North Wind: A Journal of George MacDonald Studies

Volume 21   Article 1

1-1-2002

F. D. Maurice: The Man Who Re-wrote the Book (Presidential Address given at the 2002 Annual General Meeting of the MacDonald Society)

Stephen Prickett

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.snc.edu/northwind

Recommended Citation

F. D. Maurice: The Man Who *Re*-wrote the Book (Presidential Address given at the 2002 Annual General Meeting of the MacDonald Society)

Stephen Prickett

Sometime during the eighteenth century there occurred in England one of those momentous sea-changes in reading that permanently altered the way in which books, whether sacred or secular, were understood and interpreted. The effectiveness of the new approach, and its success in obliterating its predecessor, can be judged by the fact that we are now hardly conscious of it ever having taken place at all. What makes it very different from previous appropriations is that it was not the work of any organised party or faction, and it was only in retrospect that a theory of reading emerged to justify what had happened.

Though one can find examples enough of realistic secular narrative fiction in the seventeenth century, it was probably not until the extraordinary success of Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* in 1719 that one becomes aware of how the new art-form, the so-called "novel," was altering not merely standards of realism, but—less obviously, though in the long run perhaps even more importantl —also the way in which other kinds of narrative were being read and understood. That such a new and, for a long time, low-status form of entertainment could or should affect the reading of God's Word would no doubt have seemed utterly incredible to contemporaries. Only with hindsight can such changes be seen to have happened, and explanations sought. Indeed, only since Hans Frei's pioneering work, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative,* appeared some twenty five years ago, have we learned to see the rise of biblical criticism in relation to what was happening in the contemporary novel.

The details of Frei's argument need not concern us here, but two of the results are beyond dispute. What happened, in short, was that the Bible—and in particular the Old Testament—ceased to be read as though it spoke with a single omniscient dogmatic voice (what one might call the authoritative voice of God), and began instead to be read as *dialogue,* with a plurality of competing voices (as it were, the voices of people). At the same time, what had been universally accepted as an essentially polysemous narrative, with many threads of meaning, was narrowed into a single thread of story, which was almost invariably interpreted as being "historical." Thus we find a very ordinary

biblical commentary of 1805, Mrs Trimmer's *Hints to the Unlearned in the Study of the Holy Scripture,* writing of God as if he is "author" not just of the Bible, but of His whole creation, whose human protagonists are somehow characters in the plot: **[end of page 1]**

> The Books that follow, as far as the BOOK OF ESTHER, are called the HISTORICAL BOOKS. The Histories they contain differ from all the other histories that ever were written, for they give an account of the ways of GOD; and explain *why* GOD *protected and rewarded* some persons and nations, and *why* he *punished* others; also, *what led* particular persons mentioned in Scripture to *do* certain things for which they were approved of condemned; whereas writers who compose histories in a common way, without being *inspired of God,* can only form guesses and conjectures concerning God's dealings with mankind, neither can they know what passed in the hearts of those they write about; such knowledge as this, belongs to *God* alone, whose ways are *unsearchable and past finding out,* and *to whom all hearts are open, all desires known!* (iii)

Nor was this a one-way influence. If the Bible was now being read as the supreme novel, novelists from Jane Austen to George MacDonald were incorporating biblical techniques and symbolism into their fictional structures.

That, however, is running ahead of ourselves. I want today to look at a much more unlikely figure in this story of the re-reading of the Bible: Frederick Denison Maurice. His name is unlikely to be a major one in either standard histories of biblical criticism, or in histories of the novel, but not least of the reasons for that omission are the conventions of scholarship that separate two modes of reading that were historically very deeply intertwined. Maurice was one of the very few of his generation to see that historical interconnection, and to understand its implications for the future of biblical interpretation— implications that, I would argue, are if anything more significant today than they were even in his own time.

We start with the common ground between the Bible and the novel: narrative itself. Christianity, we must remember, provided the *original* grand narrative. Unlike either Judaism, or the various pagan cults it had supplanted in the late Roman world, for more than a thousand years the worship of Christ seemed to its adherents to offer the added bonus of a final and coherent Theory of Everything. This fundamental consilience (to use E. O. Wilson's re-coined word) included not merely the dramatic sweep of the Bible

narrative itself, beginning with the Creation and ending with the Apocalypse; but cosmology, botany, zoology, and even secular literature itself could be integrated into a single vast all-encompassing system. In its most developed form not merely human society, but animals, plants, minerals, and even angels themselves, were arranged in a divinely ordered Great Chain of Being whose golden links reached from the throne of God to the lowliest inanimate parts of Creation.[1] The earth-centred Ptolemaic universe, the providential powers of medicinal herbs, and the hierarchies of mediaeval bestiaries, all bore witness to the divine scheme of the **[2]** universe. The very completeness of the narrative by the late middle ages had made the idea of an alternative story almost unthinkable.

Even the one apparent cultural exception to this order, the literature of classical antiquity, was ingeniously incorporated into this great universal narrative. As early as the first century, Philo, a Hellenised Jew, claimed that the Greek philosophers such as Plato were not merely compatible with the Hebrew scriptures, but had actually been influenced by them.[2] Other commentators applied to classical literature the same allegorising techniques that had first been used in the Christian appropriation of the Old Testament. Virgil's fourth *Eclogue,* with its prophecy of a coming ruler, was understood as a foretelling of Christ and a parallel to Isaiah. His *Aeneid* was even read as a parable of the Christian soul's journey through life. By the sixth century Cassiodorus was able to accommodate the whole of classical learning to an organised programme of Christian education (Prickett, *Reading* 5-7). Thus sanctified, the classics were embraced by the Renaissance writers as religious authorities almost on a par with the biblical writers. Dante makes the pagan Virgil his guide through a Christian Hell and Purgatory that contains both biblical and classical figures. Milton, in *Samson Agonistes,* creates a classical tragedy out of a biblical story—reminding us in his prologue that "The Apostle Paul thought it not unworthy to insert a verse of Euripides into the text of Holy Scripture, I Cor. 15. 33." "[O]f the style and uniformity and that commonly called the plot . . . they only will be best judge who are not unacquainted with Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, the three tragic poets unequalled yet by any, and the best rule to all who endeavour to write tragedy" (365; 367). All human learning: literature, art, science and religion, could be seen as being in perfect harmony.

Like all such generalisations, this is of course an oversimplification. No synthesis of this magnitude and complexity is univocal, or tells only one story. Even that musical image of "harmony" implies at least different voices or instruments playing related parts within a single tune. Another analogy might be

that of a thick rope composed of many individual narrative strands. Perhaps the best metaphor of all would be that of a Kuhnian paradigm. Within a common overall way of thinking there could be wide areas of disagreement. Aquinas' great *Summa Theologica,* now often seen as the supreme statement of the mediaeval synthesis, was sharply attacked, and even seen as heretical, in its own time. Like the Bible itself, the grand story of the universe was less a single narrative than a collection of inter-related stories on a common theme. What finally broke this paradigm, however, was not any single point of debate, but rather the collapse of the *idea* that a total common synthesis was possible at all.

In the wake of the Reformation and the disappearance of the old Ptolemaic idea of the earth at the centre of all things, the tensions underlying the always **[3]** fragile mediaeval synthesis became more visible. As in other examples of intellectual paradigms, there had been a kind of tacit symbiosis between the various parts. The self-evident truth of one piece of the argument seemed to reinforce other areas that may have been logically unrelated. Similarly, when one piece collapsed, other, apparently unrelated, parts of the synthesis suddenly seemed less obviously right. The notion of the inherent connection between knowledge and morality, for instance, was never a central Christian doctrine *per se,* but its loss nevertheless weakened the idea that there had to be a single, discernible, pattern to the universe. Once the idea of a unified grand narrative in this sense was questioned, it fell to pieces almost under its own entropic momentum.

This was not simply a matter of ideas. A prevailing paradigm may represent itself at any stage to its adherents as primarily a unified intellectual construct, but, as those who dare to challenge it quickly discover, it is also a locus of deeply entrenched emotions. Both the Reformation and the Catholic Counter-Reformation had liberated huge new reserves of spiritual energy and devotion in Europe, and in both Calvinism and the new Catholic baroque sensibility what looked like new and satisfying versions of the traditional all-embracing grand narrative had been painfully re-constructed. Yet the greater the vigour of the polemic against supposedly "Christian" opponents, the more both sides were reminded that there was another possible version of events. The universal paradigm had gone. In place of a single Church there were warring sects; in place of the traditional synthesis was nascent pluralism. Not unrelatedly, perhaps, by the eighteenth century religious observance in England, France, and Germany had sunk to lows that have never been equalled either before, or, perhaps more surprisingly, since.[3]

Such changes in collective sensibility, however, rarely have single

or simple causes. The collapse of the traditional Christian paradigm itself attracted a variety of new narratives: words like "Reformation" or "heresy" are themselves titles of implied narratives of heroic revolt, or triumphant fidelity. Other interpretations of European history tell other stories. One strand of conventional wisdom, for instance, has it that the old providential grand narrative was finally demolished by three great historical blows. The first, the belief that we lived on the central body of a limited cosmos was destroyed by Copernicus, Galileo and Newton in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The second, the biblical tradition that man was uniquely formed in God's image was exploded by Darwin in the nineteenth century, and, finally, any assumptions of intellectual rationality bolstered by the first two were rudely shattered by Freud at the turn of the twentieth century. **[4]** One problem with this account, however, is its dating. No intellectual revolution happens all at once, but the traditional belief in the uniqueness of humanity was already being treated with great scepticism by the middle of the eighteenth century, a hundred years before Darwin, who did no more than administer the *coup de grace.* Another problem is its source: this is, after all, the version put about by Freud himself, who was, not very subtly, attempting to piggy-back his own "revolution" on the prestige of the other two and claim the same status in the history of thought as Copernicus and Darwin (326). A third problem is that, as has been argued, the fact of the breakdown of the entire system was itself probably more significant than the questioning of any particular part.

Even by the seventeenth century we are already looking not at a single narrative but a profusion of incompatible and competing ones. Moreover, it is significant how so many other makers and shakers of human ideas do not seem to have reacted to these blows with the horror and dismay that Freud evidently felt they should. If, in the early seventeenth century, John Donne genuinely felt that "the new philosophy puts all in doubt" (questions of irony prevent an unambiguous reading), certainly, a full century after Copernicus' death, Milton —who not merely knew perfectly well that the earth went round the sun, but also believed the material of his great saga of the Fall of Man, *Paradise Lost,* to be divinely revealed in the Book of Genesis—calmly uses the obsolete earth-centred cosmos as the setting for his poem. Similarly, though science may well have contributed to the growth of eighteenth-century Deism, we exaggerate its importance at that period if we attribute the scepticism of the Enlightenment solely or even principally to the scientific revolution. There were many other philosophical, religious, and social roots to the Enlightenment, and Newton's theory of gravity, for instance, was not even accepted in France until the mid-

years of the century. The publication of Darwin's *Origin of Species* in 1859 certainly shook the faith of some, including, for instance, the journalist and editor John Morely, who later admitted that he had changed his mind about ordination as a result of Darwin. But the frisson that is supposed to have shaken the entire religious world loses some of its chill when we read actual eye-witness accounts of the clearly very confused debate between Huxley and Bishop Wilberforce at the Pitt-Rivers Museum, or notice that neither Maurice nor Newman, both in their own ways far more significant figures than the meretricious "soapy" Sam Wilberforce, seem to have been disturbed, either publicly or privately, by the new biological theory.

The changes brought about just by the breakdown of the idea of a single system of explanation—a single grand narrative—also resulted in corresponding linguistic shifts, first in English, but within a century right across Europe. As the historian Peter Harrison has recently shown, the word "religion" only acquired

[5] its modern meaning of a particular systemised code of belief and practice in England in the seventeenth century, as the breakdown of the mediaeval synthesis, and the religious upheavals of the sixteenth-century Reformation, allowed people, for almost the first time, to see that *more* than one such system could exist. Only then could a "religion" be perceived as one system among several, that could be studied as it were objectively, from the outside. Only then did the word acquire its plural form.[4] In that sense, our concept of religion is itself only about three hundred years old.

Characteristically, the Protestantism that was to emerge from the Reformation struggles was not a single dogmatically unified Church, but a sprawling variety of conflicting groups, all in fact "religions" in the new sense of the word: self-confessed sects, in that they defined their constituency in terms of exclusion. Some other groups—whether Catholics, nonconformists, the un-righteous or un-elect—were by definition ineligible for membership, or, more importantly, for the Lord's Salvation. All, including even those who claimed to represent the historic and pre-Reformation Anglican tradition, now defined themselves not so much as custodians of an all-embracing truth but in relation to other religious movements, other systems, with whom they were in conflict.

Oddly, almost the sole exception to this was a body whose origins seemed to most people to be identical with other seventeenth-century millenarian sects: the "Society of Friends." Even the name by which they were normally known, the "Quakers," seemed to place them with the Ranters and the Shakers, and there was little in the verbal violence of George Fox's and John Woolman's orations to suggest otherwise. Yet by the late eighteenth century

their continuing membership had achieved a level of education and prosperity that marked them out as being superior to most other nonconformists and many Anglicans. Great Quaker families, the Frys, the Rowntrees, and the Cadburys dominated the relatively new chocolate trade; the Barclays were big in other growth-areas such as banking and brewing. With such striking innovations as equal education for their women (Ackworth, in Yorkshire, was the first co-educational boarding school in the world), and new forms of treatment for the mentally ill (The Retreat, in York), the Quakers by the end of the eighteenth century were pioneering a new total vision of society. Only the Unitarians came close to them in educating women.

What was theologically interesting about the Quakers, however, was their total *absence* of theology in the normal sense. Their one and only "doctrine," if it may be so called, was that of the "inner light": that we have within us our own source of spiritual guidance and enlightenment that must take primacy over any externally imposed system of belief or morality. While outsiders have been quick to see in this obvious dangers of self-deceit and corruption, something in the **[6]** Quaker way has enabled the sect to continue and even thrive over the succeeding years in a way few other mystically inclined groups have done, while adapting without undue pain to later intellectual developments. At the same time they have never been numerous or had any significant appeal outside educated middle-class intellectual circles: present estimates of British membership are static at around the twenty thousand figure. Nevertheless, in the eighteenth century, their stress on the inwardness of religious experience, combined with their refusal to attempt to construct any kind of external grand narrative at all, placed them in a unique position in the spectrum of religious belief.

While avoiding the obvious dangers of adherence to a fixed world-picture in a society of rapid change, the Quakers in effect gave instead complete centrality to the inner narrative. They were not, of course, the first to see their lives in such a way, but by completely discarding the conventional contemporary structure of external defining narratives, they gave a new kind of stress to their internal life. Because such a narrative, by definition, embraced their whole lives, describing every part of their existence, Christianity could be thus re-constituted *within them* as a personal grand narrative. Even if it could not explain every external thing in the way that the mediaeval world-picture had done, it could *contain* ironies and uncertainties, even the kind of unconscious drives and contradictions later claimed by Freud or Jung. And it could not be fazed by new discoveries in science or biblical criticism. In that sense, at least,

it was consonant with the new philosophy being developed by Kant and his idealist successors in Germany, as well as with the new ideals of sentiment and subjectivity growing in England and France. Above all, it was essentially pluralistic.

It is, therefore, significant that the greatest nineteenth century attempt at reconstructing a universal Christian narrative, Maurice's *The Kingdom of Christ* (1838), was subtitled "Flints to a Quaker Respecting the Principles, Constitution and Ordinances of the Catholic Church," and (in its first edition) was arranged as a series of letters to a Quaker. It was a remarkable book by any standards —threatening an apotheosis of the Church of England so radical that (to invert Arnold's aphorism) Anglicans have ever since neither been able to live with it, nor live without it.[5] Yet Maurice had not even been brought up in the Church of England. Born and raised a Unitarian, he had for a time in adolescence been strongly influenced by his mother's growing Calvinism (*Life* 28-31). Though both Unitarianism and Calvinism were passing phases, later transcended, there is a sense in which the two positions remained as lifelong poles in his thought. The former, with its denial of the divinity of Jesus, and a strong scientific tradition among its members, was closer to Deism in its general tenor than traditional Anglicanism. For many Unitarians, the Book of Nature was as important as biblical Revelation. Calvinism, on the other hand, was fiercely anti-naturalistic,

[7] sceptical as to both human judgement and knowledge, and stressing the inscrutability of God's ways. Thus *The Kingdom of Christ* combines an extreme theological liberalism and openness (following Coleridge's principle that people are more usually right in what they affirm than in what they deny) with an exalted view of the Church as the means of personal salvation.

For Maurice the Church is a "universal spiritual society." The two qualities are co-dependent. Ironically, it can *only* be universal if it is spiritual. No other kind of society could embrace everyone. But it could only be spiritual if it were universal. For him openness is at the heart of the New Testament; exclusiveness is quite simply *incompatible* with spirituality. If at present these conditions were potential rather than actual, that is because the universal spiritual society was in a state of slow evolution. Its "truth" has been "working itself out into clearness for many centuries" through a "strange and painful process" (2.75). Christianity is not a system possessing a set of clear-cut ideas at all. It would, Maurice writes, be "hard to establish in a court of law the identity of the dogmas of the New Testament with those which prevailed in Scotland and Germany during the eighteenth century" (1.159).

It follows that a "gathered church" of like-minded believers is a

contradiction in terms. The model for the Church is not a group who share common beliefs, but a *family*—whose members are bound by deeper ties than verbal formulae. The Patriarchs of Genesis were first and foremost relatives. The story of Jacob, argued Maurice, witnesses to the fact that God's people were founded on family relationship and not choice (1.275). Moreover, the vigour of this unique society actually depends on the necessary tensions within it. Just as at a linguistic level the Bible is charged with a metaphorical tension by which the concepts of family and fatherhood acquire a new meaning from the uses to which they are put, so the perpetual tension between the Church as an outward physical organisation and an inner spiritual society re-shapes our ideas of what it means to be both an organisation and a spiritual society. Maurice's chosen title illustrates this tension. The "kingship" and "fatherhood" of God are inescapable poles of Christian experience. The "kingdom" of Christ *is* a "family." The deepest writings of the New Testament, instead of being digests of doctrine, are epistles, explaining to those who had been admitted into the Church of Christ their own position (1.296).

Though in retrospect it might seem that Maurice's vision of the Church represents the only viable attempt to create anything approaching a Christian grand narrative for the post-Kantian era, he himself would have been horrified by the notion. For him an all-embracing narrative—in his terms, a "system"— was fatal to the pursuit of truth. **[8]**

> When once a man begins to build a system, the very gifts and qualities which might serve in the investigation of truth, become the greatest hindrances to it. He must make the different parts of the scheme fit into each other, his dexterity shown not in detecting facts but in cutting them square. (*Lectures* 222)

A "system," together with its outward political and ecclesiastical expression, "parry," was for him a mental and spiritual strait-jacket, permitting only pre-determined gestures towards pre-defined goals. It is the vehicle of the second-hand, holding at bay all genuine possibilities of change. It is the enemy of creativity. In contrast, following Coleridge, what he called "method" was the pre-condition of all first-hand experience. Without it, impressions and intuitions were alike random and disorganised. "To me," he wrote, "these words ['system' and 'method'] seem not only not synonymous, but the greatest contraries imaginable: the one indicating that which is most opposed to life, freedom, variety; and the other that without which they cannot exist" (1.272-73). The Bible afforded the perfect example of the contrast. The systematiser "is tormented every page he reads with a sense of the refractory and hopeless

materials he has to deal with," whereas the disinterested reader who does m approach it with pre-conceptions finds a unity and meaning in the very diversity of its contents. It is "organic," providing a "principle of progression" by which we move from the known to the unknown, and without which the infinite possibilities of the new remain unexplored because they are inaccessible.

Instead of seeking a satisfactory "system" of biblical interpretation, Maurice invokes the creative power of language itself. Criticising the lexicographic approach to language which he sees as characteristic of Horne Tooke or Johnson, Maurice appeals to a common ground of experience that echoes the radicalism of Schleiermacher's *Speeches on Religion*:

> If they would have stooped to the strong and irresistible evidence which the workings of our own minds, which all history, furnishes, that there is as much vital principle in a word as in a tree or a flower, they would have understood how it was possible that the root should be a small ugly thing, and that yet it should contain in itself the whole power and principle of the leaves, and buds, and flowers, into which it afterwards expands . . .. They would have understood too, how the peculiar circumstances of any age, moral or political, like the influence of sun and air, of spring breezes, of mildew and blight, may modify the form and colour of a word, may stint or quicken its growth, may give it a full-blown, coarse, material look, cause it to sicken into a pale and drooping abstraction, or strengthen it in all its spiritual sap and juices.

(*Friendship* 53) **[9]**

This approach to language as a living, organic and essentially *narrative* entity is central to any understanding of Maurice's mode of thought. He himself was fully aware of its quite startling implications:

> In using this language I am far from intending to be metaphorical. I use that language which I believe does most literally and exactly convey my meaning. The point in debate is, whether words are endued with this principle of life, the manifestations of which it is impossible in any way so truly to express as in language of outward nature. Whether it be so or not, I repeat, is the question. To call this language metaphorical is to beg the question. (*Friendship* 54)

Throughout Maurice's thinking he takes for granted the Coleridgean principle that articulate knowledge is rooted in certainties and modes of awareness that extend far beneath consciousness to layers that are accessible to

aesthetic rather than rational or discursive forms of apprehension. Maurice's Platonism gave him a new gloss to Christ's sayings about the need for a childlike mind. As one friend wrote after a conversation with him in 1836, "Maurice says all little children are Platonists, and it is their education which makes them Aristotelians" (*Life* 1.207).

In claiming that words are "endued" with "life," Maurice is, of course echoing Coleridge's well-known affirmation in *Aids to Reflection* that "words are not THINGS, they are LIVING POWERS, by which the things of most importance to mankind are actuated, combined and humanised" (xvi). This is not some kind of magical attribution, but rather the idea that words develop progressively as they are used, constantly being adapted and changed to fit new situations, yet always laden with the freight of their past history. At the same time, they reach out from that immediate context towards something that is other and transcendent.

The ambiguity of language is thus, for Maurice, not a hindrance, but—given the complexity and richness of real thinking compared with the artificial simplicities of philosophers and theologians—a help towards greater clarity. What has to be remembered, however, is that this is not so much a philosophical clarity, as a "poetic" or narrative clarity. Despite the way in which it has sometimes been used, the Bible is not a rule-book, nor yet a manifesto, but an on-going recursive story.

Here the influence of his Cambridge tutor, Julius Hare, was highly significant. A Fellow of Trinity College and later rector of Hurstmonceux, in Sussex, Hare was one of the finest German scholars in England. His Rectory was said to contain more than two thousand books in German alone. By far his best-known work was *Guesses at Truth,* a collection of literary, philosophic, and religious fragments, jointly composed with his brother, Augustus, and first

[10] published anonymously in 1827. In spite of its distinctly down-beat title, it was to maintain an astonishing popularity throughout much of the century, going through a second, much enlarged, edition in 1838, a third in 1847, and being reprinted thereafter in 1867,1871 and 1884.

Though most English contemporaries were reminded of the more familiar maxims of Pascal or La Bruyère, to anyone familiar with the Schlegels and the other Jena Romantics, the far greater debt to Germany is obvious. Responding to the comment of one of his colleagues, that he was ready to adopt the philosophy of "certain writers"[6] because he admired their poetry, Hare is reported to have replied: "But poetry is philosophy and philosophy is poetry" (Memoir, *Guesses* xxii).

Guesses at Truth intersperses long essays on specific points of history, philology, and literary criticism with one-liners or religious and aesthetic topics. The essays are augmented and increase in number in later editions, constituting perhaps the best source of second-generation romantic critical theory in the English language, and developing ideas that are only latent or embryonic in the more famous *Four Ages of Poetry* by Peacock or Shelley's *Defence of Poetry*. Above all is Hare's sense of the changing nature of human consciousness:

> . . . Goethe in 1800 does not write just as Shakespeare wrote in 1600: but neither would Shakespeare in 1800 have written just as he wrote in 1600. For the frame and aspect of society are different; the world which would act on him, and on which he would have to act, is another world. True poetical genius acts in communion with the world, in a perpetual reciprocation of influences . . . . Genius is not an independent and insulated, but a social and continental, or at all events a peninsular power . . . . (2 136-40)

If we allow for historical development, it is logical also to allow for the incomplete and fragmentary nature of all our knowledge. For Hare a thing may be complete and yet unfinished; or finished and yet incomplete. This distinction serves as a basis for a further distinction, that between the classic and gothic spirit: "Is not every Grecian temple complete even though it be in ruins? . . . . Is not every Gothic minster unfinished? and for the best of reasons, because it is infinite . . ." (2.250).

As Maurice was quick to see, his mentor's architectural example could provide an excellent metaphor for the Bible itself. That something can be at once finished, but by its very nature dynamically incomplete, was a concept that applied both to language, and, at another level, to the structure of all narrative—including that of the Bible. In a letter of 1863 he distinguishes three different ways in which he saw the eighteenth century had understood the Old Testament: **[11]**

> 1) The purely orthodox. The divine history is in its essence miraculous—i.e., it is an exception from the law of all other histories.
> 2) The purely naturalistic. All the so-called miracles of Scripture may be explained into ordinary phenomena.
> 3) The spiritualistic (either in the Romanist or Methodist form). Miracles have not ceased. There are interferences now as there were of old (*Life* 2.454)

Turning to his own, nineteenth century, Maurice argues that Strauss and

the "Mythical School," even while they seemed to endorse the hard-headed naturalism of their eighteenth-century predecessors, Eichorn and Reimarus, had had the paradoxical effect of subverting the second of these schemes in that they had demonstrated "that *no* records of human life can be content with purely naturalistic phenomena. There is always the dream of something transcendent." But this is a two-edged weapon. Granted that if followed in one direction it implies all history is based on falsehood, but "follow it to its extreme in the other direction and you come to the true supernatural origin of history." In other words—much as George Steiner was to argue in his 1989 book, *Real Presences*—Maurice believed that the transcendent yearnings of everyday language are not part of the process of "projection," by which humanity endows its universe with its own values (as Feuerbach and Strauss believed), but are a proper part of the sacramental nature of language. By the end of the eighteenth century, argues Maurice, the three theories of scriptural interpretation had in effect reached a stalemate, each unable to sustain itself unaided, yet fundamentally incompatible with the alternatives. All three should rather be seen as expressions of a much deeper perpetual conflict about the nature of language itself. It is, by its nature, incomplete: possessing "method," but always denying the "systems" that would provide total explanation. Thus language is *never* wholly to be accounted for by language, but always points beyond itself. Sounding at this point remarkably like Derrida, Maurice has a vision of the creativity of language in terms of perpetual incompleteness, always allowing for more to be said.[7]

For Maurice, however, the special property of scripture is not just that it possesses a bi-focal or ambiguous quality straddling two worlds, but that it progressively reveals similar tendencies in the everyday world of the reader's own experience. History—and, supremely, Biblical history—shapes and conditions the way we interpret the present: language is simultaneously vehicle and symbol of this process.

Thus what begins as a theory of biblical interpretation, centring on the irruption of the divine into human history—what Eliot was to call "the still point of the turning world"—ripples out into all secular literature, providing a theory of creativity that refuses to place any boundary between the sacred and the

[12] secular. It is not hard to see how such a view would appeal to someone like the deracinated Congregational minister, George MacDonald, whose slow return to Christian orthodoxy was signalled by his growing friendship with Maurice, and his frequent attendance at the Vere Street Church in which we now are. The loss of the original grand narrative of the Christian polity was, in the end, to be

more than compensated for by the realisation that what was needed for his time was not de-mythologising, but re-mythologising—a recognition that the telling of stories lay at the very heart of what has been called "a story-shaped world."

But we can, I think, say more. Maurice is all too often treated as merely a figure in his own time—someone who exemplifies rather than transcends his own age, or even a saintly man with a second class intellect. I have argued against that position at length elsewhere, and this is no place to re-hash that case. But as the preceding passages have hinted, there is much in Maurice's arguments that make more sense in our time than it did in his own. With hindsight, his contemporary reputation for obscurity owed much to the fact that his arguments mesh better with late twentieth-century criticism and. aesthetics than they did with the ideas of his own time. The trail of names and comparisons scattered through my text today tell their own story both of Maurice's roots, and the direction of his ideas: Augustine, Dante, Kant, the Schlegels, Schleiermacher, Eliot, Sterner, Derrida. Maurice was strenuously engaged with the cutting edge of ideas in his own time, but he is also one of the very few nineteenth century thinkers whose ideas, like those perhaps of Coleridge and Schleiermacher, may yet prove to be at least as relevant for the twenty first century as for his own.

Notes

1. The best account of this is A. O. Loveday, *The Great Chain of Being.*
2. See E. R. Goodenough, *Introduction to Philo Judaeus,* and Henry Chadwick, "Philo."
3. Robert Currie et al. *Churches and Churchgoers,*
4. Peter Harrison, *"Religion " and the Religions in the English Establishment.*
5. For a fuller account see Prickett, *Romanticism and Religion,* chapter 5.
6. From the context one suspects they were Wordsworth and Coleridge.
7. For a fuller discussion of the religious potential of Derrida's arguments see Kevin Hart, *The Trespass of the Sign*. **[13]**

Works Cited

Chadwick, Henry. "Philo." *Cambridge History of Later Greek and Early Mediaeval Philosophy.* Ed. A. H. Armstrong. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1967,137-57.
Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. *Aids to Reflection.* 1825. Ed. . . Thomas Fenby. London: Routledge, n.d..
Currie, Robert, Alan Gilbert and Lee Horsley, eds. *Churches and Churchgoers: Patterns of Church Growth in the British Isles since 1700.* Oxford: Clarendon, 1977.
Freud, Sigmund. *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis.* Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991.
Goodenough, E. R. *Introduction to Philo Judaeus.* 2nd. ed. Oxford: Blackwell, 1962.

Harrison, Peter. *"Religion" and the Religions in the English Enlightenment.* Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990.

Hart, Kevin. *The Trespass of the Sign.* Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989.

Lovejoy, A. O. *The Great Chain of Being.* Harvard: Harvard UP, 1936.

Maurice, Frederick Denison. *The Friendship of Books.* 2nd. ed. London, 1874.

—. *The Kingdom of Christ.* 4th. ed. London, 1891.

—. *Lectures in Ecclesiastical History of the First and Second Centuries.* London, 1854.

Maurice, Frederick, ed. *The Life of F. D. Maurice.* 4th ed. London, 1885.

Milton, John. *The Poems of John Milton.* Ed. John Carely and Alastair Fowler. London: Longman, 1968.

Prickett, Stephen, ed. *Reading the Text: Biblical Criticism and Literary Theory.* Oxford: Blackwell, 1991.

—. *Romanticism and Religion.* Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1976.

Wilson, E. O. *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge.* New York: Little, Brown, 1998.

[14]