

The Hermeneutics of Moses Stuart: Synthesis in Hostile Times

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Nineteenth-century New England was a battleground between the increasingly antithetical religious groups of Liberalism and Orthodoxy; the former, centered at Harvard, championed rationality, while the latter held fast to its dogmatic principles. In the midst of such hostilities and polemics arose a man who was able to embrace both this rational approach to Scripture and his Calvinist theology: Moses Stuart (1780–1848). Stuart, a pioneer of German critical scholarship in America, was able to assimilate German criticism into his hermeneutics while not only maintaining his conservative Calvinist theology but even substantiating it with criticism. An analysis of Stuart's hermeneutical theory as well as his application of it reveals an interpretative method that fully incorporates criticism yet is still consistent with Calvinist theology.

Born to Calvinist farmers in Wilton, Connecticut, Stuart graduated first in his class from Yale College. During his academic career at the college, law school, and divinity school, he fell under the tutelage of Yale President Timothy Dwight, who, being a grandson of Jonathon Edwards, was deeply rooted in Edwardsean theology.¹ Calvinism surrounded Stuart from birth through adulthood. After a short pastorate, the Andover Theological Seminary convinced him to take the position of Professor of Sacred Literature there. In preparation for the post, Stuart dedicated himself to the study of Hebrew and brushed up on his Greek, eventually becoming a leading scholar and pedagogue of both.² Such a solid background in the biblical languages became a pillar of Stuart's hermeneutics. A third language became equally important: German. Stuart taught himself German in a rapid fashion out of frustration at the unintelligible passages

¹ This is Timothy Dwight IV (1752-1817), grandson of Jonathan Edwards, President of Yale from 1795-1817, not his grandson, who bears the same name and was also a president of Yale.

² Stuart wrote several grammars of Hebrew with multiple editions and even one in Greek. These became standards in seminaries throughout the country only to be replaced by the Hebrew Grammar of Gesenius, which Stuart had translated from the Latin.

in theological works. This opened all the works of German criticism—the world’s greatest biblical scholarship of the time—to him, which he eagerly devoured.³ Stuart extracted and assimilated much of German scholarship, especially the grammatico-historical approach, into his own interpretative methods.⁴ Through his own original work in the subject as well as his translations of German works, Stuart pioneered German criticism in the New World, which earned him the title of “father of biblical science in America.” Stuart’s primary focus was pedagogical, holding that same professorship for about forty years. This did not, however, prevent him from becoming a prodigious author, which constitutes much of his legacy.⁵

Stuart’s understanding of the nature of Scripture is the first foundation for his hermeneutics. He believes that it is divinely inspired but in a human form and thus subject to all the same principles of interpretation as other books:

I am indeed fully persuaded, that ‘all Scripture is given by inspiration of God.’ I believe the Bible to be of *divine* authority; and that *the men who wrote the Scriptures were under divine influence which guarded them against error or mistake, when they composed the sacred books.*⁶

Thus, Stuart subscribes to plenary inspiration. This understanding of Scripture forms the framework for his hermeneutics. His insistence upon the Holy Spirit’s presence gives the Scripture authority and infallibility, which is consistent with Orthodoxy. Such infallibility led to his preference for a literal interpretation where possible and when inappropriate—e.g. simile—he approved of a figurative or spiritual meaning, but never

³Stuart was very explicit about his interest in and zeal of German Criticism, even writing “My favourite critics and commentators, [are] the Germans.” Moses Stuart, “Hints Respecting Commentaries upon the Scriptures,” (Andover: Flagg & Gould, 1833), Microfiche, *Biblical Repository*, Vol. 3, No. 9, (January 1833), (Beltsville, Maryland: NCR Corporation for the American Theological Library Association Board of Mico Text, 1978), 149.

⁴ For information regarding the grammatico-historical approach, see Soulen.

⁵ Stuart in fact authored six major commentaries (most notably of Romans, Hebrews, and the book of Daniel), wrote a substantial defense of the Old Testament canon, famously penned several public letters debating theology and interpretation—most notably those to Channing—translated scholastic works from German and published them, and was influential in establishing the periodical *Biblical Repository*. Stuart’s legacy also was extended by the influence of his many students. Parks claims that he taught over 1500 students: more than seventy became professors or presidents of colleges, over a hundred missionaries, and about thirty engaged in translating the Bible into foreign languages (36-7). Also, for further biographical information, see McKim, Giltner in [Church History](#), and Park.

⁶ Moses Stuart, “On the Alleged Obscurity of Prophecy,” (Andover: Flagg & Gould, 1832), Microfiche, *Biblical Repository*, Vol. 2, No. 6, (April 1832), (Beltsville, Maryland: NCR Corporation for the American Theological Library Association Board of Mico Text, 1978), p. 15.

a “double-sense.”⁷ Meanwhile, his understanding of the conditions of the authors, that they were possessed of “their own consciousness [and] voluntary rational agency,” forms the foundation for the grammatico-historical approach as it permits Stuart to apply rightly reason to the text.⁸ For, since the Bible was produced by men, it is subject to the identical principles of interpretation as other books—a point Stuart repeatedly presses.

Stuart also believes in the integrity of the Bible. This belief naturally shapes his interpretative method. In his third lecture on hermeneutics, Stuart explains that

When I am persuaded that the whole of the [Scriptures] are *one system* of revealed truth, I am at liberty to quote from the whole, in a certain sense as the works of one author, in order to illustrate what is obscure by what is plain.⁹

This concept of comparing an obscure passage with another to elucidate it is characteristic of criticism applied to non-Scriptural literature;¹⁰ Stuart’s application of this principle of secular criticism is typical of the rational approach to interpretation and is consistent with Stuart’s understanding of Scripture. While Stuart clearly acknowledges that the different books of the Bible were written by various men, in various places, and at various times, he believes they constitute an integral canon: this permits Stuart not only to compare passages within the same book but also in different books of the Bible. Stuart uses this comparative approach—a product of rationalism—to support his orthodox dogmatics. For example, while many claim that the Bible is full of contradictions, Stuart is able to defend the infallibility of the Bible through this comparative method:

⁷ Cf. Origen’s hermeneutics; and for more regarding Stuart’s definition of and stance on “double-sense” or “π□□□□□” see Stuart, “Alleged Obscurity of Prophecy,” 15 et seq.; regarding his view on Christocentric interpretation: see *Ibid.*, 32.

⁸ Quoted in John H. Giltner, *Moses Stuart, The Father of Biblical Science in America* (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1988), 47.

⁹ Jerry Wayne Brown, *The Rise of Biblical Criticism in America, 1800-1870 The New England Scholars*, (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1969), 58.

¹⁰ Stuart gives an extensive display of how to interpret authors of Antiquity, including Horace, Cicero, Plato, and others and then states that the same methods should be applied to Scripture in “Scriptures,” 139.

All which the Bible contains must be consistent; and consequently, that one sacred writer does not contradict another. If this be so, then, in order fully to develop the sentiment of any one particular writer, we must compare him, whenever he treats of subjects that have been handled by any of the others, with those other writers, and see what modification of his language will result from this comparison.¹¹

The inter-book relationships are crucial to Stuart's hermeneutics. Naturally, so is the relation between the Old Testament and the New. In fact, Stuart advocates that the simplest rule for interpretation would be to "follow on in the same path in which the New Testament writers have taken the lead."¹² This includes observing how the New Testament regards and interprets the Old Testament when it does as well as examining how the Old Testament views elucidate New Testament obscurities.¹³ Thus, Stuart's belief in an integral canon validates his critical comparison of passages, which is crucial to his overall interpretative approach.

Stuart's understanding of revelation also validates his critical approach. To Stuart, "A *revelation* must be *intelligible*, or it is no revelation;" by intelligible, Stuart specifically means that the language of Scripture conforms to the *usus loquendi*.¹⁴ Second, the Bible is "written for men, in the language of men . . . its meaning is to be sought in the same manner as that of other books;"¹⁵ "[it] comes to us couched in human language—a medium necessarily imperfect."¹⁶ The medium through which revelation comes to man—sc. language—hinders him from receiving God's revelation directly or clearly. Thus, the interpreter must be able to hurdle this obstacle using the rational tools available to him—reason in the form of philological knowledge, knowledge of the *usus*

¹¹ Moses Stuart, "Hints Respecting Commentaries upon the Scriptures," (Andover: Flagg & Gould, 1833), Microfiche, *Biblical Repository*, Vol. 3, No. 9, (January 1833), (Beltsville, Maryland: NCR Corporation for the American Theological Library Association Board of Mico Text, 1978), 138.

¹² Stuart, "Alleged Obscurity of Prophecy," 31.

¹³ His students published under his supervision and at his insistence: Passages Cited from the Old Testament by the Writers of the New Testament Compared with the Original Hebrew and Septuagint Version. Andover: Flagg and Gould...Publishers. Codman Press, 1827; and Q.v. pg. 7.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 16

¹⁵ William E. Channing, *The Works of William E. Channing D.D.*, (Boston: American Unitarian Association, 1900), 368; and Channing originally said this in "Unitarian Christianity: Discourse at the Ordination of Jared Sparks," which was published in *The Works*. Stuart quotes this and affirms it in his first letter to Channing, found in Moses Stuart, *Miscellanies*, (Andover: Allen, Morrill, and Wardwell, 1846), 4.

¹⁶ Stuart, "Hints Respecting Commentaries," 138-9.

loquendi of the biblical languages, historical knowledge, □.□.□. In also believing that God “*expects to be understood*,” Stuart’s hermeneutical theory consequently compels the interpreter to apply reason.¹⁷

Stuart’s method of criticism is most in line with the grammatico-historical school. For Stuart, exegesis involves the investigation of both the text itself (grammatical) and the historical background of the text (historical), which includes the text’s authorship, historicity, date of production, etc.¹⁸ Stuart was an aficionado with respect to all of these topics. Unlike many of the German schools of criticism, however, these Stuart only pursued as a means to arriving at an interpretation—never as an end in itself.¹⁹

In addition to the purely rational and scientific aspects of his hermeneutics, Stuart emphasizes the religious aspect. Stuart writes “Religious experience is necessary to the full and adequate understanding of such passages as relate to such experience.”²⁰ Stuart maintains this orthodox tenet in the midst of his critical approach and in doing so implies that biblical science is not sufficient. In a lecture, Stuart asserted that the interpreter must “[enter] into the spirit of those who wrote Sacred Scripture and acquire] feelings similar to those,” which becomes significant when Stuart examines authorial intent.²¹

This authorial intent is at the heart of Stuart’s hermeneutics as the single question that frames his entire approach. In many ways, Stuart views the Bible as a didactic tool for the faith.²² This perspective naturally places a high emphasis on the intent of the writer. In his first letter to Channing regarding the doctrine of the Trinity, Stuart articulates this all important question, saying:

¹⁷ Stuart, “Alleged Obscurity of Prophecy,” 15.

¹⁸ Granquist classifies him as similar to Ernesti and Seiler (311). Also, Stuart produced a translation of Ernesti and would thus have been intimately familiar with him.

¹⁹ Giltner, *Moses Stuart, The Father*, 103.

²⁰ Stuart, “Alleged Obscurity of Prophecy,” 18.

²¹ Mark Granquist, “The Role of ‘Common Sense’ in the Hermeneutics of Moses Stuart,” *The Harvard Theological Review*, Vol. 83, No. 3 (July 1990), JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/stable/1509877> (accessed December 6, 2008), 315.

²² Stuart uses the metaphor of a father speaking to his children for the purpose of instructing them. In this, Stuart argues that a father would never instruct his children using language that is unintelligible to them; so likewise does God speak to us. Stuart, “Alleged Obscurity of Prophecy,” 15 et seq

The simple question is: What does it teach? Of any particular passage we have only to ask: What idea did the original writer mean to convey? When this is ascertained by the legitimate rules of interpretation, it is authoritative. It is *orthodoxy* in the highest.²³

Stuart's two hermeneutical spheres serve to answer this question of what the author intended. Stuart uses biblical science in all its facets—philology, history, literary criticism, etc.—to ascertain who wrote the passage in question and when it was written as well as to evaluate the genuineness and historicity of it. Such biblical sciences furnish the interpreter with an accurate context in which to view the author. Erudition in the original languages and the *usus loquendi* of them enable the interpreter to understand the author's grammar and clarifies ambiguities resulting from idioms, phrases, and words. In order to arrive at a full interpretation, however, the interpreter must utilize his spiritual sphere and enter into the author's spirit. Stuart employs both the rational tools available to him through the grammatico-historical approach in accordance with Orthodoxy as well as relies on a spiritual understanding of the state of the author to deduce the author's intent—the all-encompassing question for Stuart.

A specific example illustrates Stuart's interpretative methodology. In a Sermon delivered at the Andover Chapel in 1846, Stuart presented an exegesis of the oft-quoted imperative from John 1:29: "Behold the lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world!" Stuart commenced with three questions in mind: "*By whom was it first made? On what occasion? And what is the exact meaning which it was designed to convey?*" (261). The first two questions illustrate Stuart's rational and grammatico-historical approach and provide contextual aids in answering the third. In the third question, Stuart's use of "*designed*" demonstrates his interest in the intent of the speaker, of getting into his shoes (for which religious experience is required by virtue of the topic)—his primary goal in hermeneutics. Stuart systematically proceeds, efficiently answering the first two

²³ Moses Stuart, *Miscellanies*, (Andover: Allen, Morrill, and Wardwell, 1846), 11. [Hereafter cited in text]

questions (261). In answering the third, he delves into an examination of the individual words; first he examines *lamb*. How should he interpret Jesus' appellation of *lamb*?

The *literal* sense is out of all question, in this case, because the appellation is given to a *person* and a lamb in a literal sense is not a *person*. Of course the word *lamb* involves a comparison or simile. (264)

Stuart first looks to the literal sense but realizes this is illogical. He then identifies two possible meanings: "lamb" refers to Jesus' character (i.e. his meekness) or to his role as a propitiatory offering, similar to the Jewish custom (264). Stuart then examines how other biblical authors used the word "lamb," such as Isaiah (264).²⁴ Thus Stuart, believing in the integrity of the Bible both within each Testament and within the canon as a whole, examines a more plain passage in the Bible to shed light on a more obscure one. Stuart denounces the former, citing its inability to stand up to both the "*rhetorical* argument" and the "*moral*" and accepts the latter, being compatible with both Jewish custom (present practice as well as historical, viz. in Egyptian times described in Exodus) and other passages of the Scripture. Stuart labels this a "figurative or symbolic" interpretation (265-6). Stuart emphasizes the Jewish context, because John the Baptist is speaking to a group of Jews; thus Stuart's contextual knowledge affects his interpretation—characteristic of a rational grammatico-historical approach:

I do not believe, that we can rationally suppose the Jews, who encircled the herald of Jesus' approach, would ever have thought of any other meaning of John's words than this. (268)

Additionally, Stuart embraces figurative interpretations where the literal is not suitable. After settling on this interpretation of "lamb," Stuart advances to the phrase "lamb of God." Stuart returns to his notion of authorial intent: "The main design of John the Baptist is..." (268). Invoking this method, Stuart determines that the phrase means an expiatory offering (the previously determined meaning of "lamb") provided by God (269). Stuart then logically proceeds to incorporate the phrase "take away the sin." Stuart points out that the original Greek is not a classical idiom but rather Hebrew in Greek

²⁴ He quotes Is. 53:7.

costume. Stuart's relies on his extensive background with the biblical languages, in addition to diverse comparisons of passages from other books, to affirm his sacrificial interpretation (269–70).²⁵ He eventually affirms substitutionary atonement—a Calvinist tenet—with his critical approach. Stuart's sermon is both compatible with his interpretive method and exemplary of it.

In an age and area marred by oppositional theologies as New England was, such a mingling of two was extraordinary—and not unnoticed. Stuart's interest in criticism—the weapon of Liberals and Unitarians—combined with his free discourse about such topics aroused the suspicion of his friends and quickly after that of the Trustees of Andover as well—so much so that the Trustees established an investigatory committee in 1825, which stated the conservatives' fear of criticism:

The unrestrained cultivation of German studies has evidently tended to chill the ardor of piety, to impair belief in the fundamentals of revealed religion, and even to induce, for the time, an approach to universal skepticism.²⁶

It urged teachers to instruct their pupils to approach such content with “a degree of cautious interest.”²⁷ But Stuart considered himself “a thorough *Conservative*.”²⁸ His public letters to the Rev. Wm. E. Channing regarding the doctrine of the Trinity testifies to his defense of orthodox principles. Most interestingly, however, is his *Critical Defense of the Old Testament Canon* in which he uses criticism to support Orthodoxy in both the authenticity of the canon and the inspiration of Scripture.²⁹ Stuart did not by any means support all or even most of criticism's findings, calling many theories, in particular many of Eichhorn's, “obnoxious.”³⁰ Stuart maintained the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch, the unity of the book of Isaiah, and historicity of Esther, Job, Daniel, and

²⁵ Stuart explicitly quotes and cites other books of the Bible no less than nine times in this sermon.

²⁶ Quoted in Daniel D. Williams, *The Andover Liberals, A study in American Theology*, (Morningside Heights, New York: King's Crown Press, 1941), 17.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Stuart, “Alleged Obscurity of Prophecy,” 4.

²⁹ Other examples include Stuart's *Is the Mode of Baptism Prescribed in the New Testament?* and *Scriptural View of the Wine-Question*.

³⁰ Giltner, *Moses Stuart, The Father*, 43; quoted in Brown, *The Rise of Biblical Criticism*, 51; and Cf. Stuart's defense of the book of Isaiah against Eichhorn. Ibid., 56.

Jonah; and he supported all of these with criticism.³¹ Thus, while it is understandable that conservatives might be concerned *prima facie* at Stuart's interest in criticism, Stuart is clearly a conservative and in a remarkable way.

Living in an increasingly sectarianizing world, Stuart envisioned an eventual ecumenical interpretation of Scripture. Stuart himself was not a sectarian; he censured the polemics of his day, foreseeing cessation from "bitterness & personal enmity" and uniting in "understanding the *original*" Scripture; he encouraged Christians—in accordance with the world-view produced by the Enlightenment—to increase our knowledge of God, taking on such a task as a "duty."³² Stuart anticipated the correct interpretation being eventually achieved with incorrect ones perishing along the way in accordance with Darwinism:

All strained or unnatural interpretation, then, will sooner or later come to be rejected by sober and reflecting persons. It may have a temporary currency given it, by the learning and weight of some individuals; but it never can stand the test of time.³³

This implies that there is in fact a correct interpretation in the eyes of Stuart: it is arrived at by the principles of hermeneutics, by the application of reason; it is Orthodoxy in the highest.³⁴

Moses Stuart successfully integrated the rational aspects of biblical science characteristic of Germanic scholarship into a hermeneutical method consistent with his Orthodox Calvin theology. He was able to explicate an interpretive method without being blind to modern science and its findings while simultaneously relinquishing nothing of his natal theology. Most remarkable about this achievement is that he accomplished this amidst increasingly diverging and virulent churches. He did this not in an attempt to harmonize the two, nor to become eminent as a pioneer of an

³¹ Giltner, *Moses Stuart, The Father*, 43.

³² Quoted in Brown, *The Rise of Biblical Criticism*, 51. [sic]; Stuart, "Hints Respecting Commentaries," 139; "No one who knew him ever stigmatized him as a sectarian." Edwards A. Park, *Discourse Delivered at the Funeral of Professor Moses Stuart*, (Boston: Tappan and Whittemore, 1852); and Cf. Brown, *The Rise of Biblical Criticism*, 49.

³³ Stuart, "Hints Respecting Commentaries," 140.

³⁴ Q.v. pg. 6.

interpretive compromise. Rather he did this in seeking the Truth—the correct interpretation; and for such we should remember him as a gentleman, a scholar, but most of all, as a seeker of the Truth.