The 'prophetical opinions' of J. C. Ryle

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During the early 1840s when he was the curate of Exbury in the New Forest, the Rev. J. C. Ryle formulated what he called his 'prophetical opinions'.[1] Like other clergy of the day he supplemented his meagre theological education by extensive reading, and during the course of his parochial and episcopal ministry built up a large library of 3,000 volumes.[2] In November 1843 he distributed a brief farewell address to the 75 households of his district. In it he referred to the themes that were characteristic of his later tracts—personal faith, daily Bible reading, persistent prayer and regular worship—and he concluded with a simple challenge. The time is short. The Lord is at hand. A few short years and the Lord Jesus Christ will have come the second time, and separated the wheat from the chaff for ever, At that great day I shall meet you all once more.[3] Throughout his ministry Ryle's eschatological views remained unchanged, and what he had learnt in his isolated Hampshire parish stayed with him in rural Suffolk and urban Liverpool. In 1867 he confessed that his convictions remained unshaken. 'The older I grow, the more do I feel convinced of their truth, and the more satisfied am I that no other principles can explain the state of the church and the world.'[4] It is obvious that his convictions influenced the subject matter of his sermons, some of which were then published as tracts and later included in his books.[5] The distinctive style and urgent appeal found in Ryle's publications may be attributed, in part, to his particular views on the Second Coming. As an Anglican Evangelical Ryle was not alone in holding these views. By the mid 1850s over a half of the Evangelical clergy favoured pre-millennialism: fifty years later the assumption was that they all did. As an Anglican Evangelical Ryle was not alone in holding these views. By the mid 1850s over a half of the Evangelical clergy favoured pre-millennialism: *fifty* years later the assumption was that they all did.[6]

In his book *Coming events and present duties. Being miscellaneous sermons on prophetical subjects*,[7] Ryle included six sermons he had preached between 1849 and 1855 (all of which had already appeared in his collection of tracts, *Home Truths*), and two sermons he had preached in 1858 and 1879 to the London Society for Promoting Christianity amongst the Jews.[8] In addition to

Coming events and present duties, Ryle published a further ten sermons on the general theme of the return of Christ, and made reference to it in his *Expository thoughts on the Gospels*.[9]

In his preface to *Coming events and present duties,* Ryle set out eleven personal convictions concerning his 'prophetical creed'.[10] He didn't consider himself to be infallible and his views represented his own private opinions. Yet, as we will see, he was influenced by the views of the more fervent pre-millennialists of his day. The following are a summary of Ryle's eleven proposition.[11]

The 'prophetical creed'

1. I believe that the world will never be completely converted to Christianity before the end comes. In spite of all that can be done, the wheat and the tares will grow together until the final harvest; and when the end comes, the earth will be much the same as it was in the days of Noah. (Matt. 13:24-30, 24:37-39).

2. I believe that the current situation in the world is what is taught and predicted in Scripture. So far from making me doubt the truth of Christianity, they help to confirm my faith. (Matt. 24: 12; 1 Tim. 4:l; 2 Tim. 3:1,4,13).

3. I believe that God's purpose is to gather out of the world an elect people, and not to convert all mankind. True believers are few in number. The Gospel is to be preached 'as a witness', and then the end shall come. (Acts 15:14; Matt. 24: 13). 'There are only two classes of people in the world...those who are called *the wheat*, and there are those who are called *the chaff*.[12] The wheat means all men and women who are believers in the Lord Jesus Christ, all who are led by the Holy Spirit...the chaff means all men and women who have no saving faith in Christ, and no sanctification of the Spirit.[13]

4. I believe that the second coming of our Lord Jesus Christ will wind up the present order, and that our daily prayer ought to be Thy kingdom come' and 'Come, Lord Jesus'. As we look back to his death on the cross, we should look forward to his coming again. (John 14:3; 2 Tim. 4:8; 2 Peter 3:12).

5. I believe that the second coming of our Lord Jesus Christ will be a real, literal, personal, bodily coming; and that as he was seen going to heaven, so he will return. (Acts 1:11).

6. I believe that after our Lord Jesus Christ comes again, the earth shall be renewed, the curse removed; the devil bound, the godly rewarded and the wicked will be punished. Before he returns there will be neither resurrection, judgment or millennium, and not until he returns will the earth be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord (Acts 3:21; Is. 25:6-9; 1 Thess. 4: 14-18; Rev. 20: 1 etc.).

7. I believe that the Jews shall ultimately be gathered again as a separate nation, restored to their own land, and converted to the faith in Christ. (Jer. 30: 10-11, 31:10; Rom. 11:25-26). The Jews would 'probably first be gathered in an unconverted state, though humbled: and will afterwards be taught to look to him whom they have pierced, through much tribulation'.[14]

8. I believe that the literal interpretation of the Old Testament prophecies has been too much neglected, and that by *spiritualizing* and *accommodating* biblical language, Christians have completely missed its meaning (Luke 24:25-26).

9. I do not believe that the preterist way of interpreting the book of Revelation as having been almost entirely *fulfilled*, or the futurist that regards it as entirely *unfilled* are to be implicitly followed. Rather the truth will be found to lie between them.

In any case he believed that the differences between the interpreters of the book of Revelation were 'often magnified and absurdly exaggerated. The common points of agreement among expositors are often more in number, and greater in importance, than men commonly suppose'.[15] 'If truth be spoken, we must allow that all the expositions of *some parts* of the Revelation are nothing better than ingenious conjectures.'[16]

He explained the meaning of the two terms. '*Preterism* is the system of prophetical interpretation, held by those who consider the greater part of the prophecies in Revelation as fulfilled, and past already. *Futurism* is the system of those who consider the same prophecies to be as yet unfulfilled.'[17]

10. I believe that the Roman Catholic Church is the great predicated apostasy from the faith: and is Babylon and anti-Christ. Though is it highly probable that a more complete development of anti-Christ is yet to come (2 Thess. 2:3-11; 1 Tim. 4:l-6).

From the 1820s the growth of pre-millennialism and an increasing antagonism towards Catholicism went hand in hand, and ranged from opposition to Catholic emancipation through to financial support for Maynooth College.

11. I believe that for the welfare of all true Christians they should expect little from church or state, and to prepare themselves for tremendous convulsions and changes within the present order and to expect good things only from Christ's return.

He remained silent about some eschatological matters and did not speculate about them. While he conceded that other people might have more insight than he did, he had leant that it was best not to be over hasty in deciding what was true. His simple test was clear. 'Are they scriptural? Are they in accordance with the lessons of history and experience?[18]

Two fundamental convictions

While there were minor differences of opinion over the interpretation of unfulfilled prophecy, Ryle was convinced that two issues stood out from the rest, and both were clearly taught in Scripture.

> Two points appear to my own mind to stand out as plainly as if written by a sunbeam. One of these points is the second personal advent of our Lord Jesus Christ before the Millennium. The other of these points is the future literal gathering of the Jewish nation, and their restoration to their own land. I tell no man that these two truths are essential to salvation, and that he cannot be saved except he sees them with my eyes. But I tell any man that these truths appear to me distinctly set down in holy scripture, and that the denial of them is as astonishing and incomprehensible to my own mind as the denial of the divinity of Christ.[19]

Ryle was convinced that too few clergy preached on the second coming and too few believers thought enough about it. 'A few of us here and there receive the doctrine, and profess to love it, but the number of such persons is comparatively very small.'[20] So he challenged his contemporaries 'to examine your own views about prophecy'[21] and to 'live as if you thought Christ might come at any time.'[22] That simple challenge addressed to Ryle's contemporaries still needs to be heeded by us today.

No one knows precisely when Jesus will return. All that can be said is that it will be sudden and unexpected, and Ryle confessed that it would be presumptuous of him to think that he knew when it would be. 'I lay no claim to infallibility in the interpretation of scripture in this matter....Let us not be hasty to fix dates.'[23] Though he loved the subject of prophecy, he was no prophet, and disliked the 'fixing of dates, and naming of years' since it had done great harm[24] and although the precise date of Christ's return was unknown, it should not 'prevent our giving attention to the unfulfilled prophecies of Scripture.[25] If anything is clear in unfulfilled prophecy, this one fact seems clear, that the Lord's coming will be sudden, and take men by surprise. And any view of prophecy which destroys the possibility of its being sudden, whether by interposing a vast number of events as yet to happen, or by placing the millennium between ourselves and the advent, any such view appears to my mind to carry with it a fatal defect. Everything which is written in scripture on this point confirms the truth, that Christ's second coming will be sudden.'[26]

Certainly 'the order of events connected with our Lord's coming and the manner of his kingdom when it is set up, are both deep subjects, and hard to be understood.[27] Yet, though our understanding is limited, we should not doubt what is expressed in God's word. Ryle made it clear that the second coming brought four clear challenges: It was 'a powerful spring and stimulus to holy living'; it was 'the strongest argument for missionary work'; it was 'the best answer to the infidel'; and 'the best argument with the Jew.'[28]

The Eternity of Hell

An eschatological tract not included in *Coming events and present duties* was 'Wheat or chaff? Ryle believed that mankind in general and the church in particular, was divided into two groups—'believers and unbelievers, converted and unconverted, holy and unholy'.[29] When Christ returns he will separate the wheat from the chaff, and there will be 'no separation and no perfection till Christ comes! This is my creed.'[30] Believers will be secure and cared for by the Lord—in life, in death and at his appearing. But all unbelievers 'shall come to an awful end'[31] and the chaff will be burnt up with fire. But what of hell itself? Ryle dismissed the arguments against the reality of hell, the eternity of hell and the eternity of future punishment.[32] Ryle set out five factors concerning hell.

1. Hell is real and true. 'Disbelieve hell, and you unscrew, unsettle, and unpin everything in Scripture.'[33]

2. Hell will have inhabitants. 'The wicked shall certainly be turned into hell, and all the people that forget God. These shall go away into everlasting punishment.'[33]

3. Hell will be intense and unutterable woe. 'The pit, the prison, the worm, the fire, the thirst, the blackness, the darkness, the weeping, the gnashing of teeth, the second death, all of these may be figures of speech if you please. But Bible figures mean something beyond all question.'[35]

4. Hell is eternal. 'For ever and ever, everlasting, unquenchable, never-dying, all these are expressions used about hell, and expressions that cannot be explained away.'[36]

5. Hell is a subject that ought not to be ignored. While other people might keep quiet or ignore it, but Ryle felt compelled to speak out about it since it was in Scripture.

'There is a school of theology rising up in this day' said Ryle, 'which appears to me most eminently calculated to promote infidelity, to help the devil and to ruin souls.'[37] It emphasized that God is merciful and loving—but ignores his holiness and justice; there is much talk of heaven but none of hell; there is no mention of damnation and in the end all men and women will be saved. He condemned the notion that 'Everybody who believes anything has faith! Everybody who thinks anything has the Spirit!

Everybody is right! Nobody is wrong!....Reader, of all this theology I warn you solemnly to beware...I do believe it to be a theology that leads to hell rather than to heaven.'[38] Rather, 'the reality and eternity of future punishment are among the great foundation truths of revealed religion.'[39] For 'just as we believe firmly that there is an eternal heaven for the godly, so let us believe firmly that there is an eternal hell for the wicked'.[40]

The Inspiration and Interpretation of Scripture

Ryle believed that 'the Bible is the inspired Word of God'[42] but was unable to explain how the biblical writers were inspired. They were not 'mere machines

holding pens' or **type** setters in a printing office' nor were they mere 'ignorant secretaries or amanuenses who wrote by dictation what they did not understand...I believe that in some marvellous manner the Holy Spirit made use of the reason, the memory, the intellect, the style of thought, and the peculiar mental temperament of each writer of the Scriptures...there is both a divine and a human element in the Bible, and that while the men who wrote it were really and truly men, the book that they wrote and handed down to us is really and truly the Word of God.'[41] This means that 'when you read the Bible you are not reading the unaided, self-taught composition of erring men like yourselves, but thoughts and words which were suggested by the eternal God.[43]

For Ryle Scripture was divinely inspired and, for the most part, it was to be read literally. 'The primary sense of every prophecy and promise in Old Testament prophecy was intended to have a literal fulfilment.'[44] He confessed that 'from the first day that I began to read the Bible with my heart, I have never been able to see these texts, and hundreds like them, in any other light'.[45] He was prepared to accept the text of Scripture as it stood, and took the Old Testament promises quite literally. 'Let us not be ashamed to say that we expect a literal fulfilment of unfulfilled prophecy.'[46] He was critical of those who interpreted the first advent *literally*, and the second Advent *spiritually*. The plain, literal meaning of words should evidently be the meaning placed on all the statements of Old Testament prophecy.'[47] This mean that scripture should not be treated as mere allegory: 'Israel means Israel, Zion Zion, and Jerusalem Jerusalem.[48] As far as the New Testament is concerned, 'I must express my own firm belief that the coming of Christ is one distinct thing, and that death, judgment and the destruction of Jerusalem, are three other distinct things.'[49]

However, he was prepared to concede that there were some exceptions where symbolic language was used. While Old Testament prophecy should be literally interpreted, it did 'not apply to symbolical prophecies, such as those of the seals, trumpets and vials in Revelation.[50] But 'in all matters of unfulfilled prophecy...'. I am determined to believe everything that God says.'[51] for 'you must take the Bible as it is. You must read it all, and believe it all.'[52] Why, he asked, do ministers urge people to read their Bibles and hear sermons? 'Cease to wonder. Marvel no more. Our object is to make you acquainted with God's Word. We want you to have a good hope, and we know that a good hope must be drawn from the Scriptures.'[53]

The Influences on Ryle

Although Ryle did not published any lengthy treatise on the second coming he referred his readers to the some of the substantial books written by well-known premillenialists. Clearly Ryle did not disagree with them and readily recommended his tract-readers to examine works such as Horatius Bonar, *Prophetical Landmarks, containing data for helping to determine the question of Christ's pre-millennial Advent* (1847); Andrew Bonar, *Redemption Drawing Nigh, a defence of the premillennial Advent* (1847); George Ogilvy, *Popular Objections to the Pre-millennial Advent and to the study of the prophetical scriptures considered* (1842); Hugh McNeile's sermons on *The Second Advent of the Lord Jesus Christ* (1835) and his book ,*The Jews and Judaism* (1854); and Edward Bickersteth, *A practical guide to the prophecies with reference to their interpretation and fulfilment* (1835).

Ryle was much indebted to the Scottish Bonar brothers, and was prepared to endorse the sentiments expressed in the hymns of Horatius Bonar who wrote over 600 hymns, a sixth of which were in common usage at the turn of the twentieth century.[54] Ryle included five of Bonar's hymns in his *Spiritual Songs* (1849) and twenty-eight in his *[300] Hymns for the Church on Earth* (1860), and frequently included them in his tracts. Though most of Bonar's hymns are not in use today, the well-known ones include, 'I heard the voice of Jesus say', 'Here, 0 my Lord, I see thee face to face', 'Thy way, not mine, 0 Lord'.

It is clear that Ryle was a moderate pre-millennialist and his convictions were formed when such views were being readily adopted by many of his Evangelical contemporaries. However, not all of them followed this path. Francis Close, the incumbent of Cheltenham, believed that millennia1 teaching was found neither in scripture or in the Book of Common Prayer. 'The Church of England does not hold any kind of millenarian doctrines, either pre-millennial or post-millennial; but that she holds the Catholic doctrine.'[55] Some individuals, including the church fathers may have held certain views about it, but these did not represent the general teaching of the church.

While the majority of Anglican Evangelicals distanced themselves from the teaching of the Christian Brethren, of Edward Irving and of William Miller, since their teaching discredited the study of eschatology, 'the study of unfulfilled prophecy still holds its ground.'[56] Moreover, Ryle noted that the

false teaching of 'Irvingism and Mormonism have been only too successfully used as arguments for rejecting the whole doctrine of the second advent of Christ.'[57]

Throughout the year there were a number of evangelical gatherings which emphasized unfulfilled prophecy and the conversion of the Jews. It was on such occasions that sympathetic clergy and laity would be exposed to the persuasive eloquence of the rnillennialist speakers. These gatherings included the Albury Conferences in Surrey held between 1826 and 1830, where the members of 'the Albury group had the most extreme and well-defined millenarian systems;[58] from 1829 the annual gatherings associated with William 'Millenrial' Marsh and later known as the Beddington Prophetical Conference; the Powerscourt Conferences held in County Wicklow from 1831 (and in the following year one of the speakers was John Nelson Darby); and the annual Lent sermons at St. George's, Bloomsbury, delivered by some of the leading Anglican Evangelicals of the day, at the invitation of the incumbent, Henry Montagu Villiers (later Bishop of Carlisle, and then briefly Bishop of Durham).[59]

Villiers was a convinced pre-millennialist and those whom he invited to speak were expected to hold similar views to his own. The Lent series began in 1842 at the West Street Episcopal Chapel, London, where the minister William Fremantle had recently returned from the Holy Land, and on his appointment to the Claydon parishes in Buckinghamshire, the lectures were transferred to St. George's, Bloomsbury. In 1842 the speakers included such well-known pre-millennialists as Edward Auriol, Robert Bickersteth (later Bishop of Ripon), Alexander Dallas and Thomas R. Birks.

The following year Bickersteth said of the speakers: 'They all expect a millennium yet to come; they all look for the personal coming of our Lord before that millennium; they all believe the political restoration of Israel to their own land. They look for the first resurrection, and glory of the saints at the coming of our Lord before the millennium.[60] On three occasions Ryle spoke at Bloomsbury, in 1851 on 'Idolatry to be destroyed at Christ's coming (Is. 2:18); in 1853 on 'The unexpected delay of the Kingdom of God' and in 1855 on 'The revelation and its blessings (Rev. 1:l-3).[61] The first and last addresses subsequently appeared in *Home Truths* and in *Coming Events and Present Duties*.

The London Society for Promoting Christianity amongst the Jews was considered to be a purely missionary organisation. The Society achieved a fair measure of success, and in the late 1850s there were about 3,000 converts from among the 50,000 Jews living in England. While the Society was not committed to advocating any particular prophetic interpretation of scripture, it was always supported by individuals who held different views about the millennium. These included Ryle, who was a lifelong supporter of the Society, and who spoke at five annual meetings and preached two anniversary sermons.

Conclusion

Given Ryle's Reformed theological convictions it would have been expected that he would have been a convinced a-millennialist like Francis Close and Bishop Samuel Waldegrave (whom Ryle greatly admired), or a post-millennialist like Charles Simeon and the majority of Ryle's beloved Puritans. However Ryle adopted pre-millennialism because of his commitment to the literal interpretation of Old Testament prophecy. Without that conviction his views would have been entirely different. For him the biblical witness was clear—one day, before the millennium, Jesus would return—and Christians had the responsibility of making this truth known. The daily prayer for each Christian (like that of the early church) should be 'Come, Lord Jesus' and the command of Christ, to 'watch and pray'.[62]

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ENDNOTES

1. J. C. Ryle, *Coming events and present duties. Being miscellaneous sermons on prophetical subjects*, London, 1867, p. vi.
2. In 1900 the books were given to the diocese of Liverpool, and from 1912 were housed in Church House as the 'Bishop Ryle Library'. The building and the books were destroyed in an air-raid in 1941.
3. J. C. Ryle, *A minister's parting words to the inhabitants of Exbury* [1843].
4. Ryle, *Coming Events*, *op. cit.*, p. vi.
5. On Ryle's tracts, see A. Munden, J.C. Ryle, 'The prince of tract-writers,' *Churchman* Vol. 119:1, 2005, pp.. 7-13.
6. D.W. Bebbington, "The Advent hope in British Evangelicalism since 1800," S*cottish Journal of Theology*, Vol. 9, 1988:105.

7. First edition 1867 (seven chapters). Second edition 1879 (eight chapters).
8. Now called CMJ—the Church's Ministry among Jewish People.
9. The seven volumes of J.C. Ryle's *Expository thoughts on the Gospels* were published between 1856 and 1873.
10. Ryle, *Coming events*, *op. cit.,* p. vii.
11. *Ibid.,* pp.. vii-x.
12. J. C. Ryle, Wheat or chaff? [1851] *Home Truths*, Ipswich, 1855, Vol. 2, pp.. 150-1.
13. *Ibid.,* pp.. 151, 152.
14. Ryle, Scattered Israel to be gathered [I858] *Coming events*, *op. cit.,* p. 138.
15. Ryle, The reading which is blessed [I855] *Coming events*, *op. cit.,* pp.. 160-1.
16. *Ibid.,* p. 162.
17. Ryle, What time is it? [1854] *Coming events*, *op. cit.,* p. 86 footnote.
18. Ryle, Coming events, *op. cit.,* p. xi.
19. Ryle, Scattered Israel, *Coming events*, *op. cit.,* p. 133.
20. Ryle, Watch [1851] *Coming events*, *op. cit.,* p. 16.
21. Ryle, Occupy till I come [1849] *Coming events, op. cit.,* p. 46.
22. Ryle, What time is it? *Coming events*, *op. cit.,* p. 92.
23. Ryle, And so all Israel shall be saved [1879] *Coming events and present duties*, second edition 1879, p. 189.
24. Ryle, Watch, *Coming events*, *op. cit.,* p. 20.
25. J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: St Mark*, Ipswich, 1858, p. 293 [on Mark 13:32-371.
26. Ryle, Watch, *Coming events*, *op. cit.,* p. 2 1.
27. *Ibid.,* p. 17.
28. *Ibid.,* pp.. 18, 19.
29. Ryle, Wheat or chaff? *Home Truths*, *op. cit.,* p. 158.
30. *Ibid.,* p. 161.
31. *Ibid.,* p. 176.
32. Ryle added a PS on 'eternal punishment' to his sermon on 'Eternity' preached in Peterborough cathedral in December, 1877, and in response to F. W. Fads, *Eternal Hope*, London, 1877.
33. Ryle, Wheat or chaff? *Home Truths*, *op. cit.,* p. 179.
34. *Ibid.,* p. 179.
35. *Ibid.,* p. 179.
36. *Ibid.,* p. 180.
37. J. C. Ryle, The heirs of God [I8521 Coming events, *op. cit.,* p. 185.

38. *Ibid.,* p. 185.
39. J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: St Luke*, London, 1858, Vol. 2, p. 347 [on Luke 20:41-7].
40. J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: St John*, London, 1869, Vol. 2, pp.. 101-102 [on John 8:21-301].
41. C. H. Waller, *The Authoritative inspiration of Holy Scripture*, London, 1887, with an introduction by J.C. Ryle, p. 23.
42. *Ibid.,* pp.. 25-26.
43. *Ibid.,* p. 26.
44. Ryle, *Watch, Coming events*, *op. cit.,* p. 12.
45. *Ibid.,* p. 15.
46. J. C. Ryle, *Expository thoughts on the Gospels: St Matthew*, Ipswich, 1856, p. 314 [on Mt. 24: 1- 141.
47. J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: St John*, London, 1873, Vol. 3, p. 346 [on Jn. 19:24].
48. Ryle, *Scattered Israel, Coming events*, *op. cit.,* p. 129.
49. Ryle, *Watch, Coming events*, *op. cit.,* pp.. 13-14.
50. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts...on John*, *op. cit.,* Vol. 3, p. 346 [on Jn. 19:24].
51. Ryle, Scattered Israel, *Coming Events*, *op. cit.,* p. 141.
52. Ryle, Wheat or chaff? *Home Truths*, *op. cit.,* p. 183.
53. J. C. Ryle, What is your hope? [I857] *Home Truths*, Ipswich, 1857, Vol. 6, p. 43.
54. J. Julian, *A Dictionary of Hymnology*, London, 1907, p. 161.
55. F. Close, *The Catholic Doctrine of the Second Advent,* London, 1846, p. 27.
56. Ryle, What time is it? *Coming events*, *op. cit.,* p. 86.
57. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on...Matthew, op. cit.,* p. 313 [on Matt. 24: 1-141].
58. D.N. Hempton, "Evangelicalism and eschatology," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, Vol. 31, No. 2, 1980, p. 186.
59. A. F. Munden, The First palmerston Bishop: Henry Montagu Villiers, Bishop of Carlisle 1856-60 and Bishop of Durham 1860-61, Northern History, Vol. 26, 1990, pp.. 186-206.
60. E. Bickersteth, *The Second Coming*, London, 1843, p. vi.
61. Later published as "The reading which is blessed," J.C. Ryle, *Home Tntths*, Ipswich, Vol. 5, 1857, pp.. 253-84 and *Coming Events*, *op. cit.,* pp.. 149-77.
62. Ryle, *Watch, Coming events*, *op. cit.,* p. 38.