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Cotton Mather's Biblical Enlightenment: Critical Interrogations of the Canon and Revisions of the Common Translation in the *Biblia Americana* (1693–1728)

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Abstract: While there exists a robust scholarship on the cultural influences and public uses of the Bible in early American history, the historical development of biblical scholarship in America remains relatively understudied. The prevalent view suggests that biblical scholarship in America had its critical awakening with the importation of German Higher Criticism to northeastern divinity schools in the nineteenth century. This essay makes a corrective intervention by looking at Cotton Mather's unpublished *Biblia Americana* (1693–1728), the first comprehensive Bible commentary to be authored in British North America. More specifically, the essay examines Mather's response to critical interrogation of the canon and the Biblia's numerous revisions of King James translation in light of recent philological scholarship. What connects these two issues is that they both concern the "givenness" of the Bible, which, in Mather's day, was being fundamentally challenged. Behind the discussions about the canonicity of diverse books and over how to render the Hebrew and Greek texts into modern languages always lurked fundamental questions regarding the divine authority, integrity, and perspicuity of the Bible. Examining a broad range of examples from across the Biblia, the essay demonstrates how Mather's work defies clear-cut categorization as either precritical or critical. In response to the intellectual currents of the early Enlightenment, Mather pioneered a new type of deeply learned, historically conscious but apologetically-oriented biblical criticism in America. The *Biblia* clearly reflects the challenges brought on by the deepening historicization of Scripture and the destabilization of texts and meanings through a new type of criticism. More widely read in current European scholarship and in many ways more curious and daring than any other early American exegete, Mather joined the infinitely complex and open-ended quest for better translations. Moreover, he was the first in New England to seriously address

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hard questions about the canon of the Bible and its historical development. But he always did so with the aim of providing constructive answers to these debates that would ultimately shore up the authority of Scripture, stabilize the scriptural foundation for what Mather regarded as the core of Reformed orthodox theological beliefs, and offer improved interpretations of the biblical texts, which would lend themselves even better to devotion and illuminate for Christians, with the help of the most up-to-date scholarship, the full riches of God's Word.

Keywords: biblical criticism in North America; early Enlightenment; Cotton Mather's *Biblia Americana*; canon; translation

Despite robust scholarship on the cultural influences and public uses of the Bible in early American history,[1] the historical development of biblical scholarship in America remains relatively understudied. The dominant narrative is still organized around sharp divisions between pre- and post-Enlightenment periods and, leaning on Hans Frei's famous dichotomy,[2] pre-critical and critical modes of interpretation, even though these divisions have long been subject to scrutiny.[3] Biblical scholarship in America, the prevalent view suggests, had its critical awakening with the importation of German Higher Criticism to northeastern divinity schools in the

1 Good access to this literature is provided by Paul C. Gutjahr, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of the Bible in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017) and Mark A. Noll's two magisterial volumes: *In the Beginning Was the Word: The Bible in American Public Life, 1492–1783* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016) and *America's Book: The Rise and Decline of a Bible Civilization, 1794–1911* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022).

2 Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth-Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974).

3 Recent surveys stress the many continuities between biblical scholarship before and after the Enlightenment. See, for example, vols. 3 and 4 of Henning Graf Reventlow, *History of Biblical Interpretation*, transl. Leo G. Perdue and James O. Duke, 4 vols. (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009–2010); or Magne Sæbø, ed., *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament: From the Renaissance to the Enlightenment* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008). For the British context, see the essays in Ariel Hessayon and Nicholas Keene, eds., *Scripture and Scholarship in Early Modern England* (London: Ashgate, 2006); and part II ("Scholarship") In *The Oxford Handbook of the Bible in Early Modern England, c. 1530–1700,* eds. Kevin Killeen, Helen Smith, and Rachel Willie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Dimitri Levitin, *Ancient Wisdom in the Age of New Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015). For the European and specifically Dutch context, see Dirk Van Miert, Henk J. M. Nellen, Piet Steenbakkers, and Jetze Touber, eds., *Scriptural Authority and Biblical Criticism in the Dutch Golden Age: God's Word Questioned* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017) and Nicholas Hardy, *Criticism and Confession: The Bible in the Seventeenth Century Republic of Letters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2017). On some of the long-term trends and developments of biblical criticism during the Enlightenment, see Jonathan Sheehan, *The Enlightenment Bible: Translation, Scholarship, Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

nineteenth century.[4] Before that, early American divines studied the Scriptures intensely but in largely unenlightened darkness, with some solitary New England figures, such as Jonathan Edwards, Charles Chauncy (1705–1787), or Ezra Stiles (1727–1795), starting to raise their eyes to the dawn since the mid-1700s. Edwards in particular is often singled out, in the words of William Baird, as the sole "Calvinist precursor" of post-Enlightenment biblical criticism. Allegedly, he pioneered a serious, if always defensive, engagement with the new philological and historical scholarship from Europe.[5]

The ongoing edition of Cotton Mather's hitherto unpublished *Biblia Americana* and the attendant scholarly discussion has begun to challenge this dominant narrative. This essay makes a pointed contribution to that discussion by looking at Mather's response to critical interrogation of the canon in the *Biblia* and its revisions of the Authorized Version. What connects these two issues is that they both concern the "givenness" of the Bible, which, in Mather's day, was being fundamentally challenged. Behind the discussions about the canonicity of diverse books and over how to render the Hebrew and Greek texts into modern languages there always lurked fundamental questions regarding the divine authority, integrity, and perspicuity of the Bible. For working through questions like these, Cotton Mather (1663–1728) deserves to be seen as America's first major Bible scholar.

Composed between 1693 and 1728, Mather's commentary not only predates Jonathan Edwards's scattered notes and essays on biblical criticism by a full generation. It also exceeds them, by far, in the breadth and depth of its critical scrutiny. The *Biblia Americana* manuscript comprises more than 4500 folio pages, which, in the annotated ten-volume edition, will eventually amount to more than ten thousand pages in print. Mather was never able to mobilize enough subsidies and

4 See Jerry Brown, *The Rise of Biblical Criticism in America, 1800–1870* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press,1969); Glenn T. Miller, *Piety and Profession: American Protestant Theological Education, 1870–1970* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007); and Gary Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 335–66. More specialized studies are Paul C. Gutjahr, *Charles Hodge: Guardian of American Orthodoxy* (New York: Oxford university Press, 2011); John H. Giltner, *Moses Stuart: The Father of Biblical Science in America* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988); Mark S. Massa, *Charles August Briggs and the Crisis of Historical Criticism* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990); and J.G. Williams, *The Times and Life of Edward Robinson: Connecticut Yankee in King Solomon's Court* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 1999).

5 William Baird, *History of New Testament Research*, vol. 2, *From Jonathan Edwards to Rudolf Bultmann* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 6. On Edwards's engagement with historical and textual questions, Robert E. Brown, *Jonathan Edwards and the Bible* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002) and "Biblical Exegesis," In *The Oxford Handbook of Jonathan Edwards*, eds. Douglas A. Sweeney and Jan Stievermann (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021): 370–387; Douglas A. Sweeney, *Edwards the Exegete: Biblical Interpretation and Anglo-Protestant Culture on the Edge of the Enlightenment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

subscriptions to publish in far-away London what would have been America's first comprehensive Bible commentary. And so, its direct influence remained limited to the author's immediate Boston circles. Still, the *Biblia* gives us a window into the theological concerns and exegetical pursuits that preoccupied this leading colonial representative of the transatlantic Republic of Letters during a highly complex and tension-filled phase of intellectual and religious history. In the European context this transitional phase between the last third of the seventeenth and the first half of the eighteenth centuries is often framed as the "early Enlightenment,"[6] while Americanists tend to treat (or more often neglect) it as an undefined postscript to the age of Puritanism or negligible interval before the arrival of the programmatically secular Enlightenment of the Founders. However, the *Biblia Americana* is best understood as a specific colonial response to the early Enlightenment discourses across the Atlantic, which were heavily concentrated around religious subjects and specifically the Bible.

The nature of Mather's response to early Enlightenment discourses about the Bible was at once innovative and conservative. The *Biblia* pioneered a new type of deeply learned, historically conscious but apologetically-oriented biblical criticism in America. In his annotations, Mather engaged in what Robert Brown aptly describes as an "appropriation of critical interpretation" (*BA* 9:15). In his annotations on all of the Holy Scriptures and an appended group of thematic essays, Mather offered a digest of select patristic-medieval and rabbinical traditions, hundreds of post-Reformation commentators and devotional writers as well as cutting-edge contemporary works of biblical scholarship, history, geography, and even natural philosophy. Mather's hope was to create a *synopsis criticorum* that would be up to the highest scientific standards but also fully orthodox and pious in accordance with his understanding of orthodox Christianity.[7] As such, the *Biblia Americana* shares many

6 The classical work that conceived of an early Enlightenment focused on religious issues was Paul Hazard, *The Crisis of the European Mind, 1680–1715*, transl. James Lewis May (1935; New York: New York Review Books, 2013). On the early Enlightenment and the emergence of historical criticism, see, for instance, Klaus Scholder, *The Birth of Modern Critical Theology,* transl. John Bowden (London: Trinity Press International, 1990); Jonathan Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650–1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Travis Frampton, *Spinoza and the Rise of Historical Criticism of the Bible* (New York: Clark, 2006).

7 Cotton Mather, *Biblia Americana: America's First Bible Commentary. A Synoptic Commentary on the Old and New Testaments*, eds. Reiner Smolinski and Jan Stievermann et al., 10 vols. (Tübingen/Grand Rapids, MI: Mohr Siebeck, 2010-). The extensive introductions by the volume editors offer the best guidance to the relevant contexts, main sources, approaches, and topics of the *Biblia.* For further studies, see also Reiner Smolinski and Jan Stievermann, eds., *Cotton Mather and Biblia Americana–America's First Bible Commentary: Essays in Reappraisal* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010); and Stievermann, *Prophecy, Piety, and the Problem of Historicity: Interpreting the Hebrew Scriptures in Cotton*

characteristics with the new type of English Bible commentary (although saturated with ancient language citations) that started to emerge in the late seventeenth century and attempted to synthesize the fruits of biblical scholarship for a broader readership, but in ways that would also be edifying and strengthening their faith.[8]

In the following, the basic contours and impetus of Mather's project of a "Biblical Enlightenment" will be examined through two focal aspects, both of which, in the American context, are firmly associated with the post-Enlightenment period. The first, Mather's interrogation of the canon, enables us to bring into view his apologetically oriented way of dealing with the increasingly radical historicization of the Bible in its given form. Mather's numerous offerings of improved translations, the second aspect, throws into relief his utilization of European philological criticism, which flourished in Europe and was also bringing forth a steady stream of new vernacular versions of the Bible. Both aspects will reveal that, characteristically of early Enlightenment scholarship, Mather's work eludes any easy pigeonholing as either precritical or critical. Furthermore, the examples discussed will offer striking illustrations of how the *Biblia* defies the established account of biblical criticism in America.[9]

Also, the existing literature has not taken notice of any serious challenges to the common translation that might have come from the British colonies. Rather, it is taken for granted that for American Protestants, in the words of Paul Gutjahr, the King James version (KJV) remained "firmly entrenched as the monarch of American Protestant Bible versions" until well after the American Civil War.[10] It was only after the Revolution brought an end to the royal monopoly on importing English Bibles from the homeland, or so the story goes, that a growing number of alternative, and some uniquely American,

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Mather's Biblia Americana (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016). In the following, the edition will be cited parenthetically in the main text using the abbreviation *BA*.

8 Among others: Matthew Poole, *Annotations upon the Holy Bible*. (London: Printed for John Richardson, Thomas Parkhurst, Dorman Newman, and Jonathan Robinson, 1683–1685), or the Welsh Presbyterian minister Matthew Henry's (1662–1714) *An Exposition of all the Books of the Old and New Testaments* (London: Printed for Tho. Parkhurst, J. Robinson, and J. Lawrence, 1707–1712).

9 In his authoritative study, Bruce M. Metzger, for instance, highlighted Princeton's Archibald Alexander (1772–1851) as the first American to offer a sustained treatment of the topic in his *The Canon of the Old and New Testaments Ascertained; or, the Bible Complete without the Apocrypha and Unwritten Tradition* (Princeton: D.A. Borrenstein, 1826): Bruce M. Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1987), 18. On Edwards and the canon, see Brown, *Jonathan Edwards and the Bible*, 104–11.

10 Paul C. Gutjahr, *An American Bible: A History the Good Book in the United States, 1777–1880* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 91. Similarly Charles L. Cohen asserts the more or less unchallenged "primacy of the KJV" in his "Religion, Print Culture, and the Bible before 1876," In *Religion and the Culture of Print in Modern America*, eds. Charles L. Cohen and Paul S. Boyer (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008): 7.

translations and re-translations of Scripture (starting with the Aitken Bible of 1782), along with countless Bible commentaries and aids, began to crowd the burgeoning American print market. This ongoing pluralization of Scriptures was then compounded by the Revised Version (1881–85), a massive undertaking of American Bible scholars trained in the arts of German Higher Criticism to replace the faulty translation of KJV with a philologically more accurate one. With the RV, as Peter Thuesen has written, the KJV finally "began to lose its unchallenged cultural hegemony."[11] Since the *Biblia* did not enter the market it could not make a practical difference in people's Bible use. Nevertheless, as this article demonstrates, Mather undertook America's first extended initiative to revise the KJV well before the advent of Higher Criticism.

1 Cotton Mather's Biblical Enlightenment and the Debates over the Canon

The debates over the biblical canon during the early Enlightenment were, to a large degree, the outgrowth of older, partly even ancient, arguments. During Mather's era, they were renewed with added poignancy in the context of larger controversies about the Bible and its authority. Mixed up in these controversies were other issues, notably those over authorship, inspiration, and textual variants or corruptions.[12] When, how, and on what grounds were the now-canonical books selected and separated from other writings deemed sacred? What about books conventionally ascribed to inspired prophets or apostles but whose authorship appeared uncertain in the face of seemingly contradictory textual or historical evidence? How was one to think of the numerous manuscript variants and cases interpolations that scholars were discovering? Could philologists establish reliable texts of the canonical books that matched as closely as possible the original autographs?

During Mather's lifetime, such questions, if not always directly articulated, were being pushed to the fore with unprecedented force (but for very different reasons!) by diverse scholars such as the French Oratorian exegete Richard Simon (1638–1712), the Swiss Reformed theologian of Arminian persuasion Jean LeClerc (Johannes Clericus, 1657–1736), or the English Deist John Toland (1670–1722). There was little that was completely original in their works and they very much stood on the

11 Peter Thuesen, *In Discordance with the Scriptures: American Protestant Battles Over Translating the Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 42.

12 Keene, Nicholas. "'A Two-Edged Sword': Biblical Criticism and the New Testament Canon in Early Modern England," In *Scripture and Scholarship in Early Modern England*, eds. Hessayon and Keene: 94–115; Ariel Hessayon, "The Apocrypha in Early Modern England," In *The Oxford Handbook of the Bible in Early Modern England*, eds. Killeen, Smith and Willie: 131–148.

shoulders of the preceding generations of humanist Bible scholars, notably Hugo Grotius (1583–1645). What distinguished this new cohort was their greater willingness to give rein to critical inquiry as an open-ended endeavor and accept conclusions from their findings that directly challenged basic theological teachings about Scripture. In that they can be said to mark an important transition of biblical interpretation from the humanist golden age of *ars critica* into the period of enlightened *critique*.[13] At the same time, these unprecedently "critical critics" called forth a new type of apologetic literature defending the Bible on the same textual and historical grounds – literature on which Mather frequently drew.[14]

For instance, Richard Simon, in his two ground-breaking works, the *Histoire critique du Vieux Testament* (1678; translated into English in 1682) and *Histoire critique du texte du Nouveau Testament* (1689; translated that same year),[15] developed new critical theories about the authorship and composition of several Old and New Testament books, while ultimately seeking to assert the divine authority of the Scriptures. Among other things, he rejected conventional assumptions about Mosaic authorship of the entire Pentateuch but at the same time asserted that the long and complex provenance of these books had been overseen by God's providence.[16] Similarly, Simon discussed the origin and character of various books of the New Testament as well as textual differences in the tradition, engaging with both Jewish critics and modern skeptics. Simon admitted the uncertainty of the Greek text in many places, only to arrive at the conclusion that the Scriptures as bare texts could no longer, as the Reformers liked to claim, provide a sufficient foundation for the Christian faith. Rather, Simon argued, "it is necessary to know, besides this, what are the Apostolical Traditions; and we cannot learn them but from the Apostolical Churches, who have preserved the true Sense of Scriptures."[17]

If Protestant exegetes like Mather could, as a final resort, dismiss Simon's conclusions as "Popish" propaganda, his arguments demanded serious engagement. Even less easy to dismiss were similarly challenging works produced in Mather's

13 On this transition, see Hardy, *Criticism and Confession*, 373–402.

14 The following draws on insights from the "Editor's Introduction" of Smolinski (*BA* 1:113–75); Brown (*BA* 9:15–57); Stievermann (*BA* 5:9–49; *BA* 10:55–104).

15 In 1690 Simon followed up with his *Histoire critique de versions du Noveau Testament* (Rotterdam: Reiner Leers, 1690), to which he added three years later a *Histoire critique des principeaux commentateurs du Noveau Testament* (Rotterdam: Reiner Leers, 1693), surveying interpreters from the patristic to the modern era. In 1702 Simon would even produce his own edition and translation of the New Testament.

16 On Simon, see John W. Rogerson, "Early Old Testament Critics in the Roman Catholic Church – Focusing on the Pentateuch," in *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament*, ed. Sæbø: 837–50.

17 Richard Simon, *A Critical History of the Text of the New Testament* (London: Printed for R. Taylor, 1689), pt. 1, 31.

own world of Reformed theology, notably by the followers of the Dutch Arminian humanist Grotius, whose highly controversial annotations on the Hebrew Scriptures (1644) and New Testament (1641–50) continued to be discussed well into the eighteenth century. In fact, Grotius was a defining author for Mather's project, with whom he wrestled throughout.[18] While Mather, for all his reservations, greatly respected and frequently relied on Grotius's philological and historical insights, he regarded the irreverent interventions of some of his contemporary adepts as outright dangerous. This was certainly true of LeClerc's *Sentimens de quelques theologiens de Hollande sur l'histoire critique du Vieux Testament composée par le P. Richard Simon*, selections of which were published in English under the title *Five Letters concerning the Inspiration of the Holy Scriptures* (1690).[19] In his engagement with Simon's book on the Old Testament, LeClerc advanced even more critical views on the authorship, inspiration, and composition of the canon. He concluded that numerous books of the Old and New Testament were of uncertain authorship and that certain books could be removed from the canon entirely.[20]

Building on Grotius's similar opinions, LeClerc considered the historical books of the Hebrew Bible and New Testament (i.e. the Gospels and the Book of Acts) to be generally faithful to history, but not inspired like the prophetic texts. Inevitably, certain mistakes were to be expected in historical writings. The same applied to the letters of the New Testament that clearly belonged to the pragmatic genre of epistolary writing, which served purposes of human communication and for which no inspiration was to be expected. Hence LeClerc openly denied the notion of a uniformly inspired and in all respects infallible canon of Scriptures that could provide unambiguous textual support for the fine points of academic theology. Nevertheless, he asserted that a rationally interpreted New Testament provided a stable doctrinal core that sufficed to lead believers to salvation and served as a sure guide to Christian living. To Mather and other self-declared defenders of orthodoxy, such an approach to the Bible was not just irreverent but irresponsible as it would erode the foundations of Christianity. It had to be answered with good reasons.

Simon and LeClerc also cited the many cases in which humanist scholarship since the days of Erasmus had discovered discrepancies between what had become the *Textus Receptus* and other Greek manuscript traditions of the New Testament. Around the turn of the eighteenth century, this debate around the textual instability of the New Testament was further ratcheted up, as scholars increasingly began to

18 On Mather's complicated relation with Grotius, see Jan Stievermann, "Admired Adversary: Wrestling with Grotius the Exegete in Cotton Mather's Biblia Americana," *Grotiana* 41:1 (2020): 198–235.

19 See Samuel Golden, *Jean Le Clerc* (New York: Twayne, 1972).

20 Jean LeClerc, *The Five Letters Concerning Inspiration* (1690), second letter, 36.

realize the enormous extent of textual variations. A groundbreaking work of textual criticism was produced in England by the Oxford don John Mill (1645–1707). His monumental *Novum Testamentum graecum, cum lectionibus variantibus MSS* (1707), still used *Textus Receptus* as its baseline, but documented in the apparatus over thirty-thousand variant readings between some 100 extant New Testament manuscripts and countless patristic citations. Mill did not aim to undermine orthodoxy, but the sheer mass of variants he assembled had a potentially unsettling effect. And sure enough, Deist Anthony Collins (1676–1729) would soon avail himself of Mill's *Novum Testamentum* in his *Discourse on Free Thinking* (1713) to gleefully point out that even the clergy have been "owning and laboring to prove the Text of the Scriptures to be precarious."[21]

Mather did not think that the *variae lectiones*, even to the extent shown by Mill, proved any such thing upon closer examination. The *Biblia* discusses with some regularity manuscript variants but does so (with the one notable exception of the *comma Johanneum*),[22] in a rather non-alarmist manner. Mather was not a textual scholar himself and, even if he would have wanted to compare them, had no access to any manuscripts. In any case, his theological instincts let him trust the authority of learned apologists. Most important in this regard were *A Paraphr*ase *and Commentary on the New Testament* (1703), written by Mill's colleague Daniel Whitby (1636–1728), in which many of the more controversial cases were addressed. And in 1710, Whitby came forth with his *Examen variantium Lectionum Johannis Milli*, appended to his *Additional Annotations to the New Testament* (1710), which Mather also used. The majority of these variants, as Mather was re-assured by Whitby and others, represented accidental, minor changes or textual corruptions incidentally caused by scribes. Mather commented on such cases where they had led to significant interpretative difficulties or debates. On occasion, when the evidence presented to him seemed compelling, he even argued for corrections of the *Textus Receptus*.

A good example can be found in Mather's commentary on Heb. 11:37, which said (in the KJV translations based on the *Textus Receptus*) about the early Christian martyrs: "they were stoned, they were sawn asunder, were tempted, were slain with the sword." The problem here was that ἐπειράσθησαν ([epeirasthēsan] "they were tempted") seemed oddly anticlimactic after the listing of tortures preceding it. Humanist scholars had offered a variety of solutions. "Some read," as Mather summarizes, "επυρασθησαν, some, επυρωθησαν, some επρησθησαν· all signifying, *They were burnt*." This interpretation was not improbable, but, following Whitby, Mather ultimately opted for another solution. The ἐπειράσθησαν in the Byzantine

21 Anthony Collins, *A Discourse of Free-thinking: Occasion'd by the Rise and Growth of a Sect Call'd Free-thinkers* (1713), 88.

22 Stievermann, "Editor's Introduction" (*BA* 10: 104–19).

manuscript on which *Textus Receptus* was based, represented "an Error, arising, εκ διττογραφιας·[23] *From Writing the same Word twice*; or, that some who knew not what επρισθησαν meant,[24] writt for it επειρασθησαν, and so in time they came to be both written." Among the evidence that Whitby cited for this proposal was that the "the *Syriack* ha's not, επειρασθησαν" and neither did it occur in a number of early Patristic citations. All of this gave "Ground for Conjecture, that some Ignorant Writer, putt, επειρασθησαν, for επρισθησαν." The latter, then, Mather agreed with Whitby, "was the only Reading followed by the Ancients" (*BA* 10:289–90).

Such minor divergences were hardly worth losing any sleep over. With Whitby, Mather concluded that although God might have allowed minor errors to creep "into scribal copies of the New Testament, at the same time he would never allow the text to be corrupted (i.e. altered) to the point that it could not adequately achieve its divine aim and purpose." According to Whitby, the text of the New Testament was, in the words of Bart Ehrman, "secure, since scarcely any variant cited by Mill involves an article of faith or question of conduct, and the vast majority of Mill's variants have no claim to authenticity."[25] Mather was happy to take it on his colleague's word.[26] Potentially much more concerning to him were cases in which critics had argued for the pseudepigraphic nature of biblical books, or had found evidence for significant redactions or later interpolations, suggesting that the received texts were not identical with those produced by their supposed authors.

Such cases cast doubt on the uniform inspiration and divine character of the canonical Scriptures and their equal worth for the Church. After all, the defense of a text's inspiration was intimately connected to its attributability to one identifiable author. Inversely, if texts of doubtful provenance and inspiration had been canonized, on what grounds had the apocrypha and other significant texts of Jewish and Christian tradition been excluded? As a defender of Reformed orthodoxy, it was important for Mather to be able to draw a firm line around the 66 books defined as the Old and New Testament canon by the Westminster Confession of 1647. Like many of his Puritan forbears, he objected to the inclusion of apocrypha as a secondary canon in Catholic but also many Protestant Bibles, including Luther's and the KJV. The apocrypha, as the Westminster Confession had put it, were not "of divine inspiration" and hence "are no part of the Canon of Scripture; and therefor are of no

23 The phrase εκ διττογραφία (δισσογραφία) [ek dittographia] signifies "by a repetition of words by a copyist."

24 "were sawn asunder." From πρίζω [prizo] "saw." This is the reading in the NTG today.

25 Bart Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why* (New York: Harper Collins, 2005), 85–86. Ehrman relies on Adam Fox, *John Mill and Richard Bentley: A Study of Textual Criticism of the New Testament, 1675–1729* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1954), 105–06.

26 Mather made similar arguments with a view to textual variants in the Hebrew Bible (see *BA* 1:134 and *BA* 3:724).

authority in the Church of God, nor to be any otherwise approved, or made use of, than other human writings." Only the canonical books ought to serve as authoritative guides of faith and ecclesial practice, only they were to command the full attention of Christian commentaries – an imperative also reflected in the *Biblia Americana*. Mather's responses to debates surrounding the canon were largely in favor of conservative positions seeking to defend the traditional canon as well as the unity and uniform inspiration of the Holy Scriptures. However, this, "was not an exercise conducted in isolation from the growing historical awareness of the travails involved in reaching a canonical consensus."[27] And, more so than Edwards, Mather was ready to make some compromises, where the scholarly arguments appeared compelling to him.

The Old Testament Wisdom Books provided one flashpoint of controversy. With regard to Proverbs, critics had rejected the conventional assumption that the entire book could be traced back to wisdom sayings that were originally uttered by an inspired Solomon. For Ecclesiastes, Grotius and LeClerc called into doubt that Solomon had originally authored any of its content (large parts of which were so obviously out of tune with Jewish or Christian piety) and thus raised question about the book's rightful inclusion in the Bible. While Mather defended the Solomonic authorship, inspiration, and canonicity of both Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, he was ready to concede, for instance, that chapters 30 to 31 of Proverbs had to be much later interpolations from the corpus of the otherwise unknown king Lemuel.[28]

Mather was prepared to accept even more challenging historical arguments by Richard Simon about the complex composition process of the Pentateuch in order to stave off radical critics such as Baruch Spinoza or Thomas Hobbes and Deist scoffers who flatly denied the Mosaic authorship and inspiration of the five books.[29] In one of the thematic essays appended to the *Biblia* titled "*Ezra*, or, The Things done by *Ezra*, for the Restoring & Preserving of the Sacred Scriptures," he – drawing, for the most part, on the influential work of Huguenot theologian Humphrey Prideaux (1648–1724), especially his *The Old and New Testament connected in the History of the Jews and neighbouring Nations* (1716–18) – followed the Simonean reasoning by conceding that a number of passages in the Pentateuch, including the last chapter of Deuteronomy containing the account of Mose's death, must be "Plain interpolations" written much later by now unknown public scribes. The final composition of the Pentateuch happened, so Mather postulated, as Ezra made an "Edition of the Sacred

27 Compare Edward's similar but more limited remarks on the canon, most significantly in Misc. No. 1060, as discussed in Brown, *Jonathan Edwards and the Bible*, 107–110 (109).

28 For more details, see Stievermann, *Prophecy, Piety, and Historicity*, 107–48.

29 On Mather's intervention in the Pentateuch debate, see Smolinski, "Editor's Introduction" (*BA* 1:131–44) and *BA* (2:1259). For comparing Edwards's engagement with the same debate, see Brown, *Jonathan Edwards and the Bible*, 115–22.

Scriptures" after the return from the Babylonian exile, adding "what appeared necessary to him, for the Illustrating, the Connecting, and the Completing of them." Mather vehemently maintained, however, that neither the multi-layered and heterogeneous character of the Pentateuch, nor its long history of textual transmission, put its divine authority and historical truthfulness into question. The work of the redactors had been "assisted by the Same Spirit which inspired the First Writers of them" (*BA* 10:884). In adopting Simon's rather Catholic construction of an inspired tradition, Mather clearly hoped to shut down any further discussion that might undermine the canonicity of the Pentateuch.

Mather spent even more energy and ink defending the authorship and canonical status of New Testament books, where renewed attention to debates among the Church Fathers or new evidence appeared to render it uncertain. Of special importance in this regard were the so-called Catholic Letters, which had already been disputed during the early days of the Church. In commenting on these books, Mather also offered a more general interpretation of the process of canon formation during the ante-Nicean era.

As late as the days of Jerome, when the Council of Laodicea (c. 363) had already issued its famous authoritative list of New Testament books, the eminent scholar and translator of the Vulgata mentioned that the Catholic Letters continued to be counted among the *antilegomena* by some churches.[30] Yet with the backing of many (if by no means all) ancient fathers, Jerome followed the emerging consensus and included James, 1 and 2 Peter, and 1, 2, 3 John, as well as Jude into his Latin Bible, whose authority in the Western church would remain almost uncontested for a millennium. With the arrival of Renaissance humanism and the Reformation, the canon debate was reopened. Again, the Catholic Letters came under special scrutiny. Both Erasmus and Cardinal Cajetan, for example, cast doubt on the apostolic authorship of Jude, and the second, and third Epistle of John, among other books. Albeit more for theological reasons, Luther likewise questioned the canonicity and apostolic authorship of James and Jude, together with Hebrews and Revelation.

These debates intensified and diversified among seventeenth-century critics. Grotius, for instance, mustered fresh evidence for considering 2 and 3 John, 2 Peter and Jude pseudoepigraphic writings, which, also in terms of their content, were at best of secondary significance for modern Christians. Despite such challenges and tensions, in the broader Protestant as well as the Catholic tradition, the New Testament canon as enshrined in the Vulgata survived intact and was routinely being reproduced (even though in slightly different orders and with or without apocrypha)

30 See Jerome, *Liber de Viris illustribus*, 2, 4, 9 (PL 23. 609–25), and *Epistola* 120 and 129 (PL 22. 1002–03). On the 27-book canon of the Vulgata, see Jerome reflections in *Epistola* 53 (PL 22. 540–49). On this, see Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament*, 235–38.

in myriad Bible editions.[31] Around the turn of the eighteenth century, however, critics raised the debate to a new level, notably in the Netherlands and England, where there was less censorship.[32] Now the arguments were very much focused on early church history, patristic evidence, and the relative merits of apocryphal texts. Deist John Toland stirred the pot when he, in a side note to his *The Life of John Milton* (1698), alleged the arbitrariness of the New Testament's composition as we know it. Called out by infuriated churchmen, Toland responded with *Amyntor; or, a Defense of Milton's Life* (1699), in which he utilized the findings of humanist philology and patristic scholarship to argue in greater detail that the boundary between the so-called apocrypha and the New Testament books had been drawn as the result of theological and ecclesial power struggles. Many communities of early Christians (which widely differed in what books they considered authoritative) held texts such as the two epistles of St. Clement, or the Shepherd of Hermas in high regard for a long time, before they were finally ejected as a result of ecclesial pressure. Inversely, some texts that ended up in the canon, such as 2 Peter, Jude, and James, had frequently and from early on been suspected of being pseudoepigraphia. Later Toland even announced that he had recovered the Gospel of Barnabas, which most clearly reflected the original faith of the earliest "Ebionite" Christians, and, provocatively, demanded its consideration for canonization.

His quest to recover Christianity in its most pristine form also led the controversial Cambridge scholar and Newtonian William Whiston to enter the fray. In his *Primitive Christianity Reviv'd* (1711–1712), Whiston presented a case for including into the canon the Apostolic Constitutions, a body of texts that is now generally regarded as originating in the latter half of the fourth century. Whiston, however, believed it went back to the gathering of the Apostles at Jerusalem in 64 CE. He declared that the Constitutions ought to be regarded as the most sacred core of the canon because it contained "the *Catholick Doctrine*, or the main original Laws and Constitutions of the Gospel, which the 11 Apostles had personally received from our Saviours Mouth, after his Resurrection."[33] Based on the Constitutions, he, furthermore, argued for incorporating the epistles of St. Clement and St. Ignatius as well as

31 Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament*, 11.

32 On the following, see Nicholas Keene, "'A Two-Edged Sword': Biblical Criticism and the New Testament Canon in Early Modern England," In *Scripture and Scholarship in Early Modern* England, eds. Hessayon and Keene, 94–115, and Hessayon, "The Apocrypha in Early Modern England," In *The Oxford Handbook of the Bible in Early Modern England*, eds. Killeen, Smith and Willie, 131–48.

33 Whiston, *An Essay on the Apostolic Constitution*, in *Primitive Christianity Reviv'd*, 4 vols. (London: 1711–1712), 3:40.

the Shepherd of Hermas into the New Testament. A correspondent and long-time admirer of Whiston, Cotton Mather was shocked.[34]

In such an intellectual climate, theologians of various stripes felt called to offer comprehensive historical accounts of the genesis of the Bible and the early history of Christianity that also defended the established New Testament canon. In the *Biblia*, Mather used a number of works providing such accounts, including Jacques Basnage's *Histoire de l'eglise depuis Jésus Christ jusq'a présent* (1699), Loui Ellies Du Pin's *A Compleat History of the Canon and Writers of the Books of the Old and New Testament* (1699–1700), or Robert Jenkin's *The Reasonableness and Certainty of the Christian Religion* (first ed. 1696–1697). However, the most monumental and influential work of this type, which Mather cites on several occasions, was that of the Welsh Dissenting minister Jeremiah Jones (1693/4–1724), *A new and full Method of Settling the canonical Authority of the New Testament* (3 vols., 1726–1727).[35] On more than a thousand pages, Jones took it upon himself "to determine the canonical authority of any book, or books, by searching into the most ancient and authentic records of Christianity, and finding out the testimony or traditions of those, who lived nearest the time in which the books were written, concerning them."[36] Mather found in Jones's volumes confirmation that the New Testament canon was not a late and arbitrary imposition by church councils. Instead Jones "emphasized that the conception of the canon, as an authoritative body of texts, possessed an early genesis that slowly took shape as geographical, communicational and political barriers were overcome, spurious texts identified and dissenters ostracized."[37] Mather strategically ignored the potentially more troubling parts of Jones about the Syriac Version of the New Testament (which Jones deemed to be of near-apostolic origin) that did not contain most of the *antilegomena*.[38]

When Mather put down his mature convictions on the subject in the appended essay "Some Remarks, relating to the *Inspiration*, and the *Obsignation*, of the CANON," he primarily relied on the respective sections in *The Reasonableness and Certainty of the Christian Religion* by Robert Jenkin (bapt. 1656, d. 1727), Master of

34 See Whiston's *Essay upon the Epistle of Ignatius* (London: Benjamin Cooke, 1710), and also his later *Collection of Original Texts of Scripture, and Testimonies of Antiquity that relate to Christian Discipline* (London: John Whiston and T. Cooper, 1739).

35 Mather's use of Jones is evident at (*BA* 1:886-888, *BA* 9: 283; *BA* 9:209, 219, 410; and *BA* 10:351). Jones also served as a guide for Edwards to the canon debates and, even a century later, was one of the two key sources for Alexander's *Canon of the Old and New Testament*. See Brown, *Jonathan Edwards and the Bible*, 107–11.

36 Jones, *A New and Full Method of Settling the Canonical Authority of the New Testament* ([1726–27] 3 vols. Oxford: Clarendon, 1789), 1:47.

37 Keene, "'A Two-Edged Sword,'" 101.

38 Jones, *A New and Full Method,* 1:110–13.

St. John's College, Cambridge, and Lady Margaret's Professor of Divinity.[39] With Jenkin he rejected all arguments for either relegating certain canonical books to secondary status, or for including additional texts such as the Apostolic Constitution. And against all critics who questioned the divine authority of the traditional canon, Mather affirmed the full and equal inspiration of all the original writings collected in the Old and New Testament. With Jenkin he then argued, however, that such a belief in plenary inspiration was not to deny the possibility that later on in the process of manuscript transmission certain mistakes or interpolations were made. Nor did it exclude from the original process of composition "such *Humane Means*, as Information in *Matters of Fact*," which the authors would have derived "from their *own Senses*, or from the *Testimony* of others; and *in Matters of Discourse and Reason*, to argue from their own Observations." Still, he insisted that "the Holy Spirit infallibly guided them in the Use of these Means." Divine inspiration was no mechanical determination, and so the authors were allowed to "Use of their *own Words*, and of the *Style* that was most natural to them" (*BA* 10:813). Thus, Mather embraced a synergistic model of biblical authorship in which the Spirit was understood as having preserved, except for extraordinary visions, the free and conscious agency of His human amanuenses. The Holy Spirit's influence worked through the natural faculties and particular personalities of the biblical writers and employed their varied skills and characteristics of their style, which necessarily also reflected their particular time and place.[40] At all times, however, the Spirit had worked to preserve "that *Book* from Error, which was to be the *Standard of Truth* for all Ages" (*BA* 10:813–14).

From Jenkin but also in agreement with Jones, Mather argued that this process of divine oversight in the transmission of scripture had started very early, stood in direct continuity with the Apostles, and was overseen by a series of ecclesial councils (*BA* 10:814–17).[41] For skeptics such as Toland, the canon was a late selection from a great diversity of writings in circulation. Even some orthodox Protestant scholars like Basnage conceded that the canon had not become fixed before the fourth century. In Mather's view, by contrast, there had been from very early on a nucleus of Scriptures that most early Christians regarded as authoritative in addition to the Hebrew Bible. And although, as he conceded, "the Authority of some certain Books,

39 See Jenkin, *The Reasonableness,* vol. 2, ch. 2, ("Of Inspiration"), 32–40; and vol. 2, ch.4 ("Of the Canon of the Holy Scriptures"), sect. 12, 113–15.

40 On the topic of inspiration, see also the long essay-like entry on 1 Chron. 29 where Mather detailed his more specific views on inspiration and modes of prophetic revelation, mostly with the help of the Dutch reformed scholar Herman Witisus (*BA* 3:712–35). On this subject, see also Reiner Smolinski, "Editors's Introduction" (*BA* 1:156-57, 159–60) and Kenneth P. Minkema, "Editor's Introduction" (*BA* 3:44–48).

41 Compare Jenkin, *The Reasonabless* (2:113–15).

was for a while quæstioned by a few *private Men*, yett none of those Books which now stand in our *Canon*, were ever Rejected, by any *Council* of the Church; albeit, such were frequently called in the First Ages of Christianity, & had this very thing under consideration" (*BA* 10:814). In Tertullian's writings Mather saw convincing evidence that prior to the days of this ancient Father (c. 160/170–after 220), "diverse *Councils* had passed their Censure on the *Apocryphal Books*, and that the *Canon* of the Scripture had been fixed long before."[42] These councils, Mather surmised, might have taken place during the life time of Polycarp of Smyrna (Mather places his martyrdom at 147 CE), or at least around it.[43] In this way, Mather could argue for an unbroken apostolic tradition, by which "the *Canon* of the Scripture, was vouched by those, who received it from *John* the Apostle; and *Councils* were called (which *Tertullian* tells us, were very numerous & frequent in *Greece,*) to give Testimony unto the Genuine Canon, and censure the Books that were *Apocryphal*" (*BA* 10:815).[44]

Both Jenkins and Mather, therefore, thought it "manifest, that the *Canon* of the Scripture, had been settled before the Council of *Laodicea*, which appoints that no Books which are *extrà Canonem* (none but *Canonical,*) should be Read in the Christian Assemblies, and then subjoins the Titles of the *Canonical Books.*"[45] The decrees of Laodicea represented the direct outgrowth of a more than 200-year long process and its codification in the form of an official canon list. The canonical books were probably so called, Mather mused, "because they were inserted into, *The Apostles Canons*; and others were called, *Uncanonical.*" With this he referred to the Canon of the Apostles, which were part of the much-debated Apostolic Constitutions that Whiston wished to include in the New Testament. Like the vast majority of his peers, Mather considered the Constitutions authentic and authoritative but not sacred writ. Chapter 47 of book 8 contained the Canon of the Apostles, which, among other regulations, also featured a list of biblical books to be considered "canonical."[46]

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42 From Jenkin, Mather refers to Tertullian (c. 160/170-after 220), *De pudicitia*, cap. 10 (PL 1. 999–1001). While some modern scholars, too, have taken Tertullian's statement to imply conciliar decisions about the New Testament canon, most agree that during this early period there were no synods in the later technical sense, but merely local church congregations. See Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament*, 160.

43 From Jenkin, Mather refers to Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses*, 3.3.4, where it is said that in his youth Irenaeus personally met Polycarp (c. 70–156 or 167 CE), who had conversed with many who had known Christ and was appointed bishop of Smyrna by the Apostle John shortly before his death, thus serving as a guarantor of the apostolic tradition.

44 From Jenkin, a reference to Tertullian, *De jejuniis*, cap. 13 (PL 2. 971–72).

45 Jenkin and Mather refer to the directives of canon 59, Canon 60 lists 26 books for the New Testament, omitting Revelation. For a transl., see *NPNFii* (14:158–59).

46 For the NT they list: "the four Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John; the fourteen Epistles of Paul; two Epistles of Peter, three of John, one of James, one of Jude; two Epistles of Clement; and the Constitution dedicated to you the bishops by me Clement, in eight books; which it is not fit to publish

Accordingt to Jenkin and Mather, the Canons of the Apostles were produced no later than the early third century "by *Apostolical Men*, or such as lived next unto the *Apostles* times," and represented the aggregation of what was allegedly decided at earlier synods since the time of Polycarp.[47] Hence the Council of Laodicea would have referred to these decrees. "Now, that particular *Canon*," Mather thought, "which contains the *Canon of the Scripture*, the Council of *Laodicea* gives a sufficient Testimony unto it, so far as it concerns the *Books of the New Testament*; and it agrees very well with what we observed out of *Tertullian*." Mather admitted that Revelation was missing from both canon lists but argued that this had been due to its dark and mysterious character, "which rendred it less edifying to be publickly Read in the Churches." However, as he concluded in the essay, "*The Revelation*, was long before the Council of *Laodicea*, acknowledged Genuine, by *Justin Martyr*, by *Irenæus*, (both of whom wrote a Comment upon it) and by *Tertullian*, and others" (*BA* 10:815–17).[48]

What the ominous warning in Rev. 22:18 ("If any man shall add unto these things") suggested, was thus to be literally understood as the closing of the "*Canon* of the *Scripture* … by the Apostle *John*," in the late first century. Over the course of the next decades, "such Books as were not of Divine Authority," Mather believed, "were laid aside, by *Councils* held, when there were living Witnesses, to certify *Johns* Approbation of the *Canon*; or at least, those who had received it from such Witnesses." Inversely, those "Books which had been doubted of," but truly "belonged unto the *Canon* of the Scripture," like some of the Catholic Epistles, "were afterwards generally acknowledged in all the Churches" (*BA* 10:817). Thus, the inner-ecclesial process of canon formation only officially recognized, and separated from other, non-inspired writings, the body of texts that had been given to the Apostles as Scripture by the Holy Spirit. To Mather's mind, some of these non-inspired writings of the early church, including those included in Bible editions as apocrypha, possessed genuine value, especially as sources for the further elucidation of the canonical

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before all, because of the mysteries contained in them; and the Acts of us the Apostles." See *ANF* (7:385–508).

47 Traditionally, the canons had been ascribed to the Twelve Apostles and thought to have been gathered by Pope Clement I (d. 99). Since the days of Scaliger, however, scholars harbored doubts about the authenticity of the Apostolic Constitution. In 1653, for instance, Jean Daillé had argued that the Apostolic Constitution was a forgery from late antiquity, probably fabricated by Arians. See his *De pseudoepigraphis apostolicis* (1653). On this, see H. J. de Jonge, "J.S. Scaliger's De LXXXV Canonibus Apostolorum Diatribe," *Lias* 2 (1975): 115–24. Most scholars today date the Constitution around 380 CE, but some as late as the early 5th century.

48 From Jenkin, reference is made to Justin Martyr, *Dialogus cum Tryphone Judaeo*, cap. 80–81 (PG 6. 663–70); Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses*, 5.30–35 (PG 7.1064–90); and Tertullian, *De praescriptione haereticorum*, 33 and *Liber de Resurrectione Carnis*., cap. 27 (PL 2.45–46 and 833–34).

books. For this purpose, Mather occasionally used them in the *Biblia*.[49] But he always insisted on the categorial difference between them and the canonized Holy Scriptures.

It is against this background that we must understand Mather's handling of the specific questions regarding the authorship and canonicity of James, 2 Peter, 2–3 John, and Jude. While he duly considers some of the long-standing controversies over the Catholic Letters, Mather in the end always comes to re-affirm a conservative view. Drawing on Whitby, he proposed in a prefatory note to James that they had "obtained that Name" sometime in the fourth century; and been ranked in the same Order, in which they now stand. Their designation reflected not their general acceptance in the early church but their target audience and missionary intentions, in that they were all written "*generally to the Faithful, or to the Jewes of the Dispersion*. For, we learn from the Testimonies of *Origen* and *Eusebius*, and *Amphilochius*, and *Jerom*," as Mather admitted, "That the Ancients doubted Four or Five of the *Seven*" (*BA* 10:303). This was certainly so. But even though Mather acknowledged what these and other Fathers reported about the uncertain status of James, Jude, 2 Peter and, 2 and 3 John in some circles as late as the early fourth century, he had no doubt that they belonged to the proto-canon handed down from the Apostles, which was eventually recognized by all the orthodox churches.[50]

Mather was seemingly unfazed by the old and new discussions over the authorship of James. The majority opinion in the ancient church (as well as among medieval and early modern exegetes) had always been that James, the "brother of the Lord" (1 Cor 9:5; Matt 13:55; Mark 6:3; Acts 1:14; Gal 1:19) wrote the eponymous epistle. Whether a literal brother, cousin, or close friend, this James succeeded Peter as Bishop of Jerusalem and was martyred before the destruction of the city in 70 CE. The problem was that in some manuscript copies of the Epistle there was a superscription identifying James as "the Apostle," but the "brother of the Lord" had not been one of the 12 during Jesus's ministry. This and his early death had always made some exegetes doubt James's authorship. An alternative possibility was James, the son of Alphaeus, also known as James the Less or the Younger, who is identified in the apostolic list as one of the Twelve (Matt 10:3; Mark 3:18; Luke 6:15; Acts 1:13). John

49 See, for instance his references to *The Shepherd of Hermas* and *Epistel of Barnabas* (*BA* 10:305).
50 From Whitby, *A Paraphrase* (2:129), Mather alludes to Eusebius of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical History*, 3.25.1–7 and 6.25, where Origen's opinion is mentioned (PG 20. 267–70 and 579–86); and the canon list in Amphilochius of Iconium (340/45–398/404), *Iambi ad Seleucum* (PG 37. 1577–600). Jerome mentions the doubtful authorship and canonicity of the Catholic Letters in various places: James *De viris illustribus*, cap. 2 (PL 23. 609–10); Jude (ibid. 4); 2 and 3 John (ibid. 9). On 2 Peter, see *Epistola*, 120 (PL 22. 1002). For a helpful modern assessment of discussion of the patristic debates over the Catholic Letters, see Edmund L. Gallagher and John D. Meade, *The Biblical Canon List from Early Christianity: Texts and Analysis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 44–48.

Calvin, for instance, thought this was the likelier possibility, while Luther, of course, had denied that this "Epistle of Straw" had been written by any Apostle. In Mather's day different solutions to this conundrum were suggested. Whitby, for instance, proposed that James "the brother of the Lord" and James the Less were actually one and the same person. By contrast, Grotius and his early English follower Henry Hammond (1605–1660), argued that the title "Apostle" was not restricted to the original 12 but was given to many leaders in the early church, including bishops. There was thus no reason to reject the authorship of James, the "brother of the Lord."[51] Cotton Mather wholeheartedly agreed.

Mather dated the composition of James at around "A.D. 58," shortly before his martyrdom at the hands of the high priest Ananias. (*BA* 1:265).[52] The letter was written with a dual audience of "*Infidel* Jews" and "*Beleeving* Jews" in mind. Paying attention to this frequently shifting double perspective was, in Mather's opinion, crucial to the right interpretation of this book. In some parts, the Apostle aimed to correct the "haughty Errors" of unconverted Jews living by the law, and "to soften their ungoverned Zeal, and to Reform their Indecent Usages in Religion." In other parts, the priority was to comfort the Christian Jews "under the Hardships they were to suffer for their Christianity; to warn them against several Prejudices & Practices of their Persecutors … & to spirit them up unto the pure & patient Profession of the Gospel" (*BA* 10:304). The double perspective also helped to explain the alternating emphasis on works and faith that had confounded not a few interpreters and led Luther to his negative judgment of an irreconcilable contradiction in Paul's theology of grace. Paul, as Mather writes, "treats of our *Justification* before *God*, and the *Right* unto everlasting Life therein granted unto us: which is only by Faith in our Lord Jesus Christ." James, on the other hand, treats of that which may *manifest* our *Justification* unto *Men*, that see and hear, *our Profession of our Faith*" (*BA* 10:314–15). So the two Apostles were not contradicting each other at all, but each focused on one side of the same coin.

Like James, Mather also treated 1 and 2 Peter as equally authentic epistles, both written around "A.D. 65." "Not long after this," Mather added, "we may date the

51 See Whitby, *A Paraphrase* (2:130-31); Hugo Grotius, *Opera omnia theologica, in tres tomos divisa. Ante quidem per partes, nunc autem conjunctim& accuratius edita. Quid porro huic editioni prae caeteris accesserit, praefatio adlectorem docebit*, 3 vols. (London: Mosem Pitt, 1679), 2: 1073; and Henry Hammond, *A Paraphrase and Annotations upon all the Books of the New Testament. Briefly explaining all the difficult Places* thereof, 4 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1845[1653]), 4:378–79.

52 Reference is here made to Flavius Josephus (*Antiquities* 20.9), who reports that King Herod Agrippa II (44–93 ce) was instrumental in installing Ananias (47–58 CE), son of Nedebaeus, as high priest of Jerusalem. According to Josephus and Eusebius (*Historia ecclesiastica* 2.23), James, brother of Jesus, was put to death by the priests of Jerusalem a few years before Roman Emperor Nero (37–68 CE) sent Albinus to succeed Porcius Festus as Roman procurator of Judea (c. 62 CE).

Epistle of *Jude*, which agrees very much with the Second Epistle of *Peter*." Just as he was certain that the author of 1 and 2 Peter was indeed the Apostle Simon Petrus, he accepted the factuality of the authorial self-identification at the opening of Jude as a "servant of Jesus Christ, and the brother of James." (*BA* 1:268). But Mather knew that from the early patristic period, arguments that 2 Peter was to be counted among the *antilegomena* or even to be ejected had frequently extended to Jude as well. After all, the two letters were so similar in many regards and also cited from the same apocryphal writings.

Accordingly, Mather tackled the issues surrounding these texts together. For this purpose, he primarily relied on a dissertation by the Bishop of London and Christian apologist Thomas Sherlock (1677–1761), *The Authority of the Second Epistle of St. Peter* (1725).[53] Mather recognizes the controversy and starts by reviewing some of the critical opinions, ancient and new. He again mentions Origen's and Eusebius's skepticism, while noting that they were recording individual opinions and that it "appears not that this Doubt had infected *whole Churches*, or that there were *any Churches* that rejected the Epistle" (*BA* 10:360). More recently, Grotius but also the French Catholic philologist and theologian Petrus Daniel Huetius (Pierre Daniel Huet, 1630–1721) in his *Demonstratio Evangelica* (1679), had reexamined the case and concluded that Jude and 2 Peter were pseudoepigraphic writings. The vision of a fiery conflagration in 2 Pet. 3 was clearly alluding to the destruction of Jerusalem in the year 70. In Grotius's view, this event must have happened already when the letter was written, because no early Jewish Christian would have believed that the latter days were upon them before the prophesied destruction of Jerusalem had taken place. Assuming that Simon Petrus had died under Nero about 67, this ruled out his authorship. Grotius therefore speculated that Simeon, second Bishop of Jerusalem, who was martyred in 107, was likely the author.[54] Jude, on the other hand, Grotius ascribed to the 15th Bishop of Jerusalem by that same name, who held that office during the time of Hadrian.[55]

However, this was far from consensual, not even among the more critical critics. Hammond, for one, thought that Grotius's suggestions for the authorship and late dating of 2 Peter and Jude were unfounded speculations.[56] With regard to 2 Peter and Jude, Hammond opined, the fact that they "were not so universally known and undoubtedly received at first as other parts of the New Testament," should not be overestimated. For soon after, they were "universally known, and translated, and

53 Contained in Sherlock's *The Use and Intent of Prophecy in the several Ages of the World* (London: Printed for J. Pemberton, 1725), 199–230.

54 See Grotius in *Opera* (2:1113) and Huetius, *Demonstratio Evangelica* (1679), prop. 1, cap. 13, 21.

55 Grotius, *Opera* (2:1151).

56 Hammond, *A Paraphrase*, (4:426–427).

received into the ancient canon, and the apostolicness of the writing never so questioned by any as to assign it to any author, or to doubt of the truth of any thing contained in it." Both epistles were written in response to the same situation and around the same time, "foregoing the destruction of Jerusalem, and the ruin of the Jews, and Judaizing Christians, and Gnostics," about whose false teachers the two books so vehemently warned the faithful.[57] Whitby and also Sherlock went in a similar direction, carrying Mather with them.[58]

The stylistic differences to 1 Peter were really only remarkable in the second chapter of 2 Peter, which, at the same time, has the most common material with Jude in their description of the false teachers. The reason for this was that both authors paraphrased and cited language "from some Ancient *Jewish Writer*, who so described the False Prophets of his own, or perhaps earlier Times." So it was not the case that one plagiarized from the other, but "both copied from the same Original & they drew from it as they found themselves directed." This also explained why "Their *Sentiments* are the same," but "their *Expressions* very different" (*BA* 10:316).[59] The prophecies of Enoch mentioned in Jude 14, Sherlock and Mather speculated (wrongly, as it turned out), did not refer to the Book of Enoch known to some of the Church Fathers. More likely, Peter and Jude "quoted some Ancient Book, which contained the Traditions of the *Jewish Church*, which has long since been lost; & probably contained many other things relating to the ancient Patriarchs & Prophets as well as *Enoch*." The loss of this precious source was compensated in late antiquity "by forging Books under the Names of the Patriarchs," such as "the *Life of Adam*, the *Book of Seth*, the *Testaments of the Patriarchs*," which spread both among misguided Jews and Christians (*BA* 10:362).

With a view to 1–3 John, Mather squarely came down on the side of those who affirmed that all three epistles had been rightly ascribed to the Apostle John, who also authored the eponymous Gospel and the Book of Revelation. Mather does not give a precise year of composition, but in his New Testament chronology "The Three Epistles of *John*" are squeezed between 2 Timothy, the last of the Pauline epistles, which Mather dates to "A.D. 67" (the year he thought Paul was martyred at Rome) and Revelation, which he dated to "A.D. 96" (*BA* 1:268). And in an entry on 1 John 4:3, Mather actually draws on Grotius's research to argue that this letter appears to have been written "a very little before the Destruction of *Jerusalem*," for it reflected the experience of intensified persecution and the Jewish insurrections against the Romans. The original target audience for 1 John, Mather agreed with Grotius, were

57 Hammond, *A Paraphrase,* 4:478.
58 Whitby, *A Paraphrase,* 2:183–184.
59 Sherlock, *The Authority*, 202–209.

Jewish Christians who lived outside the boundaries of the Roman Empire across the Euphrates in diverse provinces of the Parthian empire (*BA* 10:404).[60]

Historically, the authorship of 2 and 3 John had been much more contested than that of the first epistle. Again, the texts were lacking direct references to the name of the Apostle. The brief superscriptions merely mentioned "the Elder" as the originator. Following some of the Fathers, Grotius had therefore called into question the apostolic authenticity of 2 and 3 John. He thought they were the epistles of another John, a bishop to the first Jewish Christian church at Ephesus.[61] None other than Hammond conceded, however, that Grotius's reasons for doing so were less than compelling, and Whitby, with many other apologetic critics, outright defended a Johannine authorship. It was not to be wondered at, Whitby suggested to Mather, that John merely called himself "The Elder," as "he is the only Apostle, that affected to conceal his Name; & who in his Gospel, scarce ever, speaks of himself without some Circumlocution."[62] Against Grotius, who thought that "the elect lady and her children" to whom 2 John was addressed were specific persons at Ephesus, Whitby maintained that this was a metaphorical way of referring to the mother of all churches and her offspring, namely "the *Christian Church* of *Jerusalem*."[63] To Mather this was much more convincing. 3 John, by contrast, was likely addressed to the church at Corinth (*BA* 10:423-25). Thus the letter would have been written shortly before the martyrdom of Paul at Rome, for which Mather set the year 67 as the *terminus ad quem*.

The example of the Catholic Letters shows how Mather looked at such cases of disputed authorship and canonicity more generally. For all his willingness to consider perplexing historical and textual evidence, in the end he always defended the position that all the books that made it into the Protestant-Reformed canon were fully, if not always verbally, inspired and without significant error. He also admitted that the formation and textual transmission of the Scriptures in the canon might have been subject to some accidents of history. Here and there some additions were made, minor variations or corruptions happened that affected some peripheral passages. Overall, however, he reassured his intended audience that the process had been safeguarded by the Holy Spirit as much as the original authorship of the texts. By God's providence nothing important was lost or distorted. When push came to shove, then, Mather the inquisitive scholar was always reined in by Mather the confessional theologian, who started and ended with the belief in the traditional Bible as the Word of God. His theological presuppositions also guided him in how he,

60 Grotius, *Opera*, 2:1126.

61 Grotius, *Opera*, 2:1147–1149.

62 See Whitby, *A Paraphrase*, 2:234, and Hammond *A Paraphrase*, 2:473–475.

63 From Whitby, *A Paraphrase*, 2:234.

in pursuit of the goal to refine the Authorized Version, navigated the potentially threatening proliferation of different meanings through alternative translations in the post-Reformation period.

2 Mather's Revisions of the King James Bible

As Mather highlighted in an advertisement pamphlet for subscriptions from "the Lovers of Religion and Learning," the *Biblia*, among other things, sought to address those "Instances, wherein the most Polite and Pious Masters in Philology, have expressed their Wishes to see the Common Translation Amended and Refined."[64] The "Masters of Philology" to which Mather alludes came from all sections of British and international Protestantism. Just as the King James Version of 1611 had been an outgrowth of humanist Bible scholarship, its continued flowering in seventeenth-century Britain put the Authorized Version under critical scrutiny and generated a substantial discourse among specialists who pointed out numerous problems in the translation.[65] Since its first publication, the KJV had gone through multiple, minimally revised (mostly printer's errors but also minor translational issues) editions, produced by the king's printer but also licensed presses at Cambridge and Oxford.[66] Well before the great revision of 1769 by Benjamin Blayney, there existed serious misgivings about the accuracy of the Authorized Version. However, without the king's permission, no alternative English version was to be printed.

Among those who publicly criticized the KJV and called for revisions, scholars with Puritan leanings, such as James Ussher (1581–1656) and John Lightfoot (1602–1675), played a prominent role. In 1645 Lightfoot presented a sermon to the House of Commons that, pointing to numerous errors of significant consequence, called for a revised translation. The Puritan-dominated Interregnum Parliament even created a subcommittee in 1657 to take up the matter but the project never materialized. Nevertheless, the movement to revise the KJV did not die there. The lingering dissatisfaction with the received translation also reflected the fact that

64 Cotton Mather, *A New Offer to the Lovers of Religion and Learning* (Boston: 1714), 11.

65 On the history of English Bible translations in the early modern period, see the chapters in Part I of *The Oxford Handbook of the Bible in Early Modern England*, eds. Killeen, Smith and Willie. On the history and reception of the KJV translation, see D. Norton, *History of the English Bible* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 89–114; and Harold P. Scanlin, "Revising the KJV: Seventeenth through Nineteenth Century," In *The King James Version at 400: Assessing its Genius as Bible Translation and Its Literary Influence*, eds. David G. Burke, John F. Kutsko, and Philip Towner (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2013): 141–55.

66 On the discussion over the KJV in the seventeenth century, see Gordon Campbell, *Bible: The Story of the King James Version 1611–2011* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 108–28.

the cumulative labors of European humanist scholarship had made various ancient manuscript versions of the Bible available in printed editions, which offered sometimes significantly divergent alternatives to the Masoretic text and *Textus Receptus* on which the KJV had been based. With the *Biblia Sacra Polyglotta*, issued in six volumes between 1654 and 1657 under the direction of Brian Walton (1600–1661), these alternative versions were at the fingertips of scholars everywhere. The so-called London Polyglott contained the Greek Septuagint, Jerome's Vulgate, the Aramaic Targumim, the Syriac (Peshitta), Arabic, and, for some books the Persian and Ethiopic versions, all in one place and conveniently fitted with their own Latin translations. At the same time, hosts of new translations in vernacular languages other than English proliferated on the Continent, to which British scholars could compare the Authorized Version.

And so the proposals for a new translation continued. In 1653 the Huguenot émigré to London Jean D'Espagne (1591–1659) published, with a dedication to Cromwell, his *Shibboleth: ou réformation de quelques passages dans les versions françoise et angloise de la Bible*, which was quickly translated into English.[67] A year before the Restoration, the free-spirited but outwardly conforming rector of St. Mary Aldermary (London) Robert Gell (1595–1665) put forth his extensive *Essay toward the Amendment of the last English-Translation of the Bible* (1659), focusing on the Pentateuch but also offering improvements for other sections of Scripture. A more wide-ranging *Essay for a New Translation of the Bible* (1701–1702) appeared anonymously half a century later. It was the work of an otherwise obscure Church of England minister Hugh Ross and based on the *Projet d'une Nouvelle Version Françoise de la Bible* (1696) by another French Huguenot theologian in exile, Charles Le Cene (Le Cesne; c. 1647–1703). While the three interventions were largely ignored by the wider public, they show that underneath the outward predominance of the KJV, dissatisfaction with the common translation was brewing among parts of the intelligentsia. Besides such programmatic publications, British scholars continued to produce learned works that examined a very wide range of scriptural passages with the tools of humanist philology and, on this basis, offered revised translations. Moreover, the new type of English commentaries by Poole or Henry comprised not only annotations but also paraphrases often amounting to re-translations.

The New England colonies were not isolated from these developments. Different Bible editions and translations, ancient and modern, polyglot Bibles, and specialized works of scholarship filled the bookshelf of collegiate libraries and even the private collections of better-to-do clergymen such as the Mathers. As is true for the

67 Translated as: *Shibboleth: or, the Reformation of severall Places in the Translations of the French and of the English Bible. The Correction of divers common Opinions, History and other Matters. Faithfully translated into English by Robert Codrington* (London, 1655).

motherland, none of this led to open rebellion against the monopoly of the Authorized Version, which American Puritans had come to accept, rather grudgingly at first, given their initial preference for the Geneva Bible. The popular culture of biblicism in pre-revolutionary New England was undoubtedly centered on the KJV. This was also due to the fact that the only Bibles to be had by the common people were KJV imprints imported from England.

However, for clerical elites at least, the debates over the accuracy of the Authorized Version were well known. And some leading members of the Puritan ministry also sought to contribute, in whatever modest ways, to improving the common translation. Not a few of the exegetical sermons and tracts that they had printed in London or Boston also contained some reflections on how to better render into English the parts of Scripture to be examined. However, Cotton Mather's *Biblia Americana* was the first large-scale attempt from New England to contribute to improving the common translation. While we do not yet have a complete count, it is safe to say that Mather offered amended translations in several hundred places across the biblical canon.

Despite this impressive quantity, his efforts were not systematic. Mather did not reassess every verse but focused on places where the Authorized Version's translation dissatisfied him personally, or another author had drawn his attention to a problem. Few, if any, of his suggested improvements are original to Mather in the sense that he personally would have come up with new translations after critically re-examining the texts in their original languages and methodically comparing manuscript variants. However, Mather was very capable of reading the biblical languages and evaluating translations from them, having been trained in Greek and Hebrew since his boyhood. He continued to work on his proficiency in the "sacred tongues" and also frequently consulted the London Polyglot and other editions to compare the Hebrew and Greek with other ancient language versions. Yet Mather could and did not lay claim to being a master philologist. Instead, when looking at particular places, he drew on the works of other scholars or alternative vernacular translations to find what appeared to him a better way of putting the passage into English. Some of his suggestions (and he always made it clear that they were no more than that) are supported by modern English translations such as the RSV and NIV, some are not. Regardless of how we may judge Mather's translations today, the point remains the same: never before and not for a long time after did an American exegete make such extensive effort toward revising the Authorized Version.

The wealth of sources that Mather employed in the service of improving the Authorized Version is truly impressive. Besides the works of Gell, D'Espagne, and Le Cène/Ross, he took his cues from the exegetical labors of a multifarious international cast of Hebraists, scholars of Greek, and Orientalists, ranging from sixteenth-century and seventeenth-century figures such as Sebastian Münster, Hugh Broughton, John

Lightfoot, or Samuel Bochart to contemporaries such as Simon Patrick or Daniel Whitby. One of the largest in the colonies, Mather's library also contained numerous modern Bible translations that offered him inspiration for correcting the KJV. Besides competing English versions – the Great Bible (1539) prepared by Myles Coverdale, the Geneva Bible (1560), but also the translated Catholic Douay-Rheims Bible (1582; 1609/10) – he referenced among others, Luther's German *Biblia, das ist die gantze Heilige Schrift* (first complete ed. 1534), the Dutch *Statenbijbel* (1637), the more recent French translation by the Swiss-born Calvinist theologian Giovanni Diodati *La Sainte Bible* (1644), or the revised Latin translation of the Old Testament (1590) by Franciscus Junius and Immanuel Tremellius. The kind of improvements Mather proposes range from simple word corrections to substantial and theologically significant revisions of verses. A few brief examples must suffice here to illustrate the spectrum.

Most frequently, Mather proposes replacements of single terms, which, as his sources convinced him, had been misinterpreted by the KJV. For instance, Mather frequently amends the translations of place, animal, and plant names mentioned in the Hebrew Bible. In several cases he did so with the help of the works by the famous Huguenot Orientalist Samuel Bochart (1599–1667), *Geographia Sacra* (1646) and *Hierozoicon sive bipertitum opus de animalibus Sacrae Scripturae* (1663). In this way Mather suggested, for example, that the creature called "/חלד/*Choled*, which we render, *The Weasel*" would more fittingly be translated as the "*Mole*," as proven by Bochart's extensive etymological and lexical explications (*BA* 2:553).[68] Or at Num 25:1, Mather takes occasion to point out that with the "*Shittim-Wood*," so often mentioned in the Pentateuch, the scholars behind the KJV had simply dodged the question which tree was signified here by offering a phonetic transliteration of the Hebrew word שִׁטִּים in the plural. Mining Le Cène and Ross's *Essay for a New Translation*, Mather reviewed the conflicting opinions of numerous ancient and modern authorities over the length of a folio page to conclude "that this Tree, is the *Acacia,"* and hence a better translation of places such as Exod 25:10 would speak of the ark being built from acacia wood (*BA* 2: 965).[69]

Single word corrections are also proposed, after comparing various ancient and modern translations together with glosses by expert scholars, to make the English conform more literally with the original or bring out a different nuance of meaning. At Num 8:7, for example, which speaks of the purification of the Levites, Mather thought that there was "no need of using such a trope" as the KJV's "*Water of Purifying,*" when the meaning (i.e., the use of the water for ritual cleansing) was

68 Bochart, *Hierozoicon sive bipertitum opus de animalibus Sacrae Scripturae* (1663), pars 1, lib. 3, cap. 34, col. 1021.

69 Le Cène and Ross, *Essay for a New Translation*, 149–50.

obvious. It were better to hew closely to the original Hebraism מֵי חַטָּאֵת, meaning "*Waters of Sin*, or as we may say; *Sin-Waters*." For this Mather pointed to several authorities: "*Arias Montanus* renders it, *Aquas peccati*. So the *Tigurin* Bible, and so *Vatablus*. *Luther* putts both into one Word, Sundwasser; *Piscator* and *Aynsworth* do the like" (*BA* 2: 847).[70] Where the KJV in Num 21:9 spoke of the "Pole" (for נֵס) on which the "Brazen Serpent" was exhibited, Mather thought this was slightly off, as was "Mast," which had been suggested by Diodati. Like Robert Gell, he preferred "a *Banner*, or *Ensign*, as most of our old *English* Translations have it, and the *Low-Dutch*, and *Luthers*. Thus, with *Arias Montanus*, it is, *Vexillum*; And in the *Spanish*, tis, *Vandera*" (*BA* 2:936).[71] This was more accurate but also carried better the typological significance of the brazen serpent foreshadowing of the triumphant messiah.

Mather's single word corrections could also be of some more theological import, however. For instance, Mather thought that the expression "O Lord, thou hast deceived me, and I was deceived" in Jer 20:7 could give rise to dangerous notions, as "it seems to carry Blasphemy in it." Philologically, there was no need to retain this translation of פִּתִּיתָנִי: "The Hebrew Original may as well bee rendred, Thou hast *Perswaded* mee, *Induced* mee, *Inclined* mee; and a good Sense may bee putt upon it." In both cases Mather took his cues from Jean D'Espagne (*BA* 5:652, 900).[72]

With some regularity, however, Mather also suggest emendations for longer phrases and more complex constructions in order to clear up perceived misunderstandings, improve intelligibility or elegance, bring out different meanings, or add emphases. In the characterization of the wisdom from above in Jas 3:17, for instance, Mather considered the KJV's "easy to be intreated" as less than felicitous for

70 Compare Arias Montanus's interlinear Latin gloss in his *Biblia Hebraica* (Antwerp: Christophe Plantin 1584), 122; the Tigurin Bible, aka. *Biblia Sacrosancta Testamenti Veteris & Novi* (Zurich: Christoph Froschauer, 1543), 64; and Franciscus Vatablus, *Biblia Sacra Bibliorum Sacrorum* (Salmantica: Apud Gasparem à Portonariis suis & Gulielmi Rouillii Benedictíq., 1584), 88. The marginal annotation at Num 8, in Martin Luther's German *Biblia: Das ist: Die gantze Heilige Schrifft* (Wittenberg: Hans Lufft, 1545), n.p.; Johannes Piscator, *Commentariorum in Omnes Libros Veteris Testamenti Tomus Primus* (Herborn, 1646), 327; Henry Ainsworth's *Annotations upon the five Bookes of Moses; the Booke of the Psalmes, and the Song of Songs, or, Canticles* (London: Printed for John Bellamie, 1627), 52.

71 Giovanni Diodati, *Pious Annotations, upon the Holy Bible* (1643), 99; Wycliffe (c. 1395) has the copper serpent set "for a signe" (1395); Tyndale (1530) "for a sygne"; Coverdale (1535) as "a token"; *The Geneva Bible* (1560) offers "a signe"; the Dutch *Biblia Statenvertaling* (1637), provides "baniere" among the alternative translations in the margin; Luther's revised *Biblia* (1546) also has Moses make a snake "zum zeichen" ("as a sign"); Arias Montanus renders it "vexillum" ("standard") in his *Biblia Hebraica*, 134; finally, the Spanish *La Biblia. Que es, Los Sacros Libros* (1502), 50r, opts for "la vandera" ("banner"). Compare Gell, *An Essay toward the Amendment* (London: Printed by R. Norton for Andrew Crook, 1659), 534.

72 Compare D'Espagne, *Shibboleth: or, the Reformation of Severall Places in the Translations of the French and of the English Bible* (London, 1655), 7–10 and 26.

the Greek εὐπειθής. He deemed the German translation by Luther better and "a very Instructive one, Läßt ihr sagen, or, *patiens Admonitionis*," and so suggested for a revised English version "willing to take an Admonition."[73] Or, the prayer of the righteous in Jas 5:16 (δέησις δικαίου ἐνεργουμένη), "which our Translation calls, *An Effectual Fervent Prayer*," he thought the French translation of the Geneva Bible rendered much more fittingly, "*La Priere faite avec Vehemence*."[74] For it was evident in his estimation, "that an *Energy*, or *Fervency*, is here ascribed unto such a Prayer; yea, but the Word here being a *Passive*, it implies that the *Energy*, or *Fervency* must bee *Inwrought* in him that partakes of it" (*BA* 10:321 and 333). In Num 14:34, to cite an Old Testament example, where the Lord condemns the rebellious Israelites to 40 years of wandering, announcing ominously that "ye shall know my breach of promise" (וִידַעְתֶּם אֶת־תְּנוּאָתִי׃) Mather felt that this was a "Translation, by no means to be endured." For the Lord was always faithful to his word. Following Gell, he maintained that one need not necessarily insist on the more literal "*Vulgat*, or *Pagnines* Translation, *Cognoscetis ultionem meam*; nor *Munsters*, *Irritationem meam*; nor the *Tigurin*, *Prohibitionem meam*; nor *Coverdales*, – *when I withdraw my Hand*."[75] It was fine to stick with the KJV's "my breach" for תְּנוּאָתִי׃. But it needed to be used in a translation that brought out the true reasons of God's ire, such as "*Ye shall know how great an Evil it is, when I break myself off from any* one," suggesting that this occurred in consequence of human disobedience, which was what Junius and Tremellius and especially Piscator's glosses proposed (*BA* 2:888).[76]

In other places Mather came close to changing an entire verse. Such is the case with Jas 4:5-6, one of the dark places of Scripture, which the KJV gave as: "Do ye think

73 Luther's *Biblia* (1546) has "lesst jr sagen" ("is ready to accept admonition"). In the modern German edition (LUT), this has become: "[die Weisheit] lässt sich etwas sagen."

74 "The prayer made with vehemence." The French Protestant Geneva Bible (1535) by Pierre Robert Olivétan in its 1687 Amsterdam ed. (*La Bible*) translates Jas 5:16 (110b): "… car la prière du juste faite avec véhémence est de grande efficace."

75 From Gell, *An Essay*, 494, Mather makes reference to (a) the VUL that has "scietis ultionem meam" ("you will know my vengeance"), Sanctus Pagninus, *Biblia Sacra ex Santis Pagnini tralatione* (Lyon: Apud Hugonem à Porta, 1542), 32: "Cognoscetis ultionem meam" ("You will recognize my vengeance"); Sebastian Münster's *Hebraica Biblia, Latina Planeq.* (1546), 292, which offers "cognoscetis irritationem meam" ("you will recognize my provocation"); Tigurin Bible, aka. *Biblia Sacrosancta Testamenti Veteris & Novi* (1543), 67: "prohibitionem meam" ("my prohibition"); Myles Coverdale's translation in his famous *Biblia. The Byble, that is the holy Scripture of the Olde and New Testament, faithfully translated in to Englysh* (1535), lxiij, reads: "when I withdrawe my hande."

76 Immanuel Tremellius and Franciscus Junius, *Biblia Sacra, sive, Libri Canonici* (London, 1593), 130, has: "cognoscatis abruptionem meam" ("you will recognize my breaking off"). The marginal gloss also offers an alternate translation (note p), "abruptionem a me" ("breaking off of me"). Johannes Piscator, *Commentariorum in Omnes Libros Veteris Testamenti Tomus Primus* (Herborn, 1646), 340: "Ut cognoscatis quantum malum sit, quum ego me abrumpo ab aliquo" ("So that you shall know how bad it is when I break myself off from anyone").

that the scripture saith in vain, The spirit that dwelleth in us lusteth to envy?/ But he giveth more grace …" One problem here was that the first sentence suggested a citation from the Old Testament, but no passage worded exactly like this existed. The other problem was the implication that the divine spirit with which God had endowed humans appeared to lead them into sin. Mather attempted to solve this conundrum with the help of the French Reformed theologian Jean Claude (1619–1687), who suggested that the first sentence ought to be separated from what follows and taken more generally as "*Think ye, that the Scripture speaks in Vain*?" This, as Mather explains, referred back "to what had been said from the Beginning of the Chapter hitherto, where wee have the Sense of many Things, that are found in the Book of *Job*, and the *Psalms*," while the "Word λεγει, is as well rendred, by, *speaketh*, absolutely, as by *saith*, relating to what followes." With Claude he then reasoned "That πρὸς φθόνον here, is more commodiously, and grammatically translated, *Against Envy*, than, *Unto Envy*," so that the second sentence could better read: "*The Spirit which dwelleth in us, lusteth Against Envy*" which nicely connected to the rest, when understood as human repentance and humility (enabled by the Spirit) being rewarded with new blessings of God's grace: "*But Hee giveth more Grace; wherefore Hee saith, God Resisteth the Proud, & giveth Grace to the Humble*" (*BA* 10:325).[77]

Or consider Mather's attempt to clarify the meaning of Moses's prediction in Deut 29:19 that the person who dared to sinfully disobey the Lord's command would recall His threats but "bless himself in his heart, saying, I shall have peace, though I walk in the imagination of mine heart, to add drunkenness to thirst." The concluding part of the verse in particular, Mather thought, the KJV had made well-nigh incomprehensible. Guided by the Lutheran Hebraist August Pfeiffer (1640–1698), Mather turned to the Arabic version of the Pentateuch – for which Walton's London Polyglot gave him a Latin translation – to elucidate the second phrase to say "*In cogitationibus Cordis mei ambulo*," meaning the innermost wicked thoughts of the sinner." However, the words (הָרְוָה אֶת־הַצְּמֵאָה׃) "which wee English, *Drunkenness to Thirst*," Mather continues, are more literally "in the Original, *The Drunken to the Thirsty*. And by the *Drunken* here my *Pfeiffer* understands, the *Fertil Earth*; and by the *Thirsty*, hee understands, the *Dry*, the *Hard*, the *Barren*." Thus the conclusion of the verse ought to read: "*I shall have Peace, tho' I walk in the Stubborness of my Heart, until the Fat Soyl bee consumed, together with that which is Dry*," as if to say, till I have lost all parts of my estate, "first, my *best* Lands, & then the *worst* ones."[78] From Le Cène and Ross Mather subsequently added a similar but more elegant rendition, "*I shall have Peace tho' I follow the inordinate Motions of my Heart even to the*

77 From Claude, *Les oeuvres posthumes de Mr. Claude* (Amsterdam: Pierre Savouret, 1689), vol. 5, *Lettre IX a Mademoiselle D. L. S.*, 28–30.

78 Pfeiffer, *Dubia Vexata Scripturae Sacrae* (Leipzig: Joh. Frider, 1699), 316–17.

Consuming of my Lands, when they are watered with Rain, & when they are parched with Drought." (*BA* 2: 1216–17).[79]

The illustrations so far have included some modifications of significant but not central theological importance. However, every now and then, Mather's revisions also touch on very weighty matters of Christian dogma and faith. In Isa 53, always one of the most crucial Old Testament prophecy for Christian theology, the messianic figure mentioned in verse 4 was famously rendered by the KJV as the "Man of sorrows," who was "smitten of God and afflicted." This supported well enough the traditional interpretation of the *vir dolorum* as a prophecy of Christ. However, Mather, drawing on a Catholic source, claimed that here the Hebrew (מֻכֶּה אֱלֹהִים) was better interpreted as "a *smitten God*" for "the whole Chapter was to bee understood, not of a *Man* but of *God* Himself made *Man*, that Hee might bear our Sins" (*BA* 5:809).[80] Obviously, such a revised translation strengthened an understanding of Christ in accordance with Nicean Trinitarianism, which in Mather's day was under attack from neo-Arians and Deists. Mather was also not afraid to ask for a better translation of the famous definition of faith given in Heb 11:1 as "the substance of things hoped for." Here the KJV really troubled him. "By ὑπόστασις," he writes, citing the explanation of Sir Norton Knatchbull (1602–1685),

> wee may either understand, *Expectation*;[81] according to that of the LXX. Psal. 39.7. ἡ ὑπόστασις μοῦ παρά σοὶ ἔστι. *Expectatio mea in te est*:[82] And if wee say, *Faith is the Expectation of things Hoped for*, it will sound better than our Translation, of *Substance*: or, wee may render it, *Confidence*, agreeably to the Import of the Word, 2. Cor. 9.4 2. Cor. 11.17. Heb. 3.14. Our Translation, *Substance*, is both dark and harsh: wee had better say, *confident Expectation*.

To this Mather added a flourish from Gell, noting "That the Word Υποστασις,[83] implies, not only an *Expectation* of Good, but also a firm, fix'd, immoveable Posture, against whatever may Oppose us, or Disturb us. … *Faith* includes *Patience* in it" (*BA* 10:279).

As the last two examples in particular illustrate, for Mather there never was any firm boundary between philology and (practical) divinity. His goal was to provide an

79 Le Cène and Ross, *An Essay for a New Translation of the Bible*, 117–18.

80 Mather here refers to the famous work that the Portuguese theologian Diego de Paiva de Andrade (Payva Andradius, 1528–1575) wrote in defense of the Council of Trent, *Defensio Tridentinae fidei catholicæ* (1578), lib. 4, 250–51.

81 Knatchbull, *Annotations upon some Difficult Texts in all the Books of the New Testament* (Cambridge: Printed for J. Hayes, 1693), 281–82.

82 The phrase that Mather cites from the LXX version of Ps. 39:7 ἡ ὑπόστασίς μου παρὰ σοί ἐστι [he hypostasis mou para soi esti] means "my hope is in you." This is also what the citation from the VUL means. Modern critical editions of the LXX have ἡ ὑπόστασίς μου παρὰ σοῦ ἐστιν ("my hope is from you"). But Walton, *Biblia Polyglotta* (3:145) also has σοί.

83 Gell, *An Essay*, 143–44.

English version that would be able to more reliably anchor sound interpretations of Scripture, but also lend itself to deepened Christian devotion or what Mather called "experimental" piety. Mather's revisions were animated by the conviction that the Authorized Version urgently needed an update with regard to many minor and some not so minor linguistic details. However, the *Biblia* annotations never suggest that Mather thought the flaws of the KJV were such that they obscured or distorted crucial parts of the Bible's salvific message. If his comparative philological work caused Mather any worries about the instability of meaning through the interpretative process of translation, it does not show. One might have expected this perhaps. After all, the sprawling nature of Mather's glosses, picking and choosing from an ever-growing body of editions, translations, and commentaries, suggest to the modern reader how by the turn of the eighteenth century the combined forces of post-Reformation biblicism and humanism had rendered the notion of the perspicuity of Scripture (and thus the Protestant imperative of turning to the authority of the naked Bible) deeply problematic. Wasn't Mather concerned, as a historian of biblical scholarship during the Enlightenment put it, that "[m]ore translations meant … more disagreement about God's real language"?[84] Apparently not. Mather never seems to have been genuinely troubled by this pluralization of Bible versions. On the contrary, he seems to have regarded them mostly as a resource for a fuller understanding of the Scriptures and for improving the common English translation. In the end, Mather simply chose the translation that appeared more plausible to him, or, more often, the one that was religiously most appealing. After correcting the translation of Jer 20:7 (see above) with the help of Jean of D'Espagne, he tellingly wrote: "I concur with a learned Frenchman, who saies here upon, *La plus favorable Exposition, est aussi la plus recevable*" (*BA* 5:900).[85] In determining what constituted a "the most acceptable exposition," the criteria were also philological and historical but more importantly theological, with the old hermeneutical principle of *analogia fidei* still exerting its influence.

Thus, even though Mather had a genuinely inquisitive mind and very wide-ranging intellectual interests, his specific theological commitments ultimately controlled his engagement with any scholarship on the Bible. In that sense, one might call him a pre-critical thinker. Yet his exegetical work was far removed from any naïve view about a modern Bible translation such as the KJV offering a transparent access to the Word of God, or about the Scriptures having been given by God in their present form. Although Mather's scholarship was apologetically oriented and aimed to defend the supernatural authority and integrity of the Bible as well as the

84 Sheehan, *The Enlightenment Bible*, 16.

85 "The more favorable exposition is also the most acceptable." D'Espagne, S*hibboleth*: *ou réformation de quelques passages*, 22.

legitimacy of traditional theological readings, the *Biblia* clearly reflects the challenges brought on by the deepening historicization of Scripture and the destabilization of texts and meanings through a new type of criticism. More widely read and, in many ways more curious and daring than any other early American exegete, Mather joined the infinitely complex and open-ended quest for better translations. Moreover, he was the first in New England to seriously address hard questions about the provenance of biblical texts, manuscript traditions, authorship and the canon, but also about the historical veracity of the Bible and the validity of scriptural evidence. Speculative, naïve, or wrong-headed as many of the historical reconstructions and evidence might appear to us today, as Brown has written about Edwards, the very fact that they were being put forth announces a significant shift.[86] Already with Mather we see a new importance given to philological explanation and historical verification vis-a-vis traditional theological claims to the self-authenticating, internal characteristics of the Scriptures. In that sense one might call Mather America's first critical exegete. Or better yet, one might dispense with any such clear distinction in dealing with a work such as the *Biblia*, which, like other commentaries from the period constitute a genre *sui generis*. In their unique mixture of piety and serious *Wissenschaftlichkeit* such works need to be evaluated on their own terms. Mather's project of a Biblical Enlightenment was not afraid to shine a light on textual or historical problems relating to the Bible. But ultimately it aimed to illuminate its divine meanings.

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86 Brown, *Jonathan Edwards and the Bible*, 110.

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