

JOHN WESLEY, BIBLICAL COMMENTATOR

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Not until John Wesley was in his fifties did he experience any clear call to serious expository scholarship apart from preparing sermons and conducting extemporaneous Bible study in his societies. He ventured into the world of biblical commentaries very diffidently and reluctantly, partly because of what he felt to be his own inadequacy, partly because of his enormous responsibilities as chief administrator and spokesman of a growing and turbulent Methodist society. Having ventured into it, however, called (as he believed) by God, he put more time and effort into this venture than into any other of his hundred literary projects – even the fifty-volume *Christian Library*. From 1754 to 1768 there was no year when he was not involved in some aspect of preparing or publishing a biblical commentary. And then, after a lull of twenty years, he was busy again, with another personally revised edition of the New Testament, and another reprint which he did not really need and probably did not sponsor, climaxed at eighty-seven with a revised pocket edition of his New Testament translation, stripped of its notes, but complete with an analysis of each book. Thus a total of some seventeen years of his maturity and old age were devoted almost completely to the one book of supreme importance in his life.

There are many landmarks in Wesley's preparation of *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament*. One of them was the penning of his own epitaph, on 26 November 1753: 'Here lieth the body of John Wesley, a brand plucked out of the burning, who died of a consumption in the fifty-first year of his age. . .'.¹ This appeared as an incident in the narrative of his increasing ill-health, when Dr John Fothergill prescribed for him 'country air, with rest, asses' milk, and riding daily'.² On 2 January 1754, he set out for the Hot Wells at Bristol, and on Sunday, 6 January began compiling his *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament* – 'a work which I should scarce ever have attempted had I not been so ill as not to be able to travel or preach, and yet so well as to be able to read and write.' His daily regimen for nine weeks in his cold bleak lodgings³ at the Hot Wells was 'rising at my hour

¹ John Wesley, *Journal* (henceforth *JWJ*), 26 November 1753.

² *Ibid.*

³ See John Wesley, *Letters* (Oxford/Bicentennial edn., ed. Frank Baker), 26.534.

[presumably 4 a.m.], and writing from five [a.m.] to nine in the evening, except the time of riding, half an hour for each meal, and the hour between five and six in the evening.⁴

His preface of 6 January 1754 set out his lengthy deliberations about this task as the possible culmination of his life's work:

1. For many years I have had an earnest desire of writing something in order to help serious men, who have not the advantage of learning, more thoroughly to understand the New Testament. But I have been continually deterred from attempting anything of this kind by a deep sense of my own inability . . . When by much importunity I have been prevailed upon to resume it, still I determined to delay as long as possible, that (if it should please God) I might finish this work and my life together.
2. But having lately had a loud call from God to arise and go hence, I am convinced that if I attempt anything of this kind at all, I must delay no longer.⁵

He then outlined his plan of approach to the New Testament text: 'I design first to set down the text itself, in the common English translation, which is in general⁶ (so far as I can judge) abundantly the best that I have seen.' He continued, however:

Yet I do not say, it is incapable of being brought in some places nearer to the original. Neither will I affirm that the Greek copies from which the translation was made are always the most correct. And therefore I shall take the liberty as occasion may require to offer here and there a small alteration, though not taking upon me to dictate to any, but simply to propose what appears to me either certain or probable.

This reflects the approach of Johannes Albrecht Bengel (1687–1752), the evangelical Lutheran scholar whose critical edition of the Greek New Testament, published in 1734, was the highlight of textual criticism in the century. (Wesley's own copy of this, bought in 1747, like his copy of Bengel's expository masterpiece, the *Gnomon Novi Testamenti* (1742) – secured by Wesley in 1752 – both reside in the Methodist Archives at Manchester.) The alpha and beta readings in Bengel incorporate variant Greek readings from the Textus Receptus which lay behind the Authorized Version, the alpha variants considered by Bengel as being *certainly* correct (*plane pro genuina habendam*), and the beta variants as *probably* correct (*nec tamen plane certa*). Wesley did allow personal preferences to influence his choices, but it is clear that in the vast majority of the alterations for his English translation he followed Bengel's preferred Greek variants. Because of this Wesley's New Testament text anticipated most of the altered

⁴ JWJ, 7 January 1754.

⁵ For the 'first draft' of the preface, in the Methodist Archives, Manchester, see *Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society* (henceforth *WHS*), 9 (1914), 99–103. With this compare that printed in the *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament* (1755), iii–vi, bearing the date 4 January 1754, but clearly written later.

⁶ The printed proof (only) of the revised text in the first edition added here, 'for the most part'. These proofs are in the Perkins School of Theology, Southern Methodist University, Dallas, Texas, U.S.A.

readings of the Revised Version of over a century later, and Wesley's changes were calculated by George Croft Cell as numbering over twelve thousand!⁷

Wesley's original preface continued:

5. To the text will be added a few short explanatory notes: as few as possible, it being not my view to swell the book, but to contract it; not to make it as large but as small as I can, and as short as possible, that the comment may not obscure or swallow up the text. And these few short notes will be explanatory only, not curious or critical, in pursuance of my great design of making the Scripture more intelligible to the unlearned reader. . . .

In this endeavour, having pondered and rejected the wordiness of Robert Gell, and even of Matthew Henry, Wesley harked back to his own early distrust of *any* commentary other than the Bible itself, and confessed:

7. I once designed to write down barely what occurred to my own mind, consulting none but the inspired writers. But no sooner was I acquainted with that great light of the Christian world (lately gone to his reward), Bengelius, than I entirely changed my design, being throughly convinced, it might be of more service to the cause of religion were I barely to translate his *Gnomon Novi Testamenti* than to write many volumes upon it. Many of his excellent notes I have therefore translated. Many more I have abridged, omitting that part which was purely critical, and giving the substance of the rest.

He did note, however, his indebtedness also to Heylyn, in addition to Guyse and Doddridge. In effect he ended up with a contemporary English version of Bengel's critical text of the Greek New Testament, combined with a translation of the heart of Bengel's evangelical Latin exposition of that text, together with some condensed excerpts from a handful of contemporary English commentators, all moulded into a unity by Wesley's own love and lore of the New Testament.

Wesley's editorial standards were different from those of most commentators, primarily because he was explaining the oracles of God to unlearned people. He deliberately avoided the use of Hebrew, Greek, and Latin. After considerable hesitation he resolved to leave his human sources uncited, 'that nothing might divert the mind of the reader' from the brief notes themselves. He omitted without comment statements with which he did not agree. All his quotations and allusions, however, rephrased as they were in simpler language, honestly sought to represent the essence of his sources.

As we think of Wesley as 'merely' editing this work, it is salutary

⁷ See A.W. Harrison, 'The Greek Text of Wesley's Translation of the New Testament', *WHS*, 9 (1914), 105-13, and T.F. Glasson, 'John Wesley as a Textual Critic of the New Testament' (unpublished Eayrs Essay prize, 1939), which notes also Wesley's occasional use of Bengel's gamma readings, App. 1, n.5, together with his article, 'Wesley's New Testament Reconsidered', *Epworth Review*, 10:2 (May 1983), 28-34. See also G.C. Cell, *John Wesley's New Testament* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1938), xi.

to visualize the actual burden of some of the mechanical labours involved a century and more before the invention of typewriters, photocopiers, or word processors. It is also important to realize that Wesley was just coming to the close of one huge editorial project to begin another. The fifty volumes of *The Christian Library* (1749–55) constituted an immense literary task. Yet this mainly involved choice, striking his pen through passages in printed works, changing words and phrases, and supplying written links from time to time. With the New Testament commentary, however, this was not possible. In any case there were two major streams of writing which he must keep separate, though closely connected: the scriptural text itself, with its thousands of new translations from the original Greek; and the explanatory notes, several times larger in bulk and complexity in spite of Wesley's determined search for brevity and simplicity. These notes involved writing out the selected portions of Bengel as Wesley translated them, and interweaving his own crisp explanatory comments. Into these he slotted selections from other writers, revising and abridging as he went along. This had to be done piece by piece, sometimes on scraps of paper attached loosely to the primary text. Fair copy was sometimes prepared by his brother Charles or other helpers, but in editing this volume Wesley himself twice transcribed the whole of the New Testament text and his notes thereon.⁸

For over two years he and his helpers were preparing fair copy for the printer, William Bowyer, while Wesley himself was mainly occupied in compiling the notes, section by section. He was still reading Bowyer's proofs on Luke while he was preparing material for Romans. We are able to follow much of the progress of the volume through Bowyer's printing-house in Whitefriars by means of an almost complete set of page proofs and revises for the *Notes*, though numerous problems still remain in their interpretation.⁹

In May 1754, however, with the Gospels in print, though far from perfected, Wesley felt sufficiently secure to seek financing for the project. As in some other costly ventures, he sought advance subscriptions. The first known advertisement appears in *Felix Farley's Bristol Journal* for 24 August 1754. For subscribers the price was twelve shillings, six to be paid in advance, the remainder 'on the delivery of the book in quires'. Booksellers subscribing for six had a seventh copy *gratis*, the deadline for this bonus being 1 May 1755; all other copies were to cost fifteen shillings.

The title-page bore the date of 1755; probably few readers – then or now – realized that Bowyer would not be able to begin delivering some unbound quires until May 1756, and that four more months

⁸ John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes upon the Old Testament* (Bristol: Pine, 1765), Preface, dated 25 April 1765, first paragraph.

⁹ I am grateful to Mrs Charles Prothro of Wichita Falls, Texas, for a photocopy of all these proof-sheets, which she has donated to the Perkins School of Theology.

would pass before the 450 copies specially bound by Mr Norris were available. By 1756 Wesley was well enough to pursue his regular preaching itinerary, and was actually in Ireland during the four months while the parcels were slowly being despatched to societies and booksellers all over the British Isles. In his absence the closing details were handled by Mrs Wesley and William Atkinson, a preacher from Plymouth who was helping at the London Foundry.

On 23 August 1756, Bowyer squared up his accounts with Wesley by dealing with the balance of the enterprise: 'Sent by John Jackson to the Foundry [*sic*], with waste and overplus parts, 2027'.¹⁰ Wesley had already realized, however, that 2,000 copies were far fewer than were actually needed. On 18 June he wrote ruefully to his wife from Limerick: 'I am afraid there have not copies enough been sent to Ireland.' Arriving in Holyhead from Dublin on 12 August, he and his accompanying Irish preachers rode south to attend their conference in Bristol, where they assembled on 26 August. Illness delayed him a few days, but he then rushed back to London to see about an immediate reprint. This was thus announced in *Felix Farley's Bristol Journal* for 11–18 September 1756:

Whereas subscribers to the Explanatory Notes on the New Testament, by John Wesley, M.A., are so unexpectedly increased that there are not copies sufficient for them. This is to give Notice, That a second edition will be published with all possible expedition; and a copy deliver'd to each of the former Subscribers, on the terms of the first Proposals. If any other Person subscribes between this and the first of January next, he may have a Copy on the same terms; but no Copy will be sold after that day under fifteen shillings.¹¹

Bowyer was in fact having trouble with a partnership, which was soon dissolved, and Wesley therefore had to turn elsewhere for a printer, though the final few gatherings of the second edition were prepared by his favourite London printer, William Strahan. No printer's name appeared on the title-page, simply, 'The Second Edition . . . London: Printed in the Year M.DCC.LVII.' The work was a corrected reprint of the original edition, usually gathering by gathering, though completely reset. Neither Bowyer's nor Strahan's surviving ledgers account for this edition as a whole, but Strahan does record a small charge of £14.5s. on Wesley's account in April 1757 for fifteen hundred copies of nine and a half sheets for an 'Exposition of the New Testament' – which correspond exactly with gatherings 4U to 5E of this volume. The second edition seems never to have been available in sheets, but was advertised only as 'B[oun]d and [l]ettered, 17s.6d.'

¹⁰ William Bowyer, 'Ledgers' (Grolier Society, New York), 148. These ledgers, combined with those in the Bodleian Library, Oxford, have been edited by Professor Keith Maslen of the University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand, and are almost ready for publication by the Bibliographical Society, London. I am very grateful to Dr Maslen for additional information about them.

¹¹ A similar advertisement was issued in the *Bristol Journal*, 2 October 1756.

Wesley was soon planning a third edition, this time greatly enlarged and improved. On 22 August 1759, he wrote to a friend: 'Will you take the time and pains to read the *Notes* critically over, and give me your alterations and additions before I print another edition?' Probably he sent a working copy of the second edition along with the letter, or shortly before it. Certainly there is one copy extant, in Drew University, which was used to enter many manuscript annotations, both in longhand and shorthand. Wesley's *Journal* for 12 December 1759 was much more specific: 'I began reading over the Greek Testament and the *Notes* with my brother and several others, carefully comparing the translation with the original, and correcting and enlarging the notes as we saw occasion.' This somewhat more leisurely and careful enterprise evolved into the definitive edition of Wesley's *Notes*.

Apparently from the outset he had decided to desert the ponderous quarto format for two or three volumes in his favourite duodecimo size. This decision allowed an easing of the literary pressure, because each of the volumes could be prepared during the winter months, when Wesley normally spent his time in his London headquarters or in some quiet suburban retreat, and printed during the summer. They were in fact so published during the spring and summer of 1760, 1761, and 1762. The volumes contained respectively the Gospels, Acts to Ephesians, and Philippians to Revelation. During these three years Wesley published no other major work except in 1761 *Select Hymns with Tunes Annext*.

Although the sessions of communal study must necessarily have been quite limited in length and frequency, it is possible to trace a few extended sessions, at least with his brother Charles. By the end of February 1760 the Gospels had been dealt with, and Wesley felt able to spend March in touring the Midlands and the North before leaving for almost five months in Ireland.

That Wesley's colleagues did continue their research on his behalf seems to be indicated by a shorthand inscription on the last page of Revelation in the Drew volume: 'Read the third time, April 5, 1761, London'. And that Wesley also consulted his co-workers as a group at least occasionally was later revealed by his letter of 10 March 1763 to Samuel Furly: 'When we revised the notes on St. Peter, our brethren were all of the same opinion with you. So we set Charles's criticism aside, and let the note stand as it was.'

One of the major targets of this third edition was revising the translation of the Greek New Testament. Many minute changes were also made in the English text taken over from the Authorized Version, especially by making it simpler for uneducated readers by removing archaisms, such as changing 'When the morning was come' (Mark 9:7) to 'In the morning'.

Wesley and his team of workers also endeavoured to discover and correct accidental errors, whether in text, in notes, or in references.

Some had been spotted in the second edition, many more in the third, and others in each later edition during Wesley's lifetime. Strangely enough, a few were discovered only in subsequent reprints, including one persisting into this century – the reference in Rom. 8:36 to 'Ps. 64:22', which should in fact be Ps. 44:22.

A modest attempt was also made to 'correct or enlarge the notes', the greatest concentration being in the notes on Matthew, with additions in about seventy verses, from the minor change in Matt. 11:14 of 'The Roman penny was about sevenpence English' to read 'sevenpence-halfpenny', and an added plea for prison-visiting in Matt. 25:36. Altogether there were some two hundred and fifty additions. There can be little question that this third edition should have been described on the title-page, not merely as 'corrected', but as 'revised and enlarged'. Under Charles's supervision it was printed in Bristol, the first volume by the partners John Grabham and William Pine, the other two by young William Pine alone.

Wesley had spent so much time and trouble on his *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament* that it was by no means surprising that many of his followers importuned him to prepare similar volumes for the Old Testament. He did indeed believe strongly in the importance of the Old Testament as the Word of God, and especially as the Scriptures from whose pages the message of the New Testament was to be unfolded. After resisting for some years, in April 1765, as he was almost sixty-three, he weakened sufficiently to pen a lengthy Preface to the work upon which he had recently but reluctantly embarked. He insisted: 'I cannot entertain a thought of *composing* a body of notes on the whole Old Testament. All the question remaining was, "Is there extant any exposition which is worth abridging?" Abundantly less time will suffice for this, and less abilities of every kind.'¹² Matthew Henry he considered 'generally clear and intelligible', though marred by 'the doctrine of absolute, irrespective, unconditional predestination'. Wesley began by cutting Henry down to a fraction, supplemented from the *Annotations* of Matthew Poole, but eventually found himself using Henry simply as a supplement to Poole and his own reflections.

Wesley summarized his general purpose thus:

It is not to write sermons, essays, or set discourses, upon any part of Scripture. It is not to draw inferences from the text, or to show what doctrines may be proved thereby. It is this: To give the direct, literal meaning of every verse, of every sentence, and as far as I am able, of every word in the oracles of God . . . in as few and plain words as I can.¹³

He wanted the reader 'to keep his eye fixed upon the naked Bible, that

¹² *Explanatory Notes upon the Old Testament*, Preface, para. 3, iii.

¹³ *Ibid.*, para. 15, viii.

he may read and hear it with understanding. . .¹⁴ In keeping with this firm pastoral intent, and with his conviction that God could speak directly from his own Word to the devout uncluttered mind, Wesley avoided most problems of textual criticism and niceties of translation, and added a mere handful of material from sources other than the amended excerpts from Poole and Henry – less than one per cent of the whole.¹⁵

Only one of Wesley's few interventions contains over a hundred words, a challenging and detailed questionnaire on the reader's own behaviour in response to the Ten Commandments, Deut. 5:7–21.¹⁶ An analysis of the remaining passages which do not derive from either Poole or Henry is both interesting and important. They may roughly be divided into the following categories, with some major examples:

- (a) Wesley (or some other source) exegeting the original Hebrew (pages 10, 49, 1635).
- (b) Wesley (or some other source) speculating on the exegesis (13, 14, 279, 446, 2530).
- (c) theological commentary: on the law (495, 2533); on God's decrees (787); on the millennium (2106).
- (d) contrasts between the Jewish and the Christian dispensations (several, including 2176).
- (e) devotional commentary (454, 534, 975, and 275, a sarcastic support of the historicity of witches).
- (f) personal observations: on slavery (273); on the unicorn (542); on the wake of a ship (1622); on eagles, 'one species of which is entirely bald' (2536); on 'the contempt of the clergy' (2608).
- (g) inconsequential, possibly Wesley preferring a phrase of his own to that of his source.
- (h) changes in chapter headings, twelve, and one in the introduction to Hosea (2466).
- (i) discussion (usually adverse) of an author's comment: Free (405);¹⁷ Henry (41, 639–40, 1599); Poole (844).
- (j) references to 'a late writer' (49, 266).
- (k) poetical quotations are almost non-existent, except for two from Charles Wesley's recently published *Short Hymns on Select Passages of the Holy Scriptures* (1762), on 1 Sam. 28:19 (986) and Proverbs 11:22 (1851) – both presented anonymously.

Publication was again by advance subscription, but this time the work appeared in weekly numbers, at sixpence each number of twenty-four

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ For a more detailed survey of the evidence see the dissertation by my former student, Robert Michael Casto, 'Exegetical Method in John Wesley's Explanatory Notes upon the Old Testament' (Ph.D., Duke University, 1977). Appendix IV (339–527) furnishes photocopies of all the additions to Poole and Henry, underlining the relevant passages, which are described and classified on 225–338. Casto notes (221) that Wesley incorporated 183 such additions, comprising 782 lines in a total commentary of 94,395 lines.

¹⁶ *Explanatory Notes upon the Old Testament*, 600–2; Cf. Casto, 'Exegetical Method', 221, 274–6.

¹⁷ 'Exegetical Method', 267–9 where Casto shows good reason for considering the reference to 'Mr. Free' as a typographical error for 'Mr. Fry'.

pages – three ‘quires’ or gatherings. As befitted such a large work, it was again in quarto, and a new edition of the New Testament *Notes* was planned to follow in the same format. The first known advertisement was in *Lloyd’s Evening Post* for 5 June 1765, which announced sixty weekly numbers, to begin publication on 1 August – when Wesley had still not returned from three months in Ireland.

John’s absence from Bristol during the opening stages, where again Charles Wesley was supervising William Pine as printer, seems to have caused a major publishing problem. Pine actually ‘set up and printed off several sheets in a type much larger than was intended’ – much larger than that of the first two editions of the New Testament *Notes*.¹⁸ This could hardly have gone beyond the first few chapters of Genesis, and John would surely have caught it had he been present, and demanded a fresh start; Charles, however, let it slide, and John’s return to Bristol was too late to call a halt. Unfortunately, this threw out their calculations far more than might have been expected, so that the estimated weekly numbers increased from sixty to ‘about seventy’ and ended up as a hundred and ten; similarly the volumes increased from two to three. The same excessively large type was also entailed upon the 1768 reprint of the New Testament *Notes*.

John Wesley himself was partly to blame for the increase, however, for he had decided to incorporate detailed chapter summaries, as much more useful to the reader than the analyses of the books alone, as in his New Testament volume. This in turn implied the use of separated chapter headings in larger type, such as he had rejected for the New Testament – however desirable was this extra space between chapters, this feature alone involved a total increase of some 120 quarto pages to the volumes, or approximately five more numbers.¹⁹ By January 1766 Wesley was so apprehensive about the proliferation of the pages as to admit that the numbers might swell to a hundred, and compel him to change his plan of giving every preacher a free set to offering sets to them at half price.²⁰

Wesley kept well ahead of his printer, and on 23 February 1766, when Pine was nearing the end of printing Deuteronomy, Wesley was finishing his notes on Job. Yet the publication of the numbers was so long drawn out that on 20 June 1766 he wrote a plaintive letter to his subscribers for insertion in the current batch of three quires, which

¹⁸ Adam Clarke, *The Holy Bible . . . with a Commentary* (6 vols., London: Tegg, 1836), General Preface, 10. To make things worse, correspondence between the two brothers was more awkward than usual, because Charles Wesley’s writing arm was causing him trouble; see his letters of 4 November 1764 (to Samuel Lloyd), and 3 May 1765 (to Sarah Wesley).

¹⁹ 929 chapters multiplied by a probable average of well over 1" (with a minimum of 0.6") and frequently about 2", a total of 1,000", or 117.6 pages of 8.5" each.

²⁰ He wrote to Thomas Rankin on 23 January 1766: ‘Suppose the numbers swell to a hundred (as probably they will), consider what it would amount to give seventy persons 50s. apiece before I am reimbursed for the expense of the edition. Indeed, I did not think of this till my brother mentioned it. But all the preachers shall, if they desire it, have them at half price.’

turned out to be No. 53, delivered on 31 July. In this, after reiterating his reluctance to begin the enterprise at all, he described his realization that the work 'would be considerably longer' than he had expected, if he were indeed to make the Old Testament intelligible to ordinary readers. He explained, however, that the friends consulted urged him to continue as he had begun, and 'not to cramp the work'. The closing section of the letter contains one of the saddest laments over literary drudgery ever penned by Wesley:

In the meantime, I myself have far the worst of it: the great burden falls upon *me*. A burden which, if I had seen before, all the world would not have persuaded me to take up. I am employed day and night, and *must* go on, whether I will or no, lest the printer should stand still. All my time is swallowed up, and I can hardly catch a few hours to answer the letters that are sent me. Does anyone who knows anything of *me* suppose that I would drudge thus for *money*? What is money to me? Dung and dross. I love it as I do the mire in the streets . . . For my own sake I care not how short the work is; for I am heartily tired of it. It is for the reader's sake that I say as much on each verse as I think will make it intelligible. And there is no fear, I should say any more: for I am not a dealer in many words.²¹

Loyally but grudgingly Wesley dragged on. At the foot of page 2613 he appended the date of his last note on Malachi, 24 December 1766. Not until 27 August 1767, however, if the regular schedule was indeed maintained, did the printer deliver the last number, though no heartfelt sigh of relief in *Journal* or letter marks either the last note or the last printed number. It is not surprising that Adam Clarke, a careful critic as well as a loyal Methodist, while paying tribute to the *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament* as 'always judicious, accurate, spiritual, terse, and impressive, [with] the happy and rare property of leading the reader immediately to God and his own heart', dismissed those on the Old Testament as 'meagre and unsatisfactory'.²²

After almost three years' drudgery the three volumes of the Old Testament *Notes* could finally be bound in 1767. In 1768 Pine continued with the fourth volume, the fourth edition of the *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament*. This was based upon Pine's third edition of 1760-62, with only minimal changes. For the remainder of Wesley's lifetime the sales of these four volumes remained steady but unspectacular. It was probably this same set which Wesley sent to Dr Samuel Johnson about 1775, who replied on 6 February 1776:

Sir, When I received your Commentary on the Bible, I durst not at first flatter myself that I was to keep it, having so little claim to so valuable a present; and when Mrs. Hall [Wesley's sister] informed me of your kindness, was hindered from time to time from returning you those thanks which I now entreat you to accept.²³

²¹ WHS, 2, 220.

²² Clarke, *The Holy Bible*, General Preface, 10.

²³ *Gentleman's Magazine*, 1797, 455.

This was mainly politeness, of course, and Wesley would hardly expect Johnson to do more than occasionally dip into the weighty tomes. Yet the letter implies that the general reception was at least kindly, though few ordinary Methodists could afford three guineas for the three Old Testament volumes. This was reduced to three pounds in 1777, and to two guineas in 1781, when, by Wesley's order in Conference, the remaining quires were sold at threepence a weekly number, changed to twopence a number for the few left in 1807. The bound volumes of the Old Testament fared better. The tradition that 750 copies were left at Wesley's death is an error – there were only twenty-seven sets on hand.²⁴

It was a different matter with the *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament*. There seemed to be almost a panic of reprinting during the latter years of Wesley's life, and some serious overproduction, perhaps through a misunderstanding in management. A fifth edition was printed at Wesley's own London printing establishment in 1788, based on Pine's fourth edition, again in the quarto size, but with many more revisions. A few months later the same press prepared a reprint of the three pocket volumes of 1760–62, upon which this new three-volume set was based, being described as 'The Fourth Edition, Corrected'. This was dated 1789–90, and the corrections were simply of misprints, with no personal revisions by Wesley; it was almost certainly carried out without his oversight, possibly without his knowledge. The inventory at Wesley's death shows the results of this proliferation. There were still 750 sets of this duodecimo edition in the Bookroom, and 1,800 of the quarto volume – almost the complete press-run of the 1788 edition, one might assume – as well as some odds and ends.

At the Dublin Conference in 1787 Wesley's closing decision was, 'I will print the text of the New Testament alone.' This, however, was by no means a simple reprinting of the text, even the text as already revised many times over. Once again he made many more changes in the translation. He gave it a new title: *The New Testament, with an Analysis of the several Books and Chapters*. Again it was printed at his New Chapel, in the year 1790, though it did not really begin to sell (for three shillings) until after his death – when 2,404 copies were still on hand in the Bookroom. In the preface he addressed a parting exhortation to his readers and a parting tribute to the Book of all books in his life. He urged that before reading it they should use from the Book of Common Prayer the Collect for the Second Sunday in Advent:

²⁴ 'Book-room inventory, 1791' (Methodist Archives, John Rylands University Library of Manchester), 4, 5. But cf. Richard Green, *The Works of John and Charles Wesley: A Bibliography* (2nd edn, London: Methodist Publishing House, 1906), 133. Green's error apparently arose from someone's mistaking for the Old Testament the three volumes of the 12mo edition of the *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament* (on p.20 of the inventory) even though the first entry is clearly given as '760 [sic] Vol. 1st, New Testament', and the second and third as '750 Vol. 2d, do.' and '750 Vol. 3d, do.'

Blessed Lord, who hast caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning, grant that we may in such wise hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that by patience, and comfort of thy holy Word, we may embrace, and ever hold fast, the blessed hope of everlasting life, which thou hast given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ.