

ART. III.—THE PRINCIPLES OF THE INTERPRETATION OF THE APOCALYPSE.

THE conditions of the problem, when stated, go far towards giving us the key to it, and in no question do the conditions of the problem require more careful attention than in this. A misconception of any of the chief of these has, as a fact, produced—and always will produce—a totally false conception of the details of the prophecy; and instead of edification we shall suffer disgust from mere historical guesswork on the one hand, or mere rationalistic explanation on the other. No book in the New Testament—or, indeed, in the ancient world—has suffered so much at the hands of commentators.

1. Let us begin with a definition. This strange, inspiring book is a Hebrew Apocalypse. By the word "Apocalypse" is meant an unveiling of something there but hidden, dimly apparent to the wise, but clear when unveiled—an unveiling, that is, of the unseen principles that underlie the surface of the evolution of human history as a plan of the living God. Again, it is a Hebrew Apocalypse. Its method is the recognised method of the Hebrew vision, an unveiling of principles by splendid, poetic, often awe-inspiring allegory, or, if you will again, by the method of a recognised prophetic cipher. What is seen is not the literal thing itself, but a great poetical imagery of the thing. There is absolutely nothing in the Apocalypse that will bear to be taken barely literally. Yet it may be safely said that if the Apocalypse of John had not been in the New Testament, it would have long since ranked as one of the highest inspirations of human genius—a magnificent monument of courage, nobility, and sweetness, unsurpassed in any literature, before which Dante, "Utopia," Milton, "Piers Plowman," and Bunyan pale their ineffectual fires. The saner commentator observes this in an increasing degree.

2. One step further and we arrive at certain important and fairly incontestable inferences from the above definition. The further step is this: It is a Hebrew Apocalypse by St. John the beloved disciple, whose residence at Ephesus had made him the later leader of the Pauline Churches of Asia Minor, to whom was the promise that the Spirit of Truth should guide him into all the truth. The Apocalypse is part of the Apostolic deposit on which the Church is built, or, in its own language, one of the foundations of the Heavenly Jerusalem, which is free and the mother of us all, upon which are the names of the twelve Apostles of the Lamb. It is a true witness for Christ and the Resurrection. The proofs of this are

very strong, both from the external tradition of those certain to know—Justin and Irenæus—and from strong internal evidence. The difficulties of Dionysius notwithstanding—and all after him have repeated them—no other John could pretend to the immediate authority in Asia Minor which evidently attaches to his name,¹ and the latest research has disclosed a more thorough correspondence in thought and language with St. John the Evangelist than has been hitherto imagined, and that in many shades of thought and peculiarities of diction.²

It is, then, a Hebrew Apocalypse by St. John the Apostle, inspired and led by the Holy Ghost, and part of that deposit of the faith of which the universal Church is the keeper and witness. A peculiarity of thought and language is stamped upon the whole. The elaborate and interesting attacks upon the unity of the book have failed to convince even the German intellect.

3. Some singularly important inferences result from these positions, or postulates of inquiry, in the way of laws of interpretation, and other lamps of guidance as to the point of view of a scientific judgment.

The true road of approach is a clear understanding of the principles which move in the whole range of Old Testament Hebrew prophecy. Our Divine Lord said of the law that He did not come to destroy it, but to fulfil (*πληρῶσαι*)—to give to it its full meaning, the flower and bloom to which it was always tending. His beloved disciple, expanding lessons which Christ Himself had given, set the expanding seal of Christ upon the prophets. Christ came not to destroy, but to fulfil, the prophets and the Psalms: the Apostle John in the Apocalypse shows how. The Apocalypse is dominated by the circle of thought in which the Hebrew prophets move, but it expands it.

¹ This is well put by Holtzmann, "Apocalypse," page 34.

² The unprejudiced observer will note psychological similarities which by themselves go far to show in the Apocalypse the hand and style of the Apostle. I give a few of the most striking. The first impression of Jesus as the Lamb of God (*ἀρνίον*, diminutive in the Apocalypse, to heighten the dramatic contrast with the wild beast, *θηρίον*), John i. 29, to which he returns (John xix. 36); the doctrine of the personal Logos in the Gospel and Apocalypse only; the idea of the bride (John iii. 29); the presence of Christ instead of the temple (John ii. 21; Ap. xxi. 22); living water; the judgment already of the Prince of this world in heaven; a great number of Johannine words and phrases, such as *ναῦν*, *ἀληθινός*, *σκηνώω*, *τηρεῖν τὸν λόγον*, and in constructions (see Bousset's interesting list in Meyer's "Kommentar," pp. 206 and 50); a tendency to seven (*cf.* the seven miracles in the Gospel and the eighth in the Appendix); the significant value of numbers (John xxi. 11); a tendency to enlarge the same idea in another form; prologue and epilogue; and many other like things.

Almost every line recalls, or hints at, or actually quotes, something from Old Testament prophecy.

Hence one great sheet-anchor rule of interpretation arises: we must seek the idea which the form embodies. As, for instance, the magnificent visions of the chariot and of the temple in Ezekiel are not to be taken literally, but point to principles working in the Divine plan of a historical restoration of Jewish worship and polity—that is, a mysterious change, enlargement, and consummation of what had gone before—so to look for a disclosure of bare historical facts in the Apocalypse is an entirely mistaken exegesis, from which we ought as entirely to set ourselves free. No educated Hebrew would have taken Ezekiel so. The builders of the second temple never came to Ezekiel for measurements, or laws to regulate the resettlement of Palestine. They knew better, and we ought to know better than to treat the Apocalypse so. There is no blessing in reading an apocalyptic newspaper, as it were, beforehand, baldly recording future facts in a cipher or riddle, and very little guidance for the Church in her good fight comes from reading such a cipher. But when the secret principles and causes which underlie the evolution of history are laid bare, we are forewarned for action and encouraged by the vision of the end.

4. But, in the second place, there is a second rule, of almost equal importance. The heavenly horizons are earthly conditioned. That is what has been called by Professor Riehm “the psychological mediation” of the Hebrew prophets. The human mind of the seer is fitted to see only what it can see by former experience. The Old Testament prophet took his images and symbols from his times, from the circle of old-world ideas, events, poetic fancies, which surrounded him:—Babylonian composite beasts, legends of the nether world, things ideal to his own time, Edom’s treachery, Ephraim’s jealousy, the Scythian invasion, personified in Gog the prince of Magog, the habits and customs of the East, Israel and Judah, a restored David and a restored Elijah. To take these things in a barely literal sense is to miss their meaning. They are the poetic clothing of a message, to which history was to give the literal meaning. For instance, to see in the picture of Isaiah lxiii. a primitively savage desire for a bloody vengeance on Edom, as Stanley and others have done, seems to me to entirely miss its meaning. The picture of the warrior with garments dyed in blood is the picture of a Divine victor after a hard-earned and terrible battle. It is a piece of tremendous poetry, not a trace of primitive savagery. The whole context of Isaiah is against this last supposition; nor is it literal of Edom. It would seem even probable that the pro-

phets who saw visions were led by the Spirit to adopt this method in the first instance often to avoid persecution from social or political misunderstandings. Consider the historical surroundings of each one of them, and this view is borne out. So, then, in like manner, the imagery of the Apocalypse is derived directly or indirectly from all past and surrounding sources. Hebrew Old Testament prophecy provides by far the greater part of it. But the Gospel according to St. John shows him intimately and specially well acquainted with all those contemporary expansions of Judaic expectation, which had come from four centuries of meditation upon the visions of the Old Testament prophets. From this circle of thought St. John undoubtedly borrows for the symbol and imagery of the Apocalypse. Such are the thousand years intermediate Messianic reign, the first resurrection, the significant handling of numbers, the whole of the conceptions, though far more poetically used, of the size and adornment of the heavenly Jerusalem. The Apocalypse is full of images which may be related to the later Jewish conception. Again, contemporary history gives many an illustration. The image of Caesar, the only imminent and threatening form of ecumenical idolatry of St. John's old age; the rumour of Nero redivivus, possibly specially in circulation in Asia Minor, afford symbols and ideas to St. John, just as the Scythian invasion and many other current ideas had afforded to Ezekiel and Daniel and those before him.

Nay, more. With Gunkel one may probably have no hesitation in tracing some ideas to an ancient Babylonian, Egyptian, or Iranian ultimate source. The seven-headed dragon of the abyss, the sulphureous lake, and other the like, for instance.¹ With these ideas and symbols St. John clothed the message of his Apostolic Apocalypse. Just as the form of every creation of the poetic imagination abounds in allusions to historic events, to old and current myths and stories, poetic fancies, great ideas in architecture, painting, and sculpture—allusions of moving interest to the educated reader—so the poet St. John, educated in a broader and finer school than that of Rabbinism, is led to use such things as had impressed his waking imagination in the form of his Divine and immortal vision.²

To seek to belittle the transcendent idea, which, with a little

¹ There is the still further question, how far these ancient ideas, some of them, run back into that primeval tradition of which the Book of Genesis presents the purest type.

² Holy Scripture itself always represents the human element of the vision as akin to a dream. The Divine message is expressed under conditions similar to those of dreams.

effort, lies clear before us, to the small or superstitious proportions which each Jewish, old-world, or classical allusion had in its origin or in its currency elsewhere, is a proceeding to which no educated man would have recourse in any other case. What commentator on Dante or Milton would do this? Or what would we think of an historian who should prove us to be still heathen because the days of our week contain the names of Saxon gods?

So in the Apocalypse, again, from another point of view, our task is to discover the idea which is embodied in the form. The idea is the message; the form is the human and transitory element of poetic imagery. The idea is eternal.

5. But there is a third rule of interpretation, which arises from the consentient relation which St. John the Apostle necessarily bears to the rest of the New Covenant revelation and to the history of its evolution. It is legitimate to interpret what is figurative and obscure by what is plain in the cycle of New Testament theology. The prophetic parables of our Lord and His eschatological discourse,¹ tinged as it is with contemporary Jewish thought, picture no halcyon, undisturbed progress of His Church to the consummation of the age. The gates of Hades should not prevail; but, having forsaken in the mass her first love, imperilled by ever new increasingly and intensely deceptive false Christs and varied persecutions, with an unavoidable mixture of wheat and tares, she was to work on to the end with her Master's spiritual presence, with a noble and continuous line of elect souls, with the continuous and increasing emergence of missionary effort, as a secret leaven leavening the whole lump, "until He come." St. Paul paints the same picture. Even before his eyes the mystery of lawlessness was already working; grievous wolves within the fold threatened the flock. His last private letters to Timothy and Titus indicate his absorbing anxiety for the handing on by well-chosen men of the Apostolic doctrine in the face of the hard times of the end. And the last writings of the New Testament fall back upon the Old Testament. The spirit of Balaam, who sold the truth he knew for unrighteous gain, was emerging in the later Church with the slackening of the first love, and is also alluded to repeatedly in the Epistles to the Churches. As Jannes and

¹ There is another saying of our Lord before the judgment seat of the high priest—"From this very time (*ἀπ' ἀρτι*, St. Luke, *ἀπὸ τοῦ νῦν*) ye shall see the Son of Man sitting on the right hand of power, and coming on the clouds of heaven"—which forms the continuous principle of the Apocalypse. To show this working as a principle in history, in the midst of mighty and world-wide opposition in Church and State, is surely its main motive.

Jambres resisted the war of Jehovah for the freeing of his people, so their spirit was discoverable in men arising in the later Church. The rebellion of ambitious Korah was an old foe with a new face. Jezebel, the powerful supporter of false worship in the Old Testament Church, was arising again. The Church, once pure, was assailed by corruption from within, as well as fearful opposition from without. St. John, in the plain teaching of his Epistle, warns us not to receive every spirit, but to try the spirits by the rule of the Apostolic teaching, for even now, he says, there are many antichrists. "Evil men and impostors," said St. Paul, "shall wax worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived."

The plain teaching of the Old and New Testament is a key to the meaning of the Apocalyptic symbols. There are exceedingly strong reasons for holding the belief that the Apocalypse was written in the times of Domitian, when a world-wide persecution was raging, from which St. John himself was a sufferer.¹ This persecution had its test in the worship of Cæsar's image. Cæsar or Christ was the alternative which tried the Church to its centre and in every part. The Apocalypse was the last voice of Apostolic doctrine. The other Apostles were dead. The Church was scattered. The earthly Jerusalem was gone. The tremendous force of the world power was at last awakened to deadly antagonism. What next? Would Christ in His revelation of the Father victoriously stand, victoriously survive the onset?

The Apocalypse gives the answer. Very interesting and very insufficient are the words of Professor Bousset of Göttingen, claiming for it that living historical recognition which is essential to maintain its interest for our own age. "The writer of the Apocalypse," says he, "knows how to inculcate this one thing with inimitable assurance—the predominating intensity of responsibility in view of God's judgment; the thought of the near end; the duty of faithfulness even unto death; of steady perseverance in the fierce warfare which now is flaming up; a confident assurance of victory against the dragon who now at last is cast in heaven and whose dominion on earth is only for a short time; an almost fierce joy in martyrdom—Happy from henceforth are the dead that die in the Lord; at least in places a burning diction, an intense longing for the end and the new time. Verily I come quickly.

¹ Πρὸς τῷ τέλει τῆς Δομειτιανῶν ἀρχῆς Irenæus, p. 803, Ed. Stieren. The exceedingly reasonable tone of this whole passage heightens our confidence in Irenæus as a witness to a matter of fact. The evidence given by the Apocalypse itself of its own environment points to the same date. The context of Rev. xi. 1 precludes the idea that it refers to a standing Temple.

Amen. Come, Lord Jesus. All this the writer invests with a magic charm and a mighty power, in spite of all that is bizarre, fantastic, and fanatical, which presents itself in every part. Of incomparable beauty and sweetness in any case are the succession of images in which the seer depicts the future world. One must have sometimes heard these words at the grave-side or in the martyr-condemned cell to understand their imperishable charm. They are still and ever as the strains of some unearthly music. So must the Apocalypse have acted for its time as a fiery war manifesto. It must have seemed, in fact, to contemporary men as a new prophetic revelation. Happy he who read and kept what was written therein. It was a loud, clear trumpet-call to a war of many hundred years."

For one plain reason, we shall be unable to confine its instruction to times gone by. The Apocalypse speaks of a complete, universal, and final victory of the Lord and of His Apostles' teaching, which we have never seen. If its instruction is only historical of the temper of Domitian Christianity, it is a false prophecy.

The Apostle St. John was not a false seer, and so must speak still in clear tones of the Church's warfare till the end be, and all our conflict has passed away, together with the ancient enemies, like the chaff blown from the summer threshing-floor. As the student of the history of the Church and the world turns away, often with disgusted disappointment at the glorious promise, at the apparently small result, at the fierce anti-Christian spirit, the ignorance and corruption which still predominate through all, and even into our boasted twentieth century, the loud, clear trumpet still rings out a call to victorious war.

The recrudescences of paganism in Church and State, revived from its deadly stroke, are not the end. They shall be rooted out and pass away. The Christian reader of the Apocalypse is stirred, indeed, to wariness, as in difficult times, but still and ever to cheerful courage.

An innumerable multitude from all lands—martyrs in China even in these latter days—are even now coming forth out of the battle victorious, and the triumph song of heaven may be heard, as one reads the Apocalypse, echoing even now, and spreading from the land that is very far off.

Sufficient hints of a historical setting shine through to enable the Christian student to locate certain fulfilments of the vision, which go far to strengthen his abiding and serene confidence in the Christian argument.¹ The inspired poem is

¹ The interesting and very suggestive book on "The Revelation of St. John the Divine" (Bickers and Son, 1, Leicester Square, Third

sufficiently in touch with our daily experience and the political and Church history of our times to move the Christian to a profound trust that when the book of God's secrets, of which Christ is the opener, lies open at last, it will disclose a plan of beauty and of grace adequate to our highest thoughts of God.

"God's in His heaven ; all's right with the world."

The Apocalypse is necessary to the faith. In all times and in all experiences we can remember, as we read its striking allegories and hear again its mighty battle-cries, *nos passi graviora*, "He that *overcometh* shall enter into the joy of his Lord."

These are the things that must quickly come to pass ; the season of them is near.

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ART. IV.—A SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY EPISCOPAL CHARGE.

A SHORT time ago there was reprinted in the *Chester Diocesan Gazette* the "Primary Charge of Nicholas Stratford," delivered in his cathedral on May 5, 1691, which is believed to be the earliest extant charge of any Bishop of Chester. The charge contains many interesting features which throw light upon the Churchmanship and religious conditions of a critical period in the life of the English Church.

But first a few words as to Stratford himself. He was born at Hemel Hempstead in 1633, the year in which Laud became Archbishop. He was admitted scholar of Trinity College, Oxford, in 1650—the year after the death of Charles I.—and he became a Fellow of the same College in 1656. In 1667—the year in which "Paradise Lost" was published—he succeeded Richard Herrick as Warden of the Collegiate Church in Manchester, where he seems to have restored the use of the surplice and the custom of receiving the elements kneeling at the rails. In 1670 Stratford became a Prebendary of Lincoln, in 1674 Dean of St. Asaph, and in 1683 Rector of St. Mary, Aldermanbury, in the city of London. In 1684 he resigned his wardenship in Manchester, and in 1689 he was

Edition), by Canon Huntingford, gives, I think, firm ground for the opinion that we are able to discover in history many sure fulfilments of this prophecy. We can see, at least, the *principles* foreshadowed in the Apocalypse at work continuously in the field of history.