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Reading Scripture in Crisis: The Victorian Crisis of Faith and MacDonald’s Response to Coleridge

Gisela Kreglinger

Introduction

This paper will argue that MacDonald’s response to the Victorian crisis of faith is pivotal for understanding his view of Scripture and revelation. We shall begin our discussion by outlining the general attitude towards the Bible and the major landmarks that shaped and changed the Victorian mindset towards the Bible around the middle of the nineteenth century, when George MacDonald began his writing career. These landmarks will be discussed in chronological order. Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s understanding of the Bible will receive more attention, as he was an important influence on MacDonald, whose understanding of Scripture bears some important similarities to that of Coleridge. This will be followed by brief discussions of *Das Leben Jesu* by D.F. Strauss, the rise of geological studies followed by a brief look at the publication of *Essays and Reviews*.

By the time MacDonald began his writing career, the Victorian crisis of faith concentrated on the seemingly irresolvable dichotomy between theology and science. In our discussion of MacDonald’s response to this crisis of faith, we will therefore focus on this issue, as one of MacDonald’s key concerns was to reintegrate the academic disciplines, especially the sciences with theology. MacDonald’s fairy tale “The Light Princess,” first published in 1863, will serve to show both MacDonald’s critique of his time as well as reveal his fundamental beliefs about the nature of reality. We will continue with an exploration of the relationship between theology and science in George MacDonald’s thought and conclude with some introductory reflections on MacDonald’s view of Scripture.

The Rise of Fundamentalism in Victorian Scotland

At the threshold of the Victorian era, the Bible was firmly established in society as the Holy Bible, inspired by God and therefore regarded as authoritative to rule matters of faith and life. While more sceptical and critical views regarding the Bible had been articulated since the age of Enlightenment, the general public was unaffected by such voices (Cheyne 192). In reaction to the more critical and liberal approaches to the Bible that were becoming
popular in Germany and Switzerland, certain Evangelical thinkers, such as the Scottish churchman Robert Haldane of Airtherey, moved to set forth a more precise theology of verbal inspiration than had been common in Scottish Evangelicalism. Haldane, according to Drummond and Bullock, became the founding father of Scottish fundamentalism (251). These Evangelicals sought to make the highest possible claims on Scripture and its divine inspiration, using such terminology as “infallible,” “inerrant,” and “perfect” (Cheyne 194).

The acceptance of the theory of verbal inspiration with its consequent belief in the infallible nature of Scripture would prove to be a major stumbling block as Victorian Britain was confronted with geological discoveries. Chadwick writes in this regard:

- The first step of . . . [geological] advance demanded time; time on a scale unknown; vistas of unimagined time while the strata of rocks were formed and embraced their fossils. They met the calculation of Archbishop Usher, placed in the margins of the King James version, that God created the world in 4004 B.C. Historical critics who examined Chinese or Egyptian records extended this calculation largely to 6000 B.C. or even earlier. But geologists demanded millions of years of time . . . First to go was Genesis-time: next to go, a universal flood. (Chadwick, Victorian Church, Vol.1 559)

Chadwick marks the 1840s as a time when the attempts to harmonize geology and theology became questionable. Archaeological discoveries challenged belief in the verbal inspiration of Scripture by questioning and undermining the timeline of Creation as described (and interpreted literally) in the book of Genesis. Significantly, this challenge would eventually lead to the popular opinion in the late Victorian era that religion and science stand in opposition to one another, viewing science as irreconcilable with religion (Chadwick, Secularization Chap. 7).

Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834), who was a major influence on MacDonald, in his Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit, first published posthumously in 1840, describes the popular opinion of the Bible in Victorian Britain as follows:

- The Bible was not to be regarded or reasoned about in the way that other good books are or may be—that the Bible was different in kind, and stood by itself . . . . What is more, their principal arguments were grounded on the position, that the
Bible throughout was dictated by Omniscience, and therefore in all its parts infallibly true and obligatory, and that the men, whose names are prefixed to the several books or chapters, were in fact but as different pens in the hand of one and the same Writer, and the words of God himself;—and that on this account all notes and comments were superfluous, nay, presumptuous, a profane mixing of human with divine, the notions of fallible creatures, with the oracles of Infallibility,—as if God’s meaning could be so clearly or fitly expressed in man’s as in God’s own words! (Coleridge, Confessions 62-63)

The general attitude towards biblical inspiration in the first half of the nineteenth century was marked by a belief in the verbal inspiration of the text by God and an absolute affirmation of the infallibly of Scripture. Coleridge did not hold this position and it was an attitude towards the Bible that MacDonald found intolerable.

Coleridge’s Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit

Coleridge, already familiar with the results of biblical criticism coming from Germany, was an early voice in England that challenged Fundamentalist approaches to the Bible. Anthony Harding suggests that Coleridge argued primarily against “literalism, the doctrine that the Scriptures do not err, and the more recent perversion of miracle-narratives into ‘proofs’ or ‘evidences’ of the truth of Christianity” (Harding 74-75). It is noteworthy that MacDonald also insisted that the miracles of Jesus must not be understood as proof of his divine mission (George MacDonald, Hope/Miracles 74).

In Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit, a collection of letters, which Coleridge first entitled Letters on the Inspiration of the Scriptures, he sets forth an understanding of the Bible strongly influenced by German criticism (Coleridge 17-39). This section will explore Coleridge’s understanding of the Bible as set out in this collection of letters. Coleridge is important here because he was a significant influence on such writers as F.D. Maurice, Thomas Carlyle, Charles Kingsley, and George MacDonald. MacDonald called him a sage who “more than any man in our times, . . . has opened the eyes of the English people to see wonderful things” (England’s Antiphon 307). His character Margret Elginbrod reads Coleridge as part of her spiritual and intellectual growth (David Elginbrod 12, 30). However, as we shall see, he did not appropriate Coleridge’s thinking uncritically. MacDonald’s father-in-law,
James Powell, knew Coleridge well and writes to George MacDonald on the subject of Scripture in 1850:

If in my earlier life I had been asked what I thought of your reading the Scriptures, I should have given an answer of approval, because you avoided monotony by giving the emphasis natural to the various speakers in the narrative parts. But the remarks of my illustrious friend, S.T. Coleridge, modified my opinion . . . . I wish I could give you a tithe of his eloquent words, but his meaning was that in reading the Scriptures, while monotony is avoided, the divine source should never be forgotten, and they should be delivered more as the Oracles of God than the opinions of man. (Greville MacDonald 137)

This letter shows that MacDonald was confronted with Coleridge’s thought from the very beginning of his writing career and it is therefore appropriate to discuss Coleridge’s work in some detail and compare it to MacDonald’s view at a later stage. As we consider Coleridge’s thought, we should keep in mind that his understanding of the Bible and biblical inspiration is formulated in reaction to a certain strand of Victorian culture, which clung to verbal dictation, the idea that the Bible is infallible, and literalism. Every word of Scripture was thought to be inspired and had some spiritual significance. Coleridge’s response, while seeking to provide a more balanced perspective, leaves many subsequent questions unanswered.

In his first letter of *Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit*, Coleridge firmly establishes that the beginning point for a reflection on revelation is Christ as “the light of man.” Alluding to the prologue of the Gospel of John (1:1-4), Coleridge writes: “There is a Light higher than all, even the Word that was in the beginning;—the Light, of which light itself is but the shechinah and cloudy tabernacle; the Word that is light for every man, and life for as many as give heed to it” (42). From this foundation Coleridge then reflects on the relationship between the Word that is Christ, the written letter, the Bible, and the reader of Scripture. He emphasizes throughout his letters that one must not equate the written word, or one’s interpretation of it, with the truth:

I, who hold that the Bible contains the religion of Christians, but who dare not say that whatever is contained in the Bible is the Christian religion, and who shrink from all question respecting the comparative worth and efficacy of the written Word as weighed against the preaching of the Gospel, the
discipline of the Churches, the continued succession of the Ministry, and the communion of Saints, lest by comparing I should seem to detach them . . . . Every sentence found in a canonical Book, rightly interpreted, contains the dictum of an infallible Mind;—but what the right interpretation is,—must be determined by the industry and understanding of fallible, and alas! more or less prejudiced theologians. (61)

While Coleridge affirms the importance of the Bible as containing “the religion of Christians,” he rightly concludes that truth in its fullness can only be found in “The Light,” which is Christ. It is the sun (Christ) that gives the light and the moon (the Bible) merely reflects its light (42). As we shall see, MacDonald picks up the same imagery of the sun and the moon to speak about the relationship between Christ and Scripture. Coleridge holds on to some yet undefined sense of inspiration but he does not address the tension that exists between divine inspiration and human authorship. Instead, he focuses on the tension between divine inspiration and human, thus fallible, interpretation.

In light of his insistence that the Bible does not contain the fullness of truth, Coleridge insists that the Bible needs to be read and interpreted within the context of Christian practices, while having to be aware that every interpretation of Scripture is always a partial one, as every reader comes to the text with presuppositions. This position, however, raises critical questions such as the extent of an interpreter’s “prejudice” and whether any meaning can be gained from the text given such a subjective stance. In contrast to MacDonald, he does not anticipate this question. MacDonald addresses this question in his essay on the nature of the fairy tale (Orts 316).

Coleridge also refuses to locate the proof of Christ’s and the Bible’s divine authority in Scripture or in historical evidences. Its authority lies in itself and gives witness to itself as the reader engages with Scripture and is transformed by it. Coleridge, drawing on the Wisdom of Solomon, puts it this way:

In short whatever finds me, bears witness for itself that is has proceeded from the Holy Spirit, even from the same Spirit, which remaining in itself, yet regenerateth all other powers, and in all ages entering into holy souls maketh them friends of God, and prophets (Wisd. Vi). (42)

Coleridge quotes here from the Old Testament Apocrypha Wisdom of Solomon 7 v. 27. Solomon praises the workings of wisdom in this passage and
Coleridge replaces “wisdom” with the “Holy Spirit.” It should be noted here that the inclusion of the apocryphal books into the biblical canon was a highly disputed issue at that time. In a later letter he continues by asserting: “Friend! The truth revealed through Christ has its evidence in itself, and the proof of its divine authority in its fitness to our nature and needs;—the clearness and cogency of this proof being proportionate to the degree of self-knowledge in each individual hearer” (64).

There are two important points that Coleridge makes in these passages. First, he argues that the truth revealed in Christ has its evidence and authority in itself. It does not receive its authority from being written down in the Bible or from historical and archeological evidence (Aids to Reflection 309). Its authority is of an internal character. What he means by this is unclear but we can see the influence of Lessing, who argues that “the Christian religion is not true because the Evangelists and Apostles taught it, but they taught it because it is true. Written traditions must be interpreted by their internal truth, and all the written traditions can give Religion no internal truth, if it have none” (Green 20). While it is commendable that Coleridge seeks to critique naïve beliefs about finding proof of the Christian faith in “natural theology,” which contributed in a significant way to the Victorian crisis of faith in the years to come, his decision to locate this proof in the very vague realm of “internal evidence” creates other critical problems because he does not define this “internal evidence” in any way. It also begs the question of whether one can so easily separate this truth and its “internal evidence” (meaning) from its manifestation in words (signification).

Second, Coleridge argues that the proof of Scripture’s divine authority is anchored in its applicability to the human condition. This second point is also problematic, as he seems to make the authority of divine truth dependent upon its fitness to human nature and needs. What does Coleridge mean by phrases like “whatever finds me,” “its fitness to our nature and needs,” and “what you find therein coincident with your pre-established convictions”? (Confessions 64-65). Does he, as Chadwick suggests, rest inspiration upon the Bible’s effect in religious experience? (529) And does the Bible merely confirm faith or does it also engender faith?

What I would like to draw attention to here is that Coleridge’s latter statement might somehow relate to his earlier reference to the Jewish wisdom tradition, where the Spirit works within the souls of men, making them into friends of God and thereby being a proof of divine authority. What seems evident from the former quotation is that he believes that whatever truth
comes from the Holy Spirit shows itself as true by making people into “friends of God.” Coleridge is not concerned to establish an abstract and intellectual concept of truth. Rather, he seeks to focus on the relational dimension of truth and how God reveals himself to his creatures by transforming them into friends of God (Coleridge, *Aids to Reflection* 309-11). Drummond and Bulloch interpret Coleridge similarly: “[He] found the authority of Scripture, not in the verbal inspiration of texts which would support a dogmatic structure, but in the power of the Bible to waken faith in God and love towards Him” (250). MacDonald follows Coleridge quite closely in understanding truth primarily in relational terms with a strong transformative emphasis. Unlike Coleridge, though, he has very clear conceptions of what it means to be transformed into followers of Jesus. Coleridge never defines what he means by “friends of God.” This is problematic as the phrase is vague and invites speculation of all kinds about what it means to be a friend of God.

While Coleridge raises important issues regarding the nature of Scripture and its relationship to Christ, his choice to manifest the proof of Scripture’s divine authority in human experience is clearly problematic. Coleridge does not adequately address the implications of such an emphasis on subjective experience. He sought to stress the importance of personal knowledge of God rather than abstract speculations about him. But such an emphasis does not do justice to the urgent mid-Victorian question of Scripture’s divine authority. If one cannot trust in the historical accuracy of the Bible’s accounts, where does one find assurance that what it says is true? It is no surprise that Coleridge’s new theory of inspiration was not received with much enthusiasm. The Free Church Professor James Bannermann reflects in 1865 upon the unfortunate impact Coleridge’s “subjective theory of inspiration” had on his own country (Drummond and Bulloch 250). It is on this point, as we shall see, that MacDonald parts with Coleridge, as he resists the temptation to provide proof of Scripture’s divine authority. For him truth is found in Christ and this truth cannot be proven but has to be received in faith.

Not only did Coleridge challenge verbal inspiration and a literal reading of the Bible, he was also the first one in England to assert that the Bible should be read like any other book (Tulloch 25). Coleridge still held to the belief that the Bible was inspired, but he wanted to emphasize that the Word of God comes to us through human channels and needs to be read as such (*Confessions* 44). Coleridge’s plea to read the Bible like any other book was not because he thought the Bible to be like any other book but because the Bible was given to us by God through human channels. It was this human
dimension that had been completely suppressed with the theory of verbal inspiration and which Coleridge sought to recover. He writes:

The more tranquilly an inquirer takes up the Bible as he would any other body of ancient writings, the livelier and steadier will be his impressions of its superiority to all other books, till at length all other books and all other knowledge will be valuable in his eyes in proportion as they help him to a better understanding of his Bible. Difficulty after difficulty has been overcome from the time that I began to study the Scriptures with free and unboding spirit, under the conviction that my faith in the Incarnate Word and his Gospel was secure, whatever the result might be . . . . (Confessions 75)

His plea was not to place all other great books on equal footing with the Bible, but for a certain freedom in reading and interpreting Scripture. Coleridge realized that the Bible was composed over a long period of time, written in different genres and from various perspectives and historical circumstances, different composers and yet these composers were all prompted by one “pure and holy Spirit” (Confessions 51-52, 58-59). All these factors, according to Coleridge, need to be taken into consideration as one seeks to understand the Bible. For him a doctrine of verbal inspiration completely ignores the rich and shaping tradition of the church. Tulloch argues that Coleridge’s attention to the tradition of the church was an important contribution for reviving an interest in the spiritual and historical tradition of the church (Tulloch 30).

While Coleridge encouraged a critical reading of the Bible, he also emphasized that the Bible needs to be read with a posture of faith in order to be understood properly. Coleridge makes this point by comparing the Bible with the eating of manna in the wilderness, imagery that MacDonald will also employ in relation to Scripture:

The fairest flower that ever clomb up a cottage window is not so fair a sight to my eyes, as the Bible gleaming through the lower panes. Let it but be read as by such men it used to be read; when they came to it as to a ground covered with manna, even the bread which the Lord had given for his people to eat . . . . (Confessions 76)

For Coleridge, then, the Bible cannot be reduced to a historical or moral document. It has to be read as a book given by God and received with faith. However, what Coleridge fails to deal with adequately is the unique nature of the Bible as the word of God, as distinct from the writings of Shakespeare for
example (Swiatecka 48-67).

In summary, we can say that Coleridge sets forth his understanding of Scripture in conjunction with a discussion of its impact upon the reader. Coleridge emphasizes the relational dimension of revelation. The fact that God has spoken in Christ, and that his words come through human channels as well as the believer’s reception of this written word are important dimensions in Coleridge’s discussion of the Bible. Christ reveals himself in and through Scripture to the believer and the transformation of human beings into friends of God, as he puts it, is a sure sign of the Bible’s divine authority.

Coleridge’s contribution lies in the fact that he raises important questions about the Bible in light of the rise of historical criticism from a perspective of faith rather than scepticism. He rightly challenges important assumptions such as verbal inspiration and the infallibility of the Bible as the basis for its divine authority or naïve attempts to find proof for the Christian faith in nature. Coleridge also raises important questions such as the relationship between divine inspiration and human authorship, the relationship between Christ and Scripture and the relational dimension of revelation. His insistence that we must hold things in tension is important. And yet he provides no clear answers and, in consequence, raises a different set of critical questions that he does not even acknowledge. In comparing Coleridge to MacDonald we shall see that MacDonald recognizes the importance of Coleridge’s concerns in regard to the Bible but considers more carefully subsequent questions. While many rejected Coleridge’s theory because of its emphasis on a subjective assessment of God’s truth, in MacDonald, Coleridge’s ideas found fertile yet not uncritical ground.

Coleridge’s “loose” view of biblical inspiration seems mild in comparison to some of the works that would soon disturb the slumber of Victorian Britain in regards to Higher German criticism. In the following section we will look at some important factors that radically challenged traditionally held beliefs about the Bible.

Four Cultural Landmarks and the Crisis of Victorian Faith

There are a number of cultural landmarks that sparked an age of questioning and skepticism, what we are referring to as the Victorian crisis of faith. In this section, we will deal with four significant landmarks in particular: the translation of F.D. Strauss’s Life of Jesus by George Eliot in 1846, geological discoveries, Charles Darwin’s publication of On the Origin of Species in 1859, and the publication of Essays and Reviews in 1861. These
books and events were all important landmarks that changed the attitude towards the Bible in Victorian Britain considerably.

George Eliot’s translation of Strauss’s Life of Jesus (followed by a translation of Feuerbach’s Essence of Christianity in 1854) was an important contribution to the advance of historical criticism in England. Strauss radically questioned the historical reliability of the Gospel accounts. Matters of faith were completely discarded in the consideration of the origin of Christianity. The miracles of Jesus should not be understood as instances of immediate divine interventions but can be explained as “mythi.” Hegel, in his search for the Absolute Spirit (Geist), had relegated images, stories, and myths to be primitive representations of God. Strauss followed him in this assessment. Strauss, specifically for his project, develops an understanding of myth that he then applied to the gospel writers, setting the category of historical (fact-reporting) writing over against mythical writing (Frei 241-42). He demythologizes the Gospel narratives in order to reconstruct the life of Jesus. Thus Strauss argues: “The resurrections in the New Testament are nothing more than mythi, which had their origin in the tendency of the early Church, to make her Messiah agree with the type of the prophets, and with the messianic ideal” (495). The feeding of the multitudes is the product of a common legend in Jewish tradition and the miracles of the withered fig tree has to be understood as a parable transformed into history. Miracles cannot be historically true as they would be a violation of the laws of nature, and, according to Strauss, such a worldview was no longer tenable (519, 34, 771).

Strauss became a major stumbling block to orthodoxy in Victorian England, and according to Chadwick the country was ill equipped to deal with the challenges that a work like Strauss’s brought with it as English conservatism had kept the critical study of the New Testament out of the curriculum of its universities. According to Chadwick, “The name of Strauss became a ghostly whip, a bogey, a talisman. The blasphemy laws prevented daring publishers from risking their reputation” (532).

In a similar manner to Strauss’s German Higher criticism, a rising interest in geological studies brought unique challenges to Victorian Christian thought. Geology became the most popular science of the first half of the nineteenth century. Chadwick writes: “Between 1820 and 1840 geology became the science of the day. It captured popular imagination . . . . A skillfully produced survey of geology sold more copies than a novel by Sir Walter Scott” (558-59). While many attempts were made to harmonize geological discoveries with the creation account of Genesis, geological
discoveries eventually challenged a literal reading of the creation account and forced a reconsideration of the origin and age of the world (Goodwin). Slowly but surely, science and theology came to be seen in opposition to one another and, according to Chadwick, “Genesis and Geology went to war” (559). One should note that such a “war” was between a very specific and narrow understanding of both science and natural theology that had developed during the earlier part of the nineteenth century in England. Tennyson’s Romantic poem *In Memoriam* (1850), a favorite of Queen Victoria, expresses this crisis of faith and anxiety in light of the tension between science and religion in the most moving and powerful way:

Be near me when my light is low . . .
Be near me when my faith is dry . . .
Be near me when I fade away . . .

Are God and Nature then at strife,
That Nature lends such evil dreams? . . .

I stretch lame hands of faith, and grope,
And gather dust and chaff, and call
To what I feel is Lord of all,
And faintly trust the larger hope.

“So careful of the type?” but no.
From scarped cliff and quarried tone
She cries, “A thousand types are gone:
I care for nothing, all shall go . . . .”

Man, her last work, who seem’d so fair,
Such splendid purpose in his eyes,
Who roll’d the psalm to wintry skies,
Who built him fanes of fruitless prayer,

Who trusted God was love indeed
And love Creation’s final law—
Tho’ Nature, red in tooth and claw
With ravine, shriek’d against his creed—

Who loved, who suffer’d countless ills,
Who battled for the True, the Just,
Be blown about the desert dust,
Or seal’d within the iron hills?

No more? A monster then, a dream,
A discord. Dragons of the prime,
That tare each other in their slime,
Were mellow music match’d with him.

(Tennyson, Stanzas 50, 55, 56)

This poem makes clear that Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* (1859) was published in an atmosphere in which faith in the Bible had already been unsettled by discoveries in geology as well as the historical study of ancient texts. The debate between faith and science came to a climax in the 1860s and Darwin’s evolution theory began to take root in the general consciousness of the Victorian mind. Davis writes: “Analogous to the physical shift in population from rural to urban areas . . . was an equivalent shift in the mental map from religious to secular ways of seeing the natural world” (55). MacDonald read geological works from as early as 1845 and he mentions Darwin, in particular, in several of his novels, although mostly in the 1870s when Darwin’s ideas gained in popularity (Hein 63). For example, he applies Darwin’s evolution theory in a metaphorical manner to speak about the moral and spiritual development of his characters. More specifically, we observe that Curdie, the protagonist of *The Princess and Curdie*, has to learn to discern whether people are growing from beastly form into truly human form or are degenerating into beastly form. In all of this, we notice that MacDonald is not overtly concerned with the problems that Darwin’s theory may introduce to Christian thinking. What is central for MacDonald’s theology is mankind’s moral and spiritual growth and lack thereof rather than humanity’s physical developmental history.

Our final landmark that contributed to the Victorian crisis of faith is the publication of *Essays and Reviews* in 1861. With these essays a group of English theologians, mostly Oxford men with liberal inclinations, encouraged a free engagement with controversial issues in theology (Reardon 309). Historical criticism in the first part of the nineteenth century was not developed in England or Scotland, and according to Chadwick the English had to choose between what was offered from Germany, mostly the Tübingen school with F.D. Baur as a major exponent, and English scholarship with J.B. Lightfoot, which was relatively conservative (69, 76). *Essays and
Reviews played an important part in opening up the discussion in England and Scotland. Even though the essays varied greatly in quality and content, they had a strong impact at the time. A fundamental issue that was addressed in numerous essays was the question on what basis Revelation was to rest. Benjamin Jowett’s essay “On the Interpretation of Scripture” deals specifically with this issue. Jowett writes:

The sciences of geology and comparative philology are steadily gaining ground; many of the guesses of twenty years ago have become certainties, and the guesses of to-day may hereafter become so. Shall we peril religion on the possibility of their untruth? On such a cast to stake the life of man implies not only a recklessness of facts, but a misunderstanding of the nature of the Gospel . . . . the idea of inspiration must expand and take them in. Their importance in a religious point of view is not that they impugn or confirm the Jewish history, but that they show more clearly the purposes of God towards the whole human race. The recent chronological discoveries from Egyptian monuments do not tend to overthrow revelation, nor the Ninevite inscriptions to support it. (349-50)

Jowett argued for a redefinition of the nature of revelation. In particular, he wanted to overcome what he thought a superficial separation between “natural” and “revealed” religion. For Jowett no clear separation between the two was possible. Like Coleridge, he argued that the Bible needs to be studied like any other book, adhering to the spirit of the Bible rather than rigid adherence to the letter (Jowett 378, 404, 26). Essays and Reviews was bitterly attacked and lawsuits were brought against two of its contributors. In 1864 the book was condemned by Convocation of Canterbury and the controversy continued to grow throughout the decade (Reardon 311).

In the above section, I have sought to provide a rough outline of the general attitude towards Scripture around the middle of the nineteenth century as a context for understanding MacDonald’s approach to the Bible. As we have seen, the theological climate was complex in its development. The rise of a more rigid belief in the inerrancy of Scripture and verbal inspiration went hand-in-hand with an increasing awareness and reception of Higher German criticism, which sought to put aside the question of revelation and focused on historical criticism as the deciding factor for “accurate truth.” George Eliot’s translation of Strauss’s Life of Jesus, as well as discoveries in geology, intensified the questions at hand, shaking the old foundations of faith and
religion. With the publication of *Essays and Reviews* the development was brought to a crisis. Even though the book was strongly attacked, it helped to bring into the open questions that had been discussed freely in Germany for a considerable time. F.D. Maurice, for example, influenced by Coleridge and a strong influence on MacDonald, embraced the questions of these essays but not uncritically. Rogerson discusses Maurice’s response in some detail. Increasingly, the Victorian understanding of science and theology was held to be irreconcilable (Cosslett 23-24). This is the context in which MacDonald started his writing career and formulated an understanding of revelation and Scripture that bears some significant similarities to Coleridge but also some important differences. Before turning to MacDonald’s understanding of Scripture, I will examine his general response to the theological trends of his time.

**George MacDonald’s Response: Inversion of Priorities**

While George MacDonald was well aware of German Higher Criticism, there is little evidence that he engaged with it in any serious degree. He often mentions the issues and questions involved but does not think that one can validate the claims made by Christianity on historical-critical or scientific grounds. Unlike Coleridge, he does not seek to locate proof of Scripture’s divine authority in human experience. Rather, he acknowledges the doubts and anxieties a believer might feel in the face of these challenges. In an essay written in 1880, MacDonald describes the dilemma of a man in doubt:

> What if the whole idea of his mission was a deception born of the very goodness of the man? What if the whole matter was the invention of men pretending themselves the followers of such a man? What if it was a little truth greatly exaggerated?
> Only, be it what it may, less than its full idea would not be enough for the wants and sorrows that weaken and weigh him down! He passes through many a thorny thicket of inquiry; gathers evidence upon evidence; reasons upon the goodness of the men who wrote: they might be deceived, but they dared not invent; holds with himself a thousand arguments, historical, psychical, metaphysical—which for their setting–forth would require volumes . . . . But at least he is haunting the possible border of discovery. (Orts 70-71)

Any attempt to prove the Bible to be true will sooner or later arrive at the “border of discovery.” For MacDonald the limitations or “borders” of
scientific discovery cannot be overcome by human searching but ultimately any truly searching person has to turn in faith and obedience to Christ as the revelation of the Father and ultimate truth (Orts 71-74). MacDonald was not opposed to historical-critical inquiry as such, but he questioned an uncritical embrace of a scientific approach without considering its limitations in leading to knowledge of the transcendent. Thus he chose not to engage in the debate (Orts 2). This does not mean, however, that MacDonald does not deal with the biblical text in a critical way. He uses the latest critical edition of the Greek text by Westcott and Hort, published in 1881, in the third volume of *Unspoken Sermons*, published in 1889, for example. Gerold’s various discussions on MacDonald’s critical engagement with Scripture are important (86-87, 166, 74). MacDonald also had Donal, the main character of *Donal Grant*, read *The Wisdom of Solomon*, a book of the highly disputed *Apocrypha* (*Donal Grant Chap. XVII*).

MacDonald shows a stronger engagement with the natural sciences versus theology debate. He insists that theology and science should not be seen in opposition to one another. While he was very interested in science himself, having studied physics and chemistry at Aberdeen University, he did not believe that one would arrive at theological truth via the sciences. His concern was that the emphasis on science and especially geology would reduce reality to its material manifestations. In his fairy tale “The Light Princess,” first published in 1863, his critique of Victorian culture and its movement away from a theological understanding towards a merely scientific account of reality becomes apparent. A closer look at this story will help unveil MacDonald’s critique of his time and culture as well as reveal his own beliefs.

MacDonald makes clear that this story has a deeper meaning when he gives the story the motto “more is meant than meets the ear” in a later publication (*Adela Cathcart* 57). While this fairy tale at first sight seems to be just for amusement, a closer look at its structure betrays a careful assessment of his time. The story goes as follows. A king and queen, after a long period of impatient waiting, have a baby daughter and forget to invite the king’s sister, Princess Makemnoit, to the christening. MacDonald here alludes to Perrault’s “Sleeping Beauty.” In true fairy-tale fashion, the princess, in her anger, decides to curse the child but rather than falling into a deep sleep, the curse takes its effect in the loss of the child’s gravity. It is here that MacDonald deviates from the traditional fairy tale to address his own time by playing with the physical laws, making gravity a variable. The parents seek help by
consulting the college of Metaphysicians. With wit, irony, and hyperbole, MacDonald presents the cures offered by the spiritualist, Kopy Keck and the materialist, Hum Drum. Kopy Keck asserts:

There is not fault in the princess; body or soul; only they are wrong put together . . . . At that decisive moment, when souls seek their appointed habitations, two eager souls met, struck, rebounded, lost their way, and arrived each at the wrong place. The soul of the princess was one of those, and she went far astray. She does not belong by rights to this world at all, but to some other planet, probably Mercury. Her proclivity to her true sphere destroys all the natural influence which this orb would otherwise possess over her corporeal frame. She cares for nothing here. There is no relation between her and this world.

Kopy Keck’s other-worldly diagnosis is followed by a this-worldly oriented cure:

She must therefore be taught, by the sternest compulsion, to take an interest in the earth as the earth. She must study every department of its history—its animal history; its vegetable history; its moral history; its political history; its scientific history; its literary history; its musical history; its artistical history; above all, its metaphysical history. She must begin with the Chinese dynasty and end with Japan. But first of all she must study geology, and especially the history of the extinct races of animals—their natures, their habits, their loves, their hates, their revenges. *(Fairy Tales* 27)

This diagnosis and prescription is followed by Hum-Drum’s no less absurd analysis:

“Hold, h-o-o-l!” roared Hum-Drum. “It is certainly my turn now. My rooted and insubvertible conviction is, that the causes of the anomalies evident in the princess’s condition are strictly and solely physical. But that is only tantamount to acknowledging that they exist. Hear my opinion.—From some cause or other, of no importance to our inquiry, the motion of her heart has been reversed. That remarkable combination of the suction and the force-pump works the wrong way—I mean in the case of the unfortunate princess: it draws in where it should force out, and forces out where it should draw in. The offices of the auricles and the ventricles are subverted. The
blood is sent forth by the veins, and returns by the arteries. Consequently it is running the wrong way through all her corporeal organism—lungs and all. Is it then at all mysterious, seeing that such is the case, that on the other particular of gravitation as well, she should differ from normal humanity?”

*(Fairy Tales 27-28)*

The materialist’s prescription is as ridiculous as the spiritualist’s, and it comes as no surprise that neither of them gets to try their cure on the princess. These over-exaggerated and comical caricatures are important as MacDonald seeks to speak to a time where society moved rapidly away from a theological worldview. Knoepflmacher even suggests that these characters, given the association of Hum-Drum with the materialist and Kopy-Keck with the spiritualist, might be MacDonald’s critique of “the absurd misapplication of the philosophical positions held, respectively, by Hume and Kant” (344).

The Victorian Idealist philosopher J.F. Ferrier complains in 1854 about the undisciplined engagement with philosophy in Britain. He writes in this regards, using the metaphor of the sailor: “All the captains are sailing on different tracks, under different orders, and under different winds . . . .” (qtd. in Davis 161).

In “The Light Princess” MacDonald seeks to subvert this trend by emphasizing that the deepest reality a Christian can know is found in self-sacrificing love. The contemporary Victorian tendency to move from theology to metaphysics to empiricism, and thus a solely material and scientific understanding of reality, is inverted in this story. This inversion comes to its climax in the princess’s eventual cure at the very end of the story. A prince, appropriate for the fairy-tale genre, breaks all class boundaries and abases himself to become a shoe black in order to be near the princess. He eventually gives his life for the cure of the princess: “His head fell back; the water closed over it, and the bubbles of his last breath bubbled up through the water . . . . he was past breathing” *(Fairy Tales 50)*. He embraces death for her sake. Before he drowns, he is fed wine and biscuit by the princess and in this symbolic last supper MacDonald ties the prince’s sacrificial death to the Eucharist and, therefore, Christ’s sacrificial death. Of course the prince’s death is not final and he awakes only to be united with his beloved princess. It is striking that the princess is being healed as the prince drowns. Realizing that the prince is drowning, she throws herself into the water to rescue him. The associations with baptism in this episode are striking: “Love and water brought back all her strength” *(Fairy Tales 50)*. The princess is healed from her superficial
and uncaring personality and she is finally able to care. Her ability to feel compassion at the end of the story is an important part of the cure as MacDonald himself stresses in his comments on the story in *Adela Cathcart*. When the prince comes back to life, the princess bursts into tears and finds her gravity as she falls on the floor. Thus the light princess becomes weighty in a dual sense of the word. She is first healed of her flighty character and then finds her gravity restored, after she is able to cry.

The ending of the story expresses MacDonald’s deepest conviction about the nature of reality. Ultimate reality is neither found in metaphysics nor materialism and empiricism, but in self-giving love of which Christ’s death is the prime example. Truth, as MacDonald reiterated in his *Unspoken Sermons* over and over again, is only found in the person of Christ. A comprehensive understanding of reality and the world—physical, metaphysical, moral and spiritual—finds its ultimate answer only in Christ, and particularity in his sacrificial death. MacDonald cleverly inverts the predominant development of his time by moving in this fairy tale from gravity as an icon for empiricism to metaphysics to theology as the ultimate key to human existence and its cure from illness. In true MacDonald fashion, more is meant than meets the ear in “The Light Princess.”

As MacDonald continued his writing career, it was an urgent concern for him to show that science and theology are not in conflict. Science occupies an important place in MacDonald’s thought. However, it remains important for him to emphasize that science is limited and consequently unable to give a complete account of reality. Thus he argues: “Those who put their faith in Science are trying to live in the scaffold of the house invisible” (*Orts* 58). MacDonald has a high regard for science as these essays show but he refuses to accept that science can provide an accurate and complete description of reality as it cannot capture the moral, aesthetic or spiritual dimension of life. Thus the mark of a mature person is the ability to integrate the scientific with the poetic.

MacDonald reiterates this argument in many different ways throughout his writing career. The incident of the globe in *Phantastes* (1858), which has puzzled many a reader, may be helpfully interpreted in this connection. Anodos’s shadow disenchants reality for him and he begins to see the world differently, more scientifically: “I will not see beauty where there is none. I will dare to behold things as they are” (61). He continues his journey and meets a girl with a mysterious globe. In his greedy desire to know about the globe—the way things really are—he breaks the globe.
Anodos’s desire for accurate knowledge has disastrous results, foreshadowing, unknowingly on MacDonald’s side, the ecological crisis of today. The globe shatters into pieces (61-62). He addresses similar issues in the fairy tale “The Day Boy and the Night Girl,” first published in 1882. The story begins with the description of a witch who wants to know everything: “There was once a witch who desired to know everything. But the wiser a witch is, the harder she knocks her head against the wall when she comes to it. She cared for nothing in itself—only for knowing it. She was not naturally cruel, but the wolf had made her cruel” (304). The whole story is a plea for a re-integration of the intellectual disciplines. The separation of the disciplines is portrayed as being demonic both in *Phantastes* and “The Day Boy and the Night Girl.” The theme of night and day as metaphors for scientific and mystical knowledge are quite possibly borrowed from Novalis who writes in Hymn 4 of *Hymns to the Night*: “Now I know when will come the last morning: when the light no more scares away the Night and Love . . .” ([Rampolli](#)6). The scientific has to be held in tension with a theological and mystical view of the world. They must not be separated. As MacDonald argues elsewhere, “It is not that Madam Science shows any antagonism to Lady Poetry; but the atmosphere and plane on which alone they can meet as friends who understand each other, is the mind and heart of a sage, not of the boy” ([Orts](#)51). A merely scientific view of the world will have devastating results for the earth.

In summary, we can say that for MacDonald science aids our understanding of reality but has severe limitations. It is unable to reveal and express reality in all its complexities, especially its emotional, moral and spiritual dimensions. For MacDonald, while not denying the role of science in our search for knowledge and understanding, truth can only be found in Jesus Christ. Science, language and, as a consequence, the Bible are all limited in their ability to express reality comprehensively. To quote MacDonald once more:

> Use all the symbols that we have in nature, in human relations, in the family—all our symbols of grace and tenderness, and loving-kindness between man and man, and between man and woman, and between woman and woman, but you can never come up to the thought of what God’s ministration is. When our Lord came he just let us see how his Father was doing this always. He “came to give his life a ransom for many.” It was in giving his life a ransom for us that he died; that was the consummation and crown of it all, but it was his life that he gave
for us—his whole being, his whole strength, his whole energy—not alone his days of trouble and of toil, but deeper than that, he gave his whole being for us; yea, he even went down to death for us. (Orts 302)

MacDonald held to a Christo-centric view of the world throughout his writing career as his translation of *Spiritual Songs* by Novalis (1851), his *Unspoken Sermons* (1867, 1885, 1889), *Diary of an Old Soul* (1880), *The Hope of the Gospel* (1892), and many other of his works demonstrate. For MacDonald, then, the crux of revelation is anchored in Jesus Christ, who came to fulfil the created glory, employing the images and material of this world to reveal the heart of the Father. He does this most profoundly in his sacrificial death. It is no surprise therefore that MacDonald did not embrace the historical criticism of his time with its naïve belief that historical investigation will provide direct access to reality and especially the realities about which the Bible speaks. Having discussed the historical context in which MacDonald begins his writing career, we shall conclude our investigation with some introductory comments on MacDonald’s understanding of Scripture.

**George MacDonald’s Understanding of Scripture and its Role within the Revelatory Process**

Like Coleridge, George MacDonald’s understanding of Scripture is formed against the notion of verbal inspiration and the infallibility of Scripture. In a letter MacDonald writes quite dramatically:

> The Bible is to me the most precious thing in the world, because it tells me his story . . . . But the common theory of the inspiration of the words, instead of the breathing of God’s truth into the hearts and souls of those who wrote it, and who then did their best with it, is degrading and evil; and they who hold it are in danger of worshipping the letter instead of living in the Spirit, of being idolaters of the Bible instead of disciples of Jesus . . . . It is Jesus who is the Revelation of God, not the Bible; that is but a means to a mighty eternal end. The book is indeed sent us by God, but it nowhere claims to be his very word. If it were—and it would be no irreverence to say it—it would have been a good deal better written. Yet even its errors and blunders do not touch the truth, and are the merest trifles—dear as the little spot of earth on the whiteness of the snowdrop. Jesus alone is The Word of God. (Greville MacDonald 373)
As we have indicated above, MacDonald reiterates throughout his work that the truth can only be found in Jesus Christ. He emphasizes this point more strongly than Coleridge. While the Bible plays a significant role in how God reveals himself, for MacDonald the Bible per se is not revelation. It guides us to the truth but it can never encompass the truth. I quote MacDonald once more: “Sad, indeed, would the whole matter be, if the Bible had told us everything God meant us to believe. But herein is the Bible itself greatly wronged. It nowhere lays claim to be regarded as the Word, the Way, the Truth. The Bible leads us to Jesus, the inexhaustible, the ever unfolding Revelation of God. It is Christ ‘in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge,’ not the Bible, save as leading to him” (Unspoken Sermons 36-37). MacDonald’s view of the Bible is thus in line with his understanding of language in general. Language and symbols can never encompass the truth. While they reveal in part, they also hide other aspects of the reality they seek to speak of (Flynn and Edwards 66-67). The Bible, as a series of words and symbols, can never be exhaustive in things pertaining to God and to expect the Bible to contain all truth is to do it great harm and misunderstand its place within God’s revelation in Christ.

MacDonald, like Coleridge, understands truth and God’s revelation in Christ fundamentally in personal and relational terms. While he would certainly affirm that God’s revelation can be grasped cognitively, a merely intellectual and rational approach is insufficient and distorts the nature of what truth in Christ means. “Intellectual greed,” as MacDonald calls it at some point, is in danger of eclipsing a relational understanding of truth and its demand for participation and transformation into Christ-likeness (Orts 322). The role of the Bible is, therefore, not only to lead into a better intellectual understanding of Christ but also to move the reader to partake and practise that which is revealed (Unspoken Sermons 67-69, 79-80, 371, 403, 49). This emphasis on knowing and living the truth is woven throughout his Unspoken Sermons and is closely linked to his understanding of revelation and the role of Scripture therein. It is Christ’s congruency in speaking and living his words that is to be the believer’s model. God’s revelation in Christ is not a system or theological concepts to be mastered. It is a person to be encountered and life to be modelled after. MacDonald points out Jesus’s parables in particular as a means by which the hearer is not merely informed intellectually but challenged to practise that which is revealed by them (Unspoken Sermons 259). With Coleridge, then, MacDonald would affirm that Scripture serves to make people “into friends of God” but unlike Coleridge, MacDonald does...
not seek to find a proof for Scripture’s divine authority in human experience. We cannot have proof of God or Scripture’s divine authority. Both Christ and Scripture have to be received in faith (Flynn and Edwards 66-67, 71).

**Revealed Symbols as Trajectories**

MacDonald believes that Scripture is given by God and has, therefore, divine authority but he does not believe Scripture to be infallible. He does uphold that the biblical writers were inspired as they pondered and wrote down what they saw and heard. MacDonald’s discussion of the Gospel of John is helpful here. Just because this Gospel is later and shows forth a greater degree of reflection upon the tradition does not mean for MacDonald that it is less accurate (Unspoken Sermons 435). MacDonald, like Coleridge, seeks to hold the divine and human side of Scripture in tension. This is not only true for its divine/human authorship but also how Scripture employs symbols from nature and human custom to speak about God.

Scripture contains symbols and MacDonald’s interpretation of biblical passages is often concerned to probe the field of meaning of a given symbol, its limits, followed by theological reflections about the symbol’s significance for understanding the nature of God and his Kingdom. A few examples are his sermons “The New Name,” “The Mirrors of the Lord,” and “Abba, Father!” in Unspoken Sermons. In his sermon “The Consuming Fire,” based on Hebrews 12:29, MacDonald traces the usage of the symbol of “fire” and “consuming fire” in the Old and New Testament. He recognizes that the author of Hebrews builds on the Old Testament usage and thus employs an old symbol in a new context, thereby advancing our understanding of how God works in this world (Unspoken Sermons 22). What is significant in his discussion of the re-employment or re-echoing of this symbol within the Bible is that for MacDonald the biblical symbols must not be superseded but only be unfolded (Unspoken Sermons 25). They serve like trajectories on which an interpreter can continue to unfold its meaning for new generations. For MacDonald, then, the Bible plays a pivotal place in revelation, as Scripture is the foundation upon which theological reflection must be built.

Similar to Coleridge, however, there is still a certain amount of ambiguity left as to how the Bible differs from other writings such as Shakespeare’s, for example, whom MacDonald held in great esteem. It is helpful to realize that one important reason why Shakespeare is so important for MacDonald can be found in Shakespeare’s creative reflection upon biblical texts and images. After discussing several passages in Shakespeare’s works
that resonate with biblical texts, MacDonald comments on Shakespeare’s ability to reinvest vitality into biblical passages that his audience was all too familiar with and which had lost their impact due to commonness of use. MacDonald writes:

> What is remarkable in the employment of these [biblical] passages, is not merely that they are so present to his mind that they come up for use in the most exciting moments of composition, but that he embodies the spirit of them in such a new form as reveals to mind saturated and deadened with the sound of the words, the very visual image and spiritual meaning involved in them. (Orts 81)

Not only does MacDonald here betray his concern for the centrality of Scripture in evaluating other literature but also the high value he places on a writer’s ability to reinvest vitality into Scriptural truth which has been dulled by over-familiarity. He is particularly aware that Shakespeare reflects upon various biblical passages without using the words of Scripture themselves, thereby giving a fresh vision of an old truth and he concludes that Shakespeare’s “mode of writing historical plays is more after the fashion of the Bible histories than that of most writers of history” (Orts 83).

For MacDonald, then, Shakespeare was an important model as he reflected theologically on biblical texts in his plays.

It is clear from this discussion that for MacDonald Scripture plays a pivotal and indispensable role in leading to Christ, who is the only true revelation of the Father. His repeated insistence betrays his commitment to the Bible as a central means by which God reveals himself. MacDonald writes:

> The one use of the Bible is to make us look at Jesus, that through him we might know his Father and our Father, his God and our God. Till we thus know Him let us hold the Bible as the moon of our darkness, by which we travel towards the east; not dear as the sun whence her light cometh, and towards which we haste, that, walking in the sun himself, we may no more need the mirror that reflected his absent brightness. (Unspoken Sermons 37)

The symbolism of Scripture, then, cannot be superseded but must always be unfolded for new generations so as to discover its meaning anew. The fact that MacDonald gives Scripture and the symbols used therein a central place in his writing betrays his attitude towards and anchorage in the Bible as given by God.
Endnote

1. See also his essay “Wordsworth’s poetry” in the same volume for similar arguments.

Works Cited


