

ARTICLE V.

THE APOCALYPSE A DRAMA.

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PRESENT conditions in Europe have stimulated efforts to find in the world war now raging explicit fulfillment of the prophecies of the Book of Revelation.

Lifelong studies in the interpretation of Sacred Scripture have crystallized in certain convictions of the writer touching the purpose of this last book of the Bible, and the meaning of its symbols, which may possibly be helpful to others.

Many questions elaborately discussed by commentators do not seriously affect the purpose of the present writing. Let it be accepted that the author of the book was the apostle John, and that the time of writing was one of the last years of Domitian's reign.

1. The whole book was, in the first instance, addressed to Oriental readers, men of imagination, men fond of parables, symbols, elaborate imagery, and "dark sayings." But portions of the book (chaps. ii., iii., xxi., and xxii., for example) are not difficult to be understood, even by an Occidental.

2. The prime purpose of the book was to fortify Christians to endure with patience and fidelity the trials before them, and to administer consolation under suffering. Properly read and understood, this book will serve the same purpose at the present time.

3. The declaration found at the beginning of the book,

and again at the end, that events foretold were shortly to come to pass, would seem, at least as regards the first five seals, to direct attention to events occurring during the life-time of men then living.

4. It is plain that later chapters of the book look forward to further fulfillments of predictions in part fulfilled in the time of John's contemporaries. There are also many glimpses of events that connect the kingdom of God in this world with his eternal kingdom.

5. Apocalyptic is distinguished from prophetic writing, *in so far as both are predictions of events still future*, in four respects:—

(1) Prophecy has time and place limits. Apocalyptic transcends those limits.

(2) In its narrower scope, apocalyptic is an appeal to God to intervene in behalf of his suffering people: prophecy foretells the judgments to be visited upon their enemies.

(3) Prophecy moves in the material, apocalyptic in the spiritual realm.

(4) In its wider scope, apocalyptic takes within its survey the kingdom of God as it wages successful war with foes of truth and righteousness in our world. In this view apocalyptic writing is found in the Old Testament prophets, especially in the Second Isaiah, and in the passage from Joel quoted in Acts ii. The Book of Revelation contains prophecy. The influence of the books of Daniel and Ezekiel is very marked in the book. But its main scope and purpose put it into the class of apocalyptic rather than into that of prophetic writing.

6. This book is best understood when taken as a spiritual drama of the great conflict of the kingdom of God on earth with the kingdoms of this world, both secular and hier-

archical, whose spirit and aims and ambitions are enemies of the spiritual kingdom of God. The *dramatis personæ* are the powers or principles of good and of evil *personified* according to the demands of the drama, but not necessarily traceable in actual persons whose names and dates and places can be determined and limited.

7. The futility of much of the effort to interpret the symbolic writing in the Book of Revelation has been largely due to slavery to the letter of Scripture. Yet in the first chapter of the book (ver. 12-16), there is a clear warning against literal interpretation. The revelator has a vision of a super-human figure that gives him an overwhelming impression of the majesty, the power, the glory, of the ever-living and reigning Christ. To take the description literally as that of a person is absurd. It is not a picture. It is a vision.

The messages to the churches (chaps. ii. and iii.) are so clear that he who runs may read. They are lessons of perennial weight and impressiveness for Christians from that day to this.

In accord with and illustrative of the principles of interpretation above stated, we offer the following specific pointers to what we mean by a spiritual interpretation of what we regard as a spiritual drama of the æonian conflict between good and evil, between the kingdom of God and worldly powers, the issue of which is to be the complete triumph of good, of divine justice, of love over evil and all the power of evil.

We must not forget, in our study of this book, that St. John was only in bodily presence on the isle of Patmos. His spirit was rapt away to heaven, and his revelations are in heavenly vision.

Chapters iv. and v. The whole of this heavenly vision
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constitutes a fit introduction to what follows. It is a vision of God as supreme sovereign of the material and the moral universe. He is served by all the forces of nature, represented by the four living creatures, worshiped by all the angelic host, represented by the four and twenty elders. Then in chap. v., under the figure of a lamb once slain in sacrifice, but endowed with immortal life and more than human intelligence, the Son of God receives the homage of the uncounted heavenly host and of all created beings. His absolute and unchallenged worthiness to be the Head of the people of God on earth and to be the victorious Leader in the great agelong conflict of truth and right against falsehood and evil is celebrated in triumphant song, which fills all heaven with joy, and leaves Jesus, the atoning Lamb, in the foreground of the dramatic scenes which are to follow, as the Revealer of the record of the kingdom of righteousness in its conflict with its enemies as the events of the future unfold.

Should we not treat the horses and their riders of the first four seals (chap. vi.) as all and alike representative of war? First we see a prince going forth to conquest. There is no bloodshedding as yet. Then follows, as everywhere in war, slaughter, famine and pestilence, persecution also in the time succeeding the time of St. John; and (fifth seal) the appeal of the martyrs, the forerunners of the martyrs of all the ages, rises before the throne of God. Then comes a far look into the future and (chap. vii.) a glance still farther forward into the life immortal.

We find, as we should expect to find, that in chaps. viii. and ix. the outlook is less clear, and we are less able to mark indicated events. But what is clear is that the conflict between

the kingdom of God and the enemies of that kingdom fills the revelator's vision.

May we not consider the "little book" of chap. x. as being such portion or portions of the Gospel as existed in St. John's time?

The two witnesses of chap. xi. are not two known persons. They are *all* God's witnesses from the first until now. The efforts to designate two persons, as Enoch and Elijah, utterly fails to meet the description. No literal fulfillment of the prophecy is to be sought for. We must never forget that we are reading dramatic representation of a great conflict unfolding in time.

No chapter of the book, perhaps, has puzzled scholars more than chap. xii. One modern commentator considers the woman to be the visible church, and her man child the invisible church. Is it not logical to hold that, in unfolding the record of the conflict between the kingdom of God and its enemies in dramatic form, St. John has here adopted this vivid personification to indicate that the growth of the kingdom of God on earth is, and is to be, through struggles and agonies like the throes of childbirth—look at Europe today—and that the result is safe in God's hands?

In chap. xiii. and the following chapters we meet the old dragon, the first beast, the second beast, the false prophet, and the harlot. The effort to identify these in historic persons has been a herculean labor for hundreds of years. Can we be certain that any result of this great effort is fact and truth? Concerning one thing all are agreed. Babylon the Great is not the Babylon of history, but some other city or cities. Even the place where our Lord was crucified is not Jerusalem, but the place where he was figuratively crucified. Do we find ten kings in pagan or in papal Rome? Are we

ever to be able to identify the person whose number is 666? Is the period of the millennium just a thousand years or is it the expression for a long period of time? Is the imprisoning of Satan and letting him loose to prove a literal historic fact? The harlot is not a person but a city. Does she personify a hierarchy or a dynasty? How are we to interpret, in relation to their context, such inspiring and triumphant strains as chaps. xiv. 12, 13; xv. 3, 4; xix. 6-10, 16, occurring from time to time in the midst of the puzzling "revelations"?

Now let us consider the whole record as a drama. Then it does not concern us to identify historic persons, secular dynasties, churchly hierarchies, the debauchery resulting from false teaching usurping holy places within the visible Christian church or in the councils of kings and governments, *personified*, even located, in Babylon, on "seven hills," on "great waters," but all and severally at last vanquished by the loyal servants of Him who has "on his vesture and on his thigh a name written, King of Kings, and Lord of Lords."

It cannot be denied, is not denied even by honest and intelligent Romanists, that there have been times in the past of the Church of Rome when blasphemous claims were made and scandalous lives lived by Roman pontiffs. Protestants do not find pleasure in reading the history of Christianity in England in the time of Henry VIII, and his successors.

It is not surprising that events now transpiring in the East should be regarded as included within the scope of prophecy concerning the great conflict in our world between worldly ambitions and eternal righteousness. Have we here an instance of the "springing and germinant fulfillment" of prophecy? "The eternal years of God" are on the side of

truth and righteousness here and everywhere, now and forever.

When we read chaps. xxi. and xxii. of our book, we enter another and wonderfully inspiring atmosphere. The great conflict is ended. God and the atoning Christ are victors. God comes down to dwell with men. The new city of God is in view. No splendor of golden streets, gates of pearl, walls of precious stones, a river on whose banks are perennial fruits, can more than faintly represent the supernal beauty and glory of the home of the redeemed and the holy servants of God and the Lamb. It is idle to dwell upon the details of the description of the heavenly city. The appeal is to the imagination and to the heart of devout Christian believers, to those longing to offer to God a sinless service, be it here or yonder, in a new world where God dwells with men, or in some realm not revealed to mortal eyes. Read as a spiritual drama of God's kingdom in æonian conflict with powers, be they secular or hierarchical, whose principles are opposed to the kingdom of God;—a conflict, however prolonged and agonizing, whose certain issue is victory for righteousness and peace eternal,—then this book is one to stimulate courage to endure and consolation in suffering, wonderfully suited to the needs of men fainting under the agony, now shared in lighter or heavier degree, by the whole human race,—a race for whose redemption the Son of God himself became man.