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Michael Wheeler challenges critical orthodoxy by arguing that John Ruskin's writing is underpinned by a sustained trust in divine wisdom, a trust nurtured by his imaginative engagement with King Solomon and the temple in Jerusalem, and with the wisdom literature of the Old Testament.

In *Modern Painters*, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* and *The Stones of Venice*, belief in the wisdom of God the Father informed Ruskin's Evangelical natural theology and his celebration of Turner's landscape painting, while the wisdom of God the Son lay at the heart of his Christian aesthetics. Whereas 'the author of *Modern Painters*' sought to teach his readers how to see architecture, paintings and landscapes, the 'Victorian Solomon' whose religious life was troubled, and who created various forms of modern wisdom literature in works such as *Unto this Last*, *The Queen of the Air* and *Fors Clavigera*, wished to teach them how to live.

Michael Wheeler is Director of Chawton House Library, Hampshire, and Professor of English Literature at the University of Southampton. While writing this book he was Professor of English Literature, and Director of the Ruskin Programme and Ruskin Collection Project, Lancaster University. His main publications include *The Art of Allusion in Victorian Fiction* (1979), *English Fiction of the Victorian Period, 1830–1890* (1985), *Death and the Future Life in Victorian Literature and Theology* (1990; winner of the Conference on Christianity and Literature Award, USA, 1991–2); and its paperback abridgement *Heaven, Hell and the Victorians* (1994). In addition he has edited and contributed to *The Lamp of Memory: Ruskin, Tradition and Architecture* (1992) and *Ruskin and Environment: The Storm Cloud of the Nineteenth Century* (1995), among other volumes and journals.

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CENTURY LITERATURE AND CULTURE 24

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MICHAEL WHEELER



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To Linda Murray
and in memory of
Peter Murray (1920–1992)

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And Solomon stood before the altar of the Lord in the presence of all the congregation of Israel, and spread forth his hands toward heaven:

And he said, Lord God of Israel, there is no God like thee, in heaven above, or on earth beneath, who keepest covenant and mercy with thy servants that walk before thee with all their heart.

I Kings 8.22–3

I do not write my foolish jesting letters without a very solemn sense of the approach to you of one of those periods of life which are intended to make us look with closer trust to Him in whom we live, and move, and have our Being.

Letter from John Ruskin to Joan Severn, Brantwood,
28 September 1873

I trust in the Living God, Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things and creatures visible and invisible.

I trust in the kindness of His law, and the goodness of His work.

And I will strive to love Him, and keep His law, and see His work, while I live.

John Ruskin, Article I from St George's Creed, 1875

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Preface

Ruskin is so multi-faceted and polymathic that later generations have been able to appropriate those elements of him that are to their taste and ignore the rest. Ruskin's religion, which had an enormous impact upon his life and work, has often been either ignored or misunderstood in the twentieth century. Although several contemporaries wrote substantial essays on Ruskin's religious teaching, the editors of the great Library Edition of *The Works of John Ruskin* (1903–12) – E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn – seem to have had no real interest in or sympathy for Ruskin's religious life, and seized every opportunity to quote Ruskin's own later commentary, written in old age, on his early Evangelicalism. Yet here was one of several great Victorians, including George Eliot and Gladstone, Newman and Manning, whose intellectual lives were grounded in the Evangelicalism of their youth which they then left behind them. As in other areas of his personal life, Ruskin's self-styled 'un-conversion' from Evangelicalism occurred later in life than usual, and although there are similarities between his position in his troubled middle years and George Eliot's agnosticism, he later returned to a simple if somewhat unorthodox Christian faith. Ruskin certainly wrestled with what his generation called 'difficulties' throughout his adult life, but in 1877 and again in 1887 he had to make it clear that he had not converted to Roman Catholicism, so strong were the rumours circulating in England. On the first occasion he stated that he was a 'Catholic' of 'those Catholics, to whom the Catholic Epistle of St. James is addressed – "the Twelve Tribes which are scattered abroad" – the literally or spiritually wandering Israel of all the Earth'.

Numerous critical books on Ruskin have, however, perpetuated the myth of Ruskin's catastrophic and irrecoverable 'loss of faith', a myth which he himself invented in a sense in his descriptions of the 'Queen of Sheba crash' in Turin in 1858. Such a crisis of faith in a Victorian intellectual is generally taken to typify the 'secularization of the

European mind'. More often than not, however, this conclusion also reflects the agnostic liberalism of the twentieth-century mind, and several critics, such as R. H. Wilenski in the 1930s and Francis G. Townsend in the early 1950s, have written off Ruskin's Evangelical upbringing as unrelievedly damaging.

There have been some notable exceptions. Van Akin Burd offers the best overview of Ruskin's religious life in the introductions to *The Winnington Letters* (1969) and *Christmas Story* (1990). George Landow, in *The Aesthetic and Critical Theories of John Ruskin* (1971), explains the relevance of Evangelical Anglican typology for Ruskin, and goes on to show how Ruskin moved away from it to his own peculiar kind of allegory. (Landow broadens his canvas in *Victorian Types, Victorian Shadows* (1980).) David Downes, in *Ruskin's Landscape of Beatitude* (1980), argues that Ruskin's standpoint was more consistently and durably Christian than is suggested by his own account in *Præterita*, and finds a continuity in Ruskin's perception of the divine within the transitory. Tim Hilton, Ruskin's biographer (1985 and forthcoming), alerts us to the significance of the Ruskin family's church- and chapel-going in the South London of the 1830s and 1840s, while Stephen Finley, in *Nature's Covenant* (1992), places Ruskin's early work in a Reformed tradition and documents his religious reading and reflection. In *The Poison Sky: Myth and Apocalypse in Ruskin* (1982), Raymond E. Fitch relates Ruskin's mythography to his reading of signs of a great cosmic battle between life-giving and death-dealing forces. More subtly, Dinah Birch's study on *Ruskin's Myths* (1988) demonstrates that, for Ruskin, myth was primarily a religious phenomenon, with an unchanging spiritual message, founded on an ancient understanding of the natural world: 'pagan' religion could thus be valued without devaluing Christianity. The late Peter Fuller's *Theoria: Art, and the Absence of Grace* (1988) places religion at the centre of a highly personal, often brilliant and sometimes wayward reading of Ruskin and modern art. Philip Davis relates what Arnold would call Ruskin's Hebraic puritanism to his 'Romantic risk of the personal' (*Literature & Theology*, 6, 4 (December 1992)). Very little indeed has been said about what I consider to be a central aspect both of Ruskin's religious life and of his writings, namely his spiritual and imaginative response to Old Testament wisdom literature, and particularly the teaching and symbolism associated with Solomon and the temple. The theologian John Drury, however, offers some of the best insights into the nature of Ruskin's spirituality in his essay 'Ruskin's Way: *Tout a Fait Comme un Oiseau*', in the forthcoming *Festschrift* for John Burrow.

Ruskin's God addresses for the first time the whole question of Ruskin and the Christian religion, and its impact upon his work, the richness and variety of which can be more fully appreciated today by recovering an understanding of the religious beliefs and ideas on which much of that work is based. For while Ruskin's life and work are in many ways unique, his internalization of debates which raged in the mid-nineteenth century – on biblical criticism, Church authority, sacred art, church architecture and Darwin – also makes him the quintessential Victorian. His beliefs underwent many changes, susceptible as they were to his own sharpened critical awareness. What never left him, however, and what proved to be least susceptible to the application of new critical tools by the scientists and biblical scholars of the day, was belief in divine wisdom and a God of peace.

Early on, in *Modern Painters*, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* and *The Stones of Venice*, belief in the wisdom of God the Father informs Ruskin's Evangelical natural theology and his celebration of natural beauty and Turner's landscape painting, while the wisdom of God the Son lies at the heart of his Christology and his interpretation of paintings such as Tintoretto's *Crucifixion* and Holman Hunt's *The Light of the World*, and his Protestant reading of St Mark's, Venice. Whereas the 'Author of *Modern Painters*' sought to teach his readers how to see architecture, paintings and landscapes, the 'Victorian Solomon' who wrote on political economy and created the Guild of St George wished to teach them how to live. The result is a Victorian version of wisdom literature. Ruskin's most familiar maxim – 'There is no wealth but life' (*Unto this Last*) – was inspired by Solomon's Proverbs. In his attacks upon modern science in *The Queen of the Air* and *The Eagle's Nest* Ruskin traces the threads that connect wisdom in the Old Testament and the Holy Spirit in the New Testament with the cults of Athena and Neith – the Greek and Egyptian goddesses of wisdom. In his critique of modernity in *Fors Clavigera* he frequently invokes the wisdom tradition, exposing the ephemeral by juxtaposing it with the eternal. The fascinating and ambiguous figure of Solomon – the subject of Veronese's painting which Ruskin copied in Turin in 1858 – becomes increasingly important in the late work, where Ruskin attempts to rewrite his earlier cultural histories of Venice (*St. Mark's Rest*) and of France (*The Bible of Amiens*), and challenges late Victorian society to respond to his version of apocalyptic wisdom (*The Storm Cloud of the Nineteenth Century*). Ruskin's application of his foundational beliefs is prophetic, and his whole project seems even more relevant today than it did in the industrial age.

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In exploring such a wide field for so long I have incurred many debts. The dedicatees have been much-loved mentors and friends, who long ago helped a student of literature to think about art and architecture (even though my cousin Peter held Ruskin in low esteem!). My wife Viv has been unfailingly generous in her support and encouragement, as ever. Professor David Carroll, my long-time friend and collaborator on many projects, has continued to listen with the acutest of ears. Dr Dinah Birch, Dr James S. Dearden, Professor Robert Hewison and Dr Chris Walsh were all kind enough to read the book in its final draft and to make helpful suggestions. Jim Dearden initiated me into the mysteries of Bembridge and the arcana of Ruskin scholarship, and, with his wife Jill, was a welcoming host. Dr Andrew Brown of Cambridge University Press encouraged me to write the book, and his colleagues Josie Dixon and Linda Bree have been splendid editors. The British Academy Humanities Research Board awarded me a grant under their Research Leave Scheme, to which Lancaster University added research leave in 1997–98. I have enjoyed and benefited from conversations with Professor Michael Alexander, the Very Revd John Drury, Professor Stephen Finley, Professor Ray Haslam, Howard Hull, Professor George Landow and Dr Andrew Tate, as well as a galaxy of Ruskin scholars too numerous to mention. Ruth Hutchison, Secretary to the Ruskin Programme, has been a strength and stay to its Director. Members of the Ruskin Programme's weekly research seminar, without whom the whole project at Lancaster would not have been possible, have explored Ruskin with me, and Robert Hewison has been an inspiring colleague. Stephen Wildman has achieved wonders in setting up the Ruskin Library at Lancaster, and Rebecca Finnerty, Deputy Curator, has been unstinting in her support in the Reading Room there. Tony Cann has always been generosity and kindness personified.

I am also grateful to the following institutions in which I have worked: Lancaster University Library, and its Librarian Jacqueline Whiteside; Abbot Hall Art Gallery, Kendal; Record Office, Kendal; Ruskin Museum, Coniston; Brantwood, Coniston; Guild of St George Ruskin Gallery, Sheffield; Armitt Library, Ambleside; British Library, London; Bodleian Library, Oxford; Ashmolean Museum Library, Oxford; National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh; Manchester University John Rylands Library; St Deiniol's Library, Hawarden, and its Librarian, Patricia Williams; Pierpont Morgan Library, New York, and its Curator of Manuscripts, Robert Parks; New York Public Library; Houghton Library and Fogg Art Museum, Harvard; Beinecke Library and Mellon

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Center for British Art, Yale; Huntington Library, San Marino; Humanities Research Center, Austin; Rosenbach Museum & Library, Philadelphia; University of California at Los Angeles Library; Notre Dame University Library; Stanford University Library; Cornell University Library.

Work in progress towards this book is reflected in the following publications: 'Ruskin Among the Ruins: Tradition and the Temple', in *The Lamp of Memory: Ruskin, Tradition and Architecture*, ed. Michael Wheeler and Nigel Whiteley (Manchester University Press, 1992); 'Environment and Apocalypse', in *Ruskin and Environment: The Storm-Cloud of the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Michael Wheeler (Manchester University Press, 1995); *Keble, Ruskin, and The Light of the World: Lecture delivered in Keble College Chapel on Sunday 28 January 1996* (Oxford: Keble College, 1996); "'Inscribed upon its visionary sides": on Reading Mountains', in *Sublime Inspiration: The Art of Mountains from Turner to Hillary* (Kendal: Abbot Hall Art Gallery, 1997); 'Gladstone and Ruskin', in *Gladstone*, ed. Peter J. Jagger (London and Rio Grande: Hambledon, 1998); 'Ruskin's Christian Theory of Art', in *English Literature and Theology*, ed. Liam Gearon (London: Cassell, 1999).

I am grateful to owners for permission to reproduce the plates (their names are given in the list of illustrations); to the Revd M. L. Malleon for permission to quote a letter from the Revd F. A. Malleon; and to The Ruskin Literary Trustees, The Guild of St George, and also those mentioned in the list of short references given below, for permission to quote from unpublished Ruskin manuscripts.

MDW Lancaster, October 1998

Abbreviations

References to Ruskin's published works are taken from *The Works of John Ruskin*, Library Edition, edited by E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, 39 vols. (London: Allen; New York: Longmans, Green, 1903–12), unless otherwise stated, and are indicated by volume and page numbers in the text, thus: 12.123. (It should be noted that they and Ruskin's earlier editors habitually capitalized pronouns and possessives associated with the Trinity, even when Ruskin did not in the manuscripts.) Another short form of reference in the main text and footnotes is *D*, 123, signifying *The Diaries of John Ruskin*, ed. Joan Evans and John Howard Whitehouse, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1956–9), p. 123. (The numbering runs straight through the three volumes.) This edition is unreliable and incomplete, and where possible and relevant I have quoted from the originals, most of which are at Lancaster. I have retained the original punctuation in extracted quotations. Short forms of reference to sources of manuscripts are as follows:

Ashmolean	Ashmolean Museum, Oxford
Berg	Berg Collection, New York Public Library
Brantwood	Brantwood Trust
HRC	Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin
Lancaster	Ruskin Foundation (Ruskin Library, Lancaster University)
Morgan	Pierpont Morgan Library, New York
Rosenbach	Rosenbach Museum & Library, Philadelphia
Rylands	John Rylands University Library of Manchester
Yale	Yale Center for British Art, New Haven

Ruskin's deletions in manuscripts are indicated as <deletions> and superscript as ^superscript^.