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COMMENTARY ON THE WHOLE BIBLE

Preface to Volume Three

by Matthew Henry

To the Students of the Words, Works and Ways of God:

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PREFACE TO VOLUME THREE

These five books of scripture which are contained in this third volume and which I have here endeavoured, according to the measure of the gift given to me, to explain and improve, for the use of those who desire to read them, not only with understanding, but to their edification — though they have the same divine origin, design, and authority, as those that went before, yet, upon some accounts, are of a very different nature from them, and from the rest of the sacred writings, such variety of methods has Infinite Wisdom seen fit to take in conveying the light of divine revelation to the children of men, that this heavenly food might have (as the Jews say of the manna) something in it agreeable to every palate and suited to every constitution. If every eye be not thus opened, every mouth will be stopped, and such as perish in their ignorance will be left without excuse. *We have piped unto you, and you have not danced, we have mourned unto you, and you have not lamented,* ^{<4117>}Matthew 11:17.

I. The books of scripture have hitherto been, for the most part, very plain and easy, narratives of matter of fact, which he that runs may read and understand, and which are milk for babes, such as they can receive and digest, and both entertain and nourish themselves with. The waters of the sanctuary have hitherto been but to the ankles or to the knees, such as a lamb might wade in, to drink of and wash in; but here we are advanced to a higher form in God's school, and have books put into our hands wherein are *many things dark and hard to be understood*, which we do not apprehend the meaning of so suddenly and so certainly as we could wish, the study of which requires a more close application of mind, a greater intenseness of thought, and the accomplishing of a diligent search, which yet the treasure hid in them, when it is found, will abundantly recompense. The waters of the sanctuary are here *to the loins*, and still as we go forward we shall find the waters still risen in the prophetic books, *waters to swim in* (^{<3408>}Ezekiel 47:3-5), not fordable, nor otherwise to be passed over — depths in which an elephant will not find footing, *strong meat for strong men*. The same method is observable in the New Testament, where we find the plain history of Christ and his gospel placed first in the Evangelists and the Acts of the Apostles; then the mystery of both in the Epistles, which are more difficult to be understood; and, lastly, the prophesies of things to come in the apocalyptic visions. This method, so

exactly observed in both the Testaments, directs us in what order to proceed both in studying the things of God ourselves and in teaching them to others; we must go in the order that the scripture does; and where can we expect to find a better method of divinity and a better method of preaching?

1. We must begin with those things that are most plain and easy, as, blessed be God, those things are which are most necessary to salvation and of the greatest use. We must lay our foundation firm, in a sound experimental knowledge of the principles of religion, and then the superstructure will be well reared and will stand firmly. It is not safe to launch out into the deep at first, nor to venture into points difficult and controverted until we have first thoroughly digested the elements of the oracles of God and turned them *in succum et sanguinem* — into juice and blood. Those that begin their Bible at the wrong end commonly use their knowledge of it in the wrong way. And, in training up others, we must be sure to ground them well at first in those truths of God which are plain, and in some measure level to their capacity, which we find they comprehend, and relish, and know how to make use of, and not amuse those that are weak with things above them, things of doubtful disputation, which they cannot apprehend any certainty of nor advantage by. Our Lord Jesus spoke the word to the people *as they were able to hear it* (⁴⁰⁸³Mark 4:33) and had many things to say to his disciples which he did not say because as yet they *could not bear them*, ⁴¹⁰²John 16:12, 13. And those whom St. Paul *could not speak to as unto spiritual* — though he blamed them for their backwardness, yet he accommodated himself to their weakness, and spoke to them *as unto babes in Christ*, ⁴¹¹¹1 Corinthians 3:1, 2.

2. Yet we must not rest in these things. We must not be always children that have need of milk, but nourished up with that, and gaining strength, we must *go on to perfection* (³⁸⁶¹Hebrews 6:1), that having, *by reason of use, our spiritual senses exercised* (³⁸⁵⁴Hebrews 5:14), we may come to full age, and put away childish things, and, *forgetting the things which are behind*, that is, so well remembering them (³⁰⁸³Philippians 3:13) that we need not be still poring over them as those that are ever learning the same lesson, we may reach forth to the things which are before. Though we must never think to learn above our Bible, as long as we are here in this world, yet we must still be getting forward in it. *You have dwelt long enough in this mountain*; now turn and take your journey onward in the

wilderness towards Canaan. Our motto must be *Plus ultra — Onward*. And then shall we know if thus, by regular steps (^{306B}Hosea 6:3), we *follow on to know the Lord* and what the mind of the Lord is.

II. The books of scripture have hitherto been mostly historical, but now the matter is of another nature; it is doctrinal and devotional, preaching and praying; and in this way of writing, as well as in the former, a great deal of excellent knowledge is conveyed, which serves very valuable purposes. It will be of good use to know not only what others did that went before us, and how they fared, but what their notions and sentiments were, what their thoughts and affections were, that we may, with the help of them, form our minds aright. Plutarch's *Morals* are reputed as a useful treasure in the commonwealth of learning as Plutarch's *Lives*, and the wise disquisitions and discourses of the philosophers as the records of the historians; nor is this divine philosophy (if I may so call it), which we have in these books, less needful, nor less serviceable, to the church, than the sacred history was. Blessed be God for both.

III. The Jews make these books to be given by a divine inspiration somewhat different from that both of Moses and the prophets. They divided the books of the Old Testament into the Law, the Prophets and the *ktwbym* — *Writings*, which Epiphanius emphatically translates *grapheia* — *things written*, and these books are more commonly called among the Greeks *Hagiographa* — *Holy writings*: the Jews attribute them to that distinct kind of inspiration which they call *rwh hqds* — *The Holy Spirit*. Moses they supposed to write by the Spirit in a way above all the other prophets, for *with him* God spoke *mouth to mouth, even apparently* (^{401B}Numbers 12:8) *knew him*, that is, conversed with him *face to face*, (^{694D}Deuteronomy 34:10. He was made partaker of divine revelation (as Maimonides distinguishes, *De Fund. Legis*, ch. 7) *per vigiliam* — *while awake*, (See Mr. Smith's *Discourses on Prophecy*, ch. 11.) whereas God manifested himself to all the other prophets in a dream or vision: and he adds that Moses understood the words of prophecy without any perturbation or astonishment of mind, whereas the other prophets commonly fainted and were troubled. But the writers of the *Hagiographa* they suppose to be inspired in a degree somewhat below that of the other prophets, and to receive divine revelation, not as they did by dreams, and visions, and voices, but (as Maimonides describes it, *More Nevochim* — *part 2 c. 45*) they perceived some power to rise within them, and rest upon

them, which urged and enabled them to write or speak far above their own natural ability, in psalms or hymns, or in history or in rules of good living, still enjoying the ordinary vigour and use of their senses. Let David himself describe it. *The Spirit of the Lord spoke by me, and his word was in my tongue; the God of Israel said, the Rock of Israel spoke to me,* ¹²³2 Samuel 23:2, 3. This gives such a magnificent account of the inspiration by which David wrote that I see not why it should be made inferior to that of the other prophets, for David is expressly called a *prophet*, ⁴¹²Acts 2:29, 30. But, since our hand is in with the Jewish masters, let us see what books they account Hagiographa. These five that are now before us come, without dispute, into this rank of sacred writers, and the book of the Lamentations is not unfitly added to them. Indeed the Jews, when they would speak critically, reckon all those songs which we meet with in the Old Testament among the Hagiographa; for though they were penned by prophets, and under the direction of the Holy Ghost, yet, because they were not the proper result of a *visum propheticum* — *prophetic vision*, they were not strictly prophecy. As to the historical books, they distinguish (but I think it is a distinction without a difference); some of them they assign to the prophets, calling them the *prophetae priores* — *the former prophets*, namely, Joshua, Judges, and the two books of the Kings; but others they rank among the Hagiographa, as the book of Ruth (which yet is but an appendix to the book of Judges), the two books of Chronicles, with Ezra, Nehemiah, and the book of Esther, which last the rabbins have a great value for, and think it is to be had in equal esteem with the law of Moses itself, that it shall last as long as that lasts, and shall survive the writings of the Prophets. And, *lastly*, they reckon the book of Daniel among the Hagiographa, (Hil. Megil. c. 2, 11) for which no reason can be given, since he was not inferior to any of the prophets in the gift of prophecy; and therefore the learned Mr. Smith thinks that their placing him among the Hagiographical writers was fortuitous by mistake (Vid. Hottinger. Thesaur. lib. 2, cap. 1, 3). Mr. Smith, in his Discourse before quoted, though he supposes this kind of divine inspiration to be more “*pacate and serene* than that which was strictly called *prophecy*, not acting so much upon the imagination, but seating itself in the higher and purer faculties of the soul, yet shows that it manifested itself to be of a divine nature, not only as it always elevated pious souls into strains of devotion, or moved them strangely to dictate matters of true piety and goodness, but as it came in abruptly upon the minds of those holy men, and transported them from the temper of mind they were in before, so that they perceived themselves

captivated by the power of some higher light than that which their own understanding commonly poured out upon them; and this, says he, was a kind of vital form to that light of divine and sanctified reason which they were perpetually possessed of and that constant frame of holiness and goodness which dwelt in their hallowed minds.” We have reason to *glorify the God of Israel who gave such power unto men* and has here transmitted to us the blessed products of that power.

IV. The style and composition of these books are different from those that go before and those that follow. Our Saviour divides the books of the Old Testament into *the Law, the Prophets, and the Psalms* (~~4244~~ Luke 24:44), and thereby teaches us to distinguish those books that are poetical, or metrical, from the Law and the Prophets; and such are all these that are now before us, except Ecclesiastes, which yet, having something restrained in its style, may well enough be reckoned among them. They are books in verse, according to the ancient rules of versifying, though not according to the Greek and Latin *prosodies*. Some of the ancients call these five books *the second Pentateuch of the Old Testament* (Damascen. Orthod. Fid. 1.4, cap. 18.), five sacred volumes which are as the satellites to the five books of the law of Moses. *Gregory Nazianzen* (Vid. Suicer. Thesaur. in *stichera* — *carm.* 33, p. 98) calls these *hai sticheraï pente* — *the five metrical books*; first Job (so he reckons them up), then David, then the three of Solomon — Ecclesiastes, the Song, and Proverbs. *Amphilochius*, bishop at Iconium, in his iambic poem to *Seleucus*, reckons them up particularly, and calls them *sticheras pente Biblos* — *the five verse-books*. *Epiphanius* (*lib. de ponder. et mensur.* p. 533) *pente stichereis* — *the five verse-books*. And *Cyril. Hierosol. Collect.* 4, p. 30 (*mihi* — *in my copy*), calls these five books *ta stichera* — *books in verse*. *Polychronius*, in his prologue to Job, says that as *those that are without* call their tragedies and comedies *poietika* — *poetics*, so, in sacred writ, those books which are composed in Hebrew metre (of which he reckons Job the first) we call *stichera biblia* — *books in verse*, written *kata stichon* — *according to order*. What is written in metre, or rhythm, is so called from *metros* — *a measure*, and *arithmos* — *a number*, because regulated by certain measures, or numbers of syllables, which please the ear with their smoothness and cadency, and so insinuate the matter the more movingly and powerfully into the fancy. Sir William Temple, (*Miscell.* part 2.) in his essay upon poetry, thinks it is generally agreed to have been the first sort of writing that was used in the world, nay, that, in several

nations, poetical compositions preceded the very invention or usage of letters. The Spaniards (he says) found in America many strains of poetry, and such as seemed to flow from a true poetic vein, before any letters were known in those regions. The same (says he) is probable of the Scythians and Grecians: the oracles of Apollo were delivered in verse. Homer and Hesiod wrote their poems (the very Alcoran of the pagan daemonology) many ages before the appearing of any of the Greek philosophers or historians; and long before them (if we may give credit to the antiquities of Greece), even before the days of David, Orpheus and Linus were celebrated poets and musicians in Greece; and at the same time Carmenta, the mother of Evander, who was the first that introduced letters among the natives of Greece, was so called *a carmine* — *from a song*, because she expressed herself in verse. And in such veneration was this way of writing among the ancients that their poets were called *vates* — *prophets*, and their muses were deified. But, which is more certain and considerable, the most ancient composition that we meet with in scripture was the song of Moses at the Red Sea (Exodus 15), which we find before the very first mention of writing, for that occurs not until ⁽⁰⁷⁴⁾Exodus 17:14, when God bade Moses write a memorial of the war with Amalek. The first, and indeed the true and general end of writing, is a help of memory; and poetry does in some measure answer that end, and even in the want of writing, much more with writing, helps to preserve the remembrance of ancient things. The book of *wars of the Lord* (⁽⁰¹⁴⁾Numbers 21:14), and the book of Jasher (⁽⁰⁰³⁾Joshua 10:13; ⁽⁰¹⁸⁾2 Samuel 1:18), seem to have been both written in poetic measures. Many sacred songs we meet with in the Old Testament, scattered both in the historical and prophetic books, penned on particular occasions, which, in the opinion of very competent judges, “have in them as true and noble strains of poetry and picture as are met with in any other language whatsoever, in spite of all disadvantages from translations into such different tongues and common prose, (Sir W. Temple, p. 329.) nay, are nobler examples of the true sublime style of poetry than any that can be found in the Pagan writers; the images are so strong, the thoughts so great, the expressions so divine, and the figures so admirably bold and moving, that the wonderful manner of these writers is quite inimitable.” (Sir R. Blackmore's preface to Job.) It is fit that what is employed in the service of the sanctuary should be the best in its kind.

The books here put together are poetical. Job is an heroic poem, the book of Psalms a collection of divine odes or lyrics, Solomon's Song a pastoral

and an epithalamium; they are poetical, and yet sacred and serious, grave and full of majesty. They have a poetic force and flame, without poetic fury and fiction, and strangely command and move the affections, without corrupting the imagination or putting a cheat upon it; and, while they gratify the ear, they edify the mind and profit the more by pleasing. It is therefore much to be lamented that so powerful an art, which was at first consecrated to the honour of God, and has been so often employed in his service, should be debauched, as it has been, and is at this day, into the service of his enemies — that his corn, and wine, and oil should be prepared for Baal.

V. As the manner of the composition of these books is excellent, and very proper to engage the attention, move the affections, and fix them in the memory, so the matter is highly useful, and such as will be every way serviceable to us. They have in them the very sum and substance of religion, and what they contain is more fitted to our hand, and made ready for use, than any part of the Old Testament, upon which account, if we may be allowed to compare one star with another in the firmament of the scripture, these will be reckoned stars of the first magnitude. *All scripture is profitable* (and this part of it in a special manner) *for instruction* in doctrine, in devotion, and in the right ordering of the conversation. The book of Job directs us what we are to believe concerning God, the book of Psalms how we are to worship him, pay our homage to him, and maintain our communion with him, and then the book of the Proverbs shows very particularly how we are to govern ourselves *en pase anastrophe* — *in every turn of human life*; thus shall the *man of God*, by a due attention to these lights, be *perfect, thoroughly furnished for every good work*. And these are placed according to their natural order, as well as according to the order of time; for very fitly are we first led into the knowledge of God, our judgments rightly formed concerning him, and our mistakes rectified, and then instructed how to worship him and to choose the things that please him. We have here much of natural religion, its principles, its precepts — much of God, his infinite perfections, his relations to man, and his government both of the world and of the church; here is much of Christ, who is the spring, and soul, and centre, of revealed religion, and whom both Job and David were eminent types of, and had clear and happy prospects of. We have here that which will be of use to enlighten our understandings, and to acquaint us more and more with the things of God, with the deep things of God — speculations to entertain the most

contemplative, and discoveries to satisfy the most inquisitive and increase the knowledge of those that are most knowing. Here is that also which, with a divine light, will bring into the soul the heat and influence of a divine fire, will kindle and inflame pious and devout affections, on which wings we may soar upwards until we enter into the holiest. We may here be in the mount with God, to behold his beauty; and when we come down from that mount, if we retain (as we ought) the impressions of our devotion upon our spirits and make conscience of doing that good which the Lord our God here requires of us, our faces shall shine before all with whom we converse, who shall take occasion thence to *glorify our Father who is in heaven*, ^{<4186>}Matthew 5:16. Thus great, thus noble, thus truly excellent, is the subject, and thus capable of being improved, which gives me the more reason to be ashamed of the meanness of my performance, that the comment breathes so little of the life and spirit of the text. We often wonder at those that are not at all affected with the great things of God, and have no taste nor relish of them, because they know little of them; but perhaps we have more reason to wonder at ourselves, that conversing so frequently, so intimately, with them, we are not more affected with them, so as even to be wholly taken up with them, and in a continual transport of delight in the contemplation of them. We hope to be so shortly; in the mean time, though like the three disciples that were the witnesses of Christ's transfiguration upon the mount we are but dull and sleepy, yet we can say, *Master, it is good to be here; here let us make tabernacles*, ^{<4187>}Luke 9:32, 33.

I have nothing here to boast of — nothing at all, but a great deal to be humbled for, that I have not come up to what I have aimed at in respect of fulness and exactness. In the review of the work, I find many defects, and those who are critical, perhaps, will meet with some mistakes in it; but I have done it with what care I could, and desire to be thankful to God who by his grace has carried me on in his work thus far: let that grace have all the glory (^{<4188>}Philippians 2:13), which *works in us both to will and to do* whatever we will or do that is good or serves any good purpose. What is from God will, I trust, be to him, will be graciously accepted by him, *according to what a man has, and not according to what he had not*, and will be of some use to his church; and what is from myself (that is, all the defects and errors) will, I trust, be favourably passed by and pardoned. That prayer of *St. Austin* is mine, *Domine Deus, quaecunque dixi in his libris de tuo, agnoscant et tui; et quae de meo, et tu ignosce et tui* — *Lord*

God, whatever I have maintained in these books correspondent with what is contained in thine grant that thy people may approve as well as thyself; whatever is but the doctrine of my book forgive thou, and grant that thy people may forgive it also. I must beg likewise to own, to the honour of our great Master, that I have found the work to be its own wages, and that the more we converse with the word of God the more it is to us as *the honey and the honeycomb*, ⁽³⁰⁰⁾ Psalm 19:10. In gathering some gleanings of this harvest for others we may feast ourselves; and, when we are enabled by the grace of God to do so, we are best qualified to feed others. I was much pleased with a passage I lately met with of Erasmus, that great scholar and celebrated wit, in an epistle dedicatory before his book *De Ratione Concionandi*, where, as one weary of the world and the hurry of it, he expresses an earnest desire to spend the rest of his days in secret communion with Jesus Christ, encouraged by his gracious invitation to those who *labour and are heavy laden to come unto him for rest* (⁽⁴¹⁸⁾ Matthew 11:28), and this alone is that which he thinks will yield him true satisfaction. I think his words worth transcribing, and such as deserve to be inserted among the testimonies of great men to serious godliness.

Neque quisquam facile credat qu...m misere animus jamdudum affectet ab his laboribus in tranquillam otium secedere, quodque superest vitae (superest autem vix brevis palmus sive pugillus), solum cum eo solo colloqui, qui clamavit olim (nec hodie mutat vocem suam), "Venite ad me, omnes qui laboratis et onerati estis, ego reficiam vos;" quandoquidem in tam turbulento, ne dicam furente, saeculo, in tot molestiis quas vel ipsa tempora publice invehunt, vel privatim adfert oetas ac valetudo, nihil reperio in quo mens mea libentius conquiescat qu...m in hoc arcano colloquio — No one will easily believe how anxiously, for a long time past, I have wished to retire from these labours into a scene of tranquility, and, during the remainder of life (dwindled, it is true, to the shortest span), to converse only with him who once cried (nor does he now retract), "Come unto me, all you that labour and are heavy laden, and I will refresh you," for in this turbulent, not to say furious, age, the many public sources of disquietude, connected with the infirmities of advancing age, leave no solace to my mind to be compared with this secret communion. In the pleasing contemplation of the divine beauty and benignity we hope to spend a blessed eternity, and therefore in this work it is good to spend as much as may be of our time.

One volume more, containing the prophetical books, will finish the Old Testament, if the Lord continue my life, and leisure, and ability of mind and body for this work. It is begun, and I find it will be larger than any of the other volumes, and longer in the doing; but, as God by his grace shall furnish me for it and assist me in it (without which grace I am nothing, less than nothing, worse than nothing), it shall be carried on with all convenient speed; and *sat cita, si sat bene* — *if with sufficient ability, it will be with sufficient speed*. I desire the prayers of my friends that God would *minister seed to the sower and bread to the eaters* (~~490~~²⁵⁰ Isaiah 55:10), that he would *multiply the seed sown and increase the fruits of our righteousness* (~~490~~ 2 Corinthians 9:10), that so he who *sows and those who reap may rejoice together* (~~465~~ John 4:36); and the great Lord of the harvest shall have the glory of all.

Chester, May 13, 1710 M.H.