

ARTICLE VII.

FALSE REVELATIONS OF THE UNSEEN.

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THE false exhibits its nature when placed beside the true, and the true shines forth in the contrast. The triviality of spurious disclosures of the unseen world has been remarked; the comparative silence of the Bible on the subject has been a matter of comment. But we may find untrodden ground, and a fresh argument for that inspired volume, by passing in rapid review some of the pseudo-revelations of various dates and both hemispheres. We shall find a singular family likeness in them; and the features are not only triviality, luxurious imagery, more or less of Munchausen exaggeration, and in general an effort to humor curiosity by a display of over-wise information, but also an assumption of much exact knowledge, even to the extreme of abundant and precise arithmetical statement. For this article, the available sources are the Talmud (epitomized in Blackwood, 1832-33), the apocryphal Gospels, and writings of Mohammed, Swedenborg, the Shakers, Mormons, and Spiritists.

It will be shown that these teachings are in extreme contrast with the Holy Scriptures—as extreme as that of the Bible cosmogony with the fantastic myths of the creation that alone are found in other ancient records. How is it that this one book is so strange an exception? How is it that the New Testament is a lofty exception to the writings, claiming high authority, that were composed in the same age, in the same region, even by men of the same nation? The truth is, uninspired man, assuming to put forth celestial revelations, can never, in any age, resist the temptation to tell

all about heaven and hell, and make a vain show of the knowledge. Every such delusion or imposture descends to the most trifling, if not absurd, details—is very particular in letting us know the place, number, size, and shape of the invisible worlds and their inhabitants, and is self-complacent in this display of minute information on so occult a subject.

First, the rabbinical Scriptures—a mass of traditions, mostly reduced to writing or collected in the first three centuries of the Christian era, and claimed to be of more value than even the books of Moses. The traditions contain much that is as sublime as Milton, or as wild and beautiful as the Arabian Nights, but much also that illustrates the vast difference between man's invention and God's word. They tell us, exactly, that there are seven heavens and seven hells. The heavens are each twelve times ten thousand miles square. The materials, furniture, and occupants of each are described; for example, in the fifth heaven or house, where Elijah dwells, are couches of scarlet and blue, woven by Eve herself. At the gates of paradise stand sixty times ten thousand spirits; they receive the soul of a righteous man; they lead him to four springs of water, margined with eight hundred species of roses and myrrh; and from these springs flow four rivers of milk, wine, honey, and balsam. In the first three hours of immortality, every righteous soul is an infant, and dwells in a celestial nursery; in the next three hours, is a youth, and mingles with youthful pastimes; in the third watch, arrives at manhood. Among the wonders of paradise is the phoenix, a bird as large as a mountain and bright as the sun. Of the tree of life, it is said that its fruits have five hundred different flavors. The Talmud is very wise, too, concerning good and evil angels. Every rabbi on earth is so infested with evil spirits that there are constantly a thousand on his right side, and ten times as many on his left. If a man is not cautious how he opens his eyes, there are some who will even be sure to get between the lids. Enough. The New Testament, so far from dealing in such fables, warned Jew and Gentile against them.

Of the apocryphal Gospels, one of the least objectionable is that of Nicodemus, otherwise called the Acts of Pontius Pilate; yet the unknown author, like every other writer of spurious revelations, cannot resist the temptation to tell us much about the unseen world and its transactions. More than a quarter of the document, which is of the average length of the canonical Gospels, is given to an elaborate description of our Lord's descent into hades after his crucifixion. First, in the blackness of darkness there appeared the color of the sun, like gold, and a substantial purple-colored light. Then we are told what the spirits of Adam, Isaiah, Simeon, and John the Baptist said about the light. There is a long quarrel between Satan and the prince of hell concerning the expected arrival. Next, this prince is commanded to shut the gates of brass against the Lord; the saints interfere; confusion ensues; the Lord bursts open the gates; he tramples on death, terrifies the devils, gives the prince of hell dominion over Satan in exchange for that over saints, takes Adam by the hand, and, the rest joining hands, all ascend to paradise. In one part of the account the particulars are given of the sojourn of Lazarus in hades, and how he escaped—a tale in striking contrast with the silence of the Gospels in respect to the experience of this Lazarus while dead. The Gospel of Nicodemus sets forth nothing of this as a parable, like that of the other Lazarus, but as fact, as history. It assures us that these transactions were copied from the record of two persons who rose from the dead, and that their accounts, written separately, agreed in every word and letter. The other pseudo-Gospels, which, unlike that named after Nicodemus, descend to grovelling puerilities, are largely taken up with the particulars of angelic appearances. The religious literature of those centuries is as a tropical swamp of fancy or folly; while far above it, in the very midst of it, soars the mountain-like word of God, solid and clear in its spiritual dignity, and solemn in its silence respecting the particulars of a future state.

The Koran of Mohammed is marked with the same distinguishing spots of a spurious revelation of the unseen. It

panders to curiosity and runs into trivial minutiae and numerical statements. It describes the gardens of paradise, the couches with linings of thick silk, interwoven with gold, the green cushions, and beautiful carpets. Every believer will feast from three hundred dishes of gold, and have eighty thousand servants. Spirits, genii, angels, are portrayed as distinctly as Agassiz delineated the tribes of fishes and polyps. The tree of happiness in paradise bears whatever one may wish: horses, ready saddled and bridled, and garments will burst forth from its fruits, if desired.

If our Holy Scriptures had been written by other persons than Oriental, it would still be a wonder that they are at the furthest pole from all this tissue of nonsense. But, when we consider that the fiery and fanciful Asiatic mind, so soon as it turns to invisible things, flies off into a blaze of extravagances as certainly as a rocket, it is amazing that the Bible is what it is, unless it was inspired and superintended by the Divine Spirit.

The curiously statistical turn of false revelations might be illustrated here by a document printed at Rome, by "superior permission," but not now at hand for quotation. It assumes to be an answer from Christ himself to a prayer; and it tells the precise number of drops that fell from beneath the crown of thorns, and the number of sighs and groans that were breathed out on the cross. But we pass to modern disclosures of the unseen.

Swedenborg, in his "Heaven and Hell," deals with the invisible. He informs us that there are three heavens, and how they are constructed; also, what class of persons dwell in each quarter—north, east, west, and south. The angels dwell in houses like ours on earth, but more beautiful; there are parlors and chambers in great numbers; there are courts, gardens, and shrubberies. Palaces there are, with gardens, on the "south side," glittering with silver leaves. The most intelligent of the angels have garments of flame or light; the less intelligent have white robes without splendor; those still less so are dressed in divers colors. Swedenborg had

seen mountains in the other world taken possession of by evil spirits, but shaken and overturned by the mere look and will of an angel; he had seen a hundred thousand of the evil dispersed and cast into hell by the same means. The greatest power resides in those angels who constitute the arms of Heaven, for all Heaven is in the shape of a man, and every single part of it is in that form. Such are samples of the information given.

Of the more local and limited forms of pseudo-revelation, that of Shakerism may be taken as a specimen. One of its followers, F. W. Evans, gave a "Compendium" of it some years since. From this it appears that there are four heavens and hells, divided among antediluvians, Jews, Christians—the fourth, however, being now in preparation. Mother Ann Lee, under whose teachings the system took its present shape, was favored with revelations: she looked into the windows of heaven and saw the angels; she saw Ezekiel Goodrich flying from one heaven to another; she saw Jane in the world of spirits, praising God in the dance; she saw Jonathan Wood among the dead, and he was like claps of thunder among them, waking them up; and she heard Ezekiel Goodrich's voice roar from one prison to another, preaching to the dead.

The Mormons profess to be materialists and adventists; they mostly confine their ideas to earth as enjoyed both now and in the future. In view of this, it is the more remarkable that, in the little their prophets say concerning invisible things, there are the inevitable spots of spurious disclosure; there is a disposition to be very wise and statistical in respect to the unseen. Joseph Smith declared that he had seen heaven and hell. One of his apostles gives the names of ten demons, such as "Kite, Kilo, Kelo," etc.; some of these are presidents over seventies in hell, and have six counselors each. This person claims to have cast out just three hundred and nineteen demons on one occasion, from one individual.¹ The Mormons make it a reproach, rather than a merit, of ordi-

¹ The Mormons, or Latter-Day Saints. London, 1852.

nary Christian faith that it is not over-wise as to heaven. One of their hymns has these lines :

The heaven of sectarians is not the heaven for me,
So doubtful its location, neither on land or sea.

Modern Spiritism, with all its affectation of high-sounding philosophy, has the precise characteristics of all the delusions now mentioned—the same vainglorious conceit of occult knowledge, and the same frivolous particularity of statement. Like the rabbin and the Mohammedan, the Spiritist believes in seven heavens. And as the rabbin informs us that the houses of heaven are twelve times ten thousand miles square, and the Mohammedan teaches that every believer will have a farm a thousand days' journey in extent, so Andrew Jackson Davis, in his "Present Age," tells us to multiply our earth, by twenty-seven million times its present size, and it will give you the exact extent of one of the countless parks of the second sphere. He locates the second sphere as encircling the milky way, and describes its mountains, shrubbery, and ten thousand varieties of flowers. Each hemisphere of this sphere is divided into six different societies. In the first are negroes, Indians, idiots, and criminals; and, strange to say, on another page it appears that this is the heaven also of an immense number of infants.² Davis once saw a congress of thousands of spirits seated "thirty miles" up in the air, "a little east of Boston." In the Mohammedan heaven there is a tree that bears horses, ready saddled and bridled; in the Spiritist heaven, according to a published communication from the other world, a young lady has her piano, and rides out every day on a pony.

Every careful and candid reader of the Bible must feel that, in the respects mentioned in this article, that book is as far from these follies as the east is from the west, as heaven is from earth. How simple and spiritual, how dignified and divine, how high and holy, does it shine forth in the contrast! How is it that it is so singular an exception, under the great uni-

² Cf. pp. 215, 218 (ed. 1853).

versal temptation to give loose rein to fancy and vainglory in speaking of invisible things?

Before coming to the New Testament, which exhibits this contrast in the strongest light, brief reference may be made to the Old Testament. The careless reader may mistake some of its passages as comparable with the false revelations. It will be found, however, that they all are visions *on* the earth, not of heaven, and are manifestly symbolic—not given as literal, eternal realities. They do not assume to remove the veil between us and the celestial, but rather are embroiderings of the veil. Such are the visions at the ascent of Elijah and to the servant of Elisha, and the highly figurative visions of Isaiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, and Zechariah. The appearances of angels, likewise, are on the earth, not an unfolding of the scenes of another world.

The same is true of everything that may be adduced for comparison from the New Testament, except it be the simple affirmation that the first martyr, looking steadfastly into heaven, saw the glory of God and Jesus standing on the right hand of God; and the brief assurance that there are "many mansions," the meaning of which is not explained, and, no less enigmatic, that there is a "spiritual body." The Revelation of John, from which enthusiasts and impostors have doubtless drawn some of their coloring, is no exception. It was a revelation of events about to come to pass on earth; it is not a revelation of the next life. The very verse which speaks of a door opened in heaven explains what follows as things which must be hereafter; it introduces a series of symbols too bold, too earthly, to have been intended for heaven itself, and all are connected with a series of crises on earth. Moreover, here and there, the heaven spoken of—a wonder in heaven, a sign in heaven, and the like—evidently locates the visions as beheld in the visible heavens, not the invisible and spiritual. And when we come to the new Jerusalem, which, like other parts of this book of John, has by mere accommodation furnished much of the celestial imagery used by Christians, and perhaps, in its enumerations and

measurements, suggested by perversion the arithmetical vagaries of fanatics who assume to describe heaven, we find that it is not heaven, but a city—a new order of things—descending to earth, to be realized on earth; “and they shall bring the glory and honor of the nations into it,” as already has largely come to pass. In fine, in the words of the last chapter, “the Lord God of the holy prophets sent his angel to show unto his servants the things which must shortly be done.” This was the purpose.

The true position of the New Testament on this subject cannot better be illustrated than in 2 Cor. xii. 2-5, and the context. Here, in brief space, are no less than eight marks of the divine modesty and moderation of the sacred writers when speaking in sober prose of the hidden things of the future world. First, Paul had apparently kept secret during fourteen years the fact of a wonderful trance, granted, no doubt, to strengthen him for his extraordinary trials. Secondly, he now speaks of it only because forced to assert his claims as superior to those of certain false apostles. Thirdly, he avoids the use of the word “I,” only saying “I knew a man” who had the vision. Fourthly, he assumes no undue knowledge, but repeats the disclaimer, “whether in the body or out of the body, I know not; God knoweth.” Fifthly, he reveals absolutely nothing of what he saw; in the expression “third heaven,” he probably spoke only after the manner of the Jews, to whom the first heaven was the cloud region, the second the starry, the third the unseen world. Sixthly, so far from disclosing anything, he declares that what he learned is “unspeakable”—“not lawful for man to utter.” Seventhly, he acknowledges a sore affliction, imposed lest he should be vain of the heavenly trance, thus teaching that God does not regard such rare revelations as things to be boastingly trumpeted abroad. Eighthly, he expressly says that, while he might make much of the trance if it were another man’s, “yet of myself I will not glory, but in my infirmities.”

Elsewhere the apostle Paul writes, “Now we see through

a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known." And similarly writes the apostle John, the author of the book of Revelation itself: "Now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be; but we know that when he shall appear, we shall be like him."

Why is the Bible so silent in respect to the physical aspects and the affairs of heaven? First, it may be because heaven does not essentially consist of outward glories; its foretastes here are not of palaces and gardens, but in moral and spiritual experiences. Secondly, it may be because much of the reality of heaven is unspeakable, transcending our words and ideas, as Paul intimates. Thirdly, if anything could be communicated to us, it may be withheld because description, in our human language, would belittle and render trite, whereas the slight hints of the Bible suggest untold glory. Fourthly, a fuller revelation of heaven might distract our thoughts from practical duty, and turn our attention from the great moral truths of existence, the substance of heaven and hell—above all, from the Lord Jesus Christ as the great object of wonder, hope, and desire. Any revelation that occupies itself with the number, size, shape, location, scenery, and transactions of the unseen worlds—with else than him who is the All in All, is evidently not of God. All these spurious visions bring a hundred vain and childish things between us and God. They are busy with the spirits and the splendors, the palace, gilding, and thousands of liveried servants, forgetting the King who is within, all-glorious—not seeking to find him and come even to his seat.

"Let no man beguile you of your reward in a voluntary humility and worshipping of angels, intruding into those things which he hath not seen, vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind, and not holding the Head," namely, Christ. And let no one beguile us with the idea that a book so unlike all pretended revelations in every age and land, so reticent, lofty, and spiritual, while they are so like each other in folly, is not more than human—is not divine.