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ELIZABETH WORDSWORTH: NINETEENTH-CENTURY OXFORD PRINCIPAL AND BIBLE INTERPRETER*

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INTRODUCTION

Elizabeth Wordsworth (1840–1932) was unwittingly¹ one of the most influential pioneers of education for women at Oxford University. As founding principal of Lady Margaret Hall, a residential hall for women in Oxford, where she served thirty-one years (1878–1909), she influenced many female students over the years. In 1886, she also founded another hall for women in Oxford, St. Hugh's Hall, with money she had inherited after her father's death.² Although not formally trained as a theologian and Bible scholar, she had a keen interest in Bible study and theology and lectured regularly to women students on various biblical and theological topics. Daughter of Christopher Wordsworth, priest and later bishop of Lincoln, much of Elizabeth Wordsworth's biblical training came through helping her father with his multivolume commentary on the Bible. As a writer of novels, poems, plays, essays, and devotional works, she also published theological reflections on the Apostles' Creed, the Lord's Prayer, the Decalogue, and the Psalms. This chapter will explore how she approaches biblical interpretation, particularly in *The Decalogue* and *Psalms for the Christian Festivals*, works that are based on her weekly lectures to the women students under her care at Oxford.³ This work was one of the many ways Wordsworth sought to pass on her

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1. Perhaps even a little reluctantly, as the title of her biography indicates: Georgina Battiscombe, *Reluctant Pioneer: A Life of Elizabeth Wordsworth* (London: Constable, 1978).

2. St. Hugh's Hall was for women students who could not afford the fees of Lady Margaret Hall. Elizabeth Wordsworth founded the hall in memory of her father.

3. Elizabeth Wordsworth, *The Decalogue* (London: Longmans, Green, 1893); idem, *Psalms for the Christian Festivals* (London: Longmans, Green, 1906).

own passion about teaching the Bible to the next generation of women so that they might be educated as interpreters of Scripture.

HER LIFE

Elizabeth Wordsworth, great-niece of the famous poet William Wordsworth,⁴ was born on 22 June 1840 in Harrow, Middlesex, England, to Anglican clergyman Christopher Wordsworth and Susannah Hatley Frere. She was the oldest of seven children, having two brothers and four sisters. Her father was then headmaster of Harrow but later became canon of Westminster in 1845 and eventually bishop of Lincoln in 1869. Elizabeth Wordsworth was a very bright child who had a keen interest in and insatiable desire for learning. Although she did not receive a formal education, except for one year at a girls' boarding school in Brighton when she was seventeen (an education that she thought was very superficial and more or less fruitless),⁵ she still received a fine classical education at home. She was well versed in classical Greek and Latin literature, modern languages, history, Bible and theology, music, and art. The only thing she lacked was training in mathematics and science. She was also a ferocious reader and argued that books, rather than teachers, were the best sources of education.⁶

Wordsworth learned Latin, French, Italian, German, Greek, and Hebrew, teaching herself Greek with the help of the Greek New Testament. On Sunday evenings their father would test all the children on their knowledge of the Greek New Testament after their evening meal.⁷ He would also introduce them to English church history. Wordsworth recalls having to recite the names of all the bishops and their sees as part of these sessions. With the aid of her brother John's Greek grammar and dictionary and a Latin translation, she was able to read the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* in Greek.⁸ She frequently borrowed her brother's Greek, Hebrew, and Latin grammars.⁹ Later she would reflect on how often girls learn

4. The sources for this section on her life are the following: Battiscombe, *Reluctant Pioneer*; Elizabeth Wordsworth, *Glimpses of the Past* (London: Mowbray, 1912); Nancy A. Barta-Smith, "Elizabeth Wordsworth," in *Modern British Essayists: First Series* (ed. R. Beum; Dictionary of Literary Biography 98; Detroit: Gale, 1990), 313–27; Evelyn M. Jamison, "Wordsworth, Dame Elizabeth, 1840–1932," in *The Dictionary of National Biography: 1931–1940* (ed. L. G. W. Legg; London: Oxford University Press, 1949), 921–22; Gale Reference Team, "Elizabeth Wordsworth, 1840–1932," in *Contemporary Authors Online* (Detroit: Gale, 2000).

5. Wordsworth, *Glimpses of the Past*, 38. She did appreciate the insights into "girls and their ways," which would help her later when she was principal of the hall for women.

6. Barta-Smith, "Elizabeth Wordsworth."

7. Wordsworth, *Glimpses of the Past*, 43.

8. *Ibid.*, 43–44.

9. Battiscombe, *Reluctant Pioneer*, 23.

from their brothers' books and grammars, "picking up crumbs beneath the tables of their masculine belongings, and blushing beautifully whenever detected."¹⁰

Toward the end of her life, Wordsworth published a book of reflections and memories from her life entitled *Glimpses from the Past*. As she recalled her upbringing, Wordsworth wrote, "Our real 'educators' had been our parents and other relatives, especially my father, whose whole level of mind was extraordinarily high."¹¹ She was very close to her father, who had a tremendous influence upon her and taught her many things. Christopher Wordsworth, a devout High Anglican, was a prolific writer, having published over eighty books and several volumes of a commentary on the whole Bible. Elizabeth, along with her siblings and mother, helped her father with the commentary. She writes:

Our home occupation, at this time, was chiefly copying out for the press the various portions of our father's Commentary, first on the New, and then on the Old Testament, and then in looking over the proof-sheets and verifying every Scripture reference. This was hard work, but we felt proud of helping him, and it taught us to know our Bibles.¹²

Although it was a family project, her role was indispensable, especially later when her father became bishop. She became his chief assistant on the commentary, a project that lasted twenty years. She also became his unofficial personal secretary when he became bishop of Lincoln.

Shortly after he became bishop, in a letter dated 3 April 1869, Wordsworth's father acknowledged the debt he owed her: "You know how much I need your help in these things now that I have no time for them myself; and I am never unthankful, my dear daughter, to Almighty God for the great blessing He has given me of your help in these important matters."¹³ In the same letter, he also asked her to examine the emendations and notes that he and his wife had made on the commentary and to give her own comments and suggestions. He writes, "Let me have the benefit of them and of any remarks that may occur to you for our adoption in the proposed reprint of the Pentateuch."¹⁴ At the conclusion of the letter, he acknowledges that the work on the commentary came as a result of a united effort, "our united labours" including Elizabeth, his wife Susannah, and Elizabeth's aunts and her sisters.¹⁵ Although it was a group effort, one wonders

10. Elizabeth Wordsworth, "Colleges for Women," in *Ladies at Work: Papers on Paid Employment for Ladies* (ed. L. Jeune; London: Innes, 1893), 17.

11. Wordsworth, *Glimpses of the Past*, 40.

12. *Ibid.*, 42-43.

13. Battiscombe, *Reluctant Pioneer*, 26; E. M. Jamison, "Appendix," in Battiscombe, *Reluctant Pioneer*, 263-64.

14. Jamison, "Appendix," 263.

15. *Ibid.*, 264.

how much Elizabeth Wordsworth actually contributed to the writing of the commentary during these years and how much her father wrote when he was so busy. We know that she certainly gave input at her father's request. She did more than simply edit the work and was able to make suggestions on the revisions. Through this, she gained a great knowledge of the Bible. Later in her career Wordsworth would regularly lecture and teach from the Bible. Her work of editing her father's commentary and notes had given her a solid foundation for understanding Scripture. Although Christopher Wordsworth published several individual commentaries on various biblical books over a twenty-year span, the complete eight-volume commentary on the whole Bible came out in 1871.¹⁶ This multi-volume work was very popular, and several editions were published.¹⁷ Elizabeth Wordsworth's critical role in helping with this work should not be forgotten.

In her biography of her father (co-authored with John Henry Overton, three years after her father's death), Wordsworth wrote about her father's work on the Bible and on the Old Testament in particular. This clearly demonstrates how influential her father was on her views of the Bible.¹⁸ Her father loved the Old Testament, for example, and emphasized the unity between the Testaments—"the oneness of the Bible"—that Elizabeth Wordsworth would also emphasize later.¹⁹

16. Christopher Wordsworth began by publishing a two-volume work on the book of Revelation in 1849. Then the first commentary on the whole New Testament was published in 1856; the New Testament in Greek and the final volume of the Old Testament commentary came out in 1871. Although he published various parts separately (for example, the Epistles of Paul in 1859 and the book of Daniel in 1871), the complete eight-volume commentary on the whole Bible came out in 1871. See James Barszcz, "Christopher Wordsworth," in *British Travel Writers, 1837–1875: Victorian Period* (ed. B. Brothers and J. Gergits; Dictionary of Literary Biography 166; Detroit: Gale, 1996), 344–52.

17. Bishop Wordsworth's commentary was very popular, coming out in at least seven editions. He was continually revising certain sections and reprinting new editions. A cheaper issue of the commentary on the whole Bible came out in 1872 because of the request of many for a more affordable work. This was an eight-volume commentary: six volumes on the Old Testament and two on the New Testament. Altogether the eight volumes consisted of over four thousand pages. See Christopher Wordsworth, *The Holy Bible in the Authorized Version: With Notes and Introductions* (8 vols.; London: Rivington, 1872).

18. John Henry Overton and Elizabeth Wordsworth, *Christopher Wordsworth: Bishop of Lincoln* (London: Rivington, 1888).

19. *Ibid.*, 414. In the preface of Christopher Wordsworth's new edition of his commentary on the Pentateuch, he emphasizes that one should not separate the Old from the New Testament. In fact, if one disparages the Old Testament, as modern-day Marcionites and Manichaeans do, treating it as "a common book" and not divine revelation, one is undermining "the foundations of the New. By separating the Law from the Gospel, and Moses from Christ, they invalidated the testimony of both" (Christopher Wordsworth, *The Five Books of Moses* [vol. 1 of *The Holy Bible in the Authorized Version*; new ed. London: Rivington, 1872], viii). In her writing on the Decalogue, Wordsworth demonstrates a positive view of the Old Testament. She does not see the God of the Old Testament as different from the God of the New Testament, and she argues

Christopher Wordsworth especially liked the book of Ezekiel. In her description of her father's love for Ezekiel, Wordsworth reveals her own views of this prophetic book as well as her admiration for her father's work.

The grandeur of the last-named obscure and wonderful book breaks upon one like a revelation in his pages, and no mere scholar, no one who had not something of the fervour of a poet, and the devout intuition of a saint, could, we think, have entered fully into that wondrous life and prophecy, with its strangely typical symbolism, recalling Dante, alike in its vivid, homely reality, and its weird and majestic sublimity. In reading Ezekiel under Dr. Wordsworth's guidance we forget the nineteenth century and the human commentator, and are swept upward to the threshold of the ideal Temple, and onward in the flight of the mystic Cherubim.²⁰

Elizabeth Wordsworth would also lecture on Ezekiel, although she never published these lectures.²¹ Her father's love for this prophetic book and the Old Testament in general was certainly an inspiration to her. Wordsworth notes that her father was the happiest when he was commenting on the Old Testament.²²

When Wordsworth's brother John moved to Oxford, she often went to visit him and his wife Esther, and, as a result, she made many friends at Oxford.²³ These connections became important because they eventually led to her being recommended for the appointment of principal of a new residential hall for women. Thus, in November 1878 Elizabeth Wordsworth accepted the invitation to become the principal of Lady Margaret Hall. Up until then, Oxford University did not accept women students, and there was no hall of residence for women.²⁴ Because Cambridge University had established two residential halls for women, Girton College and Newnham College, a number of people at Oxford felt that they should have the same. Even though female students could not attain a degree from the university, it was argued that "girls should be able to live and study at Oxford, enjoying the intellectual atmosphere of the place and taking advantage of such educational facilities as lectures and libraries"²⁵ (to learn by osmosis or by

for seeing unity in the Bible between the Testaments. Here the influence of her father is clearly seen (Wordsworth, *The Decalogue*, 73–74).

20. Overton and Wordsworth, *Christopher Wordsworth*, 416.

21. Battiscombe, *Reluctant Pioneer*, 161.

22. Overton and Wordsworth, *Christopher Wordsworth*, 415.

23. Elizabeth Wordsworth was particularly close to her brother John. Intellectually, they had much in common. John, who later became bishop of Salisbury, was a Latin scholar and published a critical edition of the Vulgate New Testament.

24. Only the Oxford local examinations were available to women, since 1867 (Battiscombe, *Reluctant Pioneer*, 63).

25. *Ibid.*, 64.

breathing the atmosphere, as Wordsworth would advocate).²⁶ Thus, two halls for women were established: Lady Margaret Hall, supported by the Church of England; and Somerville Hall for non-Anglicans.²⁷ Wordsworth became principal of Lady Margaret Hall,²⁸ and the first nine students arrived in 1879. She remained the principal for thirty-one years. When Wordsworth retired in 1909, the hall had grown from nine students in 1879 to fifty-nine in 1909.

In the 1890s, there was much debate over the possible admission of women to the bachelor of arts (B.A.) degree. With regard to this question, Wordsworth was somewhat ambivalent. She frustrated both sides of the camp, who wanted her to take a stand. She certainly was not a feminist in the modern sense of the term, yet she did much for the education of women at Oxford. For Wordsworth, the key was that women would be given the opportunity to study and do the requirements of the degree, but whether they got a degree was not important. The degree was only a token, not the actual achievement itself.²⁹ She saw education not as a means to an end but as the end to be enjoyed itself; gaining the knowledge was the key.³⁰ When she was forced to take a stand, however, she voted in favor of

26. Wordsworth's philosophy of women being educated by osmosis or by simply picking it up from the environment or circles in which they were found is illustrated in her comments written in 1893: "In the old days a 'real lady' was educated by the very atmosphere she habitually breathed. She was taught by the walls of her room, the books that lay about, the people she met, etc." (Wordsworth, "Colleges for Women," 20). She also "set great store by the educational value of contact with notable people" (Battiscombe, *Reluctant Pioneer*, 79). As principal she continually wanted her female students to meet scholars and interesting people.

27. Oxford was divided between High Church Anglicans represented by Christ Church College who wanted a Church of England hall and a more liberal-minded group from Balliol College. This latter group, represented by Benjamin Jowett, head of Balliol College, "who stood for new thought and criticism," wanted a hall for dissenters from the Anglican Church. Somerville hall became known as the "undenominational" hall and was named after Mary Somerville, a woman scientist (Battiscombe, *Reluctant Pioneer*, 65, 66, 75).

28. Wordsworth was encouraged by her father to take the position. She was able to propose the name of the hall, after Lady Margaret Beaufort, mother of Henry VII, who was a patron of the arts and learning. Wordsworth described her as a gentlewoman, a scholar, and a saint, undoubtedly three qualities that she wanted her female students to emulate (Wordsworth, *Glimpses from the Past*, 144–45).

29. Battiscombe, *Reluctant Pioneer*, 138.

30. Some of her views on women being educated are seen in an essay she wrote in 1893. In promoting the importance of colleges for women, she argued that an education was not only important for unmarried women who needed to support themselves financially but also that it was "excellent training for future wives and mothers. Why should stupidity or ignorance be taken as a qualification for married life, as some people seem to think?" (Wordsworth, "Colleges for Women," 17). Even though she herself never married, she was a strong proponent of marriage. She advocated that there were three types of women who would benefit from being educated in a women's college: (1) women born scholars—women who try to learn Latin or Greek from their brothers' textbooks (which was her own experience); (2) those women who

granting degrees to women (even though the council of Lady Margaret Hall was against it). However, the motion was defeated by the Congregation, the voting members of Oxford University, in 1896. Women would have to wait another twenty-four years to get a degree from Oxford.

When degrees were finally granted to women students at Oxford in 1920, Elizabeth Wordsworth was the first of three female recipients of the honorary master of arts degree (along with Her Majesty the Queen and Mrs. T. H. Green). With the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the Lady Margaret Hall in 1928, the University of Oxford also bestowed upon Wordsworth an honorary doctorate, the degree of doctor of civil law.³¹ Her biographer Georgina Battiscombe writes:

Though it was ironical that she, who had cared so little for degrees, should find herself thus honoured, no one had done more to deserve this recognition. She had given her life to the business of educating women.... Her wit and wisdom and, above all, the appeal of her personality, had done much to reconcile Oxford opinion to the admittance of women to university membership. No one could object to the presence of academic women if the academic woman resembled Elizabeth Wordsworth. Of all Oxford women she was the best known and the best loved, and she had earned the right to a triumph.³²

During her thirty-one years as principal, Wordsworth gave many lectures to the women at the Hall, and every Sunday evening she lectured on the Bible and led Bible studies.³³ Many of these lectures and addresses formed the basis of her publications. In her Bible addresses, it is obvious that she had gained great Bible knowledge through helping her father with the Bible commentary. Her biographer elaborates:

The long years which she spent helping her father with his Commentary had given Elizabeth Wordsworth an exceptional knowledge of the Bible, and this is apparent on every page of these addresses. She quotes the original Greek and Hebrew, she gives alternative readings from the Septuagint, she discusses in great detail the possible meanings of obscure words of doubtful passages, and she is learned on such matters as dating and authorship. Her approach is by no means obscurantist; she can allow that parts of the Old Testament may be myth rather than history, though personally she herself is always inclined towards belief in a basis of historical fact.³⁴

need to secure employment; and (3) women who are around thirty years of age or older who have not had the opportunities for training. These are women who are forced to find ways to support themselves when they can no longer live at home due to their homes breaking up (ibid., 17–19).

31. Battiscombe, *Reluctant Pioneer*, 212.

32. Ibid., 199.

33. Ibid., 135.

34. Ibid., 160.

Although not as prolific as her father, Wordsworth still published twenty-seven books plus individual chapters and essays.³⁵ We will now turn to her interpretation of Scripture as demonstrated in her books *The Decalogue* and *Psalms for the Christian Festivals*.

THE DECALOGUE

Elizabeth Wordsworth's writing on the Decalogue, published in 1893, was based on her weekly addresses given to the women students of Lady Margaret Hall on Sunday evenings.³⁶ In her introduction she adopts the typical view held in the nineteenth century that the Bible reflects stages in the development of human life and society from a more primitive stage to more evolved and complex stages. She writes, "The Decalogue is as much more elaborate than the primitive command to Adam, as human life has become during the ages that have intervened" (xiii). She compares the first command "be fruitful and multiply" in Gen 1:28 with the Decalogue, which represents a higher stage of development. She argues that this is something that natural science has demonstrated in the concept of the evolution of humankind (x). Wordsworth is not discussing Darwin's concept of evolution but rather the nineteenth-century notion of progressive revelation and the progressive education of humankind.³⁷ Not only do humans develop physically but with time also morally and socially. She contends that "There comes a time, however, in the history of humanity, as secular no less than sacred learning teaches us, when man discovers that he has a moral as well as a physical side" (x). In the fall, humans became conscious of being individuals who can make independent choices. By the time of the giving of the Ten Commandments, they moved to a higher stage of development in becoming aware of being social beings (x-xiii). Wordsworth finds support for this gradual approach to human development in history and philosophy: "In the account of the giving of the Decalogue we find (just what history and philosophy tell us) that man has become a social being—a member of state" (xiii). With the coming of Christ, there is an even higher stage in human history when Jesus demonstrates "the lofty doctrine of self-sacrifice" (xv). She believes that modern science, philosophy, and history supports this view of the Bible. Later she also argues that this notion of progress is what precisely distinguishes the Bible from other literature. The Bible "always has a future before it, and sets a future before its readers" (109, emphasis original). "The Law

35. She published two novels under the pseudonym Grant Lloyd (Barta-Smith, "Elizabeth Wordsworth," 313–27).

36. Wordsworth, *The Decalogue*, xxiii. Subsequent references to *The Decalogue* will be provided within the main text.

37. John Rogerson, *Old Testament Criticism in the Nineteenth Century: England and Germany* (London: SPCK, 1984), 246–47.

and the Prophets are throughout *prospective*. They breathe not regret for a vanished past—but progress. Their ‘golden age’ is still to come, ‘Development’ is the watchword of the Old Testament” (110, emphasis original).

Adopting this understanding of progressive development within Scripture is not unusual; what is unique is Wordsworth’s application of this to the Ten Commandments themselves. With regard to the last six commandments, she argues that the ninth and tenth commandments represent a higher stage of human civilization and development. She asserts that the ninth commandment, “Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour,” takes humanity to “a stage higher up in civilization than the four which have preceded it. . . . The ninth goes higher still, and looks upon man as belonging to some kind of political organization. False witness presupposes a tribunal before which false witness can be borne” (210). The tenth commandment, “Thou shalt not covet,” moves to an even higher level than the ninth because it focuses on the internal motivation and desire rather than the external, outward action. “The tenth, the chief commandment in the second table . . . looks exclusively at the *heart and will* of those to whom it is addressed. We are not only not to take what belongs to our neighbour, but we are not even to desire it” (224). The fact that God sees the heart and will will be more fully developed by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, but this understanding, she argues, is already present in the tenth commandment (224–25). Thus, Wordsworth sees different levels of development within the Ten Commandments themselves. What is not clear is whether she applied the same understanding to all the previous commandments. For example, did she consider the fourth commandment, to keep the Sabbath, higher than the previous three? If she was consistent, this would logically be the case, but we will never know for sure. She is only explicit on this point when it comes to the ninth and tenth commandments.

Wordsworth argues that the Ten Commandments are not obsolete but that we can still draw great principles from them.³⁸ They have a unique place within the Bible as a whole, being a higher spiritual law meant for all time (50, 53, 54, 60). “The commandments are to be looked on as *principles* even more than rules. They cover a far wider area” (61, emphasis original). Here she is following the hermeneutical approach of finding general principles within the Bible.

Wordsworth was not afraid of science but rather saw it as an aid to theology, supporting and enhancing our understanding of Scripture. In discussing the first commandment, she argues that the “belief in the Unity of God is supported by what Science teaches us about Nature” (71). Because science has shown “the radical oneness of animal life,” this proves the oneness of God (72). She contends, “Is not our theology timid just because it will not learn from Science how great and wonderful is this God of ours?” (74). Interestingly, although she did not formally

38. Only the ceremonial and civil laws were obsolete.

study science in her youth, she had obviously read a lot about science by the time she wrote this.

Wordsworth used science to interpret Scripture in her analysis of the sixth and seventh commandments, “Thou shalt not murder” and “Thou shalt not commit adultery.” Here she turns to science to talk about human instincts. She argues that science tells us that “self-preservation and self-reproduction are the two great instincts by which all life, from the very lowest forms, appears to be governed; and when we try to discover what man himself was in his primitive condition, we find these two instincts constantly at work” (155–56). As a result, Wordsworth argues that in the early stages of life it was quite foreign to say that to destroy life was wrong because it was a way to survive. “Thou shalt not kill” takes it to a different level. However, she admits that humans have not and perhaps never will completely emerge from the primitive stage. Nevertheless, she does see something positive with the combative instinct in that it is “training for that higher warfare against sin and Satan” (157).

In analyzing the fifth commandment, “Honor thy father and thy mother,” Wordsworth’s comments reflect her perspective as a woman interpreter. First, she argues that if we had authored the commandment, we would have said to love instead of to honor one’s parents, because loving one’s parents is instinctive, but honoring them is harder (138).³⁹ The reason she gives for honoring a parent even if he or she is immoral, selfish, or neglectful, is “because a father is a type of the Father of all, Almighty God” (142)⁴⁰ and the mother is a type of Christ. She writes,

the full beauty of motherhood was never realized till the Incarnation of our Lord. No doubt this is true of fatherhood also, but perhaps in not quite so marked a degree. It was not only that by His birth from the Blessed Virgin He hallowed the office of maternity, and turned the “sorrow” of childbirth into ineffable joy; but because by giving us an example of self-sacrifice, by laying down His life for us, He has given a new beauty to that most mysterious and affecting relation between mother and child, and has made us feel that not only is fatherhood

39. Although she does not specifically define what she means by love and honor, she seems to understand honoring as treating one’s parents respectfully. Thus, she refers to biblical examples of honoring and dishonoring and gives many practical suggestions of how one can honor one’s parents, such as by rising when they enter the room, by not interrupting them when they are talking, by putting on a nice dress to cheer them up, by praying and thanking God for them, and by making use of opportunities while the parents are alive because soon they will be gone (147–52).

40. In Wordsworth’s writing on the Creed, she also develops the idea that the human father is a type of God the Father. In this earlier work, however, she does not elaborate on the notion of motherhood as a type of Christ. Rather, she discusses at length Jesus’ positive relations with women, setting the example to men of how women should be treated and respected. See Elizabeth Wordsworth, *Illustrations of the Creed* (London: Rivington, 1889), 43–45, 81–85.

typical of God as our Creator, but that motherhood is to be revered as setting forth, as no other human type can do, both the pain and the joy of our redemption. (143)

Because of the self-sacrifice of mothers for their children, and by giving birth to life through pain, motherhood has become a type of Christ. Thus, Wordsworth argues that motherhood changed after the coming of Christ and that it now is “peculiarly *Christian*” (143, emphasis original). For the rest of the chapter, she focuses more on the mother than the father and highlights the important influence mothers have on their children. She observes that the mother’s name is usually given in the list of kings in Kings and Chronicles, demonstrating their important influence on their sons (146). Wordsworth also asserts that mothers are spiritually in tune and therefore the best guides to their sons’ spiritual lives. “How many men have found in their mothers the truest spiritual and intellectual sympathy! To how many a man has his mother been the best interpreter of his spiritual life!” (144).

Through these statements Wordsworth reveals her view that women are inherently religious and are to be spiritual and moral examples to others, especially to their children. It also shows how highly she regards the role of motherhood, even though she herself never was a mother (although, practically, she was a mother figure to many of her female students).

In her writing Wordsworth also gives some advice specifically addressed to women, her audience. It reveals some of her views of women and their roles, shaped by upper-class Victorian ideals. She ardently believes that a woman needs to be an exemplary figure—modest and above reproach. “The well-being of a nation depends on the purity, delicacy, sweetness, and goodness of its women, especially perhaps among the more influential classes. The mere sight of a good, holy, and refined woman is a kind of gospel to the poor and illiterate” (28, emphasis original).

Wordsworth’s views reflect the class structure of Victorian English society. “To women who are often tempted to lose themselves in petty pursuits, it may safely be said that *the* preservative is Bible-reading” (115, emphasis original). This is her advice to both men and women. In discussing the seventh commandment, she warns women against flirting, saying that it is wrong to love amusement and admiration more than the man and that it can lead to serious consequences. Wordsworth concludes that by flirting a woman is lowering herself and the ideal of womanhood (179–81). She encourages her women students to be ladies, setting the example for the lower classes and the servants, just as England is an example to America and the colonies (184). In our modern context, these words seem very patronizing, foreign, and uncomfortable to our ears, but this attitude and thinking was typical of the world in which Elizabeth Wordsworth lived, and thus we must understand her in this light.

In these examples of applying the Ten Commandments to her own context, Wordsworth clearly reads the commandments from an upper-class Victorian

woman's perspective. Because her addresses were given to a group of women students who were well-off and privileged, her suggestions for application are shaped by her audience.

In her approach to interpreting the Decalogue, Wordsworth draws on archaeological discoveries, ancient history, Greek philosophers, science, nature, her father's commentary, and other dictionaries. Throughout her writing she also refers to Hebrew, Greek, Latin, the Septuagint, the church fathers, classical Greek authors, and modern authors. She assumes her audience understands Greek and does not translate the Greek when quoting from the Septuagint, the New Testament, or the *Iliad*. Her women students obviously knew Greek or were learning it while studying at Lady Margaret Hall, because she chose not to translate it for them. In her writing, she draws on a wide range of sources, making good use of her classical training.

PSALMS FOR THE CHRISTIAN FESTIVALS

Wordsworth's second work, *Psalms for the Christian Festivals*, was published in 1906 but was based on her lectures to a group of women students in 1897. In it she discusses twenty-two psalms read at Christmas, Easter, Ascension, and Pentecost according to the Anglican lectionary. In each case she explains how the psalm has become related to the Christian festival. In her introduction, she outlines her objective and her approach to interpreting the psalms. She begins by stating that she is not going to say something new about "scholarship or Biblical criticism, but to illustrate from the Church's use of the Psalter for the Christian seasons, the bearing of the Psalms on great doctrinal truths, as well as their fitness to minister to the needs of individuals, and their relation to our personal lives."⁴¹ Although Wordsworth is aware of the historical-critical debates over the date and authorship of the psalms, she argues that the meaning and application of the psalms are universal and independent of these questions (v-vi). "As we pursue our study of the Psalms, we shall find over and over again that—whatever their origin may have been—their meaning never could have been tied down and limited to one person, or one generation, or even one set of events" (xi). The meaning of each psalm is universal and applicable to all times and all peoples:

We should approach it with a deep spirit of reverence, using no doubt, so far as we can, the results of scholarship and historical research, but always remembering that it is not the authorship of the Psalm, nor its local and historical setting that gives it its true and lasting value, but the fact that it is the voice of God speaking to the soul, and the soul replying to God. (xiii)

41. Wordsworth, *Psalms for the Christian Festivals*, v. Subsequent references to *Psalms for the Christian Festivals* will be cited within the main text.

Although historical-critical questions have some value, for her they are not the key to interpreting the psalms. Having said this, however, in her analysis of each psalm she begins by discussing questions related to authorship, date, and original context, being fully aware of current scholarly debates (2, 10, 36, 93, 101, 109–10, 125).⁴² At the same time, she does not dwell on these questions but quickly moves on to elaborate on the meaning of the psalm.

Wordsworth finds meaning in the psalms on two levels. Scripture has a natural meaning and a spiritual meaning (74). She believes that the natural meaning is found in the real, historical events described. One must begin interpreting the psalm by looking at the original context, but the meaning of the psalm is not limited to this (10–12). In illustrating this twofold nature of Scripture, she compares the Bible to Giovanni da Bologna's statue of Mercury,

with one foot on the earth, but just ready to soar away to heaven. That might stand for a type of the writers of Holy Scripture. One foot is firm on the earth, but there is a buoyancy, a spring, a heavenward aim which prevents their ever being satisfied with earth. They begin with this world—they *always* begin with this world—but they never end there. (11–12, emphasis original)

Thus, Ps 118 originally applied to the postexilic Jewish community under Ezra and Nehemiah, but on the spiritual level it also applies to Christ (70–71). Likewise, Ps 48 is set in the reign of Hezekiah and perhaps was authored by the prophet Isaiah, but it is also fulfilled in the church at Pentecost (109–14). With this understanding, she takes a typological approach to the psalms. For example, in Ps 19 the sun is a type of Christ (5), and in Ps 89 David becomes a type of Christ (34). She writes: “The Davidic monarchy was, as it were, the husk which, till the time of ripeness came, shrouded the kernel—the royalty, still future, of Jesus Christ” (95).⁴³ Although some of the psalms first applied to King David, their ultimate fulfillment is found in Jesus Christ.

Besides using this typological and christological approach to the psalms, Wordsworth is also concerned with finding application for each psalm in her own context. Although originally a marriage song probably applied to King Solomon, Ps 45 is both a type of the marriage union between Christ and the church and applicable to marriage today (10–18). Besides speaking about marriage, she also asserts that Ps 45 has something to say about “the ideal of womanhood” in her day (16). “The essentials of Christian womanhood” as seen in this psalm are: “unself-

42. Although well-informed on the different scholarly views, she tends to be conservative overall on the question of authorship and for the most part prefers the traditional view. However, she is willing to concede that David did not write all the psalms ascribed to him, e.g., Ps 110 (36).

43. Here she is discussing Pss 21 and 24.

ish devotion” to her husband, “exquisite perfection,” giving of her very best, and so forth (17). She continues:

Is not the lesson for us all to strive in everything to be as pure, as complete, as perfect as we can? No room for carelessness, slovenliness, half-done work, ugliness, bad taste. The ideal woman’s life ought to show exquisite finish in every detail. Dress, handwriting, good manners, refined speech—none of these things should be beneath her care. (17)⁴⁴

We see here how Wordsworth’s views and application were shaped by her traditional Victorian ideals and the fact that she was addressing a group of young, impressionable women under her care. Her application is very specifically related to her context as principal of a women’s college.

Other interpretive comments about women in the psalms are found in Wordsworth’s discussion of Ps 68. She makes the observation that Ps 68:11 should be translated as “the women that publish the tidings are a great host,” following the feminine plural in the Hebrew, contrary to the translation of the Authorized Version.⁴⁵ In this context, she argues that these verses refer to the time of Deborah and that there may be an allusion to the Song of Deborah, Judg 5:16, in Ps 68:13 (118). She also notes that women are included among the musicians in verse 25, commenting on this beautiful inclusive picture of the religious procession (120). Although a man could have made the same observations, it is perhaps because Wordsworth is a woman that she saw these things.

Before analyzing her final psalm, Ps 145, assigned for Pentecost, Wordsworth makes an interesting observation about the canonical shape of the Psalter. Studying the psalms as a whole, she sees an analogy between the canonical ordering of the psalms and that of human life and experience. She observes a movement from the theme of struggle, fleeing enemies, and seeking justice in the earlier psalms to that of deep devotion, consciousness of sin, and seeking grace and mercy in the later. Then she sees the development of a national spirit, by moving from individual psalms with the use of singular pronouns *I* or *me* to the plural *we* and *us* in communal psalms (133). Finally, she notes that the latter part of the Psalter includes more psalms of praise and thanksgiving and focuses less on hardship and struggle, thus reflecting the gratitude and quiet acceptance of life at an old age:

As the series of a hundred and fifty Psalms draws to a close we seem to breathe a sunnier atmosphere—that serene brightness of gratitude, which we see in an honoured old age, seems to rest on the pages which close the Psalter. There is a

44. Her views on the ideal woman is also elaborated in her writing on women’s education (Wordsworth, “Colleges for Women,” 14).

45. The King James Version says, “great was the company of those who published it”

quiet after struggle, thanksgiving after release—the horizon loses itself in light, and all is joyous, calm, and hopeful. (134)

Thus, she sees parallels between the ordering of the psalms and that of human life—a movement from the struggles of youth to the maturity and acceptance that comes with life experience and age. Although her observations and conclusions are somewhat simplistic, Wordsworth tries to find an overall pattern in the canonical shaping of the Psalter as a whole that fits with her notion of development in Scripture and her own personal experience. In her own life, she approached old age without bitterness but rather with hope and gratitude.⁴⁶

Elizabeth Wordsworth's *The Decalogue* and *Psalms for the Christian Festivals* demonstrate that her approach to biblical interpretation was shaped by a number of important factors. First of all, we see the clear influence of her father on her thinking and in her approach.⁴⁷ In her father's commentary, Christopher Wordsworth often quoted the church fathers as well as the Anglican divines and their interpretations of biblical texts. He believed that they served as important guides to interpreting the Scriptures.⁴⁸ In both her works, she, too, continually quotes the church fathers and various Anglican bishops. Following Augustine, her father firmly believed that in order to understand and interpret the Old Testament correctly, "we must begin with the New."⁴⁹ We must read the Old Testament through the lens of the New Testament. His emphasis on reading the Old Testament typologically or figuratively,⁵⁰ using the "spiritual method of exegesis,"⁵¹ and through the lens of the New Testament is clearly seen in her approach, especially in her analysis of the psalms. Her use of typology was a very common approach in Christian interpretations of the psalms, going back to the New Testament itself and the early church fathers. Thus, it is not surprising to see her adopt this way of looking at the Old Testament. Like her father, she had a very positive view of the Old Testament as Scripture and believed in its enduring relevance. Being a classicist at heart, she also drew upon the ancient Greek authors as illustrations and made good use of her knowledge of Hebrew, Greek, and Latin. Like her father, she demonstrated a deep and wide knowledge of ancient and modern literature, history, and languages.

Although Wordsworth was generally traditional and theologically conservative in her views, she was remarkably open to new ideas and was well aware of

46. Battiscombe, *Reluctant Pioneer*, 200.

47. Wordsworth's admiration for her father's work is demonstrated in her references to her father's commentary on the Bible as well as his work on church history in her writings.

48. Wordsworth, *Five Books of Moses*, xxi; Overton and Wordsworth, *Christopher Wordsworth*, 407.

49. Wordsworth, *Five Books of Moses*, viii–ix.

50. Overton and Wordsworth, *Christopher Wordsworth*, 412.

51. Wordsworth, *Five Books of Moses*, xvi.

the current debates regarding historical criticism and the Bible; here we see her depart from her father. Although she did not fully embrace it, she was not afraid of the new historical-critical approach to the Bible. Her father, on the other hand, was very critical of higher criticism because it was an approach that led some to reject the inspiration and authority of Scripture and to treat the Bible as any other book. Her father labeled those who practiced such an approach as modern-day Marcionites and Manichaeans.⁵² In her analysis, Wordsworth drew on the historical-critical scholarship of the following theologians and biblical scholars: S. R. Driver, Regius Professor of Hebrew at Oxford and Canon of Christ Church (1883–1914); A. F. Kirkpatrick, Regius Professor of Hebrew at Cambridge (1882–1903); and F. B. Westcott, Regius Professor of Divinity at Cambridge (1870–90).⁵³ She especially drew on Kirkpatrick's commentary on the psalms in the then popular Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges series as well as S. R. Driver's *An Introduction to the Literature of the Old Testament* in her own study of the psalms.⁵⁴ All of these scholars were open to the new historical-critical approach to interpreting the Bible, yet they also held to a high view of the inspiration and authority of Scripture and the belief that the Bible taught moral and spiritual truth. For them, the historical-critical approach to the Bible was compatible with Christian faith.⁵⁵ In her writing, Wordsworth clearly admires these scholars and interacts with their scholarship.⁵⁶

In commenting on the nature of Scripture in her work on the Decalogue, Wordsworth demonstrates both her high view of Scripture and her openness to the findings of historical criticism. She rejects the verbal mechanical theory of

52. *Ibid.*, vii–viii. However, Christopher Wordsworth did assert that biblical criticism was a “high and holy science” and if handled soberly and with reverence could be useful (Overton and Wordsworth, *Christopher Wordsworth*, 406–7).

53. Wordsworth, *The Psalms for the Christian Festivals*, 14, 21, 37–39, 68, 71, 102, 110, 117–19; *idem*, *The Decalogue*, 37; Rogerson, *Old Testament Criticism*, 273–75, 282, 285–86; C. L. Church, “Westcott, B. F., and F. J. A. Hort,” in *Historical Handbook of Major Biblical Interpreters* (ed. D. K. McKim; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 389–94.

54. Although she only mentions professors Kirkpatrick and Driver by name and not their specific works, after having examined their writings, it is clear that she was using these particular works: A. F. Kirkpatrick, *Psalms XC–CL* (vol. 3 of *The Book of Psalms with Introduction and Notes*; Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1901); S. R. Driver, *An Introduction to the Literature of the Old Testament* (9th ed.; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1913). The first edition of Driver's *Introduction* was published in 1891.

55. Rogerson, *Old Testament Criticism*, 273–74; M. Taylor, “Driver, Samuel Rolles,” in McKim, *Historical Handbook*, 302–9.

56. She writes that Professor Kirkpatrick is “a writer to whom students of the Psalms are greatly indebted” (Wordsworth, *Psalms for the Christian Festivals*, 38–39) and that S. R. Driver wrote “an interesting article on the ‘Cosmology of Genesis’” (Wordsworth, *Illustrations of the Creed*, 64).

inspiration of Scripture as too extreme.⁵⁷ At the same time, she believes in the “wonderful verbal accuracy and consistency of Holy Scripture.... every word *means* something.... no paragraphs ... can be ‘skipped.’”⁵⁸ Each word must be valued as fine gold, yet she recognizes that the Bible has emerged in a particular historical context and therefore will reflect its ancient cultural context. Therefore, she has no problem seeing parallel stories and similarities between the Old Testament and other ancient Near Eastern cultures. She freely admits that there are “Chaldean variants of parts of the Book of Genesis ... Levitical Law in the customs of Egypt,”⁵⁹ but these do not affect her view of Scripture as inspired. In response to difficult questions such as what the population of the earth was in the time of Cain and Abel, she responds,

It is obvious that those early chapters of Genesis do not aim at giving an *exhaustive* account of primitive society any more than they do of giving exhaustive details of Creation. There must have been many men and women at this time on the earth whose existence we have to take for granted.⁶⁰

She does not let these questions bother her. She is able to affirm the authority and inspiration of Scripture and at the same time raise questions of a historical-critical nature.

Wordsworth’s openness to more liberal thinking is also seen in the people with whom she socialized in Oxford. Her biographer writes that Wordsworth “found the liberal thinkers of the Balliol group much better company” than the more conservative thinkers of Christ Church and Keble College.⁶¹ She was friends with T. H. Green, the philosopher and fellow of Balliol College in Oxford,⁶² and socialized with Benjamin Jowett, the master of Balliol College. Benjamin Jowett had written one of the essays in the controversial publication *Essays and Reviews* in 1860, where he advocated that the Bible should be interpreted “like any other book.”⁶³ Her father wrote a scathing response to Jowett’s essay when it first came out. Although Jowett’s views were heretical to her father, Wordsworth found Jowett to be friendly, generous, and kind, not someone to be feared. She wrote,

57. Wordsworth, *The Decalogue*, 104.

58. *Ibid.*, 113–14, emphasis original.

59. *Ibid.*, 108.

60. *Ibid.*, 158, emphasis original.

61. Battiscombe, *Reluctant Pioneer*, 104.

62. T. H. Green, fellow of Balliol College, 1860–78, represented a neo-Hegelian school of philosophy, which contributed to the popular developmental view of understanding the Old Testament in the nineteenth century, as progressing from simpler to more complex and developed thought over time (Rogerson, *Old Testament Criticism*, 280). Wordsworth quotes T. H. Green in her work on the Decalogue (Wordsworth, *The Decalogue*, 232).

63. Rogerson, *Old Testament Criticism*, 217.

“Oddly enough, I never felt afraid of him, as I believe many people did.”⁶⁴ She appreciated the fact that he was friendly toward her, especially since her father had been very critical of him in print over *Essays and Reviews*.⁶⁵ We see that Wordsworth’s social circles in Oxford contributed to her openness to newer thinking and ideas, which impacted her approach to biblical interpretation.

CONCLUSION

Elizabeth Wordsworth was a remarkable woman whose breadth and depth of knowledge was amazing. She was an important figure in the intellectual life of Oxford, and as principal of Lady Margaret Hall she had a very important influence on a generation of women. Although she was not a feminist in the modern sense of the word, she believed in women being educated and encouraged women to study. She set an example by her own deep desire to learn and to share that knowledge with others. Wordsworth was passionate about teaching the Bible—a passion that lasted to the very end of her life. After her retirement as principal, she lived another twenty-three years. During those retirement years, she continued to be very active in Oxford life, teaching Bible classes regularly. Her classes become known as an “Oxford institution.”⁶⁶ At age eighty-eight, a friend came to visit her and found her studying the Latin Vulgate. Wordsworth told her to grab the Hebrew Lexicon and the Greek Septuagint and they would solve a translation problem that she had found in the Vulgate.⁶⁷ At this age, she was still reading the ancient languages and taking delight in her biblical and theological study. At age ninety-two she was leading a Bible study on the Hebrew poetry of Pss 107 and 45. That very night she collapsed, and two days later she died. Her mind remained sharp and clear to the very end. Elizabeth Wordsworth died 30 November 1932, teaching the Scriptures to a group of women.

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64. Wordsworth, *Glimpses of the Past*, 166. Although she was not as close to Jowett as Florence Nightingale, Wordsworth still had a respectful friendship with him (Battiscombe, *Reluctant Pioneer*, 106).

65. Wordsworth, *Glimpses of the Past*, 165–67.

66. *Ibid.*, 205.

67. *Ibid.*, 216.

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