

EXPOSITORY THOUGHTS
ON THE GOSPELS.

FOR FAMILY AND PRIVATE USE.

WITH THE TEXT COMPLETE,
And many Explanatory Notes.

BY THE REV. J. C. RYLE, B. A.,

CHRIST CHURCH, OXFORD,
VICAR OF STRADBROKE, SUFFOLK;
Author of "Home Truths," etc.

ST. JOHN. VOL. I.

LONDON:
WILLIAM HUNT AND COMPANY, 23, HOLLES STREET,
CAVENDISH SQUARE.
IPSWICH : WILLIAM HUNT, TAVERN STREET.

Note by Editor, Evangelical Tracts (December 2008AD)

J. C. Ryle was an evangelical at a time in the second half of the 19th century when the dead hand of liberalism started to be a force in the Church of England. Through his many tracts and expositions and Christian biographies Ryle was like a “light on a hill”, as the fog of liberalism gradually spread its deadly scepticism over the Church, alongside the Ritualist party who sought to embrace the false teachings of Rome. His was a voice crying in the wilderness. He fought the good fight against false teachers. He combined the very best devotional preaching with a sound Reformed theology in a way that was only possible from a heart full of grace, and a mind that had drunk deeply from the Word of God. That is why no one was better qualified to write an exposition of the Gospel of John than Ryle.

Although there have been many faithful expositors of John’s Gospel who have been just as sound in faith, and just as learned in their theology, none are so readable. His expositions and notes always go to the heart of the matter, and he always opens up the sacred texts in the most clear and satisfying way. But it is not only that his exposition is a good read, but to the question every Christian must ask in studying the Word of God—“does this Exposition bear witness to the truth of God’s Word; and, if it does, is the author self-evidently inspired by the grace of God to open out that truth for our lasting spiritual good?”—on both counts J. C. Ryle is pre-eminent. His works live on as popular as ever today. Especially is this so with the Gospel of John which still remains a 3 volume best seller. But where are the Expositions of the liberals and Ritualists of Ryle’s times? Who reprints their books today? That is the one comforting thought—the liberal’s theology of measuring everything according to what they deem is relevant for the age in which they live soon becomes dated. Their worship of whatever is “new” in their “gospel according to me” soon falls out of fashion. Their scepticism ultimately turns the Word of God and the “good news” of Jesus Christ into a cloud of dust to confuse the unwary. To quote Ryle’s own words in his Preface to volume 1:

“We live in a day of abounding vagueness and indistinctness on doctrinal subjects in religion. Now, if ever, it is the duty of all advocates of clear, well-defined, sharply-cut theology, to supply proof that their views are thoroughly borne out by Scripture. I have endeavoured to do so in this Commentary. I hold that the Gospel of St. John, rightly interpreted, is the best and simplest answer to those who profess to admire a vague and indistinct Christianity.”

Of the many expositions of the Gospel of John I have studied, I have no hesitation in saying that J. C. Ryle’s “Expository Thoughts on the Gospel of John” is in a class of its own. It took him 12 years, as a hard-pressed vicar of the Church of England, to complete the work in 3 volumes. But what a faithful witness and interpreter of the Gospel he was!

The following Preface is to his “Expository Thoughts on the Gospels” St. John. Vol. 1.

Preface

I SEND forth the volume now in the reader's hands, with much diffidence, and a very deep sense of responsibility. It is no light matter to publish an exposition of any book in the Bible. It is a peculiarly serious undertaking to attempt a Commentary on the Gospel of St. John.

I do not forget that we are all apt to exaggerate the difficulties of our own particular department of literary labour. But I think every intelligent student of Scripture will bear me out when I say, that St. John's Gospel is pre-eminently full of things "hard to be understood." (2 Pet. iii. 16.) It contains a large portion of our Lord Jesus Christ's doctrinal teaching. It abounds in "deep things of God," and "sayings of the King," which we feel instinctively we have no line to fully fathom, no mind to fully comprehend, no words to fully explain. It must needs be that such a book of Scripture should be difficult. I can truly say that I have commented on many a verse in this Gospel with fear and trembling. I have often said to myself, "Who is sufficient for these things?"—"The place whereon thou standest is holy ground." (2 Cor. ii. 16; Exod. iii. 5.)

The nature of the work now published, requires a few words of explanation. It is a continuation of the "Expository Thoughts on the Gospels," of which four volumes, comprising the first three Gospels, have been already sent forth. Like the volumes on St. Matthew, St. Mark, and St. Luke, the basis of the work is a continuous series of short expositions, intended for family or private reading, or for the use of those who visit the sick and the poor. But, unlike the previous volumes, the work now in the reader's hands contains full explanatory notes on every verse of the portions expounded, forming, in fact, a complete Commentary.

This "Commentary" is so extensive that it occupies far more space than the "Expository Thoughts," and is, I must honestly confess, the principal part of the work. To some it may appear far too long and full. But the circumstances of the times are my justification.¹ We live in a day of abounding vagueness and indistinctness on doctrinal subjects in religion. Now, if ever, it is the duty of all advocates of clear, well-defined, sharply-cut theology, to supply proof that their views are thoroughly borne out by Scripture. I have endeavoured to do so in this Commentary. I hold that the Gospel of St. John, rightly interpreted, is the best and simplest answer to those who profess to admire a vague and indistinct Christianity.

The theological standpoint which the writer of this Commentary occupies will be obvious to any intelligent reader. Such an one will see at a glance that I belong to that school in the Church of England which, rightly or wrongly, is called, 'Evangelical.' He will see that I have no sympathy whatever with either Romish or Neologian tendencies. He will see that I hold firmly the distinctive theological views of the Reformers and doctrinal Puritans, and that I totally disapprove the loose and broad theology of some modern schools of divines.—But while I say all this, I must be allowed

to add, that in interpreting Scripture, I “call no man master or father.” I abhor the idea of wresting and warping God’s Word in order to make it support party views. Throughout this Commentary I have endeavoured honestly and conscientiously to find out the real meaning of every sentence on which I have commented. I have evaded no difficulty, and shrunk from no inference. I have simply followed Scripture wherever its words seemed to point, and accepted whatever they seemed to mean. I have never hesitated to express my disagreement from the views of other commentators if occasion required; but when I have done so I have tried to do it with courtesy and respect.

On one point of vast importance in the present day, the reader will see that I hold very decided opinions. That point is inspiration. I feel no hesitation in avowing, that I believe in the “plenary inspiration” of every word of the original text of Holy Scripture. I hold not only that the Bible contains the Word of God, but that every jot of it was written, or brought together, by Divine inspiration, and is the Word of God. I entirely disagree with those who maintain that the writers of the Bible were partially inspired, or inspired to such a limited extent that discrepancies, inaccuracies, and contradictions to the facts of science and history, must be expected and do exist in their writings. I utterly repudiate such a theory. I consider that it practically destroys the whole value of God’s Word, puts a sword in the hand of infidels and sceptics, and raises far more serious difficulties than it pretends to solve.

I grant freely that the theory of “plenary verbal inspiration” involves some difficulties. I do not pretend to answer all the objections brought against it, or to defend all that has been written by its supporters.² I am content to remember that all inspiration is a miraculous operation of the Holy Ghost, and, like every operation of the Holy Ghost, must needs be mysterious. It is an operation of which not forty men in the world have been made the subjects, and the manner of which not one of the forty has described. It stands to reason that the whole question of inspiration, like everything else supernatural, must necessarily contain much that is mysterious, and much that we cannot explain.—But the difficulties of the “plenary verbal” theory appear to me mere trifles, compared with those which surround the counter theory of “partial inspiration.” Once admit the principle that the writers of the Bible could make mistakes, and were not in all things guided by the Spirit, and I know not where I am. I see nothing certain, nothing solid, nothing trustworthy in the foundations of my faith, A fog has descended on the Book of God, and enveloped every chapter in uncertainty! Who shall decide when the writers of Scripture made mistakes, and when they did not? How am I to know where inspiration ends, and where it begins? What I think inspired, another may think uninspired! The texts that I rest upon, may possibly have been put in by a slip of the pen! The words and phrases that I love to feed upon, may possibly be weak earthly expressions, in writing which the author was left to his own private uninspired mind!—The glory is departed from my Bible at this rate. A cold feeling of suspicion and doubt creeps over me as I read it. I am almost tempted to lay it down in flat despair. A partially inspired Bible is little better than no Bible at all. Give me the “plenary verbal” theory, with all its difficulties, rather than this. I accept the difficul-

ties of that theory, and humbly wait for their solution. But while I wait, I feel that I am standing on a rock.

I grant the existence of occasional difficulties, and apparent discrepancies, in Scripture. They are traceable, in some cases, I believe, to the errors of early transcribers; and in others to our ignorance of explanatory circumstances and minute links and details. To tell us that things cannot be explained, merely because we are not at present able to explain them, is childish and absurd! "He that believeth shall not make haste." (Isa. xxviii. 16.) A true philosopher will never give up a sound theory on account of a few difficulties. He will rather say,—“I can afford to wait. It will all be plain one day.” For my own part, I believe that the whole Bible, as it came originally from the hands of the inspired writers, was verbally perfect and without flaw. I believe that the inspired writers were infallibly guided by the Holy Ghost, both in their selection of matter and their choice of words. I believe that even now, when we cannot explain alleged difficulties in Holy Scripture, the wisest course is to blame the interpreter and not the text, to suspect our own ignorance to be in fault, and not any defect in God’s Word. The theological system of modern days, which delights in magnifying the so-called mistakes of the Bible, in explaining away its miraculous narratives, and in making as little as possible of its Divine character and supernatural element, is a system that I cannot away with. It seems to me to take a rock from beneath our feet, and plant us on a quicksand. It robs us of bread, and does not give us in its place so much as a stone.

Nothing to my mind is so unutterably painful as the patronizing tone of compassion which the modern advocates of “partial inspiration” adopt in speaking of the writers of the Bible. They write and talk as if St. Paul and St. John, and their companions, were nothing better than well-meaning pious men, who on some points were greatly mistaken, and far below our enlightened age! They speak with pity and contempt of that system of divinity which satisfied the master-builders and giants of the Church in by-gone days. They tell us complacently that a new theology is needed for our age, and that a “freer handling” of the Bible, with pens untrammelled by the fetters which cumbered former interpreters, will produce, and is producing, wonderful results! I thoroughly distrust these new theologians, however learned and plausible they may be, and I expect the Church will receive no new light from them. I see nothing solid in their arguments, and am utterly unmoved by them. I believe that the want of our age is not more “free” handling of the Bible, but more “reverent” handling, more humility, more patient study, and more prayer. I repeat my own firm conviction, that no theory of inspiration involves so few difficulties as that of “plenary verbal inspiration.” To that theory I entirely adhere, and on that theory my readers will find this Commentary is written.

In preparing this Commentary I have made it a point of duty to look through every work on St. John’s Gospel which I could meet with. I append a list of books, partly because it may be interesting and useful to some readers, and partly because I wish to show that when I differ from the authors, I have not written in ignorance of their opinions.

The commentaries and expository works on St. John which I have looked through are the following :—

I. Of Fathers. Origen, Cyril of Alexandria, Chrysostom, Augustine, Theophylact, Euthymius, and the *Catena Aurea*.

II. Of Foreign Reformers and their successors to the close of the seventeenth century. Melancthon, Zwingle, Calvin, Ecolampadius, Brentius, Bucer, Bullinger, Gualter, Pellican, Flacius Illyricus, Musculus, Beza, Aretius, Chemnitius³ Diodati, Calovius, De Dieu, Cocceius, Gomarus, Nifanius, Heinsius, Glassius,⁴ *Critici Sacri*.

III. Of Roman Catholic Writers. Rupertus, Fetus, Arias, Montanus, Toletus, Barra dius, Maldonatus, Cornelius a Lapide, Jansenius, Quesnel.

IV. Of Scotch and English Writers. Rollock, Hutcheson, Poole's Synopsis and Annotations, Cartwright, Trapp, Mayer, Leigh, Lightfoot, Baxter, Hammond, Hall, Henry, Burkitt, Whitby, Pearce, Gill, Scott, Blomfield, Doddridge, A. Clarke, Barnes, Burgon, Alford, Webster, Wordsworth, J. Brown, D. Brown, Ford. To this list I may also add Arrowsmith, on John i.; Dyke, on John ii. iii.; Hildersham, on John iv.; Trench, on Miracles; and Schottgen's *Horæ Hebraicæ*.

V. Of German Writers, from the beginning of the eighteenth century to the present day. Lampe, Bengel, Tittman, Tholuck, Olshausen, Stier, Besser.

Of course no man can spend years, as I have now done, in looking through this formidable mass of books, without forming some decided opinions about the comparative merits of their respective authors. Some of these opinions I have no hesitation in putting down, as they may be of use to some of my younger brethren in the ministry.

(A) The Fathers appear to me greatly overrated as commentators and expositors. Cyril and Chrysostom are far the most valuable of them, in my judgment, on St. John.

(B) The Continental Reformers and their successors appear to me greatly underrated and neglected. Brentius and Musculus, for instance, abound in excellent thoughts and suggestions, but seem quite ignored by most modern commentators.

(C) The Roman Catholic writers often contain much that is useful and little that is objectionable. Happy would it be for the Church of England if all her Clergy knew their Bibles as well as such men as Ferus and Toletus!

(D) The few German writers that I have consulted, appear to me to be far too highly esteemed, with the exception of Bengel and Lampe. Stier is always reverential, but tremendously diffuse. As to Olshausen, Tholuck, and Tittman, I have generally laid down their works with unmixed disappointment. What people can mean by telling us that we have much to learn from modern German writers on Scripture passes my comprehension!—I can only suppose, from my own acquaintance with them, that many say it without having read them, or without having read other expositors.

(E) The Scotch and English commentators I shall pass over in silence, as most of them are well known. I must confess that I think we have little to show in this department of Theological literature. Of our old writers, Rollock, the Scotch divine, is incomparably the best. In fact, I do not know such a "buried treasure" as his Latin Commentary on St. John.⁵—Of modern writers Burgon and Wordsworth strike me as

two of the most valuable, though I differ widely from them on such points as the Church and the Sacraments. But I admire their reverential spirit.—Alford is almost always able and clear, but not always in my opinion a safe theological guide.—A thoroughly satisfactory critical commentary on the Greek Testament, in the English language, is a great desideratum.

I have only to add that on all points of philology, grammar, etc., I have consulted Flacius, Ravanel, Parkhurst, Leigh, Schleusner, Raphelius, Suicer, Glassius, and Winer.

The vexed question of “various readings,” I have deliberately left alone. It is not because I have no opinion on the subject. But the real extent to which all the various readings would affect the meaning of Scripture, if they were admitted, is so much exaggerated, that it does not seem to me worth while to mix up the question with such a work as that which I have undertaken. The Greek text which I have been content to use throughout is that of the third Edition of Stephens (1550), edited by Scholefield. I do not say for a moment that it is the best text. I only say I have used it.

The occasional shortcomings of our authorised English translation I have not hesitated to notice. I have frequently pointed out expressions which in my judgment are not rendered so literally or accurately as they might have been. There is nothing perfect on earth. Our excellent translators undoubtedly fail occasionally to give the full sense of Greek words, and are not always sufficiently careful about tenses and the article. But it is useless to expect perfection in any translation. Translators are not inspired, and are all liable to err. The “plenary verbal inspiration” which I firmly maintain, is that of the original text of Scripture, and not of any translation.—I have no sympathy however with those who wish to have a new authorised English version of the Bible. I concede the shortcomings of the old version, but judging by the specimens of “new and improved” versions which I have seen, I doubt much whether we should gain anything by attempting to mend it. Taking it for all in all, the authorised English version is an admirable translation. I am quite content to “let well alone.”

I now conclude this preface with an earnest prayer, that it may please God to pardon the many deficiencies of this volume, and to use it for His own glory and the good of souls. It has cost me a large amount of time and thought and labour. But if the Holy Ghost shall make it useful to the Church of Christ, I shall feel abundantly repaid.

Ignorance of Scripture is the root of every error in religion, and the source of every heresy. To be allowed to remove a few grains of ignorance, and to throw a few rays of light on God’s precious Word is, in my opinion, the greatest honour that can be put on a Christian.

J. C. RYLE, B. A.,
CHRIST CHURCH, OXFORD.

Stradbroke Vicarage, Suffolk,
February, 1865.

P.S. I feel it due to many of my readers to offer some explanation of the long delay which has taken place since the publication of this work on St. John began. An inter-

val of almost five years has elapsed between the publication of the first four chapters and of the fifth and sixth. This delay, I am afraid, has caused inconvenience and annoyance in many quarters. For this I am unfeignedly sorry.

But the delay has been unavoidable, and has arisen from circumstances entirely beyond my own control. Deaths, domestic anxieties, illness, and change from one residence to another, have had much to do with it. The principal cause has been my removal to my present parish. The work was begun in a little quiet parish of 300 people. It has been resumed in a widely-scattered parish of 1400 people, requiring almost the whole of my attention.

Even now, in sending forth the first volume of the “Expository Thoughts on St. John,” I dare not promise anything certain as to the time when the work will be completed. I have the will to finish it, but I find it almost impossible to secure the necessary leisure. What absolute need there is of entire freedom from distraction and interruption in writing a Commentary, none know but those who have attempted it. What endless petty interruptions a clergyman must submit to in a poor rural parish of 1400 people, where there is no resident landlord, and no layman who has leisure, and where many things must necessarily hinge on the clergyman, no one can know unless he has filled the position.

If the great Head of the Church intends me to finish this work, I believe that He will make my way plain, and remove all obstacles. But my readers must kindly make allowances for my altered position. There are but twelve hours in the day. I cannot create time. It is not one of the primary duties of a parochial clergyman’s office to write Commentaries. If therefore the work does not go on so fast as they could wish, they must have the goodness to consider my position, and to believe that there is a cause.

FOOTNOTES

1. The expectations of Bengel, the German commentator, appear likely to be fulfilled with curious accuracy in the present day. He said, in the year A.D. 1740, “Though Socinianism and Popery at present appear mutually aloof, they will in process of time form a mighty confluence, that will burst all bounds and bring everything to a crisis. We may expect it in the following way.—The residue of heavenly influence on the professing Church, as a body, will have utterly evaporated, its holy things having been already more and more prostituted to the spirit of this world. The Holy Spirit being thus withdrawn from the camp at large, the world will deem its own victory and triumph secured. now, therefore, a spirit of liberal Latitudinarianism will prevail everywhere,—a notion that every one may be right in his own way of thinking, and consequently that all is well with the Jew, the Turk, and the Pagan. Ideas of this kind will wonderfully prepare men for embracing the false prophet.” (Life of Bengel, Walker’s edition, page 322.) How painfully correct these prognostications, made 125 years ago, have proved, anyone who observes the state of religious feeling in England must know only too well!

2. When I speak of “plenary verbal inspiration,” I do not for a moment admit the absurd theory that all parts of the Bible are equally important. I should never dream of saying that the catalogues in Chronicles are of as much value to the Church as the Gospel of St. John. But I do maintain that all parts of the Bible are equally “given by inspiration of God,” and that all are to be regarded as “God’s Word.” If we do not see the Divine character of any particular part, it is because we have at present no eyes to see it. The humblest moss is as much the handiwork of God’s creative power as the cedar of Lebanon. Yet it would be foolish to say it was an equally important part of creation. The least verse in the Bible is just as truly “given by inspiration” as the greatest. But it does not follow that it is equally valuable.

3. The work I here refer to is the Commentary on the "Harmony of the Gospels," begun by Chemnitius, and continued by Lyserus and Gerhard.

4. The work of Glassius to which I here refer is his "Expositions of the Gospels and Epistles appointed for Sundays." It is a collection of Homilies.

5. Rollock was born A.D. 1555, and died A.D. 1598. He was Principal of the University of Edinburgh.