

## The First Battle of Armageddon.

IS the present war Armageddon? The question is often asked, and is usually answered in the negative. The great Apocalyptic battle is commonly regarded as being still in the future. It may, however, be possible to establish a connection between the events of to-day and the prediction in Rev. xvi. 14-16 without deciding the question whether the latter does or does not await a future and more complete fulfilment. And I hope to show that such a connection, if it can be found, is not merely of theoretical interest, but of practical importance.

It appears to be generally taken for granted that the prophecies of the New Testament are mostly predictions of specific and single crises in history, and that all we have to do is to fit them into their right places, whether past, present, or future. And the impression seems to prevail that to introduce into their interpretation the idea of process is simply to evade their plain and obvious meaning. But a close attention to the phraseology of Scripture suggests a doubt as to the soundness of this belief. The "Coming of the Son of Man" is usually thought of as a crisis, and indeed in some passages must be so understood, but our Lord's reply to Caiaphas (Matt. xxvi. 64) shows us that there is a point of view from which it must be regarded as a process.

For, in truth, we are not compelled to choose between a "uniformitarian" and a "cataclysmic" view of history as depicted in the New Testament prophecies. The two views are complementary rather than contradictory of one another. The very antithesis between a crisis and a process is misleading; the difference between them is relative to the point of view from which they are regarded. A crisis is only a process looked at in a bird's-eye view.

Nor are we compelled to regard the events of prophecy—even when considered as crises—as being events which are only

to happen once in the course of history.<sup>1</sup> St. John himself has warned us against this error in his First Epistle: "As ye have heard that Antichrist shall come, even now are there many antichrists" (1 John ii. 18). And in the next verse he explains why the appearance of an antichrist is not a single, but an oft-recurring phenomenon; it is because such an appearance is but a specific outbreak of the anti-christian tendency which is never absent from our midst. Prophecy, in fact, is mainly concerned with moral and spiritual principles; it is, primarily, not a programme of events, but a Divine philosophy of history. Our Lord Himself, while assuredly not ignoring the predictive element in the Old Testament, taught that the innermost meaning of prophecy was to be found, not in the rise and fall of empires, but in the two great fundamental principles—the Jachin and Boaz of the Old Testament Church—"Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart . . . and thy neighbour as thyself." Should we not derive more benefit from the study of prophecy if we laid the stress where our Lord Himself laid it, on the moral and spiritual principles on which God governs the world?

Now, since these principles of necessity illustrate themselves over and over again in history, there is a strong presumption that an event foretold in prophecy will prove to be one of a class. If we have been told that Armageddon shall come, we shall not hastily infer that there are not many Armageddons. We shall rather suspect that as a particular antichrist represents an outbreak of an ever-present tendency, so a particular Armageddon is only a violent crisis in the unceasing war of the great enemy against the kingdom of God, and is related to that age-long strife much as the battles of Ypres and Neuve Chapelle are related to the conflict that rages day and night, week after week, and month after month, on the long embattled front from Switzerland to the North Sea.

This contention is supported, I think, by St. John's use of the name Babylon for imperial Rome, and also by the language

<sup>1</sup> It is well to remember in this connection that a *series* of crises may be regarded as a process.

he uses in describing its fall. The term itself suggests that the part which Babylon had formerly played in history in relation to the Kingdom of God was now being played by Rome, and would lead to a similar *dénouement*, while many of the actual phrases used in describing the catastrophe are borrowed from Jeremiah's prophecy of the fall of Babylon, and Ezekiel's prophecy of the fall of Tyre.

This is no merely academic question. It is of grave practical import. For if the view which I have suggested is the true one, if the present crisis is to be regarded as an Armageddon, as a combined onslaught of great powers upon the Kingdom of God, our own part in it as individual Christians would seem to be larger and more complex than appears at first sight. No true Christian needs to be told that fighting and making shells are not the only services he can render to the good cause; that the task of Moses and his comrades upon the mount of prayer is fully as important as that of Joshua upon the battle-plain; but if we are really engaged in a great spiritual conflict to which the name Armageddon may be suitably applied, then, surely, no detail of our spiritual lives is without its bearing upon the final issue. All that we are and do counts in the great conflict. The weakest and most insignificant Christian who is overcoming in his own inner life and manfully taking his share in the strife against sin and Satan, is holding a portion of the great spiritual field for the Captain of his salvation, and is thereby actually contributing to the victory of the good cause upon the battlefield.

Why is the great contest which is foretold in Rev. xvi. 14-16 connected with Armageddon, or, rather (as the true reading seems to be) Harmageddon, the Hill of Megiddo? The literal geographical explanation I think we may safely dismiss. The whole of the Promised Land, from the Euphrates to the Mediterranean, would not contain the armies that would be engaged. Nor does the word Harmageddon really lend itself to such an interpretation. All the other place-names in the Apocalypse (except, of course, in chaps. i.-iii.) have a mystical, not a

literal significance. Jerusalem means the Church, Babylon means Rome, and the Holy City itself is "spiritually called Sodom and Egypt." It seems probable, therefore, that Harmageddon also is to be mystically understood, and that the key to its meaning, as in the case of the other place-names, is to be sought in the Old Testament.

Where, in the Old Testament, is the key to be found? We can hardly suppose that St. John is referring to Megiddo merely as the historical "cockpit" of Western Asia. Some particular battle must, I think, be intended, some battle of decisive import, in which a formidable military power, or combination of powers, fought against the people of God, and was defeated. And this battle can surely be none other than the defeat of the Canaanites by Barak, narrated in Judges iv. and v.<sup>1</sup>

But why, among all the wars of Israel, should this particular conflict be chosen by the great Christian seer to represent the death-grapple of the Kingdom of God with the powers of this world? What were the peculiar and distinctive features which entitled it to this prominence?

In the first place, it was the annihilation by the chosen people—that is, by the Kingdom of God as then constituted on earth—of a great military power in a higher state of material civilization. Israel was still in the Bronze Age; the Canaanites were fully equipped with iron instruments of war.<sup>2</sup> Nothing in the prose narrative of chap. iv. is more striking than the way in which the writer recurs again and again, as if under a sort of fascination, to the iron chariots of Sisera. The same attitude of mind appears in chap. i.,<sup>3</sup> where the iron chariots are spoken of as an insuperable obstacle to the progress of the invading Israelites.<sup>4</sup> Is there any other instance in all history of a

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<sup>3</sup> As earlier in Josh. xvii. 16.

<sup>4</sup> Chariots *not* specified to have been of iron (they are also stated to have been subsequently burnt) do not appear to have been regarded as equally formidable (*vide* Josh. xi. 9).

Bronze Age people inflicting a crushing and final defeat upon a people equipped with all the military resources of the Iron Age?<sup>1</sup>

Nor was this the whole disparity between the two armies. Even with their own weapons the Israelites were very scantily equipped,<sup>2</sup> and it can hardly be doubted that they were enormously outmatched in numbers. There was, in fact, only one possible explanation of their victory: "the Lord discomfited Sisera."

Here, then, we have a picture of a great military power, arrayed with all the material resources of civilization against the people of God, superior in numbers, and operating on "interior lines," and yet, by Divine intervention, defeated and destroyed.

But this is only the military aspect of the crisis. So far, there is no reason to regard it as more extraordinary than Israel's deliverance from Sennacherib. Its primary significance for the history of Israel (which really means its significance for the religious history of mankind) has been pointed out by Professor G. A. Smith.<sup>3</sup> He shows that the strategic position occupied by the Canaanites constituted a danger more serious than the mere subjugation of the northern tribes; it threatened an actual break-up of the nation. "The evil . . . was far greater than the oppression of Issachar; it affected the national existence of Israel, and its removal was the concern of all her tribes." For behind the political and military dislocation caused by the Canaanite occupation, there lay the centrifugal tendency so evident in the several tribes during this anarchical period, when "there was no king in Israel," and "every man did that which was right in his own eyes."

The gravity of the situation becomes more evident when we turn to the Song of Deborah and Barak in chap. v. It is here

<sup>1</sup> Earlier defeats of the Canaanites are not quite parallel. The chariots of iron (*vide supra*) seem to have been—previous to the battle of Megiddo—the deciding factor. But, even if this be disputed, that battle remains the decisive culmination of the long struggle.

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that we are taken into the very heart of the subject and shown the conflicting forces at work within the borders of Israel, the forces that worked for a bold and united resistance, and the forces that worked for lethargy and disruption. The Song concerns itself little with the actual fighting. It is really a recruiting song—not, indeed, a song written to stimulate recruiting, but an appraisal of the conduct of the several tribes, according as they came or came not “to the help of the Lord against the mighty.” It deals, in fact, with two classes, the recruits and the shirkers.

Let us take first the list of recruits. How the reading of that splendid muster-roll strikes home to our hearts to-day! On the re-enacting of this ancient drama in our midst we have not space to dwell, but the thought of it should help to bring home to our minds the spiritual lessons which the Song of Deborah and Barak contains for every one of us.

Upon the most obvious of these lessons—the readiness of heart for God's service, alike among the governors and the people, which is twice commended in the Song, and, in particular, the willingness of the leaders to assume responsibility, to take “the lead in Israel” (ver. 2, R.V.), not from motives of pride and ambition, but as an act of consecration to God (ver. 9)—we need not, perhaps, enlarge. But we must not dismiss with a passing reference the allusion to Zebulon and Naphtali, who “jeopardied their lives unto the death in the high places of the field.” We shall miss one of the deepest lessons, not only of this ancient prophetic Song, but of the present war, if we rest content with admiring devotion such as theirs without seeking to imitate it. “He that loveth his life shall lose it” was not said solely with reference to martyrdom; it is a fundamental law of Christianity. The death to self, the surrender of all to God, which involves—if need arise—the surrender of all *for* God, is the claim made by the Gospel upon every soldier of Jesus Christ.

Has not the Church of God lost, in the soothing atmosphere of “a calm world and a long peace,” some of the military



instincts of an earlier and more strenuous age? And can we expect to see the spiritual hosts of wickedness give way to her attack, unless the warriors of the King of kings serve their Sovereign with the same devotion shown to-day by our sailors and soldiers to their earthly king?

We come now to the shirkers. These fall into four classes—Gilead (*i.e.*, Gad), Reuben, Dan and Asher, and Meroz. And we note at once that the first two names are those of Trans-Jordanic tribes. There had always been a danger that the river might prove a barrier between eastern and western Israel. Both in the time of Moses and in that of Joshua uneasiness on this point had been felt on the western side; and the controversy recorded in Josh. xxii. shows plainly that separation from the main body of Israel was regarded as practically involving apostasy from Jehovah. The fears of Moses and the western tribes had been allayed by the assurances of their eastern brethren, but it seemed now as though their apprehensions had been well founded. "Gilead abode beyond Jordan." The great battle was no concern of his, it was all on the other side of the river. The natural barrier had become a spiritual barrier. This was, perhaps, not so much deliberate selfishness as a vague feeling of aloofness; the sense of brotherhood had been weakened by geographical conditions. But the eastern tribes had deliberately chosen their geographical situation, in spite of a double warning, and a special responsibility rested on them *not* to let slip the sense of brotherhood. It is often dangerous to acquiesce too readily in divisions which may not at first sight appear to be of vital importance.

Gilead is strongly represented among us to-day. There are multitudes who stand aside from the great world-conflict between the kingdom of Satan and the kingdom of God because they do not feel that it is any particular business of theirs. Their own lives are quiet, comfortable, and prosperous, and they are not disposed to stir. They know that not far from their doors are misery and oppression and vice, but somehow it all seems very distant and unreal. The conflict is raging hotly, but it is no

special concern of theirs. "The Son of God goes forth to war," but they, like Gilead of old, refuse to follow in His train. And too often the conditions which isolate them from their struggling and down-trodden brethren on the other side are of their own choosing.

As far as outward action is concerned, Reuben might be classed with Gilead. But Reuben was not quite so indifferent as his inaction might suggest. He considered the question carefully, and even made good resolutions (vers. 15, 16, R.V.), but he never came. He could not make up his mind; or, rather—like his ancestor, "unstable as water"—he made it up only to unmake it again. His "resolves of heart," which ought to have followed, not preceded, the "searchings of heart," left him still inactive "among the sheepfolds." He said: "I go, sir," and went not.

The moral inertia of Reuben is not less fatal in its results than the indifference of Gilead. And the making of high resolves only to unmake them again is as potent to deaden the conscience and to paralyze the will as the refusal to make such resolves at all. Among the shirkers in the conflict between good and evil are many who once meant to enlist, but have never done so. Some of them, no doubt, are "waiting to be fetched."

Dan and Asher had not the poor excuse that might be urged by Gilead and Reuben. They were close to the scene of conflict. Why did they not respond to the call of Deborah and Barak?

The reason seems to have been that they were absorbed in mercantile pursuits (ver. 17, R.V.). The ships and the "haven of the sea" occupied so large a place in their hearts that the life-and-death struggle of the people of God against overwhelming odds seemed to them, by comparison, a small thing. They believed in "business as usual."

There is probably no sin which has bitten so deep into the vitals of Christendom, nor any that has done so much to hinder the progress of Christ's kingdom, as the sin of worldliness. On

its obvious and recognized forms I need not dwell. True Christians at least know what these are, and are usually more or less on their guard against them. But we are all liable to be taken off our guard by the insidious foe, because we do not fully understand what worldliness is. We flatter ourselves that we are unworldly because we stand aloof from the rush for wealth and the craze for perpetual amusement, but we forget that the cares of this world, as well as its riches and pleasures, have power to "choke the good seed, so that it becometh unfruitful." Our Lord's warning against mammon-worship was not spoken to the rich, but to the poor, and was followed by the words: "Therefore I say unto you, Be not anxious for the morrow." Yet multitudes even of Christian men and women are hindered by this anxiety about the future, coupled with the absorption in mundane affairs which such anxiety naturally begets, from taking their right place in the ranks of the army of Christ. "No man that warreth entangleth himself with the affairs of this life."

Meroz, the last shirker in the list, is more difficult to classify, because we know so little about it. But the change of note in ver. 23 is unmistakable, and invites speculation as to its cause. Where was Meroz, and what was its peculiar turpitude, that it should be visited with a special anathema, for an abstention of which many others were guilty? The question does not admit of a confident answer; but there is some archæological evidence that Meroz lay very close to the scene of conflict, perhaps even upon the actual battlefield.<sup>1</sup> The inaction of its citizens was therefore—if the suggested identification is correct—a case of peculiarly callous indifference to the cause of Israel. The tide of battle rolled past their very gates; they heard the noise of war; they saw their brethren at death-grips with the oppressor; but the sight and sound of that dread conflict awoke no response in their hearts. "They came not to the help of the Lord against the mighty."

The curse pronounced on Meroz falls in the New Testament on all who act the part of shirker in the great battle of life. It

<sup>1</sup> Note also the position of ver. 23.

is not said of Meroz, or of the other defaulters, that they assisted the enemy. The charge against them is that "they came not to the help of the Lord." In such a war neutrality was a crime. But we shall do well to remind ourselves of the yet more solemn truth that in the great conflict between Christ and Satan, neutrality is *impossible*. "He that is not with Me is against Me." The shirkers count among the enemy.

But there is another aspect of Armageddon on which the Old Testament says little or nothing. Specially characteristic of the Apocalypse, even among the books of the New Testament, is the revelation of supernatural forces working behind the phenomena of Nature and history. In all the great world-crises where spiritual issues are involved, there are dreader powers at work than the sins and errors of men,—“the spirits of devils, . . . which go forth unto the kings of the earth . . . to gather them unto the battle.” There is a thrilling scene in the “Aeneid”<sup>1</sup> of which these words remind us. On the night that Troy was taken, Aeneas, as he strove amid the burning streets and tottering walls to rally his countrymen to the defence, saw a vision which convinced him that his efforts were in vain. The mortal mist fell for a moment from his eyes; the supernatural world became visible; the forms of the dread Olympian deities showed themselves among the storming-parties of the Greeks:

“ Apparent dirae facies inimicaque Troiae  
Numina magna deum.”

It may be that if our eyes were similarly opened, we should be aware to-day of the presence of supernatural powers, both good and evil, in our midst. It is at least widely believed, particularly among soldiers, that the present conflict is not wholly one of flesh and blood, but that forces other than human are in the field.

But these are just the forces which the New Testament teaches us to regard as operating continually in the life of each individual believer. The angels are “ministering spirits, sent

<sup>1</sup> “Aen.” ii. 622, 623.

forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation." The hostile "principalities and powers in the heavenly places" are the constant antagonists of the Christian in his daily life. The great war which from time to time breaks out in an Armageddon is waged perennially by the true Church of Christ militant here in earth. Her armies are always in the field; her gates of Janus are never shut. Enlistment in her ranks is not for a term of years, but for life; "there is no discharge in that war." Her members are all combatants, and every action of their lives is, or should be, an act of war.

Thus the issue of this great conflict rests—humanly speaking—like all other moral and spiritual issues, with the Church of God, and every spiritual victory won by each of her individual members is a contribution to the main result. And this is as true of the Church's outward activities as of her inner life. We shall make a grave mistake, even from a national point of view, if we postpone to a more convenient season the evangelization of our own people. Nations, like churches, are moral and spiritual entities; as nations they are lured to the slaughter of Armageddon; as nations they bring their glory and honour into the New Jerusalem; as nations they are judged by God; and a present national revival of true religion here in England would bring down a blessing upon our armies, and leave a decisive mark upon our fortunes in the great war.

WALTER R. WHATELY.

