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Wordsworth, Elizabeth (1840–1932)

Elizabeth Wordsworth, great-niece of the famous poet William Wordsworth, was born on June 22, 1840, in Harrow, Middlesex, England, to Susannah Hatley Frere and Christopher Wordsworth, Anglican clergyman and later bishop of Lincoln. Although she did not receive a formal education (except for one year at a girls' boarding school), she nevertheless received a fine classical education at home. She was well versed in Hebrew, Greek, Latin, French, German, Italian, history, Bible, theology, music, and art. Although she was mostly self-taught, her father had the most profound influence on her, teaching her the Bible and theology. She assisted with his multivolume commentary on the Bible (a work that took twenty years to complete). Her work of editing her father's commentary gave her a solid foundation for understanding Scripture, and this in turn shaped her own interpretation of the Bible.

When Lady Margaret Hall was established, the first residential hall for women in Oxford, Wordsworth became its founding principal, where she served thirty-one years (1878–1909). In 1886 she also founded St. Hugh's Hall, another hall for women in Oxford. She published twenty-seven books as well as a number of articles and essays. Many of these were based on her lectures and addresses to her students. For her tireless work for women's education, she received two honorary degrees, a master's and a doctorate, both from Oxford University.

Wordsworth was both traditional and modern in her interpretations of the Bible, reflecting the influences of her father, Anglican tradition, upper-class Victorian ideals, and her classical and modern education, which made her open to developments in science, philosophy, theology, and biblical criticism. She

always analyzed the Scriptures in Hebrew and Greek, setting a high standard and example for her readers.

In her approach to the Psalms, Wordsworth argues that there are two levels of meaning in the Psalms, a natural (original) meaning and a spiritual meaning (*Psalms*, 70). She begins her study of a psalm by discussing historical-critical questions related to authorship, date, and original context, being fully aware of current scholarly debates (70–71, 109–14); she then proceeds to its spiritual meaning and application. Wordsworth often read the Psalms typologically, arguing for their universal appeal: “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).

In her book *The Decalogue*, Wordsworth adopts the concept of development as an important interpretative key. For example, in comparing the first command, “Be fruitful, and multiply,” in Gen. 1:28 with the Decalogue, she argues that the Ten Commandments represent a higher stage of development, something that natural science has demonstrated in the concept of evolution (x). She believes that this notion of progress distinguishes the Bible from other literature (109). “The Law and the Prophets are throughout *prospective*. They breathe not regret for a vanished past—but progress. . . . ‘Development’ is the watchword of the Old Testament” (110, her emphasis).

Adopting an understanding of progressive development within Scripture was not an unusual approach at this time; what was unique was how she applied this notion to the actual Ten Commandments themselves. For example, 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” (210). Here one sees the popular nineteenth-century concepts of development, progress, and evolution influencing her interpretation of the Ten Commandments.

Wordsworth’s interest in the education of women often shapes her reading of texts. She explains that parents should be honored “because a father is a type of the Father of all, Almighty God” (142) and the mother is a type of Christ: “The full beauty of motherhood was never realized till the Incarnation of our Lord. . . . He hallowed the office of maternity. . . . 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 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” (*Decalogue*, 143). Because of the self-sacrifice of mothers for their children, by the very act of bringing forth life through pain, motherhood becomes a type of Christ. Thus Wordsworth claims that motherhood changed after the coming of Christ; it was now “peculiarly *Christian*” (*Psalms*, 143–44, her emphasis).

In her writings Wordsworth also addresses the concept of the ideal woman. For example, she understands Ps. 45 typologically, describing the ideal wife as being unselfishly devoted to her husband, “exquisite perfection,” giving of her best, and so forth (17). She extends her application of the psalm to both married and single women: “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). Wordsworth’s views of the ideal woman are drawn more from traditional Victorian ideals and her specific context of teaching privileged, upper-class, young women in a women’s college, than from Ps. 45.

Wordsworth was one of the most influential pioneers in women’s education at Oxford. As a biblical interpreter, she blended a traditional approach to Scripture, including the use of typology and traditional attitudes toward women’s roles in the family, with insights derived from science, evolutionary notions of development, and biblical criticism. Shaped by her educational context, she often read Scripture through a distinctively female lens. Wordsworth set an example by her own desire to learn and to share that knowledge with others through her teaching and writing.

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