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FIXED DATES AND PROPHECY.

BY THE REV. W. S. HOOTON, B.D.

THE presumption of assigning a fixed date to the Coming of the Lord is unquestionable. But it is not always recognized how very small is the number of those who have been guilty of it. If we were asked, how many of us could give the names of more than one or two persons notoriously discredited in this matter, with the comparatively insignificant following they obtained? Yet, from sweeping assertions sometimes heard, one might imagine such presumption was a common feature among prophetic students: and that is an unfair insinuation. The great bulk are most reverently cautious.

It is true that other names are sometimes mentioned in such a connexion. But once again, the allegations are inexcusably ill-informed and unfair. A greatly honoured leader, for example, is misunderstood by someone who cannot take the pains to appreciate the characteristically cautious and well-balanced statements of a deeply helpful utterance on this topic so all-important for our times. Or another well-known teacher is made the butt of some secular journalist, who is not only utterly devoid of the qualifications necessary for dealing with the spiritual heights and depths of the Holy of Holies, but is also so ignorant of the elements of the matter with which he presumes to deal that he jeers at predictions of "the end of the world" that were not so much as under discussion at all. Ignorance or carelessness may fall into such deplorable blunders; but that is really no excuse for Christian preachers and teachers, who *are* supposed to be acquainted with the elements of what they are talking about, and to possess spiritual perception, and to distinguish things that differ even apart from spiritual perception, and moreover to be scrupulously careful not to suggest by unbalanced or thoughtless utterance what another has never intended and has in reality made it quite plain he never intended, but who are nevertheless guilty of these scandalously misleading and injurious generalizations.

There remains, however, a further question, which is the main subject of the present paper. Is there a fixed date at all? Is the time of the Coming of the Lord, though confessedly unknown

to us, nevertheless fixed in the knowledge of God? For most of us this question is settled by the undeniable fact that the very words in which our Lord expressed the limitation of His own knowledge, at least on earth, in this one point, also declare that the Father does know the day and hour. But let us consider the objections. The grounds of doubt which are sometimes expressed are apparently two-fold—Biblical and philosophical. On Biblical grounds, it is argued that our Lord's urgent command to "watch," His own statement just referred to, that He knew not the day nor the hour, the possible (though, it must be remembered, not certain ¹) rendering of 2 Peter iii. 12, and the early believers' anticipation of His early Coming, imply that the date of His appearing was always uncertain, and depended upon the faithfulness of His Church in performing her allotted task and preparing for His Return (see, e.g., Matt. xxiv. 14). On the philosophical side, it is felt that as the free will of man is thus, according to His own teaching, involved in the preparatory testimony upon which the Second Coming of Christ depends, therefore the fixing of a date would have been impossible.

These two lines of objection are obviously parallel if not interwoven, and may profitably be considered together. Is it a fact that a man's actions are predetermined, so that he is no longer a free agent, if they are foreknown? Some, apparently, maintain that this is the case. They consider that if it is known beforehand—even if known only to an omniscient God—that a man will act in a certain way, his action is fixed; he *will* so act whatever happens; his free-will is gone. That certainly seems to confound foreknowledge with predetermination. While admitting that the depths of these problems are beyond us, and that it is even unwise, under our present limitations of comprehension, to probe too far into the mysteries of predestination and freewill, there really seems to be no harm in exercising a little clearness of thought which is by no means beyond our limitations. It is true that there appear to be minds—even clear-thinking and deep-thinking minds—which cannot comprehend the distinction; and one wonders whether much addiction to deep philosophy may really not tend to elucidation of difficulties; and

¹ *Expos. G. T.*, though favouring "hastening," quotes Isa. xvi. 5, *σπεύδων δικαιοσύνην* (perhaps not very convincingly) as a parallel to R.V. rendering. Liddell & Scott give some classical examples which perhaps more or less favour its possibility. R.V. relegates "hastening" to margin.

whether, as there are doubtless fashions in philosophic thought as in criticism and in every other department of enquiry, students of philosophy may not be too easily contented with accepting as irrefutable the dicta of the leaders in such fashions, whereas people who stand outside find no great difficulty in detecting the pitfalls of pet theories. At any rate, if learned philosophers deny the distinction between foreknowledge and predetermination, that is no reason why any man should be in bondage to them or surrender his birthright of liberty in thought. Quite lately I came upon a quotation which shows that we shall not be singular if we do stoutly maintain this birthright. The source of it cannot be traced, as it occurs in some remarks of another writer who does not give particulars. But the words are exactly in point. Omitting a clause which does not precisely bear upon our subject, they run thus—"Foreknowledge . . . no more changes the nature of a future incident, than after-knowledge can affect an historical fact."

It is of course true that we ourselves, having no such power of foreknowledge as we have of observation and reflection, do not all find it so obviously easy to comprehend this point. But that is a very different thing from asserting, as it has been asserted before now, that even an omniscient God cannot really leave men free if He knows how they will use their freedom. Such an assertion would be presumptuous even if the distinction under discussion was absolutely incomprehensible to finite knowledge. But it is quite evident that many people find no great difficulty, whatever the demands of philosophic dogmatism may be, in comprehending here and now that a man's will may be entirely free, and yet God may know exactly how he will use it.

But let us put the matter to the test by examining whether such a phenomenon has ever occurred. And let us take one single case as an example. Many others could be found; but one is enough to establish the point, and in this instance the *data* are so positive that misconception is impossible. It is the case of Peter's denial. It will be observed that the philosophical contentions above referred to amount to this—that the issue of a free moral choice can never be foretold, even by God Himself. So that there are only two possibilities in Peter's case. Either his denial was not a free moral choice, and he had no alternative: or else these contentions are disproved, and it is possible for the issue of free choice to be foretold. No

reverent student of Scripture can hesitate for a moment between these alternatives. The truth is that if philosophers feel that foreknowledge would involve fatalism, the facts are against them ; and an ounce of fact is better than a pound of theory. The thing has happened ; and instances could be added almost indefinitely to the one already given. Therefore there must be some failure in the confessedly limited, because human, reasoning of the theorists. Indeed, a moment's reflection will show that the philosophical principle which has been examined would require the rejection of a large part of the predictive element in Scripture. How frequent are the cases in which predicted actions, which occurred in due course, involved free moral choice, and often repeated moral choice, on the part of the participators in those actions ! It amounts to this, that those who deny that freedom of action is possible in the case of a foreknown result are falling into the same kind of error as the denial that election is compatible with free will. As both are taught in Scripture, it is commonly agreed that the reconciliation between them exists, though it is above and beyond our present powers of comprehension. It is, as we have seen, far less difficult to reconcile foreknowledge with free will ; and it is correspondingly more rash to insist that they are irreconcilable. Many of us will feel that God would not be omniscient if it were so (the attempt to disprove this is not convincing) ; and we cannot allow any cast-iron philosophical theory to interfere with fundamental religious beliefs, especially as such a theory must at best be subject to the well-recognized limitations of human thought under earthly conditions—a perfectly puny implement of reasoning by comparison with the Divine knowledge.

There is one feature of the illustration selected above which is particularly impressive in considering this point. Our Lord foretold not only the fact of Peter's denial, but its accompaniments—the exact number of its repetitions, and even the detail of the moment when the cock crew. If a detail of that character could be included in a predictive utterance, there is no need for surprise if prophecies connected with the last times contain minute references to points of time. And if a moment could be so distinctly and positively foreseen, there is no difficulty in believing that a definite moment is assigned to the Lord's Return, even though an almost infinite number of individual decisions and actions involving

free moral choice are certainly involved in the task of preparing the way for it. God does not force the will to make a certain choice; but He does know beforehand what choice each perfectly unfettered will is going to make—who will accept and who will refuse; who will obey the Great Commission and who will not, and, moreover, the various degrees of faithful obedience. Omniscience is aware when the great moment of the completed task will arrive.

It was a great satisfaction to find, long after these or kindred thoughts had been revolved in the mind, that the general line of thought was entirely confirmed by a remark of Dr. Eugene Stock in a paper on the Second Advent at the "London Meeting of Lay Churchmen" in 1919. Dr. Stock reviewed three schools of prophetic interpretation, and declared he could not pin his faith to either, believing that there was truth in all, and that neither had disproved the other two. In dealing with the exact point under discussion, he wrote as follows (see the *Record*, Feb. 20, 1919):—

If I am right in thinking that the Advent might have come at any time, it is equally true that it must come some time, and that the omniscient God has always known when. Though He decreed no day, He could foresee the prolonged neglect to fulfil the Church's task and the eventual partial fulfilment of it. Suppose it pleased Him in His infinite wisdom to inspire prophets of old to mention certain days and months and years indicating the time, which could not be fully understood till the time was near, and therefore could not hinder watchfulness meanwhile, but which might encourage devout students as the great day drew nigh. No Christian can shut his eyes to the significance of the deliverance of the Holy Land from Turkish oppression; and no one can deny that the preaching of the Gospel to the nations may in a certain sense be regarded as nearly, if not quite, achieved.

By suggesting that "the Advent might have come at any time," viz., that the exact time depended on the faithfulness of the Church, he does not thus deny that God has always foreknown when this would be accomplished (as indeed we have already seen that our Lord distinctly declares), and that in that sense the date is fixed. Indeed, he expressly affirms it. We do not discuss Dr. Stock's opinion that the Advent could (theoretically) have come at a different time, in which case a different date would have been foreknown. We have not entered upon that. We have not touched the question of irrevocable decree. But it is certain that there is every reason to believe in a foreknown and fixed date, which however is unknown to us. Nor must a decreed date be ruled out.

And the words quoted supply a much needed caution against

that light dismissal of prophetic dates which is so common. What do such figures mean, if they do not denote points of time? If attempts are made to treat them solely as symbols, has anybody ever given a full explanation of the *variations* in such figures? If they are not intended to denote exact dates, why are we told, for example, in adjoining verses, of two periods of 1290 "days" and of 1335, and, shortly before them, in the same context, of another period corresponding to 1260? If these variations do not suggest different spaces of time, what do they suggest?

It is so very easy to say scornfully that it degrades the Bible to make it a kind of chronological programme, setting forth predictions in the form of arithmetical puzzles. That is quite a matter of opinion. And as the verification of such a programme forms so powerful a refutation of current views of inspiration, it is not difficult to trace the bias in some, at least, of the quarters from which such scornful judgments emanate. Many of us will feel, on the contrary, that the fulfilment of predictions of that character is a wonderful comment upon and enforcement of the faithfulness of the Word of God for which we cannot be too thankful in days like these.

Taking such prophecies as God-given signs by which we may recognize the nearness of His Coming (though not the exact date), as corroborative events unroll themselves under our very eyes, we may well be thankful. It is quite possible to understand why their meaning should only begin to appear more clearly as the time draws near and the events begin to unfold. And as to the argument that if these figures are contained in Daniel, our Lord would have known it as well as we can do, it is beside the mark. There is nothing to suggest He did not know it, or that He did not know much more about them than we can ever know, even while we see the course of God's providence being unfolded before us. Whether any of these figures suggests the actual year of His Return we do not know. If His words imply that He did not, anyhow at that time, know even this (many feel it may be over-precise to insist on "day" and "hour") that would suggest that they do not reveal it. But they may nevertheless reveal many great world developments that are signs of it. And the interpretations of reverent students of prophecy have been so strikingly verified in so many cases that it must require very obstinate adherence to a theory

not to recognize that the facts of current history, as well as of Scripture, are against the theory that there can be no fixed dates.

Such conclusions may well strengthen faith and evoke thanksgiving. They further convey their own warning. Our Lord blamed the Jews of His day for lack of discernment as to the signs of their times. And apart from any such detailed figures, which are remarkable enough, there are broader signs to which almost all official leaders of Christian thought are strangely blind. Or if they are not blind, they are still more strangely silent. The seething unrest in Church and world, the wide-spread apostasies, the unabashed ungodliness and "lawlessness" (a special feature of prophecy) in the present time find the plainest and most obvious key to their interpretation in the premonitions of Holy Writ ; yet we are still encouraged to believe that they are a passing phase which will be replaced by recovery and improvement in affairs in due course. Blindness in such obvious matters is even more blameworthy than in controversial questions as to figures and dates : and silence, if there be not blindness, is most blameworthy of all.

One final question. Though the date may certainly not be fixed for the great culminating event of the present age, is it lawful to refer the figures exactly to separate historical preparatory events ? The fulfilment may often be recognized after the event ; but is it lawful to encourage the expectation of such fulfilment beforehand ? That does not seem necessarily forbidden. Yet it is so obviously difficult to foresee with positive accuracy the course of development in the case of any particular historical movement, and God's ways often so very far transcend our most enlightened thoughts, that it is wiser to be very cautious. Broad outlines may be foreseen under the illumination of prophecy—as the future of Jew or Turk has been foreseen, and events vividly confirm the expectations formed. Or it may be possible to say that such and such a year seems designated for great and critical events of world-wide significance—and such forecasts have again been verified.

Beyond this it is wiser not to go. But is not this precisely what is generally done in those forecasts which are so much criticized, in spite of historical verifications ? Where are these instances of presumptuous prediction that are alleged to be so common ?

W. S. HOOTON.