

THE PURPOSE OF THE APOCALYPSE

CHARLES EDWARD SMITH, D.D.

FREDONIA, NEW YORK

THAT the Apocalypse has a purpose is unquestionable. The place of honor it occupies at the end of the sacred volume, its elaborate and surprising literary structure, the preëminence of its apostolic author, and the glory of its divine Inspirer,—all compel us to expect a production of great importance and usefulness. That the Word of God should close with a book without adaptation to any conceivable end, and therefore of no practical value, is simply unthinkable by any one who comprehends the general significance of Revelation.

Of course it would be overstating the lamentable bewilderment and uncertainty of Christian scholarship as to such a purpose to say that it has no ideas about it, or that the great company of God's dear children do not find in the Book of Revelation much that is unspeakably precious. On the contrary, it is to them a noble Palace, in whose chambers of peace they rest their weary souls, and in whose halls of glory they wander with delight and exultation. Bits of it they understand; here and there they perceive meaning and use; but what it is all for, the plan of the mighty maze, neither learned nor unlearned reader can be said to have yet comprehended.

This is as true to-day as it was nearly fifty years ago, when Alford wrote his Commentary, in which he expresses his doubts of all previous attempts to solve the problem and confesses his own ignorance and uncertainty. The war has turned the minds of thinking people towards the Apocalypse as likely to contain some prediction of so great a conflict, and several articles have appeared in religious quarterlies, on this remarkable book. One of them, in the *Biblical Review*, by Professor Griffith Thomas, of Wycliffe College, Toronto, gives a summary of many works

containing the views of their respective authors as to what the Apocalypse means. No two of these views agree; and while each of them has more or less valuable suggestiveness, no one can claim to have made known the *great specific purpose* which the Book of Revelation was intended to accomplish. It is easy to see that it is a book of prophecy, that a great and final triumph of Jesus is promised; but what is the *special character* of that triumph, and how the story of it is related to the *needs of God's people*, and particularly of *some special class* of God's people, none of these authors has informed us.

And yet it is not impossible to think of a *great and most important purpose* yet unprovided for when the Apocalypse yet remained to be written. When we reach the point in Jude in which we are exhorted to "contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered unto the saints," it is natural to ask ourselves what encouragement is needed, and greatly needed, to go on with that contention to a victorious conclusion.

Is there any way to make men Christians except by convincing them of their sins and persuading them to accept the offer of salvation? Is any one really a Christian until his mind has gone through that revolution by which natural errors have been displaced by divine truth? What is implied by the statement that the kingdoms of this world have become the kingdoms of our Lord and of his Christ? How is he going to acquire those kingdoms? Can he do it by force like Mohammed? Will he fall down and worship Satan to get his assistance? Is there any imaginable way except by appealing to the reason and conscience and spiritual nature of individual sinners, and bringing to bear upon them the great motives of revealed religion? Many seem to think so, but they do not and cannot show any other intelligible method. Jesus himself never used any other or suggested any other. His sole program for the conversion of mankind to Christianity is, "Go ye into all the world, and preach the Gospel to every creature"! No one of his apostles ever tried or could try any other

method, and the Great Apostle relied upon it with absolute confidence, saying, "I am not ashamed of the Gospel of Christ," and called it the "*power of God*" and the "*wisdom of God.*"

And yet under what tremendous discouragements Paul preached this gospel! What a battle, rather a lifelong war, he had to wage against Jewish unbelief and Pagan superstition! What sad experiences he had of the backsliding of his converts to another and an unreal gospel! Christ did not fail to warn his servants of the discouragements they would inevitably meet. And at the end of the apostolic age, though the successes of Christianity had been great, an apostate Jewish race and an almost universally Pagan world presented a well-nigh solid front against it.

We cannot here repeat the history of the many centuries which have elapsed since that time, but all who know it know how fluctuating have been the fortunes of Christ's cause during this long period. And how stands the score of battle now? Where upon the great field of the world is the truth of Revelation finally and unmistakably victorious over error? With the Jews generally persisting in their rejection of Christ as their Messiah; with Paganism yet shrouding the larger part of the habitable globe in midnight darkness; with corrupt forms of Christianity arrogating to themselves the title of the true Church of Christ; with the land and people of Luther renouncing every moral law and every precept of the gospel; and last, but not least of all, with the Germanized universities of Protestant nations spreading far and wide the propaganda on infidelity; what preacher of the gospel or what defender of the faith can there be who does not have his misgivings as to the final result, and feel the great need of being braced and heartened by some clear and positive assurance from the divine oracles that after all the heathen will be given to the Son of God for his inheritance, and the slow method of the Gospel and the Holy Spirit vindicated by its magnificent result? It is only necessary for this

great need to be realized to perceive what the character of the last book of the Bible had to be.

It was the knowledge of the necessity of supplying this great need by the great Head of the Church, its ascended teacher, which led to this final revelation of "the things that shall be hereafter," in wonderful and glorious contrast to "the things which are," by means of "the things which thou hast seen" in this unparalleled series of visions which constitute the Apocalypse. It was the keen realization of this need by the beloved John, when a prisoner and a sufferer "for the word of God and for the testimony of Jesus Christ" in the isle of Patmos, which prepared him to receive with joy and appreciation the encouragement which he and all his fellow witnesses to the truth as it is in Jesus so urgently need. And it will be indeed strange if we who are looking with blanched faces at the awful fact, that a nominally Christian nation can be robbed in a single generation by a false education of its Bible and its God, should yet remain blind to our own need of comfort and cheer, and fail to find it in the very place where God has graciously supplied it.

About thirty years ago (1890) the author of this paper published a study of the Apocalypse, in which he proposed as its leading and fundamental idea, "*The Progress of Truth in Enlightening and Saving Mankind.*" That is the future of the world's history in which the preachers of the gospel and the teachers of Bible truth are most interested and which it most concerns them to anticipate. It has to do with the morale of each soldier of Jesus Christ, and if it be hopeful it can inspire him with the presage of victory. It would be of comparatively little moment to him to learn what future political changes there are to be, what battles are to be fought, what earthquakes or other catastrophes are to take place. But progress in the realm of morals and the spiritual life, the campaigns of religious truth in its conquest of error, the civilizing and humanizing of wild beastly governments, the supplanting of the false church by the true, and the reduction of the carnal

thinking of natural men to the obedience of Jesus Christ as their authoritative Teacher and sufficient Saviour until the knowledge of the Lord shall cover the whole earth,— this is revelation of the future which God's people may anxiously desire to obtain and which God might well be expected to impart. And this, it may be added, is the very character of the book which most appropriately and effectively closes the volume of inspiration.

To show this fully would require a volume, but convincing evidence may be given in the space at our disposal. Great as are the difficulties of the interpretation of many details of the prophecy, the significance of its principal symbols is easily seen. To begin with the first vision, which it is reasonable to regard as the clue to what follows, let us look, as John did, at the seven golden *candlesticks*, and at one like unto the Son of man, walking among them with a countenance as the *sun* shining in his strength, and holding in his right hand seven *stars*. *Candlesticks, sun,* and *stars*, can there be any doubt as to what they mean? Are they not all symbols of *Illumination*?

Do they not at once suggest a dark world to be lighted up, and the very means by which to accomplish it? Can we be mistaken in thinking that the Lord Jesus is here resuming the thought which immediately follows the Beatitudes, when he said to his disciples, "Ye are the light of the world"? "Men light a candle, and put it . . . on a candlestick, and it giveth light unto all that are in the house. Let your light so shine before men!" Surely there is little unrevealed "mystery" about this vision when we are told that the seven candlesticks are the seven (i. e. all) churches; and the implication is plain enough, that the churches with their angels, in conjunction with Jesus himself, who is the "Light of the world," are expected to light up the moral and religious darkness of mankind, and that it is the story in symbol of this wonderful illumination that composes the remainder of the book.

If any one doubts that light is the natural and fitting symbol of truth, let him look up the many instances in the

Bible where the two are so associated! It is "the entrance of thy words which giveth light," and "Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path." And what is the "sword going out of the mouth" of the symbolic figure of the vision but the "sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God!" How simply and quite plainly we are thus told that it is "the words that go forth out of his mouth" and which he said are "spirit and life," repeated by his disciples to the end of time, by which he expected his kingdom to be established all over this ignorant and sinful earth!

To assure himself of the ruling significance of this first vision of spiritual luminaries, let the student observe how many times it is virtually repeated, though with variations suited to different situations. In the fourth chapter it is the Father seated upon his throne, who looks "like a Jasper, and a Sardine stone" (white light mingled with fire); "and a rainbow round about the throne," that sign of promise which appears only where a sun is shining. In the tenth chapter it is "a mighty Angel come down from heaven, . . . and a rainbow was upon his head, and his face was as it were the Sun, and his feet as pillars of fire." In the twelfth chapter it is "a woman clothed with the Sun, and the Moon under her feet, and upon her head a Crown of twelve Stars." In the eighteenth chapter it is an "Angel come down from heaven, having great power; and the earth was lightened with his glory." And finally, in the twenty-first chapter, it is the new Jerusalem, "having the glory of God; and her light was like unto a stone most precious, even like a jasper stone, clear as crystal. . . . And the city had no need of the Sun, neither of the Moon to shine in it; for the glory of God did lighten it, and the Lamb is the light thereof." How the many acute and scholarly minds that have wrestled with the problem of apocalyptic interpretation could have so generally failed to perceive the great significance of the essential oneness of this series of visions, that they denote *the progress of truth in the enlightening and saving of mankind*, and that the

final glorious vision announces the perfect triumph of the gospel of Jesus over all falsehood and error, is to the writer of this paper one of the strangest instances of critical blindness which the history of literature affords. With the exception of Bishop Quayle, in a recent eloquent article in *The Methodist Review*, who declares that the motto of the Apocalypse is "*Let there be light*," nobody but myself seems to have noticed that the last great book of the Bible echoes the first great book's sublime fiat, putting into it a spiritual meaning and a prophetic assurance inexpressibly comforting to every child of God.

The necessary limits of this paper forbid the reference to many additional corroborations, but there is one too striking in its agreement to be omitted. It is the scene described in the fourth and fifth chapters, in which Heaven is revealed as the great source of that illumination which those who are "sitting in darkness and in the shadow of death" on earth so much need. "Out of the Throne proceeded lightnings, and thunderings, and voices; and there were *seven lamps of fire burning* before the Throne, which are the *seven Spirits of God*." Here too are the representatives of the glorified church; but with all their wisdom, "no man in heaven, nor in earth, neither under the earth, was able to open the *book*, neither to look thereon," a book "in the right hand of him that sat on the Throne," "written within and on the backside, sealed with seven seals." What can this book mean but information, education, the knowledge of the way to dissipate the moral and spiritual darkness of earth, knowledge which only omniscience possesses? How natural the tears of the apostle at the inability of all finite minds to open the book and to loose its seals! And how exulting the new song of the glorified church when it learned that the "Lamb as it had been slain, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven Spirits of God, *sent forth into all the earth*," "hath prevailed to open the book, and to loose the seven seals thereof." What can this mean but that the evangelization of this world is not too hard a problem for God to solve, and that the gospel

of a crucified Saviour is destined to light up the dark places of earth with a brightness in which no base superstition and no false religion can survive?

In conclusion, it may be said that the purpose thus attributed to the Apocalypse is one most worthy of God to entertain, most fitting to close the Holy Scriptures, and most desirable for the Church to recognize. It is a working hypothesis capable of being applied to the explanation of the symbolism of every chapter. It is in harmony with the evident intent of similar symbolic passages in Daniel and other prophecies. It is in line with the general trend of the Bible from beginning to the end of the Epistles. It is the very purpose set forth in the sixth verse of the fourteenth chapter, where John "saw another Angel fly in the midst of heaven, having the everlasting Gospel, to preach unto them that dwell on the earth, and to every nation, and kindred, and tongue, and people." And, finally, it is a purpose which will fulfill, to those who can understand and realize it, the prediction of the introduction to the book: "Blessed is he that readeth, and they that hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written therein."