

From

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reads

*Coleridge, the Bible, and Religion*

(Palgrave 2008)

by Jeffrey W. Barbeau

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**D**ECLARING A CANON CLOSED, the work of recension complete, is as fraught with risk in literary scholarship as in the history of religion. Every act of inclusion, or exclusion, invites dissent; every gloss and footnote demands critical scrutiny. Yet the activity of canon-formation and the wish to achieve completeness seem irrepressible and inevitable.

In the history of Coleridge's reception as religious thinker, the problem of an incomplete canon has played a significant role. Nineteenth-century reviewers, knowing nothing of his intensive biblical studies, would typically give *Aids to Reflection* guarded praise, while warning their readers that it advocated an overly subjective kind of Christianity that would steer the unprepared mind away from the simple truth of Scripture and the authority of the church. When H. N. Coleridge's edition of *Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit* was published (1840), it seemed to confirm the worst fears of the faithful: Coleridge had dared to question the inerrancy and plenary inspiration of the Bible. The range and depth of Coleridge's biblical and theological investigations remained unknown to all but a few churchmen, such as J. C. Hare and F. D. Maurice, who themselves were considered dangerously speculative by such journals as the *English Review*. Even now that the notebooks and marginalia are available, the unfinished state of much of Coleridge's work poses a challenge for those who want to expound a Coleridgean "system," whether in philosophy, religion, or both together.

Jeffrey W. Barbeau, who teaches theological and historical studies in the southern United States, offers in *Coleridge, the Bible, and Religion* an exposition of Coleridge's mature "religious system," meaning the Trinitarian creed which Coleridge worked out for himself between 1810 and 1825, and which informed, in particular, the *Opus Maximum*, *Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit*, and *Aids to Reflection*. Whereas previous interpreters such as James D. Boulger and J. R. Barth ranged more freely over Coleridge's lifetime of engagement with theological issues, Barbeau confidently states that *Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit* "establishes Coleridge's religious system and the framework for a complete recovery of his understanding of Christian doctrine" (161). As if to reinforce the claim that there was a complete and consistent system underlying the *Confessions*, the structure of his book is modelled on the "Pentad of Operative Christianity" that H. N. Coleridge included in the 1840 edition among the preliminary matter. With extensive quotation from the later notebooks and marginalia, Barbeau gives a detailed account of Coleridge's theological position circa 1825, dealing in successive chapters with Christ as "Word," the Scriptures, the Church, the Holy Spirit, and lastly "The Preacher," in whom all the former elements are to unite. He argues that Coleridge's rehabilitation of the

preacher's role amounts to "a decisive recovery of Reformation theology" (159).

Readers of this journal are more likely to be concerned with questions of textual scholarship and the canon than with systematic theology, however, so this reviewer, while welcoming the increased recognition now being given to the *Confessions*, feels compelled to raise the question of texts. Barbeau bases his exposition on the 1840 edition of *Confessions*, rather than on the version in *Shorter Works and Fragments* printed from the manuscript. But as the *Collected Coleridge* editors observe, the 1840 edition "gives an impression of deliberation and finality that C[oleridge]'s ms, so close to the uncertainties and hesitations of composition, wholly lacks... Had C[oleridge] seen 'Confessions' through the press himself there can be little doubt that further revisions would have been made..." (*SW&F* II 1111). Coleridge did not sanction the publication of the work in any form. According to an entry in the Folio Notebook written in 1826, he feared that publication of these "letters on the religious and superstitious veneration of the Scriptures" would prevent fair consideration of the appeal he had issued in *Aids to Reflection*.<sup>1</sup> J.C. Hare later suggested that he felt the argument of the Letters was incomplete: "he kept them back with the purpose... of adding the half which is still wanting to complete the argument" (quoted, *SW&F* II 1113).

With everything that can be said about the vitality and accessibility of *Confessions*, to describe this work as presenting Coleridge's most "focused, comprehensive treatment of 'revealed' religion," as Barbeau does (3), is to claim more than either Hare or Coleridge himself wished to. The inclusion of the Pentad diagram in 1840 was an astute editorial decision on H. N. Coleridge's part, but it too gives a false impression of finality. The notebooks contain about fifteen versions of the theological "Tetractys" and "Pentad" diagrams, each one different from the others in major or minor ways. There is no reason to think that Coleridge would have regarded any of these as definitive: they were tools to think with, no more.

One further remark needs to be made on this question of texts. Barbeau's very extensive quotations from the notebooks and marginalia have been quietly re-edited. Words and phrases that Coleridge deleted (which are printed in the *Notebooks* and *Marginalia* editions with strike-through) are simply omitted, as are the angle brackets that designate later insertions. Greek and Latin terms are replaced by English equivalents. The cumulative effect of this silent re-editing, for anyone familiar with the sources, is the strange sensation that one is reading another writer entirely, one far more self-assured and dogmatic.<sup>2</sup>

Barbeau's detailed exposition opens with a chapter on "The Coleridgean Creed," corresponding to the first term in the "Pentad." The intention is to show how, for Coleridge, the Bible was one of the five elements of his "Confession of Faith." This five-part "Confession," rather confusingly, does

<sup>1</sup> "Anxious . . . that the momentous Truths . . . set forth in the *Aids to Reflection* should have fair play, I suspended the publication of the Letters" – CN IV 5323.

<sup>2</sup> For example, compare the quotation on page 65 of Barbeau's book with CN V 6718.

not correspond to the “Pentad.” It is as much philosophical as religious, and as Barbeau admits, gives a sometimes “disjointed” and “abstruse” summary of what Coleridge conceived of as essential articles of faith (20, 23). For the unprepared nineteenth-century reader, it must have been baffling to find orthodox Trinitarianism juxtaposed with references to “The Absolute... transcendant I AM... the Ground” (Article I), then to “the Eternal Possibilities... *Chaos spirituale*” (Article II). Such language, as Barbeau drily observes, “hardly bolsters his claim to Christian orthodoxy,” though Coleridge’s intention was to evade the danger of Pantheism by placing “apostasy,” defined as “the alienation of humanity from the stasis of God,” *outside* the divine unity (17). Theology claims that true Being is what God wills. Therefore, those who reject God’s will seek an illusion of being, or non-being. This is also a way of saying that humankind, alienated from God, needs redemption (Article III). So the way is now open for Coleridge to affirm (in articles IV and V) the Universal Church, or whole community of believers, and the Scriptures, in which the story of this redemption is told. The sceptical reader, however, might well point out that Articles I and II open a Pandora’s box of questions, beginning with “how can there be an Absolute that yet excludes ‘Eternal Possibilities?’”<sup>3</sup>

In the next two chapters, Barbeau offers an informative overview of Coleridge’s biblical commentaries. He gives a helpful explanation of what Coleridge called the “twofold character of the Scriptures” (CN V 5721): as a compilation of texts that can be investigated by scholars for “historical and grammatical meaning,” but also as *kerygma*, to be viewed “through the eyes of faith” (28). Barbeau brings out well some crucial points about Coleridge’s way of reading the Bible. Even if he learned from Eichhorn to ask whether miracles may be no more than natural phenomena retroactively given a spiritual interpretation, for Coleridge the crucial point was always how the biblical authors were expressing their sense of divine providence. This focus on the purpose of the text, rather than on the factual truth of the narrative, carries over into the commentaries on the New Testament, so that (for example) he interprets the healing of a blind man, John 9:1-7, as a “symbolic miracle.” The “primary Purpose of the Miracles in general,” Coleridge asserts, was to be “symbols... of the everlasting *Good Tidings*” (CN IV 4611).<sup>4</sup>

The salient purpose of the *Confessions*, however, was to argue that, while everything necessary to Christian belief was *contained* in the Bible, it could not be expected that the text would do its work alone and unaided. Hence, the Pentad places the Church in the position of “antithesis” (or necessary complement) to the Scriptures; and the Holy Spirit as “Mesothesis,” the mediating power, or as Coleridge proposes in one version of the Tetractys, “Community” (CN V 6285). It is significant, as Barbeau rightly argues, that

<sup>3</sup> Coleridge wrestled with this problem in the notebooks. In some versions of the Tetractys, he separated the “transcendant I AM” of the Bible from the “Absolute” (making the Absolute into the “Prothesis” and the “I AM” the “thesis”): see for instance CN V 6285.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Barbeau, 89, but the reference is incorrectly given as “CN V 4611.”

Coleridge shifted the debate about the “inspiration” of the Bible away from claims about the *text* being inspired to an apparently more subjective emphasis on the process of reception: “the light of the Spirit in the mind of the believer.”<sup>5</sup>

Since Barbeau wants to portray Coleridge as an unambiguous defender of “Reformation theology,” he minimizes Coleridge’s interest in matters of interpretation. Barbeau is particularly hostile to any suggestion that Coleridge “advocates a view of the Bible akin to some extreme versions of reader-response criticism,” since Coleridge also “recommends the authority of the church as part of a symbiotic system of ‘revealed’ religion” (112). The object seems to be to make Coleridge sound as orthodox as possible. But this three-way interaction between the church, the “light of the Spirit,” and the Bible is a difficult one for non-believers to grasp. From the point of view of an outsider to church authority, it leads to what looks like utter contradiction, as in this attempt to summarize the relationship: “Late in life Coleridge continues to prioritize [*sic*] the freedom of the individual against an overly dogmatic and rigid church. He charges theologians and laity to read the Bible with diligence as part of a broader community of faith. Church tradition is the ‘master-key’ of biblical interpretation” (126). The reader is confronted with three seemingly incompatible claims: A, and yet B, but also C. This formulation collapses as soon as one asks where the faith community resides, and where the authoritative “church tradition” expresses itself. Barbeau himself explains several of Coleridge’s quarrels with “church tradition,” particularly his vehement rejection of most writings of the early Church Fathers, and his discomfort with the *sola scriptura* school of Protestant divines. The conclusion seems inescapable: the “master-key of interpretation” resolves itself into a choice of interpretative communities, if I may use a reader-response term.<sup>6</sup>

Barbeau clearly admires Coleridge’s sense of the prophetic intention of the Bible, and his understanding of how the apostles John and Paul conceived of their mission. He is less sympathetic to Coleridge’s ventures into biblical criticism, however, and seems positively irritated by Coleridge’s expressions of anxiety about the Book of Daniel and the infancy narratives in Matthew and Luke: “Coleridge’s obsession with the infancy narratives parallels his fixation on Daniel 1-6” (81). For anyone wishing to present Coleridge as apologist for Bible-based Christian orthodoxy, his questioning of these texts presents a difficulty; but to allude to it so dismissively is to misread the state of both theological debate and biblical criticism in the early 1800s. Deists and sceptics had made much headway by alleging that Christianity forced people to accept as sacred truth stories that were clearly fables. Coleridge’s commentaries on the miracle narratives tried to shift the ground of debate: Christians don’t need to claim that all these narratives are factually “true,” if it can be shown that

<sup>5</sup> *Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit* (London: W. Pickering, 1840), 90.

<sup>6</sup> Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), 303-21. In 1827, Coleridge apparently felt he would find more “Church Fellowship” among the Moravians than in the Church of England, yet feared their distrust of “free enquiry”: CN V 5636.

they have an important spiritual function. By the 1820s, Coleridge knew enough Hebrew to be able to tell that the Hebrew of Daniel, compared to that of Isaiah or the Psalms, was decadent and clumsy. Moreover, parts of Daniel, he felt, had no genuinely spiritual function, but merely fed the taste for sensational stories. Similarly, the stories in Matthew and Luke about miraculous events surrounding the birth of Jesus had clear signs of deriving from popular tradition. The inclusion of such material in the biblical canon was (Coleridge felt) profoundly dangerous, precisely because it gave a foothold for sceptics to question the credibility of the whole canon.

Barbeau is also misleading on the state of German and English biblical criticism when he states that Coleridge's comments on the Pentateuch "reflect his familiarity with the latest biblical scholarship in England and Germany—particularly Eichhorn" (49). In the 1820s, Eichhorn was not the "latest" biblical scholarship. Eichhorn's views on the Pentateuch, and particularly on the historicity of the narrative from Genesis to Numbers, were challenged by W. M. L. de Wette in his 1805 "Dissertation" and 1806-1807 *Beiträge*. The latter work proposed reading the Old Testament as representing the *religious spirit* of the Hebrews and the people of Israel, rather than as a factual source for their history. Wilhelm Gesenius, in works published in 1810, 1812, and 1813, also challenged Eichhorn's findings about the chronology of the Old Testament writings. And in New Testament scholarship, Paulus and Schleiermacher were the dominant figures. Coleridge knew something of all these critics.<sup>7</sup> Barbeau also overlooks some early influences on Coleridge's biblical studies, such as the Unitarian Gilbert Wakefield, the Catholic scholar Alexander Geddes, and Moses Lowman's *Dissertation on the Civil Government of the Hebrews*, a key work in forming Coleridge's idea of Deuteronomistic law.

In his opening chapter, Barbeau lays down a challenge to Coleridge scholars: "I maintain," he writes, "that anyone writing about Coleridge must... make a decision about his faith. One must decide whether Coleridge was always a radical at heart, a progressively orthodox thinker, a hopelessly conflicted soul, or, as I propose, a man living in the tensions of a journey of faith" (9). It seems readers are being forced to vote for one of these options as if they were all mutually exclusive, which they are not; and as if we had sufficient evidence to decide the case, which we don't. The tone here suggests the pulpit, not a work of scholarship. Throughout his book, Barbeau argues skilfully, and with wide knowledge of the history of Christian doctrine, for viewing the Coleridge of the 1820s as an important apologist in the Anglican tradition. But other readers, who may be more interested in the history of philosophy, in hermeneutics, or even in reader-response criticism, should surely be allowed to interpret Coleridge's work in other ways without being required to "make a decision about his faith." The Coleridge canon, like the biblical canon, is multifarious, inviting a range of readings. It is certainly broader than any single creed or dogma.

<sup>7</sup> In the case of de Wette, only the novel *Theodor*. He attempted to obtain de Wette's *Introduction to the Old Testament*, but apparently without success (CM II 181).