

# THE EXPOSITOR.

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## THE IDEAL INCARNATION.

### REVELATION XII. 10.

To most readers of the Bible the Book of the Revelation does not reveal much. Its visions and burdens are as obscure to them as were those of the Hebrew seers to the Jews. But this mysterious Book is studded with brief ascriptions of praise to God, or to Christ, which, like that before us, at once commend themselves to their hearts. And it lends new beauty to these tiny psalms to know we have some reason for believing that St. John took them from the liturgy of the primitive Church, and that the Church derived them from the lips of the New Testament prophets.

*“Now is come the salvation, and the strength, and the kingdom of our God, and the power of his Christ,”* may very well have been a song in the service of the early Church; there is a liturgical roll and swell in it, as there is in all the songs of praise contained in the Apocalypse, of which the sensitive reader becomes instantly aware. “But,” it may be objected, “St. John tells us that he heard it in heaven!” True; but what is any inspired psalm save a song of heaven sent down to earth? And if *we* love the

psalms and hymns we learned in childhood, may not our friends up yonder still sing the songs they loved on earth? may not the Apostle have heard in the heavenly temple a psalm to which he had often listened in church?

The Book of the Revelation does not reveal much to most of us: but is the fault in the Book or in us? Surely it is in us; for how few of us have really studied it! We have glanced over it now and then perhaps; but, because it has not at once yielded up its secrets to us, we have closed it again, and pronounced it an impenetrable mystery. Possibly we have even treated this inspired writing with the immodesty, the impertinence, we often shew to any fine work of human art. A man of far higher gifts and wider culture than ourselves has compressed the thought and emotion of a lifetime into some noble picture or stately symphony. We look at his picture, or we listen to his symphony, and because we cannot take in—as how should we?—in a few moments what has occupied him for months or years, we say, “There is nothing in it. ’Tis a poor picture. Dull heavy music!” *That* is the very spirit in which we often deal with St. John. He comes to us with his book of pictures, pictures of the heavenly kingdom—the spiritual world of which we know so little, but of which we need to know so much. He offers us the dreams, visions, inspirations of the long solitary years during which he was an exile in the isle called Patmos; we glance hurriedly at scene after scene, picture after picture, and, because we do not at once recognize their true meaning and beauty, we push them aside as of no worth, at least to us.

Yet they are of the greatest worth. For his Book contains the story of the world as seen from heaven. It is the history of the conflict and development of the great moral and spiritual forces by which the human race is being recovered to the image and service of God. And it is mainly because we do not recognize the sublime design of the Book, it is because the gypsies of the Church have set us to hunt in it for dates and omens, for hints on the political events of the passing day and portents of the immediate future, that we have too hastily concluded the Book to have no message and no charm for us. If we would read it with intelligence, and come to love it, we must steadily bear in mind that the Christian prophecies, like the Hebrew prophecies, have many successive fulfilments, each larger than that which went before it; and that, still like the Hebrew prophecies, their chief value lies, not in their historical and still less in their predictive element, but in their moral element—in the fact that they shed the light of Heaven on the events of earth, and bring Divine laws and principles into the life of men and nations.

Let us take an illustration from the scene of which this verse forms part. St. John sees a wonder in heaven. A woman, clothed with the sun, brings forth a man-child, which a dragon seeks to devour. The child is caught up to the throne of God. The woman flees into the wilderness, and stays there in fear of the dragon for a thousand, two hundred, and threescore (*i. e.*, 1260) days, or, in the quaint notation of Hebrew prophecy, *a time* (one year), *times* (two years), and *half-a-time* (half a year), *i. e.*, three years

and a half. There is war in heaven. Michael and his angels fight with the dragon, the old serpent, "he that is called the Devil, and Satan;" the dragon and his angels are defeated, cast down from heaven to earth. He follows the woman into the wilderness, persecutes her, and makes war against "the remnant of her seed."

This is the Vision and the Wonder; and if we would at all enter into its meaning, we must glance at it from three different points of view.

First, we take the *historical* point of view. St. John wrote the Apocalypse toward the close of the first century, some years after the destruction of Jerusalem. And this vision may be, as some Commentators think it is, a symbolical history of the Divine kingdom upon earth up to the period at which he wrote. The whole human race, like the whole creation, had been groaning and travailing for the birth of the Redeemer, the Desire of all nations. At last He is born. From his very birth He is assailed by the powers of evil; the dragon waits for Him; Herod seeks to slay Him. At the very crisis of the conflict with the powers of evil, when the Jewish and Roman authorities seem about to triumph over Him, He is caught up to the throne of God: delivered by death from death, He ascends into heaven. And the Church, which brought Him forth, is soon persecuted by the evil powers which had set themselves against Him. Thinned by persecution, the love of many waxing cold, the Church of Judea, the mother Church, saw the evil days approaching which Christ had predicted. The Romans invaded Judea, besieged Jerusalem. Warned

by their Master, the Christians fled to Pella, and tarried there—perhaps for three years and a half, but we have no record of the time—till the sacred city was destroyed. Even then the Church's days of persecution were not passed. The dragon still made war on the woman, sending forth a pestilent brood of heresies and corruptions, opposing himself in an endless variety of forms to as many as "kept the commandments of God and had the testimony of Jesus Christ."

This is one way, and surely a legitimate way, in which we may interpret the symbols of St. John, and approach the meaning of the picture he sets before us:—

The Woman = the Church of God.

The Babe = Jesus Christ.

The Dragon and his angels = the powers of evil which, in the person of Herod and the Pharisees, Pilate and the Romans, made war against Him.

The Assumption of the Babe to the throne of God = the ascension of Jesus into Heaven. And,

The war of the Dragon against the Woman and her seed in the wilderness = the persecution by the evil powers of the Church and her children.

(2) But we must not confine ourselves to this interpretation and reject all others. We must remember that every prophecy has successive fulfillments, each on a larger scale than that which went before it. And, therefore, to this historical we may

add the larger *predictive* interpretation which other Commentators put upon it. And these say: In this scene the Apostle shadows forth, under the symbols and figures characteristic of Hebrew prophecy, the whole future history of the Church. We cannot now indeed recover the minute allusions with which his words abound; but the broad general scope of his meaning is plain. Humanity, the ideal of which is placed before us as a woman clothed with the sun, at last brings forth the Child who is to be the perfect man and to redeem all men to perfection. All the pure and heavenly forces enlist themselves on his side. All the evil forces array themselves against Him. He is caught up to the throne of God; *i.e.*, Christ, for Himself, has triumphed over the forces of evil, and dwells with God in an eternal peace, ruling over all the children of men.

His triumph is to be repeated, age after age, in as many as love and serve Him. But that there may be success there must be struggle, that there may be victory there must be conflict. And hence the followers of Christ are often driven into a pathless wilderness, seeking rest but finding none. Yet even in the wilderness God has "prepared a place" for them, and will "feed" them. They must fight against evil; but the forces of Heaven are on their side; the very earth shall help them: they shall at last overcome "by the blood of the Lamb, and because of the word of their testimony;" their final utterance shall be a song, a song of triumph,—“Now is come the salvation, and the strength, and the kingdom of our God, and the power of his Christ.”

Is not this also a true interpretation of St. John's words? *Has* not this been the history of the Church generation after generation, age after age, from the moment he wrote down to the present moment? Let us then take both the historical and the predictive interpretations, and say, "Both are good, both are true."

(3). But while we accept both these interpretations, let us also, taking our stand on these, look for one still higher and larger. These are only the historical and predictive interpretations; and, as has been said, the main value of prophecy lies, not in its historical or predictive elements, but in its moral and spiritual elements, in the fact that it sheds the light of Heaven on the events of earth. Now what is the great event of earth and time? It is the incarnation of the Lord Jesus Christ, with all which that event signified and involved. Must not that great event of earth and time have its counterpart, its ideal, in heaven and eternity? Must it not be full of spiritual instruction for us if, besides looking at the Incarnation from an earthly point of view, we can also look at it from the heavenly point of view, and see what it is like in the thought and purpose of God? In this *spiritual* or *ideal* interpretation of St. John's vision lies its main value for us and for the world. This aspect of it therefore we must endeavour to get clearly before our minds.

Now the earthly side of the Nativity is familiar to us all. But *we* conceive of the incarnate life of Jesus much more widely than the men of his own age conceived it. Think how it shaped itself to them. For four thousand years Prophecy had

spoken of Him, gradually converging to a definite centre, bringing its scattered rays to a focus, until it announced that "the Seed of the Woman" was to be of the Hebrew race, of the family of David, and that He would be born in Bethlehem of Judah. When He was born, the Shepherds worshipped Him as the Christ *promised to their fathers*, the Gentile Magi inquired for Him as *the King of the Jews*. Trained in a home Hebrew to the core, He confined his mission to the Hebrew race, and openly professed that He had not come save to the House of Israel. Even to the believers, the Christians of his own age, he seemed a Jew, and a Saviour of the Jews. It cost the Holy Ghost years of labour before the very Apostles could be taught that they were to go out into all the world and proclaim Christ as the Saviour of all men. St. Paul, indeed, although a Hebrew of the Hebrews, very gladly became the Apostle of the Gentiles, and taught that in Christ Jesus there was neither Jew nor Greek, neither bond nor free, neither male nor female; that all became one new man in Him. But, despite the commands of the Holy Ghost and the passionate logic of St. Paul, the first generation of believers held fast to the Jewish conception of the Messiah; the Hebrew believers deemed themselves more favoured than their Gentile brethren, simply because they were Hebrews, and many of the Gentiles came under the yoke of the Law in the hope that they might thus rise to an equality of privilege with the Hebrews.

Doubtless it was very natural that this local and national conception of Mary the Hebrew mother, and of Jesus the Hebrew babe and man, should be

tenaciously held ; for it was the outgrowth of many centuries. Nor was it possible to avoid *some* such localization of this conception. For if the Eternal Christ was to become man and dwell among us, He must obviously be born in some spot, of some race.

And yet a local conception of Christ is necessarily an imperfect and misleading conception of Him. What the world wanted and wants is not a Jew, but a man ; not the hero and prince of a single race, but the ideal and archetypal man in whom all races may recognize the very perfection of manhood. And St. Paul endeavoured, so to speak, to *delocalize* the conception of Christ, to detach it from all limits of time and space, to set Him forth as the perfect man, the Head and Crown of humanity, the Saviour of all races, the Ruler of all worlds, by the most forcible and impassioned arguments. But men are moved much more readily by imagination than by logic. And, while St. Paul appeals to our reason, St. John appeals to our imagination and heart. Instead of an argument he gives us a picture. When we go to him, and say, " Sir, we would see Jesus as He is," he shews us, not a Hebrew maiden in her cottage at Bethlehem, but a woman clothed with the sun and crowned with stars ; not a babe lying in a manger, but a man-child caught up to the throne of God,—a child, and yet a man, on whose side all the holy forces of the universe are engaged, who strives with and overcomes all the evil powers of heaven and earth, and who will repeat his victory in as many as follow his banner and espouse his cause. It is *the ideal incarnation*, the incarnation as it stood in

the thought and purpose of God, which St. John sets before us ; it is the nativity of the Saviour of all men and of all worlds, not the birth of the King of the Jews. It is the conflict of Christ, the Everlasting Word, with universal evil, not the conflict of Jesus of Nazareth with the wicked Pharisees and Scribes, of which we see the triumphant issue. It is the eternal salvation, the salvation of all races, nay, the salvation which extends through all worlds and systems, which is wrought by the man-child brought forth by the woman who is clothed with the sun, whose feet stand upon the moon, and whose head is crowned with stars. It is the ideal woman bearing the ideal man, not the Jewish mother and the Jewish babe, who are placed before us in this strange but expressive symbolism ; instead of Hebrew Shepherds and Persian Magi, Michael and all angels worship and serve the incarnate God ; the great Dragon and his angels take the place of Herod and the Pharisees ; the death of the Cross shapes itself as an assumption to the Divine throne ; the redemption wrought on Calvary rises and swells to a redemption wrought in the sun for the whole universe, of which the sun is the centre.

This was the form which the great event of time, the incarnation and work of Jesus, took for St. John when he looked down upon it from heaven, and saw it in its ideal beauty and perfection. And as he gazed upon it, the Heavenly Temple echoed with a song which fitly expressed the victorious gladness of his heart, " Now," now at last, " is come the salvation, and the strength, and the kingdom of our God, and the power of his Christ."

And, indeed, this brief exultant psalm very exactly reflects our own emotions, or adapts itself to them, as we consider the incarnation of the Son of God, whether we regard it from its earthly or from its heavenly side.

There were "saviours" before Jesus came to save his people from their sins. Moses is expressly called a saviour by the Voice of Inspiration. And David was a saviour. Nehemiah and Elijah, and Isaiah,—all the wise statesmen and eloquent prophets who helped to save the chosen people from their enemies, or their miseries, or their sins, were, in a most true sense, their saviours.<sup>1</sup> There was, too, a kingdom of God on earth before the kingdom which Jesus came to set up: for the Hebrew nation were God's people, and He was their king. But before Him there was no kingdom so truly heavenly as his, no saviour comparable with Him. All that came before Him were but as stars which a little relieved the gloom of the night; He was the Sun with whom there came a new day. When He took our flesh, bore our sins, reconciled us to the Majesty on high, heaven and earth might well affirm, might well sing,—“Now is come *the* salvation, and *the* kingdom of God.”

But the more we contemplate the salvation wrought by Christ and the Divine kingdom He established on earth, the more conscious we grow of our weakness, of the sins and infirmities which unfit us for a Divine service and blessedness. We say: “It is a great salvation, but how shall we ever grasp it and assure ourselves that it is really ours?” We

<sup>1</sup> See Nehemiah ix. 27.

say: "The kingdom of Christ is in very deed a Divine kingdom, a true kingdom of heaven, for it is pure and strong and bountiful as the heaven which bends above the earth and enriches it; but how can we—so polluted, so infirm of will, so inconstant of heart—hope ever to enter and abide in it?" And in such moods as these it is well for us if we too can hear the loud voice from heaven, singing, "Now is come *the strength*," as well as the salvation, "*and the power of his Christ*," as well as the kingdom of God. For what we want is just this,—the strength to lay hold on the salvation, and the power of Christ to draw us into the kingdom of God and to make us meet to abide in it.

Or, again, if we consider the work of Christ on its heavenly side, still heavier demands are made on our faith and hope. For now we have to conceive of Him as the ideal Man in whom all the powers and energies of humanity, masculine and feminine, are gathered up, as the centre, crown, life of the whole human world, with its various races, kingdoms, cultures, civilizations. Nay, we have to conceive of Him as the eternal creative Word, as standing at the source of universal life; as effecting a redemption, not for a single race, nor even for the Church alone, but for the whole creation, for all worlds and all their inhabitants; as conducting all the intelligent creatures of God through darkness into light, through the mysteries of life and death into the still greater mystery of life everlasting, through the seasons and cycles of time into eternity. This universal salvation we confess to be "*the salvation*," this universal kingdom to be "*the kingdom of God*." But *how* can we

rise to a conception so grand, so boundless? how can we believe, or even hope, that a salvation so great has been wrought, when we see the whole creation still groaning in bondage to vanity and corruption, and the races of men still plunged in guilt and misery? We can only rise to it and grasp it as we listen to the loud voice from heaven and believe what as yet we cannot see. In heaven they see the end from the beginning, the goal to which all things round, as well as the devious and obscure course by which they travel. And if *they*, with their wide clear vision, their insight into the counsels of Eternal Wisdom and Love, assure us that Christ sits in the sun, ruling all events; that in Him is not only salvation for all, but *the strength* by which all lay hold on that salvation; that He came, not only to establish the kingdom of God, but to exert *the power* by which all men are drawn into that kingdom,—shall we not listen to them, and believe, and hope, and rejoice? Will it be wise of us to trust eyes so dim as ours rather than their open eyes who see the truth?

O it is an infinite comfort to us, walking here among the shadows, to learn how human fate and destiny, *our* fate and destiny, shape themselves to the gracious spirits who look down on us from the unclouded light! It is an infinite comfort to us, as we advance slowly and sadly on our journey, to pause now and then and listen to the music of their song, and set our feet to the measure of its strain. And it should quicken in us the ardours of an immortal hope for ourselves and for the world that now, as, summoned by the vision of St. John, we

have paused and looked up to heaven, we have seen the Babe, who once lay in a manger, cradled in the sun, and have heard the loud glad voices of the heavenly host pouring over the walls and battlements of the eternal city to greet us with the song, "*Now is come the salvation, and the strength, and the kingdom of our God, and the power of his Christ.*"

S. COX.

THE FIRST CHAPTER OF  
THE EPISTLE TO THE HEBREWS.

VERSES 10-14.

NOWHERE in Scripture is there such a grouping of quotations, as in this first chapter of the Epistle to the Hebrews. It is a remarkable constellation, —all the stars of which are brilliant, while yet they differ from one another in size, and hue, and intensity of lustre. The inter-adjustment is strikingly felicitous. There is a fine combination of demonstration—the logical element, with embellishment—the æsthetical; so that the *tout ensemble* issues, to the appreciative reader, not only in a firm conviction of the intelligence, but also in a lively sentiment of the heart. Not only is theology developed and settled; religion is stimulated. And that is just what always ought to be in the handling of things spiritual and evangelical. It is a very special necessity in these days of wide-spread tendency toward scientific culture.

In the seventh, eighth, and ninth verses of the Chapter the writer shews, contrastively, the very