

*The Historical Faith of William Tyndale: Non-Salvific Reading of Scripture at the Outset of the English Reformation**

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This essay argues that for William Tyndale, not only was scripture not sola, but it did not have to be read solely as scripture, that is, the salvific word of God. It could also be read with historical faith, a term that Tyndale borrowed from the German Reformer Philip Melancthon and used to signify “believing in scripture as one would a non-scriptural history.” Tyndale did not exactly advocate this approach to scripture, but he recognized it as having at least some validity, given the role of human agency and authority in the transmission of God’s word. More broadly, the notion of historical faith in scripture reflects the Reformation elevation of what John Foxe called the “truth of history” along with that of scripture. In the polemical writings of Tyndale and later English Protestant Reformers, scripture served both as a means of personal salvation and as a source of historical evidence against the Catholic Church. As a source for this kind of evidence, scripture was cited in conjunction with non-scriptural histories and in ways not discernibly different from those in which such histories were cited. Tyndale’s historical faith is not, then, as his opponent Thomas More dubbed it, an “evasion” borrowed from Melancthon, but rather a part of the complex and developing relationship between scripture and history during the English Reformation.

1. INTRODUCTION

William Tyndale (ca. 1494–1536) has not generally figured in discussions of what has been termed the “rise of the view that the Bible is a historical document.”¹ The numerous references to non-scriptural histories in Tyndale’s writings have received significant attention, but the nature of his belief in these histories vis-à-vis his belief in scripture has yet to be examined. Tyndale’s recourse to history, however, needs to be understood in the context of the partnership between history and scripture during the English Reformation when both were made to provide the justification for vast sea-changes in church polity and practices.² This partnership could be said to have culminated in the sixteenth-century

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¹Burke, 61.

²For Tyndale’s use of history, see Betteridge, 48–55; Ferguson, 157–60; Pineas, 1962b; Williams, 22–33.

placement of John Foxe's (1517–87) ecclesiastical history next to the Bible in churches as well as other venues, where they “stood together . . . as powerful confirmation of the triumph of God's word in Elizabethan England.”³ Such a strong visual statement of the ability of human history to participate in this distinctly Reformation triumph had its counterpart in the joint use of history and scripture in the works of sixteenth-century defenders of English Protestantism such as Tyndale, John Bale (1495–1563), and Foxe himself. But from the start, appeals to the authority of history on the part of Reformers also raised questions about its authority relative to that of scripture. How different were these two sources of antipapal doctrine? Was there overlap between the kinds of belief they each elicited?⁴

In particular, such questions were raised by the debate between Tyndale and Thomas More (1478–1535) over *historical faith*, a term that Tyndale had borrowed from the German Reformer Philip Melanchthon (1497–1560) and introduced to an English readership. For what Tyndale meant by historical faith was “believing in the Bible as one would a non-scriptural history,” articulating what has been treated by Barbara Shapiro and Joseph Levine as a largely seventeenth-century, moderate Anglican approach to the relationship between history and scripture.⁵ Tyndale did not exactly advocate this approach, which, as he recognized, was a far cry from what he called “feeling faith,” the salvific notion of Bible reading at the heart of Protestantism. Nor, although they would seem to have some bearing upon one another, did Tyndale advertise any connection between historical faith and the literal — or, as it was also termed, “historical” — sense

³Kastan, 119. See also *ibid.*, 118–19, on the 1571 order enjoining that copies of both Foxe's history and the Bible be placed in the houses of prelates and other church dignitaries, as well as in cathedrals. There does not seem to have been an order that every church had to possess both books, but many did.

⁴See, for instance, the dedication to Edward VI in Bale, 1548a. Bale distinguishes between “records” or “writings of antiquity,” which are able to edify, confirm faith, and, as evidence of past ecclesiastical practices, help to resolve disputes within the church, and the “sermons” of prophets and apostles that are as the voice of God from on high. Ferguson, 158, asserts that Tyndale viewed the Bible as an “essentially historical document,” but he focuses on Tyndale's belief in the literal sense of scripture and does not address the issue of historical faith. Ferguson's point is not entirely accurate either, since, as we shall see, Tyndale's attitude toward reading the Bible in this way was more conflicted than Ferguson acknowledges.

⁵Shapiro, 156, argues that “by the end of the seventeenth century, the comparison between historical belief and scriptural belief had become almost commonplace in some intellectual circles.” Levine, 322, analyzes the various strategies by which moderate Anglicans opposed skepticism about the Bible and defended biblical “history as the foundation of Christian belief.”

of scripture. On the contrary, having rejected allegory, Tyndale made the literal sense of scripture spiritual, whereas we shall see that he defines historical faith as a distinctly unspiritual way of reading the Bible. But historical faith was not just an argumentative convenience for Tyndale either, or, as More describes it in his *Confutation of Tyndale's Answere* (1532), an "evasion by meane of a dystynccon made by Melanchthon."⁶ Rather, Tyndale's usage of *historical faith* is where the complexity of the partnership between scripture and history in his own works becomes most apparent. Indeed, his borrowing from Melanchthon was itself not simple, since the section of Melanchthon's 1521 *Loci Communes* from which Tyndale took *historical faith* is one in which Melanchthon appears to reject it altogether. Arguing that it is impious to assent to the Gospel story as one would to Livy or Sallust, Melanchthon admits that he used to call such belief *historica fides*, identifying it with the more widely used expression *fides historiae*. Now he sees it as mere opinion, a derogation that would seem to rule out its application to scripture.⁷

At least, such dubious faith in scripture is hardly what one would expect from the translator of it whom Foxe dubbed "the apostle of England" and extolled for having restored the decayed "trueth of the Gospell" to his native land.⁸ Yet in *Acts and Monuments* Tyndale's apostleship derives not only from the transmission of the Gospel truth but also of non-scriptural texts. One such text was the "Examination of William Thorpe," a fifteenth-century

⁶More, 8:2.741.

⁷Melanchthon, 1834–60 (hereafter cited as CR), 21:161–62, 169. On *fides historiae*, see Momigliano, 79–84; Kelley, 22–33; Gilmore, 111–15. *Fides historiae* was often used to distinguish between reliable history and fable. In his dedication of *Assertio Inclytissimi Arturii* (1544) to Henry VIII, for instance, Leland maintains the "fides historiae" of King Arthur against the argument of Polydore Vergil that Arthur was merely a "fable." See also the preface to Parker, where Livy figures as a model historian since he offers nothing "fabulous" but only that which elicits "faith" from the reader. As Gilmore, 112, notes, *fides* was an ancient rhetorical term that denoted a "warrant or security for credibility," but this meaning broadened to include "persuasiveness" in general. As applied to history during the early modern period, it could also signify "belief." For uses of *historica fides* by Melanchthon, see CR 1:88, 109. In his *Epistola de Lipsica Disputatione* (1519) and *Defensio Contra Job. Eckj* (1519), Melanchthon vouches for the "fides historica" of his account of the 1519 Luther-Eck debate. In his 1517 declamation, *De Artibus Liberalibus*, CR 11:8, however, Melanchthon goes further, using *historica fides* to identify the historic truth — the discovery of the seven liberal arts — hidden in the Homeric fable of Mercury's invention of the seven-stringed lyre.

⁸For Tyndale as the restorer of the "Trueth of the Gospell," see Foxe's preface to Tyndale, 1573, sig. Aⁱⁱⁱ. For Tyndale as the "apostle of England," see Foxe, 1570, 1224. Here Foxe also notes that Tyndale was "singularly addicted" to the "knowledge of the Scriptures."

Lollard manuscript that Foxe calls a “worthy history” and that he credits Tyndale, not entirely implausibly, with having “first set forth and corrected.”⁹ As John King argues, by giving Tyndale a role in the transmission of this text Foxe asserts the existence of a Protestant “apostolic tradition,” which was supposed to have begun with the primitive church and extended through the Lollards to the Reformation.¹⁰ Foxe does criticize Tyndale, wishing that “for the more credite of the matter,” he had not modernized so much of the “old speach of that time.” Nevertheless, from a “credible relation” of a “true auncient copy” of the same manuscript, Foxe is able to assert that “something doth remaine, saverying” of the obsolete language of the original.¹¹ This version of the “Examination” that appears in *Acts and Monuments* is then said to be the “text of the story” as Tyndale transcribed it with nothing having been “added” or “diminished.”¹²

In addition to the truth of the Gospel, another kind of truth was crucial to religious reformation in sixteenth-century England, and Tyndale’s contribution to the propagation of this latter truth, although perhaps not as significant as what he did for the Gospel, may be part of the reason that he seemed to Foxe an entirely plausible editor of a Lollard document. This was the “truth of history,” a phrase that appears in *Acts and Monuments* as part of an attack upon the authenticity of the Donation of Constantine and that echoes other similar Foxean formulations such as the “plain evidence of history” and the “plaine truth of times.”¹³ In *The Practice of Prelates* (1530), Tyndale too had castigated the Donation of Constantine as being in agreement with “no authentic story,” demonstrating here and elsewhere in his polemical writings a decided willingness to make this kind of authenticity a criterion of truth.¹⁴ Moreover, in these writings historical truth not only parallels and reinforces, but also, despite his protestations to the contrary, to a degree shapes Tyndale’s understanding of the truth to be found in scripture. This is not to say that Tyndale ever made scripture the equivalent of Livy or Sallust, since, as a source of salvation, it was unique.

⁹Foxe, 1570, 629. See King, 2006, 47, who notes that Foxe’s claim about Tyndale may be “dubious” but is not “impossible,” since Foxe’s papers do contain a manuscript of a text by Thorpe that is in Tyndale’s handwriting.

¹⁰King, 2006, 47–48. See King, 2001, 79, for other Lollard texts that Foxe and Bale credited Tyndale with editing. One such text was a 1530 publication (in Antwerp) combining the “Examination” of Thorpe with that of Sir John Oldcastle.

¹¹Foxe, 1570, 629.

¹²Ibid.

¹³For the “truth of history” and the “plain evidence of history,” see Foxe, 1570, 144, 12. For the “plaine truth of times,” see Foxe, 1570, sig. Aii^v.

¹⁴Tyndale, 1849, 279.

But for Tyndale the word of God was also a source for historical arguments against the Roman Church, and in this role it was not *sola*. Nor for the purposes of such arguments did scripture require the same kind of assent as it did to effect salvation. On the contrary, its authority was not even always discernibly different from that of other authentic stories used against the Church.

2. HISTORY AND THE EARLY REFORMERS

Scripture became a matter of controversy in the More-Tyndale polemic largely through Tyndale's 1526 New Testament, with its provocative renderings into English of key Greek terms such as *ecclesia* and *presbuteros*. More attacks these "mistranslated" terms in his *Dialogue Concerning Heresies* (1529), and he thereby justified the burning of what he sarcastically refers to as "Tyndale's testament."¹⁵ But this debate, which also comprised Tyndale's *Answer to More's Dialogue* (1531), and More's *Confutation of Tyndale's Answer*, went beyond immediate issues of translation to address broader ones concerning the authority of scripture against that of the Catholic Church. Moreover, the Bible is not the only text whose authority is asserted in the *Answer to More's Dialogue*. There Tyndale makes what may be one of the earliest English Protestant attempts to justify the enlistment of non-scriptural antiquity alongside scripture in the service of Reformation. Thus Tyndale describes what in the *Confutation* More takes to be the rationale for the Lutheran faith in the permissibility of clerical marriage and the inefficacy of good works: "Concerning outward teaching we allege for us scripture, older than any church that was this fourteen hundred years and old authentic stories which they had brought asleep wherewith we confound their lies. Remember ye not how in our own time, of all that taught grammar in England not one understood the Latin tongue? How came we then by the Latin tongue again? Not by them, though we learned certain rules and principles of them, by which we were moved and had an occasion to seek further; but out of old authors. Even so we seek up old antiquities out of which we learn, and not of our church; though we received many principles of our church at the beginning, but more falsehood among then truth."¹⁶

¹⁵More, 6:1.285.

¹⁶Tyndale, 1850, 55; see also Tyndale, 2000, for an edition with useful notes. On Tyndale's own engagement with issues of grammar and translation, see Cummings, 196–206.

Tyndale does not identify these “old antiquities,” or “old authentic stories which they had brought asleep,” and in his response More claims not to be able to fathom what they were: “And by what old stories new founden out, can he now make us knowe, that freres or monkes professed, were of olde wont to wed nunnes, and well allowed and mych commended therein?”¹⁷ Still, though it does not exactly answer More’s question, Thorpe’s “Examination” can be seen as an example of an antiquity rescued from the slumber of oblivion. (At least, this was Foxe’s view of it.) The parallel that Tyndale here draws between the humanist *ad fontes* reform of medieval Latin according to old authors and the reform of the church according to both “scripture older than any church that was” as well as “old stories” could serve almost as a manifesto for the kind of retrieval of historical materials that reached its apogee during the Elizabethan period with Foxe and Archbishop of Canterbury Matthew Parker (1504–75). The accumulation and publication of such materials was meant to support the Elizabethan church by confounding the lies of its opponents.

In the wording of the alliance that Tyndale establishes between scripture and “old authentic stories,” scripture does come first. But Tyndale’s emphasis on the antiquity of scripture (“older than any church that was”) suggests that it undermines the Church alleged by his opponent in much the same way as “old” stories do. Both history and scripture demonstrate the priority of the Christianity of the Reformers to this Church, showing that it is neither the only nor the most venerable source of “outward teaching.” Such an argument makes no claim for the primacy of scripture as the word of God. It also contrasts with other parts of the *Answer*, as when Tyndale argues that “all men’s hearts [are] of themselves dark with lies, and receive all their truth of God’s word.” This truth, which is “not true because man so saith, or admitteth it for true,” would seem to have nothing to do with human histories.¹⁸

In the *Answer*, however, as well as in other polemical writings such as *The Obedience of a Christian Man* (1528) and especially *The Practice of Prelates*, with its accounts of the rise of the “Bishop of Rome” and the depredations of English prelates through the ages, Tyndale shows considerable reliance on history as well as on scripture to dispel lies from the human heart. This reliance, moreover, was in keeping with the practices and pronouncements of key Continental Reformers. Melancthon was himself a prolific editor of and contributor to histories, and his 1517 humanistic

¹⁷More, 8:2.808.

¹⁸Tyndale, 1850, 24–25. On the problematic character of *sola scriptura* as a defining feature of Protestantism, see Betteridge, 19–21; McGrath, 142–44.

oration “De Artibus Liberalibus” argues that no authors were read more fruitfully than historians and poets.¹⁹ But perhaps most telling was the 1519 Leipzig debate between Martin Luther (1483–1546) and Johann Eck (1486–1543). In one of his challenges to Eck before the debate, Luther had cited the authority of both “approved histories” and scripture in order to attack the notion that the Roman Church had long been superior to all others.²⁰ During the debate, when Eck criticized Luther for elevating the fifteenth-century antipapal historian Bartolomeo Platina above popes and Church fathers, Luther thundered in reply that he was attributing nothing to Platina per se but rather to “history,” which is the “mother of truth.”²¹ In his preface to the *Vitae Romanorum Pontificum* (1536) of the English Reformer Robert Barnes (1495–1540), Luther elaborates further on his praises of the joint efficacy of history and scripture. Describing himself as being initially “ignorant of and inexperienced in histories,” Luther claims to have first attacked the papacy “from what came before . . . that is, out of sacred scripture.” Now others do so “from what came after, that is, out of histories.”²²

Reformers made allies of history and scripture in response to the demands of specific polemics, but the consequences of their doing so were more far-reaching, as the authority of history increased to the point of becoming at times quasi-scriptural. Putting the “fruitfulness” of reading history in a theological context, Melanchthon’s preface to *Carion’s Chronicle* (1532), which he edited for publication, argued that such reading is “useful . . . for fear and belief in God” since it reveals how God, who controls the kingdoms of the world, punishes “wrong.”²³ In his 1538 *Preface to Galeatius Capella’s History*, Luther emphasizes the same point, arguing that the examples of history are able to inspire fear even in those who do not

¹⁹CR 11:12: “maiore fruge.” For a Neoplatonic reading of Melanchthon’s understanding of history, see Maurer, 99–129. For a critique of this reading that sees Melanchthon’s understanding of histories as rhetorical, see Knape, 111–24, who argues that for Melanchthon history did not exist apart from histories, the collection and representation of the past in texts. This belief helps to explain Melanchthon’s role as a corrector, editor, and author of historical texts. See also Kelley, 156–57, on Melanchthon’s enthusiasm for history in spite of a “fundamentalist desire for a ‘revived doctrine’ disengaged from human traditions.”

²⁰Luther, 1883– (hereafter cited as WA), 2:161: “approbatae historiae.” This is from the *Disputatio et Excusatio Martini Luther* (1519). Much of the debate revolved around this challenge, which Eck engaged from the outset: see WA 2:255.

²¹WA 2:289: “mater veritatis.”

²²Barnes, sig. Aⁱⁱⁱⁱ: “ignarus nec peritus historiarum”; “a priori . . . hoc est ex scripturis sanctis”; “a posteriori, hoc est, ex historiis.”

²³Scheible, 15: “nützlich . . . zu Gottes forcht un zum glauben”; “unrecht.”

usually acknowledge God.²⁴ Likewise, in his *Practice of Prelates* Tyndale advises rulers who wink at persecution of the “open truth” to beware, because God punishes sinners against the Holy Ghost “in this life, according unto all the ensamples of the bible and authentic stories since the world began.”²⁵ Along with scripture, such “authentic stories” prove capable of delivering a sound theological message, as well as a pointed admonition to contemporary readers such as Henry VIII. By 1533, when the Henrician government would attempt to justify its own revolt from Rome with “sundry old authentic histories,” this kind of appeal was becoming almost as much of a Reformation rallying cry as *sola scriptura*.²⁶

Such faith in history was to some degree in accord with humanism and its own historicizing tendencies. Lorenzo Valla (1407–57), the Italian humanist who influenced Erasmus the most, and More’s sometime friend Sir Thomas Elyot (1490–1546) both praised history in terms that narrowed the gap between it and scripture.²⁷ As the author of the Tacitean *History of Richard III* and a collector of ancient Roman coins, More, too, might be expected to have had a high regard for history.²⁸ But this regard had its limits. In good humanist fashion, his 1520 *Letter to Oxford* argues that history, along with poetry and oratory, was a source of “prudence in human affairs.”²⁹ Nevertheless, in contrast to the sources of belief alleged by Tyndale, the faith of the Church was for More entirely ahistorical, and therefore unable to be inscribed within a familiar humanist narrative of decay and renewal. As More notes, Tyndale had likened his own efforts and those of other Reformers to “have restored agayne the right faith” by means of “antiquities and old storyes” to the restoration of the “right order in the teachynge of grammar and learnynge of the latin tong.” But for More the “symylytude of grammer likened unto fayth, is no more lyke then an apple to an oyster”: “The laten tonge was no thing that ever our lorde promised to preserve for ever and therefore it might by chauncys & occasyons of batayle and warre, perrysshe and be loste. . . . But as for the fayth can never fayle, no more than canne the catholyke chyrch against whyche our sayvour hath hymselfe promised that all the heretykes that rebelled . . . nor all the tyrauntes upon erth . . . shall never obtayne and

²⁴WA 50:384.

²⁵Tyndale, 1849, 243.

²⁶Koebner, 29. See *ibid.*, 29–41, on the efforts of Henry and others to assemble historical evidence that justifies the break with Rome.

²⁷Elyot, 389–93; Valla, 6. For Valla, Moses and the writers of the Gospels are “historians” (“historici”).

²⁸For More’s antiquarian interests, see Baker, 52–54.

²⁹More, 15:138: “rerum humanarum prudentia.”

prevayle.”³⁰ Such unfailing faith is not subject to the vicissitudes of history, represented here by some of its chief components: war, chance, tyranny, and rebellion. Nor, as More goes on to claim, does faith depend upon texts, which, no less than languages, can perish. Thus More argues that the faith “perpetually taught” to the church by the “sprite of god” will endure, “though all the bokes in the world sholde fayle” — including, we may infer, scripture.³¹ For earlier in the *Confutation* More observes of scripture that “beside the corrupcyon of bookes, myche thereof is lost” and “mych so hard that no man understandeth.” Likewise, in his *Dialogue Concerning Heresies* More claims that parts of scripture, “more peradventure then we can tell of,” were “all ready lost,” while other parts were “corrupted with mysse writing.”³²

More’s sense of the variability and corruption of the texts of scripture was itself a humanist one, borne out by the labors of Erasmus on the New Testament and articulated in More’s own defenses of those labors.³³ In his 1515 *Letter to Martin Dorp*, More underscores the corruption of the Vulgate Bible, and laments the loss of other potentially illuminating translations of scripture due to “the carelessness of the times.” For Augustine and Jerome, More observes, only the Greek codices of scripture remained largely intact, at least “more faultless” than their Latin counterparts.³⁴ But More nowhere suggests that these codices provide an absolutely reliable touchstone for faith, and by 1519 he must have been aware that Erasmus, who had derived the missing last six verses of his Greek New Testament by translating back from the Vulgate into Greek, had encountered gaps there too. Even in his *Letter to Dorp*, which predates the emergence of the Lutheran threat, More still makes paramount the “living gospel of faith” that was infused into the church before it was written and had lasted until his own time. Rather than any text, it is this living gospel of faith that provides the “inflexible rule of truth” against which all written versions of scripture are measured.³⁵

Tyndale, of course, was aware of the struggles of Erasmus and other humanist emendators of corrupt texts, and he even expressed approval of some of the fruits of these struggles in the *Answer*. Erasmus “hath improved many false books . . . put forth in the name of St. Jerome, Augustine . . . and

³⁰Ibid., 8:2.806–07.

³¹Ibid., 8:2.807.

³²Ibid., 8:1.335; *ibid.*, 6:1.115.

³³More’s unwillingness to rely upon scripture was, however, extreme. See Marius, 380–81, who notes that for More “Scripture was wracked with difficulty” and could “hardly stand without its interpretive gloss.” Hence, More’s references to biblical texts often seem to be to the “text as it was interpreted by some Father.”

³⁴More, 15:82, 90–92, 228: “temporum incuriae”; “emendatiores.”

³⁵Ibid., 88: “vivum evangelium fidei”; “inflexibilis veritatis regula.”

other, partly with authentic stories, and partly by the style and the Latin."³⁶ Here, along with philological criticism, the use of authentic stories serves as a legitimate method of discriminating between the genuine and the spurious in the works of authors who had done much to shape church doctrine, just as in the *Practice of Prelates* such stories enable Tyndale to dismiss the Donation of Constantine as a fraud. Nevertheless, although willing to acknowledge the possibility of a textually corrupt Jerome and more than willing to regard a document supporting the papacy as "feigned," Tyndale could not accept that scripture, once at least it had been stripped of false glosses, was less than genuine.³⁷ Rather, as he puts it in the *Obedience of a Christian Man*, scripture is the absolutely reliable measuring stick, or "meteyard," by which the truth of all other writings and doctrines should be judged: "In so great diversity of spirits, how shall I know who lieth, and who sayeth truth? . . . Verily by God's word, which only is true."³⁸

Tyndale, however, could himself have been accused of compromising the uniquely incorruptible status of scripture by pairing it with antiquities and stories, for the reputation of history during this period was far more ambiguous than the praises bestowed on it by some humanists and Reformers would indicate. Indeed, the persistent use of qualifiers such as *authentic* and *approved* by Reformers shows their awareness that history often inspired doubts rather than faith. Tyndale himself, as Rainer Pineas has observed, at points in his writings professes "small faith" in histories, advising readers, for instance in *The Obedience of a Christian Man*, to trust the Bible rather than "a tale of Robynhode or *gesta Romanorum* or of the Chronicles."³⁹ In particular, the problem with the chronicles, according to *The Obedience of a Christian Man*, was that they were biased in favor of the clergy because "I suppose they make the chronicles themselves." Tyndale's perception of clerical bias did not prevent him from citing the chronicles, but it did allow him to justify reading them in the most anticlerical way possible. For given this bias, anything in the chronicles of an anticlerical nature must therefore be true.⁴⁰

Tyndale's use of history, however, not only exhibits biases of its own, but for another reason too it has raised doubts. As More's frustrated question about the identity of "old stories new founden out" would indicate, Tyndale's references to history tend to be vague. As Pineas notes, not only is it "impossible to state definitely what sources Tyndale was using for his

³⁶Tyndale, 1850, 135.

³⁷Tyndale, 1849, 279.

³⁸Tyndale, 1968, 153.

³⁹Pineas, 1962b, 122–23; Tyndale, 1968, 328.

⁴⁰Pineas, 1962b, 122–23; Tyndale, 1968, 338.

historical references,” but, in addition, “often the sources available to Tyndale give no support” to the point he is making.⁴¹ Though More would also accuse Tyndale of distorting scripture, the biblical passages that he felt Tyndale misrepresented were at least available to the interpretations of others. This was not the case for unidentified “old stories,” which, as More’s sarcastic “new founden out” implies, might as well have been made up.

Tyndale’s own ambivalent and not always faithful approach to history needs to be seen in the context of a broader ambivalence among both humanists and Reformers, for *pace* both More and Melanchthon, the conjunction with poetry was not always flattering to history during this period. Thus, in his *Boke Named the Governour* (1531), Elyot acknowledges that his praises of history might meet the objection that the “histories of the Grekes and Romaynes be nothing but lyes and fayninge of poetes,” even as he suggests that these objections come from the perennial enemies of “good autors.”⁴² Nevertheless (although Elyot does not mention this), among Latin authors the rhetorician Quintillian had denigrated history as little more than a “prose poem,” useful for ornamentation but not for proof.⁴³ Moreover, in his 1531 *De Disciplinis*, Juan Luis Vives (1492–1540) offers a humanist critique of historiography that underscores the mendacity of overly poetic Greek historians such as Herodotus and Diodorus Siculus. According to Vives, these historians fabricated whatever material they could not acquire, and they were not alone in their disregard for truth. Patriotic motives led writers from an assortment of nations, including Britain, to distort the past, and, along with partiality, problems of chronology beset historiography, in particular that of remote antiquity.⁴⁴

But even more disturbing was the corruption of history that was constitutive of religious belief. In *De Disciplinis* Vives reserves some of his most strident castigations for the histories of “sacred things” and in particular for the stories of saints compiled in *The Golden Legend*: “How unworthy of saints and Christian men is that history of the saints, which is called *The Golden Legend!*”⁴⁵ Among others misrepresented in *The Golden*

⁴¹Pineas, 1962b, 122, 131. As Anne O’Donnell has pointed out to me, there are exceptions to Tyndale’s lack of specificity about sources: see Tyndale, 1849, 267, 294. The references are to Platina and the *Polychronicon*.

⁴²Elyot, 394.

⁴³Quintillian, 4:28–31: “carmen solutum.” He claims that most of the “virtutes” of history are to be shunned by the orator since it is written “for the purpose of narration,” not “for the purpose of proof.” In short, history is “closest to poetry and in a certain sense a poem without meter.”

⁴⁴Vives, 6:104, 107.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 108: “res sacrae”; “Quam indigna est Divis et hominibus christianis illa Sanctorum historia, quae Legenda Aurea nominatur.”

Legend and similar sources is Jerome himself, whose much-fictionalized life story was reviewed critically by Erasmus in his 1516 *Vita Heronymi*, the biographical corollary to his efforts to discern the true corpus of Jerome's writings.⁴⁶ Even in his preface to Barnes's *Vitae*, Luther was careful to distinguish his praises of history in general from what he saw as the fragmented state of much ecclesiastical history, whose gaps were filled by "fictitious" saints.⁴⁷ In his *Obedience of a Christian Man* Tyndale, too, disparages such saintly "lyves or rather lyes."⁴⁸

The rejection of legends by Reformers, however, did not prevent them from creating their own assemblages of "sacred things" and apocryphal stories. In the 1546 *Acts of English Votaries*, a vehement attack upon monasticism and clerical celibacy, John Bale impugns the veracity of "legends, chronicles, and saints lives," or, as he also dubs them, "holy histories."⁴⁹ But in both the *Acts* and his *Illustrium Maioris Britanniae* (1548) Bale makes considerable use of these "holy histories" to rewrite aspects of the history of his native land. Most influentially, Bale gave new life to the figure of Joseph of Arimathea, who, as the legendary bearer of apostolic Christianity to England, allowed English Protestants to see their church as having a pre-Roman origin.⁵⁰ In both the *Acts* and *Illustrium Scriptorum*, Bale also relies upon a late fifteenth-century forgery, the supposed history of Berossus, whom, together with Moses, he characterizes in the *Acts* as the "most auncient writers we reade of."⁵¹ Bale's citation of Moses along with one who, although by no means discredited then, had already begun to be suspected, is instructive. For Reformers, too, the distant past was a shadowy realm, rife with the potential for fraud and error, and, as we shall see, Tyndale's *Answer* includes its own likely reference to Berossus.⁵²

⁴⁶Rice, 129–31.

⁴⁷Barnes, sig. Aⁱⁱⁱ.

⁴⁸Tyndale, 1968, 184.

⁴⁹Bale, 1546, 5, 19: "All these holy hystoryees shall ye fynde in Johan Capgrave." John Capgrave was a fifteenth-century chronicler of saints' lives.

⁵⁰Pineas, 1962a, 93–95, argues that the sources that Bale cites often do not support his points. For Joseph of Arimathea, see Bale, 1548a, 14, where he cites Capgrave (this time with approval) to buttress his argument that Joseph spread the Gospel to England at the earliest stages of the development of Christianity. For a seventeenth-century Protestant critique of Bale's methods, see Stillingfleet, 1685, 9: "The truth is there was an old legend which lay at Glassenbury . . . out of which Capgrave hath transcribed that part which concerns this matter, from whom Bale took it. But it is so grossly fabulous."

⁵¹Bale, 1546, 10, citing both authors as evidence for the historicity of the Flood.

⁵²On Berossus and early Protestants, see Parry, 4–7; see also Grafton, 76–93. Vives and Beatus Rhenanus were early doubters of Berossus.

Histories, wrote Luther in his *Preface to the History of Galeatius Capella*, describe nothing else besides “God’s work,” and therefore one should believe them as if they were part of the Bible — if only they are written truly. Instead, as Luther acknowledges, they were too often distorted to the point where one did not know what to believe.⁵³ Tyndale and Bale had, of course, no intention of diminishing the authority of scripture when they paired it with less trustworthy texts. Nor was historical faith supposed to turn scripture into a mere antiquity. Rather, its ostensible purpose was to defend scripture as an unimpeachable source of religious truth. Nevertheless, such faith also provided a rationale for yoking together scripture and non-scriptural histories in ways that lessened the hierarchical divide between them. More recognized the contradiction here even though he by no means objected to the idea that scripture could be read with a faith that was less than salvific. Rather, More was unwilling to let pass what he saw as the more fundamental consequence of Tyndale’s notion of historical faith: that scripture on its own was not sufficient to merit belief.

3. TYNDALE VERSUS MORE

For Tyndale the defining characteristic of historical faith was its dependence upon the reliability of human narrators. In his *Answer* Tyndale offers his most elaborate account of this faith in response to the supposition that the church must underlie faith in the word of God since we receive scripture “of them that go before” and we believe “it is God’s word, by reason that they tell us so.” Tyndale counters this supposition by arguing that there are two faiths, and that only one of them comes from the church:

The historical faith hangeth of the truth and honesty of the teller, or of the common fame and consent of many: as if one told me that the Turk had won a city, and I believed it moved with the honesty of the man. Now if there come another that seemeth more honest, or that hath better persuasions that it is not so, I think immediately that he lied, and lose my faith again. And a feeling faith is, as if a man were there present when it was won, and there wounded, and had there lost all that he had . . . that man should so believe, that all the world could not turn him from his faith. Then even likewise if my mother had blown on her finger, and told me that the fire would burn me I should have believed her with an historical faith, as we believe the stories of the world, because I thought she would not have mocked me. And so I should have done if she had told me that the fire had been cold. . . . But as soon as I put my finger in the fire I should have believed not by the reason of her, but with a

⁵³WA 50:385: “Gottes werk”; “man nict weis, was man glauben sol.”

feeling faith so that she could not have persuaded me afterward the contrary. So now with an historical faith I may believe that the scripture is God's, by teaching of them and so I should have done though they had told me that Robin Hood had ben the scripture of God: which faith is but an opinion and therefore abideth ever fruitless.⁵⁴

Far from being the “mother of truth” — or, as More dubs it in his response, the “modder of every mannys christendome” — the church is here maternal in the sense of being a human, and therefore fallible, “teller” of scripture. Like Melanchthon, Tyndale too identifies historical faith with “opinion,” in particular that received from others. However, Tyndale’s point is not so much to deny the existence of such faith as to underscore its distance from the non-brokered variety. Nor in his account is historical faith entirely “fruitless.” (After all, a child could scarcely be said to heed in vain its mother’s warnings about fire.) The 1521 *Loci Communes* represents the notion that one can distinguish between faiths as an obsolete legacy of the scholastic and “sophistic” distinction between *fides formata* and *fides informis*.⁵⁵ It thus offers no counterpart to Tyndale’s feeling faith. There is only faith pure and simple. Tyndale, however, borrows from Melanchthon to reach a different conclusion: properly contrasted, two kinds of faith make sense, and may even be necessary in a Reformed theology.

As Tyndale defines these two kinds of faith, however, one is unaffected by contingency and persuasion whereas the other is grounded in them. Hence, in addition to maternal solicitude, Tyndale uses the example of the capture of a city by the Turks to illustrate the difference between historical and feeling faith. One of what More dubs in the *Confutation* the “chauncys . . . of batayle and warre,” such a military victory is characteristic of the “stories of the world.” We must in general receive such stories secondhand, even, in some instances, centuries later, and we therefore credit them until we find someone else with “better persuasions.” By contrast, a feeling faith is as if one were there at the battle and should “so believe that all the world could not turn him from his faith.” This is the unshakable faith with which the “scripture of God” should be read, even though, as Tyndale of course recognized, the Bible itself depicts numerous battles and events of a similar nature for the benefit of those who were not there.

Feeling faith, however, is unshakable, because it entails not only believing that the words of the Bible are factually true but also that they are in a salvific sense true for oneself. As Melanchthon asserts in the 1521

⁵⁴Tyndale, 1850, 50–51.

⁵⁵CR 21:160.

Loci Communes, the “history of Christ” is not per se salvific.⁵⁶ Rather, “faith is nothing other than the confidence of divine mercy promised in Christ.”⁵⁷ Feeling faith is not, then, what Tyndale castigates in the 1527 *Parable of the Wicked Mammon* as a “certain imagination or opinion of faith: as when a man telleth a story of a thing done in a strange land, that pertaineth not to them at all.” For even the devil, as Tyndale notes in *The Obedience of a Christian Man*, “believeth that Christ died but not that he died for his sins.”⁵⁸ Likewise, in his 1531 *Exposition of the First Epistle of St. John* Tyndale argues that there is a “great difference between believing that there is a God, and that Christ is God and man, and to believe in God and Christ, God and man, and in the promises of mercy that are in him.”⁵⁹ The former is “common to good and bad, and unto the devils also, and is called an historical faith and belief,” while the latter is “proper unto the sons of God, and is their life.” Such a hodgepodge of good and bad might also subscribe to the doctrine of the perpetual virginity of Mary, which, however, Tyndale does not reject. Instead, he argues in the *Answer* that this doctrine is “never so true,” but yet “none article of our faith to be saved by.” Therefore it is to be credited with “a story faith, because we see no cause reasonable to think the contrary.”⁶⁰

The doctrine of Mary’s perpetual virginity is not scriptural. Accordingly, the criterion of belief that Tyndale applies to it — that there is no reason to think the contrary — is more appropriate to non-scriptural history than to scripture conceived of in Protestant terms as the unique path to salvation. Still, and particularly as a literalist, Tyndale had to confront the degree to which the Bible is composed of stories that do not all,

⁵⁶Ibid., 177. As Melanchthon argues, “What justifies is not, as the impious think, to believe in the history of Christ, but to believe in the reason he took on flesh, the reason he was crucified” (“Neque vero historiae de Christo credere, id est, quod putant impii, sed credere cur carnem induerit, cur crucifixus est . . . ut justificaret”). In subsequent editions of *Loci Communes* (1534 and 1559), Melanchthon continued to develop his ideas on this subject. See, for instance, CR 21:422, where he argues somewhat defensively that “Nor do we exclude knowledge of the history of Christ, as some say slanderously” (“Nec vero excludimus notitiam historiae de Christo, ut quidam calumniantur”). Such knowledge is a part, though not the main one, of faith. In 1559 he would go so far as to argue that “knowledge of history” of Christ could increase the terrors of the reader of scripture unless this historical knowledge was accompanied by faith in the promises of scripture: see CR 21:746.

⁵⁷Ibid., 163: “est itaque fides, non aliud nisi fiducia misericordiae divinae, promissae in Christo.”

⁵⁸Tyndale, 1968, 52–53, 224.

⁵⁹Tyndale, 1849, 146.

⁶⁰Tyndale, 1850, 96.

on the surface at least, seem to merit the same kind of belief. In particular, he does this in *The Obedience of a Christian Man*: “All the scripture is either the promises and testament of God in Christ, and stories pertaining thereunto, to strength thy faith; either the law, and stories pertaining thereto, to fear thee from evil doing. There is no story nor gest, seem it never so simple or vile unto the world, but that thou shalt find therein spirit and life and edifying in the literal sense.”⁶¹ Tyndale does not link this argument for interpreting scripture literally to historical faith, since his purpose here is to emphasize the spiritual character of such literalism in contrast to the falseness of allegorical readings of scripture.⁶² To believe, however, in a Bible story literally does presuppose seeing it as factual, whereas this is not necessarily the case for the allegorical methods of interpretation that Tyndale rejects.⁶³ While unacknowledged, a certain amount of story faith must, then, underlie Tyndale’s scriptural literalism. As his reference to stories “vile unto the world” would indicate, moreover, Tyndale also extended his literalism to biblical narratives less central than that of the life and death of Christ, even though he recognized how problematic some of them, such as the “homely gest” of Noah’s drunkenness or the adultery of David and Bathsheba, could be. Tyndale’s refusal to replace the events described in these stories with allegory is a particular measure of his commitment to believing in the Bible as history.⁶⁴

For Tyndale the Bible also existed in history, though for him this recognition did not translate into the doubts about the written text of scripture that exercised More. Nevertheless, Tyndale was troubled by the degree to which the history of scripture was intertwined with that of an institution that he regarded as utterly corrupt. The Church, as Tyndale notes, had used Latin to hide scripture from the common people, and it had tried to make its lies pass as scriptural truth.⁶⁵ Yet, as we have seen, Tyndale also admits that everyone has had to take scripture on faith from this Church, as it were, in much the same way that those who have no firsthand

⁶¹Tyndale, 1968, 310.

⁶²For his debunking of allegorical readings, see *ibid.*, 303–04.

⁶³In the adage “Sileni Alcibiades,” Erasmus, 2001, 248, demonstrates an alternative to Tyndale’s literalism when he suggests that many stories from the Old Testament would appear to be nothing other than “fable[s] that issued from Homer’s workshop” if taken at face value.

⁶⁴Tyndale, 1968, 310–11. See also CR 21:172, where Melanchthon argues that a literal reading of the story of Noah during the Flood yields a spiritual message: “I am not at all talking about figures of speech. Rather, I mean the history at its simplest” (“Nihil de figuris loquor, non quaero allegorias, sed ad simplicissimam historiam me refero”).

⁶⁵Tyndale, 1850, 136–37.

knowledge of a Turkish victory nevertheless credit the news of it when they hear it. Later in the *Answer*, making his Turkish reference more specific, Tyndale compares scripture to a letter announcing the Turkish capture of Rhodes in 1522, and he argues that in the case of scripture the “authority of him that sent it” belongs to God, whereas the church is only “the man that brought it.”⁶⁶ But this is still to assign some of the credibility of scripture to human agents, and highly unreliable ones at that. It is as if the man who brought the letter announcing the loss of Rhodes had included with it various lying missives.

But the solution to this problem of sorting out truth from falsehood is not to fall back on scripture alone. Rather, it requires considerable exercise of historical acumen as well. Thus Tyndale urges his readers to seek outside verification of his opinion of the church by examining “the chronicles, what blood it hath cost England, to attempt to bring [the clergy] under law!”⁶⁷ He also advises comparing old expositions of scripture to current ones, and assessing the antiquity of scripture relative to that of church doctrine: “I find mention made of scripture in stories, that it was, when I can find no mention or likelihood that their doctrine was.” Tyndale’s historical findings include the further recognition that “in all ages men have resisted their doctrine with the scripture, and have suffered death by the hundred thousands in resisting their doctrine.”⁶⁸

To make stories a means of buttressing the authority of scripture vis-à-vis church doctrine is to make some of the faith due to scripture historical. But Tyndale’s use of stories on behalf of God’s word was not limited to scripture, which he did not believe to be the only communication of this word. In the *Answer* Tyndale also shows himself willing to delve into the deepest recesses of antiquity in order to show that stories provided evidence of the possibility of the written transmission of God’s word, even prior to Moses. Thus, arguing for the necessity of such a pre-Mosaic adumbration of scripture, Tyndale asserts that it allowed God to continue his “congregation from Adam to Noe, and from Noe to Abraham, and so to Moses.” For “that there was writing in the world long ere Abraham, yea and ere Noe, do stories testify.”⁶⁹ Tyndale may here be referring to Josephus’s tale of the efforts of the descendants of Seth to preserve their knowledge by writing it on pillars.⁷⁰ But his source might also have been the forged Berosus, whose

⁶⁶Ibid., 136.

⁶⁷Ibid., 138.

⁶⁸Ibid., 137.

⁶⁹Ibid., 26–27.

⁷⁰Josephus, 1:33.

account of what preceded and followed the “destruction of the world” describes the incision on stone of prophecies of the coming Flood, as well as a history of it inscribed afterward in the same manner by Noah himself.⁷¹ Either way, Tyndale makes the transmission of God’s word in part dependent on stories from a period when, as Vives notes, all things were “confused and obscure.”⁷²

But the antiquities and stories that most concerned Tyndale pertained more directly to the church. What he saw as the complementary relationship between these stories and scripture becomes most evident in the *Answer* when he attempts to fit them together into one continuous, antipapal account of church history. Tyndale had already assayed this kind of historiography in *The Practice of Prelates*, but in the *Answer* he emphasizes the role of Jewish converts to Christianity, who believed in Christ with a “story faith, a popish faith, a faithless faith and a feigned faith of their own making.”⁷³ Their faith was merely a story one for Tyndale because, although compelled to belief by the Hebrew scripture, “which everywhere bare witness unto Christ,” as well as by the “power of miracles,” these early converts still thought they would be justified by their own deeds, not Christ. In other words, they believed in the fact of Christ’s death, but not that he died for them.

The context, however, for this denigration of story faith is an attempt to trace historically the origin of ceremonies, and hence of popishness, in the church. Tyndale begins his account of “[h]ow ceremonies sprang among us” by noting that “before the coming of Christ . . . the Israelites and Jews were scattered throughout all the world, to punish their image service, both east, west, south, and north, as ye read in the chronicles how England was once full.” After the death of Jesus, when Paul “rose up and persecuted” his followers, they “fled into all coasts, and preached unto the Jews that were scattered,” bringing a great number of these into the “faith,” albeit not the right kind. These Jewish converts, being “born and bred up . . . in ceremonies,” were unable to depart from them.⁷⁴

The charge of Jewish ceremonialism is scriptural, as is the notion that, in response to the persecutions with which Paul was associated, early Christians dispersed in various directions and preached to the Jews they found there.⁷⁵ Notable here is Tyndale’s continuation of scripture through stories: “And therefore because, as I said, the Jews, yea, and the heathen too

⁷¹Berosus, 2, 4: “orbis perditio.”

⁷²Vives, 6:103: “perturbata et obscura.”

⁷³Tyndale, 1850, 70.

⁷⁴*Ibid.*, 68–69.

⁷⁵Acts 11:19.

were so accustomed unto ceremonies . . . they went clean contrary unto the mind of Paul [here having undergone his own conversion] and set up ceremonies in the New Testament: partly borrowing them of Moses, and partly imagining like as ye now see, and called them sacraments, that is to say signs (as it is plain in the stories); the sacrament of holy water, of holy fire, holy bread, holy salt, and so forth.”⁷⁶ This passage effects a seamless transition from the ceremonialism described in the New Testament — here broadened to indicate the participation of gentiles as well as Jews — to stories that show how various sacraments and signs originated. In addition to the ones listed above, Tyndale goes on to include confirmation too, since there “is no doubt but that it came this wise up.” Here again Tyndale does not specify his sources, and he even admits to reconstructing the original rite of confirmation from “what we read in stories,” using “probable conjectures and evident tokens.”⁷⁷ This willingness to use probability and conjecture may also explain how Tyndale is able to extrapolate from the chronicle evidence of the eventual presence of Jews in England to Jews’ presence there during the earliest phase of Christianity.⁷⁸ But however conjectural a notion, it was not entirely farfetched for its time. The Jewish Diaspora was real enough, and if — as the equally conjectural arguments of subsequent English Protestant historiographers purported to show — Joseph of Arimathea or Paul himself had brought Christianity to England, other Jews and Jewish converts could have also made the journey at the same time.⁷⁹

Tyndale’s account of the spread of ceremonies in the church reveals the depth of his own faith in history. In a sense, for Tyndale ceremonies had to be historical because they could not be scriptural. This was particularly an issue in the case of confirmation, since Tyndale was demoting it from its traditional status as one of the seven sacraments. In the *Confutation* More argues that confirmation was in fact scriptural, though he had the unwritten faith of the church to fall back upon even if he had not been able to make his case with scripture.⁸⁰ But for Tyndale this unwritten tradition could not serve as an explanation of the existence of ceremonies because it did not

⁷⁶Tyndale, 1850, 70.

⁷⁷Ibid., 71.

⁷⁸Acts, of course, makes no mention of any such presence.

⁷⁹Making the case for Paul in the seventeenth century, the Anglican divine Edward Stillingfleet also argued from probability: see Stillingfleet, 1685, 41, 48. Foxe, 1570, 145, argues that Joseph of Arimathea was sent to Britain “after the dispersion of the Jews,” but he is also tentative, suggesting that the British reception of the Gospel could have been through Joseph “as some Chronicles recorde, or by some of the Apostles, or of their Scholars.”

⁸⁰More, 8:1.296.

account for decline and deviation from the rule of scripture. Hence, he was left with history. In some cases, what could have taken place had to have taken place, and so some of Tyndale's own story faith — such as with the doctrine of Mary's perpetual virginity — was arguably a matter of seeing “no cause reasonable to think the contrary.”

Even as it criticizes early Jewish converts for their story faith in scripture, this account of the development of ceremonies enlists scripture in the service of history rather than vice versa. Indeed, this historical narrative illustrates what Tyndale means when he asserts that both scripture and “antiquities” support the “outward teachings” of Protestantism, and undermine those of the Catholic Church. For both provide essentially the same kind of evidence, showing that the forms and rites of this Church were not constants, but evolved over time. Nor did Tyndale view postscriptural history per se as necessarily vitiating scripture. Thus, he argues that as long as their significance was clear, the ceremonies instituted by Jewish converts “hurted not.” Only when the “devil was broken loose” and the “spirituality” began to “climb on high” did these ceremonies become less innocuous. Not only scripture, however, but history, too, is able to reveal the steepness of this decline. Thus, after claiming to reconstruct from what “we read in stories” the original ceremony of confirmation — in which a parish priest or deacon would instruct children in the meaning of their baptism — Tyndale laments, “Which manner I would to God, for his tender mercy, were in use this day.”⁸¹

Though Tyndale was scarcely the first to combine elements from scripture and non-scriptural history, his willingness to treat them as basically equivalent historical sources does offer a contrast to pronouncements made by Erasmus in his later years. For by the time of the More-Tyndale debate — and perhaps, in part, as a response to accusations that his own scriptural philology had made the Bible seem too “human” a text — Erasmus was expressing reservations about the possibility that anything but a radical divide separated sacred history from the non-scriptural kind.⁸² In particular, the 1527 edition of his New Testament *Annotationes* compares Acts to “human histories” of the early

⁸¹Tyndale, 1850, 71–72.

⁸²On the criticism that Erasmus had over-humanized the Bible, see Rummel, 136–42. On Erasmus's growing unwillingness to view scripture as being on the same level as other histories, see Bietenholz, 13–16; Erasmus, 1969–, 1:2.64 (*Ciceronianus* [1528]), where Erasmus's spokesman Bulephorus argues that “historia, si fidem detrahas, ne nomen quidem historiae meretur.” For Bulephorus, not even Livy, much less Herodotus, merits such faith in comparison with scripture. Another important discussion of the relationship between scripture and history is to be found in Erasmus, 2005, 267–373 (*Commentary on Psalm 33* [1531]).

church, and concludes that such histories were mere “fables,” lacking the “faith” of scriptural “history”: “Indeed, if you read those things which others said to have been near the times of the apostles wrote — whether as seen or heard by them or received from witnesses — you will seem to yourself, so to speak, to read fables if you compare them with the gravity and faith of this history.”⁸³ Even as he praised Acts as the most historically faithful history of the early church, Erasmus was aware of the ability of history, no matter how faithful to the facts, to diminish scripture. He goes on to note that the Holy Spirit “for the greater certainty of our faith” wanted Acts to survive, but its “history of events” not to be carried further in time lest “we slip, because of the variety of narratives, from Christ to human things.”⁸⁴ In other words, there is a divide between history, which, because of its human character and variety of viewpoints, will always leave some room for doubt, and scripture. If the history of Acts had not stopped where it did — something that Erasmus wished for in the 1516 *Annotationes* — what Erasmus in 1527 terms the “inviolable authority” of scripture would have been compromised. To some degree, though, such a continuation is what happens in Tyndale’s own narrative of the development of ceremonies as the certainty of scripture gives way to “probable conjectures and evident tokens.” Likewise, subsequent Protestant historiography of what Foxe calls the “first origine and planting of the faith this our realme” was also a continuation of Acts, involving scriptural figures in the murky uncertainties of history.⁸⁵

Responding in the *Confutation* to Tyndale’s usage of *historical faith*, More, like Erasmus, shows an awareness of the gap between human and divine truth. More uses Tyndale’s own example of the capture of a city by the Turks to stand for an event meriting “hystorycall fayth a credence gyven to a story tolde . . . by men,” and therefore depending upon the “trouth and honesty of the teller, or of the comen fame and consent of many.” The notion, however, that one could begin a journey of faith with such credence alone is itself “suche a tale as tyll he prove it better, shall never serve hym here”: “For all be it that in worldely thynges thys tale be trew yet in maters of faythe, whyche faythe is the fyrste gate whereby we entre our journeye the

⁸³Erasmus, 1990, 272: “Etenim si legas ea quae caeteri qui feruntur fuisse vicini temporibus apostolorum literis prodiderunt, vel ut ab ipsis audita conspectaque, vel ab iis qui viderant accepta, videberis tibi fabulas, ut ita dixerim legere, si conferas cum gravitate fideque huius historiae.”

⁸⁴Ibid.: “ad fidei nostrae certitudinem”; “rerum gestarum historia”; “varietate narrationum a Christo paulatim delaberemur ad humana.”

⁸⁵See *ibid.*, 270–71; Foxe, 1570, 145. In the 1516 *Annotationes* Erasmus refers to the “historia” of Acts as nothing else but “part of the Gospel,” and he expresses his frustration that Luke had not expanded it to include the “deeds of other apostles.”

ryghte way toward god we canne never come at it wythout the helpe of god, nor how probable a tale so ever be tolde us, never shall we byleve it wythout his holy hande inwardly set on us.”⁸⁶ Since in “maters of faythe,” as opposed to “worldely thynges,” even the most probable tale is not believed without the hand of God “inwardly set on us,” Christian belief, More goes on to argue, does not depend only on the “honesty of menne,” or the “outwarde occasyons” for this inward motion. Moreover, joining the external and the internal as it does, such belief is not mutable to the degree that Tyndale claims. For “shall never any mannys tale, nor the tale of a thousand agaynste one, overmayster that inward mocyon of god, as long as the will of the man will contynue styll . . . in cleavyng to the fayth.”⁸⁷

This point does not solely concern the study of scripture, but it has clear implications for this study. Thus More argues that “when we byleve the chyrche eyther in knwoynge whyche is the scrypture or in the trewe sense and right understandynge of the scrypture, god both preventeth us in the gevyng us the occasion and wurketh wyth us.”⁸⁸ This would seem to make the divide between history and scripture an absolute one. God presumably does not “wurketh wyth us” when we read Thucydides. For those who do not “byleve the chyrche,” however, this divide is less certain, since without such belief the inward motions of God are hard, if not impossible, to prove. At least for More they were. He objects, then, that in the form of feeling faith Tyndale is in fact citing invisible, and therefore easily manipulated, evidence. According to More, Tyndale says “what he lyste” and claims that he “feelethe it trewe, and fyndeth it written within his own harte by hym that can not wryte false.” Such arbitrariness is, however, the only recourse available to Tyndale when he cannot find any “reasonable outward cause” to explain the doctrines that he initially claimed to have derived from scripture with a story faith.⁸⁹ By depriving him of this recourse, More then leaves Tyndale with story faith alone as the basis for his beliefs.

However, in contrast to Erasmus’s comparison between the distinctive historical faith of Acts and the doubtfulness of other fable-like narratives, More argues that historical faith per se is no criterion of truth. As More notes, “every historical faith, that is to say every hystorycall bylyefe and credence” is not “so faynt & so feble, that it is so soone gone as Tydale sayth it is.”⁹⁰ As evidence for this point, More adduces the “obstinacy” of the

⁸⁶More, 8:2.746.

⁸⁷Ibid., 747–48.

⁸⁸Ibid., 743.

⁸⁹Ibid., 812.

⁹⁰Ibid., 781.

credence in the “false story of Machomet” by Turks, who choose to die “rather than byleve the contrary.” But if “false” history can inspire the same fervent devotion as that which is divinely inspired, then not only could historical faith be readily misapplied, but it could also be confused with feeling faith. Nor would the identity of the divinely inspired texts able to elicit feeling faith be as self-evident as Tyndale makes it. Given the problem of distinguishing the faith of a Turk in the Koran from that of a Christian in the Bible, how do we know which texts constitute the word of God? More makes this point in a way that touches his opponent more closely when he notes the dire possibility that, empowered by what he takes to be feeling faith, one of Tyndale’s followers might well “call scripture what boke hym lyst, & refuse for scripture what boke it please hym.”⁹¹ No less fervent than a believer in the “false story of Machomet,” this hypothetical follower of Tyndale would demonstrate with particular aptness that a misplaced faith is not necessarily faint or feeble.

For More the only solution to this problem is for the Catholic Church to dictate “whyche is the scripture.” The necessity of such dictation is borne out by the role played by this church in the formation of the scriptural canon itself. Historically, as More notes, “were it not for the spyryte of god keypyng the trouthe therof in his chyrche who could be sure whiche were the very gospels?” There were, after all, many who “wrote the gospel,” but the Church, by means of the “secret instinct of god,” has rejected most of these and kept only four for “undoubted trewe.”⁹² In other words, if it were not for the Church, scripture would itself be another antiquity, and we would have no way of knowing whether we were reading in it the word of God or a text worthy of the same credence as Herodotus. The problem with histories is that their competing, and at times conflicting, claims undercut one another unless some overriding authority can adjudicate between them. Thus, instead of Tyndale’s “olde authentyke stories,” which he easily dismisses, More emphasizes a tradition of interpretation beginning with the scriptural expositions of “olde auncient doctours,” who did so much to define the teachings of the Church. These doctors constitute for More the antiquity that corroborates scripture, and thus he challenges Tyndale to find “some one of so many sayntes as synnes the apostles tyme have wryten upon the scripture byfore Luthers days, that expowned . . . that it were . . . lawfull for a frère to wedde a nunne.”⁹³

In order to make this argument, however, More has to diminish the importance of the corruption of patristic writings that Tyndale had cited as

⁹¹Ibid., 729.

⁹²Ibid., 6:1.181.

⁹³Ibid., 8:2.809.

an example of the kind of problem to which humanist historicism and philology constituted a legitimate solution. More notes Tyndale's point that "fayned false books" were put forth in the name of Jerome, Augustine, and other doctors of the early church, but he argues that in this instance spuriousness resulted in no significant damage to belief: "But what great harme and losse were there in the mater, though it somtyme happed the boke of one good holy man to be named the boke of an other as the boke of saynt Austayn to be taken for a boke of sayn Ambrose? There were in such a mater no very great hurte yf it so happed in deede."⁹⁴ More here undercuts the rationale for some of the more monumental editorial labors of Erasmus. But for More patristic writings seem to have offered the closest textual approximation to the unwritten faith of the Church, and thus in his treatment of them he emphasizes continuity of belief rather than its breakdown through aberrant texts. In matters of importance, at least, "our doctours of these eyght hundred yeres passed" agree with the "olde holy doctours of the tother vii. Hundred yere a fore." This is the "contynuall fayth" of the Church, against which Tyndale and "hys fonde felowes" strive in vain: for the combined force of consensus over the centuries will prevail, driving Tyndale "as a drudge of the devil out of Chrystes chyrche."⁹⁵

If such a denial of significant textual corruption of patristic writings seems problematic in the light of some of the goals and methods of humanism itself, this is even more the case when More turns to defending the authority that he ascribes to the Catholic Church. More's insistence that it is the ultimate arbiter of doctrine and scripture provokes the obvious question of why we should believe in this church and its "holy doctors," even supposing that the texts of their writings had survived intact. The chief answer that More provides, that of the warrant of innumerable miracles, raises in turn another historiographical issue, since the accounts of such miracles had been the object of humanist and Protestant critique alike. In the *Answer* Tyndale argues that the period of authentic miracles was a limited one: "When [More] repeateth his miracles, to prove that the old holy doctors were good men in the right belief: I answer again, that the doctors which planted God's word watered it with miracles, while they were alive; and when they were dead, God shewed miracles at their graves, to confirm the same, as of Elias. And that continued till scripture was fully received and authentic."⁹⁶ The terminal point for legitimate miracles is

⁹⁴Ibid., 712.

⁹⁵Ibid., 713, 811.

⁹⁶Tyndale, 1850, 130.

not as precise as one might expect: when was scripture “fully received”? Tyndale’s belief in miracles was certainly not restricted to scriptural ones, as More himself recognized, arguing in the *Confutation* that for Tyndale “all trew miracles were ended eyther in the apostles days or some after.” Indeed, the *Answer* seems to accept the validity of the miracles at St. Stephen’s tomb, which was not discovered until the fifth century.⁹⁷ Nevertheless, at some point a fully received scripture meant that miracles were no longer needed to water God’s word, or, for that matter, to tear down structures of belief purporting to take its place. “[W]here we can confound your false doctrine with authentic and manifest scripture, there need we to do no miracle.”⁹⁸ As the dispeller of false doctrine, authentic scripture needs no help from the kind of inauthentic historiography that was so often used to buttress such doctrine.

By contrast, Tyndale argues that the Catholic Church depends on a seemingly endless procession of miracle-working saints to justify its tithes and offerings. Such is the “poetry which ye have feigned,” he asserts, playing upon the familiar association between dubious history and poetry and insinuating that More’s church is scarcely worthy of historical faith, much less the salvific kind.⁹⁹ By contrast, More argues in the *Confutation* that God causes “hys chyrche to do myracles styll in every age” in order that Christians should be “sure that theyr sayde mother the chyrche is Crystes apostle and techeth them trewe doctrine, & neither deceyveth them with false scripture . . . nor wyth false expositions.” Here More replaces Tyndale’s maternal, and therefore fallible, church with a “mother the chyrche” as continual miracle worker. Moreover, as part of its solicitude for those who have been baptized into it, this church is also “taught by the spyryte of God” to discern and forbid “false miracles” such as the “mervayles that appere in crystal stonys and other superstycyouse coniurations.”¹⁰⁰ Instead of these, the church offers “faythfull myracles for the profe of the trew faythfull doctryne” and of its own status as the “very trew chyrche” — a proof, however, that is circular since the same miracles uphold and are upheld by the truth of the church. Nevertheless, More’s point is clear: far from obviating the need for miracles, scripture has contributed to this need since the possibility of a false scripture (or false expositions of the true one) deceiving the faithful is one consequence of believing in the written word.

⁹⁷More, 8:2.246; Tyndale, 1850, 83.

⁹⁸Tyndale, 1850, 128.

⁹⁹*Ibid.*, 131.

¹⁰⁰More, 8:1.245, 247.

For More, then, the advent of what Tyndale had called a “fully received and authentic scripture” only underscores the adjudicating authority of the church. Nevertheless, while asserting the ability of the church to distinguish between faithful and superstitious miracles, More was aware that even the faithful kind could lose some of their credibility in the telling. More signals this awareness in the *Confutation* when he notes that Christ caused his apostles to accompany their preaching with wonders, because if these apostles had merely “tolde the myracles that Cryste dyd,” they would have appeared to have “lyed, and fayned such fables them selfe.”¹⁰¹ Here More himself notes the problem that miracles pose for historical faith. Miracles cannot cease but need to be ongoing in the church precisely because they are so incredible. In a sense, More agrees with Tyndale and other critics of the element of poetry and fable in saintly legends. But, significantly in this instance, More does not refer to the miracles reported in texts such as *The Golden Legend*, but rather the miracles of Christ as reported in the New Testament. By noting the likeness of scriptural miracles to fables, More has effected a neat reversal, turning the problem of hagiography back onto the Reformers, who now lack their usual vantage point from which to deride the false teachings of the church.

This reversal marks the utmost verge of More’s critique of Tyndale’s notion of a historical faith in scripture. The purpose of this critique is to show that any faith in scripture is impossible without some kind of nonhistorical certainty, one that is neither text-dependent nor merely a matter of internal and therefore unverifiable feeling. The alternative to such certainty is a confusion that should be anathema to a scripture-based Reformer such as Tyndale. Far from being the measure of truth, scripture would become impossible to distinguish from false history.

But upon closer examination, Tyndale’s own attitude toward scriptural miracles complicates the status of scripture as the absolute measure of truth. For when trying to understand Tyndale on this subject, one has to ask, Which truth? Tyndale believed that there were legitimate miracles, but he did not believe that any of these, including those described in scripture, possessed the same kind of truth as he normally ascribed to the word of God. The *Answer* does argue that true miracles “provoke men to come and hearken unto” the word of God, while false ones have the opposite effect.¹⁰² Yet when not approaching miracles with outright skepticism, the *Answer* treats them as being suitable for the exercise of historical faith alone. Miracles are able to “make a man astonied and to wonder, and to draw him

¹⁰¹Ibid., 245.

¹⁰²Tyndale, 1850, 91.

to hear the word earnestly,” but they cannot “write it in his heart.” That is, the response to these miracles should fall somewhere between incredulity and feeling faith, the truth that is inscribed within. Otherwise, there is a risk of mistaking story faith for its salvific counterpart, as Tyndale accused the early Jewish converts of doing, as well as those Israelites who, after leaving Egypt, perished in the wilderness because they “believed, moved by the miracles of Moses.” This kind of belief was for Tyndale a “faithless faith, made by the persuasion of man.”¹⁰³

Still, scriptural miracles offer the most telling evidence of Tyndale’s own willingness to read parts of the Bible with a historical faith. In particular, what made these miracles narrowly historical for Tyndale was his conviction that the age of marvels was over. Ancient miracles were *sui generis*, events not to be repeated in a later age and primarily significant by virtue of having occurred at all. To the contemporary reader, they should be in a sense a “story of a thing done in a strange land,” a story that did not in any obvious way pertain to the task of leading the English people out of the spiritual wilderness in which Tyndale saw them wandering. Approached in this manner, such miracles are not too different from other remarkable historical events, whose acceptance was equally dependent upon the “persuasion of man” and likewise not critical to spiritual well-being. If this approach bears out More’s critique of the problem with historical faith, it also deals a blow to his notion of an uninterrupted and ever-being-confirmed-again faith within the church. But in a broader sense, such was the trade-off that early Reformers made when they elevated history alongside scripture. The transhistorical claims of their opponents’ church were undermined, but so too was the unique status of the text that was supposed to take the place of this church in the hearts of believers.

4. HISTORICAL FAITH AND THE ENGLISH CHURCH

Belief in both scripture and history would come to ground a different church from the one that was the subject of the More-Tyndale controversy. This was the church whose triumph over the papacy in England would lead to More’s death as well as to the acceptance and eventual veneration of Tyndale’s writings and translations. This double grounding in scripture and history would also keep raising questions about the relationship between the two. In the preface to the 1548 edition of *The Image of Both Churches*, his influential commentary on the Book of Revelation gleaned from both

¹⁰³Ibid., 54, 132.

“scripture and most auctourised histories,” Bale argues that the prophecies of this book are a “full clerenes to all the cronicles & most notable hystories which hath bene written sense Christes ascension.” The reader diligent enough to compare such histories and scripture would discover “wonderful causes,” allowing histories to be read as the fulfillment of scripture. Still, Bale recognizes that clarification could work both ways. Realizing that such reciprocity would amount to a too-equal partnership, he went on to issue a warning to his readers: “Yet is [scripture] a light to the cronicles, & not the cronicles to the texte.”¹⁰⁴

For one of his most important readers, however, as well as for Bale himself, the partnership between scripture and history does at points seem more mutually enlightening than is consistent with the clear primacy of the former. In his dedication of the 1570 edition of *Acts and Monuments* to Elizabeth, Foxe describes his history as a complement to the recently published Bishops’ Bible (1568) and the queen’s own furnishing of “all quarters and countreyes of this your realme with the voyce of Christes Gospell”: “I thought also not unprofitable to adioyne unto this your godly proceedings . . . knowledge also of ecclesiasticall history, which in my mind ought not to be separate from [the Gospel]; that like as by the one the people may learne the rules and precepts of doctrine: so by the other they may have examples of Gods mighty working in his church, to the confirmation of their faith and the edification of Christian life. For as we see what light and profit commeth to the church by histories in old tymes set forth of the Judges, Kings, Macabeis, and the Actes of the Apostles after Christes tyme: so likewise may it redound to no small use in the church to know the Actes of Christes martyrs since the time of the Apostles.”¹⁰⁵ History and scripture here exist on a continuum, rather than on opposite sides of a radical divide. Indeed, Foxe explicitly casts his history of “Christes martyrs since the time of the Apostles” as a sequel to the history of the early church in Acts.¹⁰⁶ Nor is Acts the only scriptural history that Foxe cites here. Foxe does omit the Gospels from his catalog of such histories, and in his *Sermon of Christ Crucified* (also published in 1570) he identifies Catholics as

¹⁰⁴Bale, 1548b, Aiv^v; and Dickens and Tonklin, 7–9, where they attribute the interest of Protestant Reformers in history to their desire to demonstrate the validity of “preexistent” (and generally apocalyptic) “historical patterns.” Tyndale, however, was much less concerned with apocalyptic patterns than were Bale and Foxe. In the *Obedience* he describes the “apocalypse or revelations of John” as “allegories whose literal sense is hard to find in many places”: see Tyndale, 1968, 305. See also Betteridge, 12–16, on the tensions in this apocalyptic understanding of history.

¹⁰⁵Foxe, 1570, sig. Bii^v.

¹⁰⁶On Foxe’s modeling of his history on Acts, see Daniell, 27–28.

believers in the “whole history of Christs passion” who do not go beyond this “outward history.”¹⁰⁷ Nevertheless, in the 1570 dedication of *Acts and Monuments* to Elizabeth, Foxe scarcely castigates the belief in scripture as history. Rather, he extols the “light and profit” that comes from reading scriptural histories even as he also asserts the ability of non-scriptural history to confirm “faith” with examples of “Gods mighty working in his church.”

But however much his historiography had in common with scripture, it also had elements in common with saints’ lives, as Foxe himself recognized and as some of his Catholic critics delighted in pointing out.¹⁰⁸ In his 1565 translation of Bede’s history of the English church, which was meant to be a response to Protestant historiography of England, Thomas Stapleton (1535–98), the Catholic polemicist and biographer of More, defends the miracles in Bede’s history by noting that if the “cavilles of Protestants” against these miracles could not be otherwise repulsed, “then let them shewe a reason why the Acts and Monuments of M. Fox deserve not the like.” Among others, Stapleton alludes to the “miracles told of Tindall.”¹⁰⁹ Yet Stapleton does not deny a resemblance between scripture and such history. Rather, like More before him, he cannily uses this resemblance to undercut the notion that scripture offers a secure vantage point from which to criticize the supposed falsities of the Catholic Church. Thus, on the subject of miracles Stapleton quotes the Greek historian Theodoret to assert that “whosoever will sticke to credit such thinges as we shal report, no doubt but he will also sticke and stagger to believe the miraculous workes of Moyses, of Josue, of Elias and of Elizeus. Yea the miraculous works of the Apostles, he will quote for very fables.”¹¹⁰

This argument illustrates the danger of a close alliance between scripture and history. Their truths can become so intertwined that a loss of faith in one turns both into fables. Such intertwinement became even more pronounced in the next century, when English Protestantism encountered a different kind of skepticism than that of Stapleton and More. “All that I desire from this discourse is that you would give an assent of the same nature to the History of the Gospel that you would to Caesar,

¹⁰⁷Foxe, 1978, sig. Aⁱⁱⁱ.

¹⁰⁸See “Ad doctum lectorem” in Foxe, 1563, Bⁱⁱⁱ–B^{iv}, where he defends the faith of his history and responds to the charge that it is his “Legenda Aurea.”

¹⁰⁹See Stapleton’s preface in Bede, 9. Stapleton alludes to the story, which he could have found in the 1563 *Acts and Monuments*, of the presence of Tyndale preventing a magician from performing his enchantments. As Foxe, 1563, 520, comments, “So that a man even in the martyrs of those our dayes cannot lack the miracles of true faith, if miracles are to be desired.”

¹¹⁰See Stapleton’s preface in Bede, 7.

or Livy, or Tacitus, or any other ancient historian,” writes the antiquary and Anglican divine, Edward Stillingfleet (1635–99), in his *Letter to a Deist* (1677), which mentions the revolutionary *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (1669) of Baruch Spinoza (1632–77) in its preface and offers abundant demonstration of what Joseph Levine calls a willingness to devote “new attention to the Scriptures as historical record.”¹¹¹ Of course, only in the most distant sense can Tyndale be seen as the ancestor of a seventeenth-century latitudinarian such as Stillingfleet, although Stillingfleet interestingly does use the phrase *historical faith* in *Origines Sacrae* (1662), as does William Chillingworth in *The Religion of Protestants* (1638).¹¹² Nevertheless, neither was the seventeenth-century view of scripture as history an entirely new phenomenon in English Protestantism, despite its owing much to the rise of antiquarian erudition in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.¹¹³ What makes Tyndale’s own notion of believing in scripture as history all the more remarkable was his articulation of it, not only well before this development, but even before the efforts of Bale, Foxe, and others had redeemed the historiography of the English church from what Protestants saw as its worst taints. This was faith indeed.

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¹¹¹Stillingfleet, 1677, 27; Levine, 317.

¹¹²Stillingfleet, 1662, 112; Chillingworth, 35. Stillingfleet identifies historical faith with a necessary willingness to accept “moral certainty” as a foundation for believing more than one sees. Like Melancthon and Tyndale, Chillingworth views historical faith as being akin to opinion, though this is not the problem for him that it is for them. See Chillingworth, 37, where he criticizes the “false principle” that it “is in vain to believe the Gospell of Christ, with such a kind or degree of assent, as . . . to other matters of Tradition.” Chillingworth goes on to underscore the danger that those who find their “faith” in the Gospel “undiscernable, from the belief they give to the truth of other Stories” will therefore cast themselves unnecessarily into “wretched agonies and perplexities.” See Van Leeuwen, 21, who notes the influence on Chillingworth of Grotius’s *De Veritate Christianae Religionis* (1624), with its account of the different kinds of assent to, or faith, evoked by different kinds of truth.

¹¹³See Shuger, 23–53, on this erudition and its application to the Bible.

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