

# THOMAS SCOTT: ‘VERY BUSY, VERY UNPOPULAR, AND A LITTLE USEFUL.’<sup>1</sup>

*Fergus Pearson*

## A Man of Contrasts

Thomas Scott (1747–1821) was a very plain man. And yet his story is more than a little interesting. He was both dull and remarkable; both proud and humble; both forbidding and appealing; both ego-centric and Christ-centred.

As a newly-ordained curate in his late twenties Scott found himself in the parish next to Olney where the middle-aged John Newton was ministering. It was Newton’s influence which led, under the Spirit, to Scott’s conversion, and Newton maintained a fatherly interest in his young protégé’s career. One Monday evening Newton walked with a friend to hear Scott preach. That night he confided to his diary, ‘How ought I to be affected with the honour of being instrumental to thy gracious design, in raising up one who gives hope of being one of the most considerable of thy servants.’<sup>2</sup> In the eyes of many, as Scott’s ministry developed, God fully answered Newton’s prayers for his young friend.

Scott is hard to pin down. He was never renowned as a stirring preacher, yet he was burnt in effigy for daring to preach in Tingewick (three miles south-west of Buckingham). He wrote a large book attacking the views of his own diocesan bishop—and this just five years after that same bishop had intervened in his favour and licensed a chapel for his son in the parish of a hostile incumbent.<sup>3</sup> He was head-hunted for one of the chief preaching centres in London, the Lock Hospital Chapel, because of his Calvinistic credentials, yet for many years afterwards was vilified as an Arminian by that same congregation. During his lifetime nearly £200,000 was paid over the counter for his Bible commentary, yet Scott lived to within his final years with scarcely enough to feed himself and his family.

---

<sup>1</sup> Letter [to Thomas Charles] (12 January 1788) in John Scott, *The Life of the Rev Thomas Scott* [1822] in J Scott ed., *The Works of the Late Rev Thomas Scott* (London: L. B. Seeley & Son, 1824), Vol XI, p. 262 [emphasis original].

<sup>2</sup> John Newton Diary (20 July 1778), Princeton University, CO199 [With thanks to Marylynn Rouse for the reference].

<sup>3</sup> Bishop George Tomline of Lincoln had written *The Refutation of Calvinism*. Scott felt that he was the one particularly in his bishop’s sights and took up the challenge in ‘Remarks on ‘The Refutation of Calvinism’” published in 1811 [Scott, *Works*, Vol VII, p. 5]. Gawcott Chapel, Buckingham, was licensed in 1806 for Scott’s second son, also called Thomas.

He left school at 15 and didn't go to university yet he taught Arabic and Susoo to the CMS's missionaries (along with Latin, Greek and Hebrew). He never ventured as far west as Wales yet he was the one who almost single-handedly sourced Welsh Bibles for Thomas Charles's thousands of hungry converts in and around Bala.<sup>4</sup> The furthest he travelled by boat was Margate and he never got further north than Leeds yet he exercised a truly worldwide ministry through his writings and the missionaries he taught. Let us pause here to cite two examples. First, in the United States ten years after Scott's death Bela Bates Edwards wrote about Scott's Bible commentary, 'at least one hundred thousand families [are] gathering their views of the meaning of the Christian revelation from the comments of a single mind.'<sup>5</sup> Secondly, Benjamin Bailey, one of the Missionaries who trained for two years under Scott's sole tutelage, 'is credited with having standardised the prose of Malayalam through his translation of the Bible and other works and publicised some of the earliest dictionaries in Malayalam. It was under his supervision that the actual typography of Malayalam was cut and cast in silver.' Bailey was also 'the founder principal of CMS College' at Kottayam in South India.<sup>6</sup>

Scott's ministry was scorned—in print, during his lifetime—for being severe and coarse, heavy-handed and scolding;<sup>7</sup> yet his home life was so renowned for its love that his grandson had 'frequently been asked how it was that old Thomas Scott, the commentator, brought up his children' and felt he had to go into print about it.<sup>8</sup> He was known for his stand against worldliness, yet a Wetherspoons in Hull is named after his son, his grandson (a different one) and his great-grandson.<sup>9</sup> He had neither approval nor inclination for high culture, yet his grandson (a different one) designed

---

<sup>4</sup> See Thomas Charles, Letter to Mr M[ayor] of S[hawbury] (23 March 1787) in Edward Morgan *Thomas Charles' Spiritual Counsels* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1993), p. 361; and Thomas Charles, Letter to Thomas Scott (24 March 1787) in Scott, *Life*, p. 258 and pp. 259–63.

<sup>5</sup> Bela Bates Edwards, *Biography of Self-Taught Men* (Boston: J. E. Tilton, 1859), p. 177.

<sup>6</sup> Article in *The Hindu* 5<sup>th</sup> February 2010 [<http://www.hindu.com/2010/02/05/stories/2010020551770300.htm>] accessed 21st February 2013].

<sup>7</sup> W. Cowper, Letter to John Newton (29 March 1784) in J. King & C. Ryskamp, *The Letters and Prose Writings of William Cowper* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1981–86), vol II, p. 230. Scott defends himself at length and with some vigour, pointing out that neither Cowper nor his 'more respectable friends' ever heard him preach [Scott, *Life*, pp. 216–217].

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Scott Jr, *Training for Heaven, as Illustrated in the Family of Thomas Scott, the Commentator* (London: RTS, no date), p. 2.

<sup>9</sup> 'The Three John Scotts,' City Exchange, Alfred Gelder Street, Lowgate, Hull. It is situated opposite St Mary's Church where these three generations of John Scotts ministered.

St Pancras Station.<sup>10</sup> He had no relish or interest in associating with the great and the good, yet his ministry had a deep effect on, amongst others, Henry Thornton, Hannah More and William Wilberforce. In London he was given a wide berth by most of the prominent evangelicals—probably including his friend and mentor John Newton—because they felt he was too strong in combating antinomianism,<sup>11</sup> yet he was heard gladly by prostitutes and people suffering from venereal disease.<sup>12</sup>

He was introduced to the woman he would marry by winning her money at cards. He was ordained into the Church of England while resolutely denying the divinity of Christ and the existence of the Holy Spirit. He had entered the ministry in order to make a name for himself because he believed he had some literary talent; he died fifty years later with a name known and cherished by thousands in the British Isles, Europe, America and beyond, but with his self-belief in tatters.

## A Man in Conflict with Himself

We live in an age where the pursuit of self-esteem is universally applauded. It may seem perverse, therefore, to draw attention to a man who lost his self-esteem when he was at the height of his powers and never recovered it. But for that very reason Thomas Scott is a man worth noticing. He spent a lifetime watching aghast as his competencies, his confidences and his reputation unravelled before his eyes; but he was reluctant to regain the ground. In fact he was determined not to do so. We will explore briefly the violent storm that destroyed Scott's self-reliance once and for all and seek to discover why he was content to see out his days in this deflated state. By way of illustrating this facet of his life we will then conclude with the story of how he wrote and published his Bible Commentary.

We can trace the development of Scott's inner life relatively easily. He was an inveterate writer. He wrote two autobiographies. The first is an 'authentic narrative' of his conversion which he published in 1779 under the title *The Force of Truth*.<sup>13</sup> The second was a 'memoir' written privately to his family because he hoped that 'perhaps it may prevent

<sup>10</sup> Sir George Gilbert Scott (1811–1878) was the chief architect of the Gothic Revival.

<sup>11</sup> The fact that he does not mention Newton as an exception to those who shunned him is telling in the light of hints he gives elsewhere. In this context, for example, he writes 'Mr Newton is, I think, too much afraid of controversy...' [Letter to John Ryland Jr (20 January 1787) in John Scott, ed., 'Letters and Papers of the Late Rev. Thomas Scott; never before published: with Occasional Observations,' vol XII of *The Works of the Late Rev Thomas Scott*, p. 123. See also 'Letters & Papers,' p. 315ff].

<sup>12</sup> The Lock Hospital, where Scott was co-chaplain, was built specifically to treat people who suffered from venereal disease.

<sup>13</sup> Thomas Scott, *The Force of Truth* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1984).

errors and mistakes' by some future biographer.<sup>14</sup> It was his son John who turned out to be his biographer, essentially combining this self-penned memoir with 'copious extracts' of some 255 letters, and adding a few editorial comments.<sup>15</sup> Thus a great percentage of the biographical material about Scott comes from his own pen. But his son also published a further 300 pages of letters in another volume.<sup>16</sup> Thus we have perhaps three distinct flavours in Scott's autobiographical materials. There are the letters, which reveal Scott with a certain immediacy. Secondly, *The Force of Truth*, written within two years of his conversion, rehearses 'the state of the author's mind and conscience.'<sup>17</sup> It does so from a quite distinct theological position and for a quite distinct evangelistic purpose—to convert his wider family.<sup>18</sup> Thirdly, in the memoir and partly in the letters and in asides in his other writings, we have maturer reflections as he looks back on his life and habits. There is plenty of self-conscious writing, and often Scott is keenly aware of his reputation both for the present and for posterity.

### i. Conflict with Conscience

Scott's early letters to his sisters reveal a young man with supreme confidence but perhaps with a chip on his shoulder. His home was a farm near Skegness. In his later youth he had brought a measure of disgrace on the family's reputation—he doesn't reveal what it was—and his father had him spend his early twenties working with the sheep and cattle more like a servant than a son. The hope of university was gone. Yet he had literary aspirations. The ministry offered a way to relieve the drudgery and to further his personal ambitions. We find him in London, then, at the age of 26 and shortly to be ordained, writing a letter to his sister with suave assurance—a philosopher observing the 'incessant round of folly' of those he judges 'more desirous of *appearing* happy than of *being* so.'<sup>19</sup> It is as if he is writing letters conscious that one day he will be writing for an audience. There is also a striking moral tone which presents itself with a kind of arrogant aloofness. As his curacy in Buckinghamshire begins he sets himself on a life of concentrated study to further his personal ambitions and will be drawn neither into company nor towards indulgent

<sup>14</sup> Scott, *Life*, p. 563.

<sup>15</sup> The full title of J. Scott's Biography is *The Life of the Rev. Thomas Scott, Rector of Aston Sandford, Bucks., including a narrative drawn up by himself, and copious extracts of his letters.*

<sup>16</sup> This volume is Scott, 'Letters & Papers.'

<sup>17</sup> Scott, *The Force of Truth*, p. 21.

<sup>18</sup> Scott, *Life*, p. 143.

<sup>19</sup> Letter to one of his sisters (13 March 1773) in Scott, 'Letters & Papers,' pp. 10–11 [emphasis original].

habits. And he won't put on airs like his fellow curate who tries to present himself to the world as a man of means.

Scott's self-esteem is strong. He has ability, is studious and disciplined, and has a fierce determination to succeed. In spite of his unprepossessing early life, it is hard to deny that here might be a man who can make something of himself. In a letter around this time, explaining his study regimes to one of his sisters, he outlines a writing project on the Sermon on the Mount. 'I shall perhaps throw the whole into some other form,' he says, 'and communicate it to the public.'<sup>20</sup>

But only four years later Scott seems a very different man. The air of self-contained assuredness is gone. Two things have been at work in his life which change him entirely. The first is his conscience. The story begins with John Newton, who had gone to visit two of Scott's parishioners who were dying. 'Immediately my conscience reproached me,' Scott writes. Newton had

...walked so far to visit, and supply my lack of care to those, who, as far as I was concerned, might have been left to perish in their sins. This reflection affected me so much, that without delay, and very earnestly, yea, with tears, I besought the Lord to forgive my past neglect: and I resolved thenceforth to be more attentive to this duty.<sup>21</sup>

At around the same time his conscience played another highly significant role. Scott's literary ambitions required the income which only a lucrative parish could provide. During his curacy he made a connection with local landowner George Wright, was cataloguing his extensive library and tutoring his son, and was greatly encouraged by Wright's warm assurances that he would find Scott the living he desired. However, at this period, in a Communion service Scott's eye fell on Article VIII in the Prayer Book. Here he was struck by the phrase which said that the Athanasian Creed was to be 'thoroughly received, and believed.' He at that time neither received it nor believed it—in fact he had made a virtue of belittling it. Suddenly he was hit by a deep confusion. He was a minister of the Church—yet here he was, treating with disdain his Church's fundamental teaching. All clergy at that time, in being appointed to a ministry post, were required to 'willingly and from my heart subscribe to the Thirty-nine Articles of Religion...'<sup>22</sup> If Wright were to get him another parish he would have to 'subscribe' again. 'My mind was greatly impressed and affected. The matter of subscription immediately occurred

<sup>20</sup> Letter to one of his sisters (18 September 1773) in Scott, *Life*, p. 53.

<sup>21</sup> Scott, *The Force of Truth*, p. 33.

<sup>22</sup> Scott, *The Force of Truth*, p. 39. This was the wording used for subscription in Scott's day [ [http://www.churchsociety.org/issues\\_new/doctrine/39a/history/iss\\_doctrine\\_39A\\_history\\_subscription.asp](http://www.churchsociety.org/issues_new/doctrine/39a/history/iss_doctrine_39A_history_subscription.asp)] [accessed 21st February 2013].

to my thoughts; and from that moment I conceived such scruples about it, that...they remained insuperable.<sup>23</sup>

These matters of conscience were written up like this in *The Force of Truth* about four years later because Scott wanted to tell his story in an evangelistic tract. Did the four-year delay in the telling effectively overdramatize these events? A letter to his sister Susanna at the critical time—when he was still not converted—makes clear that it did not.

I have had too ambitious and interested views, and have placed my expectations and desires too much on the emoluments of the ministry, and too little on the labours. In my studies and schemes I have more anxiously consulted by what means I might advance myself, than how I might make myself useful as a minister of the gospel...I have arrived, in point of conscience, at perhaps an unnecessary scrupulousness, insomuch that I cannot, either through hopes of gain and favour, or through fear of loss and censure, do a thing that my heart disapproves...Within sight, as it were, of preferment, I have met with what has put a period to my present expectations, and has caused me formally to renounce them.<sup>24</sup>

His biographer continues, ‘He then states his disapprobation of many things in the Articles, and particularly his utter repugnance to the Athanasian creed...’<sup>25</sup> Scott’s conscience had scuppered his life’s plans. He saw that if he was a minister he should minister with care and devotion to the people in his parish. And he saw that he could not easily declare himself ‘above the law’ of the church he served. He was therefore driven by conscience never to take another post because he would not again subscribe dishonestly. All that was left to him was to stay without prospects in his humble position as a curate. George Wrighte was not happy. The relationship soured and Scott got the sack as his son’s tutor—reducing his meagre income still further. His life was unravelling before his eyes.

## ii. Conflict with Intellect

If the first challenge to the course of his life was a conflict with his conscience, the second was a conflict with his intellect. This was the outcome of his shock about the Athanasian Creed. He reasoned that if the Church approved this creed then he was bound at least to give it a worthy hearing. Article VIII more fully stated that the Athanasian Creed was to be believed ‘for that it might be proved by most certain warrants of Holy Scripture.’<sup>26</sup> Did the Scriptures indeed prove this creed? Scott had presumed they did not. Now he could not rest until he had put the creed

<sup>23</sup> Scott, *The Force of Truth*, p. 39.

<sup>24</sup> Letter to his sister Susanna (12 July 1775) in Scott, *Life*, p. 86.

<sup>25</sup> Scott, *Life*, p. 86.

<sup>26</sup> Article VIII as quoted in Scott, *The Force of Truth*, p. 39.

and the Articles to the test. He had already been studying the Bible with great energy and discipline in order to become proficient, for his own advancement, in the biblical languages. Now his motive was altogether different and he applied himself with equal commitment in searching out the truth.

The story of this search, and its outcome, is engagingly and doggedly told in *The Force of Truth*. He limits himself for the most part to the Scriptures and ‘approved’ Church of England writers so that his search will not be tainted with ‘enthusiasm.’ But to his utter surprise and embarrassment he finds that one by one his favoured doctrines are overturned. Worst of all,

I saw myself continually verging nearer and nearer to that scheme of doctrine which the world calls Methodism; nor could I help it without doing violence to my convictions...I had been accustomed to hear the people called Methodists mentioned with contempt, as ignorant and deluded, as fools, and sometimes as madmen; and that with no small degree of complacency and self-preference, I too had despised them as weak enthusiasts. But I now began to be apprehensive that the tables were about to be turned upon me.<sup>27</sup>

This would be devastating for his self-esteem.

If I professed and taught these doctrines, I must no longer be considered as a man of sober understanding, but as one of those persons whose heads, being naturally weak, had been turned by religious studies; and who, having fallen under the power of enthusiasm, had become no better than fools or madmen.

He adds wryly, ‘This was the sharpest trial I passed through...’<sup>28</sup>

### iii. Conflict with God

Having fought to become, as he thought, the master of his own destiny, he now finds himself at the mercy of forces beyond his control. He has been displaced. But it is not only his ability to direct his prospects in the world that has gone; he finds also that his ability before God has been a figment of his imagination. He had been reading Hooker’s *Discourse of Justification*.

I clearly perceived my very best duties, on which my main dependence had hitherto been placed, to be merely specious sins, and my whole life appeared to be one continued series of transgression. I now understood

<sup>27</sup> Scott, *The Force of Truth*, pp. 68–9.

<sup>28</sup> Scott, *The Force of Truth*, p. 69.

the apostle's meaning, when he affirms, that 'By the works of the law can no flesh be justified before God.'<sup>29</sup>

'The best things which we do,' says Hooker, 'have somewhat in them to be pardoned.'<sup>30</sup> Then through *Practical Discourses Concerning the Christian Temper* by John Evans—one of the few dissenters he read—he

at length perceived that fallen man, both body and soul, is indeed carnal and sold under sin; that by nature, in every man living, the reasonable and immortal part is destitute of spirituality, immersed in matter, and, by a dishonourable and miserable prostitution, given up 'to make provision for the flesh, to fulfil the lust thereof.'

He had come to embrace the doctrines of original sin and human depravity, and with them the teaching that 'man must be renewed in the spirit of his mind...born of the Spirit of God, made partaker of a new and divine nature, before he can possibly be made meet for, or admitted into the kingdom of God.'<sup>31</sup>

His self-reliance has gone. Everything has been pulled out from underneath him. All his resources are shown to be empty and profitless. Yet in their place another structure has emerged. This deep change, and its effect on his life, is brought home in a letter he writes to his sister-in-law in October 1779. Six years earlier, as we have seen, he was observing the world as a disinterested philosopher with conventional morals. Now,

I cannot but wonder to think of my former castle-building frame of mind, when, with eager hopes and sanguine expectations, I was forming schemes of satisfying and durable happiness in such a vain uncertain world. My dreams and visions are now vanished like a morning cloud. I find now that neither riches, nor preferment, nor reputation, nor pleasure, nor any worldly good, can afford that happiness I was seeking. I bless the Lord, I did not discover the cheat, nor lose the shadow, before I found the substance...<sup>32</sup>

Scott recognizes this change in his life as the work of the Holy Spirit in regeneration and conversion. We can turn to another letter to see him urgently pressing the need for this 'change' on his sister Susanna. He acknowledges that, when he has faced difficulties, his reactions have too often been sinful. But this

<sup>29</sup> Scott, *The Force of Truth*, pp. 55–6.

<sup>30</sup> As quoted by Scott in *The Force of Truth*, p. 55.

<sup>31</sup> Scott, *The Force of Truth*, p. 67.

<sup>32</sup> Letter to his wife's sister (19 October 1779) in Scott, *Life*, pp. 130–31.

makes me place no confidence in such poor sinful services [attempts to be more godly], but trust wholly to what Christ hath done for me—he having been *made sin for us, who knew no sin, that we might be made the righteousness of God in him*...I only therefore would wish you to strive and pray continually against the workings of unbelief.<sup>33</sup>

He continues,

You say you are ‘afraid I shall say that unless you be converted you cannot be saved.’ I do say so, and am sure of it: and saith not the Lord the same? *Verily, verily I say unto you, except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye cannot enter into the kingdom of God*— But what if I add, that I see dawning hopes that this necessary work is already wrought in your soul; and that the time is coming, and not far distant, when your own inward experience shall explain to you the meaning of this and several other expressions of the New Testament to the same effect, better than any commentators in the world?<sup>34</sup>

Scott then summarizes his thoughts:

This is conversion: being turned from seeking our happiness from the world and self, to seeking it from God only. —Generally this change is preceded by a deep conviction of our lost state by nature and practice, a sense of our perishing need of pardoning mercy, and a discovery of the glorious person, gracious work, and offices of Jesus Christ, and an application to him, according to his invitation, *Come unto me all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest*...When this change has taken place in our source of happiness, our desires and ends, aims, hopes, fears, joys, sorrows, converse, and conduct too are changed: *Old things are passed away, behold all things are become new*. This is conversion; and I trust you have experienced something of it, and that it will be more and more evident to your mind every day.<sup>35</sup>

Scott thus commends and even persuades people to give up their self-belief because their ‘best days, dispositions, and services, are all defective and defiled, and need to be washed in that fountain which the Lord hath

---

<sup>33</sup> Letter to Susanna Webster (15 January 1780) in Scott, ‘Letters & Papers,’ pp. 88–89. Emphasis original; the standard edition of Scott’s works uniformly puts unreferenced Bible quotations in italics.

<sup>34</sup> Letter to Susanna Webster (15 January 1780) in Scott, ‘Letters & Papers,’ pp. 90–91.

<sup>35</sup> Letter to Susanna Webster (15 January 1780) in Scott, ‘Letters & Papers,’ pp. 91–92.

opened for sin and for uncleanness.<sup>36</sup> Relinquish self-reliance, he says to his sister, and apply instead to Jesus on the basis of the invitation he himself issues. Come to ‘the *advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous, who is the propitiation for our sins.*’<sup>37</sup>

We have seen Scott acknowledge the struggles against his own sin. He often speaks of his own lack of expertise—indeed, his ineptitude—in ministry, both pastorally and in preaching, his constant battle against impatience and bad temper, his unwillingness to accept God’s disciplining hand, his failure to gain benefit from his circumstances, and his lack of zeal for God. Humility is an easy thing to simulate when you are as conscious as Scott was of the watching eyes of the world. But in a few unguarded moments it is evident that his lack of self-reliance is genuine. A couple of examples will suffice. In a letter (probably to his son John) he refers to the just-established CMS. ‘I had a considerable share in setting this business in motion, and I should wish to try what can be done: but I am apt to fear, that, like most of my plans, it will come to little.’<sup>38</sup> And in a letter to his friend John Ryland Jr. he admits he did not write sooner on hearing of his wife’s death because ‘I am conscious that I am not much master of the consolatory strain.’<sup>39</sup>

In Scott’s view, circumstances, along with conscience and a scrupulous integrity, have been God’s instruments in reducing his self-belief to nothing. But, for what he has lost, he has made amazing gains. The Holy Spirit has exchanged his ‘self-confidence and every towering imagination’<sup>40</sup> for something he did not have before: he, along with all believers, now has these seven great privileges: he is ‘pardoned and justified in the sight of God,’ ‘reconciled to God,’ ‘adopted into the family of God,’ ‘all his temporal wants will be supplied,’ he has the privilege of ‘communion with God,’ ‘the consolations of the Holy Spirit,’ and he will ‘be kept “by the power of God, through faith, unto salvation.”’<sup>41</sup>

## The Struggle with his Bible Commentary

We have seen that Thomas Scott eschewed self-reliance and instead learnt to look to Christ for his security and hope. How this cashed out in Scott’s life cannot be better illustrated than by telling the story of how his commentary on the Bible came to be published. Scott himself

<sup>36</sup> Letter to Susanna Webster (15 January 1780) in Scott, ‘Letters & Papers,’ p. 88.

<sup>37</sup> Letter to Susanna Webster (15 January 1780) in Scott, ‘Letters & Papers,’ p. 92.

<sup>38</sup> Letter (29 October 1800) in Scott, *Life*, p. 312.

<sup>39</sup> Letter to John Ryland Jr (18 June 1787) in Scott, ‘Letters & Papers,’ p. 125.

<sup>40</sup> Thomas Scott ‘Essays on the Most Important Subjects in Religion’ in Scott, *Works*, vol II, p. 243.

<sup>41</sup> Scott, ‘Essays,’ p. 330, p. 334, p. 336, p. 340, p. 342, p. 343, pp. 344–5.

summarises the Holy Spirit's method of dealing with his pride and ego as he reflects on the first edition of this commentary recently completed. 'It was needful that the whole progress of the work should be stamped with mortification, perplexity, and disappointment, if the Lord meant me to do any good to others by it, and to preserve me from receiving essential injury in my own soul.'<sup>42</sup>

On his deathbed Scott uttered these words: 'At any rate, I have been a plain man.'<sup>43</sup> He wrote his *magnum opus*, which earned him the nickname 'Bible Scott',<sup>44</sup> in his 'very plain way'<sup>45</sup> in order to 'explain in the notes its primary meaning...and then, in practical observations, to shew what we may learn from each passage...'<sup>46</sup> Sir James Stephen in the *Edinburgh Review* remarked that 'the unbroken monotony of the style, and the lowness of that uniform level, is maintained throughout six quarto volumes, with scarcely one passing attempt to bestow on any single passage any...warmth.' He describes Scott as 'the comparatively unlearned, the positively unskilful, and the superlatively unamusing commentator...'<sup>47</sup>

It is perhaps to Scott's credit as a 'plain man' that his abilities have been somewhat overlooked. Nigel Scotland has made the startling assessment that 'Scott had no detailed knowledge of Hebrew, Greek or Latin and so to interpret the text his method was to compare Scripture with Scripture.'<sup>48</sup> Scotland seems to have drawn this conclusion second-hand from the racy hyperbole of James Stephen: 'No exact knowledge of Hebrew, Greek, or Latin, no familiarity with the literature of the languages of modern Europe, no patristic or mediaeval learning...conducted him through the annals of the Hebrew theocracy, or illuminated his path amidst the aphorisms, the prophecies, or the mythic intimations of their inspired writers...'<sup>49</sup>

Actually, Scotland's statement flies in the face of the evidence. Let me adduce two instances. First, Scott felt himself able, in the pages of the *Christian Observer*, to question Adam Clarke's views on the use of the Septuagint in the New Testament, and even went so far as to list

<sup>42</sup> Letter to John Ryland Jr (26 June 1792) in Scott, 'Letters & Papers,' p. 277.

<sup>43</sup> Scott, *Life*, p. 551.

<sup>44</sup> Josiah Pratt in a letter to Rev Marmaduke Thompson (November 1817) in Josiah Pratt & John Henry Pratt (eds.), *Memoir of the Rev Josiah Pratt* (London: Seeleys, 1849), p. 145.

<sup>45</sup> Letter to John Ryland Jr (30 January 1788) in Scott, 'Letters & Papers,' p. 129.

<sup>46</sup> Thomas Scott, *The Holy Bible... with Explanatory Notes, Practical Observations and Copious Marginal References* (London: Seeleys, 1850) vol I, 29<sup>th</sup> page of the [unpaginated] Preface.

<sup>47</sup> Revised as James Stephen, *Essays in Ecclesiastical Biography*, vol II (London: Longman, Brown, Green & Longmans, 1850), pp. 141–2, 143.

<sup>48</sup> N. A. D. Scotland, *Evangelical Anglicans in a Revolutionary Age* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2004), p. 129.

<sup>49</sup> Stephen, *Ecclesiastical Biography*, vol II, p. 139.

and comment on ‘every direct quotation from the Old Testament, which occurs in the New; contrasting the Septuagint with the original of the New Testament; and giving a translation of the former, with some very short remarks; just noticing how far the one or the other most exactly agrees with the Hebrew text.’<sup>50</sup>

Secondly, Thomas Hartwell Horne (in referring to Scott’s commentary) notes that ‘Though it professes to be a practical commentary principally, the author has, without any parade of learning, introduced many very valuable critical elucidations of the sacred text...The marginal renderings (which appear in the larger editions of the authorised version) have all been collated with the original Hebrew: in one instance (on Numb. vi. 2.) an erratum has been corrected, that has been perpetuated in every other edition, from the first, which was published under the authority of King James I. in 1611, to the present time.’<sup>51</sup>

### i. The Struggle to produce the Commentary

While the commentary itself may be ordinary and plain, the writing and publishing of it turns out to be one of the most fascinating roller-coaster rides of the evangelical world.

One of the reasons Scott started it was for the money. A publisher called Bellamy offered him a guinea a week if he would churn out a ‘number’ each week for a hundred weeks. In the end it would be ‘four years, five months, and one day....employed in the work, with unknown sorrow and vexation.’<sup>52</sup> After fifteen numbers Bellamy decided it wasn’t a going concern after all and pulled the plug. But Scott, having poured his heart and soul into it, and hoping it was going to have a significant impact for the gospel, was reluctant to let it lapse. So he managed to get friends to plough money into the publisher to keep him going till it was finished. At last, with many ups and downs, with Bellamy turning out to be a rogue, with having to publish the last thirty-four numbers himself, with constant ill health, with the death of his wife, with three young children to raise, with mounting debts, with much soul-searching and many regrets, with changes of plan and repeated difficulties, in 174 weekly numbers, on 2 June 1792, the commentary was completed.

I meant well, [he writes to Ryland] but I engaged hastily, and made many egregious blunders: yet I hope, through the Lord’s goodness all will end well. I do not think that my health is injured by my intense application; but my spirits are surprisingly broken: and, whereas I used to rise above

<sup>50</sup> *Christian Observer* April 1810 reprinted in *Scott, Works*, vol X pp. 303–304; the OT quotations [*Christian Observer* April 1810–July 1811] are on pp. 310–357.

<sup>51</sup> T. H. Horne, *A Compendious Introduction to the Study of the Bible* (London: T Cadell, 1833), p. 494.

<sup>52</sup> Letter to John Ryland, Jr (26 June 1792) in *Scott, Life*, p. 277.

difficulties, by a certain alacrity and stoutness of mind, which I took for strong faith and much patience, I am now ready to be alarmed and dejected on every occasion; and have shed more tears since I began this work, than probably I did in all the former years of my life.<sup>53</sup>

But Scott's troubles with his commentary were only just beginning. For years—many years—afterwards as he toiled to produce four new editions this noose around his neck embroiled him in further debts, increasing embarrassments, an attempt to draw him into a pamphlet war and two cases in the Chancery Court. Scott battled to keep perspective on the whole venture. 'If God see the work suited to be an instrument for promoting his glory, neither the devil nor his factors can hinder its circulation: if not, let it go to the dogs.'<sup>54</sup> On one occasion, awaiting the Chancellor's decision, Scott is at a very low ebb. He bares his soul to his son and admits to 'gloomy thoughts.' But these, he says, 'are not so much about my temporal vexations, as concerning the reason why God thus contends with me.'<sup>55</sup> This was written early in 1813. By the end of the year things had sunk yet further and we will find Scott driven almost to despair.

The *Commentary* had been selling well. In 1798 someone else had bought the rights to reprint it and was doing very nicely from it. But not only did he neglect to keep his promise to Scott of a guinea for each number reprinted, he so inflated the price at which he would release what he held that Scott had no hope of buying him out. Scott wanted to work on a new and substantially altered edition but this was now out of the question because, with the first edition readily available in someone else's hands, no publisher would advance what was needed for it. He felt cornered. At last he decided all he could do was increase his debts yet again by asking his friends to help him undertake to publish the whole thing himself. 'The fact was, I had now no other alternative left, if I would improve the first rough sketch of a work, which I always deemed the grand business of my life.'<sup>56</sup>

To embark on a revision was no light matter. 'I find, as I proceed, so much wants mending,' he confides to his son John. 'Had I known and felt this formerly as I now do, I should never have dared to engage in a work, for which every day makes me more and more feel my incompetency.'<sup>57</sup>

## ii. The Struggle with Finances

When the first volumes of the new edition began to appear they sold well. But the economic situation now set itself against Scott. The price

<sup>53</sup> Letter to John Ryland, Jr (26 June 1792) in Scott, *Life*, p. 278.

<sup>54</sup> Letter to John Mayor (January 1813) in Scott, *Life*, p. 287.

<sup>55</sup> Letter to John Scott (11 February 1813) in Scott, *Life*, p. 288.

<sup>56</sup> Scott, *Life*, p. 271.

<sup>57</sup> Letter to John Scott (29 October 1800) in Scott, *Life*, pp. 281–2.

of paper and the cost of printing rose dramatically. This, together with the need to keep the selling price low<sup>58</sup> and the expense of the additional material Scott was writing, meant that ‘the sale of the whole edition scarcely cleared more than the prime cost.’<sup>59</sup> So Scott’s debts, now greatly increased, could still not be repaid.

However, by 1813, as reward for his 25 years of determined and devoted labour to the commentary—alongside the rest of his ministry—Scott has at least over the years received £2000 for the copyright and a further £1000 from sales. He anticipates that continued sales of the commentary—along with other works that he has published—will take care of the debts and all will be well. But at this point comes the bombshell of his end-of-year accounts with his bookseller. There is, after all, no surplus. Not only that, but there is a massive deficit. He owes the bookseller £1200. Scott is devastated. Hundreds of copies of his other works, which he had understood to be sold, turned up instead in the bookseller’s warehouse. Unsold, and, he now reckons, unsaleable.

His embarrassment is acute. He has been in ministry for 42 years. In all that time his annual income has never exceeded £200, and at his current parish of Aston Sandford in Buckinghamshire ‘the living could never be reckoned worth a clear hundred pounds a year to him.’<sup>60</sup> He and his family have lived from hand to mouth, trusting God sometimes for their next day’s supplies. ‘I cannot possibly clear my debts,’ he writes to Henry Thornton, ‘but must go to the last burdened & harassed with them.’<sup>61</sup> This letter also reveals a deeper level of embarrassment than his son seems willing to admit in the official biography. After outlining the financial problems, Scott continues to Thornton,

yet, my dear Sir, the most important part, to which especially I intreat your regard, still remains, but I hope to dispatch it in few words—It may, & will be asked—*If this be the case, and you made any gain by the Ex[position] of the Bible, & by the copy right &c: what is become of the money?* I suppose I have on the two editions, & by the copy right cleared 3000£: not much more. My answer to the enquiry is very short & simple. I have been building my house and maintaining myself & family with it.<sup>62</sup>

---

<sup>58</sup> Presumably in part because of competition from the original edition.

<sup>59</sup> Scott, *Life*, p. 272.

<sup>60</sup> Scott, *Life*, p. 360.

<sup>61</sup> MS Letter to Henry Thornton (22 November 1813), Church Missionary Society Unofficial Papers CMS/ACC81 C72 [Cadbury Research Library: Special Collections, University of Birmingham; used with kind permission].

<sup>62</sup> Letter to Henry Thornton (22 November 1813). Italics added to indicate that this is the question Scott anticipates people will be asking.

I, however had no doubt...I should accomplish the object, and have some thing considerable over plus: & in this confidence, I imprudently, perhaps unjustly, yielded to my feelings of helping my sons in their difficulties; by some little gifts: & by a loan of 300£ each, to my two eldest sons, in respect of their houses one builded, the other purchased; under the idea of their not being called on for more than the interest. I think, I have not spent extravagantly myself: but I should have thought a more penurious parsimony my duty, had I been aware, of what I have lately learned.

In addition,

I imprudently undertook the Education of my second son at College, on my own expence [*sic*]. This could not be less than 400. One cannot see children struggling with difficulties, when the means are in one's hand, without helping them a little.<sup>63</sup>

Scott does the only thing he thinks he can do. He lays before his friends and family his predicament—though perhaps not always so openly as here—asking if they will buy up the stashes of his unsold books in the warehouses at cut price. A little ready cash will, he hopes, begin to reduce these new debts and help to lessen his embarrassment. One of the friends to whom he writes is Charles Simeon at Cambridge.

On 20 December 1813 a letter arrives back from Simeon.

My dear friend, Never was a more delightful office committed to me, than that which I have to execute at this time. Your visit to Cambridge was a blessing to many, who are anxious to testify towards you their respect and love, and who earnestly request your acceptance of a few hundred pounds...<sup>64</sup>

Accompanying the letter Scott finds a remittance for £590 as a gift, and 'a considerable sum' for a number of the unsold books. Scott is overwhelmed. Three weeks later we find him writing to his second son.

I have received in all from different quarters, and from those of whom I had never heard the name...quite enough to pay all my debts: and, as I have reason to think, that most, if not all, the copies of the works will be disposed of, I now *have all and abound*; except that I want more thankfulness to God and man. I have even declined some offers made me.<sup>65</sup>

<sup>63</sup> Letter to Henry Thornton (22 November 1813). [emphasis original].

<sup>64</sup> Scott, *Life*, p. 417.

<sup>65</sup> Letter to his son Thomas (17 January 1814) in Scott, *Life*, pp. 418–9 [emphasis original].

To a friend he writes, 'I am completely set at liberty; and have enough remaining for my use as long as I shall need it, and more. You will help me to bless God for his mercies, and to pray to him for a blessing on my benefactors.'<sup>66</sup> Scott has emerged from the depths and has lived to tell the tale with humble gratitude.

## Conclusion

His son John tentatively claims two world records for the *Commentary on the Bible*. The last edition from his father's hands was, he says, 'in stereotype; and forms, I presume, the largest work ever submitted to that process.'<sup>67</sup> Secondly, the amount people paid both for the English and for the American editions, by 1821, came to £199,900. 'Probably no theological work can be pointed out, which produced, by its sale during the author's life-time, an equal sum.'<sup>68</sup> In a final assessment of Scott and his commentary we can pick up again James Stephen's sentence that we left unfinished. This

...superlatively unamusing commentator has descended further into the meaning of the sacred oracles, and has been baptized more copiously into their spirit, than the most animated, and ingenious, and accomplished of his competitors. This saturation of the comment by the spirit of the text is the true and characteristic merit of Mr Scott's *exegesis*.<sup>69</sup>

To the end of his days Scott's confidence in himself never resurfaced, but he knew Christ, and put his confidence in him. This distrust of himself and full trust in his saviour is perhaps the best way to draw our observations to a close: 'I verily believe that I have not had one loss, disappointment, or mortification, more than my stout spirit required: and I sometimes think that, in heaven, I shall thank God more for my medicines, than for my meals...'<sup>70</sup>

Rev FERGUS PEARSON is Vicar of Hensingham, Whitehaven, in West Cumbria.

<sup>66</sup> Letter to G Knight (30 March 1814) in Scott, 'Letters & Papers,' p. 266.

<sup>67</sup> Scott, *Life*, p. 289.

<sup>68</sup> Scott, *Life*, p. 290.

<sup>69</sup> Stephen, *Ecclesiastical Biography*, vol II, pp. 143–4 [emphasis original].

<sup>70</sup> Letter to 'a friend in Scotland' (19 May 1797) in Scott, 'Letters & Papers,' pp. 196–7.