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THE EDUCATION OF THE SEER OF THE APOCALYPSE

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THE education of a man is conditioned by what he is, for if he have no wits the story of his education is not worth telling except in strictly paedagogical circles. Now there is one aspect of the Seer of the Apocalypse which appears to have been generally overlooked by the commentators, and which only one gifted person, and she a woman, herself a gifted poet, has duly appreciated. I refer to Christina Rossetti and her brilliant exposition of the Apocalypse; part in prose, and when the spirit moved her, part in exquisite poetry—'The Face of the Deep.' She knew nothing of *Literarkritik*, whose function is that of dissection and detection of sources, and so she is not given a place in the honorable band of commentators. But she made an original discovery which is worth more finally than all *Literarkritik*, but which is genuine literary criticism, namely that the Seer is a poet. To this judgment the present writer adheres with conviction, and he would insist that only this primary interpretation opens the door for any understanding of the Apocalypse as sheer literature. And also only through that medium can its spirit and religion be caught. Perhaps the compilers of the Canon possessed more literary apperception than many modern students, whose only interest in that book is antiquarian.

This thesis will provoke the cross-question: What is a poet? But I forego a definition, for the appreciation of poetry is always subjective, while the critics of literature have never agreed

on a definition. In the present case we may point to the imagery and fantasy of the book, to the snatches of undoubted music scattered through it, and to the portions in poetic form, as recognized in Moffatt's translation and more exactly diagnosed by Charles. But it may be argued that form and fantasy do not alone denote great poetry, that those phases may be imitative or insincere, and that we must pursue our criticism further before we allow these visions to be great poetry. There is, however, one measure of intellectual order for both prose and poetry which may always be applied. This lies in the writer's use and control of his language. The great poet is like the wizard of science. The latter can go no farther than the forces of Nature allow, but he uncovers them, revealing ever new things, so that in the midst of immutable law he stands forth as a creator. And so it is with the true poet. He cannot rise beyond the datum of the possibilities of his tongue, but he explores and exploits those possibilities. He speaks as man never spake before, and yet he carries on his hearers in the reaches of his language, which becomes glorified and the dearer to them. Now this is true of the Poet of the Apocalypse, as I shall endeavor to show, and herein lies its charm as literature. And this despite the fact that the Poet is using a language of which he is not full master.

Assuming then this original genius, we may inquire into the Poet's education. Now it has always been remarked that the Apocalypse scintillates with Old Testament citations and allusions, and this to a far heavier proportion than any other New Testament book. But this use of the elder Bible is not the theologian's or the lawyer's, a drafting of proof texts and precedents; there is never appeal to the Law or the Prophets as such. Nor is it the commonplace citation by a pious soul, whose resort to Scripture may be charged to the paucity of his culture. And it is further obvious that these citations are hardly ever full texts of Scripture; they are brief snatches, often not more than a word or two, and then there is a leap to some other passage, so that there are few cases of exact equation with any single Old Testament locus. The result is a mosaic, but it is the work of a masterful artistry, it is not a jumble but

a curiously woven pattern. The Poet is so suffused with his Bible, the Classics of his race and religion, that he is intimate with its whole contents, and from here and there he selects his colors and precious stones to illuminate his composition. Again, it is not the scholar's use of proof-texts, as for example in the Epistle to the Hebrews, but the classicist's absolutely free handling of the Book as literature. There is no similar use of the Old Testament in the New; we should have to go for a parallel to a Bunyan's handling of the Bible or a Swinburne's mastery of the Greek Classics.

There is yet another feature of this use of the Biblical Classics. He knows them as a man of philological culture. First, he is fully acquainted with the original languages of the Bible. In the case of St. Paul we infer that he knew his Hebrew Bible, but this can hardly be proved from his citations, for almost without exception he depends upon the Septuagint. Swete (p. cli) speaks hesitatingly upon the Seer's use of the original, although he holds that 'this inference' from certain phenomena can be 'supported.' But what Swete so cautiously allows is absolutely demonstrated by some phenomena to be immediately presented.¹

May I present one case where the Seer appears to prove himself an original and masterful exegete of his Bible? The passage is 3 14: 'Thus says the Amen, the Faithful and True Witness', i. e., Jesus Christ, as 1 5 proves. Now exegetes universally turn to Is. 65 16, where we find the cryptic phrase *bêlôhê* 'amen, translated in the Septuagint by τὸν θεὸν τὸν ἀληθινόν, and similarly in all the English versions, 'by the God of truth.' But neither translation satisfies the grammarian; 'amen' cannot be adjectival to 'elôhê as Ⓔ would indicate, nor does it mean 'truth' as the EVV suppose. In the first place our Seer, if he cited this passage, evidently knew the Hebrew, because he abandons the Greek translation; and in this respect he resembles his second-century successor, the translator Symmachus, who renders by ἐν τῷ θεῷ, ἀμὴν (i. e., all the Grr. agree with Ⓔ's pointing). And similarly S. Paul is supposed to have used the

¹ Cf. Charles' emphatic position on this point, p. lxxviii seq.

Hebrew original in 2 Cor 1 17 in his treatment of the 'Yea' and 'Nay', Jesus Christ having become 'yea (*vai*) in Him.' But an objection to finding here in the Apocalypse an allusion to Isaiah consists in the generally fine distinction drawn in all Christology between the epithets for God and Jesus Christ. Our writer would not have applied 'elôhê 'amen to the latter. Accordingly we might think that the writer was poetically playing upon the mystical 'Amen' of the liturgy, as does Paul at 2 Cor 1 20. But let us read on in his verse, 3 14: 'Thus says the Amen, the Faithful and True Witness (the 'Faithful Witness,' from Ps. 89 (88) 38, agreeing with 6's entirely plausible translation of the Hebrew), the Beginning of the creation of God', ἡ ἀρχὴ τῆς κτίσεως τοῦ θεοῦ. Now this latter attribution is drawn from Prov. 8 22, and freely follows 6, κύριος ἐκτίσεν με (עָבַד) ἀρχὴν ὁδῶν αὐτοῦ. Observe now the end of this Praise of Wisdom, v. 30, where we read, וְאָנֹכִי בְּצֵדָה אִמְדִּין, 'and I became beside him 'amôn'. The Greek translators varied much on this obscure word, and commentators still dispute its meaning. Now I am strongly inclined to think that our writer found his 'Amen' in that word. Following the notorious principle of later Rabbinic exegesis he masterfully changed the vocalization, i. e., he 'read not so but so'; he pronounced it not 'amon but 'amen (and originally the word may have appeared *defective*, אָמֵן). Wisdom then is the Amen, and this epithet was at once applied to Christ. If this interpretation is allowable, not only did the writer know his Hebrew but he was acquainted with approved methods of exegesis; he was a man of education, although we may be loth to call such a poet a scholar.

The Seer then knew the Hebrew original, and how could we question this in a man whose syntax is Hebraic? And he knew it by heart, with no painful *Nachsclagen* after proof-texts. But in addition to this he knew the classical Greek translations of the Bible. For this point reference may be made to Swete's list of the citations with their parallels in the Greek versions, pp. cxxxv-cxlviii, and to Charles' more analytical lists, Int. § vii. There can be no question that the writer knew the Septuagint,³

³ See my note on 1 14 in *Expositor*, Sept. 1921, pp. 214-217.

although scholars hesitate as to the proportions of this usage; Swete holds (p. cl) that "an inspection of the table further shows that the Apoc. generally availed himself of the Alexandrian version of the Old Testament," while Bludau in his valuable survey, 'Die Apokalypse und Theodotions Danielübersetzung,' in *Theologische Quartalschrift*, 1897, 1-26, depreciates the extent of Septuagintal allusion. But there is another category of translation which the Seer uses or at least agrees with; it is that of 'Theodotion,' particularly in the allusions to Daniel, where our possession of Theodotion's full text enables us to control those citations; nevertheless the range of those citations is not confined to Daniel, for 17 agrees with Theodotion, Aquila and Symmachus, as also with John 19 37 in translating קָרַד Zech. 12 10 by $\epsilon\lambda\epsilon\kappa\acute{\epsilon}\nu\tau\eta\sigma\alpha\nu$ vs. $\text{Κ} \text{κατωρχήσαντο}$. No solution of this problem of a Theodotion before Theodotion, or *Ur*-Theodotion has yet been agreed upon. My own opinion is that there existed in scholarly circles at least an oral Greek targum, which step by step corrected the gross errors of the Septuagint, a sort of Marginal Readings Tradition. However that may be, the Seer was thoroughly acquainted with two sets of translation, the Septuagint and what for want of a better name we may call Theodotion, and he took his choice freely between them, evidently using the one or the other according to his exegetical or literary taste; or, as we have seen, abandoning them for his own renderings of the original.

Again we find a clue to a third category of translation. In 4 3 we read of 'a rainbow (ἶρις) round about the Throne.' Bousset has about a half-page of discussion on this rainbow or 'nimbus,' for which he cites numerous mythological parallels, and he is followed in this by Charles. But the *religionsgeschichte Methode* sometimes takes us far afield and ignores the primary 'philological method.' Now if our New Testament commentators thumbed over the Old Testament apparatus a little more than they do, they would find that ἶρις figures in a certain Greek translation. The Seer is drawing here upon Ezekiel's vision of the Throne in c. 1, one of the brilliant elements in which is לְשׁוֹן , generally translated 'electrum.' But reference to Field's apparatus at Ezek. 1 4 affords us here one of those

few citations from ὁ Ἑβραῖος, i. e., the Hebrew Interpreter, traces of whom have been preserved in odd glosses and Patristic citations. And this 'Hebrew' translates $\chi\sigma\tau\eta$ here by $\iota\psi\iota$. That is, the Seer deliberately chooses a rendering which is otherwise known only in that obscure version of 'the Hebrew.'

Let us sum up so far. We discover in this writer one who knows the Hebrew Scriptures, who is facile in two, perhaps three translations in a language which is not his mother-tongue; he is not the *dilettante* using only the commonplace vernacular of the Bible (like our English poets, whose Bible is the King James Version alone), nor is he the mere scholar, offering literalistic transcripts of the book he knows so well. But he has that Bible literature all by heart, the original and its versions, he selects his material now from here and now from there, but always according to his sovereign taste. I may compare this process only to some hypothetical cultured Biblical student of our day who might know his Sacred Languages well enough to cite them fluently, who is equally acquainted with the English classic version, and also has kept up his studies so as to know the renderings of the various subsequent Revisions, and possessing this literary store so accessible and so fluid that he can draw upon it spontaneously as he will. I do not know if any such man exists to-day. But such a man was the Seer of the Apocalypse. A man of education and culture he must have been, and yet not a rabbi or professor, because he is a poet.

This literary marvel raises the inquiry: In what schooling did this Poet acquire his literary culture? For we may not think of him as standing all alone, any more than did Chaucer, Shakespeare or Goethe. He was not just one of the Pious in Israel, a *Ḥasid*, such a man as was the James of the Epistle; nor was he a rabbi like St. Paul. He is not at all interested in the Law; the cult fascinates him for its mystical meaning. The piety of the Psalter is not his, nor the ethics of the Wisdom books. He knows the latter indeed, but only to select their poetical passages. One case is his citation of Prov. 8 noticed above; the other his masterly adaptation of the epical $\pi\alpha\tau\tau\omicron\delta\upsilon\lambda\alpha\mu\omicron\varsigma\ \lambda\omicron\gamma\omicron\varsigma\ \pi\omicron\lambda\epsilon\mu\sigma\tau\acute{\iota}\kappa\eta\varsigma$ of Wisdom 18¹⁵ to the Warrior on the White Horse, whose name is 'The Word of God,' 19¹¹π. And note that he draws

that term *logos* not from theology but from poetry.³ The seer appears to use the Old Testament primarily as a classical literature, much as the cultured man of letters reveals his saturation with the letters of Greece and Rome. In fact, his appeal to that volume is literary, not theological. Scholars deny indeed that we can speak of a theology of the Apocalypse, but at all events it is the most amazingly independent literary production in the whole of the Bible. And this is due to the fact that its author is a poet.

And even as the Seer uses the Bible as literature, so we may come to appreciate partly his assimilation of elements which appear so alien to the Bible. Our *Literarkritiker* have done us invaluable service in following each several clue into every domain of antiquity, Babylonia, Persia, Egypt, Hellenism. But one looks in vain through the commentators for an explanation of the process whereby the writer assimilated those various alien materials. How could a Jew or a Jewish Christian have adopted and adapted such foreign elements? From the point of view of theology or piety, we cannot understand the mystery. But if our Poet were a man of letters in the large sense of the word, we can. In this respect he is not unlike his successors in Christian literature, like Justin Martyr and Clement of Alexandria, real literateurs, who did not hesitate to introduce Classical lore into their theology. And so the Apocalyptist made bold to draw upon the imagery and myths of his Pagan environment, again binding them to his purpose, so that we lose the clues in the alembic of his composition. He deals so as a poet, while the Christian Fathers handled their Classics with theological motive. And after all why are we obliged to hold that a Bible book must be only Biblical? Certainly not, unless we agree

³ It is unfortunate that the marginal references of editions of the Greek Testament, e. g. Westcott-Hort and Nestle, and of the English Bibles, in consequence of Protestant narrow-mindedness, do not include the whole Greek Old Testament, so that such striking references are currently ignored. Strangely enough Charles in his lists fails to notice both these Wisdom citations. For the possibly Classical origin of Wisdom's 'all-powerful Word' see J. Rendel Harris, 'Athena, Sophia and the Logos,' in *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, vol. 7, no. 1, 1922.

with certain narrow schools in Judaism and the Church that we must eschew all letters but the Bible.

Here opens up a literary vista that deserves exploration. Pious readers of the Bible and scholars alike in treating the question of its inspiration have always approached it from one and the same theory of inspiration, the theological. The one party, and we may add many notable scholars, like Swete and Charles, find approved inspiration in the Apocalypse; the other, the more radical school of *Religionsgeschichtler*, discovers so much that is bizarre, alien, un-Biblical, especially in comparison with the Prophets, that their resultant is almost the denial of inspiration to the book. Its very character as a work of art, its intentioned weaving of brilliant and disparate materials into one great pattern, appears to them to contradict the genius of inspiration, even as the claim of art for the work might be offensive to many simpler readers. But I inquire if such a condemnation is ever made of any great work of literature, outside of the Bible. Leaving aside the question of divine inspiration, may we not discover that kind of inspiration which we call literary, leaving it to theologians to determine whether that is incompatible with the Divine. It is doubtless true that the elaborate and far-flung art of the Apocalypse lies far outside of the sphere of the great Prophets. But must we compare it only inner-Biblically?

There are two great poets who sum up in grand epics the acmes of the religious development of European Christendom; one is Dante, the rhapsodist of Catholic Mediaevalism, the other Milton, the more rational but equally inspired poet of Protestantism. Each of these with consummate art drew on the rich materials of human history and experience, the Puritan Milton himself as a poet inheriting from the Italian Renaissance, even as he drew his theology from Calvin. It seems to me that if the primary interpretation of a book is through the doorway of literature, we must compare John of the Apocalypse with such poets as these. Dante is no less a Christian when he takes Vergil as a guide or puts into the lowest hell along with Judas who betrayed the Lord of the Christian Faith the traitor Brutus and some Italian rascal of his own day, whose name were lost

but for Dante's record of his infamy. And when Milton invokes to his stage the myths of the ancients, painting their characters as if they actually lived, he remains no less the Puritan. May I cite a stanza from his Ode on the Morning of Christ's Nativity, one of the loveliest poems in the Christian anthology:

And sullen Moloch fled,
 Hath left in shadows dread
 His burning idol all of blackest hue;
 In vain with cymbals' ring
 They call the grisly king,
 In dismal dance about the furnace blue;
 The brutish gods of Nile as fast,
 Isis and Orus, and the dog Anubis haste.

I can imagine some *Religionsgeschichtler* of a thousand years hence studying over fragments of the almost forgotten Dante and Milton, and blandly informing their age that these poets were syncretists, half-Christian and half-Pagan. But to my mind we should essay to think of the Apocalyptist as a poet with a literary, classical background, who drew upon his rich stores as does every poet. Nor do I think that such literary art and such humanistic material diminishes the spiritual and religious value of a composition. The poet indeed thinks otherwise than 'the man in the street,' or for that matter the professor. But do we prefer the meeting-house to the Gothic cathedral?⁴

Thus, summing up, we have learned that the Seer was not a product of the Rabbinic schools, indeed he could never have brooked their discipline, except so far as they offered him varieties of exegesis. Nor does he represent that mythical element of the pious but boorish "Galilean peasants," itself a pious notion which has been driven rather hard both by the *plebs* of the Church and also by modern professors. Either there was some kind of 'School' (*Richtung*) of Biblical letters

⁴ This element of literary, historical and even scientific culture is found in most of the Apocalyptists, as also in the Wisdom literature, although in the latter it is dominated by the ethical interest.

of which we have lost all trace, or our Poet was a most remarkable genius.⁵

But there remains a subject on which any interested reader might ply me with the question: But how do you explain the Poet's barbarous Greek? How is that compatible with culture in letters, with a poet who should primarily be master of his language. The age-old impeachment must be allowed. It can only be explained, as Charles insists, on the ground that the writer thought in Hebrew, while writing in Greek. And Charles has painstakingly demonstrated that in interpreting the Greek we have to understand it just as the writer and his immediate circle of readers naturally understood it, automatically reverting it into the Semitic idiom.

But a distinction must be made that is obvious, although apparently not observed: that namely between the vocabulary and the syntax. It is an interesting and perhaps remarkable vocabulary the author uses, exceptional in the New Testament and containing some words hardly found elsewhere (s. Swete, p. cxv seq.). It would deserve examination on the part of a Graecist to estimate the choice of words, which appear to be nicely selected. I might notice one case. In 178 in his citation of Dan. 73 for \square 'sea' where the Greek versions have correctly $\theta\acute{\alpha}\lambda\alpha\sigma\sigma\alpha$, the Poet deliberately substitutes $\acute{\alpha}\beta\upsilon\sigma\sigma\omicron\varsigma$ the word which C uses to translate \square and similar rare and classical words. The sea had become in his exegesis the Abyss. Now this fine discrimination is a phenomenon we often mark in educated men who through some native disability never come to handle successfully the syntax of a foreign tongue. Many of us who may not be able to write correctly a period in

⁵ Josephus was far from being a poet, but his education as a gentleman student of the age is interesting. He tells us in the opening of his 'Life' how he tried all the schools (*schools*) of Judaism, the Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, even attempted the ascetic life under a certain professed hermit. Our Apocalypticist, himself also a gentleman of culture, gained educational advantages of a very different kind in his *Wanderjahre*. But the same college can turn out very different kinds of students. It is noteworthy that this book betrays no traces of Aramaic, a point to be borne in mind in speculation upon the vitality of Hebrew in the first century.

French or German or Latin actually think words and phrases in those tongues, and are relieved when we can use them appropriately and not be taken for intellectual snobs.

Syntax is a very difficult matter. And I think that our author's lapses are not to be charged so much to carelessness as to his rhapsodic flow of thought, which was impatient of the minutiae of an alien syntax. At the same time I doubt the correctness of Charles' judgment (p. xxi): "That he set at defiance the grammarians and the usual rules of syntax is unquestionable, but he did not do so deliberately." I agree rather with Swete (p. cxxiv), who speaks of his 'audacities;' now audacity is always purposeful. There are two cases of this deliberate defiance of grammar, which are among the most noteworthy in the book. The one is ἀπὸ ὁ ὦν καὶ ὁ ἦν καὶ ὁ ἐρχόμενος, 1 4. Now here the Poet simply throws out into bold relief his unique interpretation of the Divine Name, and as it were lifts the Absolute One above grammatical government; and he doubtless delighted in the feat. A bold writer among us might for some emphatic purpose do the same thing, helping himself out with our servile punctuation system, thus: 'from the-Is-and-the-Was-and-the-to-Come.'

The other case is ὁμοιον υἱὸν ἀνθρώπου 1 13, 4 14, which Bousset characterizes (p. 160) as 'eine einfache grobe Nachlässigkeit.' But in all the other passages where ὁμοιος occurs, 18 in number, it is properly construed with the dative; and so Charles' suggestion that the writer was thinking of ὡς fails to explain the two exceptions. The Poet has again deliberately overridden the known grammar to express his idea: the mystical מוֹלֵךְ כְּבֶן אָדָם does not mean for him the commonplace 'like of a son of man;' it has become a title in and for itself, and he dares to express himself so: 'Like-Son-of-Man.' And again he may have delighted in playing with the language he could not master, yet bending it to his genius. What Greek that man might have written!

The opinion has grown upon me that this Poet is the most cultured of the New Testament writers. The comparison may not amount to much for some. Rather he is a genius who has produced one of the most remarkable compositions in all literature.