

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-44245-0 - St John and the Victorians
Michael Wheeler
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

ST JOHN AND THE VICTORIANS

The gospel according to St John, often regarded as the most important of the gospels in the account it gives of Jesus' life and divinity, received close attention from nineteenth-century biblical scholars, and prompted a significant response in the arts. This original interdisciplinary study of the cultural afterlife of John in Victorian Britain places literature, the visual arts and music in their religious context. Discussion of the Evangelist, the gospel and its famous prologue is followed by an examination of particular episodes that are unique to John. Michael Wheeler's research reveals the depth of biblical influence on British culture, and on individuals such as Ruskin, Holman Hunt and Tennyson. He makes a significant contribution to the understanding of culture, religion and scholarship in the period.

MICHAEL WHEELER is a Visiting Professor of English at the University of Southampton and an Honorary Professor of the Ruskin Library and Research Centre at Lancaster University. His previous publications from Cambridge University Press are *Death and the future life in Victorian literature and theology* (1990, winner of the Conference on Christianity and Literature Award, USA; paperback abridgement, *Heaven, hell and the Victorians*, 1994), *Ruskin's God* (1999) and *The old enemies: Catholic and Protestant in nineteenth-century English culture* (2006). He is a Trustee of Gladstone's Library, President of the Ruskin Society and a former lay canon and member of Chapter at Winchester Cathedral.

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-44245-0 - St John and the Victorians
Michael Wheeler
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-44245-0 - St John and the Victorians
Michael Wheeler
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

ST JOHN AND THE VICTORIANS

MICHAEL WHEELER



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press
 978-1-107-44245-0 - St John and the Victorians
 Michael Wheeler
 Frontmatter
[More information](#)

CAMBRIDGE
 UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781107442450

© Michael Wheeler 2012

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take place without the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2012

First paperback edition 2014

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

Wheeler, Michael, 1947–

St. John and the Victorians / Michael Wheeler.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-521-50972-5

1. Bible. N.T. John – Criticism, interpretation, etc. 2. Bible. N.T. John – Influence.
 3. Great Britain – Civilization – 19th century. 4. Great Britain – History – 19th century.
 I. Title. II. Title: Saint John and the Victorians.

BS2615.52.W45 2012

226.5'06094109034 – dc23 2011029381

ISBN 978-0-521-50972-5 Hardback

ISBN 978-1-107-44245-0 Paperback

Cambridge University Press has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party internet websites referred to in this publication, and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-44245-0 - St John and the Victorians
Michael Wheeler
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

To Susan

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-44245-0 - St John and the Victorians
Michael Wheeler
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Most readers feel that this Gospel contains some of the most invaluable treasures of Christ's revelation; that it contains what could be supplied to us from no other quarter.

Thomas Arnold, 'Christ's Resurrection. –
The confession of Thomas' (1837)

Very remarkable is it how little children and ripe christians, the simplest minded and the deepest minded, all like [St John's gospel] with so profound a liking. To the child it is the easiest, to the mere logician the most perplexing, of all the books of the New Testament.

James Culross, *Lazarus revived* (1858)

Contents

<i>List of illustrations</i>	<i>page</i> ix
<i>Preface</i>	xiii
<i>Notes on referencing</i>	xvi

PART I THE EVANGELIST, THE GOSPEL, THE WORD

1 The Apostle of love: St John the Evangelist	3
Young disciple and aged divine	3
Witness and contemplative	13
Beloved disciple and Apostle of love	20
2 ‘The most marvellous enigma’: the fourth gospel	29
Traditional and critical orthodoxies	29
Poetry and mysticism	41
3 The Light of the Word: Incarnation	52
Light and Life	52
Interpreting the Word	57
Representing the Light	69

PART II INTERPRETATIONS AND REPRESENTATIONS

4 Water into wine: the miracle at Cana	85
In defence of miracles	85
Illustrating Cana	96
The poetry of manifestation	104
5 Living water: the woman at the well	111
Fact or allegory?	111
Christology at the well	118
The fallen woman converted	129

viii	<i>Contents</i>	
6	Raising the dead: Lazarus of Bethany	139
	A problematic narrative	139
	The quintessence of John	144
	Poetic language and narrative silence	152
	A beauty which art cannot reach	162
7	‘Behold thy mother’: at the foot of the Cross	169
	Catholic versus Protestant	169
	Bloody crucifixes and gilded Virgins	179
	Anglicizing the <i>Stabat Mater</i>	189
8	Touching the risen body: Mary Magdalene and Thomas	199
	Sainthood and misrepresentation	199
	The poetry of faith and doubt	211
	Picturing the risen Christ	224
	Afterword	236
	<i>Bibliography</i>	239
	<i>Index</i>	262

Illustrations

- | | |
|---|--------|
| 1 St John the Evangelist, east window, St Mary's Monxton, Hampshire, detail (Monxton Parochial Church Council) | page 4 |
| 2 Thomas Nicholls, <i>St John the Evangelist</i> , great screen, Winchester Cathedral, 1899 (by kind permission of the Dean and Chapter, Winchester Cathedral, photograph Dr John Crook) | 27 |
| 3 William Holman Hunt, <i>The Light of the world</i> , 1854 (by kind permission of the Warden and Fellows of Keble College, Oxford) | 76 |
| 4 Giotto, 'The marriage at Cana' (1304/6), line drawing designed by William Oliver Williams and engraved by the brothers Dalziel, in <i>Giotto and his works in Padua</i> (1853–60), in <i>The works of John Ruskin</i> , ed. Edward Tyas Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, 39 vols. (London and New York: Allen / Longmans, Green, 1903–12), vol. xxiv, p. 86 (author's copy) | 99 |
| 5 Gustave Doré, 'The wedding feast at Cana', in <i>The Holy Bible, with illustrations by Gustave Doré</i> , 2 vols. (London and New York: Cassell, 1866–70), vol. II, facing p. 124 (by permission of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library) | 102 |
| 6 William Dyce, <i>Christ and the woman of Samaria</i> , 1860 (© Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery) | 120 |
| 7 Gustave Doré, 'Jesus and the woman of Samaria', in <i>The Holy Bible, with illustrations by Gustave Doré</i> , 2 vols. (London and New York: Cassell, 1866–70), vol. II, facing p. 126 (by permission of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library) | 123 |
| 8 Francesca Alexander, 'Christ and the woman of Samaria', in her <i>Roadside Songs of Tuscany</i> (Orpington: Allen, 1885), | |

x	<i>List of illustrations</i>	
	facing p. 244 (by permission of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library)	126
9	George Richmond, <i>Christ and the woman of Samaria</i> , 1828 (© Tate Gallery, London)	133
10	Sebastiano del Piombo, <i>The raising of Lazarus</i> , 1517–19 (© The National Gallery, London)	163
11	Benjamin Robert Haydon, <i>The raising of Lazarus</i> , 1823 (© Tate Gallery, London)	166
12	Gustave Doré, ‘The raising of Lazarus’, in <i>The Holy Bible, with illustrations by Gustave Doré</i> , 2 vols. (London and New York: Cassell, 1866–70), vol. II, facing p. 142 (by permission of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library)	167
13	William Dyce, <i>St. John leading the Blessed Virgin Mary from the tomb</i> , 1860 (© Tate Gallery, London)	180
14	Dante Gabriel Rossetti, <i>Mary in the house of St. John</i> , 1858 (Delaware Art Museum)	182
15	Dante Gabriel Rossetti, <i>St John comforting the Virgin at the foot of the Cross</i> , c. 1857–8 (Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge)	183
16	Edward Burne-Jones, study for <i>The tree of Life</i> , 1888 (© Victoria and Albert Museum)	186
17	J. James [Jacques Joseph] Tissot, ‘What our Saviour saw from the Cross’, 1886, in <i>The life of our Saviour Jesus Christ</i> , trans. Mrs Arthur Bell, People’s edition, 2 vols. (Sampson Low, 1897), vol. II, p. 190 (by permission of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library)	187
18	Titian, ‘ <i>Noli me tangere</i> ’, c. 1510–15 (© The National Gallery, London)	225
19	Gustave Doré, ‘Mary Magdalene repentant’, in <i>The Holy Bible, with illustrations by Gustave Doré</i> , 2 vols. (London and New York: Cassell, 1866–70), vol. II, New Testament, facing p. 88 (by permission of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library)	227
20	Mary Magdalene, Lady Chapel window, Winchester Cathedral, detail (by kind permission of the Dean and Chapter, photograph by Dr John Crook)	228
21	William Etty, <i>Christ appearing to Mary Magdalen after the Resurrection</i> , 1834 (© Tate Gallery, London)	229

List of illustrations

xi

- | | | |
|----|--|-----|
| 22 | J. James [Jacques Joseph] Tissot, 'Christ appears to Mary Magdalene', 1886, in <i>The life of our Saviour Jesus Christ</i> , trans. Mrs Arthur Bell, People's edition, 2 vols. (Sampson Low, 1897), vol. II, p. 248 (by permission of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library) | 231 |
| 23 | James [Jacques Joseph] Tissot, 'Touch me not!', 1886, in <i>The life of our Saviour Jesus Christ</i> , trans. Mrs Arthur Bell, People's edition, 2 vols. (Sampson Low, 1897), vol. II, p. 249 (by permission of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library) | 232 |
| 24 | Edward Burne-Jones, <i>The morning of the Resurrection</i> , 1886 (© Tate Gallery, London) | 233 |
| 25 | William Holman Hunt, 'Christ and Mary Magdalene', 1893, in Edwin Arnold, <i>The Light of the world; or, the great consummation</i> (London and New York: Longmans, Green, 1893), facing p. 194 (by permission of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library) | 234 |
| 26 | William Holman Hunt, 'Christ and Mary Magdalene', 1896, in Edwin Arnold, <i>The Light of the world; or, the great consummation</i> (London and New York: Longmans, Green, 1896), facing p. 288 (by permission of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library) | 235 |

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-44245-0 - St John and the Victorians
Michael Wheeler
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Preface

The fourth gospel contains some of the best-known stories in the New Testament – the marriage at Cana, Jesus and the woman at the well, the raising of Lazarus, Mary Magdalene at the tomb, doubting Thomas – and among its verses are familiar statements that have always been central to Christian doctrine, such as ‘In the beginning was the Word’, ‘God so loved the world . . .’, ‘I am the true vine’ and ‘I am the resurrection and the life’. Whereas the three synoptic gospels read like prose narratives, the ‘gospel according to St John’ is more like a dramatic poem. At church services marking the great festivals of the Christian calendar, passages from John are generally chosen for readings, rather than from the other gospels. It is not difficult to see why the fourth gospel is often regarded by Christian readers as the most important book in the Bible. Yet questions surrounding its authorship and historical authenticity also make it problematic and enigmatic.

What did the Victorians make of John’s gospel? There are really two questions here. First, how did several generations of theologians, preachers and biblical commentators interpret John, at a time when traditional ideas about its authorship and authenticity were being challenged by Strauss, Feuerbach and Renan, among others? Secondly, what kinds of work did the artists, writers and musicians create that was inspired by John? This book is a study of the cultural afterlife of the fourth gospel in Victorian Britain, in a context of historical change, exegetical innovation and liturgical continuity.

The three chapters in Part I consider how the Evangelist, the gospel and its famous prologue were regarded and represented in the nineteenth century. In these chapters discussion focuses upon the theologians and Bible commentators, including F. D. Maurice, Westcott and Wiseman, the hymnodists, such as Caswall and Bishop Heber, and the poets, particularly Tennyson and Browning. The five chapters in Part II examine Victorian interpretations and representations of episodes that are unique to John. Central to this discussion are the painters and illustrators, including Holman Hunt, Dyce, Rossetti, Doré and Tissot, together with poets and musicians of the period.

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-44245-0 - St John and the Victorians
Michael Wheeler
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Before starting work on the book, I knew that the fourth gospel had a special place in the hearts and minds of some of the most gifted figures of the period, such as F. D. Maurice and Westcott among the theologians, Tennyson, Browning and Ruskin among the writers, and Holman Hunt among the artists. Was it possible, then, to say that there is something specifically Johannine about some of the currents of thought and imagination that fed into mainstream Victorian culture? After four years of research and writing I can affirm that recognition of the gospel's supreme importance was widespread in the period and highly significant. The chapters that follow demonstrate the range of responses to it in a rich variety of scholarly and creative forms.

The material examined here is extensive, as the bibliography indicates. Much of it is fairly obscure and library copies of some of the printed tracts, sermons, hymns and poems that I cite have hardly been disturbed since they were first published. So in a book that is documentary as well as critical I bring to light passages that are, I hope, of interest to those who want to know how the most religious age in recent British history responded to the Bible intellectually, spiritually and imaginatively. Religion is now back on the agenda in the arts departments in British universities, having been rather neglected over the past four or five decades, and many literary and art historical scholars who have done little work in the fields of ecclesiastical history or religious thought are keen to know more. I hope that this book is useful to them, as well as to those who are thinking about interdisciplinary approaches to the nineteenth century.

In studying the Bible and its past interpretation I have paid close attention to the verse-by-verse analysis by Victorian commentators and by the writers of tracts and sermons. I have often been deeply impressed. Westcott, Maurice and Liddon have long been recognized as major figures. I hope, however, that readers will find some of the less well-known commentators, such as Edward Hayes Plumptre and Marcus Dods the Younger, as engaging as I do, and that by casting a rather wider net I have landed a heavier catch than might have been expected in a study like this. There is, of course, much rubbish to be found, as there is in all ages and in all literary forms, but to read the luxuriant prose of a commentator like Christopher Wordsworth, nephew to the poet, is to engage with a member of a generation of devout and deeply learned scholars.

Walter Houghton, the father of modern Victorian studies, published a brilliant study on *The Victorian frame of mind, 1830–1870* in 1957 which I embraced with enthusiasm a decade later. His Victorians were riddled with doubt and his heroes were figures such as the previously neglected

Preface

xv

Arthur Hugh Clough, whose agnosticism could be described as ‘honest doubt’. Victorian Britain has continued to be labelled the age of ‘faith and doubt’. The emphasis has, however, tended to fall upon the doubt, and this has come about largely because today’s agnostics are drawn to yesterday’s doubters. I am more interested in the faith: the Victorian age was one of religious revival. So whereas Houghton refers only occasionally to Maurice (and then not as a preacher or commentator) and makes no reference to F. W. Farrar, these are major players in my book, as they grapple with the mysteries of the fourth gospel, in dialogue with the creative writers, painters and musicians.

Today, as in the nineteenth century, Anglicans who regard their Church as ‘Catholic and reformed’, of whom I am one, do not much like being called ‘Protestants’. For the sake of concision, however, when referring to broad trends I use the term ‘Protestant’ to mean all Anglicans and all Protestant Nonconformists taken together. Similarly, ‘Catholic’ means Roman Catholic, unless the context clearly indicates Anglo-Catholicism.

I am grateful to the British Academy for awarding me a research grant which made sustained spells of work in the British Library feasible. Also to the staff of the British Library’s Rare Books and Music reading room, Gladstone’s Library, Hawarden, the London Library and the library of the Athenaeum Club, who provided books, food and shelter, and to South West Trains, who provided clean and efficient public transport between Hampshire and London. My thanks to the Cambridge University Press team, and especially Linda Bree, Andrey Cotterell, Tom O’Reilly and Maartje Scheltens. I have incurred many personal debts, especially to Professor Michael Alexander, who read a complete draft and perfectly fulfilled the role of generous and learned critical friend, and to others with whom I have discussed aspects of the fourth gospel, including Dr John Crook (who kindly provided two of the illustrations), the Very Revd Peter Francis, Greg Gardner, Professor Barbara Gelpi, Dr Jane Gledhill, the Rt Revd Jonathan Gledhill, the Revd Terry Hemming, the Revd Chris Pettet, the Revd Canon Roly Riem, the Very Revd Stephen Smalley, the Rt Revd Michael Scott-Joynt, Professor Stephen Wildman and Susan Woodhead, to whom I dedicate the book with love and thanks.

Work in progress towards the book is reflected in my article entitled ‘Lazarus and the Victorian Church’, *International journal for the study of the Christian Church*, 10 (2010), 351–64.

Notes on referencing

Place of publications is London unless otherwise stated.

Unless otherwise stated, all biblical quotations in English are from the King James Bible (or 'Authorized Version'), this being the version that was the Victorians' 'habitual music', as Ruskin put it. Quotations from the Greek are from the Nestlé text as reprinted in *The New International Version Interlinear Greek–English New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1976).

When quoting from novels that are in print and readily available, chapter numbers only are given in the text. The particular edition quoted is, however, listed in the bibliography (Primary texts). Obvious printers' errors are silently corrected. Abstract nouns that signify or describe Christ and aspects of his divine life are capitalized: e.g. Light, Cross, Resurrection. The only abbreviation used in the main text is R.A. (Royal Academy).

There is a limit to the number of illustrations that can be printed in a monograph like this. Where I cannot have an illustration I indicate a website where the reader can view the relevant image, if it is available online. A website entitled *The Johannine literature web* is useful, particularly for Old Master paintings, which are organized by subject (catholic-resources.org/John/Art.html).