

Prophecy and Concession: A Victorian Quandary over Biblical Criticism

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"THE SLIGHTEST CONCESSION in respect of the 'Revealed Word' opens a door, which can never be shut, and through which, everything may pass."¹ Lord Shaftesbury had risen to the attack again. He was old now, in 1878, and plagued by bad health more often than not. But the souring of his physical spirits only increased his anger over the latest outpouring of the "neologizing" clergy, the Rev. Brownlow Maitland's *Argument from Prophecy*. Its offensiveness was increased by the fact that it had been published by the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, an official agency of the Church of England.

As soon as the book had been brought to his attention, in November 1877,² Shaftesbury wrote a protest to the Archbishop of Canterbury.³ He referred the Archbishop to a passage in which Maitland had accepted the conclusions of biblical criticism so far as to question the force of the argument that the fulfilment of the prophecies of the dispersion of the Jews bore out the supernatural claims of the Old Testament. By what right, Shaftesbury demanded, and in what capacity, did the committee of the S.P.C.K. responsible for the book's publication venture to assert this? "If they had thought fit to say that this grand prediction was controverted by modern critics, I should simply have regarded them as men easily diverted from the truth, but when thirteen selected, and appointed, Gentlemen, . . . agree to force, on all readers, the results of their own crude speculations, I must say that I see, in their decrees, the Infallibility of the Church of Rome, and not the Evangelical simplicity of the Church of England."⁴ To another neologizer to whom he was giving battle at the same time⁵ Shaftesbury predicted

1. The Seventh Earl of Shaftesbury's diary, February 2, 1878; used by permission of the Trustees of the Broadlands Archives.

2. By hostile notices in the extreme Evangelical newspaper, the *Record*, on November 16 and 28, 1877.

3. Shaftesbury to Archbishop Tait, December 3, 1877; in the Tait papers, Official papers (1877 Home 116), Lambeth Palace Library.

4. Shaftesbury was not the only one to accuse his opponents of popish aspirations. Shaftesbury himself was known in High Church circles as "the Evangelical Lay Pope" (see C.P.P. to the editor, January 4, 1878; in the *Guardian*, January 16, 1878); and T. G. Bonney told Shaftesbury that his attempt to enforce a narrow theory of biblical inspiration on the Church reminded him "more of a papal encyclical than anything else" (Bonney to Shaftesbury, January 5, 1878, in the *Record*, January 21, 1878).

5. The Rev. T. G. Bonney, professor of geology at University College, London, whose *Manual of Geology* had been published by the S.P.C.K. in 1874. See Shaftesbury to Tait, December 3, 1877 (Tait papers), and the correspondence between Shaftesbury and Bonney, printed in the *Record*, January 21, 1878.

that surrender to current scientific criticisms of Christianity would lead to the triumph of a vague deism.⁶

Such attacks on any deviation from fundamentalism were familiar; what was new was the feebleness of the support Shaftesbury received. Three Evangelicals and the timid Bishop of London resigned from the implicated committee, two Evangelicals followed Shaftesbury out of the S.P.C.K. altogether, and at least one High Churchman joined in the attack on the book;⁷ but that was all. Gone were the memorials covered with signatures and the crowded meetings of protest, characteristic of the 1850's and 1860's, against any attempt by professing Christians, such as *Essays and Reviews* (1860) and Bishop Colenso's critical commentaries on the Pentateuch (1862-63), to adapt their faith to contemporary intellectual demands. Shaftesbury himself recognized that the 1870's were different and that the supporters for this new attack would be few. "I shall be nearly alone," he confided to his diary, "and be condemned, censured, privately, and publicly hated; and be left to myself like an Owl in the desert, a Sparrow on the housetop, or a Pelican in the wilderness."⁸

The response that he did evoke was cautious and uncertain. Although Maitland's book did not make an original contribution to the nineteenth-century English religious debate, the way in which the leaders of the Church of England handled Shaftesbury's protest against it indicated that they found themselves on the horns of a dilemma which in general they had not appreciated before. By now they were afraid that rigid fundamentalism repelled the increasing number of those who could not refute all the conclusions of biblical, rationalist and scientific criticism which, in the wake of Darwin's *Origin of Species* (1859), were more powerful than ever before and reached a peak of intensity in 1877.⁹ On the other hand, like Shaftesbury, they were afraid that concession to the critics would undermine popular faith, a fear which the deserted streets on Sunday mornings in twentieth-century England amply bear out. These two conflicting fears reflected yet another, a lack of confidence in the Church's ability to win back waverers and convinced agnostics.

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In enquiring from the S.P.C.K. about Maitland's book, Tait, the Archbishop of Canterbury, found out about its Christian Evidence Committee, the one responsible for publishing the book. This Committee, set up in

6. Shaftesbury to Bonney, January 10, 1878, in *ibid.* However, Shaftesbury also entertained "a hope that this decline of true belief may be followed by a day . . . when . . . science will bow, in grateful amazement, before the superhuman truth of the first chapters of Genesis."

7. Apart from the Bishop of London, only one of those who in any way co-operated with Shaftesbury's attack, the Evangelical Dean Close, was a person of national importance. Close resigned from the S.P.C.K.

8. Shaftesbury's diary, December 8, 1877.

9. A. W. Benn, *History of English Rationalism in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Longmans, Green, 1906), Vol. II, p. 387.

1870, was the newest in the S.P.C.K., but there were precedents for it. Similar committees had been set up by the S.P.C.K. twice before, always at times of social and political crisis.¹⁰ In 1819, when discontent with Tory repression reached its bloody climax at Peterloo, the Society appointed a special committee to combat the spreading of infidelity, particularly among the working classes in London and northern manufacturing towns. The committee was to do this by publishing in more popular form and at cheaper prices appropriate tracts already in the S.P.C.K.'s catalogue, and to commission any other tracts it thought necessary. Over thirty new pamphlets were issued, and within four years nearly 700,000 copies had been sold. To meet the cost of this campaign, the Society issued an appeal and received £7,000, including contributions from such bulwarks of the established order as the University of Oxford. In 1823 the special committee reported that the urgency had passed, and it stopped functioning.

But in 1830-31, at the height of the agitation for reform not only of Parliament but also of the abuse-encrusted Established Church, a second committee was created. Its activities followed the earlier pattern: twenty-nine new tracts were published and many older ones were reprinted and circulated. But in spite of the greater urgency for the Church of this crisis, financial support for the campaign fell to £2,382 2s. 6d. In 1839 the Bishop of Lincoln, John Kaye, urged the revival of the committee to counter the propaganda of "the Socialists who swarm in Birmingham and its neighbourhood and whose atheistical and licentious principles are spreading with awful rapidity."¹¹ However, the episcopal referees of the S.P.C.K. advised against it. Peel's Conservatives were well on their way back to power, and the Whigs had shown clearly that they disagreed with the hostility of their Radical allies towards the Church.

Again in 1870 affairs looked threatening to some churchmen, though the threat was not as readily apparent as before. The new Government, though headed by England's most outstanding lay churchman, Gladstone, was the most radical since 1832. It had been elected in a campaign against the establishment of the Irish Church, and had begun to undermine the Church of England's hold on endowed secondary schools. Its Education Bill, now before Parliament, might well foster secular education at the elementary level, for although the many Church schools were to be incorporated into the new national network, they would find it hard to keep up with the rising costs of education.

The Education Bill reflected the widespread belief that the working classes would soon dominate politics and must therefore be trained to use their power intelligently. Churchmen, dissenters, and secularists fought over the bill because they realized that the allegiance of their future masters was

10. The following information is drawn from W. O. B. Allen and Edmund MacClure, *Two Hundred Years: The history of the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1698-1898* (London: S.P.C.K., 1898), pp. 189-90, and from W. K. Lowther Clarke, *A History of the S.P.C.K.* (London: S.P.C.K., 1959), pp. 179f.

11. Quoted *ibid.*

at stake. The prospect was all the more alarming for every religious denomination because of the increase of "infidelity" among the working classes. To start with there was not much fidelity to decrease. The working classes had been born into cities where the facilities of the Church of England had been so inadequate that its teaching was foreign to most of them. The squalid circumstances in which they worked and lived set them in opposition to the hierarchy of society, including the clergy, which allowed this state of affairs to persist. The outlook of skilled labourers could not but be deeply influenced by the pragmatic and scientific principles underlying the technological advances which they had mastered.

To turn this lack of support for Christianity into outright rejection of it, popularizers of scientific rationalism such as Holyoake, Charles Watts, and Bradlaugh had been at work during the 1850's and 1860's. This was the movement to which Dr. Hessey of the S.P.C.K. pointed with alarm in 1870. These men had propagated infidelity with all the single-mindedness and confidence of evangelists. By their high standard of morality,¹² compromised only by their advocacy of birth control, they dispelled the fear that rejection of Christianity might lead to immorality. They understood the group to which they appealed better than most of the clergy did: instead of London and the highly patronized meetings of societies which the clergy found congenial, Bradlaugh headed for Wigan and the Mechanics' Institute at Leeds, where he spoke to men hungry for knowledge. Speeches were followed up with cheap pamphlets and a few books such as Feuerbach's *Essence of Christianity*, brought out by the Freethought Publishing Company which was set up for this purpose. Bradlaugh also edited a weekly, *The National Reformer*, to put forward his religious as well as political views.

Hessey brought this campaign to the attention of the General Meeting of the S.P.C.K., the Church organization he thought responsible for meeting this kind of challenge, in May and June of 1870, while the Education Bill was before Parliament.¹³ He recommended action similar to that taken in 1819 and 1830. The Society should (he said) undertake a systematic study of the rationalist attack, the classes to which it appealed, and the existing anti-infidel literature, which (he pointed out) was generally outdated or ineffective in form. Then they should contact individuals, such as the urban clergy, and other organizations, such as the Christian Evidence Society, who were fighting the same enemy, in order to decide what was needed. In the light of this information, churchmen known for their concern about infidelity should be asked to write what each thought particularly desirable for this purpose, and they should be promised liberal remuneration. The

12. Recognized by some of their thoughtful Christian opponents. Cf. A. S. Farrar, *A Critical History of Free Thought in Reference to the Christian Religion* (London: John Murray, 1862), p. 442. Farrar also admitted that the views of these secularists were consonant "with the experience afforded by the daily life of working men."

13. S.P.C.K., Minutes of the General Meeting, May 3 and June 14, 1870, Vol. LI, pp. 218 and 241; Minutes of the Standing Committee, June 27, 1870, Vol. XVIII, pp. 158-160. (I wish to thank Mr. Arthur Barker, Public Relations Officer of the S.P.C.K., for his generous assistance in introducing me to the archives of the S.P.C.K.)

S.P.C.K. would publish the manuscripts that it considered effective. Hessey also suggested that the S.P.C.K. make grants of copies of these publications to agencies that would distribute them where needed. To handle the whole project, he moved that a committee should be created. The S.P.C.K. agreed wholeheartedly with Hessey's proposals, and raised the allotment which Hessey had requested for writers from £500 to £1,000.

Hessey's selection of men to be asked to write the needed literature¹⁴ indicated one limitation of his remedy. None of them except Dean Mansel was noted for his appreciation of the arguments of nineteenth-century scepticism. Some, like Thomson, the Archbishop of York, and Jackson, Bishop of London, were intellectual mediocrities, and two, Henry Liddon and John Burgon, were distinguished for their refusal to consider for a moment that current criticisms of Christianity might have any validity. It is therefore clear that what Hessey wanted was improvement only in the presentation of the Church's teaching, not modification of the teaching itself.

The thinking behind the project underwent a shift of emphasis before the committee was appointed. The S.P.C.K. asked a group of clergymen and laymen whose opinions carried more weight and who were more thoughtful than those suggested by Hessey to come to two conferences in midsummer to discuss the rationalist offensive.¹⁵ Because of their more hierarchical view of English society, and probably because of their own intellectual misgivings, many of the men at these conferences argued that the infidelity among the lower classes owed its existence and continuance to more refined forms of scepticism among the upper classes, rather than to the effectiveness of popular rationalist propaganda.

Consequently, they suggested that, in addition to commissioning light, popular, anti-infidel propaganda, the new committee should ask thoroughly competent writers to write works at a higher literary level on subjects such as science and religion, biblical criticism, and geographical discoveries. To ensure complete intellectual honesty among the writers, the conferences proposed that they be exempted from the supervision usually exercised over publications of the S.P.C.K. With these ideas and suggestions in mind, the Christian Evidence Committee of the S.P.C.K. was set up in November 1870, under the chairmanship of the Bishop of London.¹⁶

In line with the suggestions of the summer conferences, the committee drew up instructions for its contributors,¹⁷ directing their efforts towards the needs of the thoughtful, educated laity by asking for books of around

14. Cf. S.P.C.K., Minutes of the Standing Committee, June 27, 1870, Vol. XVIII, pp. 159-160.

15. The Earl of Harrowby, a leading Evangelical politician, and the Broad Church Bishop of Manchester, Fraser, were among those now asked. For a report of the conferences, see S.P.C.K., Christian Evidence Committee Minutes, pp. 6ff.

16. This committee of the S.P.C.K. should not be confused with the autonomous Christian Evidence Society, an organization with a similar purpose but with Non-conformist as well as Anglican support, with which the S.P.C.K. committee co-operated. Like the predecessors of the Christian Evidence Committee, it had been formed much earlier in the century, but took a new lease on life in the 1870's. ("Evidences" meant proofs intended to convince doubters of the truth of Christianity.)

17. S.P.C.K., Christian Evidence Committee Minutes, pp. 20-1.

two hundred pages. The instructions also loosened the supervision which the S.P.C.K. normally exercised over its publications,¹⁸ but the Society's editorial secretary retained the right to point out to the writers statements in their manuscripts not in agreement with the Society's principles. The committee scrutinized submissions carefully, trying to avoid pious works better suited to edifying believers than to helping doubters, but also eliminating or modifying passages that it considered too radical.¹⁹

By the end of 1873, twenty-eight publications, nineteen of them cheap, popular tracts, had been issued, dealing with subjects ranging from Positivism, creation, and the date of the Pentateuch, to the moral shortcomings of Old Testament heroes.²⁰ The original grant of £1,000 was soon exhausted, and another for the same amount was made.²¹ But the Committee had encountered a discouragingly negative response from academics in the Church. Only J. B. Lightfoot, the outstanding New Testament scholar at Cambridge, showed any willingness to co-operate.²² The rest were too absorbed in their more scholarly work (which was in most cases having little or no effect on the thought of the period) to tackle the lower ranks of infidelity.

One remarkable feature of the Committee's publications was the inclusion of eighteenth-century works in defence of Christianity and of books based upon them. It was a measure of the intellectual poverty of the Victorian Church and its lack of appreciation of the new ingredients of nineteenth-century rationalism that the committee and its writers should have relied, for example, upon Butler's *Analogy of Religion* (1736) to refute Strauss and upon Paley's *Natural Theology* (1802) to deal with the doubts raised by the theory of evolution.²³

After the first two years of the Committee's life, the flow of manuscripts

18. Each publication was to be prefaced with a statement that the Christian Evidence Committee, "while giving its general approval to this work . . . , does not hold itself responsible for every statement or every line of argument." Such a provision for the freedom and therefore honesty of the writers was remarkable in view of the notorious failure of a similar statement at the front of *Essays and Reviews*. Cf. A. O. J. Cockshut, *Anglican Attitudes: A Study of Victorian Religious Controversies* (London: Collins, 1959), p. 68.

19. Cf. S.P.C.K., Christian Evidence Committee Minutes, May 22 and June 7, 1876, and February 7, 1877.

20. S.P.C.K., Minutes of the General Meeting, April 14, 1874, Vol. LIII, pp. 34-5: Report of the S.P.C.K., 1874, Catalogue G, Class 2.

21. S.P.C.K., Minutes of the General Meeting, May 5, 1874, Vol. LIII, p. 49. This total of £2,000 over four years indicated that support for the fight against infidelity was declining. In 1830-31, £2,383 2s. 6d. was raised by the S.P.C.K. for the same purpose, and in 1819 £7,000. Cf. W. O. B. Allen and Edmund MacClure, *Two Hundred Years*, pp. 189-90.

22. He offered to prepare a new edition of Paley's *Horae Paulinae*, but later felt obliged to give it up. Cf. S.P.C.K., Christian Evidence Committee Minutes, November 17, 1871 and November 14, 1872.

23. The S.P.C.K.'s Annual Report for 1873 (pp. 32f.) described the Committee's new publication, Huckin's *Dialogues Founded upon Butler's Analogy*, as a good antidote to Strauss's latest work, *The Old and the New Faith*. Professor Clark's revised edition of Paley was advertised in the Report for 1875 (p. 37) as an attempt to deal with the discredit into which the theory of evolution had thrown the argument from final causality. Clark had pointed out to the Committee that recent scientific advances made a simple reprinting of Paley's *Natural Theology* inadequate, but he believed that careful editing would enable it to meet contemporary needs. The Committee agreed; cf. S.P.C.K., Christian Evidence Committee Minutes, November 6, 1873.

narrowed to a trickle; only one new publication was issued in 1874, and the members of the Committee themselves resorted to writing. One of the topics upon which the Committee was most anxious for a book to be written was what was known as the argument from prophecy, the contention that the fulfilling of the prophecies of the Old Testament by Christianity proved its claim to be the divine revelation. After a futile attempt to find an outsider to deal with this subject, the Rev. Brownlow Maitland, one of the most active members of the Committee, took it up himself.

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Maitland's book, entitled simply *The Argument from Prophecy*, came out under the committee's imprimatur in 1877. Two hundred pages in length, its appeal was directed towards the middle- or upper-class layman who, though educated, would not plough through many pages of academic rebuttal of anti-Christian criticism. In order to avoid basing his case upon ground made shaky by rationalist criticism, Maitland began his book with a sweeping concession: that the argument from prophecy could convince only those who already accepted the theistic belief in a continually active God. "To endeavour to draw out a proof of special or supernatural instances of the divine agency, before a basis was laid for them in those which are natural and ordinary, would be like attempting to build a house without a foundation. . . ." ²⁴ Moreover, though in the eighteenth century Christian apologists had looked upon prophecy and its close cousin, miracle, as cornerstones of their argument, now, Maitland admitted, the appeal of prophecy was subordinate to the appeal of the gospel; ²⁵ no one would accept the supernatural validity of the prophecies if he did not first believe in the divine worth of what they predicted.

Maitland also made wider concessions to biblical criticism than was at first apparent. His references to criticism were infrequent, and he never accepted its results except for the sake of argument. Nevertheless, biblical criticism had undermined confidence in so many particulars of the Old Testament ²⁶ that he felt obliged to emphasize the broad lines of prophecy rather than its concrete details, which had been so attractive and convincing to unquestioning minds. ²⁷ He concentrated on four general predictions of the Old Testament: the ultimate triumph of God's cause, the accomplishment of this by a person, the suffering of that person, and the establishment of a spiritual religion rather than one that placed its main stress on cere-

24. Brownlow Maitland, *The Argument from Prophecy* (London: S.P.C.K., 1877), p. 14.

25. Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 3f., 6f., 200.

26. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 8.

27. Maitland also took issue with the popular conception of prophecy by contending that essentially it did not consist in exact prediction of future events, but was rather "the illumination which enables [the prophet] to grasp the great principles which shape the course of human destiny, and to divine the broad outlines of the issue in the dispensations of God" (*ibid.*, p. 36).

monies.²⁸ Only when a person recognized the supernatural validity of these general forecasts could he go on to appreciate the many other more detailed ways in which the Old Testament foreshadowed and prepared the way for Christianity;²⁹ to the sceptic who did not believe in the great, general predictions, these lesser forecasts would be sure to appear "fanciful and frivolous."³⁰

The one group of Old Testament prophecies in particular upon which Maitland refused to base his case were those dealing with the dispersion of the Jews.³¹ In the eighteenth century these had been regarded as especially telling passages, predicting long before the event the dispersion, after the death of Christ, of the Jews by the Romans. It was now generally recognized that all but two of these references had been written in the kingdom of Judah when it was threatened by Assyria which had just conquered Judah's northern neighbour, the kingdom of Israel, and deported many of its inhabitants. Therefore, these passages were most easily accounted for as references to the immediate threat of a similar fate for Judah at the hands of Assyria. As for the two exceptional passages, Maitland described them as "rhetorical and minatory rather than predictive," and he also pointed out that biblical critics were generally agreed in ascribing them to the same period as the others.

Writers such as Maitland and the Rev. T. G. Bonney, whose *Manual of Geology* Shaftesbury was attacking at the same time as he took issue with Maitland, felt obliged to accept many of the fruits of scientific enquiry, in order to prevent the growth of Roman Catholicism³² as well as of rationalism at the expense of what they believed to be the reasonable faith of Protestant Christianity.³³ Both Roman Catholicism and rationalism had recently proved to be attractive resorts for men whose confidence in Protestantism was shaken; the many prominent conversions to Roman Catholicism beginning with Newman's and the triumph of extreme Ultramontanism in the Vatican Council of 1870 seemed to indicate a trend as strong as that led by Mill, Huxley, and Harrison. But Shaftesbury, for all his hatred of popery, showed more understanding of his fellow-countrymen in dismissing the prediction that many would turn to Rome.³⁴

Important though Maitland's concessions to criticism were, the total impression conveyed by his book was decidedly, and by intention, reverential and devout. "Whatever be its literary merits or demerits," he told

28. Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 120-22.

29. Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 193ff.

30. *Ibid.*, pp. 199f.

31. Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 191f.

32. Cf. Bonney to Shaftesbury, January 5, 1878, printed in the *Record*, January 21, 1878.

33. Canon Liddon, however, claimed, with reference to *Lux Mundi*, that it was such modifications of Christian teaching to satisfy the demands of intellectual criticism that undermined reasonable faith, sending men as a result in the opposite directions of Rome and rationalism. Cf. Liddon to D. L. Lathbury, November 24, 1889, in J. O. Johnston, *Life and Letters of Henry Parry Liddon* (London: Longmans, Green, 1904), pp. 367-8.

34. Shaftesbury to Bonney, January 10, 1878, printed in the *Record*, January 21, 1878.

Archbishop Tait, "it has originated in a sincere desire to promote the cause of divine truth, and . . . from beginning to end there is not a word that is not animated by a profound reverence for Holy Scripture, and a desire to strengthen to the utmost the defences of Christianity."³⁵ However, in previous years devoutness had failed to protect books that deviated from fundamentalism, particularly when written by members of the clergy, from ferocious attack by most churchmen. *Essays and Reviews* had been censured by the bench of bishops, and two of its clerical contributors had been dragged before the courts.

The first indications of change came in the autumn of 1869 when one of the leading contributors to *Essays and Reviews*, Frederick Temple, was nominated for the post of Bishop of Exeter. Most Evangelicals, previously allies of the High Church party in any fight against Broad Church neologizers, now kept quiet, to Shaftesbury's despair.³⁶ Fundamentalism seemed to have lost its grip upon the laity generally, for few of them supported the clerical protest. Nevertheless, the nomination was objectionable enough to produce frantic agitation and an alarming crisis; eight of the seventeen bishops of the province of Canterbury protested against Temple's consecration.

The extent of the retreat from fundamentalism did not become apparent until Shaftesbury attacked Maitland in 1877 and 1878. Only a handful supported Shaftesbury;³⁷ some people even suspected that Shaftesbury might have doubts about his own position,³⁸ and perhaps they were right. "Have I been over-zealous?" Shaftesbury wondered momentarily in his diary, ". . . have I been blind? Oh Lord, 'be not extreme to mark what is done amiss,' for I sought thee in prayer, through Christ Jesus."³⁹ At any rate, all the Church officials whose opinion of Maitland's book was sought repudiated Shaftesbury's stand. In less than ten years, fundamentalism had fallen from its throne as the ruling orthodoxy of the mid-Victorian Church, and was now the creed of only a small minority, at least among articulate churchmen. But the opinions that the Church leaders pronounced on the book indicated that they were hesitant about what should replace fundamentalism.

It was not surprising that Archbishop Tait should defend *The Argument from Prophecy*, since he had long been the leading protector of Broad Churchmen. Nonetheless, the authority his pronouncement⁴⁰ carried would

35. Maitland to Tait, January 24, 1878, Tait papers, Official papers (1878 Home 230).

36. G. F. A. Best, *Shaftesbury* (London: Batsford, 1964), pp. 66f.

37. According to Shaftesbury's diary (February 16, 1878), only two people supported him in public, and another three privately.

38. Cf. *Guardian*, January 2, 1878: "This extreme jealousy about the smallest deviation . . . from the baldest theory of literal inspiration does not betoken confidence and strength. . . . We begin to think that Lord Shaftesbury and his friends have their misgivings."

39. Shaftesbury's diary, January 11, 1878.

40. In a letter to Maitland, January 30, 1878, which Maitland was free to publish. Cf. copy in the Tait papers, Official papers (1878 Home 230).

help to calm the fears of the uneasy. He firmly upheld the book's orthodoxy, its cogency, and devout spirit. However, his position, age, and long experience of theological controversy made him cautious, and he suggested revising the book to minimize the offence it might give to those still unaffected by biblical criticism.⁴¹ With regard to the many prophecies upon which Maitland refused to base his plea to sceptical theists, Tait confessed himself unable to understand how they could confirm the faith of believers and yet be useless in discussion with doubters. Tait also questioned the wisdom of giving publicity to "the doubtful conclusions of a destructive criticism" without refuting them. "It is, no doubt, wise in arguing with sceptics to meet them on their own ground," but "the minds of those who take up your book without fully understanding its object, might naturally be startled and unsettled by your apparent readiness to allow that the statements of such writers are to be accepted as proved." Concession might be necessary to win the doubtful, but it might also disturb the faithful.

This was the quandary in which the Church found itself. The only faith that could retain widespread popular acceptance was an unquestioning one. To accept some criticisms and reject others required an amount of thoughtful study for which few men had the time or ability. Furthermore, with Christianity beleaguered by a vast range of criticisms, it was very easy, once one criticism was admitted, to throw away the whole faith in despair. "A man's religion is built up of small things," wrote one perplexed young Victorian, "and it gives one an uneasy feeling to be told that this brick is faulty, that stone must come out, and so forth."⁴²

With this in mind, one of the other bishops to whom Maitland's book was referred, the Evangelical Ellicott of Gloucester and Bristol, recommended a more severe course than Tait's;⁴³ although agreeing that the book did not go beyond the bounds of orthodoxy, he advised that it should not be reprinted, and later he refused to have his Charge to his diocese published by the Christian Evidence Committee.⁴⁴ "We have of late thought so very anxiously and tenderly of unbelievers," he wrote, "that we have forgotten the stumbling blocks that we have placed in the pathway of average believers."⁴⁵ He had lost confidence that more than a few outsiders could be won over by such books; and what concerned him more was their

41. This suggestion was in line with Shaftesbury's complaint to Tait that Maitland's book offended the feelings of those who took "a loftier view of the Pentateuch." Shaftesbury to Tait, December 3, 1877, Tait papers, Official papers (1877 Home 116).

42. J. D. (later Lord) Coleridge to his father, Sir J. T. Coleridge, May 14, 1863, in E. H. Coleridge, *Life and Correspondence of John Duke Lord Coleridge, Lord Chief Justice of England* (London: Heinemann, 1904), Vol. II, p. 119. Cf. Shaftesbury: "It would be easier for me to give up Revelation altogether, and reject the whole Scriptures, than accept it on the terms, with the conditions, and the immediate, and future, limitations of it, imposed, and exercised, by High Criticism" (diary, February 16, 1878).

43. Ellicott to Tait, October 31, 1878 (*sic*), and Ellicott to Maxwell Spooner, January 11, 1879, Tait papers, Official papers (1878 Home 230). In all, six prelates were asked officially for their opinion: Tait, Ellicott, Browne of Winchester, Jacobson of Chester, Philpott of Worcester, and Goodwin of Carlisle.

44. S.P.C.K., Christian Evidence Committee Minutes, January 8, 1880.

45. Ellicott to Spooner, January 11, 1879. (Cf. n. 43 above.)

unsettling effect on those inside the Church who, he unrealistically assumed, would not otherwise be reached by the disturbing conclusions of biblical critics.⁴⁶ In short, the Church must give up its hopes of evangelizing and concentrate its energies upon holding its own—if possible.

Only one of the bishops, the one most respected by contemporary scientists,⁴⁷ Goodwin of Carlisle, upheld Maitland's book without reserve.⁴⁸ He did not have much more confidence than Ellicott in its ability to win the doubtful; all Goodwin could claim with certainty was that to suppress the book "would indicate a weakness and cowardice which could not be otherwise than injurious to the cause of truth." To concede might not work, but refusal to concede would harm. The consensus of the bishops whose opinion of Maitland's book was sought was generally favourable, but it was critical of certain passages as "erring in excess of concession."⁴⁹

Meanwhile Maitland had tried to satisfy such criticisms by preparing a second edition, in which he toned down his discussion of the prophecies of the dispersion of the Jews.⁵⁰ However the S.P.C.K., now worried, insisted that he make further revisions before the book could be issued again,⁵¹ and it clipped the wings of its Christian Evidence Committee to prevent any repetitions of this controversy.⁵² The Committee's statement at the beginning of each of its publications disclaiming responsibility for every line of argument was dropped, and a panel composed of the Regius Professors of Divinity at Oxford and Cambridge and the Archbishop of York was empowered, upon complaint, to decide on the acceptability of works issued by the Committee. The projected Christian Evidence Library was abandoned. The Committee itself accepted the need for greater caution, for fear of upsetting the assurance of unsuspecting churchmen.⁵³ Immediately the number of its publications tapered off even more than before, but the

46. Archbishop Tait, however, realized that no literate young person could avoid encountering dangerous questions. Cf. his speech in support of Wycliffe and Ridley Halls, reported in the *Guardian*, June 2, 1880. The Bishop of Chester also pointed out that the doubt which Maitland was trying to combat "prevails more widely, I fear, than many are at all aware." Chester to Edmund MacClure, December 23, 1878, copy, Tait papers, Official papers (1878 Home 230). Cf. also the *Guardian's* review of Maitland's book, January 16, 1878.

47. Cf. G. G. Stokes to R. T. Davidson, December 9, 1880, Tait papers, Official papers (1881 Home 199).

48. Carlisle to Tait, July 3, 1878, copy, Tait papers, Official papers (1878 Home 230).

49. S.P.C.K., Minutes of the General Meeting, February 4, 1879, Vol. LV, p. 193. Cf. also the Bishop of Worcester to the S.P.C.K., July 16, 1878, copy; the Bishop of Winchester to Tait, August 3, 1878, copy, and the Bishop of Winchester to Maxwell Spooner, Tait's chaplain, January 22, 1879; and the Bishop of Chester to Edmund MacClure, Editorial Secretary of the S.P.C.K., December 23, 1878, copy, Tait papers, Official papers (1878 Home 230).

50. Cf. Brownlow Maitland, *The Argument from Prophecy*, 2nd ed. (London: S.P.C.K., 1878), pp. iv and 190-1.

51. Cf. S.P.C.K., Minutes of the General Meeting, March 4, 1879, Vol. LV, p. 206.

52. Cf. S.P.C.K., Minutes of the Standing Committee, January 28, 1878, Vol. XXIV, pp. 482-3, March 25 and April 29, 1878, Vol. XXV, pp. 51 and 79; Christian Evidence Committee Minutes, March 7, 1878; Minutes of the General Meeting, June 4 and October 1, 1878, Vol. LV, pp. 89 and 123.

53. Cf. S.P.C.K., Report for 1880, p. 19.

S.P.C.K. comforted itself with the assertion that the works already published by the committee covered all the ground occupied by modern scepticism.⁵⁴

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Little more than a decade after the bishops' discussion of Maitland's *Argument from Prophecy*, they tacitly agreed to allow free rein to churchmen who felt obliged to accept many of the conclusions of biblical and rationalist criticism of the current presentation of Christianity. Maitland had done so only for the purposes of argument with sceptics. Charles Gore in his essay in *Lux Mundi* (1889) went much farther and insisted on modifying the popular view of the nature of Jesus; and, like Maitland, he escaped any official censure. Later welcomed to the bench of bishops, Gore became the leader of the resistance to yet more radical theology, which in its turn, however, went unscathed.

But the decision to tolerate often extreme reinterpretations of Christianity did not release the leaders of the Church of England from the consequences which their predecessors of the 1870's had feared. Whether because of popular uneasiness about a faith whose spokesmen were ready to surrender piece after piece to its attackers, or because of popular acceptance of the attackers' case—probably both—the proportion of churchgoers among the English population fell steadily. Shaftesbury's prophecy that concession would prepare the way for the victory of a vague deism was in all likelihood fulfilled.

54. Cf. S.P.C.K., Report for 1878, p. 34; Report for 1879, p. 28.