

OUR LORD'S VISION OF THE END.

NOTHING in the Gospels has caused more perplexity than our Lord's prophecies of the end of the world: for the obvious reason that they do not seem to have been fulfilled. Explanations of some sort are therefore very necessary. They have been offered in abundance, on extremely varying lines, agreeing in nothing but in being very unsatisfactory. They may be arranged as follows:—

I. Those that assume the truth of the predictions, divided into

- A. Those that take them literally, and assert that they were literally fulfilled.
- B. Those that take them in some non-natural sense, and assert that they will yet be fulfilled.

II. Those that assume the falsity of the predictions, divided into

- A. Those that charge the error on the Evangelists, as having misrepresented our Lord.
- B. Those that charge it upon our Lord, as having been Himself mistaken.

Class A in section I. is practically summed up in the person of the able and earnest author of the Parousia, and his disciples. There is nothing to mar the complete satisfaction which one may find in this solution, save the fact that the one event upon which it turns—the bodily assumption of the first generation of Christians—is absolutely unknown to history or to Christian tradition. However difficult it is to prove a negative, it is (to the vast majority of minds) still more difficult to believe in the

actual occurrence of so stupendous an event without one shred of positive evidence, direct or indirect.

In Class B of section I. must be arranged almost all the explanations offered by "orthodox" commentators. The discrepancy between our Lord's predictions and the event seeming to be so palpable, and the event itself being unalterable, the only course open is to manipulate the predictions, and to force them into colourable agreement with the event. Thus, *e.g.*, when our Lord says that "this generation shall not pass away till all things be accomplished,"¹ it may be asserted that He did not speak of the end of the world, but only of the fall of Jerusalem; or again, that "generation" is used for the whole Christian family (as in Ps. xxii. 30, R.V. margin), which shall certainly survive until the end of all things. But howsoever many and ingenious these endeavours may be—and even useful and praiseworthy in a sense—they do all suffer from this complaint, that they are unnatural and arbitrary. Sooner or later, therefore, they cease to satisfy, because men will not continue to believe that our Lord laid Himself out to convey a false impression. That He uttered dark sayings, the moral or religious truth of which lies deep down beneath the surface; that He constantly used metaphors and parables, which only yield up their fulness of meaning slowly and partially, and are capable even of being misapplied, is, of course, quite certain. But that, in speaking to His own, He deliberately used familiar words in a sense which none could possibly have suspected; or so ordered His sentences as to be inevitably understood to be speaking of one thing when He really referred to another; *that* is incredible. The mere suggestion is felt as a wrong to Him. He has not deserved it of us that we should think Him capable of what is indistinguishable from deceit.

¹ St. Luke xxi. 22.

It is the merit of all those solutions which belong to section II., that they recognise quite frankly the discrepancy between the predictions and the event; their *demerit* (in the eyes of most of us, probably), that they account for it by methods which are practically destructive of Christian assurance. If the Synoptists, all three of them, so entirely misunderstood our Lord in this matter, how can we ever feel sure that they understood Him aright? If the books which go by their names contain reminiscences in this respect so inaccurate and so unfair to Him, where can we feel justified in trusting them? No doubt there are good Christians and learned men who are prepared to accept this difficulty, and out of their inner consciousness, enlightened by critical acumen (which, however, differs in every one of them), to decide wherein the Gospels may be believed, and wherein not. To most of us, however, such an acknowledgment would be a confession of despair.

If, on the other hand, our Lord were (in part at any rate) accurately reported, but was Himself deceived; if He falsely persuaded Himself that He should die indeed, but be raised again, and presently be given back by the power of God to reign gloriously over His own; then we who have hoped in Him are of all men most miserable. For what becomes of all those assurances about our own future in which we have trusted?

Thus we seem shut up to a choice between assumptions, all of which are either impossible or intolerable.

All the while there remains another solution, which is not at all intolerable if we suffer ourselves to contemplate it patiently; and this solution is the simplest and most natural of all, if we approach the question from the side of holy Scripture itself. That this method, wherever available, is the right one, will hardly be denied, because our Lord Himself so continually referred those that questioned Him, or disputed His authority and claims, to the Old

Testament. His method of appeal to the Scriptures may indeed have its surprises and its difficulties for us; but there can be no uncertainty as to the entire conviction with which He leaned upon its authority and its witness.

Now if we betake ourselves to the Old Testament, we are met at once with the fact that the "eschatological discourses" of our Lord have numerous parallels and forerunners in the writings of the Prophets. The "vision of the end" is a kind of inspired literature very well known in the Old Testament, and very fairly well understood in all its proper features. If in years gone by this particular element in prophecy has been neglected, and has seemed of small account, or even of doubtful value, so that many readers and commentators have passed by on the other side and left it for a prey to the scornful, all this has only been by reason of the shameful ignorance in which we were content to remain. We know now that the writings of the Prophets form the true introduction to the New Testament; that "the Law" came in by a side door (as St. Paul says)¹ out of the true line of development, which in truth runs straight on from Hosea and Amos through all "the goodly fellowship of the Prophets," to John the Baptist, and so to our Lord Himself. The Pentateuch is not of course without its profound religious interest, but the New Testament unquestionably stands (historically and spiritually) in a much closer connection with the prophetic writings than with anything else, unless it be the Psalms. The simple reason is, that the prophecies and Psalms are the direct and natural expression of the actual religious life of the people of God, of the Israel which was His "son";² whereas "the Law" embodies an ideal of formal and largely artificial holiness, based on an isolation from the religious life of the world very necessary for those times of waiting, but out of harmony with God's abiding purposes

¹ Rom. v. 20.

² Hos. xi. 1.

for His Church. Whether from a directly religious point of view, therefore, or from an historical and literary, it is in the Psalms, and especially in the prophecies, that one has to seek for the roots of all New Testament ideas, methods, revelations. What the modern criticism of the Old Testament has taught us (apart from its uncertain, and perhaps unfounded, assertions) is in general only what St. Paul has told us from his point of view, that "the Law" is quite as much a development hostile to the spirit of the gospel as a discipline preparatory to it: only what St. John has assured us of from another point of view, that "the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of *prophecy*."¹ It is in the Old Testament generally, it is in the writings of the Prophets especially, that we are to seek the guidance we need for the true understanding of our Lord's vision of the future as declared in the eschatological passages of the Gospels.

We start, then, from this firm ground and proceed to consider the passages in the prophetic books which resemble in their general character those discourses of our Lord in which we find so much difficulty. The one feature, common to them, which at once arrests our attention, is what is called (from its constant reappearance and well-marked character) the law of prophetic perspective. If we take, *e.g.*, such an example as Joel's vision of the end—contained in chapters ii. and iii.—we find that it stands in his book, just as it stood in his mind, in the closest connection with a certain visitation of locusts. It does not seem possible to doubt that the whole of this highly rhetorical imagery of an hostile army, of its frightful ravages, of the desolation it left behind, of its sudden overthrow and removal, is nothing else than a poetical rendering of a more than usually destructive invasion of locusts. The terror caused by such an invasion is not in fact exaggerated. The French under Mélaç were not so frightful a scourge, they

¹ Rev. xix, 10.

left no such desolation and despair behind them, as the pitiless and insatiable army of the locust. Nor is the suddenness of recovery exaggerated when God is pleased to rebuke the enemy, and the land has leave to show what it can do (with Heaven's blessing) to repair the ruin which he wrought. This is Joel's burden: it is this, with the lessons which belong to it, that fills his field of vision. This; and, in immediate connection with this, the end of the world. "It shall come to pass afterwards"¹ is the only note of transition to the great outpouring of the Spirit, to the signs in sun and moon, to the great and terrible day of the Lord. All the rest of Joel's prophecy concerns the end as he saw it, the gathering of the heathen into the valley of Jehoshaphat, the special vengeance to fall upon the Phœnician slave raiders, the "multitudes, multitudes, in the valley of decision." Over and beyond the flight of the locust hordes, in coming and going; over and beyond the havoc and the return of plenty; the Prophet does not see anything, is not aware of anything, but the great day of the Lord, with its signs preceding, its terrors and judgments accompanying. The structure of the book is so simple that there is no excuse for failing to take this in; and certainly there is neither commonsense nor piety in endeavouring to disguise so plain a feature of prophecy as if there were something derogatory in it. No doubt it is surprising: the methods employed by the All-Wise, whether in Providence or in Revelation, always are surprising, until we have learnt in one thing after another to accommodate our thoughts to His.

Let us then take Joel ii. and apply to it the measuring-rod of time as known to history. Verses 1-27 are entirely concerned with a locust visitation of which we cannot fix the date, because no record and no special remembrance of it has survived, save in this writing itself. All we can say

¹ Joel ii. 28.

of it is, that, at the time, it was an appalling disaster which occupied all minds and all tongues in Israel. Whether it occurred towards the beginning or towards the end of the period of written prophecy, we cannot tell; neither does it make the least difference. Verses 28, 29 refer to the events of the Day of Pentecost (as St. Peter witnesses¹)—not perhaps exclusively, but in an especial way. These events were separated from Joel's age by many long centuries crowded with judgments and mercies of the most tremendous import for Israel and the world. Verses 30–32 refer to the last signs, which are to usher in the Second Advent and the Great Judgment. Our Lord Himself witnesses to this, speaking of these signs in the sun and moon and stars as the immediate forerunners of the end of the world.² Our Lord was very well acquainted with Joel's prophecy, and must be taken as having consciously adopted Joel's language. We know now that the end of the world was destined to be separated in time from the events of Pentecost by a much vaster interval, and one much more full of interest and importance, than that which came between Pentecost and the age of Joel. It is obvious that if we insist upon introducing considerations of time, we reduce this prophecy of Joel to an absurdity; at any rate we deprive it of any teaching value. It must be looked at from some other point of view than that of chronology.

It is not difficult to find that other and truer point of view if we are willing to learn the laws and methods of inspired prophecy from the Prophets themselves. They prophesied of the future as it was given them, and it was given them by way of (mental) vision. The Prophet spake of what he saw; and what he saw, he saw from the standpoint of his own immediate surroundings (in time and place), subject therefore, of necessity, to the laws of (pro-

¹ Acts ii. 16.

² St. Matt. xxiv. 29–31, and parallel passages.

phetic) perspective. Right in front of him stood some tremendous event of the nearer future, which formed his peculiar "burden." With Joel it was the locust army and its dispersion. With most of the others it was either the fall of Jerusalem or the return from Babylon. And behind this—*immediately* behind and above this—the Day of the Lord, sometimes seen as a single event, sometimes as a series of events. Everybody knows what the laws of vision are when one looks out toward a mountain country. The first lofty hill, whatever it may be, occupies almost all the field; and immediately behind this the higher mountains which rise above it, range behind range may be, all crowded together, and perhaps melting into one another in the haze of distance. These mountains may be separated from the nearer hills by immense intervals of plain, and from one another by impassable ravines or widely-lying valleys; but of all this the eye receives nothing. For it, by the ordinary law of perspective, these distance measurements do not exist: from the lower and nearer it inevitably travels straight onwards and upwards to the higher and more distant without sense of interval. It is exactly the same with the outlook of the Prophets into the future. What lies always in the background, what for them is the absolutely necessary *terminus ad quem*, the Day of the Lord, is seen *not only immediately beyond some great and crucial event in the near future, but also in direct connection with it*. Sometimes indeed the connection is so close that the two events are to a certain extent blended, and cannot be disentangled in the imagery employed by the Prophet. This is particularly liable to occur when the two events are morally and religiously *cognate*—as the Fall of Jerusalem and the Great Judgment; or the Return from Babylon and the Restitution of all things. *Time distance*, therefore, almost disappears in the case of the prophetic, just as *space distance* does in the case of ordinary perspective. It exists indeed,

but under such peculiar conditions as to become incalculable, and practically negligible when the object of vision is far away. No one, *e.g.*, studying the Prophets at large could possibly have suspected that the first and the second coming of our Lord would not only be two quite distinct events, but events separated by an immense tract of time. Lying, as they did, in the same direct line of prophetic vision, they were so far merged that the characteristic features of the one were constantly seen as if they belonged to the other. John the Baptist himself, although contemporary with the first advent, was yet subject to this law, and suffered from it. Even he transferred to the first coming some of the features of the second: the thorough cleansing of the floor, the gathering into the garner, the burning of the refuse with "unquenchable fire."¹ It was this which gave point to his prison query, "Art Thou He that cometh, or look we for another?"² For as he lay and listened with what patience he might in his dreary dungeon, he heard no ringing of the axe, no sound of the winnowing-fan, no roaring of the furnace; only the still small voice of One that did not strive nor cry, nor make His voice to be heard in the street, but went about quietly doing good, and talking comfortably to poor people.

It is not possible to overlook this law of prophetic foresight in the Old Testament, it is so constant and so marked. The vision of the end is indeed of vast and primary importance, for the end tries all, proves all, justifies all—even God Himself. But the vision of the end is always seen as the immediate sequel to some great event in the near future, and does in certain cases rise so directly out of it that the two are not kept clearly distinct in vision or in speech. The inner justification of this law is not far to seek, when one remembers that God is the same, and His workings are all of one, whether He and they be manifested in the

¹ St. Matt. iii. 12.

² St. Matt. xi. 3.

coming and going of the locust hordes or in the end of the world. Anyhow, the fact itself is indubitable: that was the way in which the prophecies of the Old Testament were written, because it was the way in which the Prophets themselves foresaw the future.

Was it otherwise with Him who speaks to us in the eschatological passages towards the end of the synoptical Gospels? It seems to us that, as a matter of fact, He *did* so speak of the end of the world, seeing it in His prophetic vision directly beyond and above the fall of Jerusalem, and not clearly discerning ought of the enormous time interval which was to separate the two events; so that in His words they are to a certain extent intertwined. But this fact would be in the highest degree disquieting if it implied that our Lord "erred" or "was mistaken" in this matter. It is because we recognise clearly that the fact in question is in essential conformity with the Divine methods in revelation—as made known to us in holy Scripture—that we accept it and welcome it as one of those "ways" of God which are so much higher than our (preconceived) ways would have been. For it is sufficiently evident that, while our Lord in His proper personality was unapproachable in glory and greatness, while in His work of redemption and salvation He stood alone and incomparable, in His *teaching* office it was not so. He taught indeed with authority, and not as did the scribes; but this was precisely what the Prophets had done, and what He did because He was "*the Prophet* which should come into the world." He taught sublimer truths, and taught them more incisively, but He did not (as a fact) depart from the methods used by the older Prophets. Moreover, it is abundantly certain that it was no part of His mission to predict for the benefit of His followers what was going to happen. He spoke of their future only in the vaguest and most general terms, preparing them for the persecution and

obloquy which lay immediately before them, but giving not the slightest hint of the course which Christian history has in fact followed. In a word, the element of "vaticination" (as distinguished from true prophecy) is entirely absent from our Lord's teaching. As He said Himself,¹ it was not good, and therefore it was not intended, for His disciples "to know the times and the seasons," *i. e.*, to have any chronological knowledge of the future: the Father had kept all that in His own hands. The one exception was the imminent fall of Jerusalem. Our Lord *was* commissioned, as the Great Prophet, as a minister of the circumcision for the truth of God,² to declare—as so many of His predecessors had declared—the wrath of God against the apostate city. And in declaring it, He spake after the same fashion as they, seeing before Him in the immediate foreground the frightful catastrophe of the final siege and fall of Jerusalem, seeing behind it and above it, without apparent interval, that end of all things, that final judgment of all men, which from a Scriptural point of view is but the analogue and counterpart (on a world-wide scale) of that catastrophe. In His relation to Jerusalem He certainly *was* "a minister of the circumcision for the truth of God," just as all the Prophets had been in their time and according to their measure. Assume that it was in this capacity that He spake in those eschatological passages, and how else should He speak than as He did? for how else should the vision of the future come to His human soul?

"Then, after all, you mean that He was mistaken, and that He misled His followers?" That His followers *were* misled is a fact which we have anyhow to allow and to reckon with. They *did* expect, for a time, that the end of the world would come in their day; and this expectation arose naturally enough out of His sayings. Being chiefly

¹ Acts i. 7.

² Rom. xv. 8.

Gentiles, and not knowing the writings of the Prophets, they misunderstood this vision of the end, just as so many modern Christians have done.

But to say that He was "mistaken" is perverse and profane, because it is to say that all the Prophets were "mistaken"—which is to accuse God of continually deceiving them, because He gave them their vision of the future in His own way, best for them, and best for us. If we take pleasure in confessing that the Holy Ghost, the Lord and Giver of Life, "spake by the Prophets," how can we thus disparage and insult *His* work, *His* method? It was a method worthy of God's Spirit, of the Spirit of Truth. If it was worthy of Him in the case of Joel or of Isaiah—inspired messengers and ministers of God—why not worthy of Him in the case of the Son of man? God who spake to us of old by the Prophets, hath now spoken to us by His Son; in this matter, wherein His office so nearly resembled theirs, He spake in both cases after the same law of revelation.

It need not be denied that when we find our Lord thus speaking of future things, with such apparent disregard or even defiance of chronology, we are at first staggered, and cannot bring ourselves to credit it. But that is, after all, only because we had so little cared to study, so largely failed to understand, the actual methods according to which the Holy Ghost spake by the Prophets. It seemed good to the Holy Ghost *thus* to impart to them that vision of the end which it was so great a part of their office to declare unto their brethren. Are not His ways, His methods, the truest and the best? Are they not most mercifully adapted to human needs precisely *there*, where they seem faulty and inaccurate to the hasty and superficial judgment? Is it not essential to man's religious nature that the vision of the end should be constantly and effectually kept before his eyes, and yet equally essential that he

should *not* know the times and the seasons, *not*, in fact, have any real clue given him concerning them? In the wisdom of God, this double necessity was provided for in His revelation of future things unto His servants the Prophets. Thus, and to this purpose, the Holy Ghost spake by the Prophets, giving them their vision of the end in that fashion which we find so strange and yet so undeniable in their prophecies. Why should we stumble at the same thing in our Lord? Why should not His vision of the end be as theirs? He is not here the Redeemer, the Saviour of the World, the Revealer of the Father: He is the Judge of Israel; He is the last and greatest Minister of the Circumcision; He is the Prophet of whom Moses said, "like unto me." If it was given to Him—as to certain of them—to see the fall of Jerusalem right before Him, and directly beyond and above that the end of all things, how could he *speak* more naturally than He did of what He *saw*?

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