The Legacy of John Duncan

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John Duncan was born in 1796 in Old Aberdeen, Scotland, to parents who were members of the Associate Presbytery, or Secession Church. When John was nine years old, he entered Aberdeen Grammar School, where from the outset he showed great interest in languages and metaphysics, the two subjects that were to be lifelong intellectual passions. He was once discovered, during class, furiously reading a copy of Aristotle hidden under his desk. In 1810 he matriculated and, obtaining a scholarship, entered Marischal College, Aberdeen, from which he graduated with an M.A. in 1814. Despite the evangelical influences surrounding him, Duncan as a student had espoused the atheistic pantheism of Baruch Spinoza. He nevertheless became a student for the Christian ministry, studying at the theological halls of the Associate Presbytery (1814–16) and the Church of Scotland (1817–21). It was through the influence of one of his tutors, Dr. Mears, that his skepticism fell away, and he was able to believe in the existence of God. This change happened suddenly, when he was crossing one of the bridges in Aberdeen. He later recalled the impact: “When I was convinced that there was a God, I danced on the Brig o’ Dee with delight.”

Dalliance with atheism left a legacy of remorse, which Duncan summarized in the words of John Paul Friedrich Richter, “I wandered to the furthest edge of Creation . . . and I heard the shriek of a Fatherless world.” His recovery of orthodox Christian faith was long and tortuous. Rejecting atheism, he first moved to Unitarianism and for nine years opposed all the central doctrines of Reformed theology, living, as he himself acknowledged, in habitual sin and without prayer. In 1825 he was licensed to preach, a step taken “in ungodliness and doctrinal unbelief and heresy.”

To supplement his meager income, Duncan became a private tutor to a number of wealthy families in Aberdeenshire, including a family called Towers. He became romantically attracted to their daughter, Janet, and notwithstanding the considerable disparity in their economic and social status, he proposed marriage but was refused. Two years later, on hearing that Janet Towers did in fact harbor an affection for him, he proposed again and was accepted. The letters that passed between them before their marriage reflect both Duncan’s eccentricity and his scholarship. In one, having already written diagonally across his original tightly spaced sentences, he continued to fill “every available quarter inch of space in the margins and corners of the quarto pages.” He then set “himself to teach her Greek . . . illustrates this by a comparison with the structure of Latin . . . and breaks off into French.” They married in 1837 and had one daughter, Annie. The following year Janet died, following the premature stillbirth of their second daughter.

Duncan’s conversion, under César Malan in May 1826, brought to him an immediate sense of peace that nevertheless, in time, subsided into pessimism. He found help from his reading of John Owen, Hermann Witsius, and John Love, and from personal association with Gavin Parker and James Kidd. These relationships led to a deeper experience he called his second conversion. As a consequence he retained a lifelong dread of superficial Christianity, often entertaining doubts as to the authenticity of his own faith. He never enjoyed a permanent sense of assurance, and although this experience proved painful for himself and his family, it gave him great empathy for others and unusual depth in his evangelistic ministry.

Duncan was a man of remarkable intellect. In October 1839 he applied for the chair of Oriental Languages in the University of Glasgow and could claim familiarity with Hebrew and all the cognate languages, as well as with Sanskrit, Bengali, Hindustani, and Marathi; furthermore, he had a high degree of fluency in European languages and an amazing facility to express himself in the most elegant Latin. One of Duncan’s very few surviving fragments consists of scribbled annotations on 2 Corinthians 9:6. Of its approximately one hundred words, six are Greek, eight are Hebrew, and four are Sanskrit! His linguistic ability, knowledge of Jewish and rabbinic literature, style of teaching, and deep interest in the Jewish people led others to call him Rabbi Duncan.

Joined to his intellectual powers was an endearing eccentricity and absentmindedness. One example must suffice. In 1841, on the day of his second marriage (to Janet Torrance, the widow of an army officer), he went to his room to dress. Some time later when his cab arrived, he was not to be found, so his niece went to his room and discovered him asleep in his bed, with a Hebrew book in his hand. Taking off his clothes had automatically triggered his nighttime routine, which included getting into bed and reading Hebrew! Such strangeness of character, however, would have its missionary value. One of his fellow missionaries in Budapest, Robert Smith, spoke of him as “a child and a giant in one, both characters curiously intermingled. . . . No man ever inspired less awe, nor called forth deeper reverence.” But neither his brilliant scholarship nor his endearing eccentricities are the true measure of the man; he was above all a devoted Christian, serving his Savior with all his powers, which were dedicated to the salvation of Israel for the short but crucial period between August 1841 and September 1843.

Scottish Interest in the Jewish People

John Duncan himself entered into the heritage of Scottish interest in and sympathy for the Jewish people. Personal acquaintance with Jewish people probably dates from about 1290, when Jewish refugees arrived in Scotland following their violent expulsion from England. Jack C. Whytock reports that Scottish theological halls of the seventeenth century employed Jewish instructors in Hebrew. Undergraduates in Scottish universities enjoyed social contact with Jewish students from the late eighteenth century. By 1780 there was an established Jewish community in Scotland, although it was not religiously organized until some years later. Popular Romantic literature, such as the novels of Sir Walter Scott (1771–1832), often portrayed Jews with sympathy. Significantly, there are no records of Scottish anti-Semitism; the Encyclopaedia Judaica comments: “Relations between Jews and non-Jews in Scotland have always been harmonious.”

Jewish author Abel Philips described the Scots as “a people who held in reverence the teaching and moral principles of the Old Testament.” Through its reading of the Bible, its use of the Psalms in worship, its reverence for the sanctity of the Sabbath,

and its tradition of religious covenanting, the Scottish church entered into what Andrew Walls has described as the church’s “adoptive past,” its indissoluble link with the historical and religious heritage of ancient Israel.\textsuperscript{16}

In its religious literature the Scottish church reiterated a profound indebtedness to the Jewish people as the source of its greatest good. This attitude is typically expressed by Thomas Boston (1676–1732): “All the means of grace, and acceptance through Jesus Christ, that we have now, we had originally from them. . . . It was the light that came out from among them, that enlightened our dark part of the world.”\textsuperscript{17} Gratitude for such blessings, rather than the recrudescence of millennial prophecy, motivated nineteenth-century evangelistic activity aimed at the spiritual restoration of Israel.\textsuperscript{18} The foundation, in 1809, of the London Society for Promoting Christianity Amongst the Jews, with its Scottish auxiliaries, gave many Scottish Christians their first engagement in mission to the Jewish people. Duncan and David Brown, his friend and biographer, were both involved in the formation of an Aberdeen auxiliary, Duncan being one of the secretaries.\textsuperscript{19}

Through the pages of his hugely influential \textit{Edinburgh Christian Instructor}, Andrew Mitchell Thomson actively promoted mission to the Jews. In 1839 the Church of Scotland established its own Committee for the Conversion of the Jews. There was never a more popular missionary project. Evangelical leader Thomas Chalmers considered that “the evangelization of the Jews should rank as a first and foremost object of Christian policy.”\textsuperscript{20}

The committee sought to determine where it should establish the first mission stations. In 1839 a four-man deputation—Alexander Black, Alexander Keith, Robert Murray M’Cheyne, and Andrew Bonar—was sent to investigate Jewish communities in Europe and Palestine. A fall from a camel in Egypt and the general rigors of travel led Black, accompanied by Keith, to return to Europe ahead of the younger men. In Budapest, through a remarkable sequence of events, the archduchess, Maria Dorothea, came to support a Church of Scotland mission to the Jews of Pest.\textsuperscript{21}

On their return, though, when M’Cheyne and Bonar published their \textit{Narrative of a Visit to the Holy Land and Mission of Inquiry to the Jews}, it advocated establishing the mission in Palestine. In fact, the decision was neither Pest nor Palestine, for in 1840 the first missionary, Daniel Edward, commenced work in Iași, Moldavia (from 1861, part of Romania). But the following year a small team of missionaries, under the leadership of John Duncan, departed for Budapest.

**John Duncan and the Budapest Mission**

The first missionary party consisted of Duncan and his wife, assisted by Robert Smith, William Wingate, and William Allan. With the exception of Wingate, they arrived in Hungary on August 21, 1841, very conscious of the place they held in the hearts and prayers not only of the Scottish church but also of the archduchess.

Duncan held that mission to the Jews could prosper only as the Hungarian church generally prospered. In one of his earliest letters home he wrote, “I am . . . very decidedly of the opinion that whoever shall be stationed here must . . . labour for the revival of true religion in the Protestant Churches of the land; which, if it please the Lord to visit them graciously, . . . would then become . . . the best instruments for carrying on the work.” Emphasizing this need for partnership, he added, “To this work . . . we, though strangers, are imperatively called. Warm fraternal love bound our fathers together.”\textsuperscript{22} There were, however, practical as well as ideological reasons for working closely with the Hungarian church. The Hapsburg administration was opposed to its citizens changing their religious affiliation, except when Protestant spouses became Catholics. In the twelve-month period ending June 1839, altogether 103 persons had sought permission to become Protestants, but only 20 applications were successful. In the same year Hungarian printers had been ordered not to produce Protestant catechisms or confessional books without special license.\textsuperscript{23} The activities of foreign ministers and missionaries were subject to grave suspicion; officially, Duncan could operate in Pest only as the pastor of the families of the British engineers who were engaged in building the Széchenyi Chain Bridge (the first bridge over the Danube, constructed 1839–49).\textsuperscript{24}

Being a Württemberg pietist, Archduchess Maria Dorothea herself was liable to Hapsburg intolerance; the Catholic clergy constantly intrigued against her, for it was darkly rumored that Scottish Protestants planned to establish a mission for the conversion of Catholics. She dismissed such dangers as inconsequential, commenting to Alexander Keith that “they can only lodge a complaint with Metternich, and all he can do is to present it to the Empress . . . so make yourself easy about me.”\textsuperscript{25} The missionaries, however, recognized that her situation was not without risk and so referred to her in code as “the sister on the hill.”\textsuperscript{26}

As a Presbyterian, it was natural for Duncan to ally himself to the Reformed Church, but he also established close friendships with the Lutherans. When Maria Dorothea sought, and obtained, permission of the archduke to build a Lutheran place of worship in the Buda Castle district, Duncan appealed to the Scottish church for help: “I beg the Gospel for Hungary; I beg it for God, I beg it of you. Remember the fathers of the Reformation. Rekindle the lamp that kindled ours. Even amidst domestic afflictions liberally devise liberal things.”\textsuperscript{27} After the 1843 Disruption, the Free Church of Scotland contributed 20,000 Hungarian florins, and the archduchess an additional 10,000.\textsuperscript{28}

Within three months of his arrival Duncan had mastered the grammar of the Magyar language, but he did not attempt to speak it in public. His friend and helper Pal Torok, superintendent of the Hungarian Reformed Church in Pest, bore testimony to his “wisdom, modesty, and judicious procedure. He thus won us all, and carefully and happily avoided every cause of offence—all conflict with the political and ecclesiastical authorities.”\textsuperscript{29} Duncan’s identification with the Magyar people and their cause was so strong that on a visit to Hungary after the 1848 revolution, Duncan, willing to incur the wrath of the Hapsburgs, loudly cheered the sight of the red, white, and green flag of Hungary and, discarding his tall silk hat, the badge of the Austrians, went bareheaded until he could purchase one of the distinctive flat Magyar felt hats.\textsuperscript{30}

A major part of Duncan’s chosen missionary strategy was to hold public services each Lord’s Day.
English, ostensibly for the British engineers working on the bridge, they attracted many Jewish Hungarians who wanted to improve their English. It was through one of these meetings, at which Wingate preached, that a breakthrough came when Israel Saphir, a highly respected member of the Jewish community, came to believe in Jesus as his Messiah.

In private, Duncan cultivated close friendships with members of the Jewish community, including the chief rabbi, Low Schwab (1794–1857), who was responsible for the building of the magnificent Dohany Street Synagogue. Duncan and Schwab shared a particularly warm friendship, each having a conservative understanding of the Bible and an interest in mathematics and philosophy. Schwab invited Duncan to attend the marriage of his daughter to a young rabbi, who was delighted to make the acquaintance of a man he had heard so much about.

Duncan was in the habit of spending whole days in receiving visitors and bringing into play his remarkable conversational and persuasive powers. His home was “thrown open to the Jews; they saw all their habits and ways, and had Christianity presented before them without being forced upon them. His very peculiarities seemed to suit them, and to attract rather than offend.” Perhaps Duncan’s major legacy is best understood in terms of the people who, through his witness, though not his alone, embraced Christianity as the fulfillment of Old Testament promise. These included Israel Saphir and his whole family, as well as Sandor Tomory and Alfred Edersheim.

After the Disruption in 1843 Adolph Saphir (1831–91) went with Duncan to Edinburgh to be educated at New College. (Anachronistically, he appears in D. O. Hill’s important painting of the Disruption Assembly, standing beside John Duncan and the other Jewish missionaries, pointing to a map of Palestine.) In 1854 he was ordained to the Jewish mission of the Irish Presbyterian Church, later becoming one of the best-known expositors of the Jewish origins of Christianity and a strong, though not uncritical, advocate of Jewish missions. Adolph’s sister Elizabeth and their brother Philip were cofounders of the school that became the center of the Scottish Mission in Budapest.

Sandor Tomory (1818–95) became a missionary to his people in Constantinople. When he first began to show an interest in Christianity, a Roman Catholic bishop suggested he should go to Pest and see John Duncan. “Three days later I was introduced to the dear man. In a most syllogistic way, and in fluent Latin, he brought out the truth of the gospel, and urged me to accept Christ as my Saviour. . . . But quite in keeping with the character of the doctor, . . . in the same breath he began to teach me in English. While the tears were yet in my eyes and his, he began to conjugate an English verb, and made me repeat it. After that I saw him almost daily till he left for Italy. This was in the year 1842. He left, but the blessing remained behind.”

Alfred Edersheim (1823–89) went with Duncan and Saphir to Edinburgh. After attending New College, he was ordained as a Free Church missionary to Iaşi, Moldavia, and in 1849 he accepted a call to Old Aberdeen. When illness took its toll, he moved to England, becoming in 1884 select preacher to the University of Oxford. Edersheim’s literary output was immense; his Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah remains in print to the present day and is still considered useful, though challenged in parts by modern scholarship.

When, after about a year, Duncan’s ministry was interrupted by ill health, he was persuaded to recuperate in Italy. He did return to Pest, though only briefly. On May 24, 1843, the Disruption of the Church of Scotland took place, with most of the committee and all the missionaries joining the Free Church of Scotland. Duncan was recalled to the chair of Hebrew at New College, a post he occupied until his death in 1870.

Role as Teacher and Advocate of Jewish Missions

Although a brilliant Hebraist, Duncan was considered a poor teacher of elementary Hebrew, lacking the discipline and application necessary to keep order in his class. His own minister, Alexander Moody Stuart, commented, “From his student days till the end of his life he taught his pupils with ardour in his own way, however irregularly and however unsuccessfully.” Duncan acknowledged his failures, remarking that he never should have left the Jewish Mission merely to teach Hebrew. Brown’s opinion was that very little of the best of Duncan came out in either the professor’s chair or the pulpit.

Duncan’s finest contributions came through the less formal discussions he held with his students. One of his colleagues considered that the church would have been better served if he had been permitted to abandon the classroom, to conduct walks twice a week with his students in Princes Street Gardens. Referring to Duncan’s peripatetic conversations, one of his students said, “It seemed as if Pascal had shuffled into the sandals of Socrates, and walked up and down Edinburgh streets.”

Duncan’s Legacy

Apart from shaping the lives already referred to, Duncan’s influence continued to be felt for many years after his departure from Budapest. Through reading, correspondence, and occasional visits, he maintained a lively interest in all that was taking place. He corresponded in French with Archduchess Maria Dorothea, who became the patron of many evangelical causes in the light of subsequent events, they form an inspiring and motivating series of reflections. Duncan’s use of language is breathtaking; his originality, clarity of expression, and precision of vocabulary amply justify Moody Stuart’s comment that he had a “fastidious sense of the music of words.”

Duncan died on February 26, 1870, and is buried, along with his second wife, Janet Torrance, and their daughter Maria-Dorothea Spaeth, in Edinburgh’s Grange Cemetery. An inscription on the obelisk pays tribute to “an eminent scholar and metaphysician, a profound theologian, a man of tender piety, and of a lowly and loving spirit.”
Hungary. Through the medium of Latin he also kept in touch with his friend and former colleague Pal Tokor, the Reformed bishop in Budapest.

Modern opinion holds that the Scottish missionaries were the catalyst for the revival of Protestant spiritual life in Hungary. A. M. Kool considers that through their network of influence, including Maria Dorothea and Count István Széchenyi, the missionaries communicated “a vision for missions.” She cites J. F. A. De la Roi, in whose opinion the Scottish Mission was “a very blessed influence on the church. By the spread of Bibles and literature, its evangelistic outreach, its Deaconesses’ home and its school, the mission gained the biggest influence on the Protestants and Jews of Hungary. The mission to the Jews is nowhere else considered to be such a blessing as in Hungary.” Such comment stands testimony to the successful legacy of Duncan’s church and mission strategy.

Notes

2. Ibid., p. 76.
3. Ibid., p. 58.
4. Ibid., p. 110.
7. Ibid., p. 72.

23. [Georg Bauthofer], *The History of the Protestant Church in Hungary, from the Beginning of the Reformation to 1850*, trans. J. Craig (London: James Nisbet, 1854), p. 432. The author was a Lutheran pastor in Pest. Because this volume was considered subversive, the publishers preserved the anonymity of the author.
28. [Bauthofer], *History of the Protestant Church in Hungary*, p. 444.
32. Ibid., p. 441.
40. New College, Edinburgh, MSS Box 49.2.1.

Selected Bibliography

Works by John Duncan


Works About John Duncan


