

The Second Coming in the Book of Revelation

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It may be remarked at the outset what is recognised by all commentators on the Book of Revelation, that the Second Coming of Christ in this work is not exclusively an event of the future, but also represents an activity of Christ in the present. Just as the Kingdom of God, with its attendant spiritual blessings, is a present possession of the believer (i. 5-6, 9; v. 9-10; xii. 10-11; xxii. 17), so there is given to the individual a private *parousia* (iii. 20), while the exercise of judicial powers by the Lord in His Churches is spoken of as a "coming" to each such Church (ii. 5; ii. 16; iii. 3). Inevitably, however, in view of the peculiar circumstances of the Seer and his fellow-Christians, it is the future advent that is chiefly in mind throughout the book.

In no other writing of the New Testament is the imminence of the Advent more clearly marked (i. 1, 3; vi. 11; xxii. 10, 20). With such clear statements before us, it does not seem permissible to interpret the word *ταχύ*, as Swete does, in a "relative" sense, "in the light of a prophecy which interposes, between the Seer's time and the Return an age of persecution of unknown length and a subsequent millennium of dominant Christianity" (*Comm.*, p. clxvii). Far from the persecution being of indefinite duration, it is reiterated several times that it is confined to a limited period, i.e. three and a half years (xii. 6, 14; xiii. 5), while the whole book is written in the conviction that that persecution lies in the near future. Instead of making the "shortly" meaningless by interposing the thousand-year kingdom between its limits, expositors ought to have realised from its presence how impossible it is to place the millennium before the End-time. The representation of the Day of the Lord, or Day of Christ, as soon to come is a phenomenon observable in every Biblical work of prophecy and has long been recognised as part and parcel of the prophetic consciousness.

It is nevertheless a puzzling feature of the Book of Revelation that the Parousia should apparently occupy a quite subordinate position. Swete writes:

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No mention is made of the *παρουσία* or *ἐπιφάνεια* of the Lord... Moreover, there is no one vision which answers altogether to the conception of the Return, as it is presented in our Lord's teaching and in the Epistles. We look for such an appearance immediately before the general resurrection and judgment (xx. 11 f.), or in connection with the descent of the Bride, but it is absent. Perhaps the Reaper on the white cloud and the crowned Warrior on the white horse, may describe, each in its own way, the last Coming, but neither of these visions exhausts the conception, or occupies the position which the Parousia might have been expected to fill (p. clxvi).

This is no overstatement of the case, indeed it may be understatement. Most expositors are inclined to regard the picture of the Reaper on the white cloud as representing an apocalyptic figure or angel, not the Messiah Himself (xiv. 14 f.). The benediction of xvi. 15, with its mention of the Second Coming, is almost certainly displaced from the Letters to the Churches. On such a view, there is not a single explicit mention of the Second Advent of Christ in the whole apocalypse proper, the only allusions to it being found in the Letters to the Churches (ii. 25; iii. 11) and in the Prologue and Epilogue (i. 7; xxii. 7, 12, 20).

One might conclude from this extraordinary situation that the Second Coming was of little consequence to the author of the Apocalypse. It might even lead one to reconsider whether the earlier critics, who expended so much labour in endeavouring to prove the Jewish origin of the Apocalypse, were not right. But this would be hasty judgment. We believe, contrary to what might be expected, that the Second Coming of Christ is the dominant theme of the book, the background against which all else is set. Far from its being a mechanical doctrine, as many New Testament exegetes of modern days have represented it to be, John's presentation of the doctrine is thoroughly theological and made integral to the Christian message. The writer has done this by linking his teaching on the Parousia with his doctrine of God.

It is impossible not to notice that John's doctrine of God is more emphatic than that of the other New Testament writings. It seems to have been lifted bodily out of the Old Testament and placed in uneasy juxtaposition with his Christology. Yet it is equally evident that the view of Christ here given is as exalted as that of any other apostolic work, whether Gospel or Epistle. Christ is the Word of God (xix. 13) who both mediated the original creation (iii. 14), wrought redemption in this age

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(i. 5-6; xii. 10), and will share with the Father the divine glory in the new creation (xxi. 22-xxii. 5). Both Swete and Charles have emphasised that in this book the Doctrine of God and the Doctrine of the Son are complementary and have to be viewed in each other's light; that which is predicated of the One is usually predicated of the Other also.

Now, just as Christ is viewed in the light of His great redemptive act of crucifixion-resurrection (v. 6), so that His Name may be given as "The Living One" that was dead but is now alive for evermore (i. 17), so God is viewed essentially as the One who was, and is, and shall act for the redemption of His people (i. 4, 8; iv. 8; cf. xi. 17 with xi. 15). This title, so characteristic of the Book of Revelation, is all the more striking in that it appears to be a conscious adaptation of a conception current among the Jews. Sib. Or. iii. 16, e.g., speaks of God as "one who is, and was before, yea and shall be hereafter". The title is derived from the Name of God revealed to Moses at the Bush (Exod. iii. 14). LXX translates it ἐγώ εἰμι ὁ ὢν and Aquila and Theodotion ἔσομαι (δσ) ἔσομαι. Charles quotes several rabbinical comments on these words in the same strain as that from the Sibylline Oracles, one unearthed by Wetstein being particularly close: "Dixit Deus... ad Mosen: Ego fui et adhuc sum et ero in posterum" (see *Comm. on Rev.*, vol. i, p. 10). To the Jews this would be simply a revelation of God in terms of time, and as such it would have come to John's notice. But he has transformed it from a colourless description of God's unending existence into a dynamic conception of Deity, which believes that His coming to intervene for the salvation of His people, and therefore of the world, is grounded in His very nature as the God of Redemption. His Name is "The One who is and was and *is to come*." And His Name is His character. His Name signifies that His coming for judgment and redemption is rooted in His very Being. He shall come, for He must come in order to be what He is, the God of Salvation. In Christian theology, and especially in the theology of the Seer, this necessity of future action for judgment and salvation must be shared by the Son, for that which is predicated of the Father is true of the Son also, and indeed not only shared by Him but transferred to Him, for He is the Mediator between God and man. So that for God to come in judgment and deliverance means that Christ must come and Himself effect the purposes of God. This

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is the basis of the Book of Revelation. A swift perusal of its contents will confirm this conclusion.

A cardinal feature of the events of the End-time, as portrayed in the Apocalypse, is the exercise of judgment upon a rebellious world. That judgment is the joint prerogative of God the Father and Christ the Son: see the clear expression of that in vi. 15-17. It is also expressed in various ways in the symbolism employed by the seer. That *the Lamb* opens the seals of judgment in chapter vi. implies that He is the Executor of God's wrath, and it is probably intended to be a general conception covering the other series of plagues, where angelic agency only is spoken of. Yet in the preface to the last series of plagues, those of the bowls (chapter xv), it is said that they contain "the wrath of God", and the temple of God in heaven is filled with the Shekinah glory, conveying the idea that it is God Himself who is to get glory to His Name in now exercising His righteous judgments. Again, we read in xvi. 14-16 that the kings of the earth are gathered by evil spirits to "the war of the great day of God, the Almighty", but xix. 11f. shows that that "war" is fought and won by the Christ who comes from heaven. We are led to conclude that though the judgment is rightly called that of God, it is God acting through Christ. We may compare the representation in the Fourth Gospel, in which we find the Lord saying "The Father hath given all judgment unto the Son", qualified shortly by the statement, "I can of myself do nothing as I hear I judge" (John v. 22, 30). The Book of Revelation stresses that this judgment is to be associated with the crucial events of the End-time. However we conceive this judgment in our own minds, whatever picture we use to represent it, it is clear that this, and nothing less, is what is meant by the Coming of Christ: He shall come to execute the judgment of God. That it means something more than this we must go on to show.

The idea of sovereignty is even more closely attached to the presentation of God in the Revelation than that of judgment. In the scene in heaven in chapter iv, the right of God to reign is linked with His dignity as Creator (iv. 11). Yet the following chapter, which dwells on the significance of the atonement of Christ, proceeds to attribute to the Saviour the same prerogative, almost in the same words, though linking the exaltation with His atonement rather than with His inherent dignity (v. 12). In this book, therefore, one can speak indifferently of the Kingdom of

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God, the Kingdom of Christ, or the Kingdom of God and His Christ. As one would expect, the most characteristic utterances concerning the Kingdom relate to its manifestation in the crises of the consummation of the age. Thus we read in xix. 6, of the song of a great multitude, "Hallelujah; for the Lord our God, the Almighty, has ascended his throne" (ἐβασίλευσεν). In v. 9-10 a song of praise is given to the Lamb, who purchased to God men of every tribe "and madest them to be unto our God a kingdom and priests; and they reign on the earth". On this verse three things ought to be said: (i) the reference is commonly thought to belong proleptically to the Messianic era; (ii) a comparison with i. 5-6, 9, shows that the Kingdom is that of Christ; (iii) the reign concerns the entire Church of God and not simply a section of it, such as the martyrs. The Kingdom of God and of Christ is mentioned in xii. 10, probably in reference to its coming, or liberation, in power through the death and resurrection of Christ (cf. John xii. 31); but in xi. 15 the End-time crisis is in view, as in xix. 6, "The Kingdom of the world has become that of our Lord, and of His Christ, and He shall reign for ever and ever".

The Kingdom may thus be viewed as a joint reign of God and Christ; the visions of the consummated Kingdom uniformly imply that in their conjoining the name of the Lamb with

that of God in the glory of that era (xxi. 22, 23; xxii. 1, 3; cf. v. 13, vii. 16-17). What therefore are we to make of those passages wherein the rule of Christ is said to be a delegated one, as in ii. 26; iii. 21; xx. 4-6? Surely we are to infer that such a delegation is comparable with the committal to Christ by the Father of His saving work in death and resurrection. Indeed, we may go further and assert that since salvation in its final sense includes the bringing in of the Kingdom of glory, the act whereby it is introduced is inseparable from the other redemptive acts of the Lord; it is united in one organic whole with them through the work of the Spirit in the Church, just as the condemnation of sin at the Judgment-seat of Christ is the counterpart and consummation of that judgment that took place in his death and resurrection (John xii. 31) and is perpetually being declared by the Spirit in the present era (John xvi. 8f.). The Kingdom, as the Judgment, is the result of the Messianic work of the Christ, brought to its culmination at that epoch known as the Second Coming of Christ.¹

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The bearing that this has on our view of the significance of the Second Advent is important. We have seen that the theme of the Book of Revelation is the impending judgment of the world and the universal sway of the Kingdom of God. That Judgment and that Kingdom are to be brought about by the judicial and redemptive activity of Christ. It is this mighty working of Christ that constitutes for the seer the distinctive feature of the Second Coming of Christ, more important by far to him than any description of how that coming will appear to mortal eye. It is to him as integral a part of the saving work of Christ as was His death and resurrection, as we clearly see from the vision of the Lamb in ch. v, though the conception is integral to the whole book.

In view of this we are compelled to feel that those exegetes who have spoken of the New Testament conception of the Second Coming as due to primitive notions of astronomy and geography have given very superficial attention to the book which expounds it most fully. The true background of the Seer's doctrine is not primitive cosmology, but the experience of the powers of evil in opposition to the Spirit of God in the Church, and the conviction that only the forth-putting of the power of the Living Redeemer could end the struggle. One would have thought that the experiences of the twentieth-century Church would have confirmed to the full that conviction of the inspired Seer. Judgment and sovereignty, the fulfilment of the purpose of God, are what the Prophet means by the Second Coming of Christ. If that be felt by some theologians to be trivial, we must leave them to their own imaginings; for us it is revelation, the Revelation, given to His servant John by the angel of God's Anointed.

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¹ We may note in passing that as xxii. 5 speaks of the reign of God the Father only in the consummated Kingdom, whereas the immediately preceding verses make it clear that God and Christ are inseparably associated in the sovereignty of that era, so it is likely that in the judgment scene of xx. 11-15 Christ is associated with the Father, although God alone is mentioned as judge in that passage.