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Skepticism Is the “Truest Piety”

Thomas Kelly Cheyne and the Broad Church Exegesis of Isaiah

INTRODUCTION: THOMAS KELLY CHEYNE AND HIS WORK

THE CENTRAL EXEGETE OF this chapter is Thomas Kelly Cheyne, who published a significant commentary on Isaiah. Two central arguments serve as my points of departure. First, although most interpreters made use of new exegetical tools that emerged in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, it is Broad Church exegesis that is most defined by philology, historical criticism, and an attempt to avoid theological exegesis. I illustrate this by use of Cheyne's commentary. Second, I make use of Matthew Arnold for reasons other than merely exegetical, which is to show how he is representative of the general “religious” outlook of the Broad Church party. Despite an aim in their exegesis to be free (or “liberalized”) from dogma, they cannot help but generate a new set of theological commitments that speak of a general

religious *disposition* within humanity, of which the Bible is an evocative expression.

I connect Cheyne to the problem of ecclesial division in the context of his perspective on the role of the Church in the process of exegesis. It is not just the fact that Broad Church exegetes engage in higher criticism of Scripture that identifies them as “divisive.” Rather, there is no longer any guarantee of dogmatic certainty in what they saw as a traditional mode of reading Scripture because of the Church’s failure to present a coherent theological identity. The tendency is therefore to be highly suspicious of dogmatic schemes in biblical exegesis. But even more significant is a new representation of the nature of Christianity *sub specie aeternitatis*. The Bible, the Church, and most religious practices are rendered in terms of outward, phenomenological expressions of an inner reality that cannot be described in traditional dogmatic categories.

It needs to be noted, however, that despite the fact that much liberal exegesis is “antagonistic” toward traditional or conservative approaches, Broad Churchmen aim at a *defense* of the Christian faith and its revival, seeking to reinterpret belief and religion with an understanding that the world has a new “modern” consciousness. And it is also important to note that they are part of a historical process that begins in the mid-seventeenth century and the irenic exegesis of William Day, Samuel White, and William Chillingworth, as I described in Chapter 2. These latter thinkers, despite their theological conservatism, were innovators in setting out to redefine the process of exegesis, which was to make a distinction between historical textual referents and the theological/ecclesial structure that lies behind them. By the time of the nineteenth century, the theological dimension had generally become, for exegetes like Cheyne, a superfluous mode of engaging with the text. Rather, this was replaced by, for instance, an analysis of the religious sentiment behind the “Israelite” faith.

By the late nineteenth century, England saw a flowering of Old Testament criticism, with several key thinkers who contributed to this growth. “Between 1860 and 1900 . . . the new historical knowledge brought widespread agreement in the main study of the Old Testament, so widespread that it began to penetrate the mind of many educated people.”¹ There was a gradual acceptance of German historical-critical theories such as Graf-Wellhausen’s documentary hypothesis, a multiple-source theory of the Pentateuch.²

1. Chadwick, *The Victorian Church*, 2:59.

2. For the English translation of Wellhausen’s formulation of the Documentary Hypothesis, see Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Israel*.

In terms of the history of Isaiah scholarship in England, the commentaries of both S. R. Driver (1846–1914) and of Thomas Kelly Cheyne (1841–1915) were seminal, and each viewed the other as a respected friend. Both were described by many as “being the real *Bahnbrecher* of our modern British Old Testament research.”³ The *Harvard Theological Review* called Cheyne “one of the most influential English expounders of the new critical views” and stated that “it was his commentary on Isaiah . . . that first established him as a scholar of importance.”⁴ Numerous thinkers in England were imbibing new textual-critical theories, not only within the Church of England, but also in Scotland, including controversial critics such as Robertson Smith.

I focus on Thomas Kelly Cheyne’s work on Isaiah, which was described as “revolutionary.”⁵ Cheyne was a towering intellectual figure, well-versed in Arabic, Hebrew, and other Semitic languages, as well as Jewish commentaries. Most of all, Cheyne was steeped in German historical-critical methods and refers to many well-known critics who had been ignored in England for the most part because of their unorthodox “rationalist” conclusions. Matthew Arnold represents the nineteenth-century concern for the “religious” capacity of the human self. He also published a commentary on Isaiah 40–66 and is illustrative of this religious disposition. The depth of his commentary, however, does not approach that of Cheyne; I use Arnold to indicate the religious outlook that he and Cheyne share. This perspective is, theologically speaking, no longer Christianity, but a new kind of supra-Christian religion, deeply moral, highly individualistic, and suspicious of authority. T. K. Cheyne is the central exegete of this chapter, but I also argue that the religious outlook that Cheyne and Arnold share is compatible with Cheyne’s ultimate turn toward a kind of “meta-religion,” the Baha’i faith—an image of the natural culmination of an irenic orientation toward dogma, the Bible, and Christianity.⁶

Cheyne’s definition of “exegesis” is almost entirely shorn of any sense of theological or dogmatic concern, but also rarely takes on an overtly “antagonistic” tone against one particular group or another. While he was an Anglican priest—and apparently remained so even upon his conversion to

3. Whitehouse, “T. K. Cheyne’s Founders” 280. *Bahnbrecher* is the German word for “trailblazer” or “pioneer.”

4. Toy, “Thomas Kelly Cheyne,” 2–3.

5. Chadwick, *The Victorian Church*, 2:105.

6. The Baha’i faith regards all religious founders (e.g. Jesus, Mohammed, Buddha) as messengers participating in the one Source, who is God. All religions are therefore essentially the same.

the Baha'i faith—one searches in vain for more than coincidental affinities to a uniquely Anglican approach to Scripture. His brief mention of Robert Payne Smith and Pusey are respectful, but he clearly sees his method as superior in light of the new approach to the text and the necessity to move beyond the “older” or “traditional” readings of the Bible.

The influence of division can thus be described as an instance of the “tradition” of irenic exegesis, but in a very strong sense. This tradition of reading Scripture led to the development of modern scientific tools that claimed objective discernment of biblical texts. Part of the central theme of this project is to argue that the loss of a cohesive ecclesial identity in the Church in general, and religious violence between competing sects, initiated a crisis of certainty that raised a generation of scholars who attempted to read Scripture in a way that minimized the theological aspect of exegesis. This also led to a theologically “neutral” view of history whereby the text can only be interpreted diachronically, minimizing the place of the Church and its understanding of history and time in typological and figurative modes.

Cheyne was a prolific scholar and published not one, but two commentaries on Isaiah. The first, *The Book of Isaiah Chronologically Arranged*, was written in 1870, intended for inclusion in a much larger work. His longer commentary, *The Prophecies of Isaiah*, was written in 1884 in two volumes and was a significant contribution to Isaiah scholarship. My primary focus is on the latter, supplemented by the former where necessary. The approach in each tends to be similar, though in *The Prophecies of Isaiah* Cheyne at times corrected and changed his mind from his earlier commentary. In addition to these works on Isaiah, he wrote *The Book of Psalms*, *The Origin and Religious Content of the Psalter*, *Job and Solomon*, and, in a decisive turn that almost entirely broke away from Anglican orthodoxy, he wrote *Aids to the Devout Study of Criticism*. In a kind of ode to thinkers who brought criticism to bear on the Old Testament, he penned *Founders of Old Testament Criticism*. He also edited the *Encyclopedia biblica*. His last work was *The Reconciliation of Races and Religions* in 1914, after he had become a follower of the Baha'i religion. Attendant to Cheyne's shift away from traditional Christianity was a deep sense of division. He begins *The Reconciliation of the Races* by noting that,

In the hour of darkest night it is not for us to lose heart. Never was there greater need for men of faith. To many will come the temptation to deny God, and to turn away with despair from the

Christianity which seems to be identified with bloodshed on so gigantic a scale. Christ is crucified afresh today.⁷

Cheyne refers in this passage to the beginning of World War I, which he saw as a religious conflict. Although the violence of religious conflict was a catalyst for new exegetical approaches in the seventeenth century (see Chapter 2), religious violence pressed Cheyne even farther from traditional Christianity. The final solution to religious conflict was to move even beyond “liberal” ideas of religion and to see, as expounded in the teachings of the Baha’i faith, that all religions are one, a final rejection of all ecclesiastical dogma. I construe this move to a kind of “supra-religious” mode that he found embodied in the Baha’i faith as a natural culmination of not only Cheyne’s thought, but also that of Arnold. He eschewed the specificity of “dogma” in favor of “certain Oriental conceptions and systems that had been making their way gradually in the Western world. . . . He held that peace among the nations could be secured only through religious union . . . A common faith would make all men brothers.”⁸

Cheyne’s earlier work on Isaiah does not reflect such a radical shift, but I argue that his turn to modern critical tools is to aim at similar purposes. Previous “theological” readings of Scripture had failed to engender “true” religion, in his view. Thus, the approaches taken by Robert Payne Smith and Christopher Wordsworth are outdated and even prone to cause violence by their theological character. The analysis undertaken in this chapter, however, does not necessarily reveal Cheyne as being “divisive,” neither in the manner of Smith’s strident attempt to build a bulwark against the encroaching tide of negative exegesis nor in the manner of Wordsworth’s efforts to discover the figure of Christ or the Church embedded in every text for the purpose of proving its provenance. Rather, Cheyne, with his painstaking and methodical analysis of the text and his prodigious intellect, aims at taking a “scientific” approach, and hence one which has little need for ecclesiastical interference.

Cheyne was an ordained priest in the Church of England and spent time studying at the University of Göttingen under Heinrich Ewald, whose influence on his study of Isaiah was considerable. His grandfather was Thomas Hartwell Horne, another famous critic from earlier in the century whose own three-volume *Introduction to the Critical Study and Knowledge of the Holy Scripture* (1818) was a standard work. Cheyne was vice-president of St. Edmund Hall, and he was the first to teach the new critical methods of Old Testament study at Oxford. He was rector of Tendring in Essex and

7. Cheyne, *The Reconciliation of Races and Religions*, 2.

8. Toy, “Thomas Kelly Cheyne,” 5.

was a member of the Old Testament Revision Company. Near the end of his life, he was the Oriel professor of the interpretation of Scripture and canon of Rochester Cathedral.⁹

MATTHEW ARNOLD AND THE BROAD CHURCH RELIGIOUS CONSCIOUSNESS

The Broad Church is such an amorphous and ill-defined group of thinkers that it is necessary to briefly attend to Matthew Arnold (1822–88), who had a rather passing dalliance with Isaiah in order to give greater definition of a “Broad Church” perspective. Furthermore, my use of Arnold also highlights the role of division in such exegetical positions, in addition to setting up the “religious” background of these exegetes. Matthew Arnold was son of the famous Rugby Headmaster Thomas Arnold (1795–1842) and one of the “founders” of the Broad Church movement.¹⁰ I use Arnold to show the continuities between him and Cheyne in terms of this religious background, which describes a kind of supra-Christian religious consciousness.

Though not a theologian as such, Matthew Arnold was often concerned with religious matters. A poet and literary critic, he was primarily employed as a school inspector. Arnold was a very “religious” person and was initially impressed by the works of his godfather, the Oxford Tractarian John Keble, but he eventually came to reject the Oxford Movement. In comparison with Cheyne, one can sense a much stronger “Romantic” quality to his religious views, opting for the more emotional aspect of religion to balance the “rational.”¹¹ He saw confusion and instability in Victorian society, and wanted “a transformation of the ‘dominant idea of religion’ through the re-energizing stimuli of culture and poetry.”¹² He encouraged the use of German thinkers, who “thought the English clergy unlearned and bound by superstitious dogmas, in comparison with the religious freedom allowed to the clergy of Germany.”¹³ Arnold was keen to embrace the modern age and to eschew the bondage of previous ecclesial “superstition,” rejecting the

9. Livingstone and Cross, *Dictionary of the Christian Church*, s.v. “Cheyne, Thomas Kelly (1841–1915).”

10. Jones, *The Broad Church*, 51–128. This is, of course, an arbitrary choice, as I argue that the Broad Church movement is in deep continuity with several traditions of previous centuries.

11. *Ibid.*, 242.

12. Knight and Mason, *Nineteenth-Century Religion and Literature*, 1.

13. Crowther, *Church Embattled*, 48.

validity of “unscientific” ideas such as miracles, while fully embracing the power of religious feeling.

In 1875, Arnold wrote *Isaiah XL–LXVI with the Shorter Prophecies Allied to It*. It was a work that, as Arnold claimed, was “for the benefit of school-children.”¹⁴ It does not consist of a new translation, but an attempt to emend the King James Version to render the text in a more readable form. In it he engages directly with Cheyne, even amidst their different exegetical foci, and they make very similar assumptions with one another regarding the nature of Scripture and of religion. Arnold also says quite explicitly what is somewhat more hidden in Cheyne’s work, which is that a turn toward modern critical tools is precisely an attempt to assuage the problems raised by a divided Church. Arnold’s emendation of the text is not an attempt at a wholesale undoing of the translation of the day. My intent is not to attend to the quality of his choices, but only the principles that fund his approach to such a task.

It is interesting to note Arnold’s choice to work only on the chapters that biblical critics refer to as “II Isaiah.” With more directness than that of Cheyne’s exegesis, he avers that “whatever may be thought of the authorship of the last twenty-seven chapters, every one will allow that there comes a break between them and what goes immediately before them, and they form a whole by themselves.”¹⁵ While Arnold does not say that certain parts of Isaiah are to no longer be thought of as Scripture, it would be difficult for him to maintain a traditional approach to Scripture.

The most prominent feature of his view of the text is that it must exhibit the proper *style*, as opposed to fidelity of translation. Here is an issue on which we find Arnold engaging with Cheyne, sometimes quite critically. Lowth’s influence is particularly evident in terms of how the text must be viewed as a work of poetry, as a particular literary genre, and as a text of emotive force. Like Cheyne, Arnold acknowledges that “the Hebrew language and genius . . . are seen in the Book of Isaiah at their perfection.”¹⁶ Given that Arnold’s aim was to improve the “readability” of Isaiah, he notes that “the general reader, who has the bare text of a common Bible and nothing more may perceive that there is something grand in this passage, but he cannot possibly understand it.”¹⁷ The “bare text” is no longer, as the Word of God, sufficient to work in the *ecclesia*, and it is not the clergy who participate in the role of explaining possibly problematic readings, but the

14. Arnold, *Isaiah XL–LXVI*, 2.

15. *Ibid.*, 3.

16. *Ibid.*

17. *Ibid.*, 6.

cultured and the educated, whose skill is to bring out something “grand” within the passage. Cheyne also sees the professional academic as a kind of modern secular priest who is the only one properly able to interpret the text to its readers.

Arnold was influenced by the work of Heinrich Ewald, though he gives greater explicit acknowledgement to Lowth, Vitringa, and “Aben-Ezra” (Abraham Ibn Ezra), who he claims are “the three men who, before the labours of the Germans in our own century, did most to help the study of Isaiah.”¹⁸ He praises Lowth for his skill in poetry and literature, but faults him for not exhibiting the right *style* in his translation of the text. When Arnold turns his attention to Cheyne, he is critical of Cheyne’s rendering of some of the passages in Isaiah. But it is clear that he is in complete agreement with Cheyne’s overall project of critical engagement with the text. Minor textual issues are called into question, but not for theological reasons, but because of their lack of *style*:

Mr. Cheyne, who, scientific though his object be, nevertheless talks of governing himself in making changes, by “the affectionate reverence with which the Authorized Version is so justly regarded,” may be rendering [Isaiah 42:4] with more accuracy when he writes: “He shall not fail nor be discouraged till he have set religion on the earth, and the sea coasts wait for his doctrine.” But he must not imagine that he is making a slight change in the rhythm of “He shall not fail . . . till he have set judgment in the earth; and the isles shall wait for his law;” for he destroys the balance of the rhythm altogether.¹⁹

Arnold’s concern is the “sentiments” evoked by the poetic rhythm of certain verses. For instance, in his discussion of the propriety of replacing “the Lord” with “Jehovah” in the Psalms, Arnold notes that

besides the contents which a term carries in itself, we must consider the contents with which men, in long and reverential use, have filled it; and therefore we say that *The Lord* any literary corrector of the English Bible does well at present to retain, because of the sentiments this expression has created in the English reader’s mind. . . . It is in deference to these pre-established sentiments that we prefer . . . for any famous passage of our chapters which is cited in the New Testament, the New Testament rendering, because this rendering . . . touches more chords.²⁰

18. Ibid., 16.

19. Ibid., 18.

20. Ibid., 14.

The emendations thus reflect Arnold's desire to maintain or improve the style and rhythm of the text, giving precedence to the religious affections the texts evince. It is often *sentiment* that connects the two Testaments together, not a concept of a scriptural canon. Arnold's literary approach does not necessarily preclude any kind of connection to Jesus Christ. Indeed, Arnold accedes, “I admit unreservedly that these prophecies have a scope far beyond their primary historical scope, that they have a secondary, eternal scope, and that this scope is more important.”²¹ He states that the “secondary application” of Isa 53 must be to Jesus Christ. However, later Arnold discusses the Servant Passages (which include Isa 53) about which he argues that “we all know the secondary application to Jesus Christ, often so striking; but certainly this was not the primary application.”²² Since the theological is seen as “secondary,” Arnold directs more attention to possible historical referents and the ostensive original purpose of Isaiah. By the time of Arnold the use of “primary” had become value-laden, the *preferred* sense. *Extended* suggests that it is optional—even disposable. This is a similar approach in the work of Cheyne.

Given this brief outline of Arnold's approach to the text, I conclude by indicating the role of a divided Church, as Arnold speaks to this more overtly than Cheyne. Referring to his notes that accompany the text, his hope is that the reader will be led to “the more,” that luminous *something* that Scripture has to offer;

that *more* . . . has the advantage of not offering ground for those religious disputes to which a more extended interpretation of the Bible often gives rise . . . and they are the fewer the more the enquiry is conducted in an unassuming and truly scientific manner; when that only is called certain which is really certain, and that which is conjecture, however plausible, is allowed to be but only conjecture.²³

This is a retreat from any ecclesial, creedal, or communal understanding of the text; as Arnold sees them, they lead to disputes and division. There is more here, however, than a mere turn toward the scientific in order to achieve certainty. Just as we shall see that Cheyne retreats from the contentiousness of dogma toward the Baha'i faith, a religion that embraces all religions, Arnold too takes an approach to religion that is less radical in form, but not in kind. His praise of biblical poetic sentimentality reflects a

21. Ibid., 27.

22. Ibid., 29–30.

23. Ibid., 28.

shift away from Christianity proper into religion of another kind. As Vincent Buckley argues, Arnold

seems also to have the intention of, as it were, redefining religion, so that it is no longer a *bond* between God and man, a bond of which doctrinal formulations are a necessary illumination and expression, but a state of mind. Religion, that is, has its own best guarantee in the state of mind which it is capable of inducing. In a sense, it *is* that state of mind.²⁴

This redefinition of religious meaning leads Cheyne to use language of inclusion and unification, while for Arnold, and *for the same reason*, leads to the preservation of Christian language, albeit with the theological content of this language evacuated and replaced by this “state of mind.” This affective mode is the inner phenomenon that biblical language merely evokes. Even more, Arnold generally affirmed the moral system that tended to be associated with Christianity; as A. O. J. Cockshut says, “Arnold’s system really was religious, though not, in any acceptable, historical sense, Christian. Arnold himself defined religion as ‘morality touched with emotion.’”²⁵ Cockshut’s argument is that Arnold is an “emotional conservative,” who clung to the language of Christianity and even conservative Anglicanism because of a belief in its evocative power.

Thus Arnold represents the religious landscape for my analysis of Cheyne’s commentary. The two thinkers differ on minor textual matters, but they both see the use of scientific tools for exegesis as essential for revealing the meaning of Scripture. Moreover, they both share a perspective on how Scripture evokes the human phenomenon of religious consciousness. Most importantly, I suggest that there is a clear connection between such views and an urge to avoid the divisive nature that dogmatic principles generate. This is less apparent, but no less powerful, in Cheyne’s exegesis.

THE STRUCTURE, METHOD, AND INFLUENCES ON CHEYNE’S COMMENTARIES

Cheyne’s many years of work on the prophet Isaiah represent a significant achievement in England in advancing a detailed, scholarly engagement with the text. *The Prophecies of Isaiah* comprises his own translation of the text; *Isaiah Chronologically Arranged* provides emendations of the Authorized Version. Each provides critical notes and commentary on the text, though

24. Buckley, “Matthew Arnold,” 152.

25. Cockshut, “Matthew Arnold,” 171.

the later *Prophecies of Isaiah* is his more “mature” work. Within the critical notes of the text one would have to look very carefully to find his commentary dwelling significantly on theological issues. This is not to say they are absent, but Cheyne is very explicit that he understands the bulk of exegesis to be a philological and historical study of the text.

Cheyne’s methodology is to use the most recent discoveries of inscription material, comparative linguistics, and extra-biblical sources as necessary tools for exegesis. Moreover, traditional conceptions of authorship and meaning cannot be predetermined by the weight of ecclesial history. While Robert Payne Smith would no doubt have considered Cheyne’s approach to Isaiah as a “negative” one, there is very much a sense of “reconstruction” in Cheyne’s work, comprising in Cheyne’s mind a very positive effort. There is on the one hand a reconstruction of the *text* as he aims to correct the translation of the 1611 Authorized Version. On the other hand, Cheyne’s reconstruction is *historical*, a reconstruction of the events that gave rise to the writing of the book by the author(s). Cheyne’s work is emblematic of Hans Frei’s point that modern critical hermeneutics tended toward discovering the “ostensive reference” of the text. In the case of Cheyne, this is primarily a historical one, and secondarily of Israelite “religious” consciousness.²⁶ The meaning of the text is subsumed by philological, historical, and other critical methods.

Despite its erudition, Cheyne’s commentary requires a close reading and half-guessed inferences to glean conclusions of significant theological weight, were his final set of essays not offered, in which he puts his theological cards on the table. Similar to Robert Payne Smith, Cheyne often works in two “modes.” The primary one in Cheyne’s case is that of a historical and philological critic, comprising the vast bulk of his commentary. The second mode is what could very loosely be called theological, though I suggest that it is more accurately called “religious.”

Many of Cheyne’s exegetical influences were German; however, an English thinker who figures prominently in his commentary is Robert Lowth. This can be seen by Cheyne’s attention to the text as a special kind of poetic literature. The level of textual “style” is often determinative of his approach to Isaiah. For instance, Cheyne compares the prophecy against Babylon in Isa 13 and the “taunt” of Babylon in Isa 14, noting that “the poetical merits of the latter are, however, so far superior to those of the former, that I have been led to the conjecture . . . that the Ode was not originally composed to occupy the present position.”²⁷ Or, for Isa 21, which speaks

26. See, e.g., Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, 150.

27. Cheyne, *The Prophecies of Isaiah*, 1:81

of Babylon that “cometh from the wilderness,” he observes that “there is no cuneiform evidence that any invasion of Babylon was made from the S.W.; but why should we insist on a literal historical fulfilment? It is a grand poetical symbol which we have before us.”²⁸ This lifting up of the poetic quality of the text parallels the focus on the prophetic author as “genius,” to which I attend below. Moreover, he observes that Isaiah’s “discourses, at any rate, in the form in which they are now extant, presuppose in their author a high degree of literary cultivation.”²⁹ Cheyne explicitly acknowledges Lowth as the one who “began that aestheticising movement in Biblical criticism which, with all its faults and shallowness and sometimes perhaps irreverence, fulfilled . . . a providential purpose in reviving the popular interest in the letter of the Scriptures.”³⁰

Heinrich Ewald also had an enormous impact on Cheyne’s thinking. For the most part, he sees Ewald’s approach to the Bible as exemplary. Ewald represents the turn toward the “reconstruction” of the diachrony of a text and the people of whom it speaks. With respect to Isaiah, Cheyne perceived Ewald’s project as having

. . . the governing idea of reconstruction . . . As an interpreter of the prophets . . . he reminds us somewhat of his master Eichhorn, whose poetic enthusiasm he fully shares. . . . His translation of the prophets has a rhythmic flow. . . . He totally ignores the New Testament; but it is at any rate free from the anti-dogmatic theories of the rationalists.³¹

His latter point is worth highlighting: even those who in England engaged in critical studies of the Bible did not want to be cast as “rationalist,” an epithet that could evoke considerable controversy. Yet, neither are there in Cheyne’s commentary many references to the New Testament, and even they are frequently vague and merely suggestive. It is not until his *Essays* at the end of Volume 2 when Cheyne makes explicit mention of a “Christian” interpretation of Isaiah.

There are numerous other influences that bear upon Cheyne’s commentaries. Most are German, such as Hitzig, Gesenius, and Delitzsch, but also the Dutchmen Vitringa and Grotius. He speaks with some negativity of Hengstenberg, who, says Cheyne,

28. *Ibid.*, 1:127.

29. Cheyne, *Book of Isaiah, Chronologically Arranged*, vi.

30. Cheyne, *The Prophecies of Isaiah*, 2:276.

31. *Ibid.*, 2:279.

had no historical gifts, and never seems to have really assimilated that doctrine of development which, though rejected by Pietists on the one hand and Tridentine Romanists on the other, is so profoundly Christian. . . . He was therefore indisposed to allow the human element of inspiration, denied the limited nature of the Old Testament state of revelation, and . . . made prophecy nothing but the symbolic covering of the eternal truths of Christianity.³²

A great deal can be discerned here from his negative view of Hengstenberg’s perspective on Scripture, which was an attempt to read Scripture “confessionally,” that is, “expressed in terms of the Augsburg Confession.”³³ While there is rarely an overtly “divisive” approach to Scripture in Cheyne along the lines of Smith’s strident attempt to oppose the “negative critics” of Isaiah, given his disapproval of strongly confessional exegetes such as Pusey and Hengstenberg, one cannot deny that Cheyne is wary of readings that he regards as burdened by the entrapments of ecclesial readings that are informed by “dogma.”

Cheyne’s choice of thinkers as his primary interlocutors speaks to the highly “historical” form of exegesis and “reconstruction” of which someone like Ewald is representative. The earlier “traditional” shape of biblical hermeneutics conceives of Scripture as revealing the mystery of the world and the relation of God to it and it to God; this includes history, and exegetical approaches developed over the centuries (e.g., tropological, spiritual, etc.) were tethered to the “literal” or “historical” sense of the text.³⁴ Nonetheless, the historical or grammatical sense did not exhaust the meaning of the text. By the nineteenth century, exegesis enacted a reification of the “historical” sense of the text, for conservatives and critics alike. Christopher Seitz shows how, in Germany, an increased interest in the “religious” sensibilities of Old Testament peoples, led to the prophets drawing greater attention: “the prophets offered the best hope for a solid ground floor in Old Testament religion, on the terms of the kind of rebuilding project being undertaken and the blueprint it was following.”³⁵ This was based on the historical conclusion that many Old Testament texts were written and/or compiled after the Exile; De Wette was one of the key critics who contributed to this shift. He believed that “the prophets are the only figures of the Old Testament . . . whose times we can identify clearly and whose circumstances we are

32. *Ibid.*, 2:281.

33. Rogerson, *Old Testament Criticism in the Nineteenth Century*, 81.

34. Balthasar, *Origen, Spirit and Fire*, iv.

35. Seitz, *Prophecy and Hermeneutics*, 86.

in a position to feel confident we know.”³⁶ The rest of the narratives were “mythical,” by which “de Wette certainly meant unhistorical.”³⁷ Only those texts with verifiable histories, and hence trustworthy, were given greater attention, and the prophets often met these criteria. The mode by which such readings were carried out was also historical, that is, the relation of the text to its immediate historical context and not its place within the larger biblical canon. As we saw with Robert Payne Smith, this also meant a concern for the prophet as a poetic “genius,” to be studied in terms of the prophet *qua* individual.³⁸

Cheyne’s “reconstruction” project resulted in is a re-ordering not only of each prophetic book in the Bible, but also of the chapters within them. For instance, in Cheyne’s *Isaiah Chronologically Arranged*, beyond being a commentary on the text, each chapter is rearranged in the order of an externally determined historical sequence. Thus, for instance, his version of Isaiah begins with chapters 2–9:7, but with 9:8 inserted in the middle of Isa 5. Cheyne was thus a participant in a project of historical reordering of the canon, believing that “what really matters is a historical account in which we can track the stages and movement of the prophetic consciousness in its historical particularity and that this is what truly constitutes the achievement of the prophets of Israel.”³⁹ In Cheyne’s mind, this “scientific” approach to the text employs externally verifiable truths for interpretation and constitutes the process of “criticism.” De Wette, Ewald, and Cheyne never saw themselves offering anything other than a *Christian* reading of the text. In the midst of the reality of a divided Church, new critical tools were regarded as capable of bypassing the need for an ecclesial presence in the process of reading Scripture.

NEITHER CHURCH NOR INDIVIDUAL: A NEW KIND OF PRIEST

From the evidence of his commentary on Isaiah, Cheyne is least open to seeing the Church in any way as constitutive of the exegetical process. Cheyne sought to provide a commentary free from the strictures of ecclesial dogma: this is the meaning of a “critical” commentary. While Cheyne asks in the Preface “where *is* [this] commentary entirely free from theological

36. Ibid., 77.

37. Rogerson, *Old Testament Criticism in the Nineteenth Century*, 33.

38. Seitz, *Prophecy and Hermeneutics*, 82.

39. Ibid., 90.

or philosophical bias?”⁴⁰ his aim is nevertheless to raise various “critical issues” because “within my own range of observation it has not received much countenance from the authorities. . . . As yet we hear little said about these things in the organs of Church and University opinion.” His hope is that by introducing these critical tools to the study of Isaiah, “the want of which not only philology, the theology and the Church in general suffer—the application of modern methods to the criticism and exegesis of the Old Testament.”⁴¹

Cheyne’s exegesis of Isaiah is a deliberate turn away from tradition to a notion that the Church *qua* Church *cannot* read Scripture until it has first engaged with a “critical” approach to the Bible. The Church failed because of an inordinate stress on dogma. He directs his work toward the “English” student:

The plan which I adopted corresponds to their requirements. Tired of the traditionalism of the older commentators, they seem to ask, not indeed to be kept in complete ignorance of the critical problems and solutions, but to be enabled to study the text in a historical spirit, without . . . being under the dominion of a fixed critical theory. . . . Criticism is the only key to the inner chamber of exegesis.⁴²

Cheyne’s definition of “critical” is rather indeterminate, given that he follows this with the statement that “there are some writers who seem only to care for ‘the higher criticism;’ I am not one of those. Pure exegesis has a fascination of its own, and is a great liberalizer of the mind.” One could conceive of several definitions of “criticism” even within Cheyne’s account. What is clear is that his aim is a “pure exegesis,” which is the “liberalizer of the mind.” From what is the mind freed? This refers back, I suggest, to Cheyne’s above reference to students who are “tired of the traditionalism of the older commentators.” Given the nature of Cheyne’s own exegetical style, this freedom is from the perceived exegetical suppression of dogma, from which the mind must be freed to explore new theological and historical ideas.

Cheyne is enigmatic about what constitutes a distinction between the “higher criticism” and the “pure exegesis” that he lauds. I would suggest that the shape of this “pure” exegesis maintains the priority of the philological mode of interpretation over the “theological,” muting an ecclesial reading of the text. One case where Cheyne makes this argument most forcefully

40. Cheyne, *The Prophecies of Isaiah*, 1:viii.

41. *Ibid.*, 1:x-xi.

42. *Ibid.*, 2:vi.

is in a brief but enlightening engagement with Pusey's interpretation of a word in Isa 52:15, which is translated in the Authorized Version as, "so he will sprinkle many nations." The key word is *יָזַח* [*yazeh*], which Pusey translates as "sprinkle," along with the Authorized Version. Cheyne argues that "through an unfortunate failure in this respect, even Dr. Pusey is unable (be it said with all respect) to state the facts of Hebrew usage accurately."⁴³ The translation can be the traditional one, meaning that the nations are passively sprinkled, that is, "besprinkled." Another translation is that the nations are in the active accusative mode, being themselves sprinkled out. Finally, by an appeal to cognate Arabic terms, the word can be akin to "startle," the response by the nations at the disfigurement of the Servant of Jehovah. In his notes on the verse, Cheyne prefers to conclude that there is a corruption in the text,⁴⁴ but in the philological notes at the end of the commentary, he suggests that the corruption was a change in the original word, which he submits was *yatir*, "to make tremble" or "to startle." The point here is that, for Cheyne, "no word in the whole of the Old Testament so forcibly exemplifies the urgent necessity for keeping the philological department in exegesis separate from the theological."⁴⁵ This separation of exegetical modalities, already common in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, is a move away from what is perceived as the strictures of ecclesial bondage. Thus disputes can be adjudicated via academic discourse that refer to non-dogmatic, commonly accepted terms.

It is also important to note that Cheyne focuses so closely on a word that has such significant christological import. Although I speak to the christological aspect of Cheyne's exegesis below, the theological implications of his treatment of Isa 52:15 must be mentioned briefly. Surely the fact that Cheyne so forcefully focuses on this word as indicative of the need for structural changes in exegetical practices cannot be merely coincidental with its historical christological impact. Cheyne goes out of his way to offer speculation that a corruption must be present in the text, which leads him to Arabic cognates. It can only be inferred that Cheyne is not merely "objectively" interpreting the text but enacting an agenda to distance it from its theological and christological referents. The point here is not to critique his philological choices, but the method underpinning his interpretation, which is to eschew the theological history of the text and to reconstruct the linguistic and historical background independent of previous (ecclesial) reception history.

43. *Ibid.*, 2:167.

44. *Ibid.*, 2:42.

45. *Ibid.*, 2:166–67.