Photographic Truth and Prophetic Picturing: Rev Dr Alexander Keith’s ‘Evidence of the Truth of the Christian Religion’ (1847)


Introduction

Thank you for coming, and a warm welcome, with a little warning, to a paper written by someone who is more a photographer than a theologian. I am currently completing my doctoral studies at the University of Gloucestershire in the Centre for Bible and Spirituality, as part of a funded project with Bible Society. My background is fine art practice and visual culture theory and critique, so I’m something of an artist-in-residence at both Gloucestershire and here at SBL.

I sit on a fence trying to face two directions at once, in the conviction that biblical hermeneutics and photography theory have some incredibly fruitful insights to offer each other. They revolve around my opinion that the paradigm of photographic truth, that Enlightenment-bred authority of its objectivity (WYSIWYG), is subject not only to the many unveilings of critical theorists (as a modernist ideology, among many other things) but is also subject to a biblical unveiling. Photography since 1839, which deals in some way with biblical subject-matter cannot avoid bringing out questions of spirituality and truth in a different light. In turn, the Bible texts themselves are enlivened by a visual hermeneutic which is as yet largely unexplored in reception history and reader-response theories. I can’t pretend to comprehensively straddle these disciplines, but I offer here something of a starter-for-ten that will eventually sit within a thesis with other examples.

My aim here, with the example of Keith, is then to highlight ways in which his notion of photographic truth both informed and was informed by his ideas about certain prophetic texts and the visual evidence for their fulfilment. He reads the Bible, he reads the landscape of the Holy Land, and photography is made to join them together – how he does this is what I go on to present in the main part of this paper. To begin with however, some introductory words about the context of Alexander Keith and the photographs he presents.

The Context

Alexander Keith was a 19th-century Church of Scotland minister. At the time of the Disruption of 1843, he left the established church together with 450 other ministers to form the Free Church of Scotland. Keith appears here [see slide - The First General Assembly of the Free Church of Scotland; signing the Act of Separation and Deed of Demission at Tanfield, Edinburgh, May 1843. David Octavius Hill, 1866, oil on canvas (4' 8" x 12"), permanently displayed at the offices of the Free Church of Scotland, Edinburgh], seated with others representing the Jewish Mission.
For this painting of the occasion, by David Octavius Hill, the artist and his photographic partner Robert Adamson famously turned to photography for help with his portraits [see slide - Rev Dr Alexander Keith (1791-1880), calotype photographs by David Octavius Hill and Robert Adamson, Edinburgh, c.1843].

At a time when photography was less than 5 years old, early photography in Scotland flourished. This was thanks in large part to the minister and scientist Sir David Brewster, who was a principal here at St Andrews University from 1838, and longstanding friend of both Talbot and Keith. The calotypes that Hill and Adamson produced, and indeed those of one of Keith’s sons Thomas Keith, were of dramatic light and shade, compounded by a process not given to sharp, linear clarity but rather to impression and drama (often described as of a Rembrandt style at the time).

It was, instead, the daguerreotypes taken by another son, George Skene Keith, which father Alexander Keith chose to employ for his project. Keith first ventured to Palestine in 1839 with 3 other ministers as part of a mission with both a conversion and a return agenda for the Jews. It was the latter which was to form his lifelong preoccupation in print, with the first publication of a version of ‘Evidence of the Truth’ in 1823 [see bibliography]. Keith is believed to be the source of the Zionist phrase ‘a land without a people for a people without a land’ in his 1843 book ‘The Land of Israel’. Later publications focussed on more general prophecies regarding other nations and the end times.

We are going to zoom in on the 37th edition of ‘Evidence’, with its 18 plates of engravings copied from daguerreotypes. Daguerreotypes, invented in France in 1839, are unique photographs formed on a light-sensitive metallic plate, and George’s original plates do not seem to have survived. When I talk about the photographs here, for simplicity’s sake, I am conflating the engraving copy with the original, just as I conflate the son and father as photographer. It is the first and only time daguerreotypes are used to illustrate a book in Britain. Keith’s plates are usually accompanied in the text with a biblical quote directly below the photograph. I will consider 3 aspects here. These are: firstly, Keith’s depiction of solely the literal landscapes suggested by the text; secondly, his telescopic visualisation of the truth of the text; and thirdly, his conflation of the natural and the supernatural in both image and text.

1. The Literal Landscape

Keith’s approach to both the biblical texts and photography may be described as very black and white. He states that he is singularly interested in those aspects of the prophecies which “are as descriptive as history
itself,” for the purposes of what is “an investigation of the evidence” of prophecy fulfilled. Similarly, he describes photography as “a mode of demonstration that could neither be questioned nor surpassed,” an unmediated natural testimony of “what the prophets saw,” where facts are unembellished and clear. “The predictions correspond … with the express and literal reality”, and photography provides the joining link. Hence, to refer to our first example [see slide – Zion, “Zion shall be ploughed like a field,” Jeremiah 26:18, Micah 3:12 (frontispiece)], and the frontispiece of the 37th edition, the prediction “Zion shall be ploughed like a field” is literally shown to have occurred with a photograph of the cultivated hillside outside Jerusalem.

The question of the ‘obvious’ referent implied by Keith’s literal interpretations is, of course, not as simple as it may seem. That the clear-cut identification of a physical site can follow from its description in text, even from its direct naming, is today what both linguists and biblical scholars would concede as presumptive, to varying degrees. ‘Zion’ for example, can incorporate many diverse faith and politico-historical perspectives, as well as symbolic literary and poetic nuances. In Keith’s photograph, the hints of ‘Zion’ understood as particularly relating to mid-nineteenth century Zionist concerns, are reflected in a point of view that privileged the unpopulated landscape, rather than the cityscape of Jerusalem which is just seen on the horizon. In the critic Yeshayahu Nir’s words from his book ‘The Bible and the Image’:

No other nineteenth-century photographer used this angle; no one else was interested in isolating Mount Zion from the city.

A later photograph that could conceivably have been taken from the same spot, Jerusalem, Mosque of Omar. [see slide - Jerusalem, Mosque of Omar, “Jerusalem shall be trodden down of the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled,” Luke 21:24 (p.258)] separately considers not the fact of an exotic densely-populated city, but its effacement by the prominent dome of the mosque and a line of silhouetted trees. Accompanied by the words of Jesus from Luke 21:24, Keith also links the same Jeremiah and Micah passages from the previous image to this one, seeing the trees as ‘the high places of a forest’ (Jer 26:18) which surround the site of the original temple, and the mosque as part of a heathen interruption to a prophesied return (Mic 4:1).
Keith was certainly not ignorant of the codedness of prophetic language, but he defended its literalness on the basis of both the texts’ primary purpose and essence. The primary purpose of a prophetic text is in quote, “its literal fulfilment.” Keith argues against poietical and metaphorical interpretation since he sees this as a dilution of evidentially-verified prophecy into a warning of what only might be fulfilled. The facts being so substantial is part of the sure, undeviating, word of the Lord. Later biblical scholars such as G. B. Caird and Bernard C. Lategan, although generally dismissing this emphasis as naïve (notably with regard to the unfulfilment of this particular text regarding Zion), nevertheless do agree that Hebraic prophetic language is particularly black and white, dealing in absolutes within the framework of persistently referential language. It is also important to recognise that in both the general approach to his thesis, as well as to the images within it, Keith is reflecting a particularly scientific ideology: so statistics and descriptive eye-witness language, accompanied by corroborative illustrations assume an empirical survey-like style. In text and in image, Keith’s book bears a closer resemblance to a Royal Society presentation or early documentary projects in photography, than it does to biblical exegesis.

2. The Telescopied Truth

However much Keith’s approach may seem to promote the singular literal correspondence between text and image, he also, at the same time, acknowledges a layering effect which telescopes truth across history. The photographed land:

Sets before the eyes of every beholder, who knows the Bible and can exercise his reason, a three-fold illustration of the truth of Scripture, in respect to its past, present and yet destined state. There is no gap in the prophecy between the time of its utterance and the time of our interpretation – we can always see its fulfilment in action. Similarly, in the selection of particular symbolic aspects of the landscape, where olive trees or vineyards are “figures of Scripture,” their peculiar pictorial synthesis is indicative of the power of the biblical word to be a real and multi-dimensional truth, and not merely the imaginative plaything of the writers. Such figures:

Here illustrate the doings, as they are the words, of the Lord, and present a combination of expressive similitudes which render it hard to wrest Scripture here, as they visibly exhibit the truths which they reveal.

In a photograph of the ruins of Jerash [see slide – Jerash, “The cities desolate without inhabitant,” Isaiah 6:11 (p.128)], what Keith presents is a double-layer of evidence that the abundance of place (fertile land and prosperous city) did once exist, being marked on the landscape. It is the marked contrast between what was and what is which reveals the prophecies’ fulfilment: “the pomp of her strength” becomes “the land most desolate” (quoting Ezekiel 33:28 in relation to a very similar photograph). In this case seeing ruins is both negative proof of Israel’s previous greatness and positive proof of its present destruction. A third proof is adduced in the visible assurance of possible future regeneration by virtue of availability of rebuilding materials, so Keith freely jumps to another part of Isaiah in quoting chapter 60, verse 10, “the sons of strangers shall build up the walls.”
In an obvious respect, Keith assumes the seamless holistic statement of fact offered by the photographic image as a mask for an interpretative stitching exercise from different parts of the Bible, and like his literal landscape, this doesn’t hold water for much current critical biblical scholarship. Yet there is a sense in which he perhaps unconsciously taps into what Caird has identified as the “bifocal vision” of the prophets. To quote from ‘The Language and Imagery of the Bible’:

With their near sight they foresaw imminent historical events which would be brought about by familiar human causes … With their long sight they saw the day of the Lord; and it was in the nature of the prophetic experience that they were able to adjust their focus so as to impose the one image on the other and produce a synthetic picture.

Similarly, Lategan describes that multi-layered element of the text which intends “to achieve a ‘seeing as’,” in the manner of an optical instrument which effects a perspective change.

Lategan also describes the movement of the text, its dynamic referentiality, primarily to an outside which is the realm of the reader’s world. This may be akin to what Keith is grasping at with his description of the “doings” of the Lord in particular features of the landscape/text. So in the photograph of Hebron [see slide – Hebron, p.230], Keith specifically directs us to see it as a gleaning site, whereby the “many fine olive-trees” in the foreground and the verdant vineyards surrounding the city, are witnesses of God’s continuing faithfulness, reaching out to the present-day viewer. These physical ‘left-overs’, explicitly referring to the Mosaic laws concerning the stranger’s share of the harvest are emphatically thus a literal figuration of God acting and doing now.

3. The Natural = the Supernatural

Lest we think this truth remains the natural summary of a reasoned and empirical investigation, “that it is the effect of divine interposition cannot be disputed. It is equivalent to any miracle, and is of itself evidently miraculous.” There is no discord felt here between employing photography understood as a natural testimony of “what the prophets saw,” and the insistence that what it shows is precisely unnatural, beyond any human vision. Photography’s sight is God’s (fore-)sight, even though it is a combination of human and mechanical sight given by natural processes. Photography forms “an index” to the facts of prophetic fulfilment such that:

We may warrantably conclude that they could only have been revealed by the Ruler among the nations, and that they afford more than human testimony of the truth of Christianity.

This “more than human testimony” is made more visible by virtue of humanity’s erasure in both the photographic process and the scene presented. So in images of Petra [see slide - Petra (Corinthian tomb)], “Thy terribleness hath deceived thee, and the pride of thine heart, &c. Everyone that goeth by it shall be astonished” Jeremiah 49:16-17 (p.328)], Keith initially praises early engravings he saw for helping the cause of a text-based argument, but then proceeds to assert that daguerreotypes trump both efforts because of their fidelity to nature, without the enhancement of human hand. Similarly the
magnificence of the stone-hewn structures is recast by Keith, with some effort, as a gaping lack of humanity: rather than evidence of raw, and enduring, human achievement (which was certainly what overawed the majority of visitors to the site, and still does today), Keith sees the fissures and the clefts and the absented space as the primary feature.

Seeing what is not there of course touches on something of a via negativa, a trying to describe the indescribable nature of God, and it is intriguing to me that here the image of cleft in the rock has an unavoidable resonance with both Moses’ and Elijah’s encounters, or nearly-encounters, with God. For Keith, however, the point about revelation seen or unseen in this way is that it is witnessed, and that his concept of witness sits on the cusp of a biblical understanding of legal verification (Deut 19:15) and a reasoned understanding of scientific verification. We do well to remember that his photography is not automatically lumped in with the latter, but rather that a particular concern with accredited testimony pertaining to the supernatural preoccupies his discussions, especially with regard to the work of David Hume in ‘An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding’ (1748).

Regarding Hume’s rejection of miracles (on the basis of their unreasonable interruption of the laws of nature) Keith argues that reason confirms both the ongoing consistency of prophecies and their miraculous nature, ie. that previous fulfilments lead to the reasonable assumption of future fulfilments. Quote: “Prophecy being true, and uniformity true, and all prophecies being real miracles, miracles are not contrary to … uniform experience” (p.539). Uniform empirically-consistent nature, such as photography can empirically testify to, is simultaneously evidence of supernatural revelation perceived over time. The Bible plus photography gives prophecy credibility down the ages, unlike unprophesied, unverifiable miracles, which often do not stand up beyond the primary eyewitnesses.

So to sum, these thoughts about how to photograph prophecy ought to surprise both Bible scholar and visual culture critic. As a result of this book and its approach, Keith asks “may not sight lead to faith?” (p.533). His effort in involving photographs has not simply been an argumentative one, but an apologetic one: a presentation of a way of seeing. The scholar (such as Caird, p.209) might think that an emphasis on literal qualities of the text/image and the visually verifiable historical truth of prophecy would eclipse any sense of an Old Testament affirmation of covenantal faith. But Keith asserts that:

To see these things as literally done as they were literally written, is to feel that the vision is sublime, to see that the literal sense of Scripture is truly the transcendental, that the prosaic fulfilment of prophecy surpasses poetical fictions, that the King of kings will execute his word… (p.39)

For the visual culture critic such as Roland Barthes, writing in ‘Camera Lucida’ in 1981, the “power of authentication” which a photograph possesses is already a somewhat magical power, an “emanation” and an “evidential force,” (p.88, 89) which always trounced any representational and linguistic capacity that it may also attain (elsewhere described as the denoted versus the connoted message). Here with Keith, the representational and linguistic capacity of the photograph is its supernatural force, is its punctum, to quote another famous term from Barthes. And rather than acting, as Barthes thought, like “prophecy in reverse” (p.87), photography with Keith is prophecy with an ongoing propulsion into the here and now, into the viewer’s reality. As much as Keith is intent on delineating a narrowly-defined interpretation of particular prophetic texts as visually verifiable, this is nevertheless uniquely and surprisingly indicative of photography as spiritually expressive. As such, a spirituality from/of the text is similarly enlivened by the photographic image.
Publications of A. Keith:

- **Sketch of the Evidence from Prophecy; containing an account of those prophecies which were distinctly foretold, and which have been clearly or literally fulfilled. With an appendix, extracted from Sir Isaac Newton's Observations on the Prophecies**, Edinburgh, 1823
- **Evidence of the Truth of the Christian Religion derived from the Literal Fulfilment of Prophecy; particularly as illustrated by the History of the Jews, and by the Discoveries of Recent Travellers**, Edinburgh: Waugh & Innes, 1826
- **Signs of the Times, as Denoted by the Fulfilment of Historical Predictions, Traced Down from the Babylonish Captivity to the Present Time**, Edinburgh: William Whyte & Co. 1832
- **The Land of Israel According to the Covenant with Abraham, With Isaac, and With Jacob**, Edinburgh: William Whyte & Co. 1843
- **Evidence, 36th edition, 1847, with 9 plates from daguerreotypes**
- **Evidence, 37th edition, 1859, with 18 plates from daguerreotypes**
- 1850s and 1860s – 3 publications on apocalyptic prophecies and Armageddon


www.oxforddnb.com (accessed June 2013)

Ritchie, Lionel Alexander, *'Keith, Alexander (1792-1880)'*, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*