

BIBLICAL ESCHATOLOGY:
II. APOCALYPTIC LITERATURE AND
THE BOOK OF REVELATION

I

THE METHOD of approach in this paper will be to consider briefly the fundamental relations existing between prophecy and apocalyptic, to compare and contrast the New Testament Apocalypse with the Jewish apocalypses, to review methods of interpreting the Book of Revelation in the light of this information and the principles expounded in the previous paper, and finally to glance rapidly through the Book, paying special attention to the difficult passages.

It has been customary among certain types of critics to compare prophecy and apocalyptic entirely to the disadvantage of the latter. Harnack, e.g., characterised apocalyptic as "an evil inheritance which the Christians took over from the Jews". F. C. Porter opposes prophecy and apocalyptic in this manner: they represent "two contrasted conceptions of the nature of revelation, two ideas of the supernatural, two estimates of the present life, two theologies, almost two religions" (*Messages of the Apocalyptic Writers*, p. 71). With modern experts on apocalyptic, such a position is mainly considered untenable, but it is still adopted by those who dislike the eschatology of the New Testament and are glad to avail themselves of an excuse to be rid of it.

It is best to regard apocalyptic as the development of prophecy, due to the circumstances of the Jews in the centuries preceding and about the beginning of the Christian era.

We have laid it down that the great theme of prophecy is the Day of the Lord and the Kingdom of God as impending realities. Apocalyptic focuses all attention on this event, showing how past history is related to it and the present is preparing for it. It is wider in its sweep than prophecy, which does not deal so much in the past as the present, and only deals with the future as it arises out of the present. Apocalyptic sees the future as an invasion of the powers of heaven on earth and so is more "transcendental". It is a philosophy of religion.

Since the course of the world is pre-ordained up to its victorious climax, its view of history is said to be "deterministic".

Attention is so concentrated on the coming Redemption that apocalyptic tends to become other-worldly to an extreme; whereas prophets thought of the kingdom in terms of this world, many apocalyptists gave up the idea of a this-worldly kingdom and looked for an eternal kingdom in a new creation. A healthy compromise, or rather combination, of the two views is reached in such a book as John's Apocalypse. To say that apocalyptists are "pessimists" is only true in regard to the course of this age; they are optimists with regard to the ultimate outcome of history.

Prophecy is oral, rather than literary, given in brief oracles frequently poetic in style; apocalyptic, on the contrary, is literary rather than oral, written in longer sections and mainly in prose. Apocalyptic developed a well-defined style, elaborating its mysticism by excessive and sometimes ridiculous symbolism. The symbolism, however, had a history; much of it goes back to the primeval creation narrative and by that very fact conveyed a message to discerning readers.

Whereas prophecy was largely personal, apocalyptic was almost entirely pseudonymous. It was written in the name of some ancient hero of Israel's religion. This characteristic had far-reaching consequences; it heightened the esoteric quality of apocalyptic (being supposedly handed down in secret and therefore made more mysterious) and necessitated the use of history under the guise of prophecy. The reasons contributing to the adoption of this expedient are still under discussion; whatever the outcome of research on the matter, it will certainly be found that deception was the least important factor; to speak in this connection about "forgeries" of wicked men is to betray a complete ignorance of this class of writings.

II

In comparing the Apocalypse of John with Jewish apocalypses generally, certain likenesses immediately become apparent. The former, as the latter, is a product of a historical crisis. Jewish apocalypses arose as the outcome of distressful conditions suffered by the innocent at the hands of oppressing powers; their purpose was to show that deliverance from God was soon

to come and that the righteous must therefore possess their souls in patience and faith. This characteristic is shared by the two apocalypses of the Bible, that of Daniel and of John; it was the former that set the fashion and style and the latter that brought it to perfection.

Then, too, the imagery of John's Apocalypse is similar to that of Jewish apocalypses. Moffatt stated, "To write an apocalypse meant, like the composition of a drama or sonnet, conformity to certain literary rules or standards as well as approximation to a certain spirit and temper. It justified, if it did not necessitate, the use of earlier fragments, which were only partially intelligible, since the agony of their hour had long ago passed by. Apocalyptic modified and adapted such sources to the needs of a later generation." All the apocalypses used the Old Testament as their main quarry for symbols; frequently such imagery was transformed in the process. John shares this propensity with them. The apocalyptists also borrowed these adapted themes from one another and re-applied them as they wished; there seems little doubt that John did this also; this is of importance for the student, as it is often necessary to distinguish between the probable meaning of the original source and the application made of it by John. Especially does this appear in his use of Jewish and non-Jewish allegories, which he sometimes takes over with the polemical end in view of denying their popular meaning.

Lastly, John's fundamental expectation of the future has many features in common with that of Jewish apocalyptists generally. This is hardly surprising, however, since the source of both is the prophetic teaching of the Old Testament; the Jewish apocalyptists modified that teaching to conform to later Judaism, John interpreted it in conformity with the teaching of Christ.

Over against these similarities we must set the contrasts of John's Apocalypse with Jewish works of the same order. The first point commanding attention is that the book is not issued under a pseudonym but in the author's own name. So ingrained in Jewish apocalyptic is the habit of pseudonymity that some scholars feel it impossible that the New Testament apocalypse can be an exception; but the consensus of scholarship declares them to be wrong. Closely linked with this matter is a second item of difference, that the book has no history under the guise

of prophecy. The latter phenomenon was due to taking over the name of a by-gone saint, for if the said hero was to issue any prophecy concerning events contemporary with the apocalypticist, it was necessary to bridge the period from the times of the saint to his own day. John had no need of such a procedure. He wrote under the inspiration of the Living Christ, not from the example, real or supposed, of Enoch or Adam or their relations; his was a message straight from heaven for the church of his day. This fact so impressed Zahn that he declared it sufficient to mark off John's Apocalypse from all others; this is the genuine product, all others are imitations! It is doubtful if we should be so sweeping in our conclusions from this one point, but its importance is rarely given due weight.

The item of crucial importance, nevertheless, is concerned not with form but with substance. Unlike all forerunners of this type of literature, the New Testament Apocalypse deals with the work and message of the Messiah who has already appeared on earth and was at that time active by His Spirit in the experience of His followers. This feature is sometimes curiously minimised by saying, "The only difference between John's Apocalypse and the Jewish apocalypses is that he substitutes the Christian Messiah for the Jewish one". It is as though one were to say casually, "The only difference between Jews and Christians is that the latter acknowledge Jesus as Messiah while the former do not". But that difference is everything! It makes them two religions, not two brands of the same faith. In John's work, the fact that the Christ has already come and wrought His redeeming act among men is central: the crucified, risen and exalted Lord is the chief actor in the drama; *He* walks in the midst of His churches, *He* opens the book of destiny, *He* executes the wrath of God, *He* brings the Kingdom to victory, *He* shares with God the glory of the eternal City. We have no hesitation, therefore, in asserting that this Apocalypse is a Christian writing, not a Jewish nor even a semi-Christian and semi-Jewish product. The question as to whether it is to be judged on the same basis as the Jewish apocalypses cannot be decided by its formal likeness to the latter; its relation to the teaching of Jesus and of the early Church has also to be taken into account and by the latter standard alone does it stand or fall.

III

In considering methods of interpreting the Apocalypse of John, it will only be possible to examine the main trends that have been followed by the mass of expositors. It will be convenient, perhaps, first to state them and then to endeavour to assess them.

Perhaps the commonest view among evangelical Christians to-day is the futurist interpretation; it assumes that the relevance of the prophecies lies entirely in the end of the age and has nothing to do with the time in which John was living. With this view is frequently linked a historicist interpretation of the Letters to the Churches.

The historicist view looks upon the book as a glimpse of the course of the ages, from the time of writing to the end of the world. A cleavage of opinion exists as to whether the book is one continuous narration of events, or whether it is a view of history in triplicate; the three series of seven plagues present a difficulty, however one looks on the book; for the historicists, however, the problem is acute, for naturally one's reading of history into the prophecies regarded as a continuous narrative is very different from that which sees the history traversed three times.

The preterist view regards the whole relevance of John's prophecy to lie in the then immediate future, whether the time of writing was in the reign of Galba (A.D. 68) or Domitian (c. A.D. 96). Most modern scholars take their stand on this interpretation, but they diverge considerably according as they use other subsidiary methods. The so-called Contemporary-Historical school endeavours to fit all the figures and imagery into the contemporary-historical situation of the apocalyptist and minimises the influence of tradition upon the book. The adherents of this view are severely castigated by Gunkel in his remarkable book *Schöpfung und Chaos* (1895), wherein he shows the foolishness of a too rigid application of the method. He favours the Traditional-Historical method; i.e. the symbolism is viewed mainly in the light of allegorical narratives that have been handed down from distant ages, some mediated by the Old Testament and non-canonical apocalypses, but others having an existence independent of current literature in an oral tradition common to the peoples of the Middle East. Yet others pursue

the Literary-Critical method, which assumes that earlier literary sources lay behind John's Apocalypse; an effort is made to distinguish those sources, interpret their original meaning and show to what use John has put them.

The confusion wrought by the adherents of these varied schemes has caused some to turn from them all and simply view the Revelation as a highly imaginative piece of artistry, whereby the sure triumph of God over all evil powers is described; no attempt is made to identify the figures in the book, it is pure poetry.

When reviewing these methods, writers are usually generous to all parties and endeavour to smooth the brows of contentious exegetes by suavely asserting that everybody is right. Such a verdict really means nothing, for the preterist and historicist expositors cannot both be right, neither can the historicist and futurist writers agree. A means of deciding between the various views is found if we recall the principles of interpretation discussed in our earlier paper. If it is true, as we there asserted, that the prophet views the End of history and the beginning of the Kingdom of God as impending, then the historicist view in every form is rendered invalid. To say politely that there is truth in it, inasmuch as God is always fulfilling His word, is beside the mark; the historicist view does not say that, it looks upon the Book of Revelation as a view of the course of the ages prior to the Consummation; if our principle is allowed to stand, the historicist view must be condemned root and branch as fictitious and we must not be afraid to say so.

If we combine with that principle the statement that "all descriptions of the Day of the Lord and the age it initiates are given in terms of the prophet's circumstances and environment", then the futurist view, as commonly expounded, becomes equally impossible. It is not true that John wrote, as Auberlen asserted that he did, for a generation far removed from his own time. He wrote for his own age and he had in mind the circumstances of the people of God to whom he belonged. The futurist construction of the Book that goes yet a further stage, and declares that the book is without relevance even to the Church of the End-time, but was written for a Jewish remnant that will appear when the Church is gone, is utterly beyond redemption; it is based on a complete misconception of the relation of the Old Testament to the New and violates all the canons of interpretation that we laid down in our former exposition.

What shall we say of the preterist view? In so far as it implies that John wrote for the people of his day and with the events of his day in mind, we must surely accept it. The persecuting beast and his satellite is the power of Rome and its cult of Caesar, standing in a similar relation to the first-century Christians as Antiochus Epiphanes stood to the Jews two centuries earlier, or as Babylon, Assyria and Egypt stood to the various generations of Jews in yet earlier times. Gunkel's research into apocalyptic symbolism shows that the same imagery is applied to almost all these powers, for they are all viewed in essentially the same way, as manifestations of the power of evil. For this reason it is misleading to remark, as E. F. Scott somewhat facetiously does, that John's prophecy of the destruction of Rome was so far from the truth that the harlot city actually became in due course the Holy City; John's prophecy would not have been fulfilled if the city of Rome had been destroyed in A.D. 99, three and a half years after his writing; for it was not simply the city of Rome against which John prophesied but the power of evil that incarnated itself in the Rome of his day. John's prophecy can only be fulfilled when the spirit of antichrist completely dominates the world-power, so that men and women range themselves for Christ or against Him, and that power becomes broken by the iron rod of the Returning Lord. The trouble with the preterist view is not the method but the unbelief of those who have expounded it in our day. The true view of this book seems to be that which reads it as a prophecy of the end of the age and the triumph of Christ given in the terms of the circumstances of the persecuted Christians in Asia Minor at the end of the first century. It is no more invalid prophecy because of its lack of fulfilment in John's day than was Isa. liii invalid prophecy because it was not fulfilled in the lifetime of Cyrus of Persia; God fulfilled Isa. liii in His own time, and since the Book of Revelation simply embodies in concrete form the eschatological faith of our Lord and His Church, we believe that God will likewise fulfil this vision in His own time.

IV

It remains for us to give a few hints as to the structure of the Book of Revelation. The Book opens with a vision of Christ,

who gives to John letters to be addressed to the Seven Churches of the Roman province of Asia; the whole set-up of the Letters shows clearly that they are intended for the entire Church of God also, though of course the individual Churches are in mind in the first instance. We note in passing that our principles forbid us from interpreting these Letters, as is so often done, as addressed to successive ages of Church history; they were for the Church of that generation and so through them to the Church of every generation. The vision of heaven that follows prepares for the unfolding of the events of the End-time. Jewish eschatology and New Testament eschatology are at one in representing the period of the end as marked by an extreme of wickedness among men on the one hand, and an extreme of judgment from heaven on the other; the manifestations of this judgment were popularly called the Messianic Woes. It is these Woes which are elaborately set forth under the figures of the Seven Seals, Trumpets and Bowls. We have already indicated that there is difference of opinion as to whether these three series are to be regarded as continuous or parallel; great names can be quoted for both views. It seems that the view which regards them as fundamentally parallel, without attempting necessarily to relate individual items in the series, is the correct one, for each series of seven appears to culminate in the End and the establishment of the Kingdom of God; the writer doubles back on his path each time in order to dwell more fully on some important matter that needs further elucidation. The fact of this scheme has been obscured by the way the first series of woes ends; the seventh seal is followed by silence in heaven, after which trumpets are given to seven angels. But before the angels sound their trumpets we read of the offering up of the prayers of the saints with incense which results in "thunders, and voices, and lightnings, and an earthquake" (viii. 5); these portents are repeated both after the seven trumpets (xi. 19), when the Kingdom has been announced as come, and after the seven bowls (xvi. 18), when the cry "It is done" has gone forth. Since the trumpets and bowls both issue in the consummation of the age, it seems reasonable to interpret the three series as parallel.

Logically, one would have thought that these three series would have been presented in immediate succession, after which the consummation should come. But John has separated the

visions, both from each other and from his description of the End. In chapters xii-xiv and xvii-xix he inserts two parentheses which show in greater detail the true nature of the earthly conflict and its issues. The struggle between the empire and Christians of Asia Minor is seen to be in actuality a struggle of the forces of Satan against those of Heaven. The present scene of conflict is soon to extend over the whole world, causing all to receive either the mark of the Beast or the Seal of God. It is in these chapters that the most startling discoveries have been made as to the use by John of the ancient saga of the conflict with chaos for the conveyance of his message. It comes at first as a surprise, if not shock, to realise that a book in the New Testament should go to such sources for its materials, but it must be emphasised that we are here dealing purely with the medium in which the message was conveyed, the latter is from Christ. Moffatt quotes an instructive parallel of this mode of teaching in the case of Luther: Luther used the familiar superstition about the wood of the cross being found and venerated in many parts of the world and said: "The cross of Christ is parted throughout all the world, and everyone meets with his portion. Do not you therefore reject it, but rather accept it as the most holy relic, to be kept, not in a gold or silver chest, but in a golden heart, that is, a heart imbued with gentle charity." Thus a crude superstition is made to yield a message of singular beauty and truth.

Similarly in chapter xii it has been demonstrated that the story of the child rapt to heaven from the power of the dragon was current in various forms in Greece and Egypt, while some features are reminiscent of the Babylonian Tiamat saga¹ and others can be paralleled in Zoroastrianism. The fact that John has used this story explains the strange omission of all reference to the life of the Redeemer and his death and resurrection. He has used this well-known story to set forth the fact that there is but one Redeemer of mankind who is to rule the world, and neither Apollo nor Horus nor Marduk nor any Saoshyant fills the bill; Jesus only has wrought atonement and He alone shall rule the universe.

Chapters xiii and xvii both describe a seven-headed beast that ascends from the abyss to make war on the saints and

¹ Some of the implications of this are set out in the following article, "The Crooked Serpent". The above remarks should be read in conjunction with paragraph 1 on p. 287. (Ed.)

attempts to wrest for himself the sovereignty of earth. There seems little doubt that the imagery behind this picture goes back to the creation story which tells how the monster of the sea attempted to subdue the inhabitants of heaven but was overcome by a god and chained in the depths of the abyss: Rome shares the characteristics of that evil power but shall also share its fate and be destroyed. In chapter xvii this concept is fused with the current expectation of Nero's return to subdue Rome and ravage the empire. The beast is both the empire and the personal antichrist who is the incarnation of its evil; of both it could be said that he was, is not, and is to come. The ancient power of evil existed once, long ago; it "is not", in the sense that it is now being held in check; but soon it is to rear its head and strike again, and will be subdued; this describes the persecuting work of the devil who is now using Rome as his latest pawn. The imagery is also applied to the personal antichrist in that he is to come as another Nero; since the latter had died but was expected to rise again, the language, "he was, is not, and shall come", admirably fitted his description. The Bible has a closely parallel idea in the prophecy of Elijah coming to earth again as a forerunner of the Messiah; the fulfilment of that prophecy is declared by our Lord to be the ministry of John the Baptist, who worked "in the spirit and power of Elijah". So here, the expectation that Nero would return from the dead to wreak vengeance on the empire was used by John to show that the future antichrist would work "in the spirit and power of Nero", as an instrument of God's wrath on the godless world-power. Then should the End come.

The End ushers in the Kingdom of God. If the simple fact had been noted that the binding of Satan in chapter xx was a direct continuation of the description, given in xix. 20-1, of the fate of the enemies of God (cf. their mention together in xvi. 13-16), the identification of the millennium with the Church age prior to the Second Coming would have been impossible; for the putting away of Satan coincides with the throwing away of the Beast and the false prophet into the Lake of Fire, i.e. at the Coming of Christ. Then, and not till then, do the martyrs and confessors reign with Christ over earth. It is very possible that the description of the City of God, given in xxi. 9-xxii. 5, pertains primarily to the City in the millennial age, though naturally the City remains in the

same state of perfection in the new creation, described in **xxi. 1-4**. The hostility shown to this view, both by the critics, who admit its presence in the Book of Revelation but not its soundness, and the A-millennialists who deny both its presence there and its value, is one of the oddities of theological thought. In face of all opposition, on the other hand, Charles states as his conviction that this is the supreme contribution to Christianity of the Apocalypse of John, and indeed was the great object of its being written:

While the Seven Churches represent entire Christendom, Rome represents the power of this world. With its claims to absolute obedience, Rome stands in complete antagonism to Christ. Between these two powers there can be no truce or compromise. The strife between them must go on inexorably without let or hindrance, till the kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of the Lord and of His Christ. This triumph is to be realised on earth. There is to be no legislation, no government, no statecraft which is not finally to be brought into subjection to the will of Christ. John's Apocalypse is thus the Divine Statute Book of International Law, as well as a manual for the guidance of the individual Christian. In this spirit of splendid optimism the Seer confronts the world-wide supremacy of Rome with its blasphemous claims to supremacy over the spirit of man. . . . Gifted with an insight that the pessimist wholly lacks, he can recognise the full horror of the evils that are threatening to engulf the world, and yet he never yields to one despairing thought of the ultimate victory of God's cause on earth. He greets each fresh conquest achieved by triumphant wrong, with a fresh trumpet call to greater faithfulness, even when that faithfulness is called to make the supreme self-sacrifice. The faithful are to follow whithersoever the Lamb that was slain leads, and for such, whether they live or die, there can be no defeat: and so with song and thanksgiving he marks each stage of the world strife which is carried on ceaselessly and inexorably till, as in **1 Cor. xv. 24-7**, every evil power in heaven, or earth, or under the earth is overthrown and destroyed for ever (*Revelation* [I.C.C.], Vol. I, pp. ciii-civ).

This is the outlook needed to-day in the Church, perhaps equally as in the days when this Book was penned—a fearless realism combined with complete confidence in Christ, and an ardent hope for the fulfilment of His promise. When the Church takes up again the prayer of John, “Even so come, Lord Jesus”, perhaps it will share something of the indomitable courage of the Church that echoed it in the first century and by the grace of God experience something of the power which the Holy Spirit bestowed upon it then.

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