

Joseph Addison
Alexander
of Princeton

Allan M. Harman



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Preface

For over fifty years I have been using the books of J. A. Alexander. The first of them was his commentary on the Psalms, which I used in 1959. It was also the first of his books I actually owned. When I was working on a Th.M thesis on the Book of Acts under Dr N. B. Stonehouse at Westminster Theological Seminary during 1961–62, I acquired a copy of his commentary on that book. Over the years I have obtained all his major books, and my appreciation of him and his work has grown. He was a brilliant, though unusual, scholar. In this book I try to paint the picture of his life and work, and also an assessment of his significance.

I thank my wife, Mairi, for her continued help in my ministry. I am also grateful for the assistance of a friend, John Cromarty, who read over my manuscript.

Allan M. Harman

Timeline

- 1809 Born in Philadelphia, USA, on 24 April 1809
- 1812 His father, Archibald Alexander, appointed as the first professor of Princeton Theological Seminary, and the family move to Princeton
- 1826 Graduated with the B.A. degree from the College of New Jersey (now Princeton University)
- 1830 Appointed as Adjunct Professor of Ancient Languages and Literature in the College of New Jersey
- 1833–34 European tour and study
- 1834–38 Assistant to Charles Hodge in the Oriental Department at Princeton Seminary
- 1838 Appointed Adjunct Professor of Oriental and Biblical Literature

- 1840 Appointed the Professor of Oriental and Biblical Literature
- 1846–47 Commentary on Isaiah published
- 1850 Commentary on Psalms published
- 1851 Transferred to the chair of Biblical and Ecclesiastical History
- 1856 Commentary of Acts published
- 1858 Commentary on Mark published
- 1859 Transferred to the chair of Hellenistic and New Testament Literature
- 1860 Died and was buried at Princeton
- 1860 Posthumous publication of his two volumes of sermons, *Sermons, Joseph Addison Alexander, D.D.* (republished in 2004 with the title, *Theology on Fire: Sermons from the Heart of J. A. Alexander*)
- 1861 Posthumous publication of his commentary on Matthew 1-16
- 1867 Posthumous publication of his book, *Notes on the New Testament and Ecclesiastical History*

1.

Family background and early life in Princeton

In 1812, a young Joseph Addison Alexander (1809–1860), just three years old, moved to Princeton, New Jersey, when his father, Dr Archibald Alexander (1772–1851), accepted appointment by the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of America as the first professor in a new seminary. Princeton was only a small town of about 3,000 people when the seminary began. Though the choice of Princeton was at first considered temporary, just a year after its foundation the General Assembly confirmed that it was the permanent site, and building work got underway on the first of the seminary buildings.

Joseph had been born on 24 April 1809, but from early childhood his family called him by his second name, Addison. From the age of three Princeton was his home until his death, except for the period he spent in Europe in 1833–34 and the later shorter visit in the summer of 1853.

During that time it increased greatly in size. Whereas at an early period there was no direct link between Princeton and the main railway system, a branch line was later built, and connections with major centres like Philadelphia and New York became much easier.

Princeton was well known as it had been the site of the Princeton College since 1746. Early American Presbyterian ministers were usually prepared for ministry by living and studying with an experienced pastor. Some of these pastors became known for having the skills to prepare young men for pastoral work, and often trained several at the same time. In 1727 William Tennent Sr (1673–1746) established an academy on the Little Neshaminy Creek in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, that came to be called the Log College. George Whitefield (1714–1770), on his second visit to America, visited it in 1739, and commented that seven or eight young men had just been sent forth, with more students almost ready to enter the ministry. The Log College closed in 1742, but students from it had started similar academies. Discussions were held about establishing a more permanent institution, especially when Yale College showed itself very unfriendly to those who supported the Great Awakening. David Brainerd (1718–1747), the missionary to the Indians, was expelled from there for his ‘intemperate, indiscrete zeal’.

While not an official Presbyterian Church establishment, all the early trustees of the College of New Jersey at Princeton were either Presbyterian ministers or elders. Its aim was twofold. On the one hand it was to train men for the ministry, while on the other hand it was envisaged as a place where others would be trained for various useful

professions. While it began in the manse of Rev. Jonathan Dickinson (1688–1747) of Elizabethtown, New Jersey, it was moved to Princeton in 1756. Its first buildings were largely paid for by donations received in Britain on a deputation visit by Revs Gilbert Tennent (1703–1764) and Samuel Davies (1723–1761) two years previously. Of the early presidents, five died in the first twenty years of its existence, including Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758), who succeeded his son-in-law, Aaron Burr (1716–1757). Edwards died after a smallpox vaccination in March 1758, having only begun his duties in January of that year.

After two short presidencies, John Witherspoon (1723–1794), minister of the Church of Scotland in Paisley, was invited to accept the position. The trustees were not put off by his refusal of the first invitation, and after two years he was prevailed upon to accept, arriving with his family in August 1768. He had a distinguished career there, but was also very involved in the affairs of the Presbyterian Church and in national politics. He took a very pro-active role on the republican side, and was one of the fifty-five men who signed the Declaration of Independence in 1776.

Witherspoon himself taught many classes at the college, including the languages — Greek, Hebrew, Latin and French. He also lectured in moral philosophy and divinity. His influence on many of the young men was profound, with 114 of his former students becoming Presbyterian ministers. But this influence was not to last. He died in 1794, and was succeeded by his son-in-law, Samuel Smith. However, the ethos of the college was changing, and no longer did it blend scientific and religious teaching in such a way that it

prepared men for the ministry. While the college had about 200 students, very few of them were ministerial candidates. At one time over half of the graduates of the college went into the Presbyterian ministry, but by the early 1800s only 9% did so, in spite of the fact that a Presbyterian minister was the full-time professor of theology.

About 1800, Ashbel Green (1762–1848), the pastor of Second Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, started speaking to others about the possibility of the Presbyterian Church establishing its own seminary, independent of Princeton College. He spoke at a later assembly about the shortage of ministers, and the outcome was that there was a call to presbyteries to work for an increase in the number of candidates and to provide them with adequate support. The General Assembly in 1809 sent out to presbyteries a proposal with three options: a single seminary, one in the south with another in the north, or a seminary in every synod. The majority favoured the first option, and it became the one that carried. A plan, largely the work of Ashbel Green, was prepared, and it envisaged godly staff committed to the Scriptures and the doctrinal standards of the church that would train students not only academically, but in real godliness.

At the 1812 Assembly the decision was made that Princeton was to be the location of the seminary. A board consisting of twenty-one ministers and nine elders was elected, and then after prayer, Dr Archibald Alexander was elected as the first professor. He regretted leaving his congregation in Philadelphia, and thought that he was unqualified for the task. However, he responded to the call of the church and concurred in the decision. There was only one Presbyterian

Church in Princeton, a brick one built in 1760, having fifty-seven pews and galleries on three sides. It was full on 12 August 1812 as Archibald Alexander was installed. He gave a lengthy address on John 5:39: 'Search the Scriptures.' By the next year, Archibald Alexander was joined by a colleague, Samuel Miller (1769–1850). Alexander and Miller had first met at the General Assembly in Philadelphia in 1801, Miller serving in a collegial ministry in the Presbyterian Church of New York. The collegiate was broken up in 1809, and Miller became the pastor of the Wall Street Presbyterian Church. While Alexander was appointed to teach theology, Miller was the professor of Ecclesiastical History and Church Government. These two men were dominant in the life of Princeton Seminary for over thirty years, with Alexander dying in 1850 and Miller in 1851.

Archibald Alexander was minister of Third Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia when his appointment was made. At that church he ministered to a large congregation, especially of Scots/Irish artisans. He was a southerner, from Virginia, being born seven miles east of Lexington, where his Scottish-Irish grandparents had come after first migrating from Ulster to Pennsylvania. It was a hard life on the frontier, and his grandmother was killed by Indians. At an early age he had to learn how to ride a horse and to shoot.

While Archibald Alexander's grandfather had been converted during the Great Awakening, his father, though a Presbyterian elder, did not show the same spirituality. After schooling under William Graham in Hanover County, Alexander served as a tutor in the home of General John Posey in Fredericksburg. One Sunday night he was reading

from John Flavel's writings at the request of a godly woman who was part of a group at General Posey's. As he read, his emotions became too stirred, and he broke off the reading. He then went to his room and dropped on his knees seeking mercy from the Lord.

He studied again under William Graham along with several other ministerial candidates, and was licensed in October 1791 at the age of nineteen. For three years he served as an itinerant evangelist, preaching simple sermons to country folk. One man in an obscure place paid him a great compliment when, after listening to him, said, 'I guess he aint a very *larned* man!' During this period he preached effectively without notes and decided to carry on in this way. After serving in southern Virginia and as president of the recently commenced Hampden-Sydney College, Archibald Alexander moved to Pine Street Church in Philadelphia in 1807. This church was also known as Third Presbyterian Church. Believing this was God's call, he went, but was never attracted to the sophisticated social life or the crowded city conditions.

The Archibald Alexander family consisted of seven children, six sons and one daughter. The family had to get used to the busy and varied life of their father as he had many responsibilities in the early years of the seminary's existence. His own modest home at first was the library, chapel and classroom, with students participating in meals and family worship. His wife, Janetta, shared her husband's religious convictions. She encouraged him when he was downcast, was a mother to her own children, an 'elder sister' to read the religious books she had grown to love in her childhood home, and was able to explain the Scriptures very well. In