>19</sup> In fact, for years they saw more of each other than most married couples. On a typical weekday, he would come to her house in the morning and they would do their work in each other's company. He would take all his meals at her house save breakfast, and not go home until 10 p.m.<sup>20</sup> They also went on holidays together and lecturing tours.

Besant's rise in the Secularist world was fast. Having gone to the Hall of Science for the first time, met Bradlaugh, and received her certificate of membership in the National Secular Society on 2 August 1874, she was

<sup>16</sup> Bradlaugh, *Autobiography*, 14–15.

<sup>17</sup> Annie Besant, *An Autobiography* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1908), 177.

<sup>18</sup> *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates*, Third Series, Vol. CCLIII (1880), columns 593, 1296.

<sup>19</sup> Bonner, *Bradlaugh*, II, 13. <sup>20</sup> Besant, *Autobiography*, 178.

hired as a staff writer for the *National Reformer* before the month was out. By January, she had dedicated herself to being a Secularist lecturer. In May came her first opportunity to attend the annual conference of the National Secular Society and there Bradlaugh was elected president and she was elected a vice president. They would both continue to hold those offices until 1890. In 1877, they founded the influential Freethought Publishing Company. Remarkably, her name came first: 'The partners in the Freethought Publishing Company are Annie Besant and Charles Bradlaugh' (with their names again signed in that order at that the end of this announcement).<sup>21</sup> Besant also became co-editor and co-proprietor with Bradlaugh of the *National Reformer*. In other words, almost anywhere Bradlaugh's name was in the world of organized atheism, Besant's was there beside it. Added to this, they invited notoriety in 1877 by defiantly republishing Charles Knowlton's *The Fruits of Philosophy*, a birth-control manual that had already been condemned as obscene. The attention-grabbing trial which they successfully provoked further linked their names together in the public mind. Besant was highly popular in the Secularist movement as both a speaker and a writer. She had certainly become the leading woman in the Secularist movement and a case could be made that she was the second most important figure in the movement beside Bradlaugh himself. Moreover, Bradlaugh's wing of the Secularist movement was the largest and the most visible and influential and she was certainly the most important leader in it beside him. Moreover, her position should not be misconstrued as simply a gift from Bradlaugh. It was just as much a reflection of her extraordinary talents and personality. This is amply illustrated by the way that she rose to the top of other movements as well, notably becoming the president of the Theosophical Society. Annie Besant even became the president of the Indian National Congress party just four years after she had joined it. Her Zelig-like qualities even extended to being the one who conferred on Gandhi the honorary title 'Mahatma'.<sup>22</sup> For the purposes at hand, certainly in the late 1870s and the first half of the 1880s, whether they liked it or not, no one would have denied that Besant was one of the chief leaders of organized atheism.

Annie Wood, to give her maiden name, was from a family that was notably higher up in the social scale from that of Bradlaugh's. Her great

<sup>21</sup> Besant, *Autobiographical Sketches*, 117.

<sup>22</sup> Anne Taylor, *Annie Besant: A Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 315.

uncle's career included Lord Mayor of London, MP for the City, and a baronetcy. Her father, who died when she was five years old, had studied at Trinity College, Dublin. Her only surviving sibling, her older brother, Henry, went to Harrow and Cambridge and was eventually knighted. Her father had been a religious sceptic, but her mother was an easy-going Anglican who was pleased with Broad Church articulations of the faith. When Annie was nine years old, her mother sent her away to Dorsetshire to be educated by Ellen Marryat. A thoroughgoing evangelical, Marryat ensured that Annie received a biblical education. Marryat's idea of a game was a Bible quiz—thus the girls gained scriptural knowledge even while playing. If that sounds oppressive it was not experienced that way by Besant who, even as an atheist, had nothing but enthusiastic praise for her old evangelical schoolmistress. Marryat valued biblical memorization and Annie, who was a quick study and hungry for honour, pursued it precociously. She even learned by heart the entire Epistle of James. Besant recalled that 'the dignified cadences' of the Bible 'pleased my ear'.<sup>23</sup> In her mid-teens, Annie Wood became a zealous Tractarian. In 1867, at the age of twenty, she married Frank Besant, a clergyman. The couple had a son and a daughter.

Annie Besant recalled as an atheist that her 'first doubt' came during Lent 1866. It concerned 'the historical accuracy of the Bible'.<sup>24</sup> As a devotional exercise, she wanted to meditate during Holy Week on the events that happened to Christ on each of those days of the week, as recorded in the gospels. She began creating a table for this purpose, but she discovered that she could not get the chronological statements spread across the four gospels to harmonize. This story should not be accepted uncritically. First, by the time Besant wrote it, she had long been under the influence of Bradlaugh, and her story is suspiciously similar to his own one of stumbling upon discrepancies in the four gospels while pursuing a religious task in good faith (and then he listed them in a table in his first manuscript). Second, Besant printed her table for the benefit of her readers. She also acknowledged, however, that she had quickly thrown down her pen, repented of her project, and done penance by fasting. For the next three years, she was again a devout Christian not plagued by sceptical thoughts. She was even writing pious literature for the *Family Herald*. If Besant really thought that her table had been a temptation to sin that needed to be purged by fasting and had been wholehearted in her repentance, then she would have

<sup>23</sup> Besant, *Autobiographical Sketches*, 19.

<sup>24</sup> Besant, *Autobiographical Sketches*, 31.

certainly destroyed it. A not much more plausible alternative to her having kept her table is that she was able to reproduce it from memory eighteen years later. Even if this story is unreliable, however, it would be no less telling. At the very least, it would still reveal that Besant thought that a narrative of a journey to atheism should begin with an anti-Bible prompt. Moreover, it seems reasonable to assume that the basic story is true, even if the table is merely a later reconstruction aimed at putting ammunition in the hands of atheists.

Besant's Christian identity was rattled again in 1871. Her infant daughter, Mabel, endured a life-threatening illness, leading Besant to begin questioning God and her religious beliefs. She began reading Broad Church and sceptical works. Steadily, she abandoned various orthodox Christian beliefs. In 1872, she wrote her first sceptical work. Its theme was the inspiration of the Bible. It was not the first one she published and it was revised before it eventually was published. The printed version emphasizes scriptural contradictions.<sup>25</sup> Besant whimsically recounted her first 'lecture' as taking place in 1873. Alone in the church building where her husband was the priest, she entered the pulpit and the words poured out. Her theme was 'the Inspiration of the Bible'.<sup>26</sup> Her early freethinking essays were published beginning in 1873 by a committed patron of liberal and sceptical religious thought, Thomas Scott. Besant later collected them and published them unaltered in the order in which they had originally appeared under the telling title, *My Path to Atheism* (1885). In the preface, she observed:

Most inquirers who begin to study by themselves, before they have read any heretical works, or heard controversies, will have been awakened to thought by the discrepancies and inconsistencies of the Bible itself. A thorough knowledge of the Bible is the groundwork of heresy.<sup>27</sup>

She recalled that her own early doubts had included scepticism about atonement and eternal punishment, but these were symptomatic 'while the doctrine of Inspiration of Scripture underlay everything, and was the very foundation of Christianity'.<sup>28</sup> Her first published essay she had initially

<sup>25</sup> Annie Besant, *My Path to Atheism* (London: Freethinking Publishing Company, 1885), 77–91.

<sup>26</sup> Besant, *Autobiography*, 116.

<sup>27</sup> Besant, *My Path*, pp. v–vi.

<sup>28</sup> Besant, *My Path*, pp. vi–vii. Since I wrote this chapter, a germane source has appeared, Christiana de Groot, 'Annie Besant: An Adversarial Interpreter of Scripture', in Christiana de Groot and Marion Ann Taylor (eds), *Recovering Nineteenth-Century Women Interpreters of the Bible*

given a biblical title, ‘What think ye of Christ?’ (Matthew 22: 42), but this was thought by others to be heavy-handed so this text was left as the opening quotation of the essay and the title was changed to ‘On the Deity of Jesus of Nazareth’.<sup>29</sup> Even more explicitly biblical criticism, her second published essay was ‘A Comparison between the Fourth Gospel and the Three Synoptics’. Indeed, the biblicism of these essays is remarkable. Although Besant no longer believed in the authority of the Bible, when there was a biblical text that made her point, like a pious evangelical, she found it irresistible to quote her proof-text triumphantly. Thus, statements by Christ about his own identity cannot be used to bolster an argument for his divinity because he had said: ‘If I bear witness of myself, my witness is not true’ (John 5: 31). Freethinkers do not need to have all the answers provided in advance by revelation, because they ‘walk by faith, not by sight’ (2 Corinthians 5: 7).<sup>30</sup> And so it goes on. When attacking Christianity and the Bible, Besant continually reaches for biblical language that would sound esoteric to many today. She can observe, for example, that she has ‘written Tekel on the Christian faith’ (Daniel 5: 27). She even condemns the God of the Bible as ‘a blood-craving Moloch’ (cf. Leviticus 20: 1–5).<sup>31</sup> Her love of biblical cadences was such that she delighted to employ them in order to attempt to make her own rhetoric more dignified, important, and persuasive. For example, her essay ‘On the Religious Education of Children’ ends on a high by the linguistic trick of employing the structure of 1 Corinthians 13: 8:

Morality never faileth; but, whether there be dogmas, they shall fail; whether they be creeds, they shall cease; whether there be churches, they shall crumble away; but morality shall abide for evermore and endure as long as the endless circle of Nature revolves around the Eternal Throne.<sup>32</sup>

Annie Besant spoke the truth when she observed that her childhood education ‘made me very familiar with the Bible and very apt with its phrases’.<sup>33</sup>

(Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007), 201–15. It complements this chapter well in that it explores only two works of Besant and neither of them are addressed here, namely *Woman’s Position according to the Bible* (1885) and *God’s Views on Marriage* (1890).

<sup>29</sup> Taylor, *Besant*, 55.                      <sup>30</sup> Besant, *My Path*, 2, 114.

<sup>31</sup> Besant, *My Path*, 93, 58.                      <sup>32</sup> Besant, *My Path*, 100.

<sup>33</sup> Besant, *Autobiography*, 44.

This habit extended to her correspondence. In a particularly remarkable example, it is on display in a series of private letters she wrote in 1887–8 to the well-known journalist, W. T. Stead. Bradlaugh rejected socialism and therefore Besant's growing commitment to that cause meant that the Free-thought Publishing Company partners were not as close as they had been. Besant was clearly besotted with Stead.<sup>34</sup> Her pet name for the crusading journalist—as literally romantic as one could imagine—was 'Sir Galahad'. As Stead was not separated from his wife, he was naturally more cautious about this relationship, but even he admitted to her that they had a 'political & spiritual marriage'.<sup>35</sup> Nevertheless, despite the seemingly unpropitious context of a *sub rosa* flirtation, Besant's prose in these letters is infused with biblical language. For example, she reflected in this way on her deflated suspicion that her political work might be in vain:

But, my dear Sir Galahad, the power of darkness has only his hour [Luke 22: 53], & the underlying belief remains. Do you know, I have always fancied that the real blackness of Gethsemane & of the 'Eli, Eli' on Calvary [Matthew 27: 46], was the doubt if, after all, the life's ideal were a delusion.<sup>36</sup>

At times, Besant seems almost unable or unwilling to express a single thought without recourse to Scripture. Here she is on their efforts to build a diverse coalition to help labouring men who had been imprisoned for participating in lawful political protests:

I think it would have met the rebuke 'Ye know not what manner of spirit ye are of' [Luke 9: 55]. I feel no resentment against a hesitation which springs from real love to an ideal which I am thought to have insulted; but it is sad that after 19 centuries the lesson of brotherhood with all who are willing to work for 'the least of these my brethren,' [Matthew 25: 40] is not yet learned. Well, well, it may be. Any how, ours is the more excellent way [1 Corinthians 12: 31]. I was inclined to say, 'thy money perish with thee' [Acts 8: 20].<sup>37</sup>

<sup>34</sup> For Anne Taylor's account of this relationship, see Taylor, *Besant*, 195–202.

<sup>35</sup> W. T. Stead Papers, Churchill Archives Centre, Churchill College, Cambridge, Stead 1/6, Annie Besant to W. T. Stead, 4 March 1888.

<sup>36</sup> W. T. Stead Papers, Churchill Archives Centre, Churchill College, Cambridge, Stead 1/6, Annie Besant to W. T. Stead, 19 January 1888.

<sup>37</sup> W. T. Stead Papers, Churchill Archives Centre, Churchill College, Cambridge, Stead 1/6, Annie Besant to W. T. Stead, 13 February 1888.

When Stead continues to elicit resources, she refers to ‘your widow’s cruse’ (1 Kings 17).<sup>38</sup> And so it goes on.

Before developing this theme any further, it is essential to grasp that Besant’s substantive view as an atheist of the contents of the Bible was that it was a dangerous and despicable book. Already in her early essays she was asserting that the Bible was not a safe book to give to children, or even a sixteen-year-old.<sup>39</sup> In Besant’s own parenting, she did not find even the New Testament a fit book for her daughter to read. She gave this way of thinking free and forceful expression in a tract published in 1877 or 1878, *Is the Bible Indictable?*<sup>40</sup> Annie Besant wrote it in response to the Lord Chief Justice’s condemnation of Knowlton’s *The Fruits of Philosophy*. Her argument is that the same charges he made against that book apply to the Bible. Besant did not shrink from venting her objection to the Scriptures in unmeasured language: ‘Surely if any book be indictable for obscenity, the Bible should be the first to be prosecuted. I know of no other book in which is to be found such utterly unredeemed coarseness.’<sup>41</sup> She even strikes the pose that parts of the Bible are so filthy that it would be inappropriate, if not downright immoral, even to cite them:

The difficulty of dealing with this question is that many of the quotations necessary to prove that the Bible comes under the ruling of the Lord Chief Justice are of such an extremely coarse and disgusting character, that it is really impossible to reproduce them without intensifying the evil which they are calculated to do. While I see no indecency in a plain statement of physiological facts, written for people’s instruction, I do see indecency in coarse and indelicate stories, the reading of which can do no good to any human being, and can have no effect save that of corrupting the mind and suggesting unclean ideas. I therefore refuse to soil my pages with quotations . . .<sup>42</sup>

<sup>38</sup> W. T. Stead Papers, Churchill Archives Centre, Churchill College, Cambridge, Stead 1/6, Annie Besant to W. T. Stead, 24 January 1888.

<sup>39</sup> Besant, *My Path*, 85.

<sup>40</sup> Annie Besant, *Is the Bible Indictable? Being an enquiry whether the Bible comes within the ruling of the Lord Chief Justice as to Obscene Literature* (London: Freethought Publishing Company, n.d. (c. 1877–8)).

<sup>41</sup> Besant, *Is the Bible Indictable?*, 12–13.

<sup>42</sup> Besant, *Is the Bible Indictable?*, 8.

Reminiscent of Paine's *Age of Reason*, she systematically marches her way through the canon, pointing out where obscenity hunters should go to find particularly vulgar parts of 'this indictable book'.<sup>43</sup>

In the light of this strong objection to the Scriptures, it is all the more remarkable to see the compulsive way that Annie Besant quotes from the Bible in her autobiographies. The first one, *Autobiographical Sketches* (1885), is written at the height of her atheist identity and issued by her and Bradlaugh's Freethought Publishing Company. The second one, *An Autobiography*, was initially published in 1893, and a revised edition appeared in 1908, both versions being when she was a pre-eminent Theosophist. *An Autobiography* is fuller and better written and even more biblical, so it will sometimes be the one cited from, but it must be borne in mind that it essentially incorporates *Autobiographical Sketches* and then carries on the story and therefore many of the biblical quotations were already present in the Freethought Publishing Company version, as will be indicated in the footnotes.

It would be tedious to catalogue the numerous biblical allusions in Besant's autobiographies and therefore only a sampling will be given here, but it is startling to witness the entire collection. To take a random example, when she introduces her early freethinking patron, Thomas Scott, because he had once spent a few months living with Native Americans, Besant quotes the statement in Genesis 10: 9 about Nimrod being a mighty hunter.<sup>44</sup> It is hard to imagine a more gratuitous circling back to Scripture. In an address she published in the *National Reformer* that she wrote to rally support to fight the condemnation of Knowlton's book, Besant warned Secularists that they must be careful not to make any legal blunders 'for they may be sure that such sins will find them out' (Numbers 32: 23).<sup>45</sup> More substantively, Besant seems to reach for Scripture instinctively whenever she wants to give weight and dignity to an important event in her life. Only the most striking examples of this tendency will be presented here. She was a public, freethinking non-Christian when her mother died, and she wrote about this terrible event in her life as an atheist. Nevertheless, Besant reached for the Bible to give words to her loss: 'Truly, my "house was

<sup>43</sup> Besant, *Is the Bible Indictable?*, 14. Her own position seems to have been that no book written with good motives should be indictable, and that would include both Knowlton and the Bible, even though the contents of the former are useful to people while the latter are harmful.

<sup>44</sup> Besant, *Autobiographical Sketches*, 68.

<sup>45</sup> Besant, *Autobiographical Sketches*, 149–50.

left unto me desolate” (Matthew 23: 38).<sup>46</sup> When in 1875 Bradlaugh was severely ill and it was feared that he would die, Besant tells us that ‘he walked down the valley of the shadow of death’ (Psalm 23: 4).<sup>47</sup> Most extraordinary is the way that Besant expressed her decision to commit herself to being an atheist lecturer:

I knew that an Atheist was outside the law . . . I seemed to hear the voice of Truth ringing over the battlefield: ‘Who will go? Who will speak for me?’ And I sprang forward with passionate enthusiasm, with the resolute cry: ‘Here am I, send me!’ [Isaiah 6: 8] . . . No weightier responsibility can any take, no more sacred charge. . . . I have not given to my mistress Truth that ‘which hath cost me nothing’ [2 Samuel 24: 24].

Not only does this present her decision as a call to ministry lifted word for word from Isaiah’s call to be a prophet, but the importance of this is underlined with another biblical word, ‘sacred’, and rounded off with an additional, explicit biblical quotation.<sup>48</sup>

Annie Besant quoted Scripture to express her own thoughts eloquently as an atheist right to the end. Her parting speech as a Secularist declared that her commitment to ‘Truth’ was such that she could say: ‘though she slay me, yet will I trust in her’ (Job 13: 15).<sup>49</sup> While this book has not chosen to allot a separate case study to Theosophists, as the president of the Theosophical Society, Besant would be a fitting subject of such a study, and the quotations given from her *An Autobiography* amply prove that her thought patterns continued to be steeped in the Bible in that period of her life as well. A particularly remarkable example of this is a moment that she undoubtedly viewed as one of the most important speeches of her life, her presidential address in 1917 at the annual meeting of the Indian National Congress. Bizarrely, given both her own religious identity and the predominant ones in her audience—but well in keeping with her lifelong instinct that biblical language added weight to a pronouncement—her peroration was: ‘India the Crucified among Nations now stands on this her Resurrection morning . . . as the Light and Blessing of the World.’<sup>50</sup> The speech was not a success.

<sup>46</sup> Besant, *Autobiography*, 126–7; Besant, *Autobiographical Sketches*, 84.

<sup>47</sup> Besant, *Autobiography*, 201.

<sup>48</sup> Besant, *Autobiography*, 188–9; Besant, *Autobiographical Sketches*, 96–7. (The earlier version lacks the Isaiah motif, but includes the word ‘sacred’ and the quotation from 2 Samuel 24: 24.)

<sup>49</sup> Besant, *Autobiography*, 358. <sup>50</sup> Taylor, *Besant*, 312.

While Besant's energies were diverted into Theosophy from 1889 onwards, Bradlaugh remained committed to the cause of atheism to the end. It is worth highlighting some of his other various works on the Bible and briefly noticing the wider context of Victorian organized atheism and the Bible, before moving on to examining Bradlaugh's most ambitious literary project. When Bradlaugh became the editor of the *Investigator* in 1858, he declared that its mission included the necessity 'to destroy Bible influence'.<sup>51</sup> One of the ways that he did this was through a series of discrediting biblical heroes. These were also printed separately, and later kept in circulation by the Freethought Publishing Company. Titles included *New Life of Abraham*, *New Life of Jacob*, *New Life of Moses*, *New Life of David*, and *New Life of Jonah*.<sup>52</sup> The Bible was also a favourite subject of debate for Bradlaugh, and thus one can track a succession of encounters with Christian ministers across the decades with the subject being a biblical one.<sup>53</sup>

While Bradlaugh is indisputably the most prominent leader of Victorian organized atheism, and Annie Besant was his most important colleague, it is worth underlying that their heavy orientation toward Scripture was typical of the movement as a whole. To give an example, a key leader in the movement in the generation before Bradlaugh was Robert Cooper (1818–68), who founded the atheistic paper that Bradlaugh would later edit, the *Investigator*. Cooper's main publications were *The 'Holy Scriptures' analyzed, or Extracts from the Bible shewing its contradictions, absurdities and immoralities* (1832), *The Infidel's Text-Book, being the substance of thirteen lectures on the Bible* (1846), and *The Bible and its evidences* (1858).<sup>54</sup> When the *Investigator* failed, and the *National Reformer* was founded as an atheistic paper, Bradlaugh's original co-editor was Joseph Barker (1806–75). Barker was not only the most popular Secularist in the north of England—if not the whole country—at that time, but he was also, if anything, even more

<sup>51</sup> Bonner, *Bradlaugh*, I, 80.

<sup>52</sup> For some of the more entertaining passages from this series, see Larsen, *Contested Christianity*, 107–8.

<sup>53</sup> For example, *Is the Bible divine? A six nights' discussion between Mr Charles Bradlaugh . . . and Mr Robert Roberts* (London: F. Pitman, 1876); *God, Man, and the Bible. Three Nights' Discussion between Rev. Joseph Baylee, D.D., and Mr C. Bradlaugh [then debating as 'Iconoclast'], on the 27th, 28th, and 29th June, 1860, at the Teutonic Hall, Liverpool* (London: Freethought Publishing Company, n.d.).

<sup>54</sup> For Robert Cooper, see Edward Royle, *Victorian Infidels: The Origins of the British Secularist Movement, 1791–1866* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1974).

preoccupied with Scripture than Bradlaugh.<sup>55</sup> The most prominent Secularist in the generation after Bradlaugh was George William Foote (1850–1915), who succeeded Bradlaugh in 1890 as the president of the National Secular Society. Foote rose to the top of the movement due to his trial and prison sentence for blasphemy. Foote's offence had been to publish a series of 'Comic Bible' sketches. These were parodies of the kind of illustrations that had accompanied Bradlaugh's schoolboy writing samples, that is, they were irreverent cartoons accompanied by a text of Scripture written out as a caption.<sup>56</sup> Foote's numerous works on the Bible stretch across the late Victorian period and beyond. As late as 1912, just a few years before his death, Foote published with his own Pioneer Press his *Bible and Beer* and his *The Bible Handbook for freethinkers and inquiring Christians*.<sup>57</sup> Susan Budd, in her analysis of the life stories of freethinkers, discovered that when Secularists mentioned books as influential in their loss of faith, as they often did, they most often named the Bible itself or Paine's anti-Bible work, *The Age of Reason*.<sup>58</sup> The Bible loomed large for Victorian atheists.

Bradlaugh's modern biographer, David Tribe, was sympathetic to his subject and wrote as a Secularist insider. Indeed, when his biography was published, Tribe was serving as president of the National Secular Society, and thus was standing in a succession that had Bradlaugh as its esteemed founding father—a point he underlined by giving his subject the designation 'President' in the book's title. Tribe observed that Bradlaugh's *The Bible: What It Is* was the president's '*magnum opus*'.<sup>59</sup> Charles Bradlaugh embarked upon this project in 1857, intending it to become a commentary on the entire Bible ('from Genesis to Revelation').<sup>60</sup> The initial version made it through to Isaiah. It was hampered by his parting ways with his eminent Secularist publisher, G. J. Holyoake, who decided that it was 'an

<sup>55</sup> For this, see Timothy Larsen, 'Joseph Barker and Popular Biblical Criticism in the Nineteenth Century', *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester*, 82, 1 (Spring 2000), 115–34 (reprinted as 'Biblical Criticism and Anti-Christian Rhetoric: Joseph Barker and the Case against the Bible' in Larsen, *Contested Christianity*, 79–95).

<sup>56</sup> David Nash, *Blasphemy in Modern Britain: 1789 to the Present* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999), 107–66.

<sup>57</sup> G. W. Foote, *Bible and Beer* (London: Pioneer Press, 1912); G. W. Foote, *The Bible Handbook for freethinkers and inquiring Christians* (London: Pioneer Press, 1912).

<sup>58</sup> Susan Budd, *Varieties of Unbelief: Atheists and Agnostics in English Society, 1850–1960* (London: Heinemann, 1977), 107.

<sup>59</sup> David Tribe, *President Charles Bradlaugh, M.P.* (London: Elek Books, 1971), 50.

<sup>60</sup> Bonner, *Bradlaugh*, I, 63.

obscene book'.<sup>61</sup> Bradlaugh determined to start over and go about the task more thoroughly. This resulted in a new version of *The Bible: What It Is* in 1870. This time it was 434 pages long and confined to the Pentateuch. Once again he started over and in 1882 just the section on Genesis—now expanded to 346 pages—appeared separately.<sup>62</sup> In other words, not only was Bradlaugh's first manuscript a gospels commentary, but the great literary work of Bradlaugh's mature life—a project which he laboured over for a quarter of a century, if not longer—was a biblical commentary.

Bradlaugh was so focused on Scripture, and so conscientious in his Old Testament criticism, that he even took the trouble to learn Hebrew. In one public debate he was challenged without warning to prove this, and he passed this impromptu linguistic examination to the satisfaction of the hostile Christian ministers present.<sup>63</sup> In *The Bible: What It Is* (the 1870 edition is being analysed here) discussions of the Hebrew language mainly arise in order to make the point that the inability of scholars to determine the meaning of various Hebrew words ought to lead to the conclusion that this is an ill-fitting way for a divine revelation to be communicated. Here is a typical example of this sentiment: 'It is useless to do more in this place than regret that there should be so much room for difference as to the meaning of Hebrew words, when our salvation is said to depend on the rightly understanding their signification.'<sup>64</sup> As with his early gospels manuscript, Bradlaugh quotes heavily from other works in *The Bible: What It Is*. Once again, he draws on freethinkers such as Thomas Paine and Robert Taylor. Nevertheless, he had by this time moved into more scholarly literature as well. A particular favourite is the criticism of the Pentateuch offered by John William Colenso, bishop of Natal, from whom he repeatedly provides extracts that are several pages long.<sup>65</sup> Overwhelmingly, any German biblical criticism comes into the commentary through the medium of Colenso, not least because Bradlaugh himself did not know German, but occasionally

<sup>61</sup> Tribe, *President*, 54.

<sup>62</sup> Charles Bradlaugh, *Genesis: Its Authorship and Authenticity*, third edition (London: Free-thought Publishing Company, 1882).

<sup>63</sup> Bonner, *Bradlaugh*, I, 73.

<sup>64</sup> Charles Bradlaugh, *The Bible: What It Is* (London: Austin & Co., 1870), 61. The idea that salvation is at issue is merely a rhetorical heightening of the stakes by Bradlaugh.

<sup>65</sup> See, for this, Larsen, *Contested Christianity*, ch. 5, 'Biblical Criticism and the Desire for Reform: Bishop Colenso on the Pentateuch', 59–77.

Bradlaugh does cite the English or French translation of a leading German scholar, notably W. M. L. De Wette.<sup>66</sup>

*The Bible: What It Is* examines the Pentateuch in canonical order with the section on each biblical book subtitled as an exploration of ‘Its Authorship & Authenticity’. The first section states in the preface that it is ‘a commentary on Genesis, written for the purpose of demonstrating that the book is not a perfect and infallible revelation specially given from an all-wise and infinite Deity, Creator, and Ruler of all worlds.’<sup>67</sup> After various introductory remarks, Bradlaugh announces accurately: ‘I shall now take each chapter and verse in its Biblical order.’<sup>68</sup> In other words, it is not a mere rhetorical flourish to speak of this book as a commentary. Bradlaugh himself calls it a commentary without irony and he makes good on that claim by following the conventions of the genre faithfully.

Iconoclast’s animating purpose is to discredit the Bible in every possible way. This animus often tempts him into making pedantic points. For example, on Numbers 3: 39, he objects to the round figure 22,000 being used for the number of the Levites when the actual calculation is 22,300, even though he derived that more precise number by adding together all the figures provided for the Levite clans (as the reader is obviously being invited to do by the biblical author), which are themselves clearly round numbers.<sup>69</sup> The statement in Exodus 32: 20 that Moses ground the golden calf into powder, put it in water, and made the Israelites drink it, prompts this cavil:

Unless a chloride of gold had been formed by the use of chlorine and nitromuriatic acid, and of which we have no account, or unless some analogous chemical process had been pursued, the gold would not be soluble in water, but would sink to the bottom, leaving the water entirely unaffected.<sup>70</sup>

No indeterminacy in the precise meaning of some biblical word is too small to ignore. The reader is apparently meant to be concerned, for example, that: ‘One version says the glory appeared “in” the tabernacle; the Douay says that it appeared “over” the tabernacle.’<sup>71</sup> Bradlaugh even discredits Numbers 19: 13, ‘The dead body of any man that is dead’, on the grounds of literary style.<sup>72</sup> This pedantic tendency was furthered by a wooden literalism. Jacob’s vision, for example, must be communicating something about

<sup>66</sup> For example, see Bradlaugh, *The Bible*, 55, 334, 426.

<sup>67</sup> Bradlaugh, *The Bible*, p. v.

<sup>68</sup> Bradlaugh, *The Bible*, 6.

<sup>69</sup> Bradlaugh, *The Bible*, 339.

<sup>70</sup> Bradlaugh, *The Bible*, 287.

<sup>71</sup> Bradlaugh, *The Bible*, 350.

<sup>72</sup> Bradlaugh, *The Bible*, 354.

furniture and locomotion: ‘The writer of Genesis evidently conceived a ladder necessary to enable the angels of God to get up to heaven, in the same style in which you or I might ascend to the roof of a house.’<sup>73</sup>

Bradlaugh’s determinedly critical stance also led to an inconsistent approach to the question of historicity. In general, his tendency is to deny historicity in thoroughgoing, sweeping ways. He posits, for example, that Abraham is not a historical figure at all, and will not concede that even the bare fact of the ‘departure of the Jews from Egypt’ is a genuine historical residue in the story.<sup>74</sup> On the other hand, when Bradlaugh decides that certain actions are morally suspect, then suddenly he writes as if he is speaking of historical events that are accurately recorded. Thus, to take the two examples just given, Abraham (who now does exist) did indeed accept cattle as compensation for the affront to his wife, and the Israelites did ‘borrow’ jewellery from the Egyptians when they departed (which they now did indeed do)—as these events are judged by Bradlaugh to have been morally improper actions.<sup>75</sup> To continue with the moral critique, Iconoclast also steadfastly expresses outrage that the Bible contains sexually frank material. Indeed, Bradlaugh is so prudish—this from a man who fought in court for the right to publish a birth-control manual so that ordinary people would have access to sexual facts—that the mere mention of testicles in the Bible prompts him to switch the discussion into French and Latin.<sup>76</sup> Bradlaugh repeatedly claims that decent parents should not want their daughters to read the Bible.

As Genesis teaches the monogenesis of the human race, Bradlaugh presented polygenesis as the truly scientific view, despite the fact that Darwinists were also committed to monogenesis.<sup>77</sup> This move tempted Iconoclast into a racist account of what he believed were the three, separately originating stocks of human beings. Here is the last phrase of his descriptions of each of these: the Mongolian is in ‘stature rather low, trunk long, extremities rather short, wrists and ankles weak’; the Ethiopian ‘emits a strong offensive odour, especially under exposure to the sun’; while the Caucasian possesses ‘muscular strength, energy, and endurance generally

<sup>73</sup> Bradlaugh, *The Bible*, 122.

<sup>74</sup> Bradlaugh, *The Bible*, 86, 159.

<sup>75</sup> Bradlaugh, *The Bible*, 89, 288.

<sup>76</sup> Bradlaugh, *The Bible*, 416.

<sup>77</sup> For the wider context of this discussion see Colin Kidd, *The Forging of the Races: Race and Scripture in the Protestant Atlantic World, 1600–2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

considerable—in many superior'.<sup>78</sup> Thus one ends up with the key adjectives for the three races being 'weak' (the people of Asia), 'offensive' (the people of Africa), and 'superior' (the people of Europe).

One of the most surprising features of *The Bible: What It Is* comes when Bradlaugh arrives at Exodus 20: 7: 'Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain.' This occasions a long section decrying the requirements of British law to swear oaths in the name of God. Quite literally, it is a sermon with a text. Bradlaugh is not trying to undermine the meaning of Exodus 20: 7, nor deploy it ironically, he is rather preaching from it. This goes on for seventeen pages, making it the longest sustained argument in the entire book.<sup>79</sup> There are other ways in which Bradlaugh's commentary is unwittingly extraordinarily conservative, especially by the standards of our day rather than his. For example, Bradlaugh assumes uncritically that the apostle Paul wrote the Epistle to the Hebrews, a traditional view that even conservative evangelical scholars do not hold today.<sup>80</sup> A major way that Bradlaugh attempts to discredit the notion that the Bible is a divine revelation is to argue that Hebrew religion was borrowed from the so-called heathen cultures around them. His choice for this influence is Egypt, and he asserts that a whole catalogue of aspects of the religious life of the Israelites are copied from this source. The scholarly consensus is now the complete inverse, namely, that connections with Egypt are suspiciously hard to find. Bradlaugh, however, is so enthusiastic about this pay-off that he is even willing to affirm that Moses was indeed 'reared at the Court of Pharaoh' in order to underline it.<sup>81</sup>

Even if he occasionally overplayed his hand, Bradlaugh's commentary was surely effective at prodding readers into seeing familiar texts in a new light. It must have been jarring to some readers to be invited again and again to see the supernatural elements in the Pentateuch as no different in kind from the magical elements in the Arabian Nights. Or to have Moses' burning bush recast as a mere 'pyrotechnic juggle', unworthy of a serious purpose.<sup>82</sup> Here is Iconoclast on another passage: 'Can any sane person imagine that the infinite Creator presented on Sinai to the gaze of Moses heaven-made samples of golden candlesticks?'<sup>83</sup> For Bradlaugh, the Deluge account tells a story of a God who is so bloodthirsty that after having killed

<sup>78</sup> Bradlaugh, *The Bible*, 28–34.

<sup>80</sup> Bradlaugh, *The Bible*, 357.

<sup>82</sup> Bradlaugh, *The Bible*, 168.

<sup>79</sup> Bradlaugh, *The Bible*, 222–39.

<sup>81</sup> Bradlaugh, *The Bible*, 336.

<sup>83</sup> Bradlaugh, *The Bible*, 344.

all the animals in the world except for the ones in the ark, he then demands that some of them be sacrificed. Leviticus, in particular, also gave Charles Bradlaugh plenty of scope to expound on the point of view that religious regulations are often self-serving priestly plots. Iconoclast is on particularly good form when he observes that ministers today set aside the Pentateuchal rule that priests are not to have land of their own, but instead allow the Lord to be their inheritance, while insisting that the regulations regarding people tithing to them are still in force.<sup>84</sup> And so Victorian Britain's pre-eminent atheist leader went on, struggling with Scripture to the end.

<sup>84</sup> Bradlaugh, *The Bible*, 354.