

**Victorian biblical scholarship in twentieth-century South Africa:
Ramsden Balmforth's advocacy of
New Testament higher criticism**

*Frederick Hale*¹

Research Unit for Reformed Theology, Faculty of Theology,
North-West University, Potchefstroom, South Africa

Abstract

Debates in South Africa over Biblical scholarship have often been a subject of historical inquiry. John Colenso's challenges to the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch are well known, and in the Dutch Reformed tradition significant work has been done on such topics as the controversial Stellenbosch theologian Johannes du Plessis. The present article deals with central themes in the New Testament scholarship of a very liberal, Oxford-educated transplant, Ramsden Balmforth, who served as minister of the Unitarian Church in Cape Town from 1897 until 1937 and wrote several books about the Bible. The focus is on his advocacy of higher criticism (or historical criticism) of the New Testament and, within this, his emphasis on agapeist ethics of Jesus as the essential core of Christianity. This is historically contextualised by, *inter alia*, considerations of his reactions to the "fundamentalism" of the 1920s and the heresy trial of the said Dutch Reformed theologian, Johannes du Plessis.

Introduction

Few Victorians were more astute observers of the ebbing of popular religious belief in the rapidly evolving social and intellectual climate of the United Kingdom than the renowned poet and educationist Matthew Arnold. In his ever-quoted poem of 1867, "Dover Beach", he memorably perceived in the receding waters of the English Channel a symbol of the decline of the nation's faith. Arnold then envisaged a dystopian world in the absence of the once vivid legacy of traditional Christianity.

Arnold prescribed no panacea. However, six years later, under the misleading title of *Literature & dogma. An essay towards a better apprehension of the Bible*, he commented on the alienation of much of the public from the church and suggested how this could be addressed. An "inevitable revolution", Arnold observed, was "befalling the religion in which we have been brought up", and ministers of the Gospel were constantly bemoaning "the spread of scepticism" and the loss of the grip which the church once had on its members. Whether it ever really had a firm hold on them he doubted, but he did not question that they no longer held Christianity in "considerable awe", while many "freely question its truth". Some had begun to follow "teachers who tell them that the Bible is an exploded superstition". The British public, Arnold generalised, had become "rude and hard reasoners" who did not accept "the preliminary assumption with which the churches start". As one who had derived spiritual and ethical treasures from the Scriptures, this educator and humanitarian found people's loss of the Bible as their moral compass lamentable (despite the rapid increase in popular literacy). The answer, he hoped, lay in a more rationalistic approach to the Holy Writ: "So, if the people are to receive a religion of the Bible, we must find for the Bible some other basis than that which the churches assign to it, a verifiable basis and not an assumption." To corroborate his point, Arnold approvingly quoted the early nineteenth-century Swiss Protestant theologian Alexandre Vinet: "We *must* ... make it our business to bring forward the rational side of Christianity, and to show that for thinkers, too, it has a right to be an authority."²

Arnold's conviction was shared by many British theologians of liberal bent, both in the Church of England and other denominations. This coincided with the impact which Continental Biblical scholarship, chiefly of German and Dutch origin, was beginning to make on British theology. Its influence in South Africa was certainly not widespread before the turn of the century, although by 1862 and 1864, respectively, the Cape Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church had already suspended from its ministry Thomas François Burgers and Johannes Jacobus Kotzé. Not long thereafter, another young Afrikaner, David P. Faure, had returned from liberalising theological studies at the University of Leiden and, refused ordination by the Dutch Reformed

¹ Prof. Dr Frederick Hale is an extraordinary professor in the Research Unit for Reformed Theology, Faculty of Theology, North-West University, Potchefstroom, South Africa.

² Matthew Arnold, *Literature & dogma. An essay towards a better apprehension of the Bible* (London: Smith, Eder, & Co, 1889 [1873]), pp. xiii, xiv, xvii.

Church, eventually founded the Free Protestant Church, later called the Unitarian Church, in Cape Town.³ All of this was in addition to the noteworthy and well-known case of John Colenso, the first Anglican bishop of the then Natal, whose advocacy of historical criticism, especially with regard to the Pentateuch and the book of Joshua in the 1860s and 1870s, aroused a furore among his denominational colleagues in both southern Africa and England.⁴ However, when gauged by nearly any standard, Colenso, who died in Durban in 1883, was an anomaly on the ecclesiastical landscape of southern Africa.

The amount of radical theology in nineteenth-century South Africa should not be exaggerated. The local soil for nurturing it was not particularly fertile. Apart from the Dutch Reformed *Kweekskool* (seminary), which had been founded in Stellenbosch in 1859, formal theological studies at university level were still in its infancy in this part of the world; churches across much of the denominational spectrum continued to rely to a great extent on British and Continental institutions for their supply of clergy.

After 1900, however, varying manifestations of theological liberalism, including higher criticism of the Bible cropped up with increasing frequency. One of the principal conduits through which recent Biblical scholarship flowed to the Cape, beginning shortly before the outbreak of the Second Anglo-Boer War in 1899, was Ramsden Balmforth, an Oxford-educated Yorkshireman who landed at Cape Town in 1897 and served as the minister of the Free Protestant Church for the next 40 years. His many contributions to the propagation of knowledge about recent Biblical scholarship in South Africa remain an almost completely ignored topic in the nation's religious history.

In the present article, the primary focal point will be Balmforth's understanding of the New Testament, although this cannot be entirely divorced from his interpretation of the Hebrew Bible. It will be argued that he was a theologian who, perhaps more than any other Anglophone member of his profession, brought higher criticism of the Scriptures to South Africa in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It will be shown, *inter alia*, that Balmforth was heavily indebted to late Victorian Biblical scholarship, with which he became acquainted during his years at the University of Oxford in the 1890s. Although his writings continued to reflect certain developments in theology, to a great extent he remained captive to the liberal understanding of the New Testament he had acquired at that time, and even as late as the 1930s he continued to write in a nineteenth-century vein.

Balmforth's road to Biblical Enlightenment

In one of his final books, *Jesus – the man*, Balmforth facilitated the task of tracing the course of his intellectual evolution by outlining many of the early influences on his theological formation in England. He emphasised that he had not followed “the usual orthodox and conventional pathways” but rather “unorthodox and heretical channels”. These included his pre-Unitarian upbringing in “the agnostic and freethought atmosphere associated with the names of Robert Owen – then a fading memory in public life – John Stuart Mill, Herbert Spencer, [Charles] Darwin, [Thomas] Huxley, John Tyndall and others of like mind.” But these giants of nineteenth-century British secular thought had not said the final word to the young Balmforth. At some early point, which he identified only as during his “youth” (and therefore possibly in the late 1870s or early 1880s), he had read Ernest Rénan's *Vie de Jésus*, which had been translated into English almost immediately after its publication in French in 1863, and was sufficiently impressed by the post-orthodox portrayal of the Nazarene, which highlighted his ethical emphases, to deliver as one of his first lectures at an undisclosed venue “A defence of Jesus”. Thereafter, Balmforth had encountered three works by Matthew Arnold, who had made rear-guard efforts to maintain post-orthodox religious faith against the onslaught of contemporary Victorian intellectual currents, particular in *Literature & dogma*, *God and the Bible*, and *Saint Paul and Protestantism*. This exposure to popular French and British theological liberalism, it should be noted, occurred alongside his formation as a socialist, becoming an early member of the Fabian Society. To Balmforth, there was thus no necessary contradiction between his religious and political views; they went hand-in-hand and reinforced each other.⁵

Balmforth also paid tribute to the exposure his years at Manchester College, Oxford, gave him to what he termed “the Liberal school of thought”. He mentioned generally, without citing specific titles, the works of three of the most prominent British Unitarian theologians of the Victorian era, namely James Martineau, who had taught at his *alma mater* for several decades; Joseph Estlin Carpenter, who had succeeded Martineau as the pre-eminent Unitarian religious scholar in the United Kingdom; and James Drummond, an Irishman who also taught at Manchester College. Through these gentlemen, Balmforth disclosed, he had become acquainted with “the Liberal critical school of Germany and Holland”.⁶

³ Frederick Hale, “The Origins of the Free Protestant Church in South Africa: David P. Faure *contra* Dutch Reformed Calvinism”, *Studia historiae ecclesiasticae*, XXXIII, no. 1 (June 2007), pp. 327-350.

⁴ Jeff Guy, *The heretic: a study of the life of John William Colenso, 1814-1883* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, and Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 1983) is an accessible and generally sympathetic biography.

⁵ Ramsden Balmforth, *Jesus – the man* (London: The C.W. Daniel Company Ltd., 1935), pp. 5-6.

⁶ Balmforth, *Jesus – the man*, p. 6.

By his own testimony, however, what shaped his perceptions of Jesus more than the arguments of higher critics of the New Testament while he was still in England and after emigrating to Cape Town were fictional and other literary reconstructions of Jesus. In retrospect, this is hardly surprising. In the 1880s, Balmforth pseudonymously published his only known novel, an utterly didactic work virtually devoid of artistic merit titled *Landon Deecroft: a socialistic novel*,⁷ and during his decades in South Africa he compiled series of Sunday evening lectures and issued them as books, with such titles as *The ethical and religious value of the drama*, and *The problem-play*. Among the works he remembered as having contributed to his understanding of Jesus were, in addition to that by Rénan, Cambridge historian John Robert Seeley's *Ecce Homo* (1866), Lynn Linton's *The true history of Joshua Davidson* (1872), Arnold's *Literature and dogma* (1873), Mrs Humphry Ward's *Robert Elsmere* (1882) and, after the turn of the century, George Moore's *The Brook Kerith* (1916) and Stanley Mellor's *Addresses on the historical Jesus* (1926).⁸

As far as Balmforth's interpretation of the Old Testament was concerned, by his own testimony in *The Bible from the standpoint of the higher criticism* (1904), his pantheon of luminaries included Abraham Kuenen, Henricus Oort, John Colenso, Archibald Sayce, Edwin Hatch, Samuel Rolles Driver, Thomas Kelly Cheyne, George Adam Smith, and William Robertson Smith. He especially praised Kuenen's *The religion of Israel* as a work that "should be in the hands of every student of the Bible".⁹

A detailed description of Balmforth's interpretation of the Old Testament in the light of nineteenth-century criticism lies beyond the scope of the present article. However, for our purposes, it is noteworthy that he believed a "re-inthronement" (a term he had taken from Arnold) of "a rationalized Bible is necessary" and that this would not "be denied by any thoughtful man", not least because so much popular contemporary literature was a "disappointment" and could fruitfully be replaced by family Bible reading, which would "tend to foster a more serious mood". However, success in such an endeavour required that the Bible be "re-edited, especially for the young; and it requires to be made intelligible, from the evolutionary standpoint, to all". Balmforth expressed no doubt that the way forward was that of higher criticism. "Before the Bible can again become a living force amongst the people," he declared without reserve, "the results of recent critical study must be made more widely known". Anything that smacked of bibliolatry was anathema to him. "The book must cease to be worshipped as a fetish. It must be made to appear what it really is – a human literature, alive and vivid with passions, hopes, and feelings; and its truths must be rescued from the errors and obscurations which are necessarily blended with all human thought and effort." Those tasks, Balmforth informed his readers, were those of higher criticism.¹⁰

Balmforth agreed wholeheartedly with Arnold, whom he called "a true prophet", that a religious (or anti-religious) revolution was underway, declaring that it had brought a decline of faith. However, to this Unitarian liberal, it also seemed evident that "the work of reconstruction", of which he termed Arnold "one of the master-builders", had also forged ahead with "marvellous" industry and care of Biblical scholars during the past three decades. Accordingly, he stated with unveiled glee, "to the man of culture, the Bible has become a human literature, therefore, a literature to be submitted to the investigations and the tests of the spirit which produced it, namely the human spirit."¹¹ To him, the higher critics were thus heroes of the faith who were saving Christianity from drifting further into irrelevance.

To Balmforth, one of the most valuable and practical fruits of higher criticism was a progressive view of religion in the Scriptures as they had developed over a period of well over a millennium. This went hand-in-hand with his liberal attitude towards Jesus as a great moral teacher and his own convictions as a social reformer. The texts of the Bible, he judged, sometimes descended "to the lowest depths of superstition, savagery, and barbarism", but elsewhere rose "to the loftiest heights of nobility and heroism". As literary history, in other words, the Bible was "the story of the education of one great branch of the human race in character, in morality; and to be ignorant of that story is to be ignorant of the most important part of human history." And that we do at our personal and national peril, Balmforth professed, for "the Bible shows us that whenever men and nations have slid from the pathways of goodness, honour, and righteousness, into the devious ways of evil, dishonour, and unrighteousness, they and their works have descended into untraceable ruin ..."¹²

The challenges of recent and contemporary Biblical scholarship to orthodoxy were massive, he understood with gratitude, and they had already swept aside much that belonged in the dustbin of archaism. Balmforth assured readers that it had not merely rendered untenable literal interpretations of certain events of the Old Testament, such as Samson slaying Philistines with the mandible of an ass or "the fable of Eden". Rather, "the whole superstructure of dogmatic theology" had been rattled: "The Fall of Man, Original Sin, the supposed Divine Covenant with a favoured people, the doctrine of a personal Messiah and the Second Coming,

⁷ Laon Ramsey, *Landon Deecroft: a socialistic novel* (London: William Reeves, The New Temple Press, 1885).

⁸ Balmforth, *Jesus – the man*, p. 6.

⁹ Ramsden Balmforth, *The Bible from the standpoint of the higher criticism. The Old Testament* (London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co. Lim., 1904), p. viii.

¹⁰ Balmforth, *The Bible from the standpoint of the higher criticism. The Old Testament*, pp. vi-vii.

¹¹ Balmforth, *The Bible from the standpoint of the higher criticism. The Old Testament*, pp. v-vi.

¹² Balmforth, *The Bible from the standpoint of the higher criticism. The Old Testament*, p. 26.

the Miraculous birth of Jesus, the Ascension, the Resurrection of the Body, Vicarious Sacrifice, the dogma of eternal perdition, the infallibility of the Bible, the separation of the priesthood, the saving efficacy of ritual or ceremonial – all of this is at stake.” Higher criticism, Balmforth believed, had panned much of the gold from the sand and was enlightening the “man of culture” as to what could be salvaged for his immeasurable benefit.¹³

Presuppositions regarding the New Testament

In his 1905 book about the New Testament, Balmforth boldly – and perhaps naïvely – expressed his conviction that it must be approached without any doctrinal presuppositions. As a rhetorical question, he asked whether a creed was really necessary to religious life and answered affirmatively. Everyone, Balmforth generalised, had one, “either explicitly or implicitly held”; it was a necessity for everyone who would “live a wisely-ordered life”. But he hastened to distinguish between “practical” and “speculative” statements of belief. In the first category he included, *inter alia*, something as basic as “Love to God and love to Man”, which – true to his theologically liberal, anti-doctrinaire sentiments – he termed “the principle on which our own Church is based”. By contrast, “speculative” creeds, such as those which had traditionally governed Biblical scholars (and, in Balmforth’s view, restricted their findings to doctrinally acceptable conclusions), were untenable and archaic “unwisdom”. Further preparing the ground for the acceptance of whatever challenges to conventional beliefs higher criticism might bring, he observed that religious beliefs were constantly in transition, and consequently speculative creeds could not be regarded “as final statements of the truth”. Rather than endless and futile striving for doctrinal perfection in all its *minutiae*, Balmforth professed, we should concentrate on locating “the purified moral spirit – the wider sympathy, the deeper and truer feeling, the purer affection – which mankind so slowly wins from the lower, selfish elements in its nature”. People could find that, he thought, with its “practical and direct connection with their daily needs”, in the record of human history, including religious literature. By examining the New Testament, the meticulous reader could begin to discover how, for example, “the great principles of the Sermon on the Mount” could be applied to “social, industrial, and political life”.¹⁴ The overlapping of this conviction about what the summit of religious thought is, with Balmforth’s keen interest in social ethics, hardly needs to be underscored.

Reversing conventional, orthodox efforts to prove the divine origins of the New Testament, Balmforth thought it crucial to demonstrate that it was a human product. This, he believed, would remove it from the shifting sands and irrelevance of supposedly superhuman provenance as part of “speculative doctrine”. He declared his intention: “If, then, I can show that the New Testament was made not only for man, but, *by man*, that it should minister unto, but not fetter, the human spirit, that even within its pages doctrine slowly changes, and that it is our duty to elicit from its many voices its highest truths,” he had accomplished his task. This would not only be liberating, but also help to construct a foundation on which religious people “of difference creeds and doctrines can work in harmony”.¹⁵

Conveying certain key findings of New Testament scholarship

Balmforth cast a fairly broad net in his commentary on how recent Biblical scholarship had affected how the New Testament should be read and appreciated. To be sure, some of the canonical books received much more of his attention than others. At one pole, like other liberal theologians, he valued the Synoptic gospels highly; at the other, Revelation played no part in Balmforth’s Bible. He evidently thought it crucial to relate the prevailing theory of the origins of the first three gospels and guided readers briefly through an excursus about how the sayings of and narratives about Jesus had been part of the first-century oral tradition among Christians before Mark wrote down his account, and Matthew and Luke incorporated much of it in their own. That answer to the “Synoptic problem” was certainly not novel in 1905; both it and others had cropped up, especially in German scholarship, at various points in the nineteenth century. What Balmforth stressed in tandem with this, however, was that the anonymous nature of the gospels did “not detract from their moral and religious value” any more than the ethical thrust of Shakespearean dramas would be blunted if it were proven that the Bard of Avon had not written them.¹⁶

Confirming his contention that the New Testament reflected its human origins, Balmforth summarised how its canon had gradually developed during the first three centuries of Christianity in a process marked by numerous disagreements, debates, and rejections of numerous texts. This evolution of the definitive version had been made especially difficult because the exact words of Jesus had not necessarily been recorded by his disciples. That such was the case was not unique in the history of religions, Balmforth pointed out. He drew a parallel by citing the late German Orientalist Max Müller who, during his half-century career at the University

¹³ Balmforth, *The Bible from the standpoint of the higher criticism. The Old Testament*, p. 29.

¹⁴ Ramsden Balmforth, *The New Testament in the light of the higher criticism* (London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co. Lim., 1905), pp. 3-12.

¹⁵ Balmforth, *The New Testament in the light of the higher criticism*, pp. 15-16.

¹⁶ Balmforth, *The New Testament in the light of the higher criticism*, pp. 24-25.

of Oxford, had done more than any other scholar of his generation to open the world of Eastern religions to British readers and establish comparative religion as a respected academic discipline. "During the life of Buddha", Müller had explained, "no record of events, no sacred code containing the sayings of the Master, was wanted. His presence was enough, and thoughts of the future seldom entered the minds of those who followed him. It was only after Buddha had left the world to enter Nirvana that his disciples attempted to recall the sayings and doings of their departed friend and Master."¹⁷

Balmforth seems to have revelled in the asymmetrical, disjointed origins of the New Testament, as they confirmed his belief that human input made its message more credible and meaningful to the modern mind than lofty notions of divine provenance. The channels through which the teachings of Jesus had been communicated as literature were thus all the more acceptable to him. "Fallible human media, indeed", he wrote. "And yet these 'earthen vessels' have preserved to us something of the 'heavenly essence' as Dr. Martineau calls it—the everlasting truth in the fragile receptacle." To Balmforth, the Bible still contained "everlasting truths": "The tender and gracious words of Jesus, the invincible faith of Paul[...] the beautiful mysticism of John, the symbolism of the epistle to the Hebrews, the pure spirit and divine pity breathing through the author of *James*—all these will endure, will remain in the memory of man and so influence his moral life, for ever." What remained was to sort them out through critical study. Balmforth did not conceal his firm conviction that the New Testament contained generous portions of both wheat and chaff. One had to winnow "the erroneous from the true; the fanciful, the legendary, the purely speculative and metaphysical from the truths which ring responsive echoes from our own hearts, and which give us a deeper spiritual life and power."¹⁸

Debating higher criticism in Cape Town

Balmforth evidently believed that he was enlightening Capetonians and readers elsewhere and illuminating their path to a more credible and ethically valuable reading of the Bible. It cannot be overemphasised, however, that not all accepted his literary ministrations or believed that he stood on the cutting edge of scholarship. One such dissenter was a layman in Cape Town, Theodore Ballantyne Blathwayt, a fellow Oxonian and British immigrant who thought that the Unitarian parson was tethered to a slightly bygone era in Biblical scholarship. Blathwayt was no anti-rationalist. Part of his career in the Mother City, and subsequently in Johannesburg, was serving as a private tutor to university students. He also had a keen interest in astronomy, and after his death in 1934 an obituary appeared in *The Journal of the Astronomical Society of South Africa*.¹⁹

In a debate conducted in the pages of the *Cape Times* in 1911, Blathwayt took Balmforth to task for criticising the Oxford Assyriologist and Anglican divine Professor Archibald Sayce's relatively conservative positions on matters pertaining to the historicity of Old Testament narratives. Blathwayt thought he had a formidable ally against radical Biblical scholarship. "When Sayce says that every discovery of the last 23 years is against the critics, no man in his senses can blame those who appeal to archaeology against the higher criticism," he reasoned patronisingly; "and if the critics can derive any crumbs of comfort from such a statement, well, I for one would not be so brutal as to wish to deprive them of them, for they must be in a very starving condition, poor wretches." Blathwayt was convinced that much Biblical scholarship was little more than a house of cards or a fragile web of theories which had failed to disprove the literal record of ancient history. He explicitly denied that he accepted "verbal inspiration" of the Scriptures, but insisted that "the higher critics and their supporters" had failed to adduce evidence that "disproves the Bible". Instead, they could merely "cite discoveries on which they found theories which overthrow the Scriptures; but that is a very different thing."²⁰

Balmforth replied the same day and staunchly defended higher critics in general terms without directly addressing the matter of Sayce. "To insinuate that the higher criticism, including, I suppose, such men as Bishop Colenso, Canon Driver, Canon Cheyne, Prof. Gardner, Prof. Burkitt, W. Robertson Smith, Dr Carpenter, and the able band of contributors to the 'Encyclopædia Biblica,' are a set of 'poor wretches' who would reduce the O.T. to a mere farrago of lies and forgeries," he declared, "is a method of controversy which can only make the judicious grieve." Balmforth noted that many of their positions had gained virtually unquestioned acceptance in the British academic world and elsewhere and, as examples of this, he cited Colenso's theory of the composition of the Pentateuch and stated that Driver's *Introduction to the study of the Old Testament* had become a standard reference work at Oxford and other universities. In what bordered on an *ad hominem* slur, Balmforth wondered whether Blathwayt believed "possession by demons was a form of disease". The evolution of thought and scientific awareness had to be accepted if one wished to understand the deeper meanings of the Scriptures, he argued. It did not in any way denigrate the "moral greatness" of Jesus Christ to acknowledge that "he accepted many of the current notions of his times, just as he probably accepted the theory of a flat earth and the theory

¹⁷ Balmforth, *The New Testament in the light of the higher criticism*, p. 29.

¹⁸ Balmforth, *The New Testament in the light of the higher criticism*, pp. 31-32.

¹⁹ "T.B. Blathwayt", *The Journal of the Astronomical Society of South Africa* III, no. 4 (April 1935), pp. 166-167.

²⁰ T.B. Blathwayt (Cape Town) to *Cape Times*, 19 February 1911, in *Cape Times*, 27 February 1911, p. 9.

that the earth was the centre of the solar system” any more than Plato’s “peculiar and absurd notions about physiology and some other matters” made him any less a genius.²¹

Balmforth’s criticism of “fundamentalism”

By the time the Union of South Africa was founded in 1910, Balmforth had firmly established himself on its religious terrain while remaining in close contact with at least part of that of England. His faith in higher criticism was unshaken. In the 1920s, his responses to both international and local controversies, which had gained extensive publicity, shed further light on Balmforth’s commitment to what he believed was cutting-edge Biblical scholarship.

Throughout the 1920s, debates over theological modernism raged in many Protestant denominations internationally, especially in the United States of America and the United Kingdom. Especially Baptists and Presbyterians stood in the middle of the arena of dispute, while on the most liberal flank of Christendom Unitarians generally limited their involvement to critical observations of the strife. In 1920 the theologically conservative editor of an American Baptist weekly newspaper, Curtis Lee Laws of *The Watchman-Examiner*, coined the term “Fundamentalist” as, he thought, a fitting and semantically positive label for those denominational fellows “who cling to the great fundamentals and who mean to do battle royal for the fundamentals shall be called ‘Fundamentalists’.” He explicitly included himself among them and explained that whenever he used this neologism “it will be in compliment and not in disparagement”.²² His optimism about its connotations did not foreshadow its usage by others. During the early 1920s, as the disputes continued to rage in one denomination after another, the word became, at least in the eyes of theologically more liberal Christians as well as journalists and other members of the American public, a term of opprobrium. Both it and the cognate “fundamentalism” crossed the Atlantic in the first half of the decade and became anchored in both the religious and secular vocabulary of the British public.²³ The terms gained further currency in the United States and elsewhere because of the enormous publicity surrounding the “Scopes monkey trial” in Dayton, Tennessee, when a young teacher of biology was found guilty of teaching the theory of Darwinian evolution. Owing to this event, “fundamentalism” was soon used to designate literalistic interpretations of the creation accounts in Genesis.

Before the end of the 1920s, Balmforth was using it too, predictably as a negative signifier for the views of theologians and other churchmen whom he regarded as insufferably narrow-gauged in their theology and literalistic in their Biblical hermeneutics. In 1928, for example, he lamented that, in areas where fundamentalism was strong, it was “bigoted and ruthless”. Alluding to the Scopes case and legislative efforts in its way, he was appalled that on American shores fundamentalists were “trying to prohibit the teaching of Evolution in the schools, and the use of Evolutionary text-books in the colleges”.²⁴ Balmforth also reported in his church’s monthly periodical on the activities of “Fundamentalists and Anti-Evolutionists” in the United States, where their movement to incorporate “the dogma of Bible infallibility” in public law was “thoroughly organized, country-wide, [and] heavily financed”. The advance of that campaign clearly alarmed him, though he noted with gratification that in several states bills to outlaw the teaching of Darwinian evolution had been rejected.²⁵ Nothing in his responses could have surprised any reader who was familiar with his unswerving loyalty to the critical modes of Biblical scholarship he had learnt at the feet of men like Carpenter and Drummond.

Reacting to the heresy trial of Johannes du Plessis

Given Balmforth’s continuing advocacy of higher criticism and attendant criticism of “fundamentalism” during the 1920s, his critical reaction to the trial of the eminent professor of both missiology and New Testament Johannes du Plessis at the Dutch Reformed *Kweekskool* in Stellenbosch could hardly have raised eyebrows. The case is too well known to merit detailed consideration here. Briefly stated, in 1929 this former missionary was judged in an ecclesiastical hearing to have deviated from the theological norms of the Dutch Reformed Church and he was removed from his teaching position. The proceedings were reported at length in the Anglophone press in Cape Town, which was probably Balmforth’s main source of information about the case.

There is no compelling reason to believe that either Du Plessis’ subjection to ecclesiastical discipline or the outcome surprised Balmforth, but both certainly disgusted him. Indeed, in May 1928 he publicly stated that he had “every sympathy” with Du Plessis and predicted that efforts to silence him with a policy of “Hush!

²¹ R. Balmforth (Cape Town) to *Cape Times*, 27 February 1911, in *Cape Times*, 3 March 1911, p. 15.

²² “Convention Side Lights”, *The Watchman-Examiner*, VIII, no. 27 (1 July 1920), p. 834.

²³ Frederick Hale, “The Origins of a Dysfunctional Concept: Baptists and ‘Fundamentalism’”, *South African Baptist journal of theology*, XX (2011), pp. 223-232.

²⁴ Ramsden Balmforth, “Fundamentalism and the policy of ‘Hush! Hush!’”, *Free Protestant (Unitarian) Church. Monthly calendar*, VIII, no. 6 (May 1928), p. 1.

²⁵ “Anti-Evolution in America”, *Free Protestant (Unitarian) Church. Monthly Calendar*, VII, no. 5 (April 1937), p. 4.

Hush!” were “doomed to failure”.²⁶ Nevertheless, so distressing and yet topical was the continuation of the case against Du Plessis that Balmforth preached a brief series of sermons based on it in October 1929.²⁷ The small sanctuary of the Unitarian church was reported to have been filled on those Sunday evenings.²⁸ He also editorialised about it in his church’s monthly journal. Balmforth described the proceeding as a “pitiful” atavism from what he wished was a bygone era and lamented that in the third decade of the twentieth century there would be such an “exhibition of obscurantism and idolatry”. Balmforth built his argument on his pivotal ideas of progressive revelation of divinity in history and varying degrees of Scriptural inspiration. “Are we to place the ‘Cursing Psalms’ and the savage and immoral commands of the earlier parts of the Old Testament on the same level of inspiration as the higher teachings of the prophets, the Beatitudes, and the Sermon on the Mount?” he asked rhetorically while the trial was underway. “The conception of God implied in such an attitude is childish and blasphemous.” To Balmforth, the trial itself was evidence that religious education in South Africa was “crude and lax”, as it had apparently failed to impart what he called “methods of wise discrimination between what is true and pure in literature and what is false and unworthy”. Turning to readers whose interest lay “in the merely textual aspect of this controversy”, Balmforth noted that the nineteenth-century revision of the Old and New Testaments of the Authorized Version of the Bible had incorporated more than 36000 changes in the text and punctuation. Christian literature was, *inter alia*, an expression of the linguistic and other cultural context in which it was written. Consideration of this was essential for retrieving the message from “the earthen vessel” in which the “heavenly essence” was stored. Balmforth concluded his essay with an excerpt from “Bibliolatres” by the nineteenth-century American Romantic poet James Russell Lowell:

Bowing thyself in dust before a Book,
And thinking the great God is thine alone,
O rash iconoclast ...
Slowly the Bible of the race is writ,
And not on paper leaves nor leaves of stone;
Each age, each kindred, adds a verse to it.²⁹

In one of his sermons prompted by the heresy trial, Balmforth emphasised his understanding of where the core of the New Testament message lay: “The one great aim and mission of Jesus of Nazareth was to establish the eternal spiritual power, and, therefore, the Divinity, of the Spirit of Love.” Balmforth held no brief for millenarianism or other eschatological elements in the gospels or the epistles, and Revelation was a book which he hardly mentioned. Apocalypticism hardly meshed with his conception of agapeist Christianity as relevant for the life of the faithful in the world. For that matter, mention of life beyond the grave was rare under Balmforth’s pen. Instead, his reading of the New Testament, including that during the Du Plessis trial, centred on such texts as John 13:34: “A new commandment I give unto you, that you love one another.” Balmforth found it outrageous that, despite this foundational message, “men have tortured and burnt each other to death in the name of Christ and God!” The trial of Du Plessis, he asserted, was essentially “a milder and minor variation of the same spirit” which had inspired the Inquisition.³⁰

Jesus – the man

Balmforth remained active in his ministry until 1937, serving the Unitarian church in Cape Town with only a few brief interruptions occasioned by visits to England. He submitted his resignation in October 1936, but agreed to continue until the end of 1937 to give his isolated congregation sufficient time to find a successor.³¹ Beginning in mid-1930, Balmforth was assisted for less than two years by another British Unitarian, S.T. Pagesmith,³² but for the most part he carried the load of preaching weekly and otherwise attending to his pastoral duties by himself. Outside the congregation, this hard-working minister performed a spectrum of civic duties which he believed all contributed to the same ethical and cultural upliftment of humanity that, in his view, formed the crux of his explicitly religious work. In 1927, for example, when Balmforth had been in Cape Town for thirty years, it was reported in the British Unitarian periodical *The Inquirer* that he was a member of the Cape Division School Board and the Cape Town Juvenile Affairs Board, served as vice-president of the South African Peace Society, and was playing a role in the executive committee of the Cape Town League of Nations

²⁶ Balmforth, “Fundamentalism and the policy of ‘Hush! Hush!’”, p. 1.

²⁷ “Services during October”, *Free Protestant (Unitarian) Church. Monthly calendar*, IX, no. 10 (October 1929), p. 1.

²⁸ “Notes and news”, *Free Protestant (Unitarian) Church. Monthly calendar*, IX, no. 11 (November 1929), p. 4.

²⁹ Ramsden Balmforth, “The heresy trial at Stellenbosch”, *Free Protestant (Unitarian) Church. Monthly calendar*, IX, no. 10 (October 1929), pp. 2-3.

³⁰ Ramsden Balmforth, “The Heresy Trial at Stellenbosch”, *Free Protestant (Unitarian) Church. Monthly Calendar*, IX, no. 11 (November 1929), p. 2.

³¹ “Resignation of Our Minister”, *Free Protestant (Unitarian) Church. Monthly Calendar*, XVI, no. 12 (January 1937), p. 3.

³² “New Unitarian Clergyman”, *Cape Times*, 8 July 1930, p. 3.

Union.³³ Mounting political tensions in Europe which culminated in the outbreak of World War II in September 1939 also occupied much of his time as he continued to write in support of the League of Nations and otherwise devoted some of his attention to international affairs.

In 1935 Balmforth nevertheless completed his final book which dealt primarily with a New Testament topic. Titled *Jesus – the man*, this modest volume was published in London by a less well-known publishing house and did not indicate significant development in his study of the Bible.³⁴ Probably owing to both Balmforth's partial isolation from European theological movements and his preoccupation with responsibilities in Cape Town, the book reveals little more than the continuing influence of Victorian Unitarians like Carpenter and other post-orthodox theologians on his interpretation of Jesus. *Jesus – the man* betrays virtually no cognizance of such seminal works as those by Albert Schweitzer, Johannes Weiss, Karl Barth, and Edwyn Hoskyns. On the other hand, Balmforth evinced some familiarity with a few New Testament scholars, whom he cited but to a significant degree misrepresented. A brief consideration of *Jesus – the man* is thus indispensable for understanding the state of his relationship to New Testament scholarship near the end of his life.

Parts of *Jesus – the man* read like a paean to nineteenth-century research. Balmforth dwelt on the Synoptic problem, for example, informing his readers what the principal interpretation of the textual genealogy of the gospels of Mark, Matthew, and Luke were and identifying the so-called *Quelle*. Prevailing understandings of these matters were presented as self-evident truths requiring little explication and no defence. Balmforth acknowledged that "mystery and obscurity" necessarily surrounded much in the life of Jesus because the only three documents with any historiographic value were the Synoptic gospels, all of which left "large gaps and blanks of which we know nothing".³⁵

Balmforth sought to explain the different perspectives from which the four canonical gospels and the Pauline epistles were written as historical products of the different "groups" which emerged among Christians during a period of several decades as churches were emerging in the first century. Entirely in accord with what had been taught in the late nineteenth century, he identified three, which appeared sequentially as those of messianic and legalistic Jewish Christianity, those (chiefly Gentile) which incorporated the supernatural perception of Jesus propagated by Paul, who "swept clean away" the "narrow Jewish conception of Jesus" as a "teacher and prophet of the Jews", and, finally, Johannine Christianity which emphasised Jesus as the incarnation of the *Logos* or "the divine ideal[,] the spirit, the thought of God". All of this, too, meshed with nineteenth-century New Testament scholarship.³⁶

To Balmforth, for whom the ethics of Jesus and especially the Sermon on the Mount consistently formed the nucleus of Christianity, it seemed particularly lamentable that the emergence of different interpretations of Jesus in the early church had led to a series of Christological controversies which, in turn, were answered with the formulation of creedal statements in the fourth and fifth centuries. In this centuries-long historical process, the representation of the man of Nazareth had been transmogrified "into something that he himself never conceived of – a God miraculously born, suffering a shameful death in order to propitiate his father-God, rising from the dead on the third day after his crucifixion" and so on, matters on which Balmforth believed the New Testament "says little". But, he reported with unveiled relief, a path out of this dark dogmatic thicket had been cleared by the demythologising work of "Higher Criticism". Owing to pioneers of New Testament scholarship, Balmforth confidently assured readers, "that building of religion upon myth and legend, has been undermined and is being taken down piece by piece". He noted that Protestantism was being transformed by both Higher Criticism and the science of comparative religion. The work of their devotees, whom Balmforth left largely unidentified, would be continued in the next generation, whose task it would be to complete the deconstruction of dogma and "put in its place a real Christianity, a religion of the spirit".³⁷

What had Jesus proclaimed, or what had he sought to bring about? In addressing this fundamental question, Balmforth set it up by juxtaposing the work of Adolf von Harnack and Alfred Loisy, neither of whom he appears to have understood adequately. The great German scholar, he explained, had contended that "the kingdom which Jesus had in view was a spiritual kingdom, a kingdom of the spirit" reflected particularly in Luke 17:21 ("The Kingdom of God is within you"). By contrast, Balmforth argued that the French Catholic modernist believed Jesus was "possessed by the idea of the impending end of the age, and the miraculous establishment of the coming kingdom", which would be an "outward, objective" entity, not something within the hearts of the faithful. The extent to which the Unitarian minister in Cape Town had actually read these two scholars' works is apparently impossible to ascertain. However, his statements about them suggest that in neither case did he understand how the two had been received in Europe. The scholarship of each, Balmforth asserted, "none will question".³⁸ In fact, Harnack's efforts in his multi-volume *Dogmengeschichte* and other

³³ "Cape Town Jubilee", *The Inquirer*, no. 4435 (2 July 1927), Supplement, p. ii.

³⁴ Balmforth, *Jesus – the man*.

³⁵ Balmforth, *Jesus – the man*, pp. 32-33.

³⁶ Balmforth, *Jesus – the man*, pp. 33-36.

³⁷ Balmforth, *Jesus – the man*, pp. 36-37.

³⁸ Balmforth, *Jesus – the man*, pp. 58-60.

works to cut through the accretions of Christological controversies and arrive at the original nucleus of Jesus' teachings were strongly opposed during the first few decades of the twentieth century. His immensely popular lectures published originally in German as *Das Wesen des Christentums* (1901) and also in translations in numerous other languages (in English as *What is Christianity?*) met a similarly mixed reception. As Stephen Neill has observed, that volume "was received with both enthusiastic acclamation and bitter criticism".³⁹ Loisy's works fell sufficiently foul of the Roman Catholic Church as to prompt his excommunication. Even without considering churchmen whom Balmforth regarded as "fundamentalists", higher criticism with its liberalising tendencies was always less dominant and more vigorously opposed in Europe than he assumed. Moreover, by the mid-1930s, when he wrote *Jesus – the man*, reactions associated with Karl Barth and numerous other theologians were strongly challenging the positions taken by an earlier generation of scholars.

Yet one must wonder whether reading works by these and other early twentieth-century New Testament authorities would have changed Balmforth's perceptions of Jesus, which seem to have been cast in an immalleable mould. The underlying theological differences separating him from those post-liberal luminaries was probably too great for him to take them seriously. The fact that many of these scholars were committed – at least to a significant degree – to received theological orthodoxy already made their work suspect in Balmforth's critical eyes.

Reviews of *Jesus – the man* were not generous. One of the severest appeared in *The Times literary supplement* before the end of December. The anonymous critic described Balmforth as "an unrepentant Victorian" who had limned a portrait of Jesus "without regard for any of the uncertainties that have overtaken nineteenth-century theological Liberalism". What those "uncertainties" were remained chiefly unidentified, although one of them apparently went to the heart of the divine nature of Jesus Christ. The reviewer suggested that to Balmforth it was apparently "self-evident" that the notion of the incarnation was little more than "a mythological encrustation of an original simplicity", as it had been "to the 'scientific' Victorians". The general position of those liberals, this critic contended, was that Christianity could be salvaged from the ravages of contemporary scientism only by transforming it into "a kind of Mohammedanism" proclaiming, "'God is One, and Jesus is His Prophet.'" The first few decades of the twentieth century, he noted, had rejected as naïve the Victorian assumptions about the perfectibility of mankind behind the liberal theological lenses through which Balmforth had read the New Testament. Consequently, *Jesus – the man* had contributed little to what was written over and over again in those self-confident years.⁴⁰

Conclusion

Speaking from his pulpit at a commemorative service in June 1937, Balmforth retrospectively summarised the fruits of his four decades of ministry in Cape Town. Among them, he averred, his congregation had grown considerably, it was quite vibrant, and the "principles and teachings" he had proclaimed through the spoken and written word had exercised a "considerable influence" beyond the diminutive sanctuary of his church.⁴¹ How much of this sway Balmforth believed had been through his books about the New Testament and his advocacy of historical criticism he did not venture to say. From the perspective of church history, that influence is impossible to gauge. One can assume that his incessant endeavours to employ the results of nineteenth-century Biblical scholarship to make the ethics of Jesus comprehensible to his audiences and readers had some impact on numerous people, but the scope of this defies empirical analysis.

There is no evidence that Balmforth's importation and propagation of New Testament historical scholarship made a permanent impact on a significant number of South Africans' faith or their understanding of what Christianity was principally about. What can be reasonably stated, however, is that his case offers a lucid example of how a Christian of very liberal theological views could take the understanding of the New Testament, which he acquired at the feet of Unitarians at Oxford to the southern tip of Africa and, during several decades of ministry there, maintain his unswerving dedication to it without significantly allowing most subsequent waves of contradicting Biblical scholarship which challenged those notions to wash ashore and erode the edifice of his confident Victorian faith. Balmforth's name should no longer be absent from standard histories of South African Christianity.

Works consulted

Arnold, Matthew 1889. *Literature and dogma: an essay towards a better apprehension of the Bible*. Popular ed. London: Smith, Eder and Company, 1889.

³⁹ Stephen Neill, *The interpretation of the New Testament* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), p. 131.

⁴⁰ Anonymous review of Ramsden Balmforth, *Jesus - the man*, *The Times literary supplement*, no. 1767 (14 December 1935), p. 863.

⁴¹ "Mr. Balmforth's forty years' ministry", *Free Protestant (Unitarian) Church. Monthly calender* XVII, no. 6 (July 1937), p. 3.

- Balmforth, Ramsden 1904. *The Bible from the standpoint of the higher criticism: The Old Testament*. London: Swan Sonnenschein.
- Balmforth, Ramsden 1905. *The New Testament in the light of the higher criticism*. London: Swan Sonnenschein.
- Balmforth, Ramsden 1911. *Cape Times*. March 3.
- Balmforth, Ramsden 1927. Cape Town Jubilee. *The Inquirer*, 4435 edition, sec. Supplement.
- Balmforth, Ramsden 1928. Fundamentalism and the policy of 'Hush! Hush!' *Free Protestant Unitarian Church Monthly Calendar* 8(6): 1.
- Balmforth 1929. Notes and News. *Free Protestant Unitarian Church Monthly Calendar* 9(11): 4.
- Balmforth, Ramsden 1929. Services during October. *Free Protestant Unitarian Church Monthly Calendar* 9(10): 1.
- Balmforth, Ramsden 1929. The Heresy Trial at Stellenbosch. *Free Protestant Unitarian Church Monthly Calendar* 9(10): 2–3.
- Balmforth, Ramsden 1930. New Unitarian Clergymen. *Cape Times*. July 8.
- Balmforth, Ramsden 1935. *Jesus-the Man*. London: C.W. Daniel.
- Balmforth, Ramsden 1930. New Unitarian Clergymen. *Cape Times*. July 8.
- Balmforth, Ramsden 1937. Anti-evolution in America. *Free Protestant Unitarian Church Monthly Calendar* 7(5): 4.
- Balmforth, Ramsden 1937. Resignation of Our Minister. *Free Protestant Unitarian Church Monthly Calendar* 16(12): 3.
- Blathwayt, Theodore B. 1911. *Cape Times*. February 19.
- Guy, Jeff 1983. *The heretic: a study of the life of John William Colenso, 1814-1883*. Johannesburg: Pietermaritzburg: Ravan Press University of Natal Press.
- Hale, Frederick 2007. The origins of the Free Protestant Church in South Africa: David P. Faure Contra Dutch Reformed Calvinism. *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 33(1): 327–350.
- Hale, Frederick 2011. The origins of the dysfunctional concept: Baptists and 'Fundamentalism'. *South African Baptist Journal of Theology* 20: 223–232.
- Laws, Curtis Lee 1920. Convention side lights. *The Watchman-Examiner*, 8 edition, July 1.
- Neill, Stephen 1964. *The interpretation of the New Testament 1861-1961*. Edition or Printing Not Stated edition. London: Oxford University Press.
- Ramsey, Laon 1885. *Landon Deecroft: a socialistic novel, etc*. London: The New Temple Press.
- "Mr. Balmforth's Forty Years' Ministry." *Free Protestant Unitarian Church Monthly Calendar* 17, no. 6 (1937): 3.
- "Review of Ramsden Balmforth, Jesus – the Man." *The Times*, 1935, 1767 edition, sec. Literary Supplement.
- "T.B. Blathwayt." *The Journal of the Astronomical Society of South Africa* 3, no. 4 (1935): 166–167.