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*THE APOCALYPTIC SETTING OF THE EPISTLES
TO THE THESSALONIANS.*

THE two words Apocalyptic and Eschatological have to be carefully distinguished the one from the other, for they have not unfrequently been confused. Each indeed has to do with "the last things" (*τὰ ἔσχατα*), but to the apocalyptist these last things were to happen at the end of the age or dispensation, when the Messianic kingdom would be ushered in, while to eschatology these last things were to be at the end of the world, and referred to death, judgment, and the future state alike of the good and the bad. Apocalyptic, especially in its latest forms, had its own eschatology, but in its earlier and best writings it concerned itself with a vision of the new age that was to come on this earth. Apocalyptic had a splendid vision, and a great hope. It arose in evil days, and on eagle wings of living faith it surmounted all lowering clouds, and dwelt in the sunshine of the better day. The apocalyptist differed from the prophet. He believed that the present evil age was to be suddenly ended in some great catastrophe by the glorious intervention of God, while the prophet maintained the progressive revelation of God in an ever increasing unfolding, slow but gradual, of the Divine purpose. As the voice of the prophet ceased to be heard in the land that of the Apocalyptist had its opportunity.

In this way the whole atmosphere at the time of the appearance of Christ was charged with the thought and language of apocalyptic. The pious folk were influenced by it, and when Jesus used words no doubt in His case largely borrowed from the old prophetic writings, they were coloured and interpreted in the popular mind by apocalyptic imagery. While the gospel was not the product

of apocalyptic, it appeared on the soil of apocalyptic, and too often seemed to be an apocalyptic message.

To illustrate this we deal with the earliest extant Christian documents, the two letters of Paul to the church at Thessalonica. In addition to the oral tradition embodying the main facts of the life and work of Jesus, on which the Church was founded, there were doubtless several brief statements in writing of the words and deeds of the Master as the introduction of Luke's gospel would suggest. Scholars have constructed an original document called Q as one made use of by Luke and Matthew. Paul became a follower of Christ about 33 A.D., and probably had seen Jesus. As a protagonist for the Sanhedrin he doubtless was acquainted at first hand with the sayings and doings of Christ. He had begun his world-mission about 45, and had spent much time in Thessalonica. Probably he had written or sent messages to this Church before writing the extant letters. He inaugurated the New Testament Canon with these writings. In them we are brought into close touch with the earliest presentation of the Christian faith in the primitive Church. And here, if anywhere, we shall find the traces of apocalyptic in its first influence on his own mind and on that of others. We say first traces, for the mind of the apostle was continually growing, and in his last epistles the element of apocalyptic is entirely absent. In other words, apocalyptic appears in his earliest writings as a limiting and hindering factor, which was to be laid aside when he reached a fuller comprehension of the essential teaching of Jesus in its spiritual fulness.

Now we are told in striking but very simple language about the way in which Paul's preaching worked at first. It came in effective power as life from the dead, and many were "turned from idols to serve the living God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, even Jesus, whom he raised

from the dead, who delivered us from the wrath to come" (1 Thess. i. 5, 8, 9).

In these words there are two main thoughts which at first received an apocalyptic interpretation, viz., (1) The coming again of the Christ; and (2) the deliverance from the wrath to come.

We deal with the second thought first. In the early preaching of John the Baptist we find him asking the Pharisees, "Who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" And the reference is to the terrible judgment to be executed upon all unbelievers when the Messianic kingdom was to begin. The last words of Malachi, in harmony with the teaching of Isaiah and his predecessors, declared that "the coming of the great and dreadful day of Yahweh" would be a "coming and smiting of the land with a curse," unless there were a great repentance on the part of the people. In the opening words of Isaiah the glory of the "Day of Yahweh" is dwelt upon, and in two later apocalyptic passages there is dramatic emphasis laid on "the day of vengeance" (Isa. lxi. 2, lxiii. 4). While in the book of Daniel, which is essentially an apocalyptic writing, and probably the first of the long series that followed, "the stone cut out of the mountain without hands" was to break all kingdoms, and the "kingdom of the saints" was to be set up as an everlasting kingdom. The wicked were to be destroyed out of the land, i.e., the land of Palestine. The righteous are thereby to be delivered, and in a supreme act of judgment, or vindication, God is to be glorified, and those who trusted in Him truly saved. This was "the wrath to come," and it was an objective, not a subjective wrath. It was something political and national to happen at a definite moment in Israel's history. In the song of Zacharias (Luke i. 71, 74) reference is made to this apocalyptic hope. Here a narrow Jewish particularism finds expression.

Before the coming of the Messiah King there had thus to be a terrible day. The time placing is important; without it the kingdom could not come. It is the case that in the apocalyptists there is a considerable difference of opinion as to whether the day of vengeance is to be an act of God prior to the coming of the Messiah, or an accompaniment thereof, when from His mouth there would proceed a fire that would destroy the wicked. But it is necessary for us exactly to understand what the reference to "the wrath to come" here means. It is not a final world judgment of a moral and spiritual kind, as we now view the last judgment; but it was a supreme destruction of the wicked, so that the kingdom might be set up in glory. Being delivered from wrath the young Church expected the speedy coming of the Messiah. The apostle had to remind them that the "wrath to come" had not yet been seen, and that there would be no coming of Christ until in some very open and manifest manner there should be the destruction of wickedness as a spirit and power working among men, or embodied in some person, as the Man of Lawlessness or Sin. And on the meaning of this speculation was rife. Why had he not appeared? What was the restraining influence or power? Whence or where was he or it to come? And on the supposition that this apocalyptic theorising is true, every age has had its own special explanation to give. The great apostle in his last letters has obviously given up all this vain speculation, and if the Church had only seen that it was part of the apocalyptic setting, it would have followed his example, and done so too.

But the second thought now falls to be considered. That is the Second Coming or the Parousia, which as the result of apocalyptic had such a prominent place in the early Church. Here we have to think ourselves back into the

position of the early days. The glorious coming of the Messiah was part of the apocalyptic hope. To the old expression the Christian element is added, "His Son." The original expectation was that the Messiah should appear "in power and glory" as on the clouds, along with the saints or angels. This was to be a time event and of local character, as forecasted in the words of the prophet Zechariah (chap. xiv. 4). "His feet shall stand in that day upon the mount of Olives." This was not in any sense thought of as a spiritual experience; it was to be wholly sensible and external, something spectacular from which some splendid results would immediately follow. The value of the coming was in this way emphasised as a bringing about of blessings not otherwise obtained or to be obtained. It was to be the bringing in of the kingdom with all its ancient glories, the earthly kingdom of the house of David. So that when Christ began to proclaim a kingdom of God, in which bliss was alone to be found, as near at hand, which by the reaching forth of the hand and taking might be the real spiritual possession of all, the people thought of an outward kingdom, near in time. Thus the mother of John and James construed it, and probably all the disciples, as they regarded it as like other kingdoms with seats of honour for the favourites, and rewards for all. The story of the conversation on the way to Emmaus tells us how the two travellers naïvely expressed the current expectation that they were disappointed because Jesus had in no open way delivered Israel. (Luke xxiv. 21.) While also we have the anxious question in Acts i. 6, "Wilt thou at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" The kingdom as expected had not come. The first coming of the Messiah had not accomplished the commonly desired effects, and therefore a second coming was looked for. This meant the failure to understand the worth of the

first coming, of a Saviour who had come, and the "artificially constructed theory of a twofold advent!" The work of the Messiah was divided into two, part being done in His first coming, and the other part in the second advent, for which the Church had to wait. In the first was suffering; in the second, glory. (Heb. ix. 28.) It was not then understood as it was when the fourth gospel was written that suffering was glory. (John. xii. 23.)

The reference in 1 Thessalonians ii. 12 to the "kingdom and the glory" is to that of the second coming, when, as in 2 Thessalonians i. 5-10, "He shall come to be glorified in his saints."

For the bringing in of such a kingdom many in Israel were prepared to take up the sword. They were the Zealots, and one of the apostolic band belonged to them. They would take the kingdom by force, as Mahomet in his time did. When Christ spoke about the kingdom His words were thus misunderstood, and wholly misrepresented. Not His thought about a kingdom which was to be in men, growing like seed, and working like leaven, was received by His reporters; but the current idea as to the kingdom was promulgated by them and regarded then, as by many since, as His. In the fourth gospel the failure of the disciples to understand Jesus is often stated. That understanding was only their glad possession when, after the glorifying of Jesus, the Spirit was given. (John vi. 37). For the definite forms of expression His reporters, and not Himself, are responsible. So long as we forget the apocalyptic influences all around Him we cannot do justice to His mind or teaching, and our difficulties will be endless. We have to eliminate apocalyptic from the gospels, written as they were after Paul's letters, if we would understand the Master; and like Paul himself, and more especially like the writer of the fourth gospel, adequately appreciate what the Master has to say to us.

Jesus came in the true line of prophecy, basing His teaching much rather on the prophetic books of the Old Testament as the revealed will of God, than on the "backwater of Jewish literature," to quote Montefiore's description of apocalyptic. And he knew that the kingdom which the best prophets longed for was spiritual and not outward, universal and not national,—an inner vital experience as men surrendered themselves in thought and action to the rule and sovereignty of God. And Paul saw what that meant further on, when he clearly taught that the kingdom "was righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Rom. xiv. 17). And lest any imperfect features of an earthly kingdom might cleave to and thereby limit the true relationship of God the Father to His children, the very category of the kingdom is abandoned, and life eternal used instead, in the last great "spiritual gospel," as Clement truly called it. The category of the kingdom has been largely emphasised in modern days, but it is wholly inadequate to set forth the essential idea of Christianity. It is indeed only one form of government, and the thought of God as King rather than as Father fails to do justice to the way in which Christ ever represented and revealed God. A more satisfactory category under which to set forth the community of believers or the Communion of Saints would be the Brotherhood, or Family of God. It is of course true that in the Synoptics the idea of kingdom is common, but when Christ used this word He filled it with a fuller, richer meaning, and lit it up with the light of His own deep experience. A recent writer of much eminence in New Testament studies argues that kingdom "in its essence is fundamental to all religion," and in consequence he objects to its being discarded. We would rejoice if some word more in harmony with the thought of Christ Himself were used.

As long as the emphasis was laid on the kingdom idea, soon to be realised in a Second Coming, endless difficulties emerged in the young Church. There was in apocalyptic the hope that blessedness particularly belonged to those who should be alive when the kingdom came. To share in it would be joy indeed. Hence to die before its coming would be matter of highest grief. As the hope of the coming of the kingdom gathered round its immediate happening, even in the lifetime of those then living, as we find in an apocalyptic interpretation of Christ's words (Mark ix 1), sorrow filled the Church when some passed away. Hence the apostle writes urging them to "sorrow not even as others who have no hope" like theirs (1 Thess. iv. 13). For this was his conviction then that those "who are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not be before them who are asleep." Together those who have passed away and those who are alive shall meet their Lord in His glorious appearing. This difficulty had confronted the apocalyptists. Thus in Daniel we are told that those "who sleep in the dust shall awake" to share in the glory of the coming kingdom which is to be set up on earth (xii. 2). In the apocalyptic "Assumption of Moses" the dead were viewed as sleeping in the Messiah, and so coming with Him. In Baruch the dead are not to be deprived through death of sharing in the glory. Here we see how apocalyptic influences Paul's earlier way of thinking. The coming in the air, on the clouds, is of course apocalyptic imagery. So also is that of the shout and the sound of the trumpet, which are represented as accompaniments of the appearing.

In the Old Testament death is regarded as a sleep, and it was looked upon with dread because the moment of dying would be the cessation of that communion with God in which the Old Testament saint found his highest joy.

Life and immortality had not yet been brought to light through the gospel of Him who said that God was not the God of the dead, but of the living, and who bade men find the continuance of communion with God in the true life,—the life that could not end. The fuller meaning of death as a passing, not into a grave or any intermediate state, but to be with Christ is more and more grasped by Paul, and finally finds expression in his last letter to his much loved friends at Philippi. The thought of death as a sleep is given up, and “the souls of believers do at their death immediately pass into glory,” as the catechism declares. The apostle thought much on resurrection and all that it meant and implied. We see how his mind advanced to ever clearer ideas on this supreme subject. In 1 Corinthians xv. he tells us of a spiritual body, a fit instrument for the redeemed person, while in 2 Corinthians v. 1 f. he assures us that “we have a building of God, an house not made with hands, with which we shall be clothed upon.” Of this high destiny the earnest or promise is already given. But in those early days there were many limitations and colourings introduced by current ideas of time and space, which the modern mind has given up. More spiritual conceptions, such as are taught in the fourth gospel, and towards which Paul was quickly travelling, have now entered into the consciousness of the Church, and have come to stay. When the fourth gospel was written, the Church had come to see that the heaven of the believer, the Father’s House, was not a place, but a state of continuous and ever growing fellowship with God in fulness of service. Hence Christ could say, “He that believeth in me shall never die.” Death ceases not only to be the king of terrors, but to be at all. And thus men are delivered from that fear of death “through which they were all their lifetime in bondage.” (Heb. ii. 15.)

In the second letter the apostle had to give many warnings against hasty or rash inferences based upon anything that he had said or written. He would have them "not soon shaken in mind or be troubled, neither by spirit, nor by word, nor by letter as if from us, as that the Day of the Lord is at hand." As to its certainty he has at this time no doubt. He had not yet emancipated himself from the hurtful influence of apocalyptic, with its earthly and unspiritual conceptions of the truth. The words of Christ in the fourth gospel about His speedy coming, and entering into every loving heart that kept His commandments, show how a truer conception of what Christ meant by His coming was being reached. That coming, at first conceived in terms of apocalyptic with its limiting ideas as to time and outward things, is now being thought of in a more spiritual and vital way. God's thoughts are always other and better than ours, and long time and much guidance by the Holy Spirit are required before they can be understood. In the great Trinitarian formula, added to the gospel of Matthew, the truth of the Christ who has come and who abides is enshrined, "Lo! I am with you always, even unto the end of the world." The death of Christ had been for the time the collapse of faith on the part of the disciples, and it was only when they allowed themselves to be impressed by His Personality and abiding influence that they came to realise the meaning of what He had taught. He indeed came to them and revealed Himself to them so that all their previous misunderstandings passed away. This, however, was not the work of forty days or forty years. The synoptic gospels written after Paul's death still dwelt on the outward and spectacular appearing. But scoffers arose, as St. Peter tells us, and the time element was turned down. "One day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one

day." Time here does not matter. It is the spiritual reality that counts.

Emphasis had been laid on the thought that the Messiah had to appear "in flaming fire, taking vengeance on them that know not God," and in the added Christian thought, "on them that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, who shall be punished with everlasting destruction at the presence of the Lord, and the glory of his power." (2 Thess. i. 8.) But the association of vengeance, punishment, destruction comes to be put further away from the work of God, as vengeance belongeth unto God, and a great world-wide campaign in which forgiveness and full salvation would be offered to men was thought of. Before the final consummation there was to be a glorious forth-putting of Divine power to bring men to God that they might be saved.

The connexion of the legal spirit with the conception of God has done much harm. It arose naturally under apocalyptic when men placed importance on possession and privilege, and ignored service and responsibility. Then it was easy to think of God appearing to punish the enemies of a supposed holy people. When, however, the truer thought of God as waiting to be gracious, of Christ as a Saviour seeking to save the lost, became dominant, grace rather than law was seen to be the very nature of God. He was declared to be love. And it is interesting to note that in Isaiah it was a day of vengeance, and a year of acceptance. When St. Luke makes Christ quote the words from this prophet he omits altogether the reference to the day of vengeance. Here there is evidence of the way in which, in this third and last of the Synoptics, there is a surmounting of apocalyptic, and a distinct toning down of apocalyptic sayings in Mark and Matthew. There was a tendency soon manifest to associate words of Christ

with the destruction of Jerusalem, and to see in this event the day of vengeance. Hence the verse in 1 Thessalonians ii. 16, with the words "The wrath is come upon them to the uttermost," is regarded as a later comment on the apostle's own writing, added when some then (and many since) have found in a wholly arbitrary way a distinct and definite fulfilment of a prophetic word. This is but one illustration of the way in which apocalyptic influenced men's minds, leading them as it did to attach an apocalyptic significance to certain events. In this way harm has been done to "the sure word of prophecy" and to much of the teaching of Jesus by the superimposing upon it of man-made inferences. Every fact and event has its own historical meaning and interpretation in itself. It may illustrate generally the principles of the government of the world by God; but no one has any right to dogmatise about it as the fulfilment of a particular prophetic word. If Rome was the restraining influence in Paul's time, and if as a loyal citizen of her Empire he made his boast of her justice, so that with confidence he carried his appeal to Cæsar, his later experiences in the imperial city were sadly to disillusionise him, so that he found in Rome, as the writer of the Book of Revelation, another apocalypticist, afterwards did, the real enemy of the Church of Jesus.

The fundamental error of the apocalyptic attitude to life was the way in which all importance was placed upon the future, and the worth of the living present, with all its heritage of blessing, was in consequence depreciated. The apocalypticist has doubtless his own value in times of despair in bidding men be of good cheer and lift up their hearts, as he gave them comfort by glowing views of a better day to come. And yet he might, and did do harm by ignoring present possibilities and supreme responsibilities, which men of God were being called upon to realise in some urgent

manner. Cloud-gazing hinders the farmer from ploughing, and the Christian from walking worthily of his high calling to work to-day in the vineyard. In the later apocalyptic writings there had been a despair of the earth as a fit or possible arena for the new kingdom of God to which their ardent hopes were directed. The new order required not only a cleansed earth, but a new earth altogether. Hope for the world was abandoned, and all bliss was looked for in a heaven beyond the skies. Thus religion became unduly otherworldly. This danger Paul had to warn his converts against. He bade them stand fast, do their work with quietness, and be not weary in well doing. His anxiety was that their hearts should be directed into the "love of God," not into any waiting for Christ, but into the patience which Christ showed, and which should have its perfect work in all His followers. (2 Thess. iii. 5.) And he told them that "the mystery of iniquity was already at work (ii. 7). His was no interim-ethic, but with growing clearness and deeper urgency a call to higher service, addressed to those who were the children of light, who should do the works of the day, putting on the breastplate of faith and love. (1 Thess v. 8.) Only in this way can the will of God be done on earth as in heaven, and His kingdom, that new rule of God which is to fill the world with light and joy, fully come. The "worth of the apocalyptic was the passing, that of the non-apocalyptic is the abiding."

And the fault is found not only of depreciating the "life that now is" but of depreciating the worth of the Saviour who has already come, and of looking for another. In His time many were looking for outward signs, and some even came to Himself, the best of all signs, to ask from Him a sign, while they were all irresponsive to His own appeal. To such persons no other sign could be given than what they already had. They had Moses and the prophets, and now

they had Him. The fourth gospel emphasises the point that failure to use these would only attend the gift of more. While to the later experience of Paul, and this gospel, salvation was to be a living fellowship with God through Jesus Christ, and the apostle gloried in saying, "To me to live is Christ," and could count all things but loss for the excellency of Christ Jesus "his Lord (Phil. i. 21, iii. 8), he was surrounded by those who associated all their blessing with some future event, some second coming. Thus in his later epistles Paul had to lay the stress on the new life with its new order and principle, and not on the new age and a coming kingdom. The worth of the historical Jesus was not adequately realised, and we may be glad that "we possess the Idea and the Person with the minimum of historical and contemporary limitations." Even these we may drop, making no "daring re-interpretation of Jesus," as is by some attributed to the fourth Gospel, but finding there the very truth about the Master press close to His side. It has been truly said that the Judaising forms of "primitive Christianity have perished that the Gospel might be preserved." "While Jesus was not what men expected to find in the Christ or Messiah," He was something a great deal better," and the Church can take her stand on the redemption accomplished by Him, rejecting all the draperies in which He has been clothed, and by which His glory has been veiled, that so men to-day may see Jesus and come under His power as did Paul himself. It was difficult even for him to free himself from the entangling apocalyptic by which his atmosphere was charged, but he at length entered into the freedom whereunto Christ had made him free. This task in a large measure still lies before the Church to-day, and what Paul did for his time may, by the same vision which he had of Jesus, be accomplished for us now who see the glory that is in Him.

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