James Sanford Lamar and the Substructure of Biblical Interpretation in the Restoration Movement

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The statement by Alexander Campbell in the second edition of *The Christian System* has become a classic definition of the place of the Bible in the Restoration heritage: "We take the Bible, the whole Bible, and nothing but the Bible, as the foundation of all Christian union and communion."[1] The concept that the Bible is the locus of the voice of God for the church has dominated virtually all thought and usage among those who stand in the Restoration heritage.

In consequence of taking the Bible as the place where God speaks, the question naturally arose: How shall the Bible be understood? By what methodology are these ancient words to be interpreted by the modern reader? Restoration thinkers supplied a methodology which seemed to avoid the wrongheadedness of allegory and dogmatism and to make a strong appeal to practical men of common sense. That methodology was the inductive method.

The leaders of the movement were deeply interested in arriving at unanimity. Since the solution to religious division was, in the words of Moses Lard, to accept "the exact meaning of Holy Writ as our religious theory,"[2] it became crucial to determine what that exact meaning was. And since all religious differences were "occasioned by false principles of interpretation, or by a misapplication of the true principles,"[3] unity would result when right principles were rightly applied. General optimism over unanimity was due to methodological assumptions borrowed from the

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[1]*The Christian System in reference to the union of Christians, and a restoration of primitive Christianity, as plead in the current reformation* (2d ed.; Pittsburg: Forrester & Campbell, 1839. Reprint ed.; Nashville: Gospel Advocate, 1970), p. xvii.

[2]"The Reformation for Which We Are Pleading–What Is It?" *Lard's Quarterly* 1 (1864): 22.

[3]Alexander Campbell, "The Bible–Principles of Interpretation," *Millennial Harbinger,* Ser. 3,3 (1846): 13. This material had appeared earlier as "A connected view of the principles and rules by which the living oracles may be intelligibly and certainly interpreted," in *Christianity Restored,* rev. and corr. ed. (Bethany: M'Vay & Ewing, 1835).

Baconian approach to the empirical sciences. These assumptions, shared widely among American Protestants in the early nineteenth century,[4] were implicit in Campbell's approach to Scripture. "Great unanimity has obtained in most of the sciences," Campbell wrote, "in consequence of the adoption of certain rules of analysis and synthesis: for all who work by the same rules, come to the same conclusions."[5] Accordingly, Campbell believed that in the interpretation of biblical phenomena, unanimity was achievable by the same methods used by the sciences in the interpretation of physical phenomena.

Campbell's writings on biblical interpretation initially focused more on the meanings of words and sentences than on the assumptions underlying the search for meaning. It remained to one of Campbell's students–James Sanford Lamar (1829-1908)–to make the underlying assumptions explicit. Lamar was a Georgia boy who graduated from Bethany College in 1854, taking second honors in Latin and delivering the valedictory address.[6] After graduation he returned to Georgia, centering around Augusta but also active in north Florida and south Alabama. With A. G. Thomas he undertook to publish *The Christian Union*.[7] Later he became associate editor of the *Christian Standard*, of which Isaac Errett was editor, and in his mature years he became Errett's biographer.[8] In

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[4]See Sydney E. Ahlstrom, "The Scottish Philosophy and American Theology," *Church History* 24 (1955): 257-272; Theodore Dwight Bozeman, *Protestants in an Age of Science: The Baconian Ideal and Antebellum American Religious Thought* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1977); George H. Daniels, *American Science in the Age of Jackson* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968), pp. 63-85. Daniels takes Samuel Tyler (1809-1877) as a representative of American Baconianism. Tyler was a Maryland lawyer who through several articles in the *Princeton Review* attracted wide notice, including the esteem of Sir William Hamilton, a champion of the Scottish Philosophy. Daniels listed the main elements of Tyler's thought as "a passionate attachment to the Scottish common-sense philosophy of Reid and Stewart, a corresponding hatred of things 'metaphysical,' . . . and . . . deep commitment to conventional religion, especially of the Evangelical variety." Daniels then remarked, with obvious relevance for Campbell and other Restoration leaders in America, that a man of that day with those particular beliefs "could hardly be anything but a Baconian" (p. 70).

[5]"Principles of Interpretation," p. 13.

[6]"Annual Commencement of Bethany College," *Millennial Harbinger,* Ser. 4, 4 (1854): 519-523; "Valedictory Address of J. S. Lamar," ibid., pp. 524-528.

[7]1856. The periodical did not survive into a second year (Claude E. Spencer, comp., *Periodicals of the Disciples of Christ and Related Religious Groups* [Canton, MO: Disciples of Christ Historical Society, 1943], p. 47).

[8]*Memoirs of Isaac Errett with selections from his writings,* 2 vols. (Cincinnati: Standard, 1893).

1860, J. B. Lippincott of Philadelphia published Lamar's *Organon of Scripture: Or the Inductive Method of Biblical Interpretation,*[9] which laid down the philosophical substructure for attaining the unanimity of interpretation sought by Campbell.

In the *Organon* Lamar defined the religious climate in America as skepticism. The church possessed the Bible, to which it looked for ultimate truth. But when men asked the church for answers, the church returned conflicting and disparate statements; consequently, men were left in doubt as to which of the answers were true. Lamar attributed doctrinal disagreements "not to the Bible, nor yet to the depravity or incompetency of those who have studied it, but to the imperfections and perverting influences of the methods which have been followed" (p. 24).

The false methods which had led to this state of confusion and skepticism are (1) what Lamar called the "mystic method" (finding multiple levels of meaning as in much postapostolic and medieval interpretation) and (2) the "dogmatic method" (typified by late medieval scholasticism and its use of interpretation to support Catholic dogma as well as by Protestantism's attempts to square the Bible with its formulations of doctrine). In place of these two methods Lamar proposed the inductive method. He was optimistic that the Bible could be studied and understood by this method and would thereby "speak to us in a voice as certain and unmistakable as the language of nature heard in the experiments and observations of science" (p. 176).

Acknowledging his indebtedness to the scientific methodology of Francis Bacon,[10] John Herschel, and John Stuart Mill, Lamar defined the task of interpretation as to observe and compare the phenomena of revelation, given propositionally in the Bible, and then to determine "their respective places and relative bearings in the grand synthesis of the whole" (p. 42). Thus out of bits of information an overall pattern would emerge.

Lamar's own illustration of the method was the hewn blocks for Solomon's temple spread out upon the ground. By careful measurement and observation of each block, a builder could learn how to fit all the pieces together. If he was true to the character of each piece and put them all where they fit without reshaping, the result–what else?–Solomon's temple (pp. 40-41). So it is with the Bible. It contains the prefabricated materials of the temple of truth. Admittedly, they are laid out in some confusion, but if the reader will only "earnestly consider and carefully compare these materials, it is next to impossible" for him to fail to erect the structure of truth which God designed.

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[9]Reprinted many times, including an edition by the Old Paths Book Club.

[10]Lamar's book title imitates Bacon's *Novum organum scientarum* (1620), which enunciated an empirical approach to the physical sciences.

To guide the implementing of his method Lamar laid down eight canons of interpretation to "put the reader in possession of the key which not only unlocks the storehouse of natural and revealed truth, but which is able also to introduce him into every department of knowledge," since "the method of science is also the method of revelation" (p. 241). The eight canons were lifted bodily from Herschel's *Preliminary Discourse on the Study of Natural Philosophy,*[11] which proposed canons for interpreting data from the sciences.

It would be to no purpose to discuss all eight of the abstruse canons, as even Lamar's succinct explanations of their use first in physics and then in biblical study do not make them easy. It will be enough to illustrate one or two of them.

Canon 7 is one of the more accessible: "If we can find two instances which agree exactly in all but one particular, and differ in that one, its influence in producing the phenomenon, if it have any, must thereby be rendered sensible" (p. 260). In terms of physics, this canon means that if two experiments are identical in all ways but one, that one feature will account for whatever differences there may be in the results of the experiment. Taking canon 7 to scripture, Lamar concluded that the two conversions in Acts 16 and 18 are identical in all ways but one: the earthquake in Chapter 16. Drawing a general law of conversion from these two accounts, he listed hearing, faith, and baptism–but not the earthquake–as the elements necessary for conversion. But then, Lamar asked what to do with the earthquake. Canon 8 gives the solution: "Being a residual phenomenon remaining after the induction from the points of agreement have been made, [the earthquake] must be now classified with those providential or miraculous influences which concur in preparing the mind for the reception of the word which produces faith" (p. 262). In other words, having an earthquake prior to hearing the gospel is helpful, but it is not necessary to salvation.

Both Campbell and W. K. Pendleton were lavish in their praise of Lamar's work. In Pendleton's review, he said "It is truly a book of **substance**–learned, but not pedantic; argumentative, but not dull; and so rich of useful information and judicious reflection, that we feel it to be a good service to commend it, as we most heartily do, to the candid and studious perusal of the public."[12] Campbell called the work "preeminently logical in its books, its parts, its chapters, and its sections" and printed an expanded version of Lamar's already detailed table of contents. "This is a volume of

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[11]London: Longman, 1831.

[12]*Millennial Harbinger,* Ser. 5, 3 (1860):88.

much value," Campbell wrote, "got up in the best style of typography, and will interest every amateur of the Divine Oracles, and more especially those who are devoted to preaching and teaching the whole counsel of God."[13]

Other books by Restoration scholars followed. David Roberts Dungan (1837-1920) found the inductive method a firm base and elaborated its application beyond the theoretical base Lamar had laid.[14] Dungan even declared that the Bible itself recognized induction as the correct method of interpretation. Citing several examples, he concluded, "Nothing more respecting the Scripture method need be said, for it is everywhere apparent that when the Lord would conduct an investigation on any subject, He did it by the inductive method."[15]

Clinton Lockhart (1858-1951), going every bit as far as Lamar, stated that his aim in writing was, in part, "to reduce the entire system of principles to a form that accords with the present state of other sciences," and "to approach every law by a process of induction, so that the reader cannot fail to discern its value and to learn the method of application."[16]

Discussion of the inductive method has been carried into the second half of the twentieth century by James David Thomas and a number of lesser lights. Thomas' *We Be Brethren*[17] was not chiefly concerned with hermeneutic theory. It rather applied biblical materials to the controversy over church cooperation in orphanages and other institutions. But it did build upon the inductive base put down by Dungan and others.[18] A second book, *Heaven's Window,*[19] written to defend the pattern authority assumed in *We Be Brethren*, brought hermeneutic substructure once again to the fore. *We Be Brethren*, wrote Thomas, "more or less took up where Dungan left off, while [*Heaven's Window*] goes back behind Dungan's original assumptions and works in that area first."[20] Induction (or, as he prefers

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[13]Ibid., p. 101.

[14]*Hermeneutics: A Text Book* (Cincinnati: Standard Publishing Co., 1888).

[15]Ibid., p. 101.

[16]Clinton Lockhart, *Principles of Interpretation as recognaized generally by Biblical scholars, treated as a science, derived inductively from an exegesis of many passages of scripture,* 2d ed., rev. (Fort Worth: S. H. Taylor, 1915), p. 5. The first edition was published in 1910 under a slightly different name by the Christian Index Publishing Co., Des Moines.

[17]*We Be Brethren: A Study in Biblical Interpretation* (Abilene: Biblical Research Press, 1958).

[18]Thomas called Dungan's *Hermeneutics* "the best book in the general area available so far" (p. 9).

[19]Abilene: Biblical Research Press, 1974.

[20]*Heaven's Window,* p. 92.

to call it, the scientific method) serves the same end for Thomas as it served for the earlier Restoration leaders; that is, through its use each reader of Scripture "is striving to arrive at the common mind through the same methodology."[21]

J. S. Lamar did not provide the total impetus for inductive Bible study in the Restoration Movement, but he was the first within the movement to give it full and convincing expression. A hundred and twenty-five years later, we can still admire the spirit and intention of his work. He aimed at an accurate, reliable, and unfailing understanding of the teachings of scripture. He sought to achieve that aim by applying to scriptural phenomena the same canons that England's greatest living scientist applied with such success to physical phenomena. He attempted to make biblical interpretation an exact science when allegory and dogmatism had seemingly produced almost universal skepticism of arriving at a consensus of what the Bible means. In the context in which it arose, Lamar's method offered an exciting possibility: the Bible can be understood. It is as comprehensible as the natural world and has an objective meaning that anyone following the correct methodology can find out.

But we now live and work in a different context. Allegory and scholasticism no longer need to be overthrown. Baconian science is now a historical curiosity.[22] The old canons of scientific logic have been found inapplicable in many areas of knowledge. And the perspective from which we view the Bible is changing. The nineteenth-century Restoration perspective fostered the meticulous construction of a system of doctrine whose individual points were declared somewhere in the Bible. The twentieth-century perspective is beginning to encourage the study of the theological issues addressed directly by the contents of scripture, within their historical and biblical contexts. Our predecessors asked, What does the Bible say about God? about salvation? about the church? We are beginning to ask, What is the central doctrine of the Bible? What is the message of Luke-Acts? How is the history of the people of God also a revelation of God? For them, grammatical exegesis was virtually equivalent to hermeneutics; for us it is the presupposition for hermeneutics.

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[21]Ibid., p. 87.

[22]Its demise was evident as early as the midnineteenth century. It drowned under a "deluge of facts" (Daniels, *American Science,* pp. 102-137). Justus von Liebig was the first prominent scientist to repudiate Baconian inductivism (in his essay *Über Francis Bacon von Verulam und die Methode der Naturforschung* [Munich: Literarische-Artistische Anstalt, 1863]; see Larry Lauden, "Theories of Scientific Method from Plato to Mach," *History of Science* 7 [1968]: 1-63). I am indebted to Robert Colvett for these last two references.

If the changing perspective is legitimate and if the new questions are to be allowed, then to what extent is the old methodology appropriate? The answer is that, taken as an all-encompassing hermeneutic, induction has far-reaching inadequacies.

Lamar's inductive method was essentially atomistic. It reduced the Bible to "phenomena" representing "rules, laws, circumstances, influences, forces, connections, and dependences, which may be expressed *in words*" (p. 192; italics his). In studying any question, Lamar said, "the first thing to be done would be to collect the scriptural facts, or recorded instances, which bear upon the point" (p. 213). When one views the Bible as a vast assortment of phenomena, spread out, "it may be, in some confusion" (p. 42), one does not so much read it consecutively for its own sake as ransack it for data bearing on a particular question–even a question that may be wholly external and alien to the biblical witness. Lamar's own illustration suggests the fundamental weakness of induction as one's sole method: the Bible is not an assortment of prefabricated blocks on their way to becoming a temple of truth. It is itself the temple. The books of the Bible are architectonic wholes, not stacks of lumber and stone waiting to be assembled. The Canon of books is a unity, speaking a unified and coherent word. It is not the interpreter's task to erect the temple, but to explore it.

One of the most distressing results that follow when the Bible is atomized is that there are no longer any weightier matters of the law. All matters begin to weigh the same. Every phenomenon in the Bible becomes of equal height and weight with all the other phenomena. Everything in the Bible tends to become of first importance, so nothing remains of secondary importance. Everything becomes first principles, so there are no second principles.[23] Lamar grounds all true doctrine on the proposition that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God–"the true center from which radiates all the light and truth of the Bible" (p. 160). So far so good. He has identified a center. But the next move is crucial. Do matters of believing and doing gain weight and priority from their nearness to the center, or are all equally near and primary? The *Organon*'s position is clear: to believe the center "is to oblige one to obey all the commandments, to heed all the instructions, and to cherish all the promises of the Savior, either oracularly delivered in person or by those to whom he delegated the authority. In fact, the whole Bible is but a radiation from its glorious personage; and *all* its facts, precepts, promises, hopes, fears, and enjoyments, are intimately and indissolubly connected with him" (p. 162; italics mine).

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[23]See Matt. 23:23; 1 Cor. 15:3; Heb. 6:1.

Whether Lamar pressed this viewpoint consistently in his ministry is a separate matter. But here it stands at least in theory. We are led to believe that matters like christology, conversion, church organization, horse racing, and faro are all of equal weight and importance.

Both the atomizing of the Bible and the leveling out of all its contents resulted from modeling Bible study after scientific research. Science in its Baconian expression advanced knowledge by collecting facts, describing and classifying them, and then drawing consistent inferences. By this method the total body of scientific learning was increased. Without question this method is still of enormous value in certain areas of biblical research, including archaeology and philology, where the possibility exists of discovering data previously unknown and integrating them into a coherent system. But the method cannot be successfully applied to every dimension of Bible study, for at its heart, Bible study is a literary, not a scientific pursuit. It deals with a body of literature already well known. At its heart it aims at helping the reader comprehend the meaning, nature, and purpose of what is already given in the Bible. In addition to seeking answers to contemporary questions, by constructing patterns from biblical facts or phenomena, it must also recognize the larger organizing patterns already present in the biblical literature. To attempt less than that is to fail at the heart of the whole enterprise.

Until quite recent times, inductivism continued to exert its influence upon Restorationist thought, particularly south of the Ohio River. Insofar as intepreters adhered to the methods laid out by Lamar, Dungan, Lockhart, and others, the atomization of scripture, the leveling out of all distinctions between weightier and less weighty matters, and the approach to the Bible through nonliterary avenues proceeded apace. Meanwhile, biblical study at large has long since turned away from whatever vogue Baconian induction might have enjoyed. Since the second half of the nineteenth century, biblical scholarship has applied the various methods developed within the fields of historical and literary criticism to the history and literature in the Bible. Since the early part of this century, scholarship has increasingly recognized a distinction between exegesis and hermeneutics, between the descriptive and the normative tasks. That the new methodologies have seemed to lead to heretical outcomes, particularly in the practiced hands of German liberals, has done nothing to make them attractive to people with a high view of the Bible. In consequence much Restoration biblical scholarship has been carried on virtually within a closed field of discussion.

The long-range consequences of following a defective methodology within a closed atmosphere are dismal. The combination of biblical maxims lifted from their contexts leads to more and more eccentric interpretations

of scripture's intent. The removal of our researches from the critical eye of outside scrutiny eliminates the need for pleasing anyone but ourselves and suggests an underlying apprehension that our researches will not stand such scrutiny. The leveling of the Bible's contents makes soundness in faith the unfailing adherence to a limitless set of details and in practice makes unity unattainable. The equation of exegesis with hermeneutics turns preaching into lectures on the Bible and insures that our message will be increasingly unintelligible to contemporary secular man.

If we fall into stagnation and rigidity, the blame is not to be laid at the doorstep of Lamar and the other nineteenth-century thinkers. In their time their work with the text faced contemporary concerns and offered the best solutions they knew or could find out. Their clear and compelling statement of the inductive method offered a positive improvement over previous methods. Through its application, the rubbish of allegory, spiritual interpretation, and dogmatism was cleared away and the plain meaning of scripture could again be sought. But if in the final analysis inductivism failed to supply an all-encompassing hermeneutic, it is not because it attempted too much but because it attempted too little.

In our work with the text we can open up avenues and try out visions unknown to men in the last century. In our time the way is prepared for a holistic reading of scripture acknowledging the structure, shape, and thematic integrity of the various books. There is a move in the direction of biblical theology, balancing our proclamation against what is proclaimed in scripture and seeking a center for our faith around which we may enjoy community. There is a fresh impulse to cleanse the dark infections of sectarianism, flooding those areas with the light and power of truth and love. And there is a call to reenter the larger field of discussion, contributing our hard-won insights and benefiting from the insights of others.

Lamar and the men of his generation took an exciting and challenging adventure, and they did well. May the remembrance of their achievement impel us to renewed vigor and excellence in the adventure of our own day.[24]

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[24]I wish to thank Leonard Allen of Abilene Christian University for making available to me his paper "Baconianism and the Bible in the Disciples of Christ: J. S. Lamar and *The Organon of Scripture,*" presented to the American Academy of Religion Convention in 1983 and published in *Church History* Vol. 55, 1986, pp. 65-80). Dr. Allen's paper is of special interest because he follows Lamar's thinking beyond the *Organon* to his later years when Lamar himself rejected a rigid Baconianism.