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## COMMENTARY ON THE WHOLE BIBLE

### **Preface to Volume Two**

*by Matthew Henry*

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

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## PREFACE TO VOLUME TWO

This second volume of methodized and practical expositions of the inspired writings ventures abroad with fear and trembling in the same plain and homely dress with the former on the Pentateuch. *Ornari res ipsa negat; contenta doceri — the subject requires no ornament; to have it apprehended is all.* But I trust, through grace, it proceeds from the same honest design to promote the knowledge of the scripture, in order to the reforming of men's hearts and lives. If I may but be instrumental to make my readers wise and good, wiser and better, more watchful against sin and more careful of their duty both to God and man, and, in order thereto, more in love with the word and law of God, I have all I desire, all I aim at. *May he that ministereth seed to the sower multiply the seed sown, by increasing the fruits of our righteousness,* ~~AND~~ 2 Corinthians 9:10. It is the history of the Jewish church and nation that fills this volume, from their first settlement in the promised land, after their 430 years' bondage in Egypt and their forty years' wandering in the wilderness, to their re-settlement there after their seventy years' captivity in Babylon — from Joshua to Nehemiah. The five books of Moses were taken up more with their laws, institutes, and charters; but all these books are purely historical, and in this way of writing a great deal of very valuable learning and wisdom has been conveyed from one generation to another. The chronology of this history, and the ascertaining of the times when the several events contained in it happened, would very much illustrate the history, and add to the brightness of it; it is therefore well worthy the search of the curious and ingenious, and they may find both pleasure and profit in perusing the labours of many learned men who have directed their studies that way. I confess I could willingly have entertained myself and reader, in this preface, with a calculation of the times through which this history passes; but I consider that such a babe in knowledge as I am could not pretend either to add to or correct what has been done by so many great writers, much less to decide the controversies that have been agitated among them. I had indeed some thoughts of consulting my worthy and ever-honoured friend Mr. Tallents of Shrewsbury, the learned author of the “View of Universal History,” and of begging some advice and assistance from him in methodizing the contents of this history; but, in the very week in which I put my last hand to this part, it pleased God to put an end to his

useful life (and useful it was to the last) and to call him to his rest, in the eighty-ninth year of his age: so that purpose was broken off, that thought of my heart. But that elaborate performance of his commonly called his "Chronological Tables" gives great light to this, as indeed to all other parts of history. And Dr. Lightfoot's "Chronology of the Old Testament," and Mr. Cradock's "History of the Old Testament Methodized," may also be of great use to such readers as I write for. As to the particular chronological difficulties which occur in the thread of this history, I have not been large upon them, because many times I could not satisfy myself, and how then could I satisfy my reader concerning them? I have not indeed met with any difficulties so great but that solutions might be given of them sufficient to silence the atheists and antiscriturists, and roll away from the sacred records all the reproach of contradiction and inconsistency with themselves; for, to do that, it is enough to show that the difference may be accommodated either this way or that, when at the same time one cannot satisfy one's self which way is the right. But it is well that these are things about which we may very safely and very comfortably be ignorant and unresolved. What concerns our salvation is plain enough, and we need not perplex ourselves about the niceties of chronology, genealogy, or chorography. At least my undertaking leads me not into those labyrinths. What is *profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, and for instruction in righteousness*, is what I intend to observe, and I would endeavour to open what is dark and hard to be understood only in order to that. Every author must be taken in his way of writing; the sacred penman, as they have not left us formal systems, so they have not left us formal annals, but useful narratives of things proper for our direction in the way of duty, which some great judges of common writers have thought to be the most pleasant and profitable histories, and most likely to answer the end. The word of God *manifestis pascit, obscuris exercet* (Aug. in Joh. Tract. 45), as one of the ancients expresses it, that is, *it has enough in it that is easy to nourish the meanest to life eternal, yet enough that is difficult to try the industry and humility of the greatest*. There are several things which should recommend this part of sacred writ to our diligent and constant search.

**I.** That it is *history*, and therefore entertaining and very pleasant, edifying and very serviceable to the conduct of human life. It gratifies the inquisitive with the knowledge of that which the most intense speculation could not discover any other way. By a retirement into ourselves, and a serious

contemplation of the objects we are surrounded with, close reasoning may advance many excellent truths without being beholden to any other. But for the knowledge of past events we are entirely indebted (and must be so) to the reports and records of others. A notion or hypothesis of man's own framing may gain him the reputation of a wit, but a history of man's own framing will lay him under the reproach of a cheat any further than as it respects that which he himself is an eye or ear-witness of. How much are we indebted then to the divine wisdom and goodness for these writings, which have made things so long since past as familiar to us as any of the occurrences of the age and place we live in! History is so edifying that parables and apologues have been invented to make up the deficiencies of it for our instruction concerning good and evil; and, whatever may be said of other history, we are sure that in this history there is no matter of fact recorded but what has its use and will help either to expound God's providence or guide man's prudence.

**II.** That it is *true* history, and what we may rely upon the credit of, and need not fear being deceived in. That which the heathens reckoned *tempus adelon* (which they knew nothing at all of) and *tempus mythikon* (the account of which was wholly fabulous) is to us *tempus historikon*, what we have a most authentic account of. The Greeks were with them the most celebrated historians, and yet their successors in learning and dominion, the Romans, put them into no good name for their credibility, witness that of the poet: *Et quicquid Graecia mendax audet in historia — All that lying Greece has dared to record*, Juv. Sat. 10. But the history which we have before us is of undoubted certainty, and no cunningly devised fable. To be well assured of this is a great satisfaction, especially since we meet with so many things in it truly miraculous, and many more great and marvellous.

**III.** That it is *ancient* history, far more ancient than was ever pretended to come from any other hand. Homer the most ancient genuine heathen writer now entirely extant, is reckoned to have lived at the beginning of the Olympiads, near the time when it is computed that the city of Rome was founded by Romulus, which was but about the reign of Hezekiah king of Judah. And his writings pretend not to be historical, but poetical fiction all over: rhapsodies indeed they are, and the very Alcoran of paganism. The most ancient authentic historians now extant are Herodotus and Thucydides, who were contemporaries with the latest of our historians, Ezra and Nehemiah, and could not write with any certainty of events much

before their own time. The obscurity, deficiency, and uncertainty of all ancient history, except that which we find in the scripture, is abundantly made out by the learned bishop Stillingfleet, in that most useful book, his *Origines Sacrae*, lib. 1. Let the antiquity of this history not only recommend it to the curious, but recommend to us all that way of religion it directs us in, as the good old way, in which if we walk we *shall find rest for our souls*, <sup><0436></sup>Jeremiah 6:16.

**IV.** That it is *church* history, the history of the Jewish church, that sacred society, incorporated for religion, and the custody of the oracles and ordinances of God, by a charter under the broad seal of heaven, a covenant confirmed by miracles. Many great ant mighty nations there were at this time in the world, celebrated it is likely for wisdom, and learning, and valour, illustrious men and illustrious actions; yet the records of them are all lost, either in silence or fables, while that little inconsiderable people of the Jews that *dwelt alone, and was not reckoned among the nations* (<sup><0239></sup>Numbers 23:9), makes so great a figure in the best known, most ancient, and most lasting of all histories; and no notice is taken in it of the affairs of other nations, except only as they fall in with the affairs of the Jews: *for the Lord's portion is his people; Jacob is the lot of his inheritance*, <sup><0538></sup>Deuteronomy 32:8, 9. Such a concern has God for his church in every age, and so dear have its interests been to him. Let them therefore be so to us, that we may be *followers of him as dear children*.

**V.** That it is a *divine* history, given by inspiration of God, and a part of that blessed book which is to be the standing rule of our faith and practice. And we are not to think it a part of it which might have been spared, or which we may now pass over or cast a careless eye upon, as if it were indifferent whether we read it or no; but we are to read it as a sacred record, preserved for our benefit *on whom the ends of the world have come*.

- 1.** This history is of great use for the understanding of some parts of the Old Testament. The account we have here of David's life and reign, and especially of his troubles, is a key to many of his Psalms; and much light is given to most of the prophecies by these histories.
- 2.** Though we have not altogether so many types of Christ here as we had in the history and the law of Moses, yet even here we meet with many who were figures of him that was to come, such as Joshua, Samson, Solomon,

Cyrus, but especially David, whose kingdom was typical of the kingdom of the Messiah and the covenant of royalty made with him, a dark representation of the covenant of redemption made with the eternal Word; nor know we how to call Christ the son of David unless we be acquainted with this history nor how to receive the declaration that John Baptist was the Elias that was to come, <sup><1114></sup>Matthew 11:14.

**3.** The state of the Jewish church which is here set before us was typical of the gospel church and the state of that in the days of the Messiah; and as the prophecies which related to it looked further to the latter days, so did the histories of it; and still these things happened to them for ensamples, <sup><601></sup>1 Corinthians 10:11. By the tenour of this history we are given to understand these three things concerning the church (for the thing that hath been is that which shall be, <sup><2009></sup>Ecclesiastes 1:9): —

**(1.)** That we are not to expect the perfect purity and unity of the church in this world, and therefore not to be stumbled, though we are grieved, at its corruptions, distempers, and divisions; we are not to think it strange concerning them, as though some strange thing happened, much less to think the worse of its laws and constitutions for the sake of them or to despair of its perpetuity. What wretched stains of idolatry, impiety, and immorality, appear on the Jewish church, and what a woeful breach was there between Judah and Ephraim! yet God took them (as I may say) with all their faults, and never wholly rejected them till they rejected the Messiah. Israel hath not been forsaken, nor Judah, of their God, though their land was filled with sin against the Holy One of Israel, <sup><2505></sup>Jeremiah 51:5.

**(2.)** That we are not to expect the constant tranquillity and prosperity of the church. It was then often oppressed and afflicted from its youth, had its years of servitude as well as its days of triumph, was often obscured, diminished, impoverished, and brought low; and yet still God secured to himself a remnant, a holy seed, which was the substance thereof, <sup><2363></sup>Isaiah 6:13. Let us not then be surprised to see the gospel church sometimes under hatches, and driven into the wilderness, and the gates of hell prevailing far against it.

**(3.)** That yet we need not fear the utter extirpation of it. The gospel church is called the Israel of God (<sup><816></sup>Galatians 6:16), and the Jerusalem which is above (<sup><805></sup>Galatians 4:26), the heavenly Jerusalem; for as Israel after the flesh, and the Jerusalem that then was, by the wonderful care of the divine

Providence, outrode all the storms with which they were tossed and threatened, and continued in being till they were made to resign all their honours to the gospel church, which they were the figures of, so shall that also, notwithstanding all its shocks, be preserved, till the mystery of God shall be finished, and the kingdom of grace shall have its perfection in the kingdom of glory.

**4.** This history is of great use to us for our direction in the way of our duty; it was written for our learning, that we may see the evil we should avoid and be armed against it, and the good we should do and be quickened to it. Though they are generally judges, and kings, and great men, whose lives are here written, yet in them even those of the meanest rank may see the deformity of sin and hate it, and the beauty of holiness and be in love with it; nay, the greater the person is the more evident are both these; for, if the great be good, it is their goodness that makes their greatness honourable; if bad, their greatness does but make their badness the more shameful. The failings even of good people are also recorded here for our admonition, that he who thinks he stands may take heed lest he fall, and that he who has fallen may not despair of forgiveness if he recover himself by repentance.

**5.** This history, as it shows what God requires of us, so it shows what we may expect from his providence, especially concerning states and kingdoms. By the dealings of God with the Jewish nation it appears that, as nations are, so they must expect to fare — that while princes and people serve the interests of God's kingdom among men he will secure and advance their interests, but that when they shake off his government, and rebel against him, they can look for no other than an inundation of judgments. It was so all along with Israel; while they kept close to God they prospered; when they forsook him every thing went cross. That great man archbishop Tillotson (Vol. 1. Sermon 3. on ~~14:34~~ Proverbs 14:34) suggests that though, as to particular persons, the providences of God are promiscuously administered in this world, because there is another world of rewards and punishments for them, yet it is not so with nations as such, but national virtues are ordinarily rewarded with temporal blessings and national sins punished with temporal judgments, because, as he says, public bodies and communities of men, as such, can be rewarded and punished only in this world, for in the next they will all be dissolved. So plainly are God's ways of disposing kingdoms laid before us in the glass of this history that I could wish Christian statesmen would think themselves as much concerned as preachers to acquaint themselves with it; they might fetch as

good maxims of state and rules of policy from this as from the best of the Greek and Roman historians. We are blessed (as the Jews were) with a divine revelation, and make a national profession of religion and relation to God, and therefore are to look upon ourselves as in a peculiar manner under a divine regimen, so that the things which happened to them were designed for ensamples to us.

I cannot pretend to write for great ones. But if what is here done may be delightful to any in reading and helpful in understanding and improving this sacred history, and governing themselves by the dictates of it, let God have all the glory and let all the rivers return to the ocean whence they came. When I look back on what is done I see nothing to boast of, but a great deal to be ashamed of; and, when I look forward on what is to be done, I see nothing in myself to trust to for the doing of it. I have no sufficiency of my own; but *by the grace of God I am what I am*, and that grace will, I trust, be sufficient for me. *Surely in the Lord have I righteousness and strength.* That blessed *epichoregia* which the apostle speaks of (~~BOOK~~ Philippians 1:19), that continual supply or communication of *the Spirit of Jesus Christ*, is what we may in faith pray for, and depend upon, to furnish us for every good word and work. The pleasantness of the study has drawn me on to the writing of this, and the candour with which my friends have been pleased to receive my poor endeavours on the Pentateuch encourages me to publish it; it is done according to the best of my skill, not without some care and application of mind, in the same method and manner with that; I wish I could have done it in less compass, that it might have been more within reach of *the poor of the flock*. But then it would not have been so plain and full as I desire it may be for the benefit of the *lambs of the flock*. *Brevis esse laboro, obscurus fio* — *labouring to be concise I become obscure*. With a humble submission to the divine providence and its disposals, and a humble reliance on the divine grace and its guidance and operation, I purpose still to proceed, as I have time, in this work. Two volumes more will, if God permit, conclude the Old Testament; and then if my friends encourage me, and my God spare me and enable me for it, I intend to go on to the New Testament. For though *many have taken in hand to set forth in order a declaration of those parts of scripture* which are yet before us (~~BOOK~~ Luke 1:1), whose works *praise them in the gates* and are likely to outlive mine, yet while the subject is really so copious as it is and the manner of handling it may possibly be so various, and while one book comes into the hands of some and another into the

hands of others, and all concur in the same design to advance the common interests of Christ's kingdom, the *common faith* once delivered to the saints, and the *common salvation* of precious souls (~~5004~~ Titus 1:4, ~~5003~~ Jude 1:3), I hope store of this kind will be thought no sore. I make bold to mention my purpose to proceed thus publicly in hopes I may have the advice of my friends in it, and their prayers for me that I may be made more *ready and mighty in the scriptures*, that understanding and utterance may be given to me, and that I may *obtain mercy of the Lord Jesus to be found his faithful* servant, who am less than the least of all that call him *Master*.

***Chester, June 2, 1708. M.H.***