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Patristic Leaven, or Reading Donne with Coleridge

Ramie Targoff

In the winter of 1807, William Wordsworth was staying at Coleorton Hall, the home of the poet Sir George Beaumont in North West Leicestershire, when he purchased a copy of Donne's sermons at the small market town of Ashby de la Zouch. The volume that Wordsworth bought, entitled *LXXX Sermons preached by that learned and reverend Divine John Donne*, was printed in London in 1640, nine years after Donne's death, and represented the most complete collection of the sermons available until the six-volume publication of *The Works of John Donne, D.D., Dean of Saint Pauls* by Henry Alford in 1839. Sometime after acquiring the volume, Wordsworth lent the book to his friend, Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Coleridge was with Wordsworth at Coleorton for most of the winter of 1807, and may have been with him when he made the purchase. Whether Wordsworth simply handed Donne's *Sermons* over to Coleridge right away, or lent it to him after their return to London, is not clear. But apart from his signature and his note regarding where and when he obtained the book written on the top of the title page, Wordsworth left no traces.

The same cannot be said of Coleridge. Whenever Coleridge got the book into his hands—and his editors date his avid reading of this copy of *LXXX Sermons* to 1809–10 when he was evolving his position on Trinitarianism—he annotated its pages in an extravagant, passionate manner.

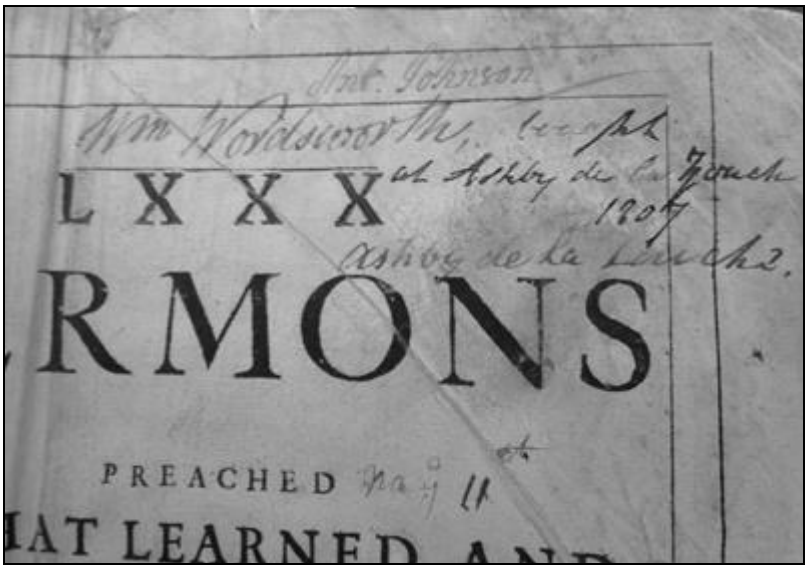

Figure 1. Reprinted with permission of Houghton Library

Coleridge was particularly interested in Donne's sermons for Whitsunday—the holiday that celebrates the descent of the Holy Spirit upon Christ's disciples—but his comments were by no means limited to those sermons alone. In addition to pursuing his theological interest in the Holy Spirit, Coleridge looked up to Donne as a fellow poet and thinker, a kindred spirit of sorts. In his marginal comments on a copy of Donne's *Poems*—the book belonged to his friend Charles Lamb—he expressed again and again his supreme regard for Donne's imaginative gifts. Next to "A Valediction forbidding mourning," for example, Coleridge wrote: "An admirable Poem which none but D. could have written. Nothing were ever more admirably made out than the figure of the Compass."[1] He also gave voice to his deep identification with the poet, as in this comment next to "The Canonization":

[1]Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Marginalia*, ed. George Whalley, Vol. II. (London Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), p. 223. All citations of Coleridge's marginalia are from this volume.

> One of my favorite Poems. As late as 10 years ago, I used to seek and find out grand lines and fine stanzas; but my delight has been far greater, since it has consisted more in tracing the leading Thought thro'out the whole. The former is too much like coveting your neighbour's Goods: in the latter you merge yourself in the Author—you *become He*.[2]

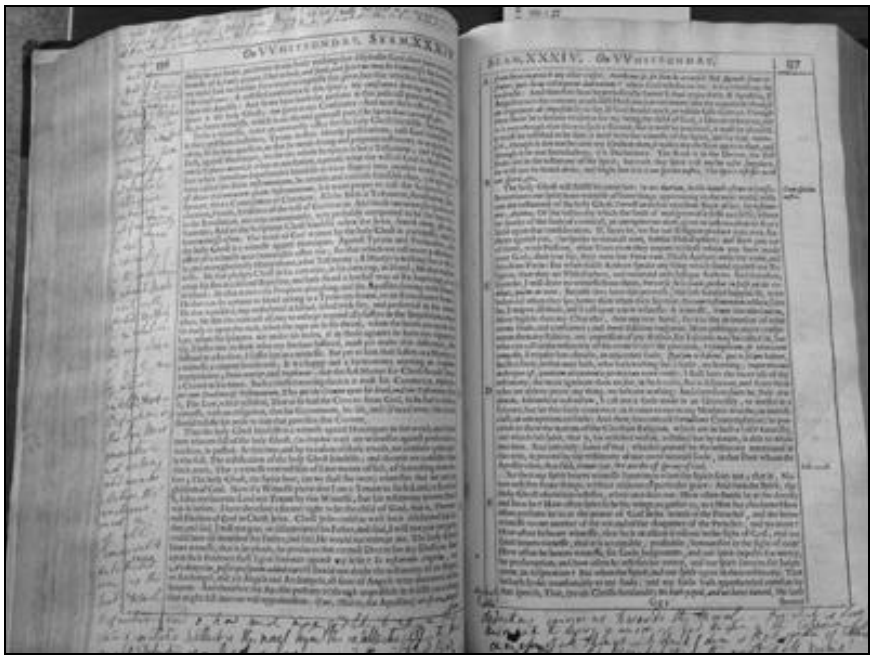

Figure 2. Reprinted with permission of Houghton Library

However great his admiration for Donne's poems, Coleridge declared at the end of his life that he preferred Donne's sermons above all. At his last visit to Cambridge in 1833, he is reported to have said:

> The prose works of this admirable Divine, are Armouries for the Christian Soldier. Such a depth of intellect, such a nervousness of style, such a variety of illustration, such a

[2]Ibid., p. 220.

> power of argument, are to be looked for only in the writings of that race of Giants.[3]

The qualities he described are strictly poetic, and not theological. "Donne's poetry," he concluded, "must be sought in his prose."

Given this estimation of Donne more as a writer than as a divine, it is perhaps not altogether surprising that Coleridge is attentive to moments in the sermons in which the poet-preacher voices distasteful positions of intolerance. In the margins of Wordsworth's copy of the sermons, as well as in the margins of a second copy of the same book that Coleridge annotated some twenty years later (this second book belonged to Coleridge himself), he repeatedly singles out those passages in which Donne seems particularly provincial or narrow-minded. He categorizes this strain of Donne's thought as "patristic leaven."

This essay focuses on two examples that Coleridge identifies of "patristic leaven" in Donne's sermons, both of which involve prejudice towards the Jews. In the first instance, the issue is one of biblical hermeneutics, and the question involves how literally the Bible should be read. In the second instance, the accusation turns on Jewish religious practice, and involves an accusation of the Jews' both denying Christ's status as the Messiah and using Christian blood in their own rites. In both cases, Coleridge's responses to Donne reflect his role as both Jewish sympathizer and enlightened skeptic. Reading Donne through Coleridge's eyes brings out seemingly disparate moments of intolerance in the *LXXX Sermons*, moments that Coleridge helps us to see as examples of "slippery Divinity" (300).

I.

The first sermon in which Coleridge identified Donne's prejudicial attitude towards Jews was preached at St. Paul's on Whitsunday 1629 on the last phrase of Genesis 1:2: "And the spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters." These words immediately follow a description of the darkness that dominated the earth until God began his work—"And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the

[3]Ibid., p. 244.

face of the deep" (1:2)—and precede what is traditionally understood to be the account of the first day of creation: "And God said, Let there be light: and there was light" (1:3).[4] In the phrase that Donne isolated for the topic of his sermon, the central question that had been raised over centuries of interpretation turned on the Hebrew word וּרוּחַ, or *ruaḥ*, which the King James Bible translates as "spirit."

Ruaḥ is used close to 400 times in the Hebrew Bible (there are 377 instances of it, to be exact), and it is a rich and multivalent word. In English, it is usually rendered as one of three related but distinct nouns: "breath," "wind," or "spirit." For "breath," the term is used to describe the breath of both human creatures and God himself, as in Exodus 15:8, "And with the blast [*ruaḥ*] of thy nostrils the waters were gathered together," or Job 8:2, "How long wilt thou speak these things? and how long shall the words of thy mouth be like a strong wind [*ruaḥ*]." For "wind," a good example is Genesis 8:1: "And God made a wind [*ruaḥ*] to pass over the earth, and the waters asswaged"; or 1 Kings 18:45, "And it came to pass in the mean while, that the heaven was black with cloud and wind [*ruaḥ*]." For "spirit," we might look to Isaiah 42:1, "Behold my servant whom I uphold; mine elect, in whom my soul delighteth; I have my put my Spirit upon him," or Psalm 51:11, "Cast me not away from thy presence; and take not thy holy spirit from me."[5]

For Donne, however, there is only one possible interpretation for *ruaḥ* in Genesis 1:2. The word must refer to the "spirit," and specifically to the Holy Ghost. Donne wants to read *ruaḥ*, that is, in a specifically Christian context: it is for him the first reference in the Bible to the third member of the Trinity. Read in this light, the choice of the phrase, "And the spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters," was especially appropriate to Whitsunday—the celebration, as we have already noted, of the Holy Spirit's descent upon the disciples—which was said to occur fifty days after Christ's resurrection. Whitsunday, or Pentecost was also the day of the ancient Jewish festival known as the "Feast of Weeks" or the "Feast of

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[4]All quotations from the Bible in English are from *The Holy Bible, King James Version*, 1987 printing.

[5]These citations are from *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, updated edition (Peabody, MA.: Hendrickson Publishers, 2007).

Harvest," which occurred fifty days after the offering of the barley sheaf during Passover (Pentecost, which means "fiftieth," was the Greek name for this festival). Thus there is already both a blurring of Jewish and Christian lines around this holiday, and a clear distinction between what is being celebrated. This simultaneous affinity and difference well lie in the background of Donne's particular animus in this sermon, as he accuses the Jews of a very partial, and spiritually deadening, understanding of the verse—and in effect, of the holiday itself.

Donne begins by laying out his case for understanding *ruaḥ* as the Holy Spirit. "In this Text," he declares,

> is the first mention of this Third Person of the Trinity; And it is the first mention of any distinct Person in the Godhead; In the first verse, there is an intimation of the Trinity, in that *Bara Elohim,* That *Gods,* Gods in the plurall are said to have made heaven, and earth . . . so *Moses* having given us an intimation of God, and the three Persons altogether in that *Bara Elohim,* before gives us first notice of this Person, the Holy Ghost, in particular, because he applies to us the Mercies of the Father, and the Merits of the Son, and *moves upon the face of the waters,* and actuates, and fecundates our soules, and generates that knowledge, and that comfort, which we have in the knowledge of God.[6]

Donne's notion that the first line of Genesis, "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth," should be understood as "In the beginning *Gods* created the heaven and the earth," is technically correct: *Elohim* is a plural noun, but it is joined with the singular third-person verb, "*bara,*" when it is meant to signify God. According to the twelfth-century Jewish scholar Abraham Ibn Ezra, the plural *Elohim* is used as a term of respect for God, comparable to the use of the "royal

[6]*The Sermons of John Donne,* ed. George R. Potter and Evelyn M. Simpson, 10 vols. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1953–62), Volume 9, pp. 92–93. All references to Donne's sermons are from this volume, and will be cited in the essay by volume and page numbers.

we" in English.[7] When the term is used to describe heathen gods, by contrast, it takes a plural verb. It is the lack of subject and verb agreement, however, which makes possible Donne's Trinitarian gloss, and he was certainly not alone among Christians in reading the verse in this way. Indeed, the idea that Genesis 1:1 presupposes the presence of the Holy Ghost within an intentionally plural *Elohim* had a long history in Christian commentary, and was widely disseminated through Peter Lombard's immensely popular twelfth-century work, *The Sentences*. According to Lombard, who cites as his authority the fourth-century St. Hilary of Poitiers, "the Father is not alone, nor is the Son alone, nor is the Holy Spirit alone," so that when Moses says "In the beginning, God created heaven and earth," Moses uses the term *Elohim* and not the singular *El*, because he wants to indicate the "plurality of persons."[8]

Donne had himself acknowledged, if not fully embraced, the legitimacy of the anti-Trinitarian interpretation of *Elohim* in his earlier work, *Essays in Divinity*, which he wrote between 1611 and 1615. There, he declared that "we affect, and strain at more Arguments for the *Trinity*" than in earlier times, "which needed them more," and therefore imagine that "by this name of *God*, *Elohim*, because it is *plurally pronounced in this place, and with a* singular verbe," the Trinity is "insinuated."[9] Although Donne does not outright reject the Trinitarian position—the *Essays* are intellectual exercises or "essays" in the truest sense of the word, and Donne lays out the disagreement among church fathers and theologians without clearly indicating his own interpretation—he ultimately comes to the conclusion that "I am taught by collation of many places in the Scriptures, that it [the use of the term *Elohim* for the singularity of God] is a meer Idiotism" (26). The noun "idiotism," now obsolete, was a synonym for "idiom," so

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[7]See Chanita Goodblatt's excellent discussion of this crux in *The Christian Hebraism of John Donne* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 2010), pp. 142–45.

[8]Peter Lombard, *The Sentences: Book One: The Mystery of the Trinity*, trans. Giulio Silano (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2007), Distinction II, chp 14.5, p. 15.

[9]John Donne, *Essays in Divinity*, ed. Evelyn M. Simpson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952), p. 26.

Donne concedes the fact that there is no need to interpret *Elohim* in a way that includes Jesus Christ and the Holy Ghost.

In his 1629 sermon, then, Donne adopts the position that he had some fifteen years earlier recognized as counter to the idiomatic use of the term *Elohim* in Holy Scripture. He also ignores the wisdom of Calvin, whom he cited in the *Essays* as warning against the Trinitarian interpretation. Here is what Calvin has to say:

> *God*. Moses has it *Elohim*, a noun of the plural number. Whence the inference is drawn, that the three Persons of the Godhead are here noted; but since, as a proof of so great a matter, it appears to me to have little solidity, [I] will not insist upon the word; but rather caution readers to beware of violent glosses of this kind.[10]

From Calvin's perspective, Donne's reading would fall squarely into the category of a "violent gloss." To insist that the second verse of the Hebrew Bible introduces the third person of the Trinity is too large a claim for so little proof. It lacks, Calvin says, "solidity."

For Donne the preacher, however, he is interested less in exploring the multivalency of the term than in offering a compelling Christian interpretation before the large crowd at S. Paul's. His reading of *Elohim* as including the "three Persons of the Godhead" is confirmed by the use of *ruaḥ* in Genesis 1:2 to signify the Holy Spirit—for Donne, the first two verses of Genesis are the strongest evidence of the Trinity—and in his Whitsunday sermon he faults the Jewish interpreters for resisting this apparent truth:

> Within these rules we proceed to enquire, who this *Spirit of God* is, or what it is; whether a Power, or a Person. The Jews who are afraid of the Truth, lest they should meete evidences of the doctrine of the Trinity, and so of the Messias, the Son of God, if they should admit any spirituall sense, admit none, but cleave so close to the letter, as that to them the Scripture becomes *Litera occidens, A killing Letter, and the savour of death unto death.* They

[10]John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses called Genesis*, trans. by the Rev. John King (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library) Vol. 1, p. 35.

> therefore, in this *Spirit of God*, are so far from admitting a Person, that is, God, as they admit no extraordinary operation, or vertue proceeding from God in this place, but they take the word here (as in many other places of Scripture it does) to signifie onely a *winde*, and then that that addition of the name of *God* (*The Spirit of God)* which is in their Language a denotation of a vehemency, of a high degree, of a superlative (as when it is said of *Saul, Sopor Domini, A sleepe of God* was upon him, it is intended of a deep, a dead sleepe) inforces, induces no more but that a very strong winde blew upon the face of the waters, and so in a great part dryed them up. (IX: 96)

The Jews, Donne declares, echoing a long-standing critique of Jewish hermeneutics dating back to St. Paul, read Holy Scripture too literally. As Paul said in the Second Letter to the Corinthians: "[God] hath made us able ministers of the new testament, not of the letter but of the spirit: for the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life." Donne invokes this idea of the Jews' excessive literalism to explain why they read *ruaḥ* as wind, and in this instance interpret *Elohim* not as signifying God or the Trinity, but as an intensifier of the wind itself—it was a "wind of God," in other words, a really strong wind. "And this opinion," he continues, "I should let flye awaye with the winde, if onely the Jews had said it:

> But *Theodoret* hath said it too, and therefore we afford it so much answer, That it is a strange anticipation, that Winde, which is a mixt Meteor, to the making whereof, divers occasions concurre with exhalations, should be thus imagined, before any of these causes of Winds were created, or produced, and that there should be an effect before a cause, is somewhat irregular. In Lapland, the Witches are said to sell winds to all passengers; but that is but to turne those windes that Nature does produce, which way they will; but in our case, the Jews, and they that follow them, dreame winds, before any winds, or cause of winds was created; *The Spirit of God* here cannot be the *Wind*. (IX: 96)

Donne becomes fixated here on the particular order in which creation proceeded—how can it be, he asks, that the winds, which are a "mixt

Meteor," came before the creation of the "causes of Winds"? Even the Lapland witches' manipulation of the weather, he adds, has more basis in truth than the notion that "the spirit of God" in the second verse of Genesis might refer to the actual elements. The Finnish witches may alter the course of the wind, but the Jews do much worse: "[they] dreame winds, before any winds, or cause of winds was created."

Donne's mocking of the supposed Jewish reading of Genesis 1:2 follows directly upon his declaring his openness to multiple and divergent readings of Scripture. Earlier in the same sermon, he announced:

> Where divers senses arise, and all true, (that is, that none of them oppose the truth) let truth agree them. . . . Let us use our liberty of reading Scriptures according to the Law of liberty; that is, charitably to leave others to their liberty, if they but differ from us, and not differ from Fundamentall Truths. (IX: 94–95)

This is the kind of tolerance readers often associate with Donne, and there are certainly moments in his writing, of which *Satire III* is the most famous example, in which he resists putting forward any single interpretation or belief as definitive.[11] In this sermon, however, Donne's tolerance for hermeneutical liberty is no sooner proclaimed than it reaches an impasse with a reading of Scripture that violates what he terms "Fundamentall Truths."

As it happens, Donne's characterization of the Jewish interpretation—as if there were such a thing as a uniform Jewish interpretation in a tradition so varied and with no clear hierarchy of authority—was largely mistaken. Donne almost certainly did not read rabbinic literature himself: as Golda Werman shows in her book, *Milton and Midrash*, seventeenth-century Protestants very rarely had sufficient training in Hebrew and Aramaic to enable them to read

[11]See Richard Strier's fine analysis of this poem in *Resistant Structures: Particularity, Radicalism, and Renaissance Texts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), "Essay 6: Impossible Radicalism I, Donne and Freedom of Conscience," pp. 118–64.

these texts on their own.[12] It is therefore likely that Donne was exposed to the Midrash through Christian Hebraists, as Chanita Goodblatt has convincingly argued.[13] In the Midrash Genesis Rabbah, we find two very different glosses for this verse, neither of which corresponds exactly to Donne's characterization. The first is from Rabbi Judah b.R. Simon, who does translate *ruaḥ* as wind, but maintains God's agency in the wind's creation. "AND THE SPIRIT (RUAH) OF GOD HOVERED OVER THE FACE OF THE WATERS," he writes,

> should be understood as, *God made a wind* (*ruaḥ*) *to pass over the earth.* Said the Holy One, blessed be He: "How long shall the Universe go on in darkness: Let the light Come!"[14]

Donne, we will recall, insisted that the Jews eliminated God's presence entirely from the meaning of *ruah*: "They therefore," he argued, in this *Spirit of God*, are so far from admitting a Person, that is, God, as they admit no extraordinary operation, or virtue proceeding from God in this place."

The second commentary is from Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish, who wrote that "the spirit of God" alludes to the Messiah, "as you read, 'And the spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him'" (Isa. XI. 2).[15] Here Donne's characterization of the Jewish interpretation completely collapses, since the idea of *ruaḥ* as the Messiah is as close as it could possibly come, given the fundamental religious differences between Jews and Christians, to his own understanding of *ruah* as the Holy Spirit.

We also know that Donne read Nicholas of Lyre's biblical commentary—he owned a copy of the Vulgate Bible with Nicholas's commentary, *Postillae Perpetuae*—and thus, through Nicholas, was probably familiar with the commentary of the eleventh-century Jewish

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[12]Golda Werman, *Milton and Midrash* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1995) pp. 27ff. See also Jason Rosenblatt, *Torah and Law in Paradise Lost* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

[13]See Goodblatt, *The Christian Hebraism of John Donne,* pp. 22ff.

[14]*Midrash Rabbah: Genesis*, trans. by Rabbi Dr. H. Freedman, 2 vols. (London: The Soncino Press, 1983), Vol. 1, p. 6.

[15]*Midrash Rabbah*, Vol. 1, p. 17.

theologian, Solomon ben Isaac, better known as Rashi.[16] For Nicholas, Rashi and other rabbinical sources represented a much-needed corrective to the overly allegorized readings that had become popular in Christian biblical hermeneutics. Within the Jewish tradition, Rashi himself represented a compromise between a literal interpretation of scripture and the more typically allegorized Midrashic interpretations.[17]

Christian Hebraists such as Nicholas would have found in Rashi's commentary of this verse a completely different interpretation, however, from the one Donne characterized as "Jewish" in his sermon. Rashi glosses the phrase "the spirit of God was hovering" as follows:

> The throne [*kise*] of honor was suspended in the air and hovering on the face of the water by the breath [*ruaḥ*] of the mouth of the Holy One, Blessed be He, and by his word, as a dove hovering over the nest.[18]

Why Rashi introduced here the idea of God's throne—a term used, for example, in 1 Kings *22*:19, "I saw the Lord sitting on his throne"—is an intriguing question that lies outside the parameters of this essay. But it is certainly the case that the interpretation is far from literal. It also lacks any reference to the wind.

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[16]See "Appendix IV: Books from Donne's Library," in Geoffrey Keynes, *A Bibliography of Dr. John Donne* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973) Fourth Edition, p. 279. For Nicholas's reliance upon Rashi, see Herman Hailperin, *Rashi and the Christian Scholars* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1963), Part IV: "Nicholas de Lyra, Franciscan," pp. 137–246.

[17]On Rashi's attempt to balance the plain meaning, or *peshat*, and the homiletical, or *derash*, see Avraham Grossman, "The School of Literaral Jewish Exegesis in Northern France," in *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament: The History of Its Interpretation* (Gottingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2000) Vol. I, part 2, pp. 334–36. Grossman also provides a helpful bibliography on the widely studied topic, p. 335, n. 13.

[18]I am indebted to Goodblatt for her emendations to this translation, which is based on *Pentateuch with Rashi's Commentary*: *Genesis*, translated into English and annotated by M. Rosenbaum and A. M. Silbermann, in collaboration with A. Blashki and L. Joseph (Jerusalem: Silbermann Family, 1973c1929), p. 3.

When Coleridge reads Donne's sermon on Genesis 1:2, he does not, as he does elsewhere, react specifically to Donne's mischaracterization of Jewish belief. Instead, he embraces the mischaracterized Jewish position himself. More specifically, his imagination takes off from the idea of *ruaḥ* as wind:

> If the Earth were waste & wild—and a fluid confused mass—how can this confusi[on] be imagined withou[t] *winds*?—Let Lime meet with an acid—& then with a strong Hea[t,] will there not b[e] a violent rush of fixed air?—Doubtless, the Gloss of the Jews is accurate/tho' still it would be a wretched Taste to translate it, as D[r] Geddes has done—a violent wind—: for this may be the cold truth of the *Thing* but by no means a fear [fair] transfusion of the Prophet's meaning—or in the spirit of the theocratic Theology, which attribute all things to God *immediately*. . . .
>
> (246)

Coleridge is particularly fixed on the opening words of Genesis 1:2—"And the earth was without form and void"—which he renders more evocatively as "the Earth [was] waste & wild." Coleridge is focused less on the state of emptiness and vacancy than on the chaos that preceded God's work, a chaos that cannot "be imagined without winds." *Ruaḥ* shifts, then, from being an attribute of God—"the spirit of God," as the King James Bible has it—to an attribute of the empty and void, or wild and waste, which God found before he began.

Coleridge wants to understand from the first verse of Genesis the process by which chaos moved toward definition, and his invoking the chemical equation whereby lime, or calcium hydroxide, mixed with acid creates both a salt and water (although not necessarily salt-water, which may have been what he had in mind) reveals his desire to strip the passage altogether of its spiritual resonance and get down to the mechanics of creation itself. Coleridge is disappointed, then, less by Donne's flawed theology than by his flawed science. Or perhaps he is simply disappointed by Donne's peculiar failure to see in what he regards as the Jewish position a powerful account for how the world was made.

II.

My second example of Coleridge's attention to Donne's prejudice against Jews comes from a sermon preached on Christmas day, 1625 at S. Paul's, on Galatians 4:4 and 4:5: "But when the fulnesse of time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the Law, to redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of Sonnes." In this case, Donne's prejudice is not against Jewish biblical interpretation, but against Jewish practice itself. As the verse, and the occasion suggests, his sermon is concerned with the birth of God's son, and his mandate to redeem humankind. "We are met here," Donne declares, "to celebrate the generation of Christ Jesus" (VI:331).

Donne opens with a discussion of the phrase, "*the fulnesse of time*," and specifies that he wants first to consider this fullness "in respect of the Jews." The Jews, he exclaims, had ample evidence that Christ's birth satisfied all of the conditions in their own prophetic books for the coming of the Messiah. "That he must come while the Monarchy of Rome flourished; And before the Temple of Jerusalem was destroyed; That he must be born in Bethlem, That he must be born of a Virgin"—each of these prophecies, Donne affirms, was "exactly fulfilled" (VI:333). "So fully was the time of the Messias coming, come," he continues,

> that though some of the Jews say now, that there is no certain time revealed in the Scriptures when the Messias shall come, and others of them say, that there was a time determined, and revealed, and that this time was the time, but by reason of their great sins he did not come at his time, yet when they examine their own supputations, they are so convinced with that evidence, that this was that *fulnesse of time*, that now they expresse a kinde of conditionall acknowledgement of it . . . (VI:333–34)

To anyone in St. Paul's Cathedral paying attention, Donne's account of Jewish belief may well have come as a surprise. Despite all appearances to the contrary, he contends that the Jews actually do believe Christ was the Messiah. Or, to be more precise, he suggests they have accepted it "conditionall[y]." The evidence he presents is

even more surprising. The Jews show their "conditionall acknowledgement" of Christ as the Messiah, he declares, through "this barbarous and inhumane custome of theirs":

> [T]hey alwayes keep in readinesse the blood of some Christian, with which they anoint the body of any that dyes amongst them, with these words, if Jesus Christ were the Messias, then may the blood of this Christian availe thee to salvation: So that by their doubt, and their implied consent, in this action, this was *the fulnesse of time*, when Christ Jesus did come, that the Messias should come. (VI:334)

How Donne came to this supposed knowledge of secret Jewish practice is not revealed. His account has obvious resonances with the blood libel: the idea that Jews murdered Christian children to use their blood for ritual purposes, which were typically associated with the Passover holiday. Jews were accused, among other things, of using Christian blood to bake their unleavened bread (*matzah*) and to mix with their wine. An eighteenth-century pamphlet published in Poland that listed Jewish crimes in the form of an almanac offers this summary of the Jews' perfidy in the month of Nisan, when Passover falls:

> If there is any month in which it is appropriate to detest Jewish customs, it is certainly this month. On the second day [of Nisan], the Jews are obliged to murder a Christian child in order to begin this month by shedding Christian blood. They need the blood first and foremost to spellbind the Christians, so that they will be favorably inclined toward the Jews. Further, they need blood for newlyweds, who are given an egg spiced with blood during the ceremony of marriage. The rabbis also anoint dying Jews using the white of an egg mixed with blood. Finally, the Jews must use Christian blood for [the preparation] of the matzot.[19]

The first recorded case of the blood accusation came from England, when in 1144 a young boy named William was found murdered in the

[19]Pawel Maciejko, *The mixed multitude: Jacob Frank and the Frankist movement, 1755–1816* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), p. 105.

woods near Norwich, a murder that was blamed on the Norwich Jews. Donne almost certainly knew the story of this murder through the famous account of it written in St. Thomas of Monmouth's *The Life and Miracles of St. William of Norwich*. In the centuries that followed the murder, accusations of Jews' torturing and crucifying Christian children in order to obtain their blood spread across Europe and led to horrendous persecution of Jews and terrible strains between Jews and Christians, as modern historians have extensively documented.[20]

What interests Donne about the blood libel, however, has nothing to do with accusations of Jewish acts of violence—indeed, he does not even mention the ways in which the Christian blood might have been obtained. What interests Donne is the theological implication of the alleged Jewish practice: namely, the idea that the Jews denied Christ's status as the Messiah, *and yet* also believed that Christian blood might possess salvific powers. Donne imagines for the Jews, that is, the equivalent of Pascal's wager—the idea that even if it is unlikely that God exists, the potential benefits of believing in God far outweigh the risks. "Let us weigh up the gain and the loss," Pascal writes, "in calling heads that God exists. Let us assess the two cases: if you win you win everything; if you lose, you lose nothing. Do not hesitate then: wager that he does exist."[21] Jews, Donne rather treacherously suggests, do not believe that Christ was the son of God, but in case it turns out he is, they anoint their dead with Christian blood. The Jews, in short, hedge their bets.

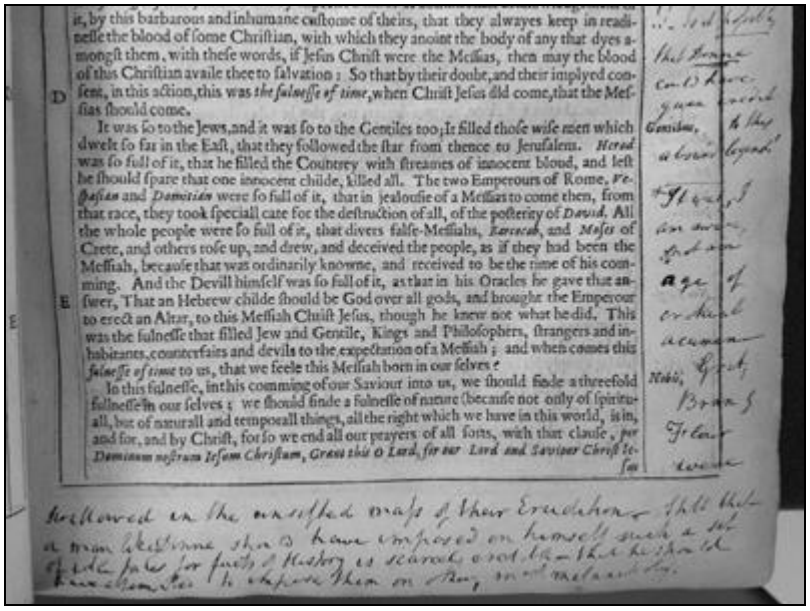
Coleridge responds to Donne's claims in the second copy of *LXXX Sermons* that he annotated, now held in the Bodleian Library at Oxford. His marginalia in this book, composed around 1831–32, reflects several decades of further reading and thinking both about theology more generally and Donne's divinity in particular. It is

[20]For an excellent account of the William of Norwich story, see E. M. Rose, *The Murder of William of Norwich: The Origins of the Blood Libel in Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015). For a fascinating account of the historiographical issues the blood libel has raised over the centuries, see Hannah R. Johnson, *Blood Libel: The Ritual Murder Accusation at the Limit of Jewish History* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012).

[21]Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. A. J. Krailsheimer (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966, rev. 1995), p. 123.

therefore with greater knowledge—and greater shock—that he scribbles in the margins of this sermon:

> "!!—Is it *possible*, that DONNE could have given credit to this absurd legend!
>
> It was, I am aware, not an age of critical acumen—Grit, Bran & Flour were swallowed in the unsifted mass of their Erudition—Still that a man like Donne should have imposed on himself such a set of idle tales for facts of History is scarcely credible—that he should have attempted to impose them on others, most melancholy.[22]


it, by this barbarous and inhumane cuſtome of theirs, that they alwayes keep in readineſſe the blood of ſome Chriſtian, with which they anoint the body of any that dyes amongſt them, with theſe words, if Jeſus Chriſt were the Meſſias, then may the blood of this Chriſtian availe thee to ſalvation: So that by their doubt, and their implyed conſent, in this action, this was *the fulneſſe of time*, when Chriſt Jeſus did come, that the Meſſias ſhould come.

It was ſo to the Jews, and it was ſo to the Gentiles too; It filled thoſe wiſe men which dwelt ſo far in the Eaſt, that they followed the ſtar from thence to Jeruſalem. *Herod* was ſo full of it, that he filled the Countrey with ſtreames of innocent bloud, and left he ſhould ſpare that one innocent childe, killed all. The two Emperours of Rome, *Veſpaſian* and *Domitian* were ſo full of it, that in jealouſie of a Meſſias to come then, from that race, they took ſpeciall care for the deſtruction of all, of the poſterity of *David*. All the whole people were ſo full of it, that divers falſe-Meſſiahs, *Barcocab*, and *Moſes* of Crete, and others roſe up, and drew, and deceived the people, as if they had been the Meſſiah, becauſe that was ordinarily knowne, and received to be the time of his comming. And the Devill himſelf was ſo full of it, as that in his Oracles he gave that anſwer, That an Hebrew childe ſhould be God over all gods, and brought the Emperour to erect an Altar, to this Meſſiah Chriſt Jeſus, though he knew not what he did. This was the fulneſſe that filled Jew and Gentile, Kings and Philoſophers, ſtrangers and inhabitants, counterfaits and devils to the expectation of a Meſſiah; and when comes this *fulneſſe of time* to us, that we feele this Meſſiah born in our ſelves?

In this fulneſſe, in this comming of our Saviour into us, we ſhould finde a threefold fullneſſe in our ſelves; we ſhould finde a fulneſſe of nature (becauſe not only of ſpirituall, but of naturall and temporall things, all the right which we have in this world, is in, and for, and by Chriſt, for ſo we end all our prayers of all ſorts, with that clauſe, *per Dominum noſtrum Jeſum Chriſtum*, Grant this O Lord, for our Lord and Saviour Chriſt Jeſus

Figure 3. Reprinted with permission of Houghton Library

On the one hand, Coleridge wants to blame Donne's belief in these "absurd legends" on the era in which he lived—it was not, he says, "an age of critical acumen." On the other hand, he clearly expects from Donne something better. He expects Donne, that is, to be a better

[22]Coleridge, p. 274.

sifter: to separate the wheat from the chaff, "the Grit, Bran & Flour" from the "mass of [his] erudition."

Behind Coleridge's astonishment over Donne's accepting "idle tales for facts" lies an even deeper suspicion: that Donne did not really believe these stories after all. It is in this context that Coleridge introduces the phrase "patristic leaven," which surfaces twice in the second copy of the sermons. First, Coleridge uses the phrase in a general comment written on one of the pages preceding the title page—it is part of his first note in the book, although an internal reference makes clear that these comments were written after he composed the marginalia in which the phrase "patristic leaven" is also used. "Even in Donne, <(see p. 80)>, still more in Bishops Andrews and Hackett," he writes, there is a strong patristic leaven." Coleridge's reference to page eighty brings us to the other use of the phrase, which comes in the margins of a undated sermon Donne preached on Candlemas Day on Matthew 5:16, "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorifie your father which is in heaven." "We have a story," Donne declared,

> delivered by a very pious man, and of the truth whereof he seemes to be very well assured, that one *Conradus* a devout Priest, had such an illustration, such an irradiation, such a coruscation, such a light at the tops of those fingers, which he used in the consecration of the Sacrament, as that by that light of his fingers ends, he could have reade in the night, as well as by so many Candles . . . (X:93)

To this, Coleridge responds:

> This ridiculous Legend is one instance of what I have called the *patristic* leaven in Donne—who assuredly had no belief in the authenticity of this letter, but himself considered spurious. But yet it served a purpose. As to Master Conradus, he must have recently shaken hands with Lucifer.[23]

[23]Ibid., p. 301.

"But yet it served a purpose." The reference to "patristic leaven" resonates with Coleridge's comments about Donne's "unsifted erudition"—there is something unprocessed or flawed in Donne's very bread—but it also draws upon the use of the term "leaven" in the Gospels to signal hypocrisy. According to Matthew, "When [Jesus'] disciples were come to the other side, they had forgotten to take bread. Then Jesus said unto them, Take heed and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, and of the Sadducees." The disciples are puzzled, since they have taken no bread, and discuss the matter among themselves. Jesus becomes irritated with their literal mindedness, and after accusing them of being "of little faith," he asks: "How is it that ye do not understand that I spake it not to you concerning bread?" "Then understood they," Matthew concludes, "how that he bade them not beware of the leaven of bread, but of the doctrine of the Pharisees and of the Sadducees" (Matthew 16:8–12, *in passim).* Luke captures the episode more succinctly:

> In the meantime, when there were gathered together an innumerable multitude of people, insomuch that they trode one upon another, [Jesus] began to say unto his disciples first of all, Beware ye of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy. (Luke 12:1)

In accusing Donne of "patristic leaven," Coleridge shifts his criticism of the preacher from one of prejudice to opportunism. Donne rehearses positions that he could not possibly have believed, but that "served a purpose"; Donne recognized that the arguments he was making were spurious, *and yet.* Earlier in the Candlemas sermon, Coleridge scribbled this in the margins:

> In this page Donne rather too much plays the rhetorician . . . Donne was a truly great man; but he did not possess that full, steady, deep and yet comprehensive Insight into the nature of Faith and Works, which was vouchsafed to Martin Luther . . . With all my reverence for D^{r} Donne, I warn against the contents of the preceding page as scarcely

> tenable in Logic, unsound in Metaphysics, and unsafe, slippery Divinity.[24]

In his reading of Donne's sermons, Coleridge identifies a habit of mind that makes the preacher dangerous. Donne lacks, he concludes, "comprehensive Insight," and espouses "unsound" doctrine. Reading Donne through Coleridge's eyes teaches us to admire Donne as a "truly great man"—by which Coleridge almost certainly means that Donne possessed a "truly great" mind—but not to lean on him for religious guidance in the way we might lean, Coleridge imagines, on Luther. As we see both from Donne's manipulation of Jewish interpretations of the Hebrew Bible and his completely irresponsible affirmation of the blood libel, he was fundamentally not to be trusted when it came to Jewish doctrine or practice. To say Donne was anti-Semitic—which he certainly shows signs of being—does not fully capture, however, what Coleridge had in mind. For Coleridge identified not only in Donne's attitude toward the Jews, but also in his willingness to affirm obviously incredulous stories like that of the Christian priest Conradus, a tendency on Donne's part to suspend his better reason. Coleridge helps us to see, that is, something both opportunistic and reckless in Donne's theology, which sometimes carried him, to borrow a comment Coleridge made elsewhere in the margins, "like a Balloon—away from earth, but not a whit nearer the Arch of Heaven."[25]

Brandeis University

[24]Ibid., pp. 299, 300.
[25]Ibid., p. 166.