

The Apocalypse.

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THE perplexity which at the very outset confronts the student of the Book of the Revelation as to which of the four schools of interpretation to follow, accounts for a great deal of the neglect which it has suffered. Not only are the main outlines of the four methods of explanation widely different, but on many points there are marked varieties of interpretation by members of the same school. And, further, the selection of the particular method to adopt is rendered still more difficult by the attractiveness of each of the four.

If the study of the Canonical Apocalypse is prefaced by some acquaintance with the Apocalyptic literature of the same age—*e.g.*, the Apocalypse of Baruch, the Book of Enoch, the Assumption of Moses, the Sibylline Oracles, etc.—the many points of similarity which he discovers will attract the student to the Preterist view of the book. He observes that the Johannine Apocalypse is one of a kind, though immeasurably the highest of its kind. There is in them all the same background of persecution, the same general purpose—to justify the dealings of God—the same prospect of deliverance held out, and the same counsel to patience enforced. The same prominence is given to the personality of Satan, and the certainty of his speedy overthrow. There is the same general type of symbolism—the strange, grotesque, mysterious figures, portrayed in vivid colouring—and the same style of visions introduced and partially explained by angels. With these strongly-marked resemblances to contemporary Apocalyptic literature in mind, it becomes only natural to assume that the Book of the Revelation should be viewed as a document chiefly concerned with the times in which it originated. A century of Roman history will then suffice to cover the fulfilment of five-sixths of the book,

and the mysterious personality of the Wild Beast will be taken to be, "beyond all shadow of doubt or uncertainty, the Emperor Nero." The Preterist method will appeal to many as the simplest and most natural interpretation of the book. It is certainly the easiest. And the difficulty of finding a fulfilment to many of its prophetic visions is easily shirked by the plea of ignorance of the details of European history between the years A.D. 50 and 150.

Approaching the subject from a different standpoint, the student of the Historical school finds himself wholly dissatisfied with the narrow, local, and uninteresting explanation of the Preterist. Accustomed as he is to take broad views of the dealings of the Almighty with the human race, to survey eras and cycles and ages and dispensations, to trace the evolution of the Divine revelation from its primeval and primitive inception to its culmination and consummation in the Person of the Incarnate Word of God, he looks to the Apocalypse of St. John the Divine to provide a splendid programme of the entire Christian Dispensation. He sees in it a continuous prophecy exhibiting the main features of the world's history. He identifies its symbolic figures and visions with personages and events which are notable in European history. In the Wild Beast and in the mystic Babylon he is convinced that he sees the Church of Rome. And the visions of the book he considers to be mostly fulfilled, some more in course of fulfilment, a few still waiting to materialize in the course of the twentieth century. To the student of history this view of the book is fascinating. This broad method of treatment appeals to his broad outlook on men and things. If he should shrink from an ultra-Protestant treatment of the book, his Catholic sympathies will devise a variety of concurrent and interchangeable, though still historical, explanations. He has nearly nineteen centuries of European history within which to roam about for his interpretations and fulfilments. The study of the book becomes one of absorbing interest, and the variety of the methods which are accessible for explaining the visions is only limited by the extent of his

acquaintance with the ancient, medieval, and modern history of Europe.

But all students of the Bible are not authorities on European history, and the vivid imagination and eager expectation of a large number of earnest Christian people gain the greatest possible stimulus in the Futurist interpretation of the book. Here they find all the materials for the construction of a magnificent and exciting programme of events which are shortly to take place. It seems to them the most natural and reverent way to take the symbols and the visions as literally as possible. The book becomes intensely realistic. The rise and fall of superhuman personages, the clash of colossal forces in a portentous military engagement, the terrorizing display of the forces of Nature in cataclysmic onslaught, fire the imagination, excite the emotions, and arouse the keenest enthusiasm. Not by any means all of the advocates of the Futurist school commit themselves to the excesses and the "vicious literalism" of some of their leaders. Many sane and scholarly men, finding themselves disgusted with the narrowness of the Preterist view, and unable to follow any of the varied explanations of the Historical school, adopt in the main the Futurist position. They may not be adepts at the moral analysis of the history of the past centuries, but they are keenly alive to the conditions and tendencies of their own age. They view with alarm the spirit of the present age—the growth of militarism, the spread of democracy, the prevalence of materialism, the vast changes which are taking place so rapidly in different parts of the earth and affecting so profoundly the future of myriads of its inhabitants. They believe—and much they find to justify their belief—that the present period of transition will not merge into one of millennium without political, social, and religious upheavals on a scale which the world so far has never witnessed. And the visions of the Apocalypse suggest to them the lines on which these upheavals are likely to issue, and the manner in which the wrath of man will at last be subjected to the triumph and the glory of God.

Yet other minds there are which find it impossible to construct either out of the materials of the past or the present, or out of their conceptions as to what the future has in store, any satisfactory solution of the difficulties, or any conclusive interpretation of the symbols and visions of the Apocalypse. In the desire to avoid the literalism which more or less pervades the teaching of each of the three preceding schools, they find more satisfaction in following the spiritualizing method of interpretation. They see in the book symbolic representations of good and evil principles common to every age. They find in it pictorial unfoldings of certain great principles in constant conflict. Under different forms and a varying symbolism they find a progressive exemplification of the same great fundamental truths. They seek and they find a spiritual meaning. They do not deny that the book had its primary reference to the years that immediately followed its production. They do not condemn the researches of the historical interpreter, who finds the fulfilment of the book in the nineteen centuries that are past. They do not throw a wet blanket on the vivid expectations of the Futurist. But they contend that the lessons of the book are not so much historical and eschatological as permanent and spiritual; that the book is rather a mine of spiritual truth underneath thick layers and strata of allegorical figurism, than a diagram of ancient and modern history, or a chart and key to the cycles of the future. Unfettered by limitations or postulates or "methods" of any kind, they patiently ponder over the book; and though they do not pretend to find, or perhaps do not even seek, the solution to its many problems or the explanation of its many mysteries, they yet obtain pure gold out of the sacred mine, and bring forth things new and old out of the ancient treasure-house.

Whatever view is taken of the book, its dramatic power cannot but make its appeal to the thoughtful mind. There is a symmetry about the arrangement of the several dramas, but their succession is not always progressive, and sometimes the reader seems to be taken back again over old ground, though

with a new series of symbols and visions. Yet the absence of chronological order does not seem to impair the dramatic force of the book. There is a dignity throughout its pages which the strangeness and grotesqueness of some of its figures never destroys. From the first three verses of neat and graceful introduction, the reader is at once introduced to the majestic vision of the Christ. Twice at the beginning of the book, as twice at the end, the Almighty is presented under the sublime titles of the Alpha and Omega, the Beginning and the End of all things. An elevated plane of thought is reached, and an atmosphere of reverential awe ; and that level is never lowered, or that atmosphere attenuated, throughout the book. The letters to the seven Churches are solemn and dignified. The vision of the Throne of God is serene, sublime, and magnificent. The visions of the conflict follow with their lurid imagery, the seven Seals, the seven Trumpets, the silence of the seven Thunders (for their messages are not disclosed), the tragedy of the two Witnesses, and the tragedy of the Woman and her Man-child in her struggle with the Dragon. Then the Trinity of Evil—the Dragon, the Beast, and the False Prophet—that great parody and travesty of the Holy Trinity, is portrayed. The seven Angels utter their messages, the seven Plagues are outpoured from the seven Vials of Judgment. The tragic drama follows of the mystic Babylon, and a haunting dirge full of melancholy splendour is sung as a lament over her fall. The rise and fall of the seven Kingdoms are introductory to the last great events. Finally, the awe and solemnity of the book culminate in the vision of the Judgment Day, with its Great White Throne, and its grave and irrevocable sentence. Then the thunders cease, and a picture of serene and delicate loveliness emerges ; the clouds and mists of earth are for a few brief moments dissolved ; the New Heavens and the New Earth appear in their unrivalled loveliness ; the tears and sorrow and pain are banished ; there is no more sea ; there is no more night ; there is no more sin ; there is no more death ; the Paradise which was lost is as nothing compared with the

Paradise which is regained ; and, as the Sum and Centre and Mainspring of all, is revealed the Almighty Father, the Lamb Who was slain but Who lives and reigns, and the Eternal Spirit Who bids us "come."

It will be noticed that the drama of the book pursues its varied course till it ends, as it cannot but do, in tragedy ; and the tragedy having attained its climax, passes off the scene to make way for the matchless serenity of the final scenes—the New Jerusalem, the Marriage of the Lamb, and the eternal association in fellowship and service of the Heavenly Bridegroom with the earthly Bride, whom He presents to Himself spotless and undefiled, to share the kingdom, and to enter into the joy of her Lord.

The object of our study, however, will fall short of its attainment if it carries us no further than an appreciation of the book as a grand historical drama. The blessing promised to the reader of the volume is conditional not only on "the hearing of the words of this prophecy," but also on "the keeping of those things which are written therein." The Apocalypse has its practical meaning and message for every age—its message to the early Christian, to the medieval saint, to the living militant members of the Church Catholic, and it may be to generations of Christians yet unborn. It may have its varied meaning to its different schools of interpreters, for the truth of God is always larger than any one mind or school of thought can grasp, and a general recognition of this elementary fact would have saved the Church from the distressing spectacle of the unlovely and bitter dissensions of which some of its interpreters have been guilty. But without committing ourselves to the detailed methods of any one school, it may yet be possible to distinguish certain broad lines of teaching which are independent of any one theory, and yet common to them all.

In the first place may be mentioned its *doctrine of God*. Mention has already been made of the dignity, the sublimity, and the grandeur of the whole conception of the Deity. The limits of human language seem to have been reached, and the

resources of earth's symbolism seem to have been exhausted in the effort to convey to the imagination of mankind the might, the majesty, and the ineffable glory of God Almighty. Vision succeeds vision of the Eternal Father—Alpha and Omega, of the Lamb who was slain, Redeemer and now King, and of the Holy Spirit before the throne, in His sevenfold perfection.

“Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, which was, and is, and is to come,” is the grand central ascription. There is no elaborated doctrine of the Trinity, yet there is a constant recurrence of the underlying idea of a Triune Personality, a Trinity in the unity of the Godhead. There is no question as to the need of this generation for an elevated conception of the being of God. There is no doubt that an exposition of the book from any standpoint will conduce to a more reverent and exalted conception, and a more humble and adoring worship of Almighty God.

The Apocalypse has well been called “a book of contrasts” and it is only natural that over against the splendid conception of God which it presents, there should be a striking *portrayal of Satan*—His great rival and adversary. The teaching of St. John as to the personality of Satan is as clear a reflection of our Lord's own teaching as is that of St. Paul and St. Peter. Under the form of the dragon, Satan is depicted as a personality inspired by tremendous malignity, hatred, cunning, and power, all of whose varied gifts are directed to the organization and management of a vast campaign against God. As St. Paul has also described him, he is viewed as the head of a great organized confederacy. Assisted by the allies which he finds in the world, the Beast, whose power seems now on the wane, and the False Prophet, whose influence appears to be now at its height, he aspires to usurp the throne and kingdom of God. The Atonement of Christ for sin, and the widespread proclamation and acceptance of the Gospel message, have given him a deadly wound; but the wound is healed, and he is more potent than ever. Now in this age he is actually, as St. Paul calls him, the god of this

world. The Church of Christ repudiates him, denounces his claim, and cleaves with loyalty and devotion to her Lord.

But outside her ranks, either explicitly or implicitly, directly or indirectly, Satan is acknowledged as god. The very idea of a personal Satanic being may be ridiculed by unbelievers whose eyes he has blinded; but the Christian at least ought not to be ignorant of his devices. The Apocalypse is a standing warning against disbelief in the Devil. It tells us of his malignant power, of his allies and confederates, and of their nefarious schemes and policy. "Woe unto you," it says, "for the Devil is come down unto you, having great wrath, because he knoweth that he hath but a short time."

From the doctrine of Satan it is but a step to the *doctrine of sin*. Sin is here presented as the attitude of opposition to God. Running throughout the book is the idea of conflict, a fierce and inevitable conflict between the forces of good and the forces of evil. The characters in the drama are all ranged on one side or on the other, either for God or against Him. And throughout the book sin is almost invariably looked at in its God-ward, and not in its man-ward, aspect. The question of a man's sin against his brother man is scarcely entertained. The lists of heinous sins comprise many sins which are done directly between man and man. The liar, the thief, and the murderer, sin directly against their brother men. But this idea of sin is altogether swallowed up in the greater thought, that every such sin is a grievous offence against God. It is this fundamental conception that accounts for the grouping together of sins that are generally regarded as vulgar, gross, and criminal, with those whose sinfulness a *fin de siècle* civilization would scarcely admit. Yet from the view point of God the fearful and unbelieving are classed with the murderers and the fornicators. The moral cowardice which dissuades men from following Christ for fear of ridicule and social ostracism, the unbelief which exalts the material and the temporal, and which paralyses the whole conception of the spiritual and the eternal, the sins which, like these, are wholly between man and his God, are shown to be as damnable as any

of the vulgar crimes against society which are the only offences which are punishable by law. Sin against a man's own person equally with sin against his neighbour is in reality sin against his God.

In these days it is of pressing importance that this truth should be taught. The modern view of sin leaves God out of account. Sin is spoken and thought of as little more than an unfortunate and unpleasant occurrence, even if not, as by some, an inevitable stage in man's upward climb to perfection. And the Christian soldier, unless he chooses to doff his uniform, and receive the brand on his forehead of the mark of the Beast, must range himself unmistakably on the side of God, and maintain that the primary and paramount consideration in all question of human transgression, is the manner in which it is related to the law and will of a holy God.

In the fourth place we come to the teaching of the Apocalypse concerning *the Church*. Most beautifully and suggestively is that teaching set forth. The two familiar divisions, the Church militant and the Church triumphant, are much in evidence; and though the names are absent, the ideas which they connote are always latent, if not always apparent. There is the Church militant, fighting its way through life and death to glory. It is engaged in relentless conflict with all the powers of darkness, struggling to hold its own against the strategy and might of the confederate forces who do battle in the spiritual realm on behalf of the trinity of evil—the Dragon, the Beast, and the False Prophet. Hour by hour there are passing from the battlefield of human life great contingents of seasoned veterans on their way to join the ranks of the Church triumphant. Yet hour by hour their places are filled, and more than filled, by the battalions of recruits who are hastening from all quarters to range themselves under the banner of the Cross. Throughout the book there is a constant transference of scene, effected by sudden and abrupt transitions of thought. Now it is the Church at warfare which occupies the stage; and the picture is full of the din and confusion and smoke of the battle. Now it is the

Church at rest which is depicted in language full of delicate charm, reflecting the serenity, the purity, and the calm of heaven. Every new stage in the earthly conflict is paralleled by a further revelation of the glory of its final issue. At last the vision of the fury of the spiritual warfare gives place to the vision of the multitude which no man can number, whose voices are like the sound of many waters, the bride preparing for the Heavenly Bridegroom, the New Jerusalem in all its matchless symmetry, and finally the symbolism of the closing paragraphs, so suggestive of the security, the permanence, the society, and the restful, joyous activity of the Eternal City home, where earth's luminaries are no longer needed, for "the glory of God doth lighten it, and the Lamb is the light thereof."

The *seven anthems of the Apocalypse* form a study by themselves, for each has a setting and a character and a meaning all its own. There is first the *Anthem of the Living Creatures*, the representatives of the created universe, in chap. iv., to which the Church adds her Doxology. In the next chapter follows the *new Song of Redemption* to the Lamb, who is worthy to take the book and to open its seals; and in this song the Church joins her voice to that of Nature, because both are affected by the work of redemption; and while Nature, through her representatives, chants her solemn "Amen," the Church is seen to prostrate herself in silent and adoring worship. In chap. vii. is set forth the loud *Anthem of Salvation*, and the "Gloria" is rendered by the angels round about the throne. Chap. xi. is the *Anthem of the Coronation*. Chap. xiv. opens with the *New Song of the Sanctified Church*. Then follows in the next chapter the *Song of Moses and of the Lamb*—the song, that is, of thanksgiving, not only for the salvation which has come to the Church through the Atoning Sacrifice of the Son of God, but also for all the long way, from first to last, by which God has led His Church to that glorious issue. The seventh and closing anthem, with its fourfold "Alleluia," is the *Grand Pæan of Triumph* when the apostate Church is defeated, and the true Church is ushered into the presence of the Lamb.

In the last place, we come to the teaching of the book in regard to the *Second Advent of Christ*. Visions are unfolded to us—great, solemn, majestic, magnificent—of that

“Great far-off Divine event
To which the whole creation moves.”

It is the Saviour who is to come again—the Lamb that had been slain, the same Jesus who lived on earth, was crucified, and buried in Joseph's garden, who rose triumphant, and in the presence of His disciples ascended to glory. It is the same Lord Jesus, and none other—still one with us in His manhood, through all eternity Man as well as God. We shall see Him! We shall know Him! For Jesus Christ is the “same yesterday, to-day, and for ever.”

It is Christ the Judge who is to come. Our earthly tribunals hold their petty courts, and modern public opinion listens to its earth-born witnesses, pronounces its little sentences, and inflicts its short-lived penalties. But the whole thing is ephemeral. Like a panorama it passes across the stage. Yet all the while the great assize of heaven is being prepared; the Judge of all the earth is making ready His august decrees; the proclamation is preparing to issue which shall summon all mankind to stand before the judgment-seat; and He who is to be man's Judge is none other than the Man Christ Jesus.

Who is He that is to come? The Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End, the First and the Last, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords—He it is who is the Coming One. The last and final trump must peal its warning summons. The roll of the elect must be completed. The four-and-twenty elders fall upon their faces, saying: “We give Thee thanks, O Lord God Almighty, which art, and which wast, and which art to come, that Thou hast taken to Thee Thy great power and hast reigned.” And the trumpet-blast blares forth the message to the utmost bounds of the realms of the universe: “The kingdoms of this world are become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ, and He shall reign for ever and ever.”