

DR HORT ON THE APOCALYPSE

THOSE who reverse the memory of a loved master turn with natural anxiety to the posthumous additions by which the affectionate zeal of their fellow pupils supplements his published work. The valuable fragment of Dr Hort's exposition of the First Epistle of St Peter has fully justified the care which rescued it from obscurity. It revealed to a wider circle than the little group of those who had intelligently followed his lectures what may perhaps be called the intensity of his scholarship. The reader of those notes is impressed not merely with the extraordinary range from which the commentator draws his illustration of a text or of a single word, but yet more with the seriousness with which alternative explanations are suggested and investigated—alternatives often wholly unexpected, sometimes destined to be ultimately dismissed, but yet never failing to stimulate and to instruct. 'I wish he would give himself time,' Dr Hort one day remarked of a brilliant pioneer in biblical criticism, 'to consider possible alternatives.' It was his own method. The result of it was that his work ripened very slowly, and whereas Lightfoot and Westcott each did his share, to a large measure at any rate, of the projected Commentary on the New Testament, Hort laboured at his task, but published not a word. The fragment on St Peter disclosed for the first time his genius as a commentator; and this second fragment on the Apocalypse is worthy to take its place by the first. It is a solid contribution to the study of the New Testament, eminently characteristic, and therefore unique.

The Apocalypse, long neglected, has of late received much attention. The revival of interest in a book which had been discredited by fanciful exposition is due in part to the recovery of a considerable number of apocalyptic works, Jewish and Christian, leading to the scientific treatment of this class of literature, and suggesting a new handling of the canonical Apocalypse. At the same time interest was aroused by the

attractive theory which discovers a Jewish apocalypse embedded in the work of the Christian seer: and again quite recently new hope of an intelligent treatment of the book was given by the illustration which it receives from modern archaeological research in Asia Minor. But Dr Hort's lectures were written as early as 1879, before any of these special claims of interest had been developed. He approaches the book simply as a part of the sacred canon needing exposition, exceptionally difficult indeed, but certain to repay any labour devoted to it. The date at which he wrote (for the revision in 1889 hardly affects the remark) lends a peculiar interest to the comparison of the fragment now published with the corresponding portion of Dr Swete's complete commentary which has been written in the light of these newer considerations. Dr Swete's book must long remain the standard work upon the subject, and its value is in no wise diminished by the new publication, even for those chapters which both commentators have handled. The serious student will read both side by side, and the frequent contrariety of exposition will bring home to him at once the difficulty and the worth of the original text.

One or two examples may here be given of the surprises which Dr Hort's notes offer to the student. Commenting on the passage which is so familiar to us in the form, 'Every eye shall see him, and they also which pierced him; and all kindreds of the earth shall wail because of him,' Dr Hort writes:

ἐπ' αὐτόν] Cannot possibly mean 'because of him': doubtless as in Zechariah 'over him,' i. e. for him, the mourning as for a first-born. It is not, therefore, wailing because of punishment upon themselves that is meant, but the wailing of sorrowful repentance, the prophecy not being of vengeance but of conversion.

Dr Swete suggests 'at him' as the translation of the words, but he does not offer any further elucidation. Perhaps we now know why the Revised Version has 'over him'. This passage is immediately followed by the words *Ναί, ἀμήν*. Dr Swete interprets them as a double asseveration. Dr Hort is not content with this; he says:

xxii 20 [*Ναί· ἔρχομαι ταχύ· ἀμήν· ἔρχου*] clearly assigns the two words a separate force, *Ναί* the divine promise, *ἀμήν* the human acceptance

of it : and this is as clearly the sense in 2 Cor. i 20 q.v. Here, then, the two seem purposely brought together. *Ναί* seems to express affirmation or reaffirmation, divine or human ; *ἀμήν* human response and humble acceptance ; so that *ναί* might be rendered 'It is so' (end of Browning's *Saul*, ' And the little brooks witnessing murmured, persistent and low,] With their obstinate, all-but hushed voices—" E'en so, it is so ! "')
ἀμήν] ' So be it.'

The extraordinary ambiguity of the apocalypticist's language finds an illustration in the different interpretations which his opening words suggest to qualified exponents. The first two verses occupy more than seven pages of Dr Hort's commentary. This is due in part to the necessity of discussing incidentally certain passages of the book which are outside the first three chapters, in part to the possible alternatives which rise for consideration. It must suffice to point to results, without indicating the reasons which commend them.

Our readers must have the Greek before their eyes, and for the first verse without punctuation :

Ἄποκάλυψις Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ ἣν ἔδωκεν αὐτῷ ὁ θεὸς δεῖξαι τοῖς δούλοις αὐτοῦ ἃ δεῖ γενέσθαι ἐν τάχει.

Dr Swete takes the words thus :

The revelation, or Apocalypse, of Jesus Christ, which God gave to him, in order that he might shew to his servants [i. e. primarily the Christian prophets'] the things which must shortly come to pass.

Here Jesus Christ is regarded as the author of the Apocalypse : ' the title might have been *Ἄποκάλυψις Ἰησοῦ*, though the instinct of the Church has rightly substituted the name of the disciple through whom the message was delivered.'

Dr Hort, on the other hand, interprets thus :

The revelation, or Unveiling, of Jesus Christ, which God gave [i. e. granted, caused or permitted] him to shew to his servants ['not the prophets'], even the things which must shortly come to pass.

Here Jesus Christ is regarded as Himself revealed or unveiled in the book : this revelation of Himself He is permitted by God to make to the servants of God : ' the primary Revealer is God, Christ being both that which is revealed and the supreme or immediate instrumental Revealer.'

The second verse is the occasion of yet further divergence.

Καὶ ἐσήμανεν ἀποστείλας διὰ τοῦ ἀγγέλου αὐτοῦ τῷ δούλῳ αὐτοῦ Ἰωάννῃ, ὃς ἐμαρτύρησεν τὸν λόγον τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ τὴν μαρτυρίαν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ, ὅσα εἶδεν.

Dr Swete interprets :

And he sent by his angel and signified it [*sc.* the Apocalypse] *to his servant John, who testified the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ* ['i. e. the revelation imparted by God and attested by Christ'], *even the things which he saw* [i. e. in vision].

But Dr Hort takes it otherwise :

And he sent by his angel and signified them [i. e. indicated these events beforehand by signs, viz. by symbolic 'visions'] *to his servant John, who testified the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ* [i. e. the full Christian confession], *even the things which he saw* [namely as an eye-witness of the Gospel—not the scenes of the Apocalypse].

To weigh these interpretations it would be necessary to examine the various passages of the book in which these expressions or the like recur, 'the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ,' and 'the things which he saw (or, thou sawest)'. It must suffice here to point out that the interpretation of the book depends from the very outset upon the view held as to its authorship and its date.

Of this question of date something must now be said. Dr Swete dates the Apocalypse in the last year of Domitian's reign (90-96), and he refuses to determine the question of its authorship. Dr Hort places it twenty-five or even thirty years earlier, between Nero's persecution and the fall of Jerusalem; and he attributes it to St John the Apostle and Evangelist. This primary difference is reflected again and again in the exposition of the text. The obvious difficulty which arises upon a comparison of the literary style of the Apocalypse with that of the Gospel is met by the two commentators in opposite ways. Dr Hort, having abandoned the early Christian tradition as to date, finds himself able, in view of the long interval between the two books, to maintain the tradition as to their common authorship. Dr Swete maintains the traditional date, and consequently hesitates—we may almost say refuses—to identify the writer of the Apocalypse with the writer of the Gospel and Epistles. We

have the advantage of seeing each position defended with exceptional learning and skill by quite independent investigators.

A year ago in this JOURNAL Dr Sanday wrote an article of remarkable clearness and force, in which he called attention to recent work on this subject, marshalling and criticizing the arguments which were being used on either side of the debate. He inclined very distinctly towards the acceptance of the view advocated by Dr Swete; but he was aware that Dr Hort had left materials which might be published, and he expressed a desire that these might come to light before further judgement should be pronounced. He has now written a preface to Dr Hort's small volume, and he gives us to understand that his inclination to the later date is seriously modified.

In particular (he says) the old impression, of which I have never been able entirely to rid myself, resumes its force, that the historic background as Dr Hort so impressively paints it does suit the Apocalypse better than that of the time of Domitian. Can we not conceive the Apocalypse rising out of the whirling chaos of the years 68-69 A.D., when the solid fabric of the empire may well have seemed to be really breaking up, more easily than at any other period? And would not the supposition that it did so rise simplify the whole historical situation of the last five-and-thirty years of the first century as nothing else could simplify it?

Dr Sanday here seizes on the vital argument. It is worth while to transcribe Dr Hort's own statement of it (p. xxvi).

The book breathes the atmosphere of a time of wild commotion. To Jews and to Christians such a time might seem to have in part begun from the breaking out of the Jewish war in the summer of 66. Two summers later Nero committed suicide, and then followed more than a year of utter confusion till the accession of Vespasian, and one long year more brings us to the Fall of Jerusalem. To the whole Roman world the year of confusion, if not the early months of Vespasian's reign, must have seemed wholly a time of weltering chaos. For nearly a century the empire had seemed to bestow on civilized mankind at least a settled peace, whatever else it might take away. The order of the empire was the strongest and the stablest thing presented to the minds and imaginations of men. But now at last it had become suddenly broken up, and the earth seemed to reel beneath men's feet. Under Vespasian, however, the old stability seemed to return: it lasted on practically for above a century more. Nothing at all corresponding

to the tumultuous days after Nero is known in Domitian's reign, or the time which followed it. Domitian's proscriptions of Roman nobles and Roman philosophers and Roman Christians were not connected with any general upheaval of society. It is only in the anarchy of the earlier time that we can recognize a state of things that will account for the tone of the Apocalypse.

A broad consideration of this kind may rightly be set against a variety of allusions which appear to favour the later date. The question, which seemed to be almost closed, has certainly been reopened. My own particular studies give me no claim to interpose. Yet no one who has worked at the early Christian literature can have escaped the necessity of shaping at least some provisional opinion; and it may possibly be worth while, for the sake of other students, to record one or two impressions which are left by a review of the present situation of this controversy.

One great service which was rendered by the three Cambridge masters was the annihilation of what was known as the Tübingen position. Now whereas the Tübingen school depressed the date and disparaged the worth of many of the New Testament books, it somewhat surprisingly asserted the value of the Apocalypse, and assigned to it the earlier date. Westcott, Lightfoot, and Hort accepted this peculiarity of their opponents' scheme, refuted the conclusions sought to be drawn from it, and remained in possession of the field with a reasonable explanation of the marked difference in style between the Apocalypse and the Fourth Gospel. There must have been something of the joy of battle in this. The new position gained was of high strategic importance; and how powerfully it could be defended is shewn by Dr. Hort's arguments now published. But I have long felt, and I cannot get away from the feeling, that the adoption of the earlier date was primarily a result of apologetic controversy; and the question perpetually recurs whether we can properly acquiesce in the sacrifice of early tradition which it involves. The battle-smoke of the old controversy has passed away: both in Germany and here the outlook is clearer. Dr Harnack, for example, who has been carefully correcting several aberrations from tradition which were popular among his countrymen, has declared for the traditional date of the Apocalypse; and our own scholars have been recognizing more

fully the great difficulties of the whole Johannine problem. Dr Swete is undoubtedly right in seeking to separate as far as possible the critical discussion of the authorship and date of the Apocalypse from the question of the authorship of the Fourth Gospel.

The second remark which I will venture to offer is of another kind. It arises out of the study of the first three chapters under Dr Hort's guidance. It is right to remember that difference of style may be partly accounted for by difference of subject, and there can hardly be a greater contrast in Christian literature than the contrast between a Gospel and an Apocalypse. These three chapters, however, include the least apocalyptic portion of the Apocalypse—the messages to the seven churches: and the language of these messages is, in spite of a few striking parallels, equally remote from the language of the Christ of the Synoptic Gospels and from the language of the Fourth Evangelist. Lofty and profound indeed it is; vigorous, searching, authoritative; but yet cast in quite another mould. Obscure, but not from Hebraism; subtly allusive and allegorical, but drawing its metaphors from a wider area than the Old Testament or the book of nature or of common human life. The white stone with the new name—to give one example only—must find its elucidation, it would seem, in some Greek custom of religion, not in any Jewish practice or metaphor. The writer of the Fourth Gospel has a very definite conception of how the Lord spoke on earth: it is difficult to think that the same writer at any period should have represented Him as speaking after the manner—the quite distinct and sustained manner—in which He speaks in the Apocalypse. The earlier date does not help us out of this difficulty.

Nor, I think, does it help us to account for difference of style, so far as that is a question of grammatical construction. If it could be maintained that the style of the Apocalypse was due to want of acquaintance with a foreign language, then twenty or thirty years of residence among Greeks might account for a vast change. But the chief faults in style of the Greek of the Apocalypse do not appear to me to be faults of the writer individually so much as faults of the language itself in its decay. The instrument, and not the workman, must take the

main share of blame. It is not that the writer is ignorant of Greek—his vocabulary, on the contrary, is abundant—but that the type of Greek with which he is familiar has lost the precision of the older tongue. Fairly correct and precise Greek could indeed still be written: happily St Paul could write it. Why the apocalyptist could not we do not know. The Greek in which he expressed himself was more like the Greek of the Egyptian *papyri* and of inscriptions found in various parts of the Graeco-Roman world.

We have already noted an example of one fault in his style—its curious ambiguity; but I do not think this can be accounted a fault arising from unfamiliarity with the language: he writes easily, but without precision. A yet more obvious fault is his frequent neglect of what we regard as primary rules of grammar. Why does he often prefer to use the nominative in apposition to an oblique case which has immediately preceded, and sometimes even after a preposition? This is not ignorance in the ordinary sense: it is familiarity with a relaxed standard of speech, such as we find often enough in the professional letter-writers who indited the petitions and private correspondence of the peasants of the Fayûm. If this be so—and I would rather put it forward as a suggestion than assert it as a fact—then we are dealing with a writer who is quite familiar with one way of writing Greek, and would not be likely, say between his sixtieth and eightieth years, to acquire the power of writing it in a wholly different way. For there is a profound chasm between this manner of writing and that of the Fourth Evangelist, whose style is simple, and generally correct according to the literary standard of the day, specially notable for its linking of sentence to sentence with a mere copula, as a Jew might write who had learned Greek well, but preferred the less elaborate constructions of his native speech.

Since writing these sentences I have seen to my satisfaction that Dr J. H. Moulton, who has a far more extensive acquaintance than I can claim with the diction of the *papyri*, corroborates my general impression. These words of his are quoted in a footnote by Dr Swete:

Apart from places where he [the writer of the Apocalypse] may be definitely translating from a Semitic document, there is no reason to believe that his grammar would have been materially different had he

been a native of Oxyrhynchus, assuming the extent of Greek education the same.

Dr Swete, it is true, utters a warning against prematurely concluding that what are commonly called 'Hebraisms' are not to be allowed as an element in the apocalypticist's style; but that is not the use which I wish to make of the parallel. What I am suggesting is that the faulty style is not due to a *foreigner's* imperfect acquaintance with Greek, but is, on the contrary, the result of his perfect familiarity with Greek of a debased type. I have indicated what seems to me the importance of the suggestion, if it can be justified; and I have hazarded it in the hope of stimulating further enquiry.

We may say, with little fear of contradiction, that no piece of literature in the world has gained so greatly by translation as the Book of the Revelation. Where can we find language so peculiarly fitted to the thoughts which it interprets, so rhythmical, so sublime, as (to give two examples from our unrivalled English version) in the description of the fall of Babylon and the judgement of quick and dead before the great white Throne? Yet no book of the New Testament is so painfully ungrammatical, so cramped and distorted in its original Greek. Generations of patient scribes sought to mend its most distressing breaches of grammar and syntax, and to make it more tolerable to educated ears while faithfully endeavouring to retain the true sense. Textual criticism has no less patiently laboured to undo their work, and to reproduce the irregularities of the writer's diction. It has been a necessary and a fruitful task: for at all cost of form we must seek to recover the exact original in order to probe to its depth the message of the book. But a kind providence allowed this inspiring prophecy to be rendered into the English tongue before it had been thus stripped bare again, and at a moment when our language was ready for its noblest effort. Probably no other language has shewn such a capacity for rendering Hebrew narrative and poetry as ours. Before the Semitic syntax Greek broke down sadly, as may be seen in the Greek version of the Old Testament, which is often grotesque where the English is majestic. The Apocalypse is Hebrew at heart, and full of phrases borrowed from the Hebrew prophets: the Greek which its writer employed was far more

debased from the literary standard than the Greek of the Septuagint: the underlying Semitic phraseology is better matched by its English equivalents; the ugliness of a decaying speech gives place to the beauty of a vigorous language making its first conquests in the domain of literature; and so the translation rises to a height loftier by far than the original.

This book, which has fascinated and perplexed so many generations of English readers, has at last received adequate treatment. We have a commentary and a fragment of a commentary which alike commend themselves as critical, devout, and wholly sane. The solutions which have in the past been offered of its unique problems have often been so contradictory or so whimsical that intelligent persons have abandoned all hope of gaining anything from its study. Yet all the while its picture-language has been the joy of the poor and simple, and the most cultivated have perhaps best learned its power when they have heard it read to a great congregation, and have shared the common inspiration of the moment. To many these commentaries will bring a surprise of new confidence. They may not care very greatly whether the John who wrote this book is also the writer of the Fourth Gospel. They will care to know that the book brought a living message from a Christian prophet to men who sorely needed it—a promise of supernatural aid in their overwhelming difficulties, an assurance of certain victory for the cause to which they had devoted themselves with a passion which we can hardly understand, a warning to some among them in whom that passion had cooled, a vision to all and for all time of an immediate Presence dominating and to dominate the whole of human history.

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