

Updating Matthew Henry Commentary

by Martin Manser

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The English nonconformist minister Matthew Henry wrote his Commentary over 300 years ago; he began writing in November 1704. The first volume was first published in 1708; the first volume with four others appeared in a uniform edition in 1710. Before he died at the age of 52 in 1714, he had completed volume 6 up to Acts. After his death, the Letters and Revelation were prepared by thirteen Nonconformist ministers. He wrote in his journal on 12 November 1704: 'This night, after many thoughts of heart, and many prayers concerning it, I began my Notes on the Old Testament. It is not likely I shall live to finish it, or if I should, that it should be of public service, for I am not *par negotio*; yet in the strength of God, and I hope with a single eye to his glory, I set about it, that I may endeavour something and spend my time to some good purpose and let the Lord make what use he pleaseth of me. I go about it with fear and trembling, lest I exercise myself in things too high for me. The Lord help me to set about it with great humility.'

My updating

Matthew Henry's original work has had a significant influence on many ministers and individual Christians in the last 300 years, and so when the publishers approached me in 2002 about editing a version in contemporary English, I immediately felt humbled at the sheer privilege of the task. The work itself was immense: the original text contained over eight million words: on average, Matthew Henry's comments take up more than 200 words on every verse of the Bible. Over the period 2003-2008, I updated the whole of his Commentary. The abridged edition is being published by Zondervan in October 2010.

My task was to update the wording of the original to make it read clearly in contemporary natural-sounding English, so that it is in effect a modern, practical, and devotional commentary on the KJV. I had to make the original more readable and understandable to present-day generations and future generations.

This meant, for example, shortening his lengthy sentences and updating his language. I sought to ensure that this commentary would have the same impact on contemporary readers that Matthew Henry would have had on his original readers in terms of clarity of expression. Where his text was clear but awkward by today's standards, I edited his text. On other occasions, when his original text was unclear, I have provided a thought-for-thought recasting of his original sense. I asked myself many times day after day for years, "If Matthew Henry were here today, how would he have expressed this?" I did not, generally speaking, seek to update the scholarship on which the text was originally based: in many cases, he draws out points that are timeless.

ABC

One example of a phrase which was difficult to understand was "Abraham had a good bottom". My *Oxford English Dictionary* for the phrase *good bottom* showed that it referred to "the bottom of a ship", and from there the meaning transferred to "a ship",

then “passage through life” or “circumstances”. That took some working out!

Here are some examples from the letter ‘A’:

<i>Original</i>	<i>my translations</i>
advertisement	deliberation, reflection, consultation, consideration
Afterwit	second thoughts, reconsideration
amazed	dismayed, terrified, fearful, dumbfounded
astonished	astonished perplexed, dismayed, horrified
at all adventures	recklessly

and from B and C:

be one's own carver	take or choose for oneself at one's own discretion
beeves	cattle, oxen, bulls, cows
break the measures of	frustrate the plans of
chance-medley	manslaughter by chance-medley: accidental killing
climacterical	critical
collops	lumps, waist bulges with flesh
curious	cleverly skilful, inquisitive, elaborate, intricate, richly made, embroidered, subtle, noteworthy, occult, magical, of food or clothing: exquisitely prepared, dainty, delicate

Many phrases I looked at seemed old, but sometimes I was surprised by how contemporary early 18th century English was, e.g.: *sponge off someone*, *break the ice*, *turn the tables on someone*, and *not know when you are well off*.

The New Testament

The style of the New Testament was somewhat different from the Old Testament. Matthew Henry died before he finished his commentary and his friends compiled much of the New Testament commentary on the basis of his notes. Moreover, the style varies – e.g., the way of writing (including numbering – or a lack of numbering! – subsections) changed at Matthew 15 – perhaps one editor compiled Matthew 1-14 and another Matthew 15-28? Mark, too, seems to have been written by a different compiler.

A group task

Many people helped me in this work: my secretaries Rosalind Desmond and Inna Frampton, and editorial assistant Nicky Bull assisted in the task of refining and correcting the text. At the publishers, Stan Gundry offered great support and encouragement throughout the project; Verlyn Verbrugge and Jack Kuhatschek provided me with invaluable help to make sense of the original Hebrew and Greek; I would also like to thank Robert Banning for his editorial changes. Andrew White assisted by proofreading the entire typeset book. We gladly acknowledge the great usefulness of the *Oxford English Dictionary* in helping us understand archaic words and senses. I also gathered around me a group of friends who supported me in prayer over the years, and I am very grateful for their encouragement.

On my knees

The task was humbling. As I attempted to present Matthew Henry's text in contemporary

English, I realized I was standing on the shoulders of a giant, and inwardly at least, I also knelt alongside this giant in adoration of the Lamb.

Sample texts

Original from 2 Kings chapter v5 (abridged)

We have here the cure of Naaman's leprosy.

I. The short and plain direction which the prophet gave him, with assurance of success. Naaman, with all his retinue attended at Elisha's door as a beggar for an alms. Naaman expected to have his compliment returned, but Elisha gave him his answer without any formality, would not go to the door to him, lest he should seem too much pleased with the honour done him, but sent a messenger to him, saying, *Go wash in Jordan seven times*, and promising him that if he did so his disease should be cured. The promise was express: *Thou shalt be clean*. The method prescribed was plain: *Go wash in Jordan*. It was intended as a sign of the cure, and a trial of his obedience. Those that will be helped of God must do as they are bidden.

II. Naaman's disgust at the method prescribed, because it was not what he expected. Two things disgusted him: 1. That Elisha, as he thought, put a slight upon his person, in sending him orders by a servant, and not coming to him himself, v.11. Being big with the expectation of a cure, he had been fancying how this cure would be wrought, "*He will surely come out to me*, that is the least he can do to me, a peer of Syria, to me that have so often been victorious over Israel. *He will stand, and call on the name of his God, and name me in his prayer, and then he will wave his hand over the place*, and so effect the cure." And, because the thing was not done just thus, he fell into a passion. He scorns to be healed, unless he be humoured.

2. That Elisha, as he thought, put a slight upon his country. He took it hard that he must be sent to wash in Jordan, a river of Israel, when he thought *Abana and Pharpar, rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel. May I not wash in them and be clean?* He might wash in them and be clean from dirt, but not wash in them and be clean from leprosy. 3. Jordan was the river appointed, and, if he expected a cure from the divine power, he ought to acquiesce in the divine will, without asking why or wherefore. Naaman talked himself into such a heat (as passionate men usually do) that he turned away from the prophet's door in a rage, ready to swear he would never have anything more to say to Elisha; and who then would be the loser?

III. The modest advice which his servants gave him, to observe the prophet's prescriptions, with a tacit reproof of his resentments, "*If the prophet had bidden thee to do some great thing, had ordered thee into a tedious course of physic, Wouldst thou not have done it?* No doubt thou wouldst. And wilt thou not submit to so easy a method as this, *Wash and be clean?* The reproof was very modest and respectful, very rational and considerate. If the servants had stirred up their master's angry resentment, and offered to avenge his quarrel upon the prophet, how mischievous would the consequences have been! They reasoned with him, (1) From his earnest desire of a cure: *Wouldst thou not do anything?* When diseased sinners come to this, that they are content to do any thing, to submit to anything, to part with anything, for a cure, then, and not till then, there begin to be some hopes of them. Then they will take Christ on his own terms when they are made

willing to have Christ upon any terms. (2) From the easiness of the method prescribed: “The methods prescribed for the healing of the leprosy of sin are so plain that we are utterly inexcusable if we do not observe them. It is but, “Believe, and be saved”--” — “Repent, and be pardoned”--” — “Wash, and be clean.”4.. The cure effected, in the use of the means prescribed, v.14. Naaman, upon second thoughts, yielded to make the experiment. *His flesh came again, like the flesh of a child*, to his great surprise and joy.

My version:

Here we have the healing of Naaman’s leprosy: 1. The short and clear direction which the prophet gave him, with an assurance of success. Naaman with all his retinue came to Elisha’s door as a beggar asking for gifts. Naaman expected to have his compliment returned, but Elisha gave him his answer without any formality. He would not go to the door to meet him personally, wanting not to seem too pleased with the honor given him, but sent a messenger to Naaman, saying, *Go wash in Jordan seven times* (v. 10), promising him that if he did this, his disease would be healed. The promise was clear: *Thou shalt be clean* (v. 10). The treatment prescribed was direct: *Go wash in Jordan* (v. 10). It was intended as a sign of the healing and a test of his obedience. Those who want to be helped by God must do as they are told. 2. Naaman’s disgust at the prescribed treatment because it was not what he expected. Two things disgusted him: 2.1. That Elisha, he thought, was insulting him by sending him orders through a servant and not coming to him himself (v. 11). Having big expectations of healing, he had been working out how the healing would happen: “*He will surely come out to me*, that is the least he can do to me, a lord of Aram, to me, one who has so often been victorious over Israel. *He will stand and call on the name of his God*. He will name me in his prayer, and then he will *wave his hand over the place*, and so bring about the healing.” And because the thing was not done just like that, he lost his temper. He scorned to be healed unless he was humoured as well. 2.2. That Elisha, he thought, was insulting his country. He took it hard that he must be sent to wash in the Jordan, a river of Israel, when he thought *Abana and Pharpar, rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel* (v. 12). *May I not wash in them and be clean?* (v. 12). He could wash in them and be clean from dirt, but not wash in them and be clean from leprosy. Jordan was the appointed river, and if he expected healing by divine power, he should accept the divine will without asking why. Naaman talked himself into such a temper — as angry people often do — that he turned away from the prophet’s door in a rage, ready to swear he would never have anything more to say to Elisha. But who then would be the loser? 3. The modest advice which his servants gave him — with an implicit rebuke to his anger — to observe the prophet’s prescription (v. 13). “*If the prophet had bidden thee* (told you to) *do some great thing* (v. 13), if he had prescribed some difficult medical treatment, *Wouldst thou not have done it?* (v. 13). No doubt you would have. And will you not submit to such a simple way as this, *Wash and be clean?* (v. 13).” The rebuke was modest, respectful, rational, and considerate. If the servants had stirred up their master’s angry resentment and offered to avenge his quarrel on the prophet, how troublesome would the consequences have been! They reasoned with him: 3.1. From his fervent wish to be healed: *Wouldst thou not do* (v. 13) anything? When diseased sinners come to the point at which they are content to do anything, to submit to anything, to part with anything, in order to be healed, then — and not until then — there begins to be some hope for them. They will take Christ on his own terms when they are made willing to have Christ on any terms. 3.2. From the simplicity of the prescribed treatment: *Wash and be clean* (v. 13). The prescribed treatment to heal the leprosy of sin is so clear that we are completely inexcusable if we do not observe it. It is only, “Believe and be saved” — “Repent, and be forgiven” — “Wash, and be clean.” 4. The healing that was brought

about by using the treatment prescribed (v. 14). Naaman had second thoughts and tried the experiment. *His flesh came again, like the flesh of a child*, to his great surprise and joy.

Psalm 119:81-82 (abridged)

The original:

He longs *for the salvation of the Lord and for his word*, that is, salvation according to the word. He is not thus eager for the creatures of fancy, but for the objects of faith, salvation from the present calamities and doubts and fears. It may be understood of the coming of the Messiah; the souls of the faithful even *fainted to see* that salvation of which the prophets testified. (1 Pet. 1. 10); their eyes failed for it. Abraham saw it at a distance, and so did others, but at such a distance that they could not steadfastly see it. David cried out, "*When wilt thou comfort me? When the eyes fail yet the faith must not; for the vision is for an appointed time, and at the end it shall speak and shall not lie.*"

My contemporary version:

The psalmist longs *for the salvation of the Lord and for his word* (vv. 81 – 82), that is, salvation according to the word. He is eager not for mere figments of imagination but for the real objects of faith, salvation from the present adversities and doubts and fears. The verse may be understood to refer to the coming of the Messiah; the souls of the faithful even *fainted to see* that salvation of which the prophets testified (1Pe 1:10). They searched intently for it. Abraham saw it at a distance, and so did others, but at such a distance that they could not see it decisively. David cried out, *When wilt thou comfort me?* (v. 82). When the *eyes fail*, yet (v. 82) faith must not, for *the vision is for an appointed time, and at the end it shall speak and shall not lie* (Hab 2:3).