Coleridge, Christology, and the Language of Redemption

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The Anglican poet and philosophical theologian Samuel Taylor Coleridge privately wrote notebooks that develop vital aspects of his mature public theology, especially his understanding of the doctrine of redemption. While Aids to Reflection (1825) is Coleridge’s central public explanation of the doctrine of redemption, the late notebooks reveal the careful exegetical work that grounds his theological system. Through a close analysis of Paul and John, Coleridge questions traditional theological assumptions about the meaning of redemption. Coleridge’s analysis of theological language, sacramental imagery, and the role of symbols allows him to distinguish between the work of Christ and the consequences of its effects in individual Christians. Coleridge’s mature theology influenced the mid-nineteenth-century Broad Church Movement as well as a variety of North American theologies.

One of Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s (1772–1834) most significant contributions to nineteenth-century Anglican theology was his critical study of the Bible. Even as a young Unitarian preacher speaking throughout the Bristol region, Scripture formed Coleridge’s burgeoning philosophical theology. As Coleridge explained in the Biographia Literaria, his earliest religious difficulties came in the attempt to reconcile personality with infinity: but though his “head” was with Spinoza, the biblical wisdom of Paul and John ruled his “heart.”1 Late in life, Coleridge penned thousands of private notebook entries on the Bible that he intended to contribute to his long-planned magnum

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opus—a philosophical and encyclopedic defense of religion. Coleridge hoped, according to one lengthy outline of the opus in May 1828, to devote a whole volume of his work to a study of the Bible: “It will be, I trust, a complete Substitute for the German Introductions to the Old & New Testaments . . . a real History of the Bible—not a flat newwording of the Bible History—the great object to restore the Bible to it’s [sic] due place in the Love & Veneration of Christians by at once establishing its Homopneumaty yet asserting it’s [sic] Humanities.”

Though these critical notebook commentaries remained unpublished during his lifetime, they are pivotal for a fuller recovery of Coleridge’s theology.

I argue that Coleridge’s late notebooks, especially his commentaries on Scripture, enhance our understanding of his mature theological system by providing the exegetical groundwork of his adherence to the Christian doctrine of redemption. Redemption ranks high among the central themes of Coleridgean theology. In Aids to Reflection (1825)—widely regarded as the “central statement” of the doctrine in his writings—Coleridge goes so far as to claim that “Christianity and REDemption are equivalent terms.” Placing the idea of redemption in Aids to Reflection within the fuller context of the notebook commentaries reveals Coleridge’s unique place as “Theologian of the Word.” His full account of redemption is far more than a corrective to early nineteenth-century Protestant theology, as it appears in Aids to Reflection. Rather, Coleridge’s theology provides a thoroughgoing, constructive analysis of the person of Christ that relies heavily on a critical exegesis of Paul and John. The notebooks, in my view, should be regarded as an essential part of the Coleridgean corpus: rather

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than the scattered, fragmentary remains of unfinished labor, the note-
books actually strengthen the case that Coleridge developed a broadly
unified system of theology. Attending to the full scheme of redemp-
tion in these works also sheds further light on several prominent
themes in Coleridge’s thought, including his understanding of theo-
logical language, use of sacramental imagery, and the role of symbols
in his system—themes that were later taken up by Broad Church An-
glican theologians such as Julius Hare and Charles Kingsley.

The Language of Redemption

The chief object of Coleridge’s *Aids to Reflection*—a volume de-
voted to “the formation of a manly character on the several grounds
of prudence, morality, and religion”—is “the value of the Science of
Words, their use and abuse” (*AR*, 6–7). Coleridge is better known for
his interest in the moral concerns of religion (the second intention of
*Aids to Reflection*, in order of importance), the “momentous distinc-
tion” between Reason and Understanding (third in importance), and
the fundamental doctrines of Christianity (fourth in importance). Yet
Coleridge’s focus on language indicates an important historical trajec-
tory in the development of nineteenth-century theology (for example,
the place of language in Horace Bushnell and the liberal Protestant
tradition in America). The proper use of language grounds Coleridge’s
theological method. His writings show a strong interest, throughout,
in words, and especially “the incalculable advantages attached to the
habit of using them appropriately, and with a distinct knowledge of
their primary, derivative, and metaphorical senses” (*AR*, 7).

Language is a pivotal aspect of Coleridge’s famous claim that
“Christianity is not a Theory, or a Speculation; but a Life. Not a Phi-
losophy of Life, but a Life and a living Process” (*AR*, 202). When
Coleridge explains that “the Life, we seek after, is a mystery,” he
is reminding his readers that the power of the gospel is not equivalent
to the language of theology. Too often, Christians mistake the ex-
pressed effects of a work of God with the act itself and thereby turn

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4 On system in Coleridge’s theology, see Hedley, *Coleridge, Philosophy and Reli-
gion*, 17; compare Seamus Perry, *Coleridge and the Uses of Division* (Oxford: Claren-
don, 1999), 7–34.

5 These themes are commonplaces in the critical literature; see Claude Welch,
*Protestant Thought in the Nineteenth Century*, vol. 1 (New Haven, Conn.: Yale Uni-
versity Press, 1972), 112.
Christianity into a religion of the rationalizing intellect. Often, what appear to be concrete truths of the gospel are truths wrapped in analogical, metaphorical, or allegorical language. Analogous language, for Coleridge, aids “conviction” when “a thing, power, or principle in a higher dignity is expressed by the same thing, power or principle in a lower but more known form” (AR, 205). He cites John 3:6 (“That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit”) as a clear example of analogy, since the declaration of fact in the latter half of the verse—the conviction—is made plain through the intelligible language of the former part. By contrast, a metaphor illustrates a thing not by identity but by a specific form of similarity: the relationship between a cause and its effects. Thus, Coleridge explains, when one refers to a transcendent act of God as causing certain effects, one may—by means of metaphorical language—describe the transcendent act by a similar relationship between a more widely known cause and effect. Metaphorical language, then, does not render either the act or the manner of agency “conceivable,” but rather “shows the nature and magnitude of the Benefits received from it” and thereby “excite[s] the due admiration, gratitude, and love in the Receivers” (AR, 206). Allegories are essentially a cluster of connected metaphors, a series that functions as a connected whole (CN, IV, 4711, 4832). The writer who employs allegorical language translates “abstract notions into a picture-language.”

When Coleridge passes from his treatment of original sin to the doctrine of redemption in *Aids to Reflection*—“from the necessitating *Occasion* of the Christian Dispensation to Christianity itself!” (AR, 307)—his interest in the matter revolves chiefly around a linguistic correction. His discussion of redemption, one of the foremost

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6. All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise noted, will be drawn from the Authorized Version (Coleridge’s version).


8. In a notebook entry on Socinianism in January 1821, Coleridge claims that “Redemption is the sine qua non of the [Christian Religion], to which all other parts show as means, to that as the end, or effect of that as the cause” (CN, IV, 4797). Calling redemption the “Superstructure” of Christianity in one 1825 letter, Coleridge complains that “in the article of Redemption, Metaphors have been obtruded as the Reality: and in all the Mysteries subordinate to Redemption, Realities have been exinanized into Metaphors” (*Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs, 6 vols. [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971], V, 406). Much of the section on redemption in *Aids to Reflection* has its origin in a marginal note on Richard Field’s *Of the Church*
objects of the book, stems from “those too current misrepresentations of its nature and import,” misrepresentations that are “at variance with the Law revealed in the Conscience” (AR, 308). Coleridge’s 1831 edition of *Aids to Reflection* admonishes readers to weigh the merits of the book against one’s state of mind before and after reading it: “Has it led you to reflect? Has it supplied or suggested fresh subjects for reflection? . . . Has it increased your power of thinking connectedly? Especially on the Scheme and purpose of the Redemption by Christ? If it have done none of these things, condemn it aloud as worthless” (AR, 3).  

Above all, the moral implications of the allegedly vicarious sacrifice of Christ troubled Coleridge. In one marginal entry, Coleridge emphasizes his firm belief in redemption and the possibility of forgiveness, but rejects the notion that “an innocent & most righteous Being has suffered—that God gives Good to the Miserable only on account of the Misery of the Good—this startles the mind” (CM, II, 1187). Coleridge’s theological work is heavily apologetic: he frequently demonstrates an overt concern for the potential faith of the skeptic or inquirer. According to Coleridge, the very notion that physical suffering could satisfy divine justice had led to the rejection of the idea of redemption by the Unitarian and Deist alike.  

Coleridge instead argues that four principal metaphors capture the notion of redemption: (1) Sin-offerings, sacrificial expiation; (2) Reconciliation; (3) Ransom from slavery; and (4) Satisfaction of a Creditor’s claims by a payment of the debt (AR, 320–21).  


9 Sara Coleridge recognized the special importance of redemption in her father’s work and wrote an extensive treatment of the doctrine that was appended to two posthumous editions of *AR*; see Jeffrey W. Barbeau, “Sara Coleridge the Victorian Theologian: Between Newman’s Tractarianism and Wesley’s Methodism,” *The Coleridge Bulletin*, n.s. 28 (2006): 29–36.  

10 This also has implications for Coleridge’s notion of hell (CM, II, 263). Too frequently, divines have sacrificed the dictates of conscience (morality) rather than risk demeaning the work of Christ (see CN, V, 5630). Elsewhere, Coleridge claims that “the Unitarian and the Calvinist equally strive to evacuate the spiritual mystery of our Redemption from the corrupted Nature / the first by denying the corruption, the second by seeking in the arbitrary adjustments of human Law-courts for the release from it” (CN, V, 6595).  

11 Though Coleridge most frequently refers to the work of Christ as “redemption,” his categories indicate that “redemption” itself is yet another metaphor (connected with a “ransom from slavery”) for a mystery that cannot fully be named.
all four of these metaphors to explain the idea of “being saved” to his Jewish audience. According to Coleridge’s definitions, Paul describes redemption not according to the thing itself (a thing of higher dignity expressed by a “more known form”), i.e., analogy, but through metaphors, which illustrate transcendent ideas through known relationships of cause and effect. The aim of these comparisons, again, is not to explain either the act or the agent of redemption, but to stir in others a sense of the “superlative boon” of the act amid “feelings of joy, confidence, and gratitude” (AR, 324). Coleridge then proceeds to draw out Paul’s rhetoric by paraphrasing the Apostle’s illustrations in a contemporary form:

(1) Do you rejoice when the Atonement made by the Priest has removed the civil stain from your name, restored you to your privileges as a Son of Abraham, and replaced you in the respect of your Brethren?

(2) Had you by your own fault alienated yourself from your best, your only sure Friend?

(3) Would you be grateful to one who had ransomed you from slavery under a bitter foe, or who brought you out of Captivity?

(4) Had you involved yourself in a heavy debt for certain gewgaws, for high seasoned meats, and intoxicating drinks, and glittering apparel... [?]13

Through each question, Coleridge reminds his readers that Paul’s writings chiefly illustrate the occasion or consequence of everyday misfortunes. Paul used the language and patterns of thinking of those around him as his means of elucidating divine ideas: he relied on the “objects, opinions, events, and ritual observances ever uppermost in the imaginations of his own countrymen” (AR, 319). Coleridge follows each example, too, with an explanation of how Paul’s language likely

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12 On the senses of the term “saved,” see CM, I, 232.
13 AR, 324–326. Numeration added and reordered to correspond to Coleridge’s original numeration at AR, 320. The whole passage lacks parallelism and he inconsistently commingles sin-offerings and atonement (which are initially divided between categories 1 and 2).
elicited within his readers a sense of the consequences of the effect of Christ’s redemption in the one who believes:

(1) Here is an atonement which takes away a deeper, worser stain, an eating Canker-spot in the very heart of your personal Being! This, to as many as receive it, gives the privilege to become Sons of God (John i.12) . . .

(2) The forgiving friend has come, even the Son of God from Heaven.

(3) Here is redemption from a far direr slavery, the slavery of Sin unto Death! . . .

(4) The Debt is paid for you! The Satisfaction has been made.14

The whole passage amounts to a dialectic of sorts, almost as if fashioned in the style of an evangelist. And for good reason, because Coleridge’s retains the same end: to clarify Paul’s use of biblical language. The language needs to be stirring because Paul was not indicating a sameness through analogy, but likeness through the similarity of known effects, the “Consequent, i.e. the effects in and for the Redeemed” (AR, 319). Coleridge is certainly not attempting to eliminate these terms from Christianity, but placing them in their proper light. In the Statesman’s Manual, for example, Coleridge relied on precisely this language as the basis of a series of reflective questions that any individual might ask when faced with fundamental questions of the self: “Am I sick, and therefore need a physician?—Am I in spiritual slavery, and therefore need a ransomer?—Have I given a pledge, which must be redeemed, and which I cannot redeem by my own resources? Am I at one with God, and is my will concentric with that holy power, which is at once the constitutive will and the supreme reason of the universe?—If not, must I not be mad if I do not seek, and miserable if I do not discover and embrace, the means of at-one-ment?” The use of a series of metaphors indicates the consistency of Coleridge’s approach to the language of redemption: each question

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14 Again, I have reordered his responses to correspond to the original numeration. Moreover, his response to reconciliation (2) is conflated within the section on a forgiven debt (4).
focuses on the need for another to rectify a difficulty that cannot be
surmounted through one’s own power (LS, 55).

Most of Coleridge’s exposition of Christ’s work in *Aids to Reflec-
tion* focuses on Paul, but his comments on John are crucial, however
brief. Coleridge believes that John, “the Evangelist [according to the
spirit],” explains the facts of Christianity directly: “John, recording the
Redeemer’s own words, enunciates the fact itself, to the full extent in
which it is enunciable for the human mind, simply and without any
metaphor, by identifying it in kind with a fact of hourly occurrence—
expressing it, I say, by a familiar fact the same in kind with that in-
tended, though of a far lower dignity;—by a fact of every man’s
experience, known to all, yet not better understood than the fact de-
scribed by it.”15 It is the language of analogy. Whereas Paul typically
focuses on the consequent, John describes the antecedent, Christ as
Redeemer. Moreover, even when John turns to the effects of redemp-
tion, the language remains analogous: redemption is a “re-genera-
tion, a birth, a spiritual seed impregnated and evolved, the germinal
principle of a higher and enduring Life, of a spiritual Life—that is, a Life,
the actuality of which is not dependent on the material body, or lim-
ited by the circumstances and processes indispensable to its organiza-
tion and subsistence” (AR, 322). Linguistically, John’s description of
Christ’s work maintains the principle of analogy without turning to the
metaphorical mode of illustration that Paul relied on (and which sub-
sequently led so many astray).

**The Work of Christ**

Coleridge limited his discussion of redemption in *Aids to Reflec-
tion*, his major statement on redemption, to a corrective to the popu-
lar misunderstanding of Christ’s work on the cross. By contrast, his
notebook entries—rooted in a near-daily examination of the entire
Bible beginning around 1827 and continuing almost to the end of his
life in 1834—offer a fuller portrait of his attempt to understand this

15 *AR*, 322 (translated Greek in italics). John’s gospel is, without question, his
favorite. He held to its apostolic authorship throughout his life: “It would inflict a
sharper pang than the Loss of any other portion of outward Evidence, on my mind,
were I compelled to entertain a doubt of the Authenticity of the 4th Gospel—or that
it was not bonâ fide, with the possible exception of the latter half of the last Chapter,
written by the beloved Disciple—and not only like Matthew, according to him” (*CN*,
V, 5069). John and Paul share a common doctrine, even if typically clothed in “dif-
ferent drapery” (*CN*, V, 6010).
pivotal doctrine in dialogue with Scripture and clarify his views tremendously.\textsuperscript{16}

Coleridge’s notebook entries on Paul’s Epistle to the Romans in 1829 reflect his persistent interest in the doctrine of redemption. After briefly highlighting the historical context and some remarks on the first chapter, Coleridge turned to Romans 3–7, where his attention was—once again—on the language of atonement and Paul’s rhetorical method. He begins by noting the centrality of the Law, which he links to “the Law of Right Reason applied to the Will by the Conscience” (CN, V, 6006). It is the conscience that “makes” sin, according to Coleridge, even while the conscience remains unable to extricate the self by its own powers. How is redemption effected? By grace, as in Romans 3:24, “a divine righteousness applied to us by faith in Christ.” Yet Coleridge is troubled by his own rather cliché answer, and quickly adds, “so the words are commonly rendered—but I confess, that in this & the following verses the Apostle’s Reasoning is anything but luminous and the construction not always clear.”\textsuperscript{17} He is bothered by Romans 3:25 (“Whom God hath set forth \textit{to be} a propitiation through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins that are past through the forbearance of God”), a passage directly within the compass of his earlier treatment of redemption in Aids to Reflection. Coleridge posits that Paul had perhaps dictated one verse only to replace it with another, but that his amanuensis allowed both to remain. The notebook comment reflects his frustration: “It is remarkable that the fairest authority for the doctrine of an atonement, or expiation . . . by the Blood of Jesus should be one of the most confused & awkwardly constructed Sentences in all the Apostle’s genuine Writings.” Yet, despite this, Coleridge entertains the possibility that he has misinterpreted the passage. On the one hand, it may be figurative or metaphorical, “the Apostle’s mind being full of the Mosaic Law, which the Idea of Law in it’s \textit{sic} wider sense had awakened, so that the whole means only that the faith of Jesus Christ, ‘the mind that


\textsuperscript{17} Coleridge’s interest in Paul’s use of the phrase “faith in Christ” resonates with ongoing conversations in biblical theology; see J. Gerald Janzen, “Coleridge and \textit{Pistis Christou},” \textit{Expository Times} 107 (1996): 265–268. I wish to thank Prof. Janzen for offering perceptive comments on a number of aspects of this essay.
was in Christ Jesus, ingrafted in us by belief in him, was that by which
God was reconciled to him, and consequence had the effect intended
by & hoped for in the [propitiatory sacrifices and expiations].” ¹⁸
Thus, regeneration, metaphorically considered, is the renewal of
the individual mind through faith in Christ—such a reconciliation as was
also effected by means of the Law, with its blood sacrifices. On the
other hand, Coleridge supposes, perhaps “we are compelled to un-
derstand it literally, or . . . to take it literally whether we can under-
stand it or no.” He leans strongly toward the former view, particularly
based on (1) his earlier presumption that the Law Paul refers to is
“the Law of the Practical Reason” and (2) his belief that Paul’s con-
ception of Christ may be closely identified with the declarations of
John. If so, then the expiations, sacrifices, and reference to the blood
are all “of the same character—i.e. great universal (philosophic) ideas
conveyed in the husk of Judaic Analogies.” In the diction of Aids to
Reflection, they are metaphors of the consequences of the effects of
the work of Christ.

Even though Coleridge rejects the literal interpretation of a
blood sacrifice in both Aids to Reflection and again in his notebook
commentary on Romans, he is not wholly content with his solution.
Coleridge still feels compelled to explain why Paul chose to depict the
nature of redemption as he did. The solution is especially germane to
the biblical commentaries: an exposition of Paul’s rhetorical method.
Too often, readers assume that an author such as Paul divulged his
whole mind on a subject in any single verse or remark. The error, for
Coleridge, is akin to believing that every verse of Scripture was “dic-
tated by an Infallible Intelligence,” a view that he most famously dis-
paraged in his posthumously-published Confessions of an Inquiring
Spirit (1840).¹⁹ Coleridge, commenting on Romans, laments “the er-
ror of taking a particular Statement of the Christian Faith as a total &
most mature view” (CN, V, 6007). He argues that Paul “knew human
nature too well” to attempt to lay out all his insight on them at once,
too cautious “to think of pouring down the new religion in this com-
pendiary shower-bath way” (CN, V, 6008). Instead, Paul works his way
along, by steps, “like the cinque-spotted Insect up the Stream.” He

¹⁸ Translated Greek in italics (see CN, V, 6006n).
¹⁹ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit (London: William
Pickering, 1840), 13. In the comments on Romans, Coleridge similarly claims: “This
custom of finding the Summa Theologicae Christianae in single Chapters, nay, in single
texts, has been a sad Blinder!” (CN, V, 6007).
knows that to win his countrymen he must represent the new birth in Christ according to the metaphorical language of their culture, describing “these Consequences as Substitutes for these sacrifices &c of the Old Law, & so giving them the names of those of the rites, which they superseded, on the ground of the identity in the final object. This was one step gained” (CN, V, 6006). After this, Coleridge claims that Paul could next represent the rites as “Types of the redemptive power of Christ” and, in a final step, “calling them Shadows, i.e. that which had no . . . operative or substantive force, but only a declarative or suggestive Significancy.” In this way, Coleridge manages to enable Paul (and himself!) to escape a literal interpretation of the sacrifices. If Paul regards sacrifices as shadows, then Christ’s redemption can only be understood as a figurative sacrifice on behalf of humanity. Paul’s metaphors are thereby a reflection of the Hebrew Scriptures. In one July 1830 notebook entry, Coleridge maintains that the best text for a sermon on the atonement comes from neither John nor Paul, but Numbers 14:18: “The Lord is longsuffering, and of great mercy, forgiving iniquity and transgression, and [yet] by no means clearing the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation.” The text produces “the genuine Pauline Import of the doctrine” and identifies the work of Christ with forgiveness and a change in relationship. Thus, Coleridge challenges others to consider Paul’s audience, and the cultural cues that may not be immediately apparent to subsequent generations.

In John, Coleridge found a model of redemption that shifted attention from the blood shed on the cross to the life of the Logos—Christ’s blood as “individualized nature.” For Coleridge, true redemption is participation in the nature of Christ. So, while Paul’s use of the language of blood and the cross has frequently captivated his readers’ attention, John’s focus on Christ’s nature through the language of participation points to the same idea. When John Donne

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20 Christ was “both the High-Priest & the Sacrifice; but yet the High Priest was his especial Type—the proof of this in Mechisedek, who offered no Sacrifice (Epistle to the Hebrews). But let it not be forgotten that all then are but Pauline metaphors of Johannonian Properties. How could the Conscience be more [?intangled] in one Sacrifice than another—if both actually the same?” (CN, IV, 5269).

21 Coleridge wished to add the “yet” to clarify the meaning of the Authorized Version.

22 This, despite Coleridge’s claim that John and Paul are “preachers for all times” (CN, V, 5844).
advocated the blood of Christ, noting that “Gods justice required bloud,” Coleridge could only remind his readers to collate Paul and John and, further, respond that Reason requires a spiritual meaning for blood: “It was not on the visible Cross, it was [not] directing attention to the blood-drops on his Temples and Sides, that our Blessed Redeemer said—This is my body—and this is my Blood” (CM, II, 266–67). Coleridge thereby pushes the redemptive work back in time—away from the cross—because he wants to identify it with participation in the eternal generative work of the Logos. In one of his most intriguing accounts of redemption, Coleridge claims that Christ’s eternal work may be classified in “three great Epochs”: “Eternal Generation, regeneration to Eternity, and Formation as the bridge over the dire Chasm of Apostasy” (CN, V, 6654). Participation in the blood of Christ, then, is not first and foremost about the application of Christ’s literal blood shed on the cross, but participation in Christ’s person. In an August 1830 notebook entry, Coleridge asks, “What is the Blood, dynamically considered? Is [it] not the constant mediatorial Agent between the Individual and the System to which he belongs—a continual individualization of the surrounding Nature that includes the constant dependence on & union with it—as Air (Lungs) and Nourishment[,] . . . Is not the Blood the Representative of Nature, the Nature individualized?” (CN, V, 6415).

Most frequently, Coleridge identifies the blood of Christ with the eucharistic language of John 6, one of his favorite passages of Scripture. After feeding the five thousand, Jesus proceeded to give one of the most difficult teachings of his ministry, claiming that “he that eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, dwelleth in me, and I in him” (John 6:56). For Coleridge, the passage contains a vital insight into the true meaning of Christ’s blood: “What do the Scriptures, what did the Apostles, John and Paul, mean by the Blood of Christ? What did our Lord himself mean to convey, John VI? The redeeming Blood is here stated not as that which Jesus was to shed but that which we are to drink, and of which whosoever drinketh not cannot be saved—and this, he explained, was a spiritual Substance” (CN, IV, 4909). Jesus’ own words provide the spiritual meaning of the biblical use of blood. It is for this reason that, in 1827, when Coleridge notes his first reception of the Eucharist in more than thirty years, he turns again to John 6 for guidance on the meaning of true redemption: “Christmas day. Received the Sacrament—for the first time since my first year at Jesus
College / Christ is gracious even to the Laborer that cometh to his Vineyard at the eleventh hour—33 years absent from my Master’s Table / — — Yet I humbly hope, that spiritually I have fed on the Flesh & Blood[,] the Strength and the Life of the Son of God in his divine Humanity, during the latter years” (CN, V, 5703). He then proceeds to observe that the Anglican communion service is “solemn and affecting,” despite the fact that many of the clergy share the dissenters’ view that the Eucharist is merely a “forced visual metaphor” for “the sensible crucifixion of Jesus.” Far more important, Coleridge claims, is “that most vital mystery revealed in John VI, of which the Eucharist is at once symbol & instance!” In John 6, Christ offers not merely his body, but his very life. The language thereby works on the level of analogy, even as it presents a full spiritual meaning: “He is at once the Teacher and the Doctrine, the Giver and the Gift—yea, and if Scripture do not mock our common sense . . . he is at once (he, not merely his moral precepts)[,] he is at once the Feast and the Master of the Feast” (CN, III, 3847). In this way, based on Jesus’ words in John, eucharistic language emerges as the optimal vocabulary for the work of redemption: to be redeemed is to be regenerated, it is “a Process of spiritual Transsubstantiation [sic]—a daily Eucharist” (CN, V, 6484).

One ought to avoid the inference from this, however, that Coleridge’s turn to John 6 was a covert attempt to diminish the work that Christ accomplished on the cross. Romans 5, with its presentation of death for all in Adam and the gift of life through Christ, provided yet another step by which Paul helped to prepare his readers for the manner in which Christ dwells spiritually “in the Faithful” (CN, V, 6010). Adam represents, as an individual man, the souls of all humans—“he was not only Man but Mankind.” So, too, Christ represents not only “a spiritual divine Man” but also “the essential Divine Humanity.” In turn, according to Romans 6:3 (“Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death”), all people are now capable of redemption through the work of Christ. As with Adam, so, too, with Christ. For Christ represented the universal in the individual. Christ accomplished “a perpetual timeless act in a temporal deed.” Now, by faith, believers repeat Christ’s act spiritually: “We are bound to take up the cross of Christ—what was effected at once in the unity of the Root must be repeated.

23 Compare CN, V, 6857; AR, 314n.
successively and individually in each twig or fibre that grows out of the Root” (CN, V, 6011). The organic language is paramount, since Coleridge regards Christianity as a life that finds its ground in Christ himself. The regenerative work of Christ thereby effects a change in the being of the individual. It effects a freedom of will and a rebirth of the soul: “The end of Redemption is to give birth to a Spiritual Life as the Base or Supposition of the Self-conscious Will” (CN, IV, 5243).24 Any attempt to reduce regeneration—or justification—to a merely legal event fails to capture the life-giving power of the death of Christ on the cross.25

For Coleridge, the crucifixion is a symbol, a fourth class of biblical language. In The Statesman’s Manual, Coleridge describes symbols as “not a metaphor or allegory or any other figure of speech or form of fancy, but an actual and essential part of that, the whole of which it represents” (LS, 79). Coleridge’s 1825 lecture before the Royal Society of Literature, “On the Prometheus of Aeschylus,” introduced the term “tautegorical” to distinguish symbols from allegories (Schelling approved of the coinage and famously praised Coleridge in his noted work on mythology).26 Barth describes Coleridge’s use of symbol in the language of ontology: “The suprasensible truths that are the objects of reason can be ‘incorporated’ (that is, ‘bodied’) in ‘images of the sense’ precisely because there is a community of being


between them.” Applied to the acts of Christ—such as the passion and crucifixion—one may say that these acts become symbols insofar as they embody spiritual meaning—symbols are consubstantial with the reality they present. Unlike metaphors, symbols contain the reality they present and function much as sacraments, especially the Eucharist. Coleridge makes precisely this connection in marginalia on Donne: “As the Sacrament [of the Eucharist] is the Epiphany for as many as receive it in faith, so the Crucifixion, resurrection and ascension of Christ himself in the Flesh were the Epiphanies, the sacramental Acts and Phænomena, of the Deus Patiens [suffering God], the visible Words of the invisible Word that was in the Beginning, Symbols in time & historic fact of the redemptive functions, passions, and procedures of the Lamb crucified from the foundation of the World.” For Barth, who draws from the theology of Schillebeeckx in his elucidation of symbols as the locus of divine encounter, the perception of symbols is a deeply religious act:

We should add that the search for the numinous that is expressed in symbol is at the same time more than a search. It is an encounter; it is a search that is already in some measure successful. The “search” is a struggle to articulate what has already been grasped without words—what has been felt in the bones, what has been dreamt, what has been glimpsed in vision. The search is for words, words to express this numinous “other.” The search is to articulate an encounter, an encounter with the sacred, which has already taken place and yet which takes place still in and around the symbol.

In the case of redemption, Paul’s language expresses a spiritual truth which may be glimpsed but not fully encapsulated through the language of analogy and metaphor: the sacred act of the Logos.

Coleridge’s use of the language of “symbol” provides yet another angle on his theology of redemption, especially in light of the theological method displayed in *Aids to Reflection*. Late in life, Coleridge

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28 *CM*, II, 279; see also Barth, *Coleridge and Christian Doctrine*, 133–134, which includes “of the Eucharist.”

still evinces a characteristic willingness to question his own inter-
pretation of Paul’s use of metaphorical language. In one 1833 notebook
entry, Coleridge almost remorsefully reflects on his method in Aids to
Reflection. He had worked from the starting point of the metaphors in
order not to “debase” the “Idea of the Divine.” It was a largely nega-
tive move, expressing his critique of contemporary theology by focus-
ing on what redemption is not. However, his assertions would have
been different, he laments, had he moved from “the Light into the
Darkness”: “Then these very terms would become Symbols, having the
reality of their relation in the divine Acts, of which they are the for
us appropriate representatives” (CN, V, 6785). If this approach were
taken, he claims, “I should be among the first & most strenuous as-
serters of their literal truth, of their being the proper expressions of
the Ideas signified.” A positive method would not have altered his
objection to the misappropriation of Paul’s metaphors, but may have
allowed him to speak more persuasively about the positive, represen-
tational quality of the acts, i.e., a move from the consequences of the
effects to the actual effects in the redeemed.30

In addition, Coleridge’s turn to the language of symbol provided
him with a means of dealing with the continued doubts he faced about
the nature of redemption. Coleridge was not only fond of Paul and
John, but also of the Old Testament, which he spent considerable
time studying. Although Coleridge relied on a critical method of bibli-
cal interpretation and certainly was conversant with the latest findings
and trends in German criticism, he persisted in interpreting the Old
Testament through typology and a thoroughgoing christological her-
meneutic. For Coleridge, “the best Christian-Scriptures, and of the
most edification for Christians of all classes and in all states and du-
ties, are the Books of the Old Testament read and studied in the light
of Christianity” (CN, V, 5753). Because of his high esteem for these
writings, the Old Testament could provide an equally pressing chal-
lenge to his understanding of Christian doctrine. This attitude drives
one markedly self-effacing reflection on Isaiah 53:

30 “How wonderfully is the adorable mystery of the Eucharist symbolized for man
thro’ all the detail of the associative process in life & vital growth!—Is there a mystery
in the Gospel Doctrine of Redemption by regeneration, by the ‘new creation,’ as
taught by Paul (Ephes.) and by John . . . which we may not find prefigured and proph-
ecied in the ascent of Life? What am I but as a molecule, that become Flesh, only by
being taken up into a higher organism?” (CN, V, 6875).
Coleridge, Christology, and Redemption

I will—god vouchsafing grace & strength—bring my present conceptions of the redemption in special relation to the Word Incarnate, to Jesus Christ, to a strict test—namely, the 53rd Chapter of Isaiah. If these conceptions give, or are supported by, a fair interpretation of the successive verses of this & of the preceding Chapter—Well! if not, I must pray again & again & strive for Light / The main [question] is—Is my Idea of Redemption compatible with the doctrine of atonement by the sufferings of Jesus Christ? Does my System give a distinct Causativeness, a direct efficiency, to “the stripes by which we are healed[”]?—If not, I am prepared to deem it imperfect & by omission at least false—Much, I foresee, will depend on the right understanding of the Symbolic, as real; and vice versa, of a reality, that is nevertheless a Symbol. (CN, V, 6790)

His earlier rejection of the need for a good man to suffer to satisfy God’s justice is challenged here by the specific invocation of Christ’s generative renewal of the human through “wounds,” “bruising,” and the “stripes” by which “we are healed” (Isa. 53:5). His only solution to the problem posed by Isaiah is a reliance on the idea of the symbol.

The Nature of Redemption

Returning to Aids to Reflection, one is now in a better position to appreciate Coleridge’s overarching scheme of redemption, which he summarizes according to four primary questions (AR, 332). For each, I will expand on the category based on the further insights of his private notebooks and marginalia.

(1) Who is the Agens Causator? The “agent and personal cause” of redemption is Christ. For Coleridge, only Christ could redeem humanity from the Fall. Against the Unitarians, Coleridge maintained the need for a redeemer who could mediate between the Infinite God and the finite person. What is needed is not merely an example or a pattern. Coleridge thought his German contemporary Friedrich Schleiermacher had taken precisely this erroneous path in his handling of Christ: “If I were disposed to accept a pure and practical code of Morals under the name of Religion, as Christianity, I should adopt the Discourses of Dr Frederick Schleiermacher, as my Manual and

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Guide. But I want, I need, a Redeemer: and this is possible only under the two-fold Condition, which I find asserted in the New Testament and in the Creeds of the Universal Church—that he is my fellow-man, yet not my fellow creature” (CN, IV, 5318). The redeemer of all must be fully God and fully human. This examination further demonstrates that Coleridge’s reconversion to Trinitarianism in the early 1800s was more orthodox and doctrinally-concerned than some interpreters allow.32

(2) What is the Actus Causativus? The “causative act” is “a spiritual and transcendent Mystery.” As I have noted, even the use of “redemption” by Coleridge is somewhat misleading, since “redemption” is yet another metaphor for the consequences of the effects of the work of Christ. The influence of Kant is apparent at this point. The act belongs to the “Laws of Spirit, or the World of Noumena,” and cannot be known except through the realm of phenomena or sense. The act belongs, by necessity, to the realm of faith and is revealed through the conscience, even though “(it being a Noumenon) it is impossible for me to explain the How, or to have any insight into the possibility” (CM, I, 201).33 Coleridge refers to the crucifixion and surrounding events as symbolic acts for this reason: the cross, in particular, presents a spiritual truth because it participates in “the whole of which it presents” (LS, 79).

(3) What is the Effectum Causatum? The “effect caused” is “being born anew: as before in the flesh to the World, so now born in the spirit to Christ.” The effect is, returning to the centrality of the Logos, a marriage that finds its origin in the redemptive plan commenced long before the Incarnation of Christ. Only the redeemer may bring about a renewal, a re-generation of the soul: “My Nature requires another Nature for it’s [sic] support, and finds no repose but in another from the divine Indigence of it’s [sic] Being” (CN, V, 6437). As with his use of the Eucharist as sacrament, Coleridge also refers to the sacramental language of Ephesians, adding that “this is only possible in the sacrament [mystery] of Marriage . . . the Marriage of the Soul or [Supreme Soul] of the Church, to the Creative Redeemer.” The new birth accomplished by the mystery of Christ’s work is the


33 Coleridge refers to such mysteries in Paul as the “unutterable” or “incommunicable” that may only be inferred by the conscience (AR, 78–79).
beginning of a regenerative process. Christ’s initial work requires a reciprocal activity on the part of the human. As the agent of redemption, Christ can act on humanity, but “he cannot become us, except as far as we become him” (CL, V, 48). This “assimilation,” a “vital real act,” allows God to bridge the apostasy of the human will in original sin and work in the human “as a Life” (CL, V, 48; CN, V, 6654). Once accomplished, this life—the “Seed of Christ”—is “awakened” and expands as “the regenerate Man strives to transfer his ‘I’ thereto, and to identify it with his proper and spiritual Self” (CN, V, 6483). Henceforth, the individual recognizes the old self as “an evil ground out of which he is to grow & growing to loosen & extricate his roots preparatively to a final transplantation into a divine Ground.” This is the true effect of participation in Christ’s death and resurrection.

What are the Consequentia ab Effecto? The “consequents from the effect” are sanctification from sin and liberation from punishment for sin, “these Consequents being the same for the Sinner relatively to God and his own Soul, as the satisfaction of a debt for a Debtor relatively to his Creditor; as the sacrificial atonement made by the Priest for the Transgressor of the Mosaic Law; as the reconciliation to an alienated Parent for a Son who had estranged himself from his Father’s house and presence; and as a redemptive Ransom for a Slave or Captive” (AR, 332–33). These various illustrations remind the redeemed of the great benefits of Christ’s mysterious work and, thereby, stir within believers greater “admiration, gratitude, and love” (AR, 206).

In all, Coleridge’s theology of redemption is a thoroughgoing exposition of the Word. While his treatment of redemption in Aids to Reflection is a prominent statement of his views, an appeal to the notebook commentaries on Scripture opens up Coleridge’s full scheme of the doctrine to critical reception. Coleridge’s private writings on Scripture reveal a man who continued to question the views he expertly described in Aids to Reflection, and this led to some of his most important theological insights. The availability of the late notebooks further substantiates the commonplace, nineteenth-century belief that Coleridge was the leading thinker in England (for example, J. S. Mill’s belief that “every Englishman of the present day is by implication either a Benthamite or a Coleridgian”). Moreover, Coleridge’s private writings clarify the scholarship behind public writings and help.

substantiate the reason why these writings proved so momentous in the English Broad Church Movement and abroad (consider, for example, Claude Welch’s otherwise startling claim that Coleridge “was as important for British and American thought as were Schleiermacher and Hegel”). Horace Bushnell, to cite one major North American theologian, develops views of language and the atonement in *God in Christ* (1849) that directly correspond to Coleridge’s views on redemption in *Aids to Reflection*.

Coleridge was unquestionably one of the great Anglican theological minds of the age. Grounded in a critical exposition of Paul and John, armed with a poet’s eye for the use of language, Coleridge provided a positive, developed (even if, by necessity, fragmentary), and insightful theological construction of Christ’s work. A comprehensive development of Coleridge’s doctrine of redemption expands on the full significance of his great theological claim in *Aids to Reflection* that “Christianity is . . . a Life.” The mystery of Christ’s redemptive work leads to new spiritual life in the individual soul by rebirth and eventual assimilation to the divine nature.

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35 Welch, *Protestant Thought in the Nineteenth Century*, I, 112.
36 Bushnell, who rarely admitted the influence of others on his work, claimed “that he was more indebted to Coleridge than to any extra-Scriptural author” and that after reading Coleridge he discovered “how language built on physical images” (*Life and Letters of Horace Bushnell*, ed. Mary Bushnell Cheney [New York: Harper & Brothers, 1880], 499, 209). See also Horace Bushnell, *God in Christ, Three Discourses, Delivered at New Haven, Cambridge, and Andover, With a Preliminary Dissertation on Language* [Hartford, Conn.: Brown and Parsons, 1849]).