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Introduction

CHAPTER I

*'To enlighten a People by your Wisdom':
 the divine commission*

You are blessed with a fine Capacity & even Genius & you owe it as a Duty to the author of your Being & the giver of your Talents to cultivate your powers & to use them in his Service & for the benefit of your fellow Creatures.

You may be doomed to enlighten a People by your Wisdom & to adorn an age by your Learning. It would be sinful in you to let the powers of your mind lie dormant through idleness or want of perseverance when they may at their maturity aid the cause of Truth & of Religion & enable you to become in many ways a Benefactor to the Human Race. I am forced to smile when I figure to myself the very little Gentleman to whom I am addressing such Language . . .

Letter from John James Ruskin to John Ruskin, 6 November 1829¹

I

These are extraordinary words for a father to write to his ten-year-old son; but then neither father nor son was ordinary. As was often the case in his middle years, John James Ruskin (1785–1864) was engaged in an extensive business trip away from home in November 1829, visiting his customers in the wine trade, when he wrote to inform young John that there were signs in his latest Latin exercise of a special providence and a divine commission. The smile that he records when thinking of the 'very little Gentleman', living at home with his mother in Herne Hill, suggests embarrassed parental pride, ambition and affection in this latter-day David, whose infant Solomon might one day build the temple which he himself can never raise, being tied to the business.²

¹ *The Ruskin Family Letters: The Correspondence of John James Ruskin, his Wife, and their Son, John, 1801–1843*, ed. Van Akin Burd, 2 vols. (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1973), I, 209–10.

² Solomon's 'father, knowing that he was to build the temple, made great preparations for it, and trained him up with great care': Thomas Brown, *Brown's Edition of the Proverbs of Solomon; or, Wisdom Revived . . . to which are added, Memoirs of David and Solomon; and a Vocabulary . . .* (Edinburgh: Brown, 1835), p. 71.

This study will show the extent to which John James's words were prophetic in terms of Ruskin's writings, from *Modern Painters* (his *magnum opus*, written partly for his father, to 'aid the cause of Truth & of Religion'), through the middle period in which the call to 'enlighten a People' by his wisdom manifests itself in a modern form of wisdom literature, to the late work which reflects both Ruskin's broader religious sympathies and his devout wish to be a 'Benefactor to the Human Race'. In this introductory chapter the focus is upon the religious context which made John James's letter possible, and which shaped his son's early religious life and later reaction against it – the dynamic Evangelical revival which had such a profound effect on a whole generation of early Victorians. Many of the works quoted here as examples of Evangelical doctrine and moral teaching were published in 1829, and are contrasted with Ruskin's later, much altered views, summarized at the end of this chapter and examined in later chapters, where it is argued that a trust in divine wisdom and the God of peace, nurtured by his imaginative engagement with Solomon and the temple in Jerusalem, and with Old Testament wisdom literature, not only remains through all the vicissitudes of Ruskin's tormented private life and prophetic public role, but also underpins the vast corpus of his published work.

The recipient of the letter was born on 8 February 1819 at 54 Hunter Street, Brunswick Square, London, the same year as Princess Victoria, Charles Kingsley, George Eliot, and Arthur Hugh Clough. Twelve days later he was baptized at Hunter Street by the Revd James Boyd, Presbyterian Minister of the Caledonian Chapel, Hatton Garden, although it was not until 8 December 1837 that his birth was finally 'Entered, Filed, and Registered, according to the custom in use among Protestant Dissenters', in a style that is redolent both of the family's Dissenting tradition and of the ledgers at John James's offices in Billiter Street in the City.³ The Ruskins attended the Episcopalian Chapel in Long Acre and sat under the Revd William Howels, a Welshman of 'extraordinary inability & not a little eccentricity' according to a source described by Ruskin's biographer as typical of much that was said of him at the time.⁴ Their choice seems more understandable, however, when

³ The birth certificate has in recent years been on deposit from the Ruskin Museum Coniston at Kendal Record Office, Cumbria: ms WDSO 106/1. As no register was kept at the Caledonian Chapel in Boyd's day, he sent John James this certificate on request, with a covering letter of explanation. It is cited in Helen Viljoen, *Ruskin's Scottish Heritage: A Prelude* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1956), p. 216, n.10.

⁴ Tim Hilton, *John Ruskin: The Early Years, 1819–1859* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985), p. 20.

viewed in the light of the later description by Ruskin's friend Henry Edward Manning, Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster, of this 'cracked-voiced Welshman in Longacre' as 'a wonderful and original thinker' who 'greatly arrested' him as an earnest young Anglican.⁵ For the infant Ruskin, Howels provided splendid material for his party-piece – a sermon in imitation of the minister, preached 'over the red sofa cushions' at home, to the admiration of his mother's 'dearest friends', being some eleven words long and beginning with the lisped admonition, 'People, be good' (35.26).

The tutor under whom Ruskin wrote the Latin exercise that inspired the letter comes into the picture when the family moves to 28 Herne Hill, Camberwell, to the south of London, in March 1823, and worships at Beresford Chapel (further from their house than the local parish church),⁶ under the Revd Dr Edward Andrews, a leading Evangelical Congregationalist who was famous for his 'ornate sermons, his energy, and his ambition', and was described as 'a sort of Pope' by his fellow Congregationalists.⁷ The young Ruskin also had lessons in Classics and Hebrew three times a week from Andrews, one of the best Greek scholars of his day, and seems greatly to have admired his minister and tutor, commenting to his father on 'What a nice man doctor Andrews is', 'What nice sermons he preaches', and 'What a nice face he has' in a letter of May 1829⁸ – the year in which he first went into print with his 'Lines Written at the Lakes in Cumberland: *Derwentwater*' in Andrews's short-lived magazine entitled *The Spiritual Times*.⁹

The letter would also have been read, and no doubt reread, by Margaret Ruskin (1781–1871), famed for her devoted, but also obsessive vigilance during Ruskin's childhood and early manhood, and a most powerful influence upon him well into his middle years. Whereas John

⁵ Edmund Sheridan Purcell, *Life of Cardinal Manning, Archbishop of Westminster*, 2 vols. (London: Macmillan, 1896), 1, 68. Manning misremembers Howels's name as 'Howell', as Ruskin does in *Præterita*. The Revd Charles Bowdler described Howels's sermons as 'didactic, sententious, aphoristic, familiarly pastoral, not drily logical': William Howels, *Sermons, &c. &c.*, 2 vols. (London: Hatchard, 1834, 1833), 1, cxxviii. Howels suffered from what he himself described as 'a very violent dyspepsy', a 'heavy cross' which he bore for more than twenty years: *The Evangelical Magazine and Missionary Chronicle*, ns 9 (1831), 11.

⁶ See James S. Dearden, *John Ruskin's Camberwell* (St Albans: Guild of St George/Brentham, 1990), p. 27.

⁷ Hilton, *John Ruskin*, p. 20.

⁸ Burd, *Ruskin Family Letters*, 1, 200. Hanson argues that Ruskin's 'sudden engagement with religious topics' in his poetry and prose 'can now be exactly correlated with the arrival in early 1829 of his new tutor, the Reverend Edward Andrews': David C. Hanson, 'The Psychology of Fragmentation: A Bibliographic and Psychoanalytic Reconsideration of the Ruskin Juvenilia', *Text*, 10 (1997), 237–58 (p. 249).

⁹ *The Spiritual Times: A Monthly Magazine*, 1, 4 (August 1829), 150.

James, whose own mother had been a daughter of the manse,¹⁰ was a moderate man in religious matters and later warned his son against excessive zeal, Margaret Ruskin was deeply invested in Calvinist Evangelicalism. She was baptized into the Church of England as a child and was taught 'evangelical principles' in a day-school in Croydon (35.18). Her Scottish Presbyterian inheritance from her Aunt Catherine (John James's mother), with whom she lived in Edinburgh as a young woman, gave a firmer shape to her adult religious life, and helps to explain her family's attendance at Beresford Chapel on a Sunday.¹¹ (It was not until she reached middle age, and both the family's fortunes and her own clerical ambitions for her son had risen, that she again became a practising member of the Established Church.) Having dedicated her boy to God at his birth, she later insisted that he read aloud two or three chapters from the Bible each day, and also learnt several verses daily – a habit that stayed with him into adult life, by which time he knew the Bible better than the bishops.¹² In *Præterita* (1885–9), the autobiography written at the end of his career, he was to record his gratitude to his mother for the lessons, continued until he was fourteen, which had made every word of the 'Scriptures' familiar to his ear 'in habitual music, – yet in that familiarity revered, as transcending all thought, and ordaining all conduct' (35.40, 189). He learned the whole of 1 Kings 8 and Deuteronomy 32 by heart, for example, and, as he noted in *Præterita*, 'the lower corners of the pages' of his oldest Bible in use were 'worn somewhat thin and dark' at these chapters as a result, the learning of Solomon's prayer at the dedication of the temple – a passage also loved by other Evangelicals¹³ – and the last song of Moses having cost him 'much pains' (35.42). (Significantly, he also learned four chapters from Proverbs and Psalm 32 – part of the wisdom tradition of the Old Testament.¹⁴) It would also have been at his mother's instigation that

¹⁰ On 30 October 1807, Catherine Tweddale Ruskin had written to her son in terms not dissimilar from John James's own to Ruskin twenty-two years later: 'thy God will give thee Wisdom, and lead thee on with the spirit of truth to Eternal Joy and happiness' (Burd, *Ruskin Family Letters*, 1, 10). ¹¹ See Viljoen, *Ruskin's Scottish Heritage*, p. 85.

¹² He was still learning passages from the Bible by heart at the age of thirty-four (12.lxxviii).

¹³ John Cumming, the popular preacher, wrote, 'I do not know a more sublime, spiritual, and comprehensive litany in any language than that which was offered at the dedication of the temple of Solomon': *Expository Readings on the Book of Kings* (London: Hall, Virtue, [1859]), p. 57.

¹⁴ The subjects of the chapters which Ruskin claims in *Præterita* to have learnt by heart and to have 'established [his] soul in life' are as follows: Exodus 15 and 20 (Moses' song after crossing the Red Sea; the ten commandments); 2 Samuel 1.17–end (David's lament over Saul and Jonathan); 1 Kings 8 (Solomon's prayer at the dedication of the temple); Psalms 23 ('The Lord is my shepherd'), 32 ('Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven'), 90 ('Lord, thou has been our dwelling place'), 91 ('He that dwelleth in the secret place'), 103 ('Bless the Lord, O my soul'), 112 ('Praise

Ruskin, in his own words in *Præterita* (35.490), 'received' his religion from Bunyan and from Isaac Ambrose, the Puritan divine whose standard work was entitled *Looking unto Jesus* (1658).¹⁵

Yet it would be a mistake to think of Mrs Ruskin as a Mrs Clennam, Dickens's life-denying sabbatarian Calvinist in *Little Dorrit*. Although her favourite chapters of the Bible are largely from the Old Testament, many are expressions of thanksgiving and blessing, and the only chapter which dwells upon the wrath of God – Deuteronomy 32 – was omitted from Ruskin's list of what he regarded as his most significant inheritance from her.¹⁶ Her reference to 'receiving' *The Evangelical Magazine and Missionary Chronicle* in 1823,¹⁷ offers some clue to her religious position during the Herne Hill years, when she was training up her child in the way he should go (Proverbs 22.6).¹⁸ Calvinist doctrine is vigorously defended in the magazine,¹⁹ and Byron's *Letters and Journals* are said to 'present a melancholy picture of the human mind in its unregenerate state'.²⁰ Yet Byron was read and admired in the Ruskin household, and it appears that it was not only towards the end of her life that Margaret Ruskin, in a manner inherited by her son, could

ye the Lord'), 119 ('Blessed are the undefiled'), 139 ('O Lord, thou hast searched me'); Proverbs 2, 3, 8, 12 (the benefits of obedience and wisdom); Isaiah 58 (the benefaction of true godliness); Matthew 5, 6, 7 (the Sermon on the Mount); Acts 26 (Paul tells the story of his conversion to Agrippa); 1 Corinthians 13, 15 (on 'charity' and on the resurrection of the dead); James 4 (on sanctification and judgment); Revelation 5, 6 (the book sealed with seven seals, the four horses, the opening of the sixth seal). Ruskin also had the versified Scottish paraphrases of the Bible to learn (35.41).

¹⁵ See p. 101 below. Ruskin also records that in boyhood he read Walter Scott's novels and the *Iliad* (in Pope's translation) on weekdays, and *Robinson Crusoe* and the *Pilgrim's Progress* on Sundays (35.13). When Mary Richardson joined the family in 1828, the diet on Sunday evenings included the sermons of Hugh Blair, Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* and *Holy War*, Quarles's *Emblems*, Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*, Mrs Sherwood's *Lady of the Manor* and *Henry Milner*, the *Youth's Magazine*, Mrs Hofland's *Alfred Campbell the Young Pilgrim* and the Revd W. Bingley's *Animal Biography* (35.72–3).

¹⁶ See Viljoen, *Ruskin's Scottish Heritage*, p. 162. On Margaret Ruskin's more earthy and 'Smollett-esque' side, see Jeffrey L. Spear, *Dreams of an English Eden: Ruskin and his Tradition in Social Criticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), p. 16.

¹⁷ Burd, *Ruskin Family Letters*, 1, 121. We also know that she took the *Christian Treasury* in the mid-1850s (see p. 100 below).

¹⁸ Another favourite Evangelical text: see, for example, Thomas Dale, *Heavenly Wisdom the only Sound Principle of Education: A Sermon, preached at Christ-Church, Newgate Street, before the Right Hon. the Lord Mayor, and the Governors of the Royal Hospitals, &c., &c., &c. . . . on St. Matthew's Day, Sept. 21, 1837* (London: Richardson, 1837), p. 13. The Book of Proverbs emphasizes the importance of sons receiving 'correction' from fathers (3.12), and refers not only to the father's instruction but also to that of the mother (1.8); see John Day, 'Foreign Semitic Influence on the Wisdom of Israel and Its Appropriation in the Book of Proverbs', in *Wisdom in Ancient Israel: Essays in Honour of J. A. Emerton*, ed. John Day, Robert P. Gordon and H. G. M. Williamson (Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 55–70 (p. 66).

¹⁹ See, for example, *The Evangelical Magazine and Missionary Chronicle*, ns 2 (1824), 518, 528.

²⁰ *The Evangelical Magazine and Missionary Chronicle*, ns 9 (May 1831), 190–1.

soften her hard line on a topic in the face of particular practical cases.²¹

John James's letter to his son was written towards the end of a momentous year for Evangelical Protestants, who had been profoundly disturbed by the Catholic Emancipation legislation brought in by Wellington's Tory government. Indeed the more radical among them had read it as an ominous 'Sign of the Times', in the eschatological sense of heralding the end of the established world order.²² On 14 February Margaret Ruskin had written hesitantly to her husband in Chester:

I cannot rely on my own judgment for I may be prejudiced but it seems to me that all that is urged by the R Catholics and their favourers is weak equivocal underhand equally devoid of sincerity or honesty & integrity in short they appear to me not to care what they do or say to gain their end I believe they would take Satan himself into their cabals to further their purposes to bring every thing under their subjection.²³

Significantly, however, the Ruskins chose not to worship at the Episcopalian Chapel, Hatton Garden, during the ministry of the far from hesitant Edward Irving,²⁴ the most charismatic preacher (in every sense) in London, who in 1829 wrote an impassioned plea against bringing in the legislation entitled *The Signs of the Times*, in which he applied the language of the Book of Revelation, or Apocalypse, to Roman Catholicism: 'The "dragon" describes the spirit of the Roman empire before Christianity was established in it, while it sought to devour the woman, which is the Church, and her man child, which is the faithful progeny of the church.'²⁵ Irving and *The Morning Watch* frequently denounced the so-called 'Clapham Sect' for their indifference to wage-slavery at home, but it seems likely that, for all Margaret's more extreme

²¹ In March 1871, following the death of Ruskin's old nurse, Ann Strachan, Margaret Ruskin commented: 'one must hope there are intermediate kinds of places where people get better'. Malcolm Hardman writes, 'Like his mother, Ruskin tended towards the absolute, but also possessed a willingness to demolish it in the face of experience': *Ruskin and Bradford: An Experiment in Victorian Cultural History* (Manchester and Dover, NH: Manchester University Press, 1986), p. 31. Margaret's choice of a Congregational chapel also reflects a moderate rather than an extreme Calvinism; many used an abridged version of the Anglican liturgy: see C. Stephen Finley, *Nature's Covenant: Figures of Landscape in Ruskin* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992), p. 55.

²² Thomas Carlyle adopts rather than invents the year's catch-phrase (from Matthew 16.3) in the title of his well-known essay, 'Signs of the Times', published in the *Edinburgh Review* in 1829.

²³ Burd, ed., *Ruskin Family Letters*, 1, 177. ²⁴ Hilton, *John Ruskin*, p. 20.

²⁵ Edward Irving, *The Signs of the Times* (London: Panton, 1829), p. 19; compare his *Babylon and Infidelity Foredoomed of God: A Discourse on the Prophecies of Daniel and the Apocalypse which relate to these Latter Times, and until the Second Advent*, 2nd edn (Glasgow: Collins, 1828), pp. 81–2. The reviewer of the first edition of *Babylon and Infidelity* (1826) in *The Evangelical Magazine and Missionary Chronicle* was pained to 'pronounce a dissentient opinion': NS 4 (1826), 292–4 (p. 292).

views, the Ruskins would not have associated themselves with the pre-millennialist, pentecostal, adventist and revivalist Irvingites, who believed in God's direct intervention in the world and therefore supported direct human intervention in social affairs.²⁶

Dr Andrews himself pronounced on the crisis in the opening words of the first number of his monthly magazine, *The Spiritual Times*, in May 1829:

The last month or two have been distinguished by changes and agitations unparalleled in the history of this or any other country . . . we have seen at home, and within a few weeks, a total and unexpected reversion of certain arrangements and habits, in reference to a distinction which has long been deemed sacred between two Churches, essentially hostile to and destructive of each other . . .

May it please Almighty God to make this awful visitation a means of stirring up our church clergy to greater zeal.²⁷

What the young Ruskin described as Dr Andrews's 'nice face' had appeared as the frontispiece to the *Evangelical Magazine* for June 1828 (plate 1).²⁸ He thus joined the magazine's hall of fame at a time when the more popular Evangelical preachers of the day were treated as celebrities. Engravers made preachers look as appealing as possible to readers, especially, one suspects, lady readers: their coats and stocks are presented as generously cut, and their hair luxuriously coiffured.²⁹ Popular preachers attracted large congregations when they gave charity sermons, and raised substantial sums. (W. E. Gladstone and John James Ruskin were to be among the subscribers when the Revd Thomas Dale and the Revd Henry Melvill – both of whom ministered to the Ruskins – preached on 'Spiritual Destitution of the Parish of Bethnal-Green' on 29 December 1839, in Melvill's case before the Lord Mayor and Sheriffs.) The omnibus conductors used to call out 'Melvill' on their way to Camberwell on Sundays (1.490n), and the *Evangelical Magazine* reported that the crush in the parish church of Kirkcaldy on 17 June 1828, when it was falsely rumoured that Irving was to preach, was so great that twenty-six members of the congregation were killed following the

²⁶ See Boyd Hilton, *The Age of Atonement: The Influence of Evangelicalism on Social and Economic Thought, 1795–1865* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988), pp. 10, 15–16, and Christopher Tolley, *Domestic Biography: The Legacy of Evangelicalism in Four Nineteenth-Century Families*, Oxford Historical Monographs (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997), p. 58, *et passim*. John James Ruskin was to disapprove of his son's writing on political economy in the early 1860s, thus causing a rift between them.

²⁷ *The Spiritual Times: A Monthly Magazine*, no.1 (May 1829), 2.

²⁸ Andrews's *Sermons Delivered at Beresford Chapel, Walsworth* (1827) also includes a portrait.

²⁹ In his diary for 31 March 1840 Ruskin records Dr Shuttleworth's account of 'Sydney Smith's intense dislike of fashionable preachers', those 'dandy saints' (*D*, 76).

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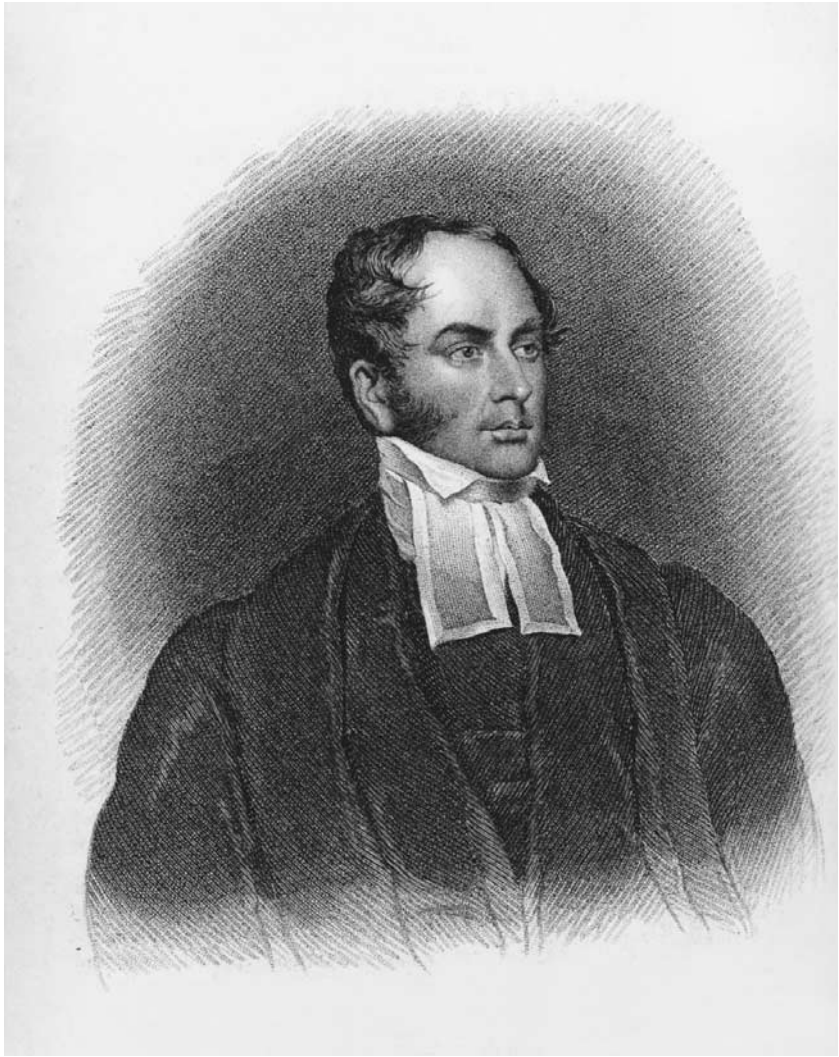


Plate 1. 'Rev. Dr. Andrews, Walworth', *The Evangelical Magazine and Missionary Chronicle*, NS 6 (June 1828), frontispiece

collapse of the gallery.³⁰ The magazine responded angrily to the methods employed by *The Preacher*, which, unlike *The British Preacher* (published 'under the sanction of the Ministers whose Discourses appear in its pages'), sent its reporters 'from chapel to chapel, to pirate the sermons of ministers, without their consent'.³¹ It was in the context of lively activity and fervent belief among Evangelicals, when sermons were news and preachers were pin-ups, that John James wrote to his son in November 1829. The young Ruskin was already copying Andrews's sermons for his father, with the help of his cousin Mary Richardson, who now lived with the family, and was soon to write sermons of his own.³²

It was probably between September 1832 and some time in 1834 that Ruskin carefully inscribed eighteen sermons on the Pentateuch in five small manuscript booklets, hand-made, like the Brontës' juvenilia, and with pages neatly arranged so as to look as much like printed books as possible. The sermons' systematic commentary on the Pentateuch reveals their author's early interest in religious themes that were to be taken up in the mature published writings, and lays special emphasis upon prayer, obedience to the Law (for Ruskin the key to religion (28.156)), church attendance, observance of the Sabbath and benevolence. While exceptional in their precocity, the sermons follow a conventional Evangelical plan of interpreting the Bible as revealing 'the process of conversion: conviction of sin, justification by faith, and sanctification of the justified sinner'.³³ One passage should be cited here, however, as it touches upon beliefs which were later to be central to Ruskin's religious life. The more we examine and meditate upon the Bible, he argues, 'the

³⁰ *The Evangelical Magazine and Missionary Chronicle*, ns 6 (June 1828), 312. Later in the century, in 1856, a malicious false alarm of fire caused panic at the Surrey Gardens Music Hall, where Spurgeon was preaching to a congregation of 12,000, causing seven fatalities: see C. H. Spurgeon, *Autobiography*, vol. 1: *The Early Years, 1834–1859*, rev. edn, originally compiled by Susannah Spurgeon and Joseph Harrald (Edinburgh and Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1962), p. 435. When Spurgeon toured the country preaching in 1858, a large temporary structure built to accommodate an audience of 8,000 in Halifax collapsed, but not, providentially it was thought, during the service: see William Walters, *Life and Ministry of the Rev. C. H. Spurgeon* (London and Newcastle-on-Tyne: Scott, [1882]), p. 82.

³¹ *The Evangelical Magazine and Missionary Chronicle*, ns 6 (June 1828), 245–6.

³² The abstracts that Ruskin and Mary Richardson compiled of sermons heard at Beresford Chapel (35.72) were little more than fragmentary notes (Beinecke ms 11), and are not to be confused with Ruskin's 'Sermons on the Pentateuch': see Van Akin Burd, 'Ruskin's Testament of His Boyhood Faith: *Sermons on the Pentateuch*', in *New Approaches to Ruskin: Thirteen Essays*, ed. Robert Hewison (London: Routledge, 1981), pp. 1–16 (p. 2), where Helen Viljoen's unpublished notes on the sermons are summarized.

³³ David C. Hanson, "'Out of the Same Mouth Proceedeth Blessing and Cursing': Ruskin as the 'Strange Disciple'", *Modern Philology*, 90, 3 (February 1993), 360–80 (p. 363). Hanson has carried out the most exhaustive research to date on Ruskin's childhood religion.