

From

## **The Coleridge Bulletin**

The Journal of the Friends of Coleridge  
New Series 33 (NS) Summer 2009

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<http://www.friendsofcoleridge.com/Coleridge-Bulletin.htm>

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*Coleridge's Responses, Volume II: Coleridge on the Bible*

(Continuum 2008)

edited by Anthony J. Harding

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ON MANY OCCASIONS when I worked at Jesus College, Cambridge, I gazed at the bust of William Frend, in a colleague's window, at that time located in Coleridge's former room in First Court, without fully understanding the significance of this erstwhile tutor of Samuel Taylor Coleridge for the latter's biblical hermeneutics. This collection of Coleridge's notes, and more extended treatment of biblical topics, has remedied that gap in my knowledge. More importantly, it provides an excellent introduction to the principles of his biblical interpretation and enables a modern biblical scholar to see how it is that someone who, in many respects came to represent the hermeneutical traditions of catholic Christianity, nevertheless saw the complementary contribution of critical, textual and historical scholarship. In this endeavour reason is allowed full sway, but exercised in the context of a fundamental conviction that the Bible was the instrument of the Divine Spirit through which people in different times and places could find themselves addressed by God. So, existential impact is important, and as Coleridge put it: 'Concerning the Inspiration of the Scriptures—the great speculative difficulties, & how these fade into nothing if taken as all religion ought to be practically—thus—if inspired, yet *for* you they are not unless the truth, they contain, enter your understanding & marry with your desires and impulses' (CN III 3440; *Coleridge's Responses* 89).

The collection is presented chronologically, thereby giving the reader some sense of the development of Coleridge's thought (less apparent to this amateur reader of Coleridge than it may be to experts). The material is grouped in six chapters: Radicalism, Unitarianism and the Bible; *The Friend*, notebook entries, marginalia; Explorations of the biblical canon 1788-24, *The Statesman's Manual*, and *A Lay Sermon; On the Constitution of the Church and State*; and, finally, *Table Talk* and last commentaries. There is a concise introduction to the book as a whole and lucid summaries with attention drawn to matters of particular importance at the beginning of each chapter.

What is striking to the modern biblical scholar is how much of their scholarship Coleridge anticipates. Of course he himself was widely read in contemporary German biblical scholarship—as shown by comments on the pioneering work of Paulus and Eichhorn (of whom more anon). There is a robust confidence about the way in which Coleridge expresses his doubts about the Gospel of Matthew and his preference for the Gospel of John. The mature Coleridge, like Luther before him, looks to the Gospel of John and the Epistles of Paul as the crown of the New Testament, the former being the ultimate explication of the doctrine of Christ and the Pauline epistles the

reasoned explanation of them. Johannine authorship of the gospel is a *sine qua non*, and it forms the foundation of his biblical theology. Coleridge is prepared to go to some lengths to separate the Gospel of John, to which he readily attaches so much authority, from that which has been traditionally linked with it, the Revelation to John. Echoing Luther's 'canon within the canon', and the patristic critics, Coleridge voices doubts about it, not least because of the deleterious influence on his friend Edward Irving.

To one whose knowledge of Coleridge has been dominated by the earlier influence of Revelation, for example in his *Religious Musings*, the attitude to Revelation was a surprise. How could it be that the author of this poem, not to mention 'Kubla Khan', could have become so suspicious of the book? That said, there is evidence of a more positive assessment of the book as a kind of 'summum theologiae' of the New Testament, as the pinnacle of its christological inventiveness (*Coleridge's Responses* 189). While (as we shall see) Coleridge was not unsympathetic to the apocalyptic and mystical explorations of William Blake, the use of the book of Revelation by others (Edward Irving's interpretation in particular is mentioned in this book, but there were others like Joanna Southcott and Richard Brothers), might have made it less palatable.

Coleridge's hermeneutics keeps a firm grasp of the relationship between the Old and New Testament, demonstrating a curiosity about the origin of biblical customs, laws and myths. Indeed, Coleridge propounds the interesting view that the fulfilment of the Old Testament in the New paved the way for an appreciation of the former for its own sake, not just as a forerunner of the New Testament. That is typical of the confident way in which he approaches his exegetical task, mixing historical and philological curiosity with the kind of reverence for the text which could come straight out of Augustine's 'De Doctrina Christiana'. This is possible, because as he frequently asserts, it is not the words themselves that are important but the words as vehicles for a deeper theological truth which may speak to the reader or hearer at any time and place, which is all-important:

The *truth* inferred is for *us*; the argument or induction for the first readers & immediate Addressees of the Epistle. In what other way indeed could the moral interest of the then present age have been reconciled with that of Christians in all after ages? And vice versa the latter with the former? In the progression of vital Growth the Integument drop off; but the stem remains & springs upward. The grain is for a while protected by the Husk which we afterwards separate, by the winnowing of the Spirit of Truth, who has promised to be with his Church even to the end.—The Insight into this truth constitutes the main difference between a superstitious and a truly religious use and veneration of the Scriptures.

(CM I 468-9; *Coleridge's Responses* 161)

This ability to engage with higher criticism while maintaining a fundamentally

traditional hermeneutic makes Coleridge a pivotal figure for the emergence of a critical biblical hermeneutics in Britain.

There are many interesting perspectives which repay further thought and show Coleridge as being that remarkable mix of traditionalist and liberal interpreter. He has a solution to the ‘synoptic problem’, which stresses independent use of earlier oral collections more than literary dependence of, say, Matthew and Luke on Mark, the standard solution of modern biblical scholarship. Anticipating Franz Overbeck and others he regarded the Gnostics as ‘the first men of learning, who embraced the doctrines of Christ’ (*Coleridge’s Responses* 61). He was wedded to the historical and theological authority of the Gospel of John in a way very much at odds with those that commend themselves to modern biblical scholarship. Nevertheless he has noted that the Pastoral Epistles (1 and 2 Timothy and Titus) are not by Paul and is prepared to suggest that, if given an opportunity, he could improve on Paul’s argument in Romans (while in all humility understanding why it is that Paul had put it in somewhat different terms). Here is the exponent of ‘Sachkritik’ at work! Such is the method of those who believe that the biblical books are not just historically relevant but are able to speak to men and women in other times and places.

Coleridge was knowledgeable about patristic authors and very ready to express his suspicion of the polemical tendencies of writers like Irenaeus. His writing exhibits an understanding of the problems of the text which only a close reading would throw up. Thus, at several points he has something to say about the appearance of Christ in the pages of the Old Testament, whether that is in references to the Name of the Lord or the Angel of the Lord. Early Christian apologists like Justin (and indeed Origen after him) had made much of passages which seemed to suggest the existence of another divine figure alongside the one God. Interestingly, this has been a feature of modern New Testament scholarship in its Second Temple context over the last twenty years or so (for example, in Alan Segal’s *Two Powers in Heaven* and Jarl Fossum’s *The Angel of the Lord*). This is an insight which Coleridge anticipated. So also did William Blake (for example, in ‘The Everlasting Gospel’ and the ‘Job’ engravings), the Angel of the Divine presence becoming a demiurge, akin to what we find in earlier Christian Gnostic systems but only properly understood within the framework of Blake’s theological monism.

Reference to Blake suggests him as an interesting point of comparison for Coleridge’s hermeneutics. The politics are very different but the hermeneutics are in some ways similar. Coleridge was immersed in contemporary scholarship and showed that he was widely read in Christian theology and history in the very genre of his works—after all this book is in large part a collection of marginalia, so we know what it was on which Coleridge was commenting. Both were prepared to entertain the possibility that ancient myths and legends make up the Bible but for both the origins and historicity are less important than the ways in which they function as (to quote Blake)

‘sentiments and examples which whether true or Parabolic are Equally useful’.

However, on the basis of this collection, it is unlikely that Coleridge would have gone all the way with Blake, whose readiness to criticise the Bible as the cause of error, not just the unhappy victim of the expositions of misguided interpreters, takes criticism of Holy Scripture to levels which Coleridge would not have contemplated. Blake’s ‘Book of Urizen’ and ‘The Marriage of Heaven and Hell’ would probably have elicited from Coleridge a less sympathetic response than his view, on the basis of his reading of ‘Songs of Innocence and Experience’, of Blake as ‘a man of Genius’ (CL IV 833-4).

For Blake the Bible is addressed to the imagination—and does this better than other texts. Coleridge too stresses the way in which biblical poetry appeals to the imagination. Indeed, Coleridge’s words concerning the Scriptures as ‘incorporating the Reason in Images of the Sense, and organizing (as it were) the flux of the Sense by the permanence and self-circling energies of the Reason’ (*Coleridge’s Responses* 133) echo Blake’s earlier words. The importance of self-involvement in reading is crucial for Coleridge too. Thus, in a famous passage from ‘Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit’ Coleridge writes:

In my last letter I said that in the Bible there is more that *finds* me than I have experienced in all other books put together; that the words of the Bible find me at a greater depths of my being; and that whatever finds me brings with it an irresistible evidence of having proceeded from the Holy Spirit. But the Doctrine in question requires me to believe that not only what finds me, but that all that exists in the sacred volume bears witness for itself that it has proceeded from a Holy Spirit.

(‘Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit’, *Coleridge’s Responses* 168-9)

But then Coleridge parts company with Blake, for he goes on to confess, ‘And here, perhaps, I might have been content to rest, if I had not learned, that, as a Christian, I cannot, must not stand alone’ (168). The difference is that Blake *was* content to rest there, and never made his peace with organised religion.

One of the most remarkable passages quoted in the book is the comparison between Luther and Rousseau, and in particular the extraordinary sympathy he expresses in his understanding of Luther’s dream:

I see nothing improbable, that in some of those momentary Slumbers, into which the suspension of all Thought in the perplexity of intense thinking so often passes; Luther should have had a full view of the Room in which he was sitting, of his writing Table and all the implements of Study, as they really existed, and at the same time a brain-image of the Devil, vivid enough to have acquired *Outness*, and a distance regulated by the proportion of its distinctness to that of the objects really impressed on the outward senses.

(*Coleridge’s Responses* 79)

Here the author of 'Kubla Khan' goes on to offer a meditation on 'this Law of imagination' and to identify with 'the heroic Student, in his Chamber in the Warteburg', and the way in which the apparitions insert themselves into his life. In this passage we may grasp not only the extraordinary insight but also the peculiar fecundity of the poet and mystic impinging on historical interpretation. It does also in another remarkable passage (unfortunately not included in this collection). Here Coleridge the poet allows the poet's genius to fructify his biblical interpretation which takes the discussion to extraordinary levels of insight, as he does in his reproach of J. G. Eichhorn for his lack of understanding of 'the analogy of Dreams during an excited state of the Nerves, which I have myself experienced, and the wonderful intricacy, complexity, and yet clarity of the visual Objects' (CM III 188-9, note on Eichhorn, *Einleitung in den Alten Testament*).

That brilliant critique of Eichhorn's discussion of Ezekiel's visionary experience deserves mention because it complements what is contained in this book and encapsulates the essence of Coleridge's best work. That Ezekiel's call vision is mere poetic decoration which needs to be explained and deciphered, represents for Coleridge a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of the experience which the prophet struggles to articulate and which Coleridge understands so well:

It perplexes me to understand how a Man of Eichhorn's sense, learning and acquaintance with psychology could form or attach belief to so cold blooded an hypothesis. That in Ezekiel's vision ideas or spiritual entities are presented in visual symbols, I never doubted; but as little can I doubt, that such symbols did present themselves to Ezekiel in visions—and by a law so closely connected with, if not contained, in that by which sensations are organized into images and mental sounds in our ordinary sleep.

(CM III 188-9, note on Eichhorn, *Einleitung in den Alten Testament*)

Coleridge's approach to visionary texts is one that could be usefully heeded by modern biblical exegetes. There is no better attempt to articulate the nature of visionary experience than this. It manifests Coleridge's own experience, doubtless, but that subtle mix of historical enquiry and reverence for the text, the former impelling him to understand better its peculiarity. Indeed, throughout this collection of Coleridge's responses there are oblique references to esoteric tradition stretching from Jewish origins down to the Kabbalah. As many Christian scholars from the Middle Ages onward have realised, there are aspects of the Jewish mystical and cabbalistic tradition which have many affinities with Christianity, and this is something that Coleridge himself appreciated.

Compared with the Wolfenbüttel fragments of H.S. Reimarus Coleridge comes across much more as the Augustinian 'lower critic' though that role laced with a mild dose of historical curiosity about the nature of the text and its

origins. There is none of the 'hermeneutic of suspicion', which we find in Reimarus's discussion of the historical Jesus. In the latter, the historical veracity of the surface meaning of the text had to be questioned as it masked a deeper historical reality which was at odds with the literal sense of the text, not to mention the received wisdom of ecclesial tradition. The 'real Jesus' was not the saviour of the world but rather a Jewish messiah whose failure to establish God's kingdom on earth had been covered up by the inventiveness of early Christians as they wove their embroidery of doctrinal fantasy to cover the traces of what actually happened. It is a method which has become typical of so much historical research on the Bible, as the relationship between history and theology in the biblical texts has remained a central subject of discussion.

On the other hand, William Blake's suspicion of the biblical text is less about a 'cover up' and more about the deleterious effects of the political models offered by the Bible. Blake's questioning of transcendence and divine monarchy as models for understanding God and the way this has been used as a paradigm for human society leads him to offer his critique of the way the prophetic spirit has been quenched. Blake's abhorrence of monarchy, whether divine or human, and the exclusive hegemony of the rationality of the elite are the forerunner of the kind of critique which has been typical of late twentieth century liberationist and feminist biblical critiques in both of which questions are raised about the social and political effects of an authoritative text. Blake more often anticipates trends in modern biblical criticism in his recognition that being 'found' by the Bible is a mixed blessing. Blake, like many antinomians before him, discovered, especially (but not only) in the New Testament, themes which conflicted with the dominant themes of Christian orthodoxy. He did this, however, not like Reimarus, by questioning the veracity of the gospel narratives but by discerning that Jesus is portrayed as acting 'from impulse: not from rules' ('The Marriage of Heaven and Hell' plates 23-24). Blake's sense of being inspired by the same spirit which inspired the apostles gave him an interpretative confidence which enabled him to challenge received wisdom and to discern significant theological threads in the Bible. These then became his inspiration and which he used as a means of criticising those other parts which were less to his taste.

Both Blake and Coleridge would have been puzzled at the ways in which modern biblical studies has become a form of ancient history or literary criticism, cut off from the interpretative contribution of the interpreting subject. The criticism of Eichhorn's interpretation of Ezekiel, for example, demonstrates the way in which experience offers insight and is the motor of the possibility of historical understanding. The need to defend the credibility of biblical studies in the modern university has meant that the secular character of the discipline is jealously guarded. The preoccupations of the twenty-first-century scholar largely neglect the question: how might the Bible contribute to the well-being of a contemporary generation? The age of religious tests, one hopes, is over, but the imaginative engagement with the Bible which, in

different ways, one finds in Blake's and Coleridge's work, reveals a quality of intellectual engagement which often enables a grasp of the text's meaning as a result of the way in the experience of the interpreter becomes the motor of criticism. Coleridge seemed to have solved the relationship between history and faith by allowing his firm grasp of orthodoxy to give him freedom to pursue whatever historical enquiry he considered appropriate. Blake, on the other hand, allowed himself as interpreting subject a much larger contribution to the way in which the Bible formed and controlled his imagination. That meant that the Bible is never allowed to make demands so much as inform and to be grist to his interpretative mill, the language and inspiration for what in effect are new 'scriptures' for a new generation. Coleridge's solution, in which orthodox faith allows space for historical and literary exploration, has become the cornerstone of the way in which modern biblical studies has been accommodated in the life of the Christian communities.

In this remarkable collection of Coleridge's responses, the marginal comments are often more profound than the extended expositions. We find a peculiar blend of the traditional and inquisitive, which manifests a mind at work which had made its peace with the developments of critical scholarship and the intellectual enquiry which it engendered but without in any way losing the grasp of what made these texts such an important intellectual and religious resource. If the foundation of liberal Christianity is the refusal to conflate the words of the Bible with the advent of the Divine Word then Coleridge like many others, before and after him, epitomizes that religious temper. It is indeed a world similar to the world of modern historical academic enquiry that Coleridge inhabits in his biblical exegesis, in which the engagement with and criticism of contemporary scholars is a central part of his agenda. His is a muted kind of enthusiasm. It has probably taken the best part of the last nearly two hundred years for the devout Christian intellectual to catch up with Coleridge. In some ways we might find his comments not historical enough, and perhaps too speculative for our modern taste, but one cannot fault the relentless commitment to engage with the texts and to follow wherever his attention to detail took him. The result is a wide-ranging insight into the disparate character of the text, which all too often is at odds with received wisdom. As a result one can sometimes wonder at his ready acceptance of ecclesiastical wisdom as the necessary hermeneutical guide. His enquiring spirit led him to toy with conclusions about the origins of the Bible every bit as controversial as contemporary biblical critics who were much less orthodox than himself. On the evidence of this collection, there may not be the political hermeneutical and existential insight of Blake, but the ability to marry critical enquiry and ecclesial commitment can have had few better apologists.

Coleridge marks a significant moment in the history of the birth of modern biblical hermeneutics, possibly a more significant figure than is sometimes allowed. He evinces the way in which the critical spirit and respect for the interpretative conventions of Christian orthodoxy yield a reasonable



approach to the Bible, a book which reflects the fallibility of the human authors' response to the Spirit. Coleridge regarded the reasons for writing the biblical books and the influences on the authors as culturally conditioned but continued to hold that one might pierce to the inner meaning of the Bible whence the divine might spring forth (*Coleridge's Responses* 161). Coleridge's insistence that biblical passages demonstrate divine inspiration, in so far as the reader testifies to their effect on them indicates the distance that has been travelled in the three centuries since Calvin. Hans Frei described the way in which the reader is illumined by the Spirit to discern the biblical word to be God's own word which teaches the truth (Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, 1974, 21). There is a more existential and subjective turn in what Coleridge writes. Coleridge too invokes 'the great Reformers'. Nevertheless, in comparison with the hermeneutical assumptions as set out by Frei, for Coleridge human subjectivity becomes a crucial part of the process of validating the inspired character of the Bible. One effective part of the Bible becomes a foundation for validating the rest—a canon within the Canon, therefore. This testifies to the ways in which, according to Coleridge, the judgement of the theologically enlightened reader complements the effects of that which 'finds' one in the Bible:

But least of all, ought it to be forgotten or overlooked, that this inference of the great Reformers [the sufficiency of the Scriptures, as the ground for Belief, Morals and Discipline] was accompanied by and inseparably connected with, another position, which, even tho' the former were an error disarm it of all its injurious qualities—namely, the necessity of the same Spirit in the Readers of the Scriptures—so that in those parts only, in which the Spirit in the Letter revealed itself to the Spirit in the Heart, were guiding Scriptures for each individual—and nothing more was imposed on him that the duty, which both Humility and Charity dictated, of presuming that all the other parts of the Scriptures <might have been> for other Christians <and might become> for himself at some future time and in other moods & states of spiritual insight, the transparent Shrines of the same Spirit of Truth  
(*Coleridge's Responses* 191).

Coleridge's position represents one type of modern position in biblical studies. Like Coleridge, many Christian biblical scholars, both catholic and protestant, have made their peace with historical study of the Bible and found a space for both faith and criticism. One can go about one's exploration and make all kinds of outlandish suggestions about the origins of the Bible but in the end one is 'under authority'. Blake, on the other hand, is the intellectual ancestor of those who say the Bible will continue to be part of the problem not the solution. He dethroned the Bible from its place as an authoritative book under which one sits. That is the kind of religion from which Job had to be redeemed, according to the 1825 'Job' engravings. Coleridge, on the other

hand, anticipates the accommodation of the modern orthodox religious with criticism.

The textual shape of Coleridge's engagement with the Word of God places him closer to those who give special place to what Blake termed 'The Bible or Peculiar Word of God' as the prime authority. Blake, by contrast, stressed the importance of 'Conscience' and 'the Word of God Universal': (Annotations to Watson's 'Apology', Erdman edition 615). Such a view links Blake with the Spirit-based hermeneutics, stretching back, to the writings of Hans Denck and Sebastian Franck, whose writings were translated into English and influenced the biblical hermeneutics of the seventeenth century. In this, the literal sense gave way to the interpretative power of the indwelling Spirit, a point that Blake made on the first of the 'Job' engravings, where 2 Corinthians 3:6 and 1 Corinthians 2:14 epitomize the correct biblical hermeneutic.

Christians down the centuries have played lip service to the divine spirit who inspired the prophets, but few are either comfortable, or find compatibility, with the emphasis of the prophets on what the divine spirit *now* says to the churches. Of course, the contemporary word to the church is central to mainstream Christianity, but the person who gives it is usually authorised and is not some upstart prophet such as Amos (Amos 7:14). The problem for Christianity is that it has at its heart the contraries of letter and spirit, reverence for the law and antinomianism. This is nowhere better exemplified than in the writings of the Apostle Paul. In a writing like 1 Corinthians we find standing alongside one another the endorsement of the wisdom offered by the indwelling Spirit (such as in 1 Corinthians 2:10-16) with appeals to apostolic authority and the influence (sometimes, as the allusions to Leviticus 18 in 1 Corinthians 5 indicate) of the Bible as a continuing authority. Blake stands at one end of the spectrum, represented by 1 Cor. 2:10-16, whereas Coleridge sitting under the authority of the Bible attempted to make space for reason and imagination in allowing the interpreting subject a degree of autonomy in the hermeneutical process.