

INTRODUCTION

Authority, Identity, and the Bible in the Early Republic

IN THE SUMMER OF 1802, Lucy Hurlbut, of Connecticut, went to hear Lorenzo Dow preach and he pointed at her. At that time Dow was not as famous as he would be, but he was famous enough, especially in Hurlbut's environs, near Dow's own hometown. Lucy had made a special plan to make it to this sermon, having missed another one six weeks before. She went hoping to be touched by God's word as related by one of His more eccentric spokesmen, and she was not disappointed. "When the preacher arrived and began his discourse the word was set home to my sole," she wrote in her journal. "After preaching a while he left the subject and pointing to me the Lord enabled him to speak to my case[:] he told of my former convictions and how the spirit of the Lord had been striving with me[.]" Dow, Hurlbut felt, told her about herself: "I thou[gh]t he described the sit[u]ation of my mind better than I co[u]ld have done."¹

Dow pointed a lot. He was a talented rhetorician, and that pointing finger, the identifying of individual members of his vast audiences, was an unusually transparent demonstration of the strategy of all rhetoric: it situates, names, *subjects* its audience. Dow identified Lucy Hurlbut as a suffering soul, guilty over past sins, feeling God's judgment, and by doing so he helped create that Lucy Hurlbut. Dow's polemic print publications from this same era of his career read like raw transcriptions of his frenzied oral performances, and they, too, *point*, figuratively and, in a way, literally. Dow frequently punctuated his allusive, impressionistic arguments with a manicule attached to a signature phrase: ☞ "And you cannot deny it."

In these written moments, as in the sermon that so affected Lucy Hurlbut, Dow does not argue or persuade: he positions his reader or listener as someone already implicated in what he is saying and subjected to his authority to say it. In her response to Dow's pointing, Hurlbut likewise positioned Dow as an

authority, one who could pronounce God's judgment: "[T]he Lord enabled him to speak to *my* case." Rhetoric, when it works, creates such relationships. Each subject position makes the other possible.

This relationship—that of the suffering sinner and the bearer of the Word—itself depended on a shared set of symbols, types, behaviors, and vocabulary that came from another authority: the English Bible. Dow was not ordained by any ecclesiastical body or trained in theology by any seminary; he represented no school of thought, no powerful social set, no disciplinary body, civil or religious. He had, that is, no particular authority to cast judgment on Lucy Hurlbut, other than that accruing to any white man. Dow's performance of judgment worked, though, because he could make himself recognized as an apostle, as one having such authority from God. That recognition depended on Hurlbut's ability to know an apostle when she saw one—on her facility with the Bible. While contemporaries and subsequent scholars refer routinely to "the authority of the Bible" in the early national period, I will argue here for a fuller understanding of that authority, one that recognizes that it inhered not in a book, but in the relationships that users such as Hurlbut and Dow created with it.²

This is a study of the authority of the Bible in the early national period that attends to its actual rather than idealized terms. Historians have long recognized the decades after the American Revolution as a period of upheaval with respect to religion as well as politics. These same historians have often identified the way that the Bible was positioned as an answer to the era's problem of authority. The dominant Protestant rhetoric of the time proclaimed the "Bible alone" to be authoritative bedrock—"an anchor of religious authority in a churning sea of demographic, social, and political turmoil," as Mark Noll has put it.³ Books do not act as authorities without readers, though. In this period, "the authority of the Bible" was a statement about the Bible's status as a complicated site of contestation with respect to religious authority. As above, the Bible served as a source of symbols and models for the creation of authoritative relationships. Each use of those symbols was a possible disruption of the Bible's authority. In its rhetorical use, the text itself could not remain static or unchanged.

A variety of relationships among would-be religious authorities and their potential followers, created and maintained through reference to the Bible, flourished during the post-revolutionary era. This period matters because the question of how roles were to be made recognizable was particularly acute during this time. The changes wrought by the revolution created new opportunities for new roles, but they also unsettled the terms by which those roles could be made legible, understandable, and recognizable. For Protestants, Catholics, and those they proselytized, the Bible was the shared script for responding to this uncertainty. All authority is fundamentally rhetorical, and

rhetoric like that acknowledged by Hurlbut was unusually effective in developing relationships of authority in the decades after the revolution.

This book pursues an understanding of early national American religion grounded in detailed moments of biblically-constituted relational authority in the context of large-scale cultural characteristics that determined what it meant to read or otherwise use bibles during this time. While previous studies of this era have tended to echo its Protestant rhetoric in suggesting that the Christian Bible became the era's preeminent religious authority, this study asks the many questions that underlie such an assertion: What does it mean for a text to act as an authority? What is the relationship between personal and textual authority? What did the concept of religious authority mean to those bound by it in the early nineteenth century? Any answer to these questions must come from investigating the Bible's *authoritative use* by individuals in their relations with others, not from the assumption that the inert book itself possessed authority. Moreover, it must also consider forms of authoritative bible use beyond the learned, considered articulations of argumentative theology. The authoritative use of bibles in the early national period was the means of creating and maintaining authoritative relationships that departed from eighteenth-century conceptions of what it meant to be a religious subject. This study will explore the print-bible culture that made various forms of bible usage possible in early national America. It will treat those forms of bible usage—written, oral, and performative biblical citation, carried out in more and less explicit ways, in more and less formal settings, by more and less privileged Americans—as bids for and responses to authority that had effects on both relationships of authority and on the Bible itself. This approach reorients arguments about early national biblicism and its authoritative stakes toward the practical, lived, material experience of rhetorical worlds and away from static notions of biblical and bible-based authority. This reorientation is the primary goal of this book.

Charles Nisbet, staunch Presbyterian and first head of Dickinson College, was a consummate representative of established Protestant authority entering the last decade of the eighteenth century. Trained in divinity in Edinburgh and Princeton, he spoke nine languages and was responsible for Dickinson's course of lectures in systematic and pastoral theology. In October of 1791, as the Bill of Rights neared ratification, Nisbet was characteristically sarcastic about his expectations for the religious environment promised by what would be the first amendment to the Federal Constitution. In a letter to printer William Young, Nisbet proposed that Young write a pamphlet "showing that although toleration is indeed begun among us, yet it is as yet very imperfect." The problem, Nisbet slyly suggested, was that not only did "the several sects keep their pulpits to their own people only, excluding all others," but they only let one

minister speak at a time. Nisbet suggested that this was “expressly contrary to the spirit of the federal constitution, which places all sects, teachers, and doctrines on an equal footing.” Congress itself, he thought, should be encouraged to set an example of true toleration for the nation’s religious institutions.

[P]ropose to that august body, to make an addition to their present places of meeting, so as to contain a stage large enough to hold the representatives of all the sects on the continent, including Indians, & that all the teachers of those sects be employed to officiate at once as chaplains to Congress, at the same time, that no sort of preference may be given to one above another, & when a sermon is to be preached before congress, that it be preached by all the chaplains of the different sects at the same time time [*sic*] and in the same place, & that the congress make a law that in all congregations the same form of worship be observed as above described, & that each congregation entertain a preacher of all the different sects on this continent, as it can not be said that our pulpits are free & unrestrained, while any one Sect is kept out of them, either altogether or for a time.⁴

Nisbet’s sarcasm came from a place of concern. The cacophony of all sects preaching at once—a cacophony made dangerous as well as absurd to a reader like Young by Nisbet’s specific inclusion of “Indians”—was a symbol of the disorder that men like Nisbet feared as the logical outcome of his era’s undermining of traditional models of religious authority.

Disestablishment, Noll has argued, was a symptom of and goad to late colonial Americans’ reverence for the Bible. In the eighteenth century, he writes, “recourse to Scripture fueled rejection of church-state establishments” at the same time that a “deepened attachment to Scripture heightened the feeling that all of life required divine direction from the Bible.” Noll argues that in this vacuum which biblicism itself had created, devotion to the Bible allowed an “informal Christendom’ to continue even when Americans rejected church-state establishments.”⁵ The atmosphere of biblical reference that Noll gestures to, in which nearly everyone presumed the relevance of the Bible while nearly no one agreed on *how* it was relevant, is the setting of this book.

During the early national period, the latent questions of religious authority were laid unusually bare. With the dissolution of British control over the colonies and the uncomfortable negotiation of relationships among the new states, everything from the political language available to name those relationships to the self-perceptions of their citizens to economic matters such as the notional value of paper currency came unmoored from traditional meanings.⁶ This upheaval manifested in religious matters as a popular rhetoric that rejected previously accepted ecclesiastical and clerical means of validating religious authority. For many, clerical education and ecclesiastical office became irrelevant or in fact damaging to one’s capacity to lead in religious matters. Congregational,

Presbyterian, and Anglican establishments were challenged by Baptists (present in the colonies since the seventeenth century but newly ascendant in the late eighteenth) and Methodists (arriving from England in the 1760s), by ministers from within their own ranks, and by entirely new denominations and popular movements.⁷

Still, rhetorical deference to the Bible remained.⁸ The standard work on religion in the early national period, Nathan Hatch's *The Democratization of American Christianity*, is organized around the tropes of individualism and lay empowerment, specifically with respect to the interpretation of the Bible. "[C]ommon people, Bibles in hand," Hatch wrote, "relished the right to shape their own faith and submit to leaders of their choosing." Hatch overlaid early national religiosity with the republican impulse of the revolution: the Awakening, he wrote, was spurred by an "ideology of communications . . . driven by the exhilarating sense that people could break free of elite domination and speak and write whenever they felt led."⁹ Many religious leaders of the era declared that each of their listeners could read and interpret the Bible for him- or herself, discovering through his or her own reading how it answered the various questions to which they sought authoritative answers. In the rhetoric of this period of upheaval, religious authority rested with, as the catchphrase of the period went, "the Bible alone."

Approaching this era with a robust conception of religious authority, what does it mean to take a text as an authority? Stephen Greenblatt has written that the Reformation invested scripture "with the ability to control, guide, discipline, console, exalt, and punish that the church had arrogated to itself for centuries."¹⁰ Such abilities, though, require discursive exchange. Protestants of all stripes profess that the Bible speaks to them through the Holy Spirit, but bibles as objects do not have the agency required of authority—they do not speak. Human authorities, rather, speak through bibles, or with them. The written text may be said to have authority, but only a reader can control, exalt, and punish.¹¹

Underlying that key phrase—"the Bible alone"—is the fact that the authority of the Bible is not a timeless, abstract, inviolable truth, but a *process*, one that moves in multiple directions and features multiple interacting components, strategies, and products. Religious studies scholar Vincent Wimbush has argued that approaches to scripture as a concept need to be oriented not toward texts such as the Bible and Qur'an as such, but toward the ongoing practices that distinguish those texts as "scriptural": "[T]he primary focus should be placed *not upon texts* per se (that is, upon content-meanings), but upon textures, gestures, and power—namely the signs, material products, ritual practices and performances, expressivities, orientations, ethics, and politics associated with the phenomenon of the invention and uses of 'scriptures.'¹² Rather than "scriptures," he argues, we should be thinking about "scripturalization." Wimbush intends this deverbal noun to carry the implication of an

ongoing, dialogic process, replacing “scripture” and its connotations of fixity. This approach “regards ‘text’ in more layered and expansive terms and positions the narrowly construed ‘text’ in the complicated middle,” not at the end or the beginning of the enterprise.¹³

As I read them, Wimbush’s theoretical interventions are of a piece with Catherine Bell’s reorganization of ritual studies around “ritualization.” Bell insisted that ritual be thought of as a process of creating “privileged differentiation” of some actions from other actions, “a way of acting that specifically establishes a privileged contrast, differentiating itself as more important or powerful.”¹⁴ Likewise, scripturalization is about suggesting or sustaining for some texts a privileged distinction from other texts. Scripturalization in this sense, as Bell held with respect to ritual, runs in all directions. It concerns both those texts thought of as scriptures, such as the Bible, as well as the universe of texts that cite that scriptural text and each other, from commentaries and concordances to bible-based performatives and biblical quotations worked into everyday speech. Biblical citation—through oral quotation, physical performance, written imitation—is a way of distinguishing some speech or activity from the usual, as special. *At the same time*, scriptural citation marks the cited text itself as special, worthy of citation. This co-constitutive operation that sustains privileged contrast—or, in the case of new scriptures, creates it—is scripturalization.¹⁵

To take full stock of the implications of this approach, it is important to remember Wimbush’s charge that the text be located in the middle of scripturalization as a phenomenon, not at the beginning or the end. The status, nature, and content of scriptural texts change constantly through the operations of scripturalization. This changing text is nevertheless real, both notionally and materially; the Bible is both a concept and a set of print objects. The ability to cite such a text as if it were static and to have such citation be recognizable is what makes scripturalization possible, providing the ostensibly shared objects of citation necessary to distinguish some speech from other speech. The terms by which the scriptural text is recognizable are never more than contingent, however. As Bell emphasized with respect to ritualization, context is everything for the functioning of scripturalization.¹⁶ In early national America, for instance, sometimes citing the Bible meant only producing English sentences with a structure and word choice typical of the early modern period. Countless commentators, from the 1830s to the present, have noted that much of the nonbiblical content of the *Book of Mormon* “sounds like” the King James Bible. This is an operation of scripturalization—the text of the new scripture cites and improvises on the old—and yet it would only be such in an anglophone context in which the King James Bible was widely known.

The contingency of the text speaks to the imaginary nature of scripturalization. The privileged distinction of a scripture is contingent; the power relations conjured by reference to a scripture are relationships of fictional asymmetry.

As Wimbush argues, scripturalized power is “the power of, and to, make-believe, that is, to make the social collective believe certain things in certain ways, to make it accept the reality of things that are made up.”¹⁷ Other scholars have distinguished such relationships of asymmetry in terms of authority rather than power, distinguished by its constitution through discourse alone rather than violence or the threat of violence.¹⁸ However it is named, the asymmetry of the authoritative relationship is fictional. This is an especially salient point with respect to religious authority. To say that a relationship of authority is religious is to posit that the asymmetry of the relationship is grounded in the relative access to or possession of assets that are unseen, of skills that must remain unproven or, at best, tautologies: demonstrated by the same authoritative discourse that they would support. Authority—fictive asymmetry, produced discursively—is an essential component of religion. Authority engenders belief, contextualizes experience, scripts ritual. It does not, however, transcend any of those things: it is constituted from within them even as it effects them.

The practical consequence of ritualization, Bell wrote, is that it renders ritualized subjects: individuals in relationships of power constituted by ritual activity. Expanding on Bell’s terms, this study will speak of late colonial and early national America as a scripturalized culture, and its residents as scripturalized subjects. In my approach to relational subjectivity, I am particularly influenced by genre theory as a subset of rhetorical studies. Weaving together Mikhail Bakhtin’s dialogic approach to discourse, Kenneth Burke’s dramaturgic analysis of rhetorical action, and J.L. Austin’s notion of speech acts, genre theorists have argued that particular forms of speech and action are constituted by the aims of speakers, the expectations of audiences, and the universe of shared historical and material factors that make up both. In her field-defining article “Genre as Social Action” (1984), Carolyn Miller argued that genre should be considered not in terms of taxonomies of texts but as a way of naming “typified rhetorical action” taken in response to “recurrent situation[s].” Genres “have conventional forms,” she wrote, “because they arise in situations with similar structures and elements and because rhetors respond in similar ways, having learned from precedent what is appropriate and what effects their actions are likely to have on other people.”¹⁹ With this theoretical armature in mind, biblical citation can be analyzed as a genre, as a recurrent form of rhetorical action. Viewed this way, the citational possibilities of scripturalization both regulated existing relationships of power and provided for the possibility of new ones. Scripturalized subjects are the products and the wielders of the rhetorical power that comes from having recourse to a scriptural text.²⁰

This, then, is what “the Bible alone” meant in early national America: a renewed rhetorical emphasis on the scripturalized terms of religious authority. This emphasis coincided with a culture-wide change in scripturalization’s

materiality. The contingent text had never been more complicated. In early national America, advances in the technologies of print production and distribution made possible a print-bible culture of unprecedented variety and volume, exacerbating the inherent tensions of scripturalized authority. The early national print market was flooded with bibles created by competing publishers, editors, and commentators, along with a universe of bible-citing material. For the most part, the content of this material was not new. Before 1800 and only slowly evolving thereafter, the domestic print market in America, across all genres, was primarily involved in reprinting British books.²¹ What was new was the diversity and volume of available religious print, and the circumstances of its rhetorical use.

This market developed at precisely the post-revolutionary moment when reliance on a bible—an idealized text made usable in printed, material copies—as a source of authority took on new analogues. Printed matter had an increasingly important role in the creation of authority of all kinds in the decades after the revolution. From the Declaration of Independence to the Constitution, and in texts such as the Federalist Papers that worked to establish the legitimacy of the founding documents, the new nation was founded in writing, and renewed focus on the Bible was part of this moment. Scripturalization operates in a universe of cultural, economic, environmental, and interpersonal variables. In the revolutionary era, the rhetorical creation of the United States and its citizens was a new variable added to the longstanding scripturalization of the Bible in North America. “Trust in the Bible was a religious analogue to political trust in the Constitution,” Noll has written.²²

On a conceptual level, such new political analogues for the Bible had long-term effects on the Bible itself. Michael Warner argued in *Letters of the Republic* that the early American “national state grounded its legitimacy not just in the people or the rule of law . . . but in the very special cultural formation of print discourse.”²³ Because a large part of print discourse in the early republic was biblical or bible-based, the association of print and state legitimacy necessitated the association of state and Bible. This association had consequences not just for the state, but also for the Bible. The use of the Bible to create an American national identity added a new referent for bible-based rhetoric.

As will be discussed at length in chapter 1, scripturalization constitutive of British national identity was a long-standing fact, which made its operations readily available to the making of American national identity. James Byrd’s *Sacred Scripture, Sacred War* tracks the martial aspect of this rhetorical work, demonstrating the ways in which ministers used the Bible to sell the Revolutionary War. In *American Zion*, Eran Shalev examines the centrality of the Old Testament to early national rhetorical creations of American identity. Shalev’s study is particularly useful in its attention to the broad, general implications of early national biblicism, the difference that the Old Testament made to

political discourse in ways that are not reducible to or immediately evident in “straightforward declarative propositions.”²⁴

Both Shalev and Byrd focus on biblically-inflected public rhetoric, primarily that articulated by elites. This is, to be sure, an important element in the operations of scripturalization in the early national period, but I am more interested in authoritative uses of the Bible better described as interpersonal, implied, and popular. Taking public rhetoric as representative of an actual public is dangerous, as it risks confusing authorial intention with audience response. Here, I have examined a wide variety of sources to try to get at the mutually-constitutive nature of speaker, audience, and Bible in the early national period.

My primary area of focus with respect to the consequences of the early national association of the Bible with political identity has to do with the rhetoric surrounding the founding era’s democratic ideals. “Democratization” is a crucial aspect of American national creation in which the Bible’s scripturalization is deeply implicated. Expressing confidence in every reader’s ability to comprehend and use the Bible was, as Hatch suggested, a rhetorical resource for democratization. Hatch’s view of the democratizing tendencies of the early national period depended on “leveling” as democracy’s defining feature. As Jeffrey Stout argues, however, leveling is not necessarily what democracy is about: “As a social formation democracy has more to do with structures of earned and accountable authority than it does with leveling.”²⁵ I argue that the scripturalized environment of early America meant that biblical usage—citation of and creation from the Bible—served as the terms for earning and accounting for authority as institutional and traditional means faltered. At the same time, the rapid proliferation of American print-bible culture in this era resulted in an environment in which the biblical means of creating and sustaining relationships of authority were more available to more individuals and communities than ever before. The scripturalization of early national America provided both means for and constraints on relationships of authority. Moreover, the exercise of both those means and constraints in specific circumstances had an ever-developing effect on the scripturalized status of the Bible itself.

This, to be clear, is an argument about the expectations of readers and the volume of print-bible culture in the scriptural formation that was early American democratic nationalism, not an argument about the liberating effects of early national democratic scriptural rhetoric. Access to literacy, print, and the circumstances for claiming biblical authority would remain unevenly distributed across lines of race, gender, class, and geography throughout the early national period, and this study will attend to those differences. I will maintain, though, that as technologies of reading and citation proliferated, democratizing rhetoric did have both authorizing and constraining effects on popular bible usage, even among and across demographic groups.

It must be noted here that one of the most important demographic lines to attend to with respect to early national biblicism is that between Catholics and Protestants. Wrapped up in the nation-making aspects of early national scripturalization is a native anti-Catholicism. The rhetorical focus on textual authority in the era of the American founding was a manifestation of Protestant assumptions that surfaced more and less explicitly. While the prerogatives of institutions, clergy, and tradition loom as large in the history of Protestantism as they do in the history of Catholicism, from the sixteenth century Protestants used rhetorical insistence on textual authority to distinguish themselves from Catholic forms of authority. Inheriting this legacy, a largely Protestant early national print-bible culture (re)asserted the importance of the Bible often against an imagined Catholic other. Anti-Catholicism was not incidental to late colonial and early national scripturalization, but constitutive of it. Scholars concerned with the underlying assumptions of secularism in American history, such as Tracy Fessenden, have emphasized that Noll's "informal Christendom" that followed disestablishment was specifically an informal *Protestantism*.²⁶ Fessenden and others have brought attention to the unmarked, "soft" Protestantism of early American Christianity, but there was plenty of hard Protestantism, too. Catholics made up a small portion of the population at the beginning of this period, but took up an outsized space in the Protestant imaginary, particularly where authority was concerned.²⁷ Early American biblicism is inseparable from its anti-Catholic edge.²⁸

For the period of this study, the operations of scripturalization played out in primarily intra-Protestant discourse inflected with anti-Catholic assumptions, and the subjects investigated here will reflect this. At the same time, I hope to make clear that Catholics did not cede biblicism—or the operations of scripturalization—to Protestants. Thomas Ward's *Errata of the Protestant Bible*, first published in 1688 and based on Catholic criticisms of Protestant bibles going back to the sixteenth century, was well known in early America and printed in several American editions in the early nineteenth century.²⁹ Irish Catholic Mathew Carey published what was probably the first English-language family bible printed in the United States, in 1790. It was a Douay-Rheims, subsidized by John Carroll, the nation's first Catholic bishop, who also consulted on the text and helped find subscribers.³⁰ Carey's considerable efforts to sell the book were focused on its status as an avowedly Catholic bible. His advertisements for the Catholic bible demonstrate, all at once, the Catholic biblicism, Protestant biblicism, and presumption of anti-Catholic bias regnant in the post-revolutionary era. On the one hand, he wrote in advertisements that he expected "every Roman catholic family throughout the union, who can afford the expense" to buy one, not least out of the need to refute the Protestant assumption "that [Catholics] are forbidden the use of the sacred volume."³¹ On the other hand, he also addressed advertisements to Protestants, urging them to pick it up as a second bible. Pointedly referring to the

King James as “the common church-of-England translation” (a jibe at a time when all things English were out of favor), Carey argued that it was a matter of common knowledge that “there are various and important errors in it,” and therefore suggested that an attentive Protestant needed a second translation with which to compare the Authorized Version, to “enable him to detect most, if not all of [the errors]—and thus to remove from his mind those doubts and difficulties, which are so fatal to true religion.” Carey also encouraged Protestants to see the purchase of a Douay-Rheims as an opportunity to demonstrate enlightened American tolerance, by placing their names on the subscriber list next to those of the nation’s Catholics.

Carey sold his entire print run of five hundred copies of the Douay-Rheims, but many copies were returned by the buyers for being defective. Carey sent the bibles to Craig and Lea, a firm in Wilmington, Delaware, to be bound, and hundreds of them came back misbound: sections of the books were upside down, missing, and dramatically out of order. “Were the sheets put together by a child, and never examined afterwards, they could not be worse,” Carey wrote in anger to his binder. Even after he started complaining, between December of 1790 and March of 1791, batch after batch of unreadable bibles reached Carey. He was particularly annoyed because of the special status of the book compared to others: “Heavens! If it was a collection of primers surely they would deserve more attention.” Having never had a problem with Craig and Lea’s work before, Carey intimated in his complaints that he believed the mistakes were so gratuitous as to be intentional, though he never openly stated the ostensible motive for a binder to deliberately ruin Catholic bibles. Craig apologized and claimed that the mistakes were the work of one person responsible for sewing the books, but he, likewise, never named a motive. Remembering the incident decades later, Carey was more direct: “I supposed that the affair must have resulted from the malice of Some besotted Sectarian who worked in the office & whose zeal & malice were inflamed by the appearance of a Catholic Bible.”³² Carey did not return to bible publishing until 1800, and when he did he turned to Protestant bibles. While an active and prominent Catholic, Carey published more than sixty editions of the Authorized Version between 1801 and 1825 and became one of the most prolific and successful bible publishers in the country.³³

Those Catholic bibles, their text deliberately scrambled by Protestants, are evocative if idiosyncratic artifacts of the operations of scripturalization in early national America. In these unreadable books, the mediation, the stakes, and the contingencies of biblical authority are made manifest. This study reorients understandings of early national biblicism toward such contingent, mediated, and contested artifacts of early national bible-based authority. This means looking closely at the material culture of bible production and distribution, the vast body of parabiblical materials that contributed to the ability

of an ever-widening set of people to effectively use the Bible, the ways in which they did so, and—crucially—the effect of all of this biblical activity on the Bible itself. Part I will focus on the characteristics of late colonial and early national print-bible culture. Part II will turn toward the consequences of this scripturalized environment for religious authority and the place of the Bible itself.

Chapter 1, “Creating the American Bible Reader, 1777–1816,” traces the development of the imagined American bible reader out of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century British print-bible culture. At the turn of the nineteenth century, the burgeoning American bible market, embedded in the broader market of bible-oriented print, imagined a reader who was in many ways the inverse of the dominant religious authority of the eighteenth century: rather than educated, upper-class, and male, this reader was some combination of barely literate, lower-class, and female. This imagined reader’s relationship to actual readers was uneven, but her presence in early national print-bible culture was fundamental to the era’s creation of new religious subjects, because it created space for readers to imagine the self-sufficient authority of their own bible reading. This imagined reader, manifest in the material bibles of the period, had important consequences for early national bible usage across the American population.

Chapter 2, “Taking a Text: Reading and Referencing the Bible in the Early Nineteenth Century,” focuses on reference as an aspect of biblical facility essential to Protestant religious authority in the early national period. Reading has its own authoritative aspects, but it is reference that defines bible usage as an authoritative act because of its public implications: reference is by definition an attempt to make one’s reading authoritative for others. Early national bible culture disseminated the skills necessary to authoritatively cite the Bible—“chapter and verse”—among a wide range of readers. At the same time, this dissemination consisted of bringing the textual mediations of intellectual and theological elites to a larger set of readers, encouraging novel forms of religious authority to develop along traditional lines.

Where part I will demonstrate the authoritative importance of explicit reference to the Bible in the early national period, part II elucidates the ways in which communities interacted with the Bible as the defining part of the era’s discursive field, imaginatively building on and expanding the Bible through their references to it. These chapters will think through the mechanics of reference and citation to explore the scripturalized terms of religious authority in the period and the consequences of those terms both for religious subjects and for the Bible itself.

Chapter 3, “Joshua, When the Walls Fell: Biblical Roles in Changing Times,” examines forms of bible usage that were performative, popular, and implicit. Here, under the rubric of “performed biblicism,” I am interested in elucidating the Bible’s ability to act as a script for the performance of new and invented

roles in an era of shifting identities. Performed biblicism offers a way of making sense of the ways in which the Bible participated in the construction of relationships of religious subjectivity as a dynamic aspect of lived circumstance. In the early nineteenth century, congregations gathered to playact the New Testament church, performing the Pentecost according to the script provided in Acts. Mormon missionaries, dispatched two by two on the apostolic model, stopped at the edges of towns that rejected them and knocked the dust from their feet (Matthew 10:14–15; Acts 13:50–51). Slave owners made themselves over into Abraham. Visionaries such as Isaac Childs and Chloe Willey cast themselves as Isaiahs and Daniels and Miriams. Would-be authorities extracted roles from the Bible that invited audiences, real and imagined, to respond with coordinating roles, conjuring relationships that pushed against the limits of early national structures of power and authority. Moments of biblical self-identification in the early national archive are not monolithic. What distinguishes those discussed here under the rubric of performed biblicism is the expansion of the ostensibly static biblical text into the contingency of embodied life.

Chapter 4, “‘Write These Things in a Book’: Scripturalization and Visionary Authority,” homes in on one particularly dramatic form of performed biblicism that highlights the relationship between performed and written scripturalized authority. Visionary accounts placed the authority of a given speaker front and center. At the same time, while at the level of the text these accounts were monologic—stories told by a uniquely privileged storyteller—they depended on an existing field of discourse shared among speakers and audiences for their comprehensibility. As texts created and authorized by communities of authors, editors, copyists, and readers, visionary accounts are uniquely ideal sites for thinking about the stakes and effects of scripturalization in the late colonial and early national period. This chapter features a detailed study of the history of *The Vision of Isaac Childs*, a virtually unstudied late colonial visionary text that circulated widely in both print and manuscript throughout the nineteenth century.

Chapter 5, “The Many Bibles of Joseph Smith: Scripturalization in Early National America,” brings together the various themes of the book to document the creation of a new scripturalized community. This chapter highlights the place of print-bible culture, citationality, performance, and the scripturalization of biblically-resonant visionary texts in earliest Mormonism. Smith’s texts invited their readers and auditors to regard them as scriptures and therefore to regard Smith, their immediate source, as a prophet. These texts functioned by citing the Bible, both implicitly and explicitly. The scripturalized community conjured by Smith and those around him is the preeminent example of the type of religious authority made possible by early national bible culture and an important window on the ways in which the authoritative use of bibles changed the Bible itself.

Finally, this book's conclusion will gesture toward the consequences of early national biblicism for subsequent American religious history. The Bible's availability for citation and re-citation fundamentally changed the desire, effectiveness, and circumstances of its citation. While the Bible's cultural presence in the early national period has been treated as flat and simple, the identities quarried from it were of infinite diversity and particularity; its ability to conjure those identities in concert with circumstance and other presences was at the nexus of religious authority in the early national period. The Bible's capacity to sit at that privileged position, however, was dependent on a set of circumstances that changed. The terms, processes, and effects of scripturalization are never static. The conclusion, "Abandoned Quarries," will gesture toward not the "decline" of the Bible's importance in America, but this shift in the nature of the Bible's persistent authoritative use.

Much existing scholarship on the use of the Bible in America has a difficult time separating itself fully from the assumptions of its subjects. Even where hermeneutics is made the central concern—i.e., where scholars focus on interpretation rather than on the innate characteristics of scripture—this is generally carried out with a sense of irony or even condemnation drawn from the tacit assumption of a core or base reality to the text. The operations of scripturalization are nevertheless implied, though, in this work. My intention here is not to draw a sharp line between scripturalization and more traditional arguments about the historical presence of scriptures, but to emphasize that the text's contingency, as a necessary product of its very use and usefulness, *is* the story, not an ironic or unfortunate aspect of the story.

My approach to dialogic, co-constitutive discursive environments has important analogues in existing scholarship. In *Jeremiah's Scribes*, Meredith Marie Neuman uses seventeenth-century sermon notebooks to reconstruct the creation and dissemination of Puritan sermon literature. Neuman uses notes of oral sermon delivery kept by audience members alongside ministers' own sermon notes to highlight the ways in which "sermon culture" was the product of both ministers and their community in a discursive, collaborative process. In this way, she challenges "static notions of authorship, authority, and authenticity," showing how "[a]cts of hearing, notetaking, and applying the sermon implicate the auditor in the work of the pulpit."³⁴ Neuman's construction of seventeenth-century "sermon culture" as a discursive process rhymes with nineteenth-century "bible culture" as I will explore it here.

Neuman's primary sources consist of a cache of sermon notes which are the enviable product of Puritan religious practices. Because of the density and structural rigor of Puritan sermons, note-taking was both possible and often presumed necessary for audience comprehension. The current study concerns a much broader discursive community surrounding the scripturalization of the Bible in the early United States. The processes of scripturalization took place

across theological and denominational distinctions and were active in the constitution of clerical and lay roles, rather than observant of supposed distinctions between them. Scripturalization operated in performative moments, in oral speech, and in written texts both public and private, manuscript and print. Out of this vastness, my sources are necessarily selective. There is no single, delimited body of texts that would facilitate the argument I want to make here about the developments of biblical usage in the early national period. As in any such study, questions of representativeness can be fairly asked. I have attempted to highlight moments and readers—known, lesser-known, and unknown—that illustrate widespread tendencies and practices. What my subjects have in common is that their words are preserved in the archive. This alone makes them in some sense atypical. For every usefully marked-up bible I looked at for this study, I looked at twenty whose margins were silent, who may as well have been fresh from the binder's, with no legible evidence of having ever been touched by a reader. I don't think that any of my well-known subjects are less representative of their time for being published, even though the outlets for their bible usage certainly can't be said to be typical. Likewise, the stray marks in old books that came into my view during this research are no less admissible than all of those that didn't. As an historian I am indebted to those readers who made marks that I can read, two centuries later. David Paul Nord, writing about the less-than-perfect nature of colporteur reports as sources for talking about what people read, observes that, whatever their faults, they are recommended by the fact that "they are what we have."³⁵ The historian's hope is that in the aggregate the voices speak for the silences. But let it be said that there will always be more silences than voices; these are the terms we accept when we look at the past. Like any scholar, all I can say is that I looked, and I saw.