CHAPTER FIVE

ETHNOLOGY AND THE “TWO BOOKS”: SOME NINETEENTH-CENTURY AMERICANS ON PREADAMIST POLYGENISM

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And [God] hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth, and hath determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of their habitation

Acts 17:26, KJV

To readers of America’s weekly religious newspapers in the late 1840s, science appeared safely domesticated to the house of God. The gravest challenge of the previous decades had been met, conquered, and enlisted in their arsenal of anti-infidel polemics. Geologists had set Earth’s age at thousands, if not millions, of years, but new interpretations of Scripture had reconciled this scientific development with revelation. Whether Earth history belonged to a “gap” between the first two verses of Genesis 1 or to one of the days of creation, now understood as immense periods of time rather than solar days, they believed that the resulting harmony of nature and revelation demonstrated the authenticity of Holy Writ. Although not everyone accepted these new understandings of nature and Scripture, most writers on science in the religious weeklies celebrated them and expressed a buoyant, even jubilant, confidence that true science would always support their faith. After all, God authored both Scripture and nature; therefore, they could not contradict, however much they may speak in different idioms.

This metaphor of God’s revelation in two books—Scripture and nature—had become a standard literary trope in the popular religious press. Employed or implied, it routinely appeared in articles addressing

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1 See Numbers 2007 for a description of these options in popular Christianity.
2 A very small sampling of the ‘two books’ metaphor in the religious press includes Y-N-R 1840, Connection of Science with Christianity 1842, Science and Theology—Their Harmony 1854, Matter Inert apart from God 1859, and Coffin 1860.
scientific topics with the effect of comforting the faithful that, come what may, nature and Scripture would ultimately agree, once both had been correctly interpreted. Another trope, taken from I Tim. 6:20, served as a corollary to the ‘two books’; a phrase from that passage, “science-falsely-so-called,” merged into a single byword. Because nature, correctly read, could not contradict Scripture, correctly read, any science that appeared to do so had to be defective. It might take time, but seemingly destructive scientific ideas would eventually be debunked or harmonized with Scripture. “Once infidels looked to stars, geology, human history to show no God. Now these disciplines support religion.”

The popular Baconian notion of progress—in which theory-building is subordinated to empirical research—supported this narrative understanding of the relationship between science and religion. Infidel attacks on Scripture, as religious writers described them, employed the empirically weak and overly speculative results of infant sciences that further research inevitably undermined. The success of strategies harmonizing the new geological timescale with the Genesis creation narratives, exemplified the course of true scientific and exegetical progress. Once infidels had claimed that geology emptied the truth out of the Bible, but now it enlightened Christians’ understanding of the Bible and confirmed Scripture’s authenticity. How else could the ancients have known the results of modern science if God had not whispered it in their ears?

By the 1850s, writers in the religious weeklies had combined these notions into a pastoral tool designed to assure the faithful that they had nothing to fear from new scientific ideas. The narrative element played a key rhetorical function: it excused them from countering every challenge in detail. Instead, these writers could exhort their readers to wait patiently for future developments in the offending science, developments that would vindicate the Bible.

The placid mood in articles on religion and science in the religious weeklies was abruptly interrupted in late 1849 and early 1850 by two works. Josiah C. Nott, a physician practicing in Mobile, Alabama, published his Two Lectures on the Connection Between the Biblical and Physical History of Man, late in 1849, and three articles by Harvard naturalist Louis

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3 Science Confirming the Bible 1852.