THE

**WORKS**

OF

**THE REV . JOHN NEWTON**

LATE RECTOR OF THE UNITED PARISHES OF

ST. MARY WOOLNOTH AND ST. MARY WOOLCHURCH-HAW,

LOMBARD STREET, LONDON.

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CONTAINING

AN AUTHENTIC NARRATIVE, &C., LETTERS ON RELIGIOUS SUBJECTS, CARDIPHONIA, DISCOURSES INTENDED FOR THE PULPIT,

SERMONS PREACHED IN THE PARISH CHURCH OF OLNEY,

A REVIEW OF ECCLESIASTICAL HISTORY, OLNEY HYMNS, POEMS,

MESSIAH, OCCASIONAL SERMONS, AND TRACTS.

TO WHICH ARE PREFIXED

MEMOIRS OF HIS LIFE, &c.

BY THE REV. R. CECIL, A. M.

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COMPLETE IN ONE VOLUME.

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LETTER XV.

A PLAN OF A COMPENDIOUS CHRISTIAN LIBRARY.

DEAR SIR,

AN eager desire of reading many books, though it is often supposed to be the effect of a taste for knowledge, is perhaps a principal cause of detaining multitudes in ignorance and per­plexity. When an inexperienced person thus ventures into the uncertain tide of opinions, he is liable to be hurried hither and thither with the changing stream; to fall in with every new proposal, and to be continually em­barrassed with the difficulty of distinguishing between probability and truth. Or if, at last, he happily finds a clue to lead him through the labyrinth wherein so many have been lost, he will acknowledge, upon a review, that from what he remembers to have read (for, perhaps, the greater part he has wholly for­gotten) he has gained little more than a dis­covery of what mistakes, uncertainty, insig­nificance, acrimony, and presumption, are often obtruded on the world under the dis­guise of a plausible title-page.

It is far from my intention to depreciate the value, or deny the usefulness of books, with­out exception: a few well-chosen treatises, carefully perused, and thoroughly digested, will deserve and reward our pains; but a mul­tiplicity of reading is seldom attended with a good effect. Besides the confusion it often brings upon the judgment and memory, it occasions a vast expense of time, indisposes for close thinking, and keeps us poor, in the midst of seeming plenty, by reducing us to live upon a foreign supply, instead of labour­ing to improve and increase the stock of our own reflections.

Every branch of knowledge is attended with this inconvenience; but it is in no one more sensibly felt than when the inquiry is directed to the subject of religion. Perhaps no coun­try has abounded so much with religious books as our own; many of them are truly excel­lent; but a very great number of those which are usually more obvious to be met with, as they stand recommended by great names, and the general taste of the public, are more like­ly to mislead an inquirer, than to direct him into the paths of true peace and wisdom.

And even in those books which are in the main agreeable to the word of God, there is often so great a mixture of human infirmity, so much of the spirit of controversy and par­ty, such manifest defects in some, and so many unwarrantable additions to the simple truth of the gospel in others, that, unless a person’s judgment is already formed, or he has a prudent friend to direct his choice, he will probably be led into error or prejudice before he is aware, by his attachment to a fa­vourite author.

Allowing, therefore, the advantage of a dis­creet and seasonable use of human writings, I would point out a still more excellent way for the acquisition of true knowledge: a me­thod, which, if wholly neglected, the utmost diligence in the use of every other means will prove ineffectual; but which, if faithfully pursued in an humble dependence upon the divine blessing, will not only of itself lead us by the straightest path to wisdom, but will also give a double efficacy to every subordinate assistance.

If I may be allowed to use the term book in a metaphorical sense, I may say, that the most high God, in condescension to the weak­ness of our faculties, the brevity of our lives, and our many avocations, has comprised all the knowledge conducive to our real happiness in four comprehensive volumes. The first, which may be considered as the text, is cheap, portable, and compendious, so that hardly any person in our favoured land, who is apprised of its worth, need be without it; and the other three, which are the best and fullest commen­taries upon this, are always at hand for our perusal, and pressing upon our attention in every place and circumstance of our lives.

It will be easily apprehended, that, by the first book, or volume, I mean that perfect and infallible system of truth, the Bible. The internal characters of this book, arising from its comprehensiveness, simplicity, majesty, and authority, sufficiently prove to every enlight­ened mind, that it is given by inspiration of God. They who are competent judges of this evidence, are no more disturbed by the sug­gestions of some men reputed wise, that it is of human composition, than if they were told that men had invented the sun, and placed it in the firmament. Its fulness speaks its au­thor. No case has yet occurred, or ever will, for which there is not a sufficient provision made in this invaluable treasury. Here we may seek (and we shall not seek in vain) wherewith to combat and vanquish every error, to illustrate and confirm every spiritual truth. Here are promises suited to every want, di­rections adapted to every doubt that can pos­sibly arise. Here is milk for babes, meat for strong men, medicines for the wounded, re­freshment for the weary. The general his­tory of all nations and ages, and the particu­lar experience of each private believer, from the beginning to the end of time, are wonder­fully comprised in this single volume; so that whoever reads and improves it aright, may discover his state, his progress, his tempta­tions, his danger, and his duty, as distinctly and minutely marked out, as if the whole had been written for him alone. In this respect, as well as in many others, great is the mystery of godliness.

The simplicity, as well as the subject-mat­ter of the Bible, evinces its divine original. Though it has depths sufficient to embarrass and confound the proudest efforts of unsanctified reason, it does not, as to its general im­port, require an elevated genius to understand it, but is equally addressed to the level of every capacity. As its contents are of uni­versal concernment, they are proposed in such a manner as to engage and satisfy the inquiries of all; and the learned, with respect to their own personal interest, have no advantage above the ignorant. That it is in fact read by many who receive no instruction or benefit from it, is wholly owing to their inattention or vanity. This event may rather excite grief than wonder. The Bible teaches us to ex­pect it. It forewarns us that the natural man cannot receive the things of God, can neither understand nor approve them. It points out to us the necessity of a heavenly teacher, the Holy Spirit, who has promised to guide those who seek him by prayer, into all necessary truth. They who implore his assistance, find the seals opened, the veil taken away, and the way of salvation made plain before them.

The language of the Bible is likewise clothed with inimitable majesty and authority. God speaks in it, and reveals the glory of his perfections, his sovereignty, holiness, justice, goodness, and grace, in a manner worthy of himself, though, at the same time, admirably adapted to our weakness. The most laboured efforts of human genius are flat and languid, in comparison of those parts of the Bible which are designed to give us due apprehensions of the God with whom we have to do. Where shall we find such instances of the true sublime, the great, the marvellous, the beau­tiful, the pathetic, as in the holy scriptures? Again, the effects which it performs, demon­strate it to be the word of God. With a powerful and penetrating energy, it alarms and pierces the conscience, discovers the thoughts and intents of the heart, convinces the most obstinate, and makes the most careless tremble. With equal authority and efficacy, it speaks peace to the troubled mind, heals the wounded spirit, and can impart a joy unspeak­able and full of glory, in the midst of the deepest distress. It teaches, persuades, com­forts, and reproves with an authority that can neither be disputed nor evaded; and often communicates more light, motives, and influ­ence, by a single sentence, to a plain unletter­ed believer, than he could derive from all the voluminous commentaries of the learned. In a word, it answers the character the apostle gives of it: “It is able to make us wise unto salva­tion; it is completely and alone sufficient to make the man of God perfect, thoroughly furnished for every good work.” The doc­trines, histories, prophecies, promises, precepts, exhortations, examples, and warnings, contained in the Bible, form a perfect WHOLE, a complete summary of the will of God con­cerning us, in which nothing is wanting, no­thing is superfluous.

The second volume which deserves our study is the book of Creation. “The hea­vens declare the glory of God, and the firma­ment showeth his handy-work;” nor can we cast our eyes anywhere, without meeting in­numerable proofs of his wisdom, power, good­ness, and presence. God is revealed in the least, as well as in the greatest of his works. The sun and the glow-worm, the fabric of the universe, and each single blade of grass, are equally the effects of divine power. The lines of this book, though very beautiful and expressive in themselves, are not immediately legible by fallen man. The works of creation may be compared to a fair character in cypher, of which the Bible is the key: and without this key they cannot be understood. This book was always open to the Heathens; but they could not read it, nor discern the proofs of his eternal power and godhead which it affords. “They became vain in their own imaginations, and worshipped the creature more than the Creator.” The case is much the same at this day with many reputed wise, whose hearts are not subjected to the authority of the Bible. The study of the works of God, independent of his word, though dignified with the name of philosophy, is no better than an elaborate trifling and waste of time. It is to be feared none are more remote from the true knowledge of God, than many of those who value them­selves most upon their supposed knowledge of his creatures. They may speak in general terms of his wisdom; but they live without him in the world; and their philosophy can­not teach them either to love, or serve, to fear, or trust him. They who know God in his word, may find both pleasure and profit tracing his wisdom in his works, if their inquiries are kept within due bounds, and in a proper subservience to things of greater im­portance; but they are comparatively few who have leisure, capacity, or opportunity, for these inquiries. But the book of creation is designed for the instruction of all believers. If they are not qualified to be astronomers or anatomists, yet, from a view of the heavens, the work of God’s fingers, the moon and the stars, which he hath created, they learn to conceive of his condescension, power, and faithfulness. Though they are unacquainted with the theory of light and colours, they can see in the rainbow a token of God’s covenant-love. Perhaps they have no idea of the mag­nitude or distance of the sun; but it reminds them of Jesus the Sun of righteousness, the source of light and life to their souls. The Lord has established a wonderful analogy be­tween the natural and the spiritual world. This is a secret only known to them that fear him; but they contemplate it with pleasure; and almost every object they see, when they are in a right frame of mind, either leads their thoughts to Jesus, or tends to illustrate some spiritual truth or promise. This is the best method of studying the book of Nature, and for this purpose it is always open and plain to those who love the Bible, so that he who runs may read.

The book of Providence is the third volume, by which those who fear the Lord are instruc­ted. This likewise is inextricable and unin­telligible to the wisest of men who are not governed by the word of God. But when the principles of scripture are admitted and understood, they throw a pleasing light upon the study of divine providence, and, at the same time, are confirmed and illustrated by it. What we read in the Bible of the sove­reignty, wisdom, power, omniscience, and om­nipresence of God, of his overruling all events to the accomplishment of his counsels, and the manifestation of his glory, of the care he main­tains of his church and people, and of his at­tention to their prayers, is exemplified by the history of nations and families, and the daily occurrences of private life. The believer re­ceives hourly and indubitable proofs that the Lord reigns; that verily there is a God that judges in the earth. Hence arises a solid con­fidence: he sees that his concerns are in safe hands; and he needs not be afraid of evil tid­ings. His heart is fixed, trusting in the Lord; while others live at an uncertainty, exposed to the impressions of every new appearance; and, like a ship in a storm, without rudder or pilot, abandoned to the power of the winds and waves. In the history of Joseph, and in the book of Esther, and indeed throughout the Bible, we have specimens of the wise unerring providence of God; what important consequences depend, under his management, upon the smallest events; and with what certainty seeming contingencies are directed to the issue which he has appointed. By these authentic specimens we learn to judge of the whole; and with still greater advantage by the light of the New Testament, which shows us, that the administration of all power in heaven and earth is in the hands of Jesus. The govern­ment is upon his shoulders: The King of saints is King of nations, King of kings, and Lord of lords. Not a sparrow falls to the ground, nor a hair from our heads, without his cognizance. And though his ways are higher than our ways, and his thoughts than our thoughts; though his agency is veiled from the eye of sense by the intervention of second causes; yet faith perceives, acknow­ledges, admires, and trusts his management. This study, like the former, does not require superior natural abilities, but is obvious to the weakest and meanest of his people, so far as their own duty and peace are concerned.

The fourth volume is the book of the heart, or of Human Nature, comprehending the experience of what passes within our own breasts, and the observations we make upon the prin­ciples and conduct of others, compared with what we read in the word of God. The heart of man is deep; but all its principles and workings in every possible situation, and the various manners in which it is affected by sin, by Satan, by worldly objects, and by grace, in solitude and in company, in prosperity and in affliction, are disclosed and unfolded in the scriptures. Many who are proud of their knowledge of what they may be safely ignorant of, are utter strangers to themselves. Having no acquaintance with the scriptures, they have neither skill nor inclination to look into their own hearts, nor any certain criterion whereby to judge of the conduct of human life. But the Bible teaches us to read this mysterious book also; shows us the source, nature, and tendency of our hopes, fears, desires, pursuits, and perplexities; the reasons why we cannot be happy in ourselves, and the vanity and in­sufficiency of everything around us to help us. The rest and happiness proposed in the gospel, is likewise found to be exactly suitable to the desires and necessities of the awakened heart; and the conduct of those who reject this salvation, as well as the gracious effects produ­ced in those who receive it, prove to a demon­stration, that the word of God is indeed a dis­cerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.

My limits will admit but of a few hints upon these extensive subjects. I shall only observe that whoever is well read in these four books, is a wise person, how little soever he may know of what the men of the world call science. On the other hand, though a man should be master of the whole circle of classi­cal, polite, and philosophical knowledge, if he has no taste for the Bible, and has no ability to apply it to the works of creation and provi­dence, and his own experience, he knows no­thing yet as he ought to know. I have point­ed out a treasure of more worth than all the volumes in the Vatican.

I am, &c.