

BOOK REVIEW FORUM

Rethinking the Decline of a Bible Civilization

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At 846 pages, Mark Noll's history of what he labels America's Protestant Bible civilization certainly has the feel of encyclopedic comprehensiveness. That this hefty volume is but the second portion of Noll's larger history of the Bible in America only adds to the sense of grand summation: the synoptic account of how the scriptures have shaped the nation—its public life, moral order, political divisions, and otherworldly hopes. It is a story filled not only with Protestant successes—the massive publishing program of the American Bible Society or the scriptural suffusion of popular hymnody and everyday devotion—but also with Protestant failures, most obviously in the way nothing-but-the-Bible moral reasoning compounded the abiding divisions over slavery. Indeed, at the end of the day, Noll presents this as a story of loss more than triumph: the decline and fragmentation of a Protestant Bible civilization that had been built amid all the contingencies of a new republic. That narrative arc carries an obvious element of regret that could certainly feed a white evangelical nostalgia for a Christian America, but that is clearly not Noll's intent. Especially on matters of slavery and race, his account is one far more of reproof than reclamation.

There is something peculiar, though, about Noll's particular narrative of “irrecoverable decline”: namely, the way it serves to underscore the presumed dominance of America's Protestant Bible civilization even as it purports to document its undoing (10). The very weight of Noll's summation, the encyclopedic feel, becomes the millstone that sinks any substantial challenges to the Bible's ascendancy. That is in fair measure because most of the problems that the Bible civilization faces in Noll's account are internal to Protestantism itself. For example, Noll dwells on how the commitment to sola scriptura ends up subverting the possibility of national consensus on one issue after another; time and time again, that principle heats up the sectarian hothouse and subverts Protestantism's political, moral, and ecclesial coherence. But, this Bible-alone preoccupation, including Noll's account of that fixation, allows no escape from the echo chamber of the scriptures themselves. When Noll eventually turns from explaining the Bible civilization's decline in terms of Protestantism's internal divisions, he accentuates challengers—religiously committed Catholics and Jews—who share a Protestant sense of the Bible as a spiritual and cultural treasure, even as they stray from the singularly hallowed King James Version. Hence Noll's story of the decline of America's Bible civilization ends up not looking very much like a decline at all. This is the peculiar trick—or, put more innocuously, the narrative paradox: Noll crafts a story of decline that serves to reassert the determinative power of the Bible, its central authority and

landmark status, and its necessity for American public life and a flourishing republic. By the end of the volume, when Noll cites a recent survey showing that 95 percent of Americans who turn to “sacred writings” for guidance have but one book of choice, the factoid comes as little surprise in this story of a supposedly dethroned Protestant Bible civilization (666). The plural again becomes the singular; the fragments fall into an all-too-familiar pattern. America’s Bible civilization is dead; long live America’s book.

That is an ungenerous way to begin, so let it be noted: Noll has offered a balanced, wide-ranging history of the Bible in the United States over the long nineteenth century—a seasoned synthesis of decades of scholarship, not least his own field-defining contributions. His accomplishment is unmistakable; it warrants underlining. In this context, though, pursuing an argument is more important than praising an achievement. To that end, what follows is a brief sketch of two alternative ways a story of decline could be told—both of which magnify fissures already in Noll’s account rather than importing ones extrinsic to it: freethinking irreligion and women’s rights activism. Noll’s account manages to tame both of these movements, to keep America’s book largely intact in the face of these considerable rifts. A story that took these two clefts in the scriptural edifice more seriously—one that plumbed the depths of them rather than spackled over them—would make the story of the decline of a Protestant Bible civilization more convincing. It would also perhaps make the narrative more compelling to scholars of American religion and culture who no longer position their work in primary relationship to the history of Protestant Christianity.

First, Noll largely forecloses substantial consideration of freethinking unbelief at the outset through emphasizing just how thoroughly Thomas Paine’s *Age of Reason* was rejected by American Protestants of all stripes in the early republic. Noll’s evidence here is impressive, but the story of decisive defeat is familiar—indeed, it recapitulates in sophisticated scholarly dress a Protestant talking point repeated endlessly throughout the nineteenth century and beyond: Paine impugned, dismissed, and forgotten. No doubt Paine was turned into a byword of moral monstrosity for his takedown of the scriptures, but his ideas kept circulating—and not only his political justifications of a new democratic order. His axe-wielding attacks on the scriptures—on the very notion of a God who speaks through revealed words—considerably advanced a radical Enlightenment disposition to turn the Bible itself into an object of mockery and parody. Paine’s remark on the story of Jonah and the whale stood for the whole of this exegetical predilection: “A fit story for ridicule, if it was written to be believed; or of laughter, if it was intended to try what credulity could swallow.”¹

Paine’s *Age of Reason* may have been buried under a heap of Protestant tracts and treatises, but its style of ridicule hardly disappeared. One freethinker after another made the scriptures a sourcebook for dark comedy and biting satire, not pious meditation or sermonic exposition. Noll does not go down this path of irreligious amusement and blasphemous delight. With Paine crushed, there is no need to discuss Mark Twain, and Robert Ingersoll is taken care of in a relatively unthreatening paragraph or two (Noll’s subsection on freethinking skepticism after the Civil War totals four paragraphs). The freethinker’s darkly comic Bible—with its preference for stories such as the baldheaded prophet Elisha calling upon God to punish a group of small children for teasing him, which the Lord obliges by sending two bears to maul them—was deadly serious. Its basic proposition was that the Bible’s hold upon the culture, its moral

¹Thomas Paine, *The Age of Reason* (Secaucus, NJ: Citadel Press, 1998), 152.

authority and revelatory aura, could be dispelled through the sneer of satire and incredulity. The subversive creativity of the comic Bible lives on as a source of resistance to the persisting power of America's Bible civilization. Take, for example, the feminist invention of the book of Fallopian in the defense of women's reproductive rights: "He who hath not a uterus should shut the fucketh up," so goes one protest verse.²

The pericope from Fallopian leads to the second point—how fuller engagement with feminist critiques of scripture would improve the storyline of decline. It is not a hopeful sign when those who are tasked with challenging the civilizational hegemony of the white male Protestant Bible are put in parentheses in chapter titles: in this case, "Chapter 18: Whose Bible? (Women)." Noll is painstaking in his account of both the exegetical habits that supported white supremacy and the determined efforts of African Americans to find scriptural antidotes to those very poisons. He is far less thoroughgoing in his account of Bible-based patriarchy, with its long-ensconced defenders and its emergent critics. When issues of gender and sexuality arise (the latter almost never), Noll gravitates to those "loyal" to the Bible, to those deferential to its authority and inspiration: say, Baptist evangelist Dolly Quimby, holiness expositor Phoebe Palmer, or temperance reformer Frances Willard. He dwells on those who looked to biblical role models to justify their public engagement, even as they sought to revise the prevailing interpretations of verses that subordinated and silenced women. When it comes time to engage Elizabeth Cady Stanton's *Woman's Bible*, Noll is more interested in how much her iconoclasm cost her among more pious suffragists than he is with the range of her arguments for women's equality and against biblically sanctioned forms of subservience. Within these debates over the *Woman's Bible*, Noll emphasizes how impolitic Stanton's radicalism was and gives the final word to Willard's persistent devotion—her avowal of undiminished reverence for "the voice that calls to me from the pages of the Bible" (514). Noll likely does not intend this move as a containment strategy, but it certainly reads that way.

What would happen at this point in the story if Noll paid as much attention to the "rejectionists"—those who saw the Bible as "a prime impediment" to the enfranchisement of women—as to the Protestant "loyalists" like Willard (504, 514–515)? (In fairness to Willard, even a cursory reading of her diary, as edited and selected by Carolyn De Swarte Gifford, would give pause about how loyal Willard was to Protestant familial and sexual regimes, but that is a topic for another time.) Certainly at issue here again are freethinking forms of exegesis that were openly hostile to a Protestant Bible civilization: Noll addresses Stanton and mentions two other forceful critics, Helen Gardner and Eva Ingersoll. He presents this feminist critique of the Bible as a secular turn, but it was more religiously eclectic and complexly dissident than that. Stanton was familiar with a range of occult literature, and so were several of her collaborators, including Matilda Joslyn Gage, Lucinda B. Chandler, and Frances Ellen Burr. As Per Faxneld has argued in *Satanic Feminism: Lucifer as the Liberator of Woman in Nineteenth-Century Culture*, Stanton's Bible was a form of "protest exegesis" or "inverse exegesis" developed in dialogue with esoteric counter-readings of the scriptures, particularly H. P. Blavatsky's topsy-turvy interpretation of Genesis 3 in which

²The derisive reference to Fallopian has become relatively common in recent pro-choice protests. See, for example, <https://www.gettyimages.com/detail/news-photo/handsmaid-themed-protesters-march-down-bourbon-street-in-news-photo/1146337556?adppopup=true> and <https://www.gettyimages.com/detail/news-photo/protesters-take-part-in-the-womens-march-and-rally-for-news-photo/1235651924>.

she refigured Eve, Satan, and the Tree of Wisdom.³ This exegetical example is but the tip of the metaphysical iceberg—the Theosophical Society, spiritualism, New Thought, Rosicrucianism—the whole of which remains submerged in Noll’s account. In this whirl of exegetical protest and inversion, witches emerged as forebears; God the Father became the God the Mother; androgyny was sacred; the patriarchate was disrupted; the goddess returned; marriage and sexuality were reimagined. These fractures, already profound by the early twentieth century, would only deepen with time.

The welter of religious sources from which women’s rights advocates were drawing inspiration by the 1890s suggests a concluding point: a story about the decline of America’s Protestant Bible civilization—the republic “possessed only one truly national book,” Noll says of the antebellum period—would be more persuasive if that single book was made to encounter the growing pluralization of sacred books that characterized the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (133). Noll fully acknowledges how the democratization of religious authority fed a proliferation of new prophecies, most conspicuously those revealed by Joseph Smith in the *Book of Mormon*. It would have been worth following through on that scriptural fecundity and diffusion as the century progressed, including Walt Whitman’s new Bible, *Leaves of Grass*, and the bohemian religious reinventions it inspired. Tellingly, Whitman and Emerson make no appearance, nor does Theodore Parker or Henry David Thoreau, which suggests again how Noll is insulating America’s book from some of its most consequential post-Christian challengers—again a story of decline and fragmentation without major agents of that destabilization. Soon enough there would be Hindu, Baha’i, Zoroastrian, and Moorish Science messengers, among any number of others. “So many gods, so many creeds, so many paths that wind and wind,” Ella Wheeler Wilcox opened one of her poems at the turn of twentieth century.⁴ Whether all that diversity was bewildering or energizing, whether it suggested pluralistic promise or Protestant decline, it certainly made it harder and harder to speak of the Bible as America’s book without sounding nostalgic for the moral and spiritual coherence that a Protestant Bible civilization posited but never realized.

³Per Faxneld, *Satanic Feminism: Lucifer as the Liberator of Woman in Nineteenth-Century Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 11, 133–142. For the key work on Stanton’s Bible, including the freethinking and esoteric circles in which she and many of her collaborators traveled, see Kathi Kern, *Mrs. Stanton’s Bible* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001), esp. 150–160.

⁴Ella Wheeler Wilcox, *Poems of Power* (New York: Conkey, 1908), 159. Whitman’s name appears in a long list of artists and intellectuals influenced by the Bible, but otherwise not at all (630). Emerson, Parker, and Thoreau are not mentioned.