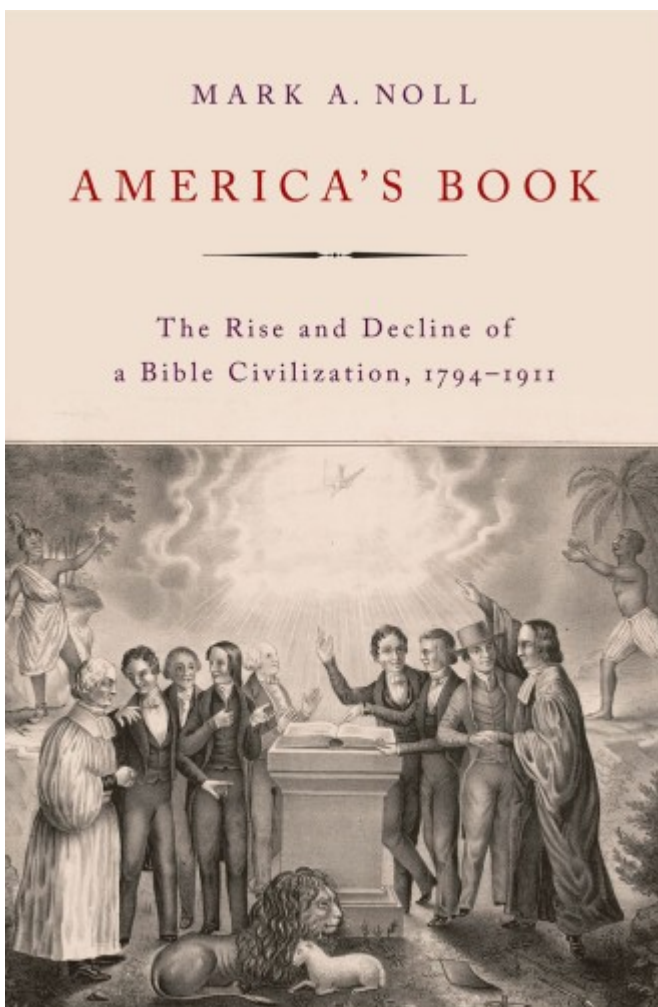


America the biblical

In a breathtaking scholarly work, Mark Noll explores the doomed experiment of a republic built on an unwritten law of *sola scriptura*.

by [Brad East](#) in the [August 2023](#) issue

In Review



America's Book

The Rise and Decline of a Bible Civilization, 1794-1911

By Mark A. Noll

Oxford University Press

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“This country is, as everybody knows, a creation of the Bible,” said Solomon Schechter at the dedication of a new building at New York’s Jewish Theological Seminary in 1903. The renowned Jewish scholar went on: “The Bible is still holding its own, exercising enormous influence as a real spiritual power, in spite of all the destructive tendencies.”

Schechter gave these remarks at almost the exact midpoint between the American founding and the present day. Were they true then? Are they true now? True or not, what do they mean? And what are “the destructive tendencies” to which he refers?

In his new book, historian Mark Noll attempts an answer. Across 850 pages, he takes the reader on a comprehensive journey through the long American 19th century, from the publication of Thomas Paine’s *The Age of Reason* in 1794 to the tercentennial celebration of the King James translation of the Bible in 1911. The result, as with everything published by Noll, is the very definition of scholarly excellence. Words like *masterly* and *magisterial* fail to do it justice. His knowledge of the sources and periods is encyclopedic; the reader is left breathless after minor seven-page asides, to say nothing of whole chapters. The book is, in the best sense, overwhelming.

But it isn’t aimless. As a sequel to his previous work, *In the Beginning Was the Word: The Bible in American Public Life, 1492-1783*, this volume has an argument to make.

Here it is in a nutshell. The United States was, from the start, founded and widely understood as a repudiation of and alternative to European Christendom. Whatever the proper relationship between church and state, the federal government would have no established religion—would not, that is, tax citizens in sponsorship of a formal ecclesiastical body. On this arrangement, most nascent Americans agreed. What then would, or should, the implications be for Christian faith and doctrine in the public square? How could Christian society endure without the legal and political trappings of Christendom?

Answer: through the Bible. Not the Bible *and*; not the Bible *as mediated by*. The Bible *alone*. America would be the first of its kind: a “Bible civilization.” That is to say, a constitutional republic of coequal citizens whose common, voluntary trust in the truth and authority of Christian scripture would simultaneously (1) put the lie to

the “necessity” of coercive religious regimes, (2) provide the moral character required for a liberal democracy to flourish, and (3) fulfill the promise of the Protestant Reformation. *Sola scriptura* thus became the unwritten law of the land. Regardless of one’s confession or tradition, the sufficiency of the Bible for all aspects of life—the canon as the cornerstone for religion, ethics, and politics alike—was axiomatic. For more than a century, it functioned as a given in public argument. Only rarely did it call for an argument itself.

Noll contends, on the one hand, that this unique attempt to organize an entire nation around purportedly shared yet voluntary assent to the Bible was not as quixotic as it may sound. For a time, it actually worked. On the other hand, it always contained the seeds of its own destruction. Foremost among these was the institution of chattel slavery. The Civil War was the death knell of American Bible civilization, even if it lingered on in successive half-lives.

Two further factors ensured the demise of the experiment. One was the incipient uniformity of the citizenry. Perhaps a Bible-only country might be possible when a supermajority of its people are, for example, White Anglo-Saxon Protestants, by birth or by heritage. But the very religious freedoms enshrined in the Constitution and cherished by those same Americans also made possible—indeed invited—waves of immigrants who neither looked nor lived nor worshiped like them: Roman Catholics, Jews, German-speaking Lutherans, and more.

The second factor was the Protestant principle itself, what Noll calls “the self-delusion that had always lurked in Protestant conceptions of *sola scriptura*.” Here is how he delivers the verdict: “The American republican experiment gave a redeemed population an opportunity to be guided by nothing except the Bible; American experience showed that for the pursuit of common social, economic, political, and social goals, *sola scriptura* simply did not work.” It was, in a word, “a delusive impossibility.” The Bible must be read. Americans read it differently. How could the very source of American disunity effect national unity?

That disunity burned itself up in the conflagration of civil war. “If the Bible was the nation’s book,” Noll writes, “why could it not resolve the nation’s most pressing moral problem?” If formidable arguments could be marshaled from the Bible both for and against slavery, then the Bible, as E. Brooks Holifield puts it, “could no longer articulate the moral vision that held the culture together.”

Yet even apart from slavery, Bible-only Christians had already shown their inability to agree on even the most elementary doctrinal questions: liturgical order, the practice of the sacraments, rest on the sabbath, ecclesial unity, pastoral authority, the use of creeds, and so on. Noll distinguishes three main ways of being Christian at the time. *Custodial* or *proprietary* Protestants were organized and institutional; educated and monied; unafraid of elites, laws, or national mobilization. *Sectarians* were populist, radically biblicist, suspicious of hierarchy, zealous in their attachment to disestablishment, and wary of parachurch power. *Methodists* split the difference, and with the most impressive results: evangelistic, conversionist, and apolitical, they were also nationally coordinated, highly disciplined, and efficiently managed from the top down. (I've always thought of Baptists as the definitively American Protestant tradition. I was wrong. It's Methodism.)

Whether Methodist, sectarian, or custodial Protestant, the preachers and writers of antebellum America were highly successful in their efforts. Their ranks swelled by millions. Where they did not succeed was in uniting Christians across denominational dividing lines—much less in uniting Americans across ethnic, regional, and political lines. This was never going to happen. Nonetheless they cast the vision and pursued it. Noll's record of their labors is therefore moving at times but ultimately tragic. It may not have had to end in bloodshed, as it did on the fields of Gettysburg and Shiloh. But it wasn't built to last.

Noll is right to interpret this failure as intrinsic to the project of a "Bible civilization." I am less persuaded by his apparent agreement with the protagonists' self-understanding, namely, that in the process they were repudiating Christendom. It seems to me that their efforts are better interpreted not as post-Christendom but as Christendom by other means. Noll approvingly quotes Hugh McLeod's definition of "the traditional European pattern" of Christendom, where

there are close ties between leaders of the church and secular elites; where the laws purport to be based on Christian principles; where, apart from certain clearly defined outsider communities, everyone is assumed to be Christian; and where Christianity provides a common language, shared alike by the devout and the religiously lukewarm.

On these terms, is not the American nation a version of Christendom, at least in its first century of existence? In one or two places Noll nods in this direction, as when

he comments on “American Protestant efforts to replace the structures of formal Christendom with an informal Christendom relying on the Bible.” Far more often, though, the stated aims of the young Americans set the parameters of Noll’s proposed interpretation.

A similar issue arises in the only chapter in the book that rings a false note. Here is the thesis:

Exceedingly able scholars have . . . concluded that in the antebellum decades the biblical proslavery position triumphed over biblical abolition. Although I once agreed, further reading in the works of antebellum abolitionists, and not disregarding the confusion caused by the great diversity of antislavery appeals to Scripture, I no longer agree. In fact, the Bible in antebellum America, and understood in traditional terms, offered wider, deeper, and more thorough support for abolition than for slavery. Contingent historical circumstances, rather than the intrinsic credibility of the arguments, created the opposite impression.

This is a very strange paragraph. Is a historian competent to inform the reader whether a sacred text, when read by adherents of a religious tradition as God’s living word, does or does not “in fact” endorse a particular sociopolitical position? All while showing in detail that the adherents in question disputed the matter with one another? The very thesis Noll wants to defend undermines his claim.

The Bible cannot speak for itself. It requires readers, and not them alone but readers inhabiting a community whose tradition informs them—sometimes explicitly, usually implicitly—how to read well. One’s interpretive community, in other words, defines the hermeneutical premises and procedures that qualify as good reading. It renders certain questions intelligible and certain answers admissible. Which means it also answers certain questions in advance. All this is true whether one knows it or not.

Noll is correct, therefore, that “contingent historical circumstances” created the impression that the Bible supports chattel slavery. He is wrong, however, to suggest that he or anyone else is in a position to assess the “intrinsic credibility” of the arguments either way. If we are standing outside the hermeneutical circles in which those arguments occurred, as I take it a historian should, then we have no grounds on which to offer a dispositive answer to the question. If, on the other hand, we are standing inside (one of) those circles, then we are no longer doing history but

considering the normative question as co-disputants—in which case we may no longer claim to be offering an independent answer, since we have entered intrinsically contested hermeneutical space.

Put another way, it is Noll's hermeneutical context that determines his evaluation of the arguments. But presumption of that context (or any other) is question-begging, since representatives of the position he rejects would claim, and did claim, an alternative context (i.e., an alternative set of hermeneutical norms). For example, is a strong biblical argument one that marshals discrete proof texts that mention the subject matter by name? Is it one that reads the canon as a total narrative whose moral momentum continues into the present? Or is it one that privileges the living testimony of believing readers, particularly those who lack power or are victims of unjust suffering?

The Bible will not tell you which one makes for a strong reading. It does not provide the terms of its own interpretation. By definition it cannot. This is why Noll cannot offer a neutral correct answer from without. For in doing so he involves himself in the quarrel, and thereby proffers (wittingly or not) a preferred hermeneutical context for resolving it.

To be clear, Noll's context is the right one; likewise his answer to the question of the Bible's position on slavery is the right one. But not because the Bible, all on its own, in fact supports his position. We've seen why that can't be. Rather, it's because he reads the Bible as supporting his position. Which it does, when read in accordance with his community's tradition of interpretation—a tradition superior to that assumed by advocates of chattel slavery.

We are in thick philosophical weeds. The point is a crucial one, however. It informs both historians' methods and Christians' understanding of the American debate over slavery. There is finally no Archimedean point from which to see clearly the right answer to a previous generation's question about how to read the Bible, certainly not as an exercise in understanding that generation's disagreements in their time. There is no escaping contingency, including our own. We cannot let ourselves off so easily.

Not that Noll would want that. His life's work is one long refusal to let any American myths, above all about the Bible and evangelicals, go unquestioned. That refusal is on erudite display in this book. I have offered only a hint of the treasures it contains.

I have not even mentioned his riveting discussions of the role and use of the Bible in American synagogues, in women's societies, in abolitionist literature and temperance meetings, in the narratives of freed slaves and the sermons of Black preachers and the "Negro spirituals" that Noll rightly calls "America's most memorable scriptural gift to the world."

I do not know whether this is Noll's final masterpiece or the middle entry in a trilogy. Either way, he has done more than enough. All the rest of us have to offer is thanks.