

DR. SWETE'S EDITION OF THE APOCALYPSE.

IN the very interesting introduction which he contributed to Dr. Hort's Commentary on 1 Peter (alas! incomplete), Bishop Westcott has told us how the famous triumvirate of Cambridge scholars had agreed to distribute the books of the New Testament amongst themselves with the view of preparing a complete Commentary. "The Epistles of St. Paul were assigned to Dr. Lightfoot: the Synoptic Gospels, the Acts, and the Epistles of St. James, St. Peter and St. Jude to Dr. Hort: the Gospel and Epistles of St. John fell to me." Two books were not finally assigned—the Epistle to the Hebrews and the Apocalypse. "Dr. Lightfoot was unwilling to undertake the former, nor could I undertake the latter." It was a great scheme, and the parts of it which were carried out remain as a monument to the capacity of the three to have built up thus a great commentary on the New Testament. But, unfortunately for the cause of theological learning, Lightfoot and Westcott were successively removed from Cambridge to work, which made its further prosecution by them almost impossible; and Hort died, leaving only this unfinished fragment of his work on 1 Peter. It is a cause of no little satisfaction that several of the gaps which remained when Lightfoot and Westcott laid down the work have since been filled by members of the same University, working in the same spirit and with the same scholarly thoroughness. We have had from Dr. J. B. Mayor the Commentary on St. James, from Dr. Armitage Robinson that on the Ephesians, and from Dr. Swete (Bishop Westcott's successor as Regius Professor of Divinity), an excellent commentary on St. Mark. It is the same scholar whom we have now to thank

for a commentary on the Revelation of St. John not unworthy to take its place in the same series.

“It seemed to us,” says Dr. Westcott, “that the New Testament should be interpreted as any other book, with loyal obedience to the strictest rules of criticism, to the most exact scholarship, and to the frankest historical inquiry. . . . There were natural differences between us in the application of our principles : one looked primarily to the vivid realization of the original meaning of the text, another to the determination of the elements of philosophical theology which it contained, another to the correspondences of different parts of the Apostolic records which suggest the fulness of the vital harmony by which they are united.” It is not difficult to assign the three distinctions to their respective owners. Dr. Swete, it need hardly be said, shares the common ground of his illustrious predecessors. He has the exact scholarship which has been the sign-manual of the Cambridge school, the minute attention to form and syntax, and the wide knowledge of what has been written by the older commentators, which they had ; and he places it all at the disposal of a reverent and intense desire to ascertain the original meaning of his author. It is no disparagement of Dr. Swete’s method to say that it is more akin to the first of the three distinguished by Dr. Westcott than to either of the other two. A vivid realization of the original meaning of the text goes far to satisfy his ambition. As to the interpretation of the thought, he gives a wide selection from the suggestions chiefly of the ancient commentators, and for the rest inclines to leave the reader to form his own interpretation, by the application of the general principles which are indicated in the introduction. It may be doubted whether a somewhat bolder treatment of the larger problems of interpretation is not demanded by this book beyond all others ; and

whether, on the other hand, such treatment is not outside the reach of a method which, while resolutely sober and restrained by wide knowledge, is equally resolute in rejecting the possibility of "sources" in the text. This is the first English commentary on the Greek text of the Apocalypse prepared and provided with all the apparatus of modern classical and textual learning: it is probably the last of equal authority in these respects which will insist on treating the Apocalypse not only as a literary unity, but as homogeneous.

This is a distinction of vital importance for the interpretation of the book. The inner unity, of which Holtzmann spoke in 1886 as the foundation of all the more recent work on the Apocalypse, has since been effectively vindicated by Bousset and others. By that is meant the rejection of all theories of "expansion" on the one hand, and of "conglomeration" on the other. There was not at any time a Jewish Apocalypse which was transformed into our Christian one by additions and interpolations, neither was there a series of Apocalypses (Jewish or Christian) originally independent and subsequently combined. We have before us a "literary unity," in the sense that all the thought-material has passed through the crucible of a single mind. But that does not mean that all which is here presented was originally the creation of a single mind. Much of the language, imagery and symbolism of the book comes from a source which all can recognize—the Old Testament: and what is essential to a full interpretation of its message is to recognize that certain passages in it, from three to twenty verses long, have their origin in another mind, and are here adopted and adapted by the author for his own purposes. The true meaning of these passages, and their contribution to the message of the book, will be found in the discovery of the reasons why they were selected by the author, why

he deemed them appropriate for quotation, and how he adapted them for his purpose. It is this fact that we mark when we say that the book, though a literary unity, is not homogeneous.

The difficulties in which a commentator is involved who finds himself precluded from accepting this theory are evident when we turn to any of the crucial passages, e.g. the Two Witnesses, or the Woman and the Dragon. Commenting on the former of these, Dr. Swete rejects any historical reference, e.g., to Moses and Elijah or to Elijah and Enoch, also any allegorical reference to Law and Gospel or to Old Testament and New. "Rather the witnesses represent the Church in her function of witness-bearing, and her testimony is symbolized by *two* witnesses, partly in reference to the well known law of Deuteronomy, partly in order to correspond with the imagery of Zechariah." This may be, and no doubt is, a legitimate homiletic application of the passage; but is it a sufficient interpretation of it as originally written? Does it do justice to the very precise and minute description that follows? "These are the two olive-trees, and the two candlesticks, standing before the God of the whole earth. And if any man desire to hurt them, fire proceedeth out of their mouth," etc. The single point to which Dr. Swete attaches his interpretation is only one of many details: are the rest otiose? They may be so regarded, if we are guided by other indications in the context, and see here a quotation from an old prophecy about the Two Witnesses. The writer would then have taken over the whole for the sake of the leading idea, and of the transition which the passage provides to the figure, so important for what follows, of the Monster. The old commentators, patristic and mediaeval, were surely right in insisting that these two figures stand for two actual expected personalities, expected to appear in the flesh and

to be seen and known of men. If we cannot see how the details regarding them fit into the rest of our writer's scheme, then we have so much the more reason for following other indications in the passage, e.g. Hebraism in diction, abrupt transition to the prophetic style, localization in the material Jerusalem and affinity to familiar Jewish tradition, and tracing in the whole passage an older prophecy regarding Antichrist. If that were so, it would be the business of the interpreter to discover the point of contact between this passage and the writer's own scheme of the future, and the angle at which he sets the old in order to throw light on the new. The point of contact may be the indignities offered to the bodies of the witnesses, or, more probably, the mention of "the beast." Dr. Swete says: "The article assumes that this Wild Beast which comes up from the Abyss is a figure already familiar to the reader. Perhaps it points back to Daniel vii. 3, the Apocalypticist mentally merging the four in one." But Daniel's four monsters supply no true analogy to this single one, who for the Apocalypticist has no compeer, and is himself the sole source on earth from which other evil forces derive their power. And we may ask, is this the way in which a writer would introduce one of the two dominant figures in his book, if he were writing here his own thought? Is it not just the way in which he might introduce it if he were quoting from an earlier prophecy?

The Vision of the Woman, the Man-child and the Dragon is one which presents even greater difficulties when the attempt is made to interpret it as the direct expression of the mind of a Christian Apostle. Dr. Swete says that the Man-child is "primarily the Son of Mary." This is not a conclusion arrived at after stating and weighing other views, but a proposition which is advanced with the air of being self-evident; and it is supported by quotations from

Primasius and Bede. Of course, Dr. Swete is familiar with what has been written on the subject in the last twenty years, and could give his reasons for dismissing other views ; but it may be doubted whether his readers should be left to look elsewhere in order to discover that hardly any authoritative writer during that period has accepted this as the "primary" interpretation of the figure, or the passage as originally derived from a Christian source. The statement of Johannes Weiss is not one which can be passed over in silence : "The discovery of Vischer that the vision of the birth of the Messiah cannot have been conceived by a Christian remains, in spite of all hesitation and minimizing, an indisputable scientific fact." A conclusion so widely held and supported by so many arguments is not adequately met by the remark, "the Seer foreshortens the Gospel history." And the difficulties in finding satisfactory interpretations for the details of this passage are in their cumulative effect so great that the suggestion of incorporation from an earlier source comes to many as a great relief. The point of contact with the Apocalypticist's own visions is not the birth of the Messiah, but the descent of the devil to the earth, the explanation of his activity and his fury against the saints.¹

It is the cumulative difficulty of finding an interpretation of these passages consistent with itself and with that of the rest of the book which makes us very unwilling to shut our minds to the suggestion of quotation. Dr. Swete comes very near to accepting it. He acknowledges as highly probable "that the author of the Apocalypse made free use of any materials to which he had access and which were available for his purpose." He admits "the presence in St. John's book of the conventional language of apocalyptic literature." "Phrases and imagery which fall under

¹ See Joh. Weiss, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, p. 79 ff.

this category must generally be held to belong to the scenery of the book rather than to the essence of the revelation." That being so, the question resolves itself largely into one of proportion. If we recognize foreign "phrases and imagery," why not also a few quotations of longer passages? There is nothing to impair the literary unity of the book in the use of such fragments of earlier material any more than there is in the use of images, phrases and symbolism which were not the creation of the author, but part of his religious tradition. There can be no doubt that the task of the Christian interpreter is greatly lightened thereby.

On the question of authorship Dr. Swete is much more open to conviction by modern arguments than on that of the composition of the Apocalypse. At the close of a careful statement of the evidence and of the difficulties in the way of the traditional ascription to John the son of Zebedee, he describes his position thus: "While inclining to the traditional view, which holds that the author of the Apocalypse was the Apostle John, the present writer desires to keep an open mind upon the question. Fresh evidence may at any time be produced which will turn the scale in favour of the Elder." This caution, though it may be unwelcome in some quarters, is justified by the extreme uncertainty into which all questions concerning the personality of "John" have come to be involved. There is a growing disposition to attach more importance than at its first discovery to the evidence of "de Boor's fragment," according to which "Papias, in his second book, says, that John the divine (*ὁ θεολόγος*) and James his brother were slain by the Jews." This comes as a confirmation of the statement to the same effect in Georgius Hamartolus, which it has been the custom to dismiss as an insoluble enigma, in the face of the apparently well established tradition that "John" died in extreme old age, and by a peaceful death.

It also calls up into effective activity a number of obscure hints which had sunk into obscurity, such as Eusebius' two tombs at Ephesus and Irenaeus' steady refraining from calling "John" an Apostle. Two obvious objections to the authority or accuracy of the fragment present themselves. Could any writer of the age of Papias be expected to give the title *ὁ θεολόγος* to John? According to Zahn, it was not applied to the Apostle before the fourth century. Dr. Sanday thinks "it may quite well be due to the fragmentist," while Schwartz boldly defends the use of it by Papias himself, explaining it by the fact that John describes Christ as the "God-word." The second objection lies in the order of the names, and in the obvious inference that the writer regarded the martyrdom of John as having taken place previously to, or concurrently with, that of Jesus, i.e. before or in 43-44. Against the possibility of this, we have the silence of the *Acts* and the statement of St. Paul in Galatians (ii. 9), where "John" must be one of the Apostles.¹ But the difficulty would disappear if, with Bousset and Jülicher, we take it that the order of the names is due not to the historical collocation of the martyrdoms, but to some other cause, such as traditional pre-eminence, which might well be effective after the lapse of fifty years. That there were two men bearing the name of John, of nearly equal importance in the eyes of the second century, we know from Papias. If one of them, the son of Zebedee, perished before A.D. 70, and the other lived in Asia Minor until the end of the century, it is certain that many perplexities would be removed. The position of the younger, called "the elder," would become much clearer. "There would be then no difficulty in identifying him at once with the beloved disciple and with the author of the Gospel and

¹ See H. B. Workman, *Persecution in the Early Church* (Appendix B), for a clear and forcible statement of the objections.

Epistles.”¹ But for Dr. Swete it would have the consequence which he suggests as not impossible: “If the statement of Papias be allowed to enter into our calculations, it becomes a very important factor, for it disposes of the Apostolic authorship of the Apocalypse. If we believe it, we shall be compelled to attribute the book to an unknown John, who will probably be the second of the two who are named in the Eusebian fragment of Papias.”

The early date of the Apostle's death would have this result for Dr. Swete, because, following most of the more recent authorities, he accepts the late (Irenæan) date for the Apocalypse. In doing so he departs, obviously and admittedly with great unwillingness, from the view which was strongly held by “the great Cambridge theologians of the last century.” Bishop Lightfoot seems to have accepted the view “which assigns it to the close of Nero's reign or thereabouts.” Bishop Westcott placed it “before the destruction of Jerusalem.” Dr. Hort, in his posthumous commentary on 1 Peter, writes: “There are strong reasons for placing the Apocalypse not long after Nero's death.” Dr. Swete's adhesion to the later date involves him in considerable difficulties when he comes to the interpretation of xvii. 10 ff., a vision which, as he says, “seems to be dated in the reign of the sixth Emperor,” an Emperor whom he afterwards identifies with Vespasian. He has to suggest some explanation by which this date can “be reconciled with the traditional date of the Apocalypse,” and for once looks longingly at the possibility “that the Apocalypticist incorporates at this point an older Christian prophecy,” with alternative possibilities that he re-edits his own earlier work, or “purposely transfers himself in thought to the time of Vespasian.” Saving the remote possibility of two editions, there is surely a dilemma here: either the

¹ Sanday, *Criticism of the Fourth Gospel*, p. 253.

author uses "sources," or the whole book, being homogeneous, belongs to the reign of Vespasian.

The reasons inducing Dr. Swete to accept the later date are set forth in the relative section of his Introduction. They fall under three heads. There is the early tradition connecting the book with the reign of Domitian, which begins with Irenaeus. Against this has to be set the fact that, "according to other early but not ancient authorities, the book was written under Claudius, Nero, or Trajan." With this late date Dr. Swete thinks that "the general situation presupposed by the book is consistent," but he fails to show in any convincing way that it is not equally consistent with a date thirty years earlier. With the Epistles to the Galatians and the Colossians before us, it is difficult to maintain that the cooling of enthusiasm or the prevalence of false doctrine necessarily calls for the lapse of a longer period to account for it. Indications of date of a third class are rightly found in the legend of Nero redivivus, and the cryptic allusion to Emperors in chapters xiii. and xvii. But while the former of these indications may be variously interpreted, there is a curious discrepancy in regard to the other between the Introduction and the text. In the former Dr. Swete says that "in chaps. xiii., xvii. Domitian is described in terms as plain as the circumstances allowed." According to the notes on chapter xvii., the vision seems to be dated in the reign of Vespasian, and cannot be taken at the same time as an historical description of Domitian.

Dr. Swete passes over several arguments in favour of the later date which have been alleged especially by Professor Ramsay, and which seem to the present writer of at least equal importance. And yet even the cogency of these may be open to question. Professor Ramsay's arguments may be summarized thus: (1) The Apocalypse looks

back over a period of persecution widespread and involving many victims. (2) These victims suffered "for the Name," and not on the ground of alleged crimes (*flagitia*), and therefore not in the Neronic but in the Flavian period. (3) The Apocalypse shows the Church and the Empire engaged in inexorable war, and that is not consistent with the situation in A.D. 70. (4) It is most improbable that the Christians of Asia were at that date so highly organized in numerous congregations as they were when the letters to the seven churches were composed, and it is contrary to all evidence that they were at that time exposed to serious persecution and actual execution.

It is not a distinction without a difference to point out that the Apocalyptist does not regard the churches of Asia in his time as "exposed to," in the sense of already suffering from, actual persecution, but as about to be so exposed. He anticipates with intense vividness and conviction a persecution widespread and bloody: but he anticipates it. He neither assumes it as in progress, nor does he, so far as we can see, look back upon such a persecution within these churches of Asia at least as already past. Professor Ramsay quotes eight passages as evidence to the contrary, but only two of these connect the victims of persecution with any particular locality, and that locality is Rome (xvi. 6; xvii. 24). In xiii. 15 the reference is prophetic; in the other five passages it is entirely general and might very well be to the victims of persecution of which the churches in Asia had only heard, to those whose martyrdom at Rome had evidently made so deep an impression on the writer's mind. As regards the churches of Asia, the only definite allusion to bloody persecution already undergone is found in the letter to Pergamum, and the reference to "Antipas my faithful witness" (or martyr). Neumann's inference that Antipas was the only martyr that had as yet

suffered at Pergamum does still appear to be a reasonable one. The language of the context is quite consistent with a form of persecution which was not official and stopped short of death to its victims except in the one case which is singled out. Ramsay himself makes the remark that "on the whole surprisingly little space or attention is given in these messages to persecution": he might have gone farther, and pointed out that in the seven Letters there is no other reference to persecution unto death. These letters describe opposition, oppression, the need for endurance: they anticipate an advance on the part of the hostile forces to bloody persecution; but they do not go farther. Is not this absence of allusion to serious persecution as already experienced an argument for the early date at least of the letters? In that to Smyrna we find the anticipation of suffering thrown into the phrase: "Behold, the devil is about to cast some of you into prison": is that the way in which the writer would have described what was coming to a church which had already known a bloody persecution?

The argument to a late date from "persecution for the Name" as reflected in the Apocalypse also calls for examination. Professor Ramsay quotes four passages (ii. 13; vi. 9; xii. 11; xvii. 6). In only the first of these is there actual reference to "the Name," and there the reference to persecution is at best indirect. "Thou holdest fast my name, and didst not deny my faith, even in the days of Antipas, my faithful one, my witness, who was killed among you." In xvii. 6 the reference is to "the blood of the martyrs of Jesus," in the other two passages to "those that were slain for the word of God," and to those that "overcame by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony." Apart from any question as to the validity of the criterion applied, these passages appear to

provide but a slender basis for the argument that the victims of persecution recalled or anticipated by the Apocalypticist were martyrs "for the Name."

It is further said that inasmuch as the Apocalypse shows the Church and the Empire engaged in inexorable war, it envisages a situation which is inconceivable as early as A.D. 70. But does not the book itself contain evidence which it is difficult to avoid interpreting in a contrary sense? One of the facts most surely established in its interpretation is that the first Monster of chapter xiii. represents the Roman Empire and its heads (seven), the Emperors, in their predestined number; further, that chapter xvii. elaborates the same imagery. These chapters were written, as Dr. Swete admits with regard to at least one of them, in the reign which was reckoned to follow that of Nero, that is to say, before 79. But these are the chapters which most emphatically describe the antagonism between the Church and the Empire; and while Professor Ramsay's remark that "no such relation existed between the Jews and the Empire" disposes of the possibility of tracing these chapters to a Jewish source, they remain as a witness to the possibility that even in 69 a Christian writer could regard the Empire as the implacable foe of the Church.

Lastly, it is said that it is most improbable that at the early date the Christians of Asia were so highly organized in numerous congregations as they were when the letters to the seven churches were composed. That the churches were there we know, as to several of them, from the Epistles of St. Paul; that those addressed in the Apocalypse were more highly organized than those to which the Epistles to the Colossians and Ephesians were sent, there is little or nothing to show. It may be an inference from a very doubtful interpretation of the phrase, "the angel of the Church." On this point Dr. Swete is admirably clear:

“Tempting as it is to discover in these *ἄγγελοι* an allusion to the rising order of the Episcopate, the invariable practice of our writer forbids such an interpretation.” Traces of developed organization may possibly be found in the assumed freedom and regularity of intercourse between the Christian communities; but it would be hazardous to postulate that as a feature which marked only the ninth decade of the century and not the seventh.

If the general objections to the early date of the Apocalypse seem to be less cogent than has been supposed, more weight may be given to the positive indications in favour of its earlier origin. We have already drawn attention to the silence of the seven letters on the subject of bloody persecution actually experienced as pointing to an early date. As to the central part of the book (iv.—xxii. 5) it is noteworthy how much of it bears marks of an early origin, xi. 1–11, xii., xiii., xvii., and probably xviii. Two at least of these passages are in all probability quotations from earlier, possibly Jewish writings; but the probability of their being so employed by a Christian writer is certainly greater at the early than at the late date. On the other hand, there is nothing in this central block to suggest, still less to demand, a date nearly thirty years subsequent to the date of xiii. and xvii. As regards the remaining portions of the book, the opening and the closing sections, the early date is rather supported than discredited by the form of the eschatological expectation. The writer plainly expects the end, the return of Christ, within a very short space of time. His expectation, both as to its date and its manner, finds its closest parallel in 1 Thessalonians, and its greatest contrast in the Fourth Gospel. Not that there is necessarily contradiction between the Apocalypse and the Gospel; but there is development, what Mr. Vernon Bartlet has called “a growing disentanglement of

the abiding 'eternal life' from the changeful forms of its earthly history." It is this progress in eschatology, among other reasons, which compels us to put a considerable interval between the two documents, while at the same time the stage at which we find it in the Apocalypse justifies us in assuming for it a date not far removed from the Pauline Epistles.

It may be pointed out in conclusion that it is at the early date of the Apocalypse that Johannes Weiss practically arrives at the close of a minute and unprejudiced analysis. The only large sections he removes are chapters viii. and xv.--xx. ; when we add to the rest of the book the passages which he believes to be quotations from earlier sources or a Jewish Apocalypse, there is but little of the book left unaccounted for. He recognizes the work of an editor or redactor, but it is the great bulk of the book to which he gives the title of the Apocalypse of John, and concludes that its composition by a John of Asia Minor in the second half of the sixties is by no means impossible. His examination of the book leads him to set aside the tradition as to its date, which originates with Irenaeus, and it may be doubted whether, apart from that, it would have ever been ascribed to the reign of Domitian.

C. ANDERSON SCOTT.