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## The Biblical and Imaginative Interiority of Samuel Rutherford

SAMUEL RUTHERFORD (c. 1600–1661) lived during one of the most tumultuous and formative periods, both political and religious, in Scottish history. As a professor, pastor, preacher, prisoner, political thinker and statesman, he played a central role in determining the distinctive ecclesiastical shape of the Scottish Kirk, reforming the minds and hearts of its members, educating future leaders, resisting and re-instating Stuart monarchs, and defining the constitutional rights of the people, most notably in his treatise *Lex Rex*, which was burned by the public hangman and almost cost him his life. However, it is not any of these dimensions of his history that form the explicit focus of this essay. Rutherford was also a prolific letter writer, and it is on the posthumous collection of these epistles, which he himself never intended for publication, that his reputation is primarily based.<sup>1</sup> There are numerous points of intersection between the various public roles by which he was known to his contemporaries and the content of the *Letters*, which otherwise are essentially personal and devotional. Like many Covenanters and Puritans of his time,<sup>2</sup> Rutherford was a man of the Book, and his *Letters* reflect and display in multiple and complex ways the shaping influence of the Bible in Scottish life, thought and ecclesiology. However, they are also intensely individual, mapping the unique devotional life and experience

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<sup>1</sup> John Coffey, *Politics, Religion and the British Revolutions: The Mind of Samuel Rutherford*, Cambridge Studies in Early Modern British History, ed. Anthony Fletcher et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997) 5.

<sup>2</sup> The Scottish Covenanters and English Puritans were members of a common British seventeenth-century religious movement. Rutherford himself does not disown the label “Puritan” though he recognizes it is intended in a derogatory sense, and the close working relationship between the two parties at the Westminster Assembly (1643–47) confirms their fundamental affinities in a day of intense spiritual division. See *Letters of Samuel Rutherford*, ed. Andrew Bonar (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1984) 53, 134, 512.

of a remarkable man.<sup>3</sup> This fusion is what renders the *Letters* such a useful site through which to explore a biblical and imaginative “interiority” that defined itself in active relation to the world and others, rather than through a withdrawal from the “public” sphere.

This assertion requires a theological detour to justify and define it. For many Rutherford remains an enigma: Scottish Covenanter and mystic, scholastic theologian and suffering saint, legal theoretician and passionate pastor, national politician and rural cleric; he embodies a series of contradictions that are often simplified into the dichotomy of “public” and “private.” While much of this is obviously the consequence of Rutherford’s distinctive character, (which remained a puzzle to him also),<sup>4</sup> the “problem” of the two sides of his personality is equally a product of frequently unquestioned beliefs concerning the relationship between interior and exterior, body and spirit, religion and spirituality in Western culture. Such simplistic oppositions occlude a crucial dynamic expressed propositionally in Reformed theology and articulated experientially in the lives of Rutherford and his correspondents: namely, that it is a personal experience of communion with God which enables, energizes and compels an active engagement with others in the material world. Philip F. Sheldrake expresses this Puritan theological conviction in theoretical terms that rework the relationship more constructively: “the concepts of interiority and exteriority need to be held in creative tension. The heart of Christian spirituality may indeed be expressed in terms of this tension—a dialectic of the mystical contemplative and transformative practice (the prophetic).”<sup>5</sup>

Sheldrake re-evaluates traditional readings of Augustinian thought in order to rehabilitate a crucial distinction between “privacy” and “interiority.” To turn within is not necessarily to selfishly neglect the needs of others and the outer world, as it is by looking within that we find the *imago Dei* in which we are created. While “sin is a withdrawal into privacy,” in the biblical text “human ... solidarity with others (is) expressed in the image of the undivided heart.” Thus, “the language of the heart ... what is interior to me is, for Augustine, also where I am also united with the whole human family.”<sup>6</sup> This circular hermeneutic is given classic expression in John Calvin’s

<sup>3</sup> Marcus Loane, “Samuel Rutherford: The Saint of the Covenant,” in *Makers of Religious Freedom in the Seventeenth Century* (London: SCM, 1960) 73.

<sup>4</sup> Kingsley G. Rendell, *Samuel Rutherford: A New Biography of the Man and his Ministry* (Inverness: Christian Focus Publications, 2003) 129.

<sup>5</sup> Philip F. Sheldrake, “Christian Spirituality as a Way of Living Publicly: A Dialectic of the Mystical and Prophetic,” *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 3 (2003): 20.

<sup>6</sup> “Christian Spirituality as a Way of Living Publicly” 21–23.

*Institutes*, and is crucial to Rutherford's understanding of the self, God and others: "Our wisdom ... consists almost entirely of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves. But as these are connected together by many ties it is not easy to determine which of the two precedes and gives birth to the other."<sup>7</sup> In biblical terms the heart is the centre of the person, where all good actions must originate in purity before God, by the grace of God, if one is to do anything effectively for others.<sup>8</sup> As Sheldrake observes: "the purpose of interiority (is) ... external action rather than the cultivation of an inner universe of private experience" and "the *homo interior* was a shared human nature, made in the image of God" rather than "a unique, particular, autonomous self."<sup>9</sup> Denys Turner notes that two metaphors complement one another in Augustine's understanding of the spiritual life "interiority" and "ascent."<sup>10</sup> This dialectical notion of "inwardness paradoxically leads beyond distinction of inner and outer towards the eternal boundlessness of God."<sup>11</sup> He is not only within, but above.

Interiority and the various aspects of human being that fall under its rubric engage the biblical notion of "the heart," which is central to scriptural anthropology. Terence Erdt has traced the evolution and mutation of "the sense of the heart" through the Calvinist tradition. Classically, as defined by John Calvin and his seventeenth-century Puritan heirs, it is the feeling of sweetness that arises in the hearts of believers upon realizing that they have received the mercy of God in Jesus Christ. It is experimental, a "regenerative change in the inclination of the heart" awakening a relish for God. It is the assurance that one has been saved by grace, elusive, yet of the essence of faith: the means by which the believer acquires "an experiential knowledge of the nature of God and of divine providence."<sup>12</sup> This is critical to a right understanding of the theology that undergirds the experiential mysticism of Rutherford expressed in the *Letters*: delight in God, fellowship with other believers, and the ability to trace God's hand in providence, are all attributed to this divinely initiated infusion of grace in the heart.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vol. 1.1.1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1959).

<sup>8</sup> Terence Erdt, *Jonathan Edwards: Art and the Sense of the Heart* (Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1980) 4.

<sup>9</sup> It is possible to extrapolate Sheldrake's observations on the medieval Augustinian tradition and apply them to Rutherford and his circle.

<sup>10</sup> Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995) 74–101.

<sup>11</sup> Sheldrake, "Christian Spirituality as a Way of Living Publicly" 24.

<sup>12</sup> Erdt, *Jonathan Edwards* 11–15.

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, *Letters of Samuel Rutherford* 108, 218–20, 460–63.

The first anonymous edition of the letters was published in Holland in 1664, by Rutherford's former secretary Robert McWard.<sup>14</sup> Numerous collections were subsequently produced incorporating a greater number of letters as these were discovered, or made available. The final and still authoritative critical edition was collated in 1891 by Andrew Bonar, consisting of three hundred and sixty-five letters generally accepted to be authored by Rutherford.<sup>15</sup> The publication history of these letters, which have remained in print since first issued, is remarkable,<sup>16</sup> and unique not only in Scottish literature, but British religious culture more generally,<sup>17</sup> where it is only in the past few decades that close attention has been paid to the social role of pastors and theologians in the seventeenth century. Their reading public has been specialised, interested primarily in the devotional quality of the collection;<sup>18</sup> but they have also attracted continuing interest from literary critics, who feel obliged to refer to them as a remarkable and influential phenomenon, even if they deplore Rutherford's idiosyncratic, impassioned and almost baroque prose.<sup>19</sup> This is most evident when he deals with the beauty, sufficiency, fairness, love and glory of Christ, the theme which consumed him and forms the central focus of the collection as a whole. Rutherford has even been described as a mystic;<sup>20</sup> a quality rarely attributed to Scottish Covenanters, although they shared the Puritan commitment to experiential piety. His language echoes that of a broad Catholic tradition, grounded in commentary and interpretation of the Song of Songs, and demonstrated most notably by Bernard of Clairvaux.<sup>21</sup>

Rutherford's discourse upon the Person of Christ can be usefully categorized as a biblical aesthetic, carving out an interiority intrinsically

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<sup>14</sup> *Letters of Samuel Rutherford* 23–24.

<sup>15</sup> Bonar is not as accurate as could be desired, making several mistakes in chronology and dating. See Rendell, *Samuel Rutherford: A New Biography* 100–101.

<sup>16</sup> Coffey, *Politics, Religion and the British Revolutions* 264–68.

<sup>17</sup> Robert Gilmour, *Samuel Rutherford: A Study Biographical and Somewhat Critical, in the History of the Scottish Covenant* (Edinburgh: Oliphant, Anderson & Ferrier, 1904) 10.

<sup>18</sup> Maurice Roberts, "Samuel Rutherford: The Comings and Goings of the Heavenly Bridegroom," in *The Trials of Puritanism: Papers Read at the 1993 Westminster Conference* (1993) vol. 119.

<sup>19</sup> Coffey, *Politics, Religion and the British Revolutions* 107–10. Gilmour, *Samuel Rutherford: A Study Biographical* 15–19. Hans H. Meier, "Love, Law and Lucre: Images in Rutherford's Letters," in *Historical and Editorial Essays in Medieval and Early Modern English for Johan Gerritsen*, ed. H. Wirtjes and M.-J. Arn (Groningen: Wolters-Noordhoff, 1985) 79–80.

<sup>20</sup> A.M. Machar, "A Scottish Mystic," *The Andover Review* 6 (1996).

<sup>21</sup> Coffey, *Politics, Religion and the British Revolutions* 90–97. "Mystic," however, may be variously defined.

relational and experiential. He draws broadly from the linguistic and metaphoric resources of the biblical text, in order to express and present his understanding and experience of Christ to his correspondents. Examples could be taken from almost any letter, and the following is characteristic:

Oh! oh! But we have short, and narrow, and creeping thoughts of Jesus, and do but shape Christ in our conceptions according to some created portraiture! O angels, lend in your help to make love-books and songs of our fair, and white, and ruddy Standard-bearer among ten thousand! ... O glorified tenants, and triumphing house-holders with the Lamb, put in new psalms and love-sonnets of the excellency of our Bridegroom, and help us to set Him on high! ... O fairness of creatures, blush before His uncreated beauty! ... O sun in thy shining beauty, for shame put on a web of darkness, and cover thyself before thy brightest Master and Maker! ... enjoy this Jewel of heaven's jewels! ... Post, post, and hasten our desired and hungered-for meeting. Love is sick to hear tell of tomorrow.<sup>22</sup>

The tone is one of rapture and reads strangely in a modern context that does not valorize a style of verbal extravagance. But, while singular in its accumulation of superlatives, stretching language taut to breaking-point in an attempt to convey a sense of the infinite, it is also richly biblical. Rutherford echoes the solicitations of the psalmists to angels to help them in praising God;<sup>23</sup> there is a possible allusion to being “compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses,” mentioned in Hebrews,<sup>24</sup> in the reference to “glorified tenants”; whilst the call for “new psalms” draws upon the Psalms, epistles and Revelation.<sup>25</sup> Behind the passage also is the image of the Bridegroom, taken from Revelation and Song of Songs, supplemented by interpretations of David and the Messianic Psalms as typological precursors of Christ, seen in the attributions of “ruddiness” and beauty.<sup>26</sup>

This unique form of discourse, rooted in the biblical text and focused upon the Person of Christ, helped to shape a tightly knit community. The aesthetic and affective terminology that so clearly expresses Rutherford's personal appreciation of the loveliness of Christ has an inherent dynamic resulting in close communion and relationships (or covenants) with others of like mind. It also qualifies the narrow definition of aesthetics dominant in contemporary discussion by its incorporation of spirituality and ethics. Jonathan Edwards, the eighteenth-century New England theologian, provides a helpful point of comparison in elucidating this issue. Edwards

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<sup>22</sup> *Letters of Samuel Rutherford* 582–83. These and future parenthetical references to Rutherford's words are from Bonar.

<sup>23</sup> For example, Psalm 148.

<sup>24</sup> Hebrews 12:1.

<sup>25</sup> Psalm 98:1; Colossians 3:16; Revelation 5:9–14.

<sup>26</sup> 1 Samuel 16:12; 17:42; Psalm 45.

carefully elaborates the Calvinist “sense of the heart” that implicitly informs Rutherford’s scriptural interpretation and its application to nature, physical or spiritual life, and providence. This “sense of the heart” is a gift of the Holy Spirit, enabling a kind of spiritual intuition, which allows the Christian to move from a recognition of the beauty of creation, to a transforming apprehension of spiritual beauty.<sup>27</sup> Edwards takes the biblical phrase, “the beauty of holiness,”<sup>28</sup> and combines it with the perceptual, “sense of the heart,” developing a theological aesthetic in which beauty becomes the term best able to unify and convey the intellectual, emotional, and supernatural dimensions of the spiritual life, forging a link between personal spiritual experience, perception of the natural world, and relationships with others, centred in an interiority of communion with God.

The beauty of holiness is that thing in spiritual and divine things, which is perceived by this spiritual sense, that is so diverse from all that natural men perceive in them: this kind of beauty is the quality that is the immediate object of this spiritual sense: this is the sweetness that is the proper object of this spiritual taste.<sup>29</sup>

Edwards provides a useful theological context that explains the peculiar deployment of biblical language to describe Christ, which fills Rutherford’s *Letters*; the sensual and tactile quality of his nouns and adjectives are best categorized as aesthetic and affective. To cite just a few examples, he speaks of Jesus as the “Sun of righteousness” (42), “your Well-Beloved . . . ye feel the smell of His garments” (47) “the King’s wine-cellar” (55), “the sweetest Master” (64) “fair Chief Corner-stone” (67) “that soul-delighting, lovely Bridegroom, our sweet, sweet Jesus, fairer than all the children of men, “the Rose of Sharon” (78), “the fountain of living waters . . . the sweetest apple in all God’s heavenly paradise, Jesus Christ, your life and your Lord” (79). This poetic sensibility, though, expressive of a rich and deeply felt interior communion with Christ, is inextricably linked to the strong ethical and doctrinal implications present in biblical images such as, “Lord,” “Master,” “Beloved” and “Chief Corner-stone.” Rutherford himself makes this connection explicit when writing to the persecuted Church in Ireland:

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<sup>27</sup> Jonathan Edwards, “The Covenant of Redemption,” cited by Erdt, *Jonathan Edwards* 50.

<sup>28</sup> Psalm 29:2; 96:9.

<sup>29</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *Religious Affections*, cited by Erdt, *Jonathan Edwards* 32.

If heaven and earth, and ten thousand heavens even ... were all in one garden of paradise.... yet set but our one Flower that groweth out of the root of Jesse beside that orchard of pleasure, one look of Him, one view, one taste, one smell of His sweet Godhead would infinitely exceed and go beyond the smell, colour, beauty, and loveliness of that paradise.... I earnestly recommend this love to you, that this love may cause you to keep His commandments, and to keep clean fingers, and make clean feet, that ye may walk as the redeemed of the Lord.... let not His fairness be spotted and stained by godless living. Oh, who can find in their heart to sin against love? (573–74)

This passage has been quoted at length in order to give some idea of Rutherford's style, and also to demonstrate the way in which his Christocentric biblical aesthetic incorporates a spiritual and pastoral dimension; praise and a personal experience of Jesus are shown to lead necessarily, on the grounds of affection and loyalty, to a life of sanctified holiness. In Edward's words, it is the sight of "divine beauty" that "bows the will" and "draws the heart."<sup>30</sup> Or in terms of our current discussion, interiority impels ascent and outward engagement.

The exotic, sensual and impassioned extravagance of Rutherford's language and imagery has aroused equally strong responses of admiration and antagonism amongst his readers.<sup>31</sup> An apparent incongruity between his rapturous paeans of praise and the phenomenal output of books in Latin on scholastic theology and doctrinal controversy has often troubled his biographers.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, it was his theological rigour that made him eminent amongst his contemporaries, and perhaps led to his appointment as one of the five commissioners from Scotland present at the famous Westminster Assembly from 1643–47.<sup>33</sup> The aesthetic dimension explored earlier helps to resolve this seeming dichotomy, the Calvinistic interiority or "sense of the heart" is intimately connected to the experiential piety that Covenanters and Puritans alike sought to enact, and which, as pastors, they repeatedly

<sup>30</sup> Jonathan Edwards, "True Grace Distinguished from the Experience of Devils," cited in Sherry, *Spirit and Beauty: An Introduction to Theological Aesthetics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992) 15.

<sup>31</sup> *Letters of Samuel Rutherford* 24–25. Philip W. Lilley, "Samuel Rutherford, 1600–1661," in *Transactions of the Hawick Archaeological Society* (1935) vol. 12–13. Adam Philip, "The Golden Book of Love," in *The Devotional Literature of Scotland* (London: James Clark & Co., 1920) 118. Faith Cook, *Samuel Rutherford and His Friends* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1992) 145.

<sup>32</sup> E.g., A. T. Innes, "Samuel Rutherford," in *Studies in Scottish History, Chiefly Biographical* (London, 1892). This alternative spelling of the name is used consistently by Innes.

<sup>33</sup> Coffey, *Politics, Religion and the British Revolutions* 52. Here British Anglican, Puritan, Presbyterian and Independent divines sought to shape a uniform system of church government and creed.

urged upon their congregations.<sup>34</sup> Rutherford identified himself primarily as a pastor. He states that apart from Christ, his supreme passion was to preach Christ (202), and the genre of the sermon fuses the doctrinal treatise with the divine love letter.<sup>35</sup> As Coffey insightfully observes:

Rutherford was not aiming for literary grace, but for maximum rhetorical effect on his audience. His language possessed a raw, colloquial energy precisely because it was intended to grab the attention of a congregation.... In letters and sermons of great imagination, he fused the apocalyptic and the nuptial, the sublime and the homely, constantly surprising and assaulting the senses.<sup>36</sup>

The *Letters* are characterized by a great diversity of imagery, and Rutherford rarely repeats himself.<sup>37</sup> However, a close analysis has revealed three spheres to be pre-eminent amongst the many drawn upon, demonstrating an inherent dynamic between interiority and public engagement conveyed through biblical metaphor. These are pithily summarized as “love, law and lucre.”<sup>38</sup> To elaborate, the nuptial or erotic occurs most frequently, closely followed by the commercial, and then forensic.<sup>39</sup> Of course, the boundaries between these spheres, particularly the last are fluid, and they reveal much about rural life in seventeenth-century Scotland, as well as becoming vehicles to convey pointed spiritual lessons. The semantic range and power of these allusions grows when one recognizes how compatible these areas of life are with recurrent biblical imagery.<sup>40</sup> The juxtaposition of contemporary life with biblical metaphors could be mutually illuminating. When comforting a woman who had recently lost her husband, Rutherford observes: “Know therefore, that the wounds of your Lord Jesus are the wounds of a lover, and that he will have compassion upon a sad-hearted servant ... He loved you in your first husband’s time, and He is but wooing you still. Give Him heart and chair, house and all ... He will have all your love.”<sup>41</sup> Or, fusing paternal and forensic discourses to convey a sense of his continual spiritual indebtedness to Christ: “It is good to be ever taking from Him. I desire that He may get the fruit of praises for dawting and thus dandling me on His knee: and I may give my bond of thankfulness, so being I have Christ’s back-bond again for my relief” (240).

<sup>34</sup> *Politics, Religion and the British Revolutions* 94–97.

<sup>35</sup> Loane, “Samuel Rutherford: The Saint of the Covenant” 91–95.

<sup>36</sup> Coffey, *Politics, Religion and the British Revolutions* 110.

<sup>37</sup> *Politics, Religion and the British Revolutions* 103.

<sup>38</sup> Meier, “Love, Law and Lucre.”

<sup>39</sup> “Love, Law and Lucre” 82.

<sup>40</sup> “Love, Law and Lucre” 84.

<sup>41</sup> Cook, *Samuel Rutherford and His Friends* 6.



As Meier notes, these three systems are highly fruitful due to the remarkable degree of correspondence between them, and the way in which it is possible to integrate and extend them metaphorically. In fact, the idea of Christ as “husband,” “judge,” or “surety,” not only suggests significant parallels, but if one interprets the mutual relationships these imply in the legal framework of “bonds” then their convergence forms “a symbolic foundation of the “covenanting spirit,” from which covenant or federal theology has sprung.”<sup>42</sup> This is important, as it illustrates the central role played by imagery in the logical development of thought in and between the *Letters*. It also links this literature, which is often confined to the “devotional” or “mystic” sphere firmly within the theological and political context of seventeenth-century Scotland. However, focusing on the “commissive or mandatory”<sup>43</sup> clusters of imagery, can result in a skewed portrait, creating the sense of an abject subject position under a tyrannous and arbitrary lord. There is a strong authoritarian strain in Rutherford, but as the earlier reference to being dandled on Christ’s knee demonstrates, he deploys many gentler, more loving images, referring to “bairns,” friendship (34), motherhood, lost sheep, and so on (217). Or, in a more celestial strain to a mother who has lost her child, he observes: “She is not sent away, but only sent before, like unto a star, which going away out of our sight doth not die and evanish, but shineth in another hemisphere” (41).

Rutherford’s language in these letters is vivid and peculiar, to a large extent this is due to his fusion of biblical language with the Scots dialect and it adds to the literary impact of his epistles, though it can also make them more difficult to follow.<sup>44</sup> This distinctive idiom is energized by his vivid imagination and gift for pithy and trenchant aphorisms, as well as lengthy rhapsodies on the Person and work of Christ. Thus, the familiar image of the Beloved from the Song of Songs is rendered uniquely, when Rutherford draws upon Scottish terms for a distant lover: “He looked fremed and unco-like upon me when I came first here; but I believe Himself better than His looks” (148). Similarly, in seeking to apply the scriptural injunction to take up his cross when banished to Aberdeen he notes: “Those who can take that crabbed tree handsomely upon their back, and fasten it on canily, shall find it such a burden as wings to a bird, or sails to a ship” (148). Finally, he describes himself in terms of a child, hungrily waiting upon

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<sup>42</sup> Meier, “Love, Law and Lucre” 84–5.

<sup>43</sup> “Love, Law and Lucre” 85.

<sup>44</sup> The *Oxford English Dictionary* quotes him approximately 700 times to illustrate words now rare, colloquial or redundant. (See Coffey, *Politics, Religion and the British Revolutions* 102.)

Christ for food: "I seek not an apple to play me with.... I but beg earnest, and am content to suspend and frist glory whill supper-time.... Will not a father take his little dawted Davie in his arms, and carry him over a ditch or a mire? My short legs could not step over this lair, or sinking mire; and, therefore, my Lord Jesus will bear me through" (225). The examples could be multiplied indefinitely, but sufficient have been cited to give a sense of the way in which seraphic strains of praise are welded to earthy imagery, and a distinctive Scottish idiom, which has made these *Letters* of literary interest, as well as devotional. It explains the observation of Richard Cecil, "Rutherford's *Letters* is one of my classics.... He is a real original."<sup>45</sup>

The *Letters* are informed by the biblical text at many levels. Rutherford applies the dynamic hermeneutic of scriptural typology in order to understand the circumstances, often of intense suffering and deprivation, in which he and his correspondents found themselves. Of the three hundred and sixty-five extant letters written by Rutherford, more than two hundred were penned during his imprisonment at Aberdeen, where he had been banished by the bishops, for his "newly printed book against the Arminians" (then the ascendant party in the Church), and for "not lording the prelates" (135). The most galling part of this edict was his separation from his congregation at Anwoth, and being forbidden to preach (205). It was the latter that probably precipitated the extraordinary flow of epistles that emerged during this period of eighteen months in exile (1636–38).<sup>46</sup> Rutherford self-consciously interprets his situation on the basis of biblical models like the apostle Paul, imprisoned in Caesarea and Rome,<sup>47</sup> or the beloved disciple John, exiled at Patmos.<sup>48</sup> The affinities, of course, are accentuated, when one considers that many of the New Testament epistles were first sent by these men to various individuals or congregations during periods of imprisonment.<sup>49</sup> Rutherford similarly writes to churches in Ireland and Anwoth (e.g., 438–44, 521–24, 549–55), individual parishioners (e.g., 323–24, 344–48, 378–80), friends (e.g., 361–63), and those suffering acute persecution (418–20), during his period of exile. In his dedications and benedictions particularly, Rutherford models his language upon these biblical exemplars. He addresses John Fleming, Bailie of Leith, with the words, "Grace, mercy and peace be unto you" (292), a direct echo of Paul's

<sup>45</sup> Cook, *Samuel Rutherford and His Friends* 144.

<sup>46</sup> Coffey, *Politics, Religion and the British Revolutions* 45–48.

<sup>47</sup> Acts 24:24–27, 25:4; 29:30–31.

<sup>48</sup> Revelation 1:4, 9.

<sup>49</sup> See for example Ephesians 4:1; Colossians 4:18; Philemon 1; 2 John 1; 3 John 1.

letter to Timothy;<sup>50</sup> he concludes his letter to Lady Busbie, "I entreat you to think upon me, His prisoner, and pray that the Lord would be pleased to give me room to speak to His people in His name" (292) picking up Paul's plea to the Colossians, "remember my bonds"<sup>51</sup> and "praying also for us, that God would open unto us a door of utterance, to speak the mystery of Christ, for which I am also in bonds."<sup>52</sup> It can also be heard movingly in his oft-repeated phrase, "the blessing of a prisoner of Christ be upon you" (285), "remember my bonds" (243), again echoing Paul.<sup>53</sup>

In addition to his self-identification with the apostles in prison, and determination to fulfil his pastoral role through letters, when transferred "eight score-miles" (141) to "this Northern world" (159) and consigned to "dumb Sabbaths ... like a stone tied to a bird's foot" (207)<sup>54</sup> the content of Rutherford's letters largely echo those of the New Testament epistles. This can be seen preeminently in his focus upon the Person of Christ, and his exhortations to his readers to pursue him alone. But woven throughout are the recurrent themes of purification through suffering, the relationship between Christ and his Kirk, the need to pray for Zion, the prospect of imminent judgment, renunciation of the world, and an ecstatic hope of glory. These themes are by no means uniquely characteristic of Rutherford, they were often dealt with at the time, and frequently recur in the writings of Christians when under intense persecution or suffering; as the parallels with the New Testament make sufficiently obvious. Rutherford's *Letters*, however, in their entirety form a singular biblical response to a situation that has repeatedly occurred in the history of the Church. His correspondents valued his pastoral insight and sympathy;<sup>55</sup> this, along with the vivid imagery, aesthetic and devotion previously explored, as well as the sheer amount of letters he wrote, cause his text to stand out amongst other writings of a similar genre.

Many of Rutherford's letters were addressed to women, which also distinguishes him from other religious counsellors, like John Calvin or Ignatius Loyola, who frequently resorted to this form of address.<sup>56</sup> This has

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<sup>50</sup> 1 Timothy 1:2.

<sup>51</sup> Colossians 4:18.

<sup>52</sup> Colossians 4:3.

<sup>53</sup> Colossians 4:18.

<sup>54</sup> But his frustration at separation from his flock and inability to preach are always accompanied, and frequently overwhelmed, by joy in the presence of Christ, in "my King's Palace at Aberdeen" (131).

<sup>55</sup> John M. Brentnall, *Samuel Rutherford in Aberdeen* (Inverness: John G. Eccles, c. 1981) 15.

<sup>56</sup> Coffey, *Politics, Religion and the British Revolutions* 97.

provoked some infelicitous comments, like that of Meier: "I was first struck by the extraordinary style of Samuel Rutherford's *Letters* among the other Scottish divines. By comparison, his qualities recalled one's first contact with women: they were softer, warmer, heavier, and sweeter than one had expected."<sup>57</sup> Rutherford's style is certainly unique; its elaborate and luscious qualities can alienate even sympathetic readers. While gender is a useful tool of analysis, such stereotypical contrasts as those identified by Meier do not provide any real insights. Close relationships between pastors and women in their congregation, especially during times of persecution, when both pastors and people could be dismissed from their positions, imprisoned, beheaded, or burnt at the stake with little warning, were characteristic of Puritan and Covenanting circles, and a source of mutual encouragement.<sup>58</sup> The temptation to read amorous sub-texts into such exchanges is present,<sup>59</sup> but misses the intense spiritual dynamic at work in these tight-knit communities, as well as underestimating their serious and genuine hatred of adultery and fornication as sins that would bring about divine retribution. More significant in this present context is the obvious influence that these women could exert socially in Scotland for the cause they held to be biblically right for Kirk and country, and the way in which concerns peculiar to his female correspondents, as women, determined the subject-matter of Rutherford's *Letters*.

Most prominent amongst these is the reality of acute suffering and loss. Again and again, Rutherford writes to women of high and low station who have been bereft of children, or husband. In his epistles to Lady Kenmure, to whom fifty-six of his letters were addressed,<sup>60</sup> he refers consistently to her young son, asking after the "sweet child" and praying God's blessing upon him (132, 138, 149–50, 198, 200, 201, 202, 216, 402). This situation was particularly poignant as Lady Kenmure had lost several children and her husband (40, 100–101); while the young Viscount to whom Rutherford refers was also to die at four years of age (565–68). He himself had lost his first wife after a period of great sickness, and all but one of his children died before him (44, 49, 50–51, 52–53). It is in this context that many of his letters were written, and which made biblical teaching on suffering, sanctification, providence and glory of such pressing relevance and concern. Rutherford's biblical response to these agonising experiences was nuanced

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<sup>57</sup> Meier, "Love, Law and Lucre" 77.

<sup>58</sup> Coffey, *Politics, Religion and the British Revolutions* 97–102.

<sup>59</sup> *Politics, Religion and the British Revolutions* 99–100.

<sup>60</sup> *Politics, Religion and the British Revolutions* 97.

and complex, but always focused on the Person of Christ. There is space here to consider only two instances of the many clusters of scriptural images that informed his writing. In a letter to Barbara Hamilton upon the death of her son-in-law, he describes God as Builder and Gardener:

We see His working and we sorrow . . . we see hewn stones, timber, and an hundred scattered parcels and pieces of an old house, all under-tools, hammers, and axes, and saws; yet the house, the beauty and use of so many lodgings and ease-rooms, we neither see nor understand for the present; these are but in the mind and head of the builder, as yet. We see red earth, unbroken clods, furrows, and stones; but we see not summer, lilies, roses, the beauty of a garden.

(623–24)

The argument of the passage is in the images, taking up the principle in Romans that “all things work together for good to them that love God.”<sup>61</sup> More introspectively, in an earlier letter to James Hamilton, he compares Christ to an Artist, shaping the “unclean and impure channel” (Rutherford) so that it “casteth such lustre” to his glory:

I see that Christ will be Christ, in the dreg and refuse of men. His art, his shining wisdom, his beauty speak loudest in blackness, weakness, deadness, yea, in nothing . . . no deserving, is the ground that Omnipotency delighteth to draw glory out of. (471)

Here the process of sanctification is described in aesthetic terminology: the divine Artist shapes the “black” human material into a vessel through which his “shining wisdom and beauty” glow and “casteth a lustre.” It again clearly draws upon and echoes the biblical text, “the base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not . . . But of him are ye in Christ Jesus, who of God is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption.”<sup>62</sup> Rutherford here takes up a biblical hint like that in Ephesians, that believers are God’s *poema*, and traces the divine imagination at work weaving the events of daily life into “the beauty of a garden,” through his artistic direction of providence, in order to shape the characters of his children through the crucified aesthetics of suffering into a beauty that reflects the image of the Creator: “his art, his shining wisdom, his beauty” delights to write poems of grace transforming “blackness, weakness, deadness” into “glory.”

It was thus out of an historical situation of deep suffering and uncertainty that the exotic aesthetic and literary sensibility of Rutherford’s *Letters* emerged. They represent an epistolary appropriation of the biblical

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<sup>61</sup> Romans 8:28.

<sup>62</sup> 1 Corinthians 1:28, 30.

text in the midst of a religious community where it held an authoritative role in all matters of faith, ecclesiastical discipline, structure, life and practice. They are unique, however, in their rapturous Christocentric focus, which draws heavily upon the Song of Songs and Revelation, in the tradition of authors like Bernard of Clairvaux, inviting their immediate and subsequent readership to develop a sensuous and tactile spiritual interiority, centred on communion with Jesus Christ. Rutherford thus forges a unique language and stock of imagery, which can be accurately categorized as an aesthetic biblical interiority. Built upon a Calvinist theology that united clear scholastic logic, with passionate devotion to the glory of God, this "sense of the heart" present in the believer by grace, enabled a beatific vision of Christ, to which purity of heart and life, expressed in active communion with like-minded believers and the "public" sphere of the day was the only adequate response. While the baroque interiority that characterizes the *Letters* have made them foreign and uncongenial to contemporary tastes, the influence they exercised upon the preaching and spirituality of Scottish culture in subsequent centuries,<sup>63</sup> is an incontrovertible testimony to their literary power, vision, and biblical passion.

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<sup>63</sup> Stuart Loudon, cited by Coffey in *Politics, Religion and the British Revolutions* 96–97.