

ARTICLE VIII.

OWEN'S COMMENTARIES ON THE GOSPELS.¹

THE mere quantity of the literature of which the Bible is the subject, and the centre, irrespective of its quality, is one of the most remarkable phenomena in the history of literature. An English antiquarian has made a list of works, chiefly commentaries, on the Bible, or portions of it. He estimates their number to be not less than sixty thousand. Of these, some twenty-five hundred pertain to the five books of Moses, five thousand to the Psalms, and two thousand to the Prophecy of Isaiah. About six thousand volumes have been published on the four Gospels, three thousand on the Epistle to the Romans, and two thousand on the Revelation. These numbers are exclusive of commentaries on the whole Bible, or the whole of the New Testament. Add to this list of known works the greater number of books whose very names have been lost, and add to the commentaries the countless number of published and unpublished sermons that have been preached every Sabbath in all the pulpits of Christendom, all affixed to a passage of scripture, and more or less a development of its sentiment, together with all the unnumbered essays, criticisms, and controversies that have sprung, more or less directly, out of the scriptures, and how vast is the amount of intellectual activity which has flowed from this inexhaustible fountain. In this single point of view, the Bible well deserves its name. It is emphatically *the Book* — the *Book of books*.

And if we further take into consideration the quality of this literature, the moral excellence and moral power of these books and sermons, their lofty themes, their reach of thought, their instructive truths and commanding eloquence, their adaptation to move the masses, and the extent to which the masses have actually been instructed and moved by them in all the great nations that have existed since the canon of scripture was closed, there is nothing at all like it in the history of the world. The poems of Homer, the writings of Plato and Aristotle, have been widely read, and have given rise to not a few commentaries and criticisms. But these have reached only the chosen few, while what has been written and taught and spoken respecting the Bible, has been the daily food and drink of the multitude in every part of Christendom. Compare the Psalms of David with any other production of the Eastern World a thousand years before the Christian era! The latter is known only to a few scholars and antiquarians; the former is in the hands, on the lips, and in the hearts of the men, women, and children of every country that is acting any important part in history. Compare the Gospels, written for the most part by the

¹ A Commentary, Critical, Expository, and Practical, on the Gospels, for the use of ministers, theological students, private Christians, Bible classes, and Sabbath schools. By John J. Owen, D.D. Matthew and Mark. nn. 501; Luke, 400; John, 502. New York: Leavitt and

unlettered fishermen of Galilee, with any other history that was written,— we will not say in the East, but in the West, — anywhere, in the same age! Who knows or cares for the histories, however interesting in their contents or classical in their style? Who does not know and care for the Gospels? Who has not seen them, read them, studied them? Who does not possess some one or more commentaries, perhaps, a whole library of helps to understand them? Who would have predicted such a result two thousand years ago? When Tacitus was writing his description of the Jews, in the fifth book of his *Histories*, and loading them down with the most contemptuous and opprobrious epithets, as *despectissima pars servientium, terribilissima gens, superstitioni obnoxia, religionibus adversa, projectissima ad libidinem*, etc.; suppose some prophet had foretold to him that the sacred books of those despicable barbarians and slaves would almost supersede the admired history, poetry, oratory, and philosophy of the Greeks and Romans throughout the Roman Empire, and, long after that empire was extinct, would mould and shape the literature and religion of all the great nations of coming times! The historian, and all his readers, would have pronounced the prophet mad. The Bible is not only a supernatural book in its contents, in its facts and thoughts and style and spirit, but the whole history of the book, in its preservation and promulgation through the world, is a standing miracle. So full of striking analogies to the book of nature as to prove itself a production of the same divine author, it has given rise to more study and thought, more reflection and research, more mental activity, than the book of nature itself. If, therefore, you would immortalize yourself and your productions (such is the prudential maxim suggested by the miraculous history of the book, as well as by its divine principles), link yourself to the Bible; commit your name and fortunes to the keeping of him who has so manifestly kept the Bible from the beginning, and is thus pledged, by deed as well as word, to keep it unto the end. The man who could write a commentary so perfect that it should become a part and parcel of the Bible itself, would do a great and good work for coming generations, and secure his own immortality.

There are two kinds of commentaries, distinguished from each other by the purpose for which they are written, and consequently by the manner in which they are executed.

Those of one kind are written for scholars. They are based directly on the original Greek. They enter minutely into the criticism of words and phrases, discuss grammatical constructions and principles of interpretation, and state at length not only the results at which they have arrived, but the reasons and processes by which they have arrived at them. As a general fact, Christian doctrines and their practical applications are not made prominent in commentaries of this kind, though sometimes they are not only doctrinal but controversial and dogmatical in the extreme; and sometimes, though more rarely, they indulge in preaching and practical observations to a greater or less extent. Such commentators are, or should be, like the explorers who search the bowels of the earth for the precious

metals; like the miners, who go down into the mines and bring up the solid ore, though too often they only scratch the surface, and mistake the mere tinsel and glitter of words for the gold, silver, and precious stones of divine truth. The Germans labor and excel especially in this kind of commentary; and, though they very often labor for that which is not bread, and expend much learning on that which satisfieth not, still their commentaries and introductions are storehouses of philological and exegetical lore which cannot be dispensed with by scholars, teachers, or preachers, who would rightly interpret the word of truth. Some recent English commentators, such, for instance, as Alford, Ellicott, and indirectly Trench, with less diffuseness and display than the German, but more good sense and reverence for the scriptures, have contributed some of the best specimens of critical and exegetical commentary. Professor Stuart has the merit of introducing the study and the writing of such commentaries into this country; and Professor Hackett, in his Commentary on the Acts, has carried it as near to perfection as can well be expected of human works, producing a model commentary for learned and clerical readers, while, at the same time, the unlettered laity may consult it to great advantage.

The other kind of commentary is designed for the use of the masses, and so founded directly on the scriptures in the vernacular tongue. Nothing forbids, however, indirect references to the original; and all the results of profound philological learning, without the detail of processes, may appear to advantage, if wisely and fitly incorporated, in commentaries for the unlearned. Being written for a practical purpose, they admit of "practical observations" by way of "improvement," though these become offensive excrescences, instead of vital organs, just so far as they go beyond the simple development and expression of the exact thought and spirit of the sacred writer. Englishmen have wrought with great zeal and considerable success, in this field. Henry and Scott are known almost as widely as the English Bible, and have doubtless contributed largely to a better understanding of the scriptures in multitudes of Christian families, though they have superadded quite too much of the mind of Scott and Henry to the simple mind of the sacred writer and of the Holy Spirit. Doddridge's Expositor approaches more nearly to the true idea of a simple unfolding of the true meaning and intent of the scriptures to the understanding of common readers, and is at the same time a remarkable anticipation of some of the best results of modern biblical criticism. Mr. Barnes's Notes, Explanatory and Practical, for the use of Bible classes and Sabbath schools, answer well the purpose for which they were intended. They partake, perhaps, of the nature of expository sermons (for which, also, many of them were actually delivered) too much to realize the perfect idea of a *commentary*; but the substantial learning and unaffected piety of the author, combined with his practical wisdom and his experience as a pastor, have given these Notes a place as deserved as it is high in the estimation of the churches.

Professor Owen's Commentaries on the Gospels correspond more exactly than any of these to the true idea of a *com*

plan is that of a simple *exposition* of the words and thoughts of the Evangelists, and this plan is, for the most part, consistently carried out, though the author is not always proof, and no commentator, perhaps, can be expected to be always proof, against the temptation to superadd, sometimes to obtrude, remarks of his own, that are not strictly exegetical. No commentator within our knowledge labors more faithfully to *develop* and *express* the exact import of every word in the sacred text in itself and in its connection. This is always done with reference to the original Greek, which is in reality the basis of the whole commentary. But the words of our common English version alone appear in the notes. A Greek word is very rarely seen, never obtruded on the attention of the English reader, who reaps all the benefit of a searching verbal criticism, and yet is annoyed with none of the technicalities or pedantries of biblical scholarship, nothing which is not familiar to his eye and level to his apprehension. Perhaps Dr. Owen carries this conscientious fidelity to *all* the words of the original author to excess, and sometimes burdens the reader with a minuteness of verbal criticism which wearies his attention without bringing a sufficient reward. But this feature exhibits the true spirit of a commentator, and, if a fault, it is better than a fault in the opposite direction.

A few preliminary remarks on the requisite qualifications of a writer of commentaries for the people, will enable us to estimate more justly the merits of the commentaries before us.

1. *Learning.* There is no kind of knowledge which is not valuable for the commentator, because there is none which may not be available, not to say indispensable, in the illustration of the infinitely diversified contents of the scriptures. The commentator on the New Testament must, at any rate, be master of the language in which it was originally written, not merely the classical dialects of the extant Greek literature, but that common and spoken language (the Hellenic) which combined the riches of all the dialects, and that peculiar form of the common language (the Hellenistic) which was spoken by the Greek-speaking Jews. The geography and history, manners and customs of Bible lands must also be familiar to him, almost, as those of his own country, that, like the author of that admirable commentary, "The Land and the Book," he may see every part of every gospel or epistle in the very light in which it was written. At first view it might, perhaps, be thought that such stores of classical and biblical learning are less essential to the writer of commentaries for the unlearned. Certainly it cannot be so rigidly demanded of such a commentator, that he know everything by his own personal observation or research. He must be allowed to take some things at second-hand. But he cannot reach the perfection of his art unless directly or indirectly, and to a great extent directly, he be master of all the knowledge that pertains to it.

2. *Good common sense, practical wisdom, knowledge of men and things, and sympathy with them;* especially with the masses of men and the things of common life. This is a gift or an acquirement which, though often deemed incompatible with extensive and profound learning, is not necessarily so; and which, however it may be dispensed

for the learned, is quite indispensable in those that are designed for the benefit of the common people. The Bible was written for men of all classes and conditions in life, and the commentator for the many, like the preacher, must address himself, not to that which is peculiar to any one class or condition, but to those elements of humanity which are common to all. If the Bible is adapted to any one class more than others, it is to the poor and humble — “to the *poor* the gospel is preached,” — and want of sympathy with that class especially unfits a man alike for understanding the sacred writers, and for interpreting their thoughts and feelings to those for whose especial benefit they wrote.

3. Sincere and earnest piety, reverence for the scriptures as the word of God, and cordial sympathy with the sacred writers in their faith, hope, and love as Christians. The Bible is to be interpreted according to the same general laws of language and of the human mind as other books. But the fundamental qualification for interpreting any book is sympathy with the author, especially in that which is most characteristic of him. A commentator who is not full of the same spirit that inspired the sacred writers, however profound his scholarship or abundant his knowledge of men and things, is just as unfit to interpret the Bible as a purely poetical genius would be to write a commentary on Euclid's Elements of Geometry, or a profound mathematician to see the beauty of the *Paradise Lost*; just as incapable of understanding it as the merest plodder in the practical business of life would be of comprehending the Dialogues of Plato. The commentator, like the preacher, if he would be full of power, must be full of the Holy Ghost; for the Holy Ghost is, in the highest sense, the author of the Bible.

In short, it is the commentator's office to *re-present* the exact thoughts and spirit of the sacred writers to modern readers; and, in order to this, he must reproduce them in his own mind and heart. In order to do his work perfectly he must put himself in their place, know all they knew, feel all they felt, be animated and possessed as it were by their spirit, and live over again their life. At the same time, he needs to know and feel all the wants, experiences, circumstances, characteristics of the age and people to whom especially he would open the treasures of divine wisdom contained in the scriptures. Of course this cannot be done perfectly; but this is the true ideal of an interpreter; and just in proportion as he approximates to this ideal, he realizes the proper aim and end of a commentary on the scriptures.

Professor Owen possesses, in a good degree, these fundamental qualifications of an expositor of the scriptures. His life has been spent in the study and the teaching of the Greek and Latin classics. His editions of Homer, Thucydides, and Xenophon, are favorably known through the country, and are used as text-books in the principal academies and colleges of New England. They are characterized by sound learning and good common sense. The *student* finds help in them just when he needs it, and is not encumbered with assistance when he can better go alone; while the *teacher* welcomes the editor as an intelligent guide who goes along with the pupil, leading the way, and pointing out the objects chiefly made of

attention and study, without superseding either the teacher's office or the exertions of the pupil. Long experience in teaching has acquainted him with the real wants of students, and he meets those wants with rare success, just because he manifestly has a cordial sympathy with students and a conscientious desire to do them good. At the same time he has a good measure of sympathy with the classic authors in general; though we do not think Dr. Owen possesses that warm sympathy with each particular author which in some commentators almost identifies them with the author for the time being, and so inspires their readers with something of their enthusiasm, and not a little of the author's sentiments and spirit, to say nothing of that power to reproduce and so to represent antiquity, which is the prerogative only of the highest order of genius. But industry and fidelity, a sincere love of truth, and a conscientious sense of duty are more reliable qualities in a commentator than even genius and enthusiasm; and these, with good common sense and a genuine sympathy for whatever is human, are never wanting in the editor of these editions of the classics.

The same sound learning, the same practical wisdom and good sense, the same conscientious love of truth and goodness and mankind, are distinguishing features of the commentaries on the New Testament.

The Greek language, in its lexical forms and its grammatical constructions, has been his special study. The habit of verbal and logical analysis, which he has formed by long practice in the recitation room, and which he has sharpened by his critical editions of the classics, follows him in his study of the scriptures, and conduces greatly to that independent investigation of their literal meaning which must be the foundation of correct exegesis. Such a scholar and teacher naturally approaches a passage on the grammatical side, and inquires, not what it is usually understood to mean, not what it must teach in order to square with a certain school of theology or system of philosophy, but what it does mean when interpreted according to the laws of language. The knowledge and experience of a classical teacher are also eminently conducive, not only to a thorough acquaintance with the facts of geography and history, but to a just appreciation of their subtle influence on the coloring of thought and the shades of expression.

At the same time, nothing can be further removed from the pedantries and frivolities of barren and heartless hermeneutics than these commentaries. The rules of exegesis and the learning of the schools are means, not ends, faithful servants, and not capricious tyrants, in the work of interpretation. Exegetical technics are admitted only where clearness and conciseness require, and when it were sheer pedantry to exclude them. Far-fetched interpretations have no charms. Original explanations are not preferred simply because they are original. On the contrary, other things being equal, the received explanation has the preference. The most obvious interpretation is rather *presumed* to be the true interpretation. In short, good common sense is the predominant faculty in the mind of Professor Owen, and the presiding genius in his commentaries; and it makes the most judicious use of all the stores which he has accumulated by many years of study and experience.

With his experience as a scholar and teacher, Dr. Owen manifestly combines a deep Christian experience; and that large common sense, which is a kind of outward eye for the correct observation of men and things, is but an entrance to the inner eye, that eye of the soul, which discerneth all things, even the deep things of God, namely, a large heart enlightened and sanctified by the Spirit, and filled with the love of God and man, without which all the lights of science, all the lights of outward observation and experience, fail utterly to illumine the sacred page, or man's pathway to a better world. "The light of the body is the eye," the light of the soul is the heart; and to the interpreter of the scriptures not less than to the preacher and the hearer of the word, the language of our Lord applies: "If, therefore, thine eye be single, thy whole body (soul) shall be full of light; but if thine eye be evil, thy whole body (soul) shall be full of darkness. And if the *light that is in thee* be darkness, how great is that darkness!"

Doctor Owen has a supreme reverence for the Bible as the word of God. His theory of inspiration is the same which manifestly underlies all our Saviour's citations of the Old Testament. What "the scripture saith," "God saith," whether it be by "the mouth" of Moses or the prophets, of apostles, or of our Lord himself. And a "thus saith the Lord" is to him the end of all controversy. It is refreshing to see a faith so implicit and unhesitating, so manifestly hearty and sincere in a writer of such scholarly pursuits and attainments, and in an age which is so infected with avowed or disguised scepticism. He is a cordial believer in the supernatural revelations of the Bible, and in the profoundest mysteries of the Christian scheme, essentially as they are understood and received by evangelical Christians. He believes them because they are clearly revealed on the face of the scriptures as their obvious and natural meaning, and also because they meet the wants of his moral nature, accord with his own inward experience, and are spiritually discerned by the eye of the inmost soul. He not only believes them as facts, but cordially receives them as eternal truths, conforms his own life to them as the great realities of the spirit world, and builds his own hopes upon them for time and eternity. Thus is he prepared to *interpret* them not only to the understanding, but to the inward consciousness and inner experience of the Christian who hungers for the word of God as for the bread of life. Professor Owen is even more at home in his commentaries on the Gospels than he is in his editions of the classics. His heart is more enlisted. He is in livelier sympathy with his author on the one hand, and his readers on the other, and so better qualified to be a medium of communication between them. We cannot but hope that great numbers of our young men who have found him a pleasant guide and a useful helper in the delightful fields of classical literature will follow him with still higher delight and greater profit into the broader and richer province of the Bible. And we hope he will be encouraged by the manifest success and usefulness of his labors to extend his studies from the Gospels into the Epistles. At the same time, the learned professor will pardon us for the suggestion that this is not

slight preparation, or dispatched in undue and inconsiderate haste. The Epistle to the Romans is beset with verbal and logical difficulties beyond even the Gospel of John; and, while we look with admiration, and even astonishment, on the published achievements of Professor Owen's spare hours, after teaching so large a portion of the day, we cannot but think he has yielded to the temptation into which so many authors and editors fall of making books too rapidly. We have marked not a few inaccuracies and infelicities of expression in these commentaries on the Gospels, and we doubt not other readers have marked similar lapses, which would have been avoided by more time and more care.¹ A more careful revision of the whole commentary before printing would have prevented palpable inconsistencies between the notes on different chapters, and sometimes on different verses of the same chapter; such, for example, as the opposing explanations of "*the end*," in the notes on Matt. x. 22 and 23; the note on the latter distinctly implying what is as distinctly denied in the note on the former, that *the end* is the destruction of Jerusalem; and the inconsistency between Matt. x. 3 and xiii. 55, in the former of which James and Lebbeus are made the cousins, and in the latter the brothers, of our Lord. A cool and deliberate revision would, perhaps, strike out numerous egoisms; such, for instance, as "I like Alford's suggestion," commentary on John, p. 12; and "this strikes me," and "I am yet inclined to think," both on p. 15; and "I cannot agree with Alford," p. 41, which "strike" the reviewer as better suited to a review than a commentary, though this may be a matter in which tastes differ. The reading *Bethlehem*, on p. 55, is probably a mere typographical error. It should be *Bethshan*. The interpretation (commentary on Matt., p. 341) of 1 Thess. i. 16, 17, as if proving that the righteous will rise before the wicked at the general resurrection, though not uncommon among illiterate Christians, is so contradictory to the express terms of the passage, and to all respectable commentaries on it, that it must be the result of sheer thoughtlessness and forgetfulness. Our author's great *anxiety* to defend what he believes to be the truth (which is usually the orthodox faith), sometimes leads him to broad and sweeping statements which are hardly sustained by the facts in the case, and sometimes to labored and protracted arguments whose very length and labor throw suspicion on the doctrine. As an example of the former we would refer to the strong and rather dogmatic declaration (com. on Matt., p. 341), that the whole tenor of scripture, and the experience of our missionaries, is against the idea that any can be saved without the knowledge of Christ in this life; and, as an illustration of the latter, to the very elaborate and anxious argument (com. on Luke, pp. 388-396) touching the resurrection body of our Lord. To bring these friendly criticisms to an end, we cannot but observe, and we have heard the same remark from others, that, as there is sometimes a want of conciseness and precision in the language of these commentaries, so also there is too often

¹ For example, Commentary on John, p. 40, "correctness of his claims to the Messiahship," instead of the validity of his claims to be the Messiah; p. 355, "none but *him* could hear." Repeated on p. 357.

a vagueness and indefiniteness of conception, which shows that the writer either wants the sharpness to discern the *exact* truth, or that he has not taken time and pains enough to look *all around* the subject. There are some of the highest gifts and most refined graces of an expositor which we do not discover in these commentaries. But they combine so many of the substantial and fundamental excellences of a commentary, both for students and for the masses, that we cordially recommend them "for the use of ministers, theological students, private Christians, Bible classes, and Sabbath schools."

W. S. T.

ARTICLE IX.

WORKS OF RUFUS CHOATE.¹

THESE handsome volumes are a deserved tribute to the memory of a most brilliant, accomplished, and fascinating man. The biography, which extends through considerably more than half of the first volume, has been prepared from the fullest materials now accessible, and with eminent care and judgment. The intimate relations of the editor with the subject of his Memoir, his sympathetic and admiring, yet thoroughly discriminating, appreciation of his character and genius, and the full contributions of correspondence, reminiscences, and other valuable matter by professional and personal friends, make it in all respects most adequate and most attractive. Especially do the letters and journals, together with the reminiscences of the closing chapter, reveal the charm of Mr. Choate's personal character and domestic life, as well as the wide variety of his professional labors and literary studies, and will bring a new delight to those who had only known and admired him in his public career. The whole portraiture of the man — the advocate, the orator, the statesman — is spirited, beautiful, and complete.

The remainder of the work consists of Lectures, Addresses, Speeches in the Senate of the United States, and Miscellaneous Speeches, with an Appendix containing Fragments of Translations from the Classics. These serve to give some idea, as far as words, without the magical voice and eye, and marvellous power of personal presence, can do, of the strength and richness of Mr. Choate's mind and his full-toned and most musical eloquence. They show a broad range of subjects, and an interest and enthusiasm in all good learning which may well claim for the volumes a notice in our Review. The author of the Lecture on the Power of the State developed by Mental Culture, the Address at the Dedication of the Peabody Institute, and the Speech on the Bill for the Establishment of the Smithsonian Institute, will have the affectionate thanks

¹ The Works of Rufus Choate; with a Memoir of his Life. By Samuel Gilman Brown, Professor in Dartmouth College. Boston: Little, Brown, & Co. 2 vols. pp. 558, 523.