“The Unitarians must break into two schools,” Convers Francis acutely observed in 1836, “the Old one, or English school, belonging to the sensual and empiric philosophy,—and the New one, or the German school …, belonging to the spiritual philosophy.”¹ The “old school” affirmed the historical veracity of the biblical record and believed that all “knowledge of Christ and Christianity” was “derived not from consciousness or intuition, but from outward revelation.”² The Transcendentalist “new school,” by contrast, insisted that the primary validation of religion was inner consciousness. The “new school’s” philosophy of intuition came to the fore in the miracles controversy of 1836 which by 1840 had quickly broadened into an open conflict about the historicity of the Jesus tradition.

For the “new school,” miraculous evidence could no longer serve as the pristine channel of revelation. Christianity rested more upon the teachings of Jesus than on his supposed deeds. “[W]e hold it to be an unsound method,” George Ripley declared in the *Christian Examiner* in 1836, “to make a belief in [miracles] the essential foundation of Christian faith, or the ultimate test of Christian character.”³ It is impossible “to establish the truth of any religion merely on the ground of miracles.” Ripley’s assertion moved an intuitive religion into the foreground, challenging the “old school’s” claim that the miracles Christ performed attested to the veracity of an “outward revelation” that was “not innate” but rather “super-induced.”⁵

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When it came to the miraculous evidence of “outward revelation,” Unitarians were confronted head-on with the “Scotch Goliath,” David Hume, who argued that it was not reasonable to believe on the basis of reported evidence that a miracle had taken place (L, 1:138). In his *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748), Hume pointed out that a miracle implied a violation of the laws of nature. These laws, however, Hume insisted, were drawn from experience which in itself contained a factual proof against the possibility of miracles. From German higher criticism came another powerful challenge of the Unitarian belief in miraculous evidence. The Harvard–Göttingen men had painfully experienced how biblical critics like Eichhorn rendered the historical reliability of the biblical narratives uncertain and adduced data questioning the uniqueness of the life of Jesus accounts. Eichhorn thus belonged to “that class of German critics” who, as Norton formulated, “reject the belief of any thing properly miraculous in the history of Christ.” For Unitarians at home and abroad, the rejection of the miraculous character of Christianity as well as of the “the genuineness of the Gospels” seemed to explode cherished conceptions of revealed religion. Thus Norton judged that “in proportion as suspicion is cast upon the genuineness and authenticity of the [Gospels], the history of Christ becomes doubtful and obscure.” Similarly, Ticknor did not have any “objection to a serious and thorough examination of the grounds of Christianity.” But “learned” teaching “that the New Testament was written in the latter end of the second century and … that a miracle is a natural and a revelation a metaphysical impossibility” was incompatible with the beliefs of a Unitarian who held that Christianity was a doctrinal system validated in particular by miracles of which the New Testament gave a historically accurate account. Eichhorn’s “rules of criticism,” Bancroft judged, are “in general right tho[ugh] not unlimitedly right, but their application is sadly

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