



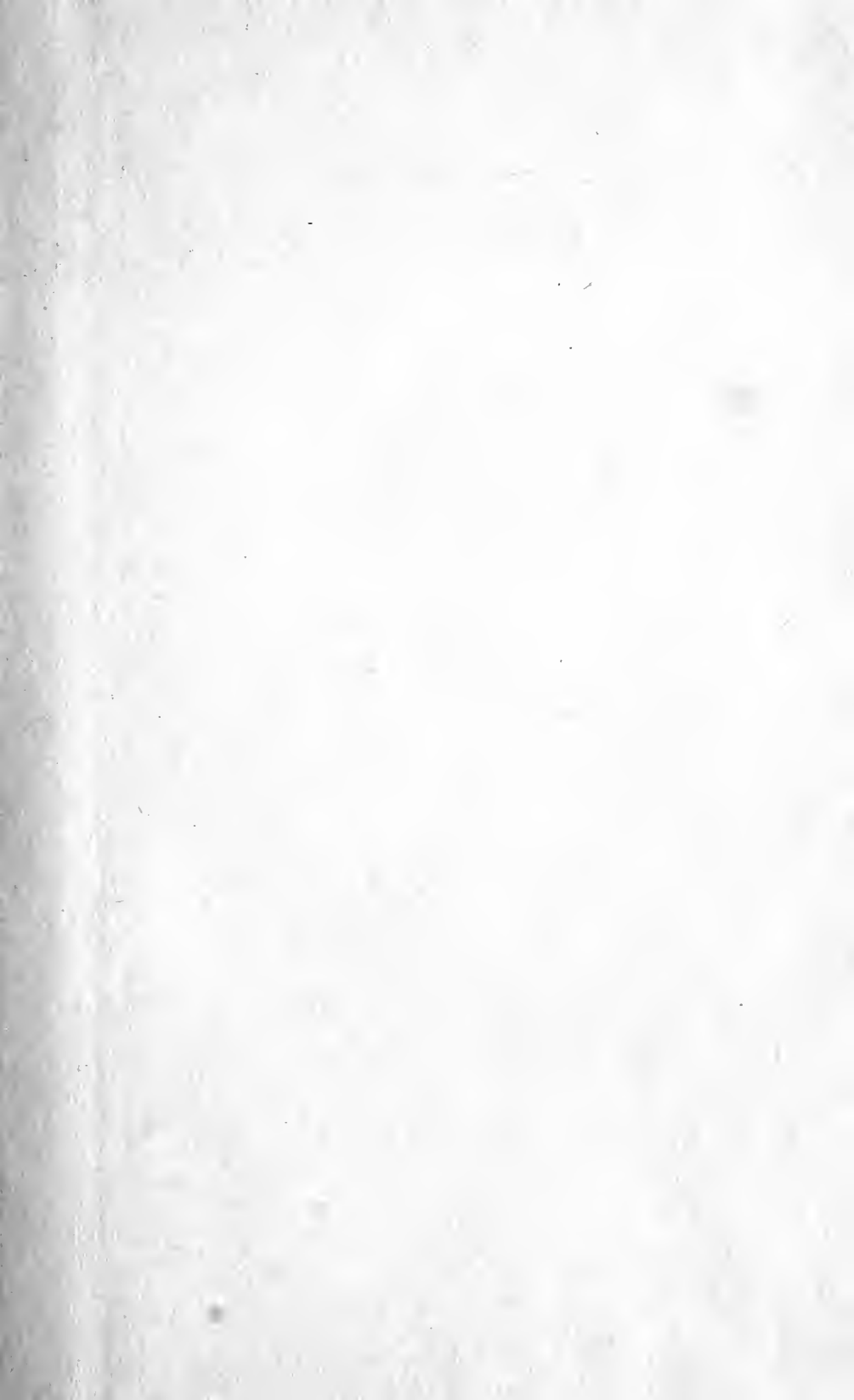
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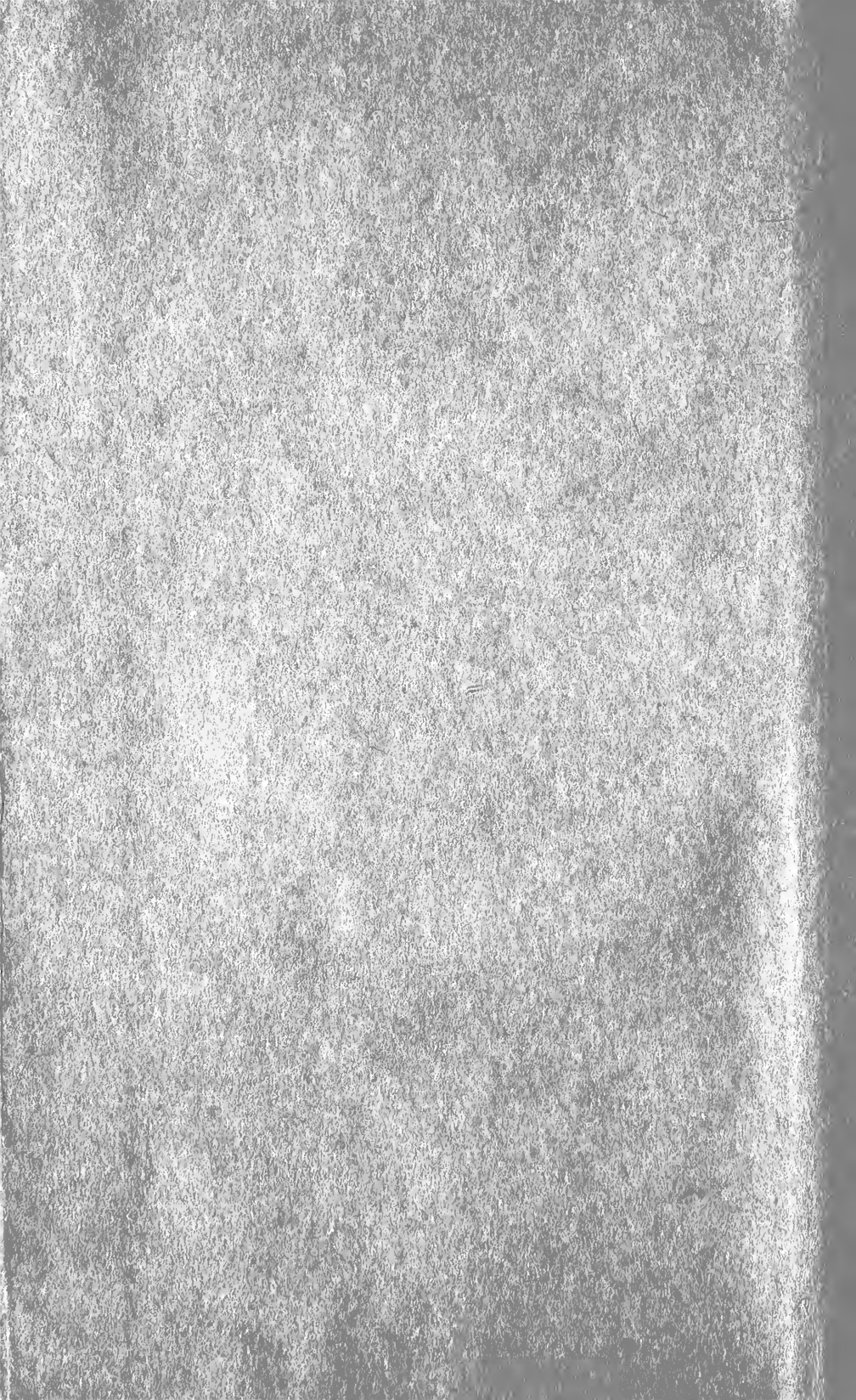
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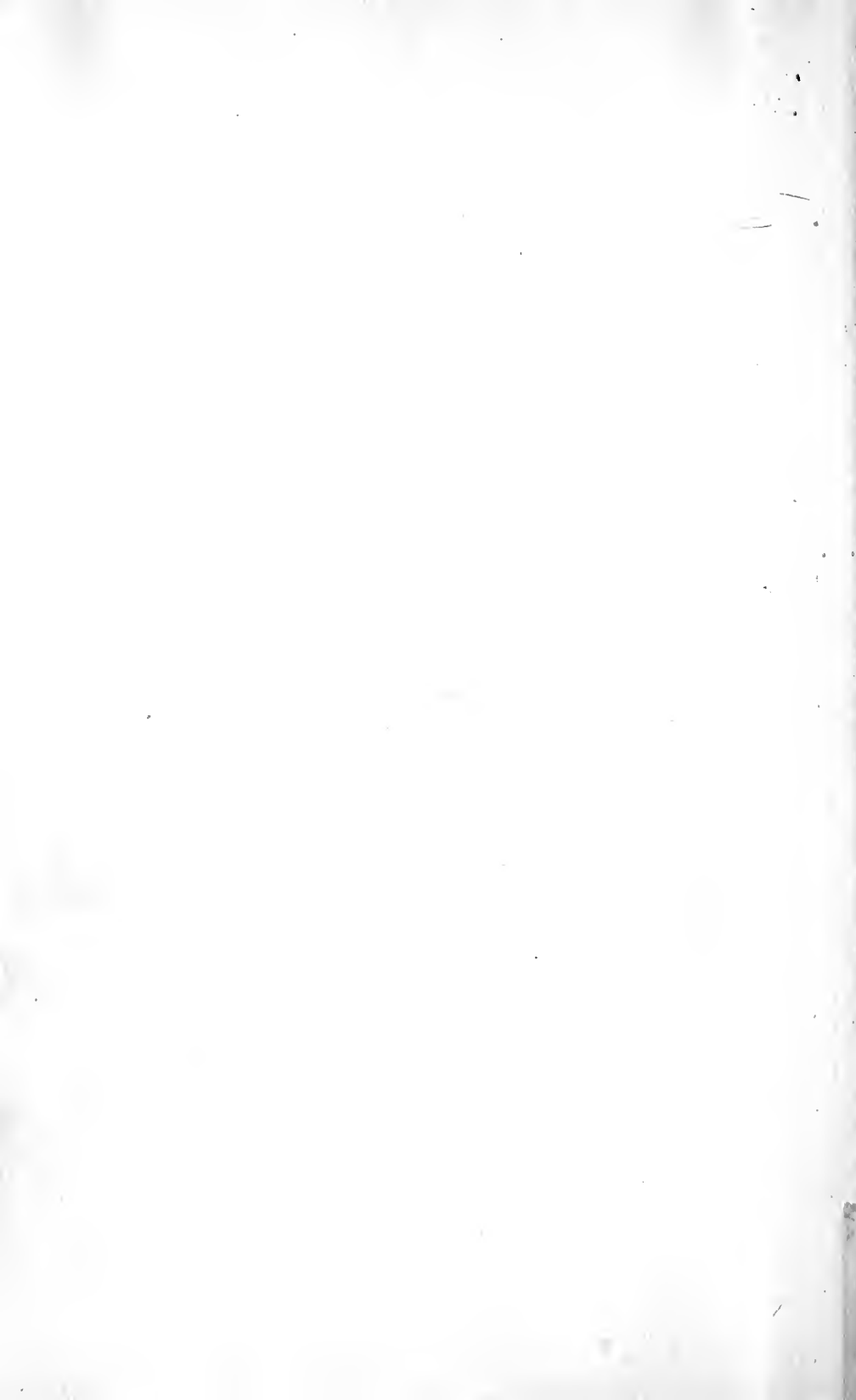








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THE BIBLE IN THEOLOGY.

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REV. WILLIAM W. FENN.

AMERICAN UNITARIAN ASSOCIATION,  
BOSTON.

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Aug 11 1892  
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“The object of the American Unitarian Association shall be to diffuse the knowledge and promote the interests of pure Christianity ; and all Unitarian Christians shall be invited to unite and co-operate with it for that purpose.” — ARTICLE I. *of the By-Laws of the American Unitarian Association.*

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## THE BIBLE IN THEOLOGY.

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FIVE years ago I heard Dr. McKenzie, of Cambridge, say that the next great debate in the Christian Church would be upon the nature and measure of Biblical authority. Upon as slender a foundation as even this passing remark rests the fame of many an old-time seer, for to-day the prophecy is manifestly fulfilled, not in a corner, but "before all Israel and the sun," and within the quick memory of those who heard the prediction. The little cloud then descried upon the horizon, — which, by the way, had long been hanging there, — having suddenly gathered into itself all scudding flecks of controversy, now darkens almost the entire blue of theology, and threatens by obscuring the sun to chill religious ardor and starve the fruits of the spirit. Religious disputes are always as regrettable as they are sometimes unavoidable. The army of the Lord cannot even yet altogether dispense with polemics; but future gains will more than make good immediate losses. Crops always suffer when ploughshares are beaten into swords and pruning-hooks into spears, but Joels may still remind us that the triumph of an eternal principle is more than the garnering of a season's harvest; and obviously, no principle is more vital to institutional Christianity on the one side and to spiritual Christianity on the other than that now mooted, for all the differences among sects are finally traceable either to the greater or less weight given the testimony of Scripture or to disagreement as to what

that testimony actually is. If all Protestants were to agree that the Bible carries no unique sanction, but is to be tested as regards the accuracy of its statements and the truth of its ethical and religious teachings by exactly the same canons which are unhesitatingly applied to the Vedas and the Koran, a multitude of petty disputes would close as quickly as legal battles about the meaning of a testament when another will is discovered of proved genuineness and a later date. Darwin's book on the "Origin of Species" put an end to innumerable and apparently interminable scientific quarrels about classification. It matters comparatively little how subjects interpret a royal proclamation so long as they are ready to do the sovereign's will when known; but it's a bad day for the monarch, and ominous of revolution, when men fall to asking what right he has to be king and issue decrees at all. When Thoreau once heard an auditor ask, "Why does he lecture at all?" he says, "It made me quake in my shoes."

Thus the importance of the question alone might almost justify the bitterness which its discussion engenders, but there is yet a finer palliation. Men have "become Christians" seldom or never because after critically canvassing the evidences, they have come to the conclusion that, on the whole, the credentials of this religion are rather better than those of any other, and hence that it is more worthy of credence, but almost invariably because some simple or heroic Christian life or some heart-stirring Christian word has penetrated their lethargy and compelled their allegiance. We may select our servants critically, but our masters come to us with the words of Jesus on their lips, "Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you;" and we do them instinctive homage. When Arnold came tearing upon the field to complete the victory of Saratoga by rallying the American troops for an attack upon Burgoyne's line manœuvring for position, no soldier

raised the question whether, in view of his quarrel with Gates, he had any right to issue orders. There was no mention of credentials or commission; enough that he was leading the way that all would go, straight against the enemy, and so they followed, although not a man who then charged with him to victory but would afterward have upheld his title to command, since it is natural to contend earnestly for that to which we have committed ourselves. His right to lead for them was based upon the fact that he was actually leading in the right way. So it would be strange if those (and there are many such) whose moral defeat has been turned into spiritual victory by the inspiration of some thrilling Bible call, or whose despair and grief have been lightened by some tender Bible promise, were not hot against those whom they deem, though mistakenly, gainsayers of the book which has done so much for them. When a belief lies very near a man's heart, is structural in his personality, it is impossible that calling it in question should not evoke personal feeling. If you do not care whether I think as you do or not, it must be either that your thought is not precious and helpful to you or else that you have not sufficient concern for my welfare to care whether I am helped or not.

When, therefore, one who has found the Bible so potent in his own experience, and who, moreover, is intensely desirous that his brothers shall have all possible encouragement and sustenance in spiritual living, finds that his former opinions regarding the book are no longer tenable, it is only natural that he should be cautious and hesitant, reluctant for his own part to abate one whit of his old-time reverence, and fearful lest by misunderstood speech he may turn others from what he knows to be a source of abundant strength. If therefore we grow impatient with the alleged radicals for a

timid reserve verging perilously toward untruthfulness and insincerity, or are disgusted at the acrimony with which those who suppose themselves conservatives egg their opponents and egg on their champions, whose vociferousness is usually commensurate with their ignorance, it is well to bear in mind, by way of mitigation, that while there may be a tincture of unworthy sentiments, the basic feeling in either case is an eager care for the spiritual life, which must always command respect. Nevertheless, while the importance of the Bible in the thought of Christendom and in the lives of individual Christians may well excuse zeal without knowledge on the one side and knowledge without zeal on the other, nothing but the truth can be of permanent aid in the religious life; and the truth or falsehood of current views regarding the Bible is to be determined solely by an appeal to facts and a scholarly weighing of evidence. The Holy Spirit alone does not qualify a man to pronounce upon the age of a geological formation or of an Old Testament book, the authorship of the letters of Junius or of the Fourth Gospel, although without the Holy Spirit manifesting itself in supreme devotion to the truth alone, no inquiry whatsoever can be successfully prosecuted. Mr. Moody is a good and holy man; "so are they all, all honorable men," who addressed his meetings in Northfield last summer; but hardly one of those who spoke so harshly and dogmatically had any more right to pass judgment upon the methods and results of the Higher Criticism than you and I have to ridicule the canal-builders in Mars, if such there be or were. As Dr. Parkhurst said recently, "If the Pentateuch speaks of the coney that chews the cud, and science denies that the coney is a ruminant, the true method is not to denounce those who call attention to the discrepancy as subverters of the Bible, but to pro-

duce a cud-chewing coney." It must be repeated often and firmly that the place of the Bible in theology is to be settled, not by sentiment and the supposed necessities of faith, nor yet by our hankerings after an infallible authority and vague guesses as to where we shall be without it, but solely by strict investigation into the needs of theology and the contents of the Bible.

The toughest problem with which any one can close, and with which, in one form or another, nearly every man tries a fall sooner or later, concerns the relation between our ideas and external realities, between the thing as it appears to us and the thing as it is in itself. Having concluded that our ideas of material objects must be adequately representative, since otherwise we should have been worsted in the great struggle where everything depends upon accurate perceptions, we ask next after our aspirations and ideals. Has Nature, like a cunning sharper, let us win these lighter games only to trick us when our highest interests are at stake? Are our ideals merely ours, — our fairest yet most evanescent possessions having no correspondents in the world without, — or are they valid and trustworthy because prophetic products of Nature, who is revealing now in brain-matter what she will some time make manifest in all matter? If we take not the blind alley of materialism, but the high-road of religion, opening unhorizoned vistas, and affirm that as there is in ourselves a system of ideals which we call the soul, so there is also in the universe a system of ideals of which ours is a product and competent transcript, which we call the soul of the world, or God, it devolves upon theology to bring our ideals into more perfect conformity with the universe ideals, and also to show in each fact and event the presence and working of the divine Unity. Religion, which is a firm belief in the spiritual nature of the uni-

verse, may exist with a very imperfect theology, perhaps even with no theology at all; but it grows in purity and power only as the craving for unity, which is the soul's thirst for God apparent in thought, makes theology necessary and leads it in the way of perfection. As a science, theology must make the facts with which it deals transparent to thought. As a science of religion, and therefore having to do with all facts, it must make the whole world transparent to ideals. As a progressive science of religion, it develops as our ideals become truer and our knowledge larger and more precise. The demand for unity finds its fulfilment only in a perfect intellectual system of the universe, revealing a perfect system of ideals; that is, in a perfect theology.

Although it would be admitted almost universally that we have not yet a perfect theology, the vast majority of Christians believe that the thought of the Hebrew people received such especial divine illumination as to constitute it a revelation, and its transmission such especial divine oversight that in the Christian inheritance we have the materials for a perfect theology. Disregarding for the moment, as not germane to the present discussion, the claims of the historic churches to be the bearers and developers of the assumed revelation, let us consider the fundamental tenet of Protestantism, — that the Bible is the sole authoritative source of theology. There is undoubtedly a Biblical theology, precisely as there is a theology of the Greek poets; but the claim of Protestantism has been that Biblical theology is identical with theology absolute. Although it could never be affirmed that a compact system of theology is to be found in the Bible, — since it is manifestly a forest and not a lumber yard, still less a finished temple, — yet the time was when it was believed to contain all the facts necessary for a perfect intellectual



system of the universe, and all the ideals necessary for a perfect system of ideals, so that the theologian was only a systematizer and framer of the facts and principles of the Bible. Dr. Hodge, for instance, defines theology as the science that has to do with the facts and principles of the Bible. After repeating once to a very pious woman a statement in a sermon which struck my boyish fancy, to the effect that the pagan, or heathen, was literally one who dwelt in the country, and did not readily hear the Christian doctrine first proclaimed in great cities, I remember well the stern tone in which she asked me, "Did he find that in his Bible?" And it was only a decade ago that a young man intending to enter the Christian ministry declared to me his intention of studying only the Greek and Hebrew languages, that he might perfectly understand the Bible, which contained all that was necessary for a Christian preacher or theologian. Yet such views of the Bible, common enough once, are fast weathering away, not merely by the action of Biblical criticism, scientific study, and comparative religion, but mainly by the growing sense of unity which re-enforces each and is re-enforced in turn. When the feeling for unity questioned the idea that all the truth of God had been intrusted to a single nation arbitrarily selected, and that its thought upon all subjects, preserved for us in its literature had been kept free from error of every sort, Biblical criticism arose to show that the Bible was not infallible, and that the thought of Israel had developed in accordance with universal laws; and comparative religion made it evident that other nations besides Israel had been divinely taught. When science had vindicated beyond cavil the competence of the human mind to discern the truth in Nature, the demand for unity, reaffirming the doctrine of the one God, declared for the trust-

worthiness of reason in religion as well as in Nature, and — denying the possibility of permanent contradiction between the two revelations, in Nature and in the Bible — gave the book of Nature the decisive voice, as bearing better guarantees than the alleged book of immediate revelation.

Inasmuch, therefore, as the craving for unity has been constantly enlarging the needs of theology, and as steadily modifying traditional conceptions of revelation in general, and the contents of the Bible in particular, it is not strange that as Unitarians — laying, as has been brightly and truthfully said, more stress upon the Unit than upon the Arians — we have been foremost in receiving and presenting the real new theology, which, finding nowhere as yet a perfect system either of facts or of ideals, recognizes no single source or infallible authority for theology, but resting solely upon the perfecting human spirit as it grows into the divine likeness, pushes hopefully and trustfully on toward the perfect thought of God. Our attitude is precisely described by the much misused yet highly honorable name of “Liberals,” which has been called upon us; for the Liberal in theology is he who admits no bonds or limitations to thought save those which inhere in the constitution of the mind itself. No matter what a man’s opinions may be, if he stops short of conclusions at the behest of any external authority, or if in defending them he makes final appeal, not to his innermost sense of duty and rationality, — which he assumes to be concordant with that of others when untampered with, as his physical senses are with theirs, — but to some outlying declaration or rule, he is not a Liberal. For one Protestant who contends that in the building of the Lord’s house no lumber may be used unless it grew in Palestine, and that every scrap of that growth is too sacred

not to be worked up somehow into the holy edifice, there are thousands who allow that wood may be brought from Philistia or elsewhere, and that even the trees of Israel may be trimmed and hewn a little without harm, but who urge, nevertheless, that every stick of the Biblical growth must be utilized, because it bears a heavenly stamp and hence may be relied upon not to give, warp, or decay; but the "Liberal," while recognizing the intrinsic superiority of the timber in this particular grove, gives it no immunity from closest scrutiny, rejects whatever seems to him unsound, and levies his contributions upon the forests of the world. The Bible does not supply all the materials for a perfect system of theology, since its facts are insufficient and frequently inaccurate, and its ideals are not always sound. Neither is it an infallible or even a final authority in theology, since the denial of what Professor Thayer calls "the pestilent theory that the Bible is absolutely free from error of every sort"—a theory which still obtains only among the uninformed—carries with it the implication that the Bible stands upon precisely the same footing as other books, and is subject to the same tests of trustworthiness and value. Of what use, then, is the Bible in theology, if it is not a perfect source or a final authority?

To say that the Bible is on the same footing as other books by no means implies that they are its equals. All men are on the same footing, for all tread the same earth; but there are giants and dwarfs, Emersons and "dagos." All stars bespangle the same sky, but "one star differeth from another star in glory." The Hebrews were master sons of the Spirit, and their testimony is that of experts in religion. Hence one chief use of the Bible in theology is to afford us the corroboration of the Spirit. My own opinion gains

wonderfully, quotes Carlyle frequently, "when I hear it from another's lips,"—the more if that other is an acknowledged leader in the science whereof he speaks. Hence it is that, with no lingering superstition or timid subservience, our tone gets firmer and more confident when our thoughts answer to the thoughts of the Hebrew prophets, particularly of Jesus, their unmistakable chief; and our fitful glimpses of truth are found to coincide with their steady vision. . . Moreover, the testimony of experts always has a presumption in its favor which does not attach to ordinary sources of information. When Professor Ezra Abbot, the Corypheus of New Testament students in this country, made a statement concerning a manuscript or a reading, it was received with much greater deference than if emanating from some unknown writer in a religious journal, though it was by no means regarded as infallible or beyond revision. To say that we must approach the Bible precisely as we approach all other books is to say that we must come to a painting of Rembrandt and to the work of an unknown artist with the same mental posture. From what we know of the nature and history of the Bible, we are prepared to find its thought high and spiritual, ready to "consider it again" and think a little harder and longer over what at first seem to us blemishes and defects, yet never relinquishing our prerogatives of cross-questioning, of weighing, and, if need be, of positive and final disagreement. No word of Scripture is to be received without question, neither is any to be rejected without reason. To those holding the extreme Orthodox position, the Bible is a theological constitution which may never be amended, with which all opinions must square, and to which all judgments must conform. To the "Liberal Orthodox" it is a volume of leading cases which embrace all legal principles and all of

whose recorded rulings are final; but to us it is simply a volume of reports chronicling the decisions of eminent judges, whose opinions may be set aside by riper consideration, though they are presumably sound, and at any rate are not to be lightly rejected.

This idea of the corroboration of the Spirit gives what little color there is to the pretensions of the historic churches to be the seat of authority in religion. For, if we believe that the Semitic peoples, particularly the Hebrews, were the peculiar bearers of religion, as the Romans were of law, and if we use the word "Church" in its most comprehensive and least formal sense, as identical with that religious consciousness which is in the line of historic succession from Moses, Isaiah, and Jesus, we can hardly doubt that in the Church, as its most likely sphere, a perfect theology will slowly be evolved. Not that a doctrine once formally considered and approved by a formal conclave of the formal Church is therefore authoritatively settled for all time; evolution does not proceed thus mechanically and fragmentarily. The perfection of an organism is not attained by perfecting one by one its various members; the parts find and keep their perfection in the perfecting whole. The sun does not come up by piecemeal, here a bit and there a bit, with long intervals of time between the successive appearances, but as a whole; and the streaks of light are not the sun or portions of it, but only the hinting foregleams. When, however, we find that an idea is the lineal descendant, or ascendant, from a thought that was formative in the Hebrew consciousness and in Church history, we may rely with considerable confidence upon the authority of the Church, the "*testimonium sancti spiritus*," as evidence, not that we have attained to ultimate truth, but that we are in the right road, — that we are in the ways of the Spirit.

Besides the corroboration of the spirit, the Bible is of use in theology, as a source of facts and principles. Obviously, the laws of religious development must be of immense importance in the study of theology, but these laws can be found only in the facts of religious growth; and where can we more hopefully look for the necessary facts than in the records of a nation whose history more than that of any other nation of the world is the history of a religious evolution? Much has been made of the uncertainty hanging over the facts of the Bible, particularly of the life of Jesus; but the uncertainty arises in good measure from the unwillingness to subject records which are held so sacred to the strict application of ordinary critical processes. There has doubtless been perversion and distortion of the facts; but, knowing the medium through which they have come, it is not so very difficult for us to compute the angle of refraction and plot the course of the ray before it entered the prism of superstition and vulgar prejudice. However much of myth and legend may have gathered about the primitive germ, the magnet will not attract wood, and the character of the accretion reveals the quality of the core. Moreover, what must be rejected as historic fact is often of paramount importance as evidence of a national sentiment. "Remember," said Ruskin, "that a lovely legend is all the more precious when it has no foundation. Cincinnatus might actually have been found ploughing beside the Tiber fifty times over, and it might have signified little to any one, least of all to you and me. But if Cincinnatus never was so found, nor ever existed at all in flesh or blood, but the great Roman nation, in its strength of conviction that manual labor in tilling the ground was good and honorable, invented a quite bodiless Cincinnatus and set him according to its fancy in furrows of the field, and put its own words into his mouth, and gave the honor of

its ancient deeds into his ghostly hand, — this fable which has no foundation, this precious coinage of the brain and conscience of a mighty people, you and I — believe me — had better read and know and take to heart diligently.” Hence, although it is incredible that the Commandments were graven on stone by the finger of the Lord, it does not at all follow that they are only “ten crotchets of Moses,” but rather that they embody the deepest and most ethical thought of the people. If many of the Old Testament and New Testament stories are not true to fact, they are true to principles which governed both in conduct and in literature. More important than the historical accuracy or inaccuracy of these stories is the fact that they were actually held to be true by a nation born for religion, and are the vehicle of its ideals, which, whether conveyed in narrative or didactic form, are almost always lofty and fit for theology.

Besides the two uses of the Bible in theology already mentioned, the corroboration of the spirit and the communication of facts and principles, it has yet a third: it creates the right climate for theology. Behind all the particular ideals of the Hebrews lay this great formative principle: God is holy, and will have his people holy. Because of this, their thought is marked by realism. “The Hebrew people,” says Professor Briggs, “were as realistic as the Greeks were idealistic.” In all their uplifts of heart and brain, their feet are fast on mother earth. They are not blind to solid facts; but they see them as solid, in their cubicalness with God as the third dimension. Because of this, too, their religious thought is ethical. It is easy to point out isolated instances of false ethical feeling, notably in the book of Esther, and of undue stress upon ceremonialism, as in the Levitical legislation; but is it not true that in the Hebrew literature, as a whole, we find religion sanctified by right ethical feeling and ethics

ablaze with religious fervor? Moreover, the God of Israel always stood for the best ethical thought of the people. Never among them, as so frequently elsewhere, was the God of popular theology baser than the man of popular approval. And, because this creative idea so permeates the Bible, the more fully we are imbued with its spirit, the less likely we shall be to vaporize and temporize in religious thinking, and the more emphasis we shall lay upon morality in religion and ethics in theology. Thus the climate of the book is favorable for the growth of pure ideals and for the maturing of a true theology. The book brings us into the same spirit whereof Isaiah and Jesus and Paul were partakers, and lifts us far above sordid materialism and belittling selfishness. Only in this zone can theology thrive. A man with no sense of beauty may construct a system of æsthetics, one who never laughed may produce a philosophy of the comic, but one who has never been thrilled by an ideal, who in hours of gloom has never heard —

“the sound of silver wings  
Slow beating through the hush of night,”

and who in moments of trial has never seen —

“how life’s rugged mountain side  
Is white with many an angel tent,”

has no power to bring theology to birth. What makes religion possible and theology necessary but the fact that our ideals come to us clothed with more than mortal majesty and born unmistakably “not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God”? And as no science of beauty is satisfactory which does not make those who master it more keenly alive to beauty, and no ethical system can be valid which does not strengthen the moral sense, so no system of theology can



be true which does not grow best in the climate of ideals and further their growth. A body of divinity without an inspiring soul is worthless, and will become an offence. Hence any book which feeds and freshens the religious life is of immense value to the student of theology. Beyond the corroboration of the spirit and the communication of facts and principles is this service to theology of the Bible as a book of the Spirit.

I am aware that to many outside of our fellowship, perhaps to some within it, this view of the Bible may seem painfully inadequate and possibly lowering to the book. To me it does not seem so, for as I cannot conceive of a higher tribute than that paid to Emerson by Matthew Arnold in calling him the friend and helper of those who would live in the Spirit, although to some of Emerson's friends even this seemed mean and insufficient, so I can imagine no greater encomium upon a book than to say of it truthfully that it finds us, and we find it, in our noblest moods,—so that it becomes a real *vade mecum* in the ways of the Spirit. But there are those who, as they say, “want something to tie to,” and complain bitterly because, as they think, modern students of the Bible are hacking down the hitching-post of infallibility which God himself set up. But it is no longer a matter of choice, save with those who “glory in believing instead of taking the trouble to ascertain,” whether or not the Bible is of infallible, unquestionable authority; it is a question of knowledge and conscience. It would undoubtedly be very convenient, and save us a deal of thought and care, to have an infallible guide whose dicta on religion and ethics could be accepted without question and acted on without doubt; but we have not been exempted from the discipline of questioning, and the simple fact is that there is no such infallible authority in church, book, or human spirit. God has chosen, not that we should tie to anything, but that

we should be ever on the move toward himself; and only in the current of righteousness setting steadily heavenward are security and certainty. We might wish it were otherwise, but the wish can be father to the thought only when wedded to ignorance. Desires and prejudices one side, the fact is that we have in the Bible a human book, but a book in which humanity is at its best estate, — the surviving literature of a nation that had an exceptional aptitude for religion and a wonderful eye for truth. This is the fact, and it will be found better in the long run “to learn to keep house with facts” than to bar them out with our prejudices and maroon with ignorant desires.

Although intelligent Protestantism has parted company with the idea of an infallible Bible, with which Roman Catholicism never consorted, a few habits formed in its companionship still linger to vex us all. We ought to recognize and frankly aver that our theology does not rest upon the Bible, but upon the human spirit, of which the Bible is but one noble expression, and that, while we welcome it as a substantial prop, we are not dependent upon it for support. Were it possible to prove that the New Testament teaches the doctrines of the Trinity, the vicarious atonement, and the endlessness of future punishment exactly as they are believed in popular Orthodoxy, with the same certainty that it teaches the second personal advent of Jesus, we should be compelled to modify our appreciation of the book; and if it were shown that Jesus so believed and taught, of Jesus himself; but it is impossible that one who has attained the true view of the Bible should in the least waver in his denial of these dogmas. This is only an explicit statement of common Orthodox practice; for the Bibles of the holy ones of earth are not equally thumbed and dog’s-eared in all parts, and the expounders of Liberal Orthodoxy take refuge under the

convenient blind of spiritual interpretation, theories of accommodation, and the like, that they may evade the obligation of trying to believe what appears to them clearly false, and at the same time claim the infallible authority of holy Scripture, more for popular effect than for their own convincing, for such doctrine as they approve.

With regard to the Bible, the mind of Protestantism will continue to hang in the wind until sails are courageously trimmed to the breeze that freshens our way. And that, let us remember, is the course charted by early Protestantism. Luther made the authority of a book hinge upon whether it preached Christ or not. Calvin said; "As to this inquiry, whence shall we be persuaded that Scripture hath flowed from God unless we have recourse to the decrees of the Church? This is as if one should inquire, Whence do we learn to distinguish light from darkness, white from black, sweet from bitter? For Scripture lets us have a no more obscure perception of its own truth than black and white things of their color, sweet and bitter of their taste." And the French Confession of 1559, which in this respect fairly represents the early creeds, boldly declares: "We know these books to be canonical, and the sure rule of our faith, not so much by the common accord and consent of the Church as by the testimony and inward illumination of the Holy Spirit, which enables us to distinguish them from other ecclesiastical books upon which, however useful, we cannot found any article of faith." In applying to the contents of the several books the same tests which are here used to discriminate inspired from apocryphal books, Unitarianism is only carrying the principle of unpolluted Protestantism to its logical issue. The tragedy of "King Lear" has been enacted with the human spirit, and its two chil-

dren, the Bible and the Church, as *dramatis personæ*; only the king never really signed away his power, and is now coming to his own again.

With deepest gratitude, therefore, for the truth which the Bible brings us and for its help in the spiritual life, it must, nevertheless, be affirmed that an inspired man of to-day is more fully in the secret of the Eternal than were the inspired men of twenty centuries ago. It would be passing strange if after twenty centuries in the heart of man the Holy Spirit had not brought humanity to a more perfect knowledge of eternal things. It is perilously near the sin against the Holy Spirit not to prefer the God of Channing and Parker and Emerson to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; and one is never quite so sure of this as when brooding over the book not one of whose authors bases his thought upon the words of his predecessor, but all of whom begin by saying, "The word of the Lord came unto me," and so claim for themselves present inspiration and a brighter revelation of the Almighty. And yet it does not follow, as might hastily be supposed, that therefore modern books can fully take the place of the Bible in the spiritual life; for as the sketches of a great artist, especially if arranged in chronological order with the finished picture at their head, are more valuable to a learner than the masterpiece alone, and as to workers in literature Hawthorne's "Ancestral Footstep," "Dr. Grimshaw's Secret," "Septimius Felton," and "The Dolliver Romance" (studies for the Romance of Immortality) are more helpful in their incompleteness than even "The Marble Faun" or "The Scarlet Letter," because they let us into the workshop of the author and reveal his methods, so the early strivings of the Spirit chronicled in the sacred books of the Hebrews are even more serviceable to those who would live and work in the

same spirit than the more perfect utterances through later prophets.

A second survival of the discarded theory of the Bible is in the methods by which the book is studied. I am told that there is in Boston a writing-master who boasts of being the only teacher in the town that makes a small *a* exactly right. All the rest, he says proudly, carry the shading a little too far down. It is possible that he might be a valuable instructor for a man with nothing to do but "write him down an ass" (with a small *a*) all day long; but men with work to do cannot waste time on such tomfoolery. Yet the textual criticism and the philology of the New Testament proceed upon the assumption of verbal inspiration, and are simply ridiculous apart from it. In the "Metaphors of Saint Paul," for instance, Howson says, "In examining the different parts of the New Testament, I should wish to be guided by the reverent belief that each word has a meaning; that each word is the best that could be used." But, taking the human view of the Bible, with what show of reason can we conclude that its authors were always so precise in their language as to choose the very best word? Mr. Ruskin, indeed, speaks of spending an entire forenoon over a single sentence, and states that for twenty years he has not written a word without testing it syllable by syllable; but which of us can say as much, or would submit his sermons to the scrutiny which Ruskin gives his selected lines from "Lycidas"? And are we to suppose that Amos at Bethel paused in his denunciation of woe to choose the one word in the Hebrew language, with all its extraordinary wealth of synonymes, which exactly expressed his idea; or that Jesus called the Pharisees "whited sepulchres" only when, after long and painful deliberation, he had determined that that phrase, with its associations and impli-

cations, was precisely the one which fitted his indignant scorn; or that Paul stopped the headlong rush of his argument to mouse in a Thesaurus or a dictionary of synonymes? Such niceness as this notion presupposes is entirely out of keeping with what we know of Biblical authors, and to assume it is sure to lead us astray. Moreover, to interpret Peter and Paul and James by the meanings which the words they use bear in the writings of Homer, Demosthenes, and Plato, is as if a foreigner should seek to understand James Whitcomb Riley or Uncle Remus, knowing only Chaucer and Shakspeare and Milton.

It is high time for lovers of the Bible to protest against the methods and aims of present Biblical study, not only because they are foolish and misleading, but also because many a student of theology, disgusted by this punctilious time-wasting exercise, is turned away from the book, and so loses the help which he might receive for himself and for others from this blessed pool of the Spirit. The words of the Bible are of far less importance than its thoughts, and its thoughts are indefinitely less important than the spirit that prompted them. Hence words and thoughts are comparatively useless unless they bring us to the living spirit.

It is timely to insist thus upon the right method of using the Bible, because we are clearly in the midst of a great revival of interest in its study. Not only are the Semitic languages taking their rightful place in schemes of liberal education, but the literary study of the Bible in schools and colleges, the International Sunday-school Lessons, the Correspondence Schools, etc., are directing the minds of English-speaking Protestants toward the Bible as perhaps never before. But the value of such study — yes, even the wholesomeness of it — depends

largely upon methods and aims. It was when essentially the same methods now in vogue prevailed in Israel that religion was at its lowest, and professional exēgetes slew the prophet of the soul. But, as we are far enough away from the Roman Catholic Church to appreciate discriminately its real worth, to love its solemn music and stately ceremonies, to join in its prayers for the dead, and to delight in its rich symbolism, so we are far enough away from the letter of the Bible, though near enough in its spirit, to urge its value in the spiritual life and in theology without being embarrassed by its few immoralities and absurdities which oftentimes prove so distracting to others.

I wish that we, as Unitarians, might rise to our opportunity, to our duty, and help direct this awakened interest in the Bible into better channels than those which it now seeks. If, as is sometimes flippantly said, the Bible is "a fossil," it must be remembered that the study of fossils is shedding light upon the history and destiny of man. If it is a "back number," the story of Humanity is a serial, and only by reading the earlier chapters can the current issue be understood and the outcome forecasted. If it is a "dead letter," be sure that within it is the living spirit.

The time is coming — may we hasten it! — when this dear book shall take its rightful place as a manual of devotion instead of a text-book in theology, as a friend of the spirit instead of a despot over the intellect, helping us to open our ears to the present messages of the eternal Spirit, and our eyes to the unending parable of Nature, and more than all, putting and keeping us all in that great current of revelation issuing from Mount Zion which is steadily growing nearer to the perfect knowledge and fellowship of God.

Fresh study of the Bible, as in the time of Wycliffe, Tyndale, and the Authorized Version, has always been followed historically by great social and religious movements which have blessed the world. May we not hope, therefore, that this revival of Biblical study, due in part to the Revised Version of 1881, "may be so guided and governed by His good spirit" as to break forever the shackles of traditionalism, and reinstate the Bible as "the great friend and helper of all who would live in the Spirit" ?

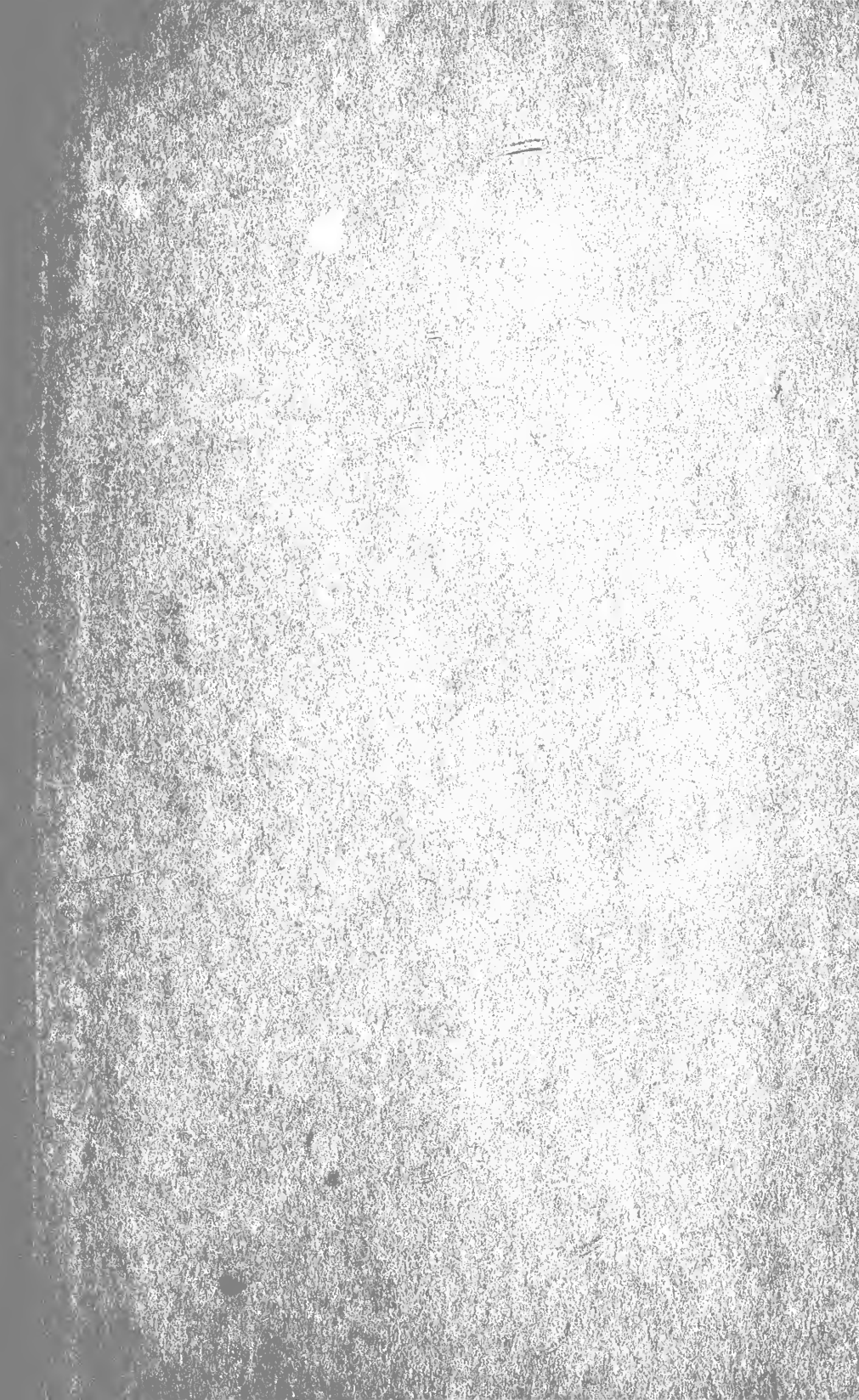














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