THE REVELATION OF ST. JOHN.

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THE Apocalypse or Revelation of St. John is to many a sealed book, full of enigmas, strange numbers, symbolical figures, mystic matters and violent contrasts, with which human conjecture has been busily employed through all the centuries.

It recalls the Book of Daniel in the Old Testament, being written and conceived in the same style. There are many works written in a similar style, but vastly different, for they have not the same Divine authority in Jewish literature. Such were composed in times of national distress, and constituted attempts to offer an answer to the problem of the Psalmist (lxxiii), why the wicked prosper and the righteous suffer in this world of God's, if God is Almighty.

The object of the Book, like that of Daniel, is to throw light upon the problems and processes of natural and spiritual life. "Apocalyptik" differs from prophecy in this, that its subject is *scenes*, while prophecy consists of *messages*. Here St. John saw visions full of symbolical shapes. He relates his experiences which are for every age and place. The work is one: it is a revelation not Revelations, and is to be read as a continuous whole, as Dr. Swete has shown in his excellent commentary. It is written by the same hand, traces of whose peculiar Hebraistic idioms are found in every page. As Dr. Charles has shown in his *Studies* it is a magnificent film for the spirit, warning and appealing; revealing and concealing.

It grows in interest and intensity as we turn over its mystic pages. The scenes are marshalled with skill; painted with an art that makes its subjects live before us; and presented with a realism, now awful and now inspiring. We see the angels move and speak; we hear the shouts of the conqueror, the screams of the vanquished, the lamentations of the despairing, the voices of the heavens, the songs of the saints, and the anthems of redeemed humanity.

Many and conflicting have been the interpretations of it. In the first centuries of persecution the Christian teachers found in it a representation of the struggle between the Church and the Empire. When the Empire had been converted it resolved itself into a mystical narrative of the world-long struggle between good and evil. Augustine in his *City of God* develops this idea of God's guidance of His Church all through the ages. The Thousand Years' reign (xx. 3) and Antichrist (xiii.) presented the Church with problems to which various ages offered various solutions. The Thousand Years have been explained literally and historically by Irenæus; spiritually by the Alexandrian teachers, mystically by Augustine, and each school is represented to-day. One Greek commentator

Andreas (sixth century) combined the three methods. There is undoubtedly an historical background to the work; there is also much that is allegorical, symbolical, and cryptic in it; and the underlying principles of God's will, power, and righteousness can only be spiritually discerned, for they are Spiritual.

The problems presented by Babylon and the first and second Beasts, solved in the early centuries by persecuting emperors and pagan Rome, afterwards created a controversy between the Reformers who followed the Franciscan Abbot Joachim's (1202) identification with papal Rome, and the Jesuits who found the key in the future or the past. Ribeira the Jesuit (1601) declared that John foresaw only the nearest future and the last things, nothing between; and relegated Antichrist to the remotest period. Alcasar (1613) argued that the Apocalypse fell into three parts, the first, iv.–xi., dealing with the Church's conflict with Judæism which it conquered, and the second, xii.–xix., its conflict with paganism, the third, the closing chapters, dealing with the present triumph of the Church. Bossuet following on the same side referred the portions containing these controversial matters to the period of persecution under the Roman empire (*cc.* v.–xix.). In England, Sir Isaac Newton and Whiston were interested in the Apocalypse and found minute fulfilments of it from the days of Domitian to their own. The French Revolution gave a fresh zest to its study. At the present time some writers (principally German) find more interest in what they describe as its sources than in its subjects. Archbishop Benson saw in it a Christian philosophy of history, and others, following Eichorn, find in it a drama of the progress of the Christian faith. Some of these interpreters have seen some side of this many-sided book whose symbolism permits a latitude of interpretation.

Following a time standard, there are three systems of exegesis: (1) the Preterists, who see the references to the past, the closing scenes of the writer's life, or of the pagan empire of Rome; (2) the historical school, who find it a continuous history of what has happened, and is happening, and a prophecy of what shall happen; (3) the Futurists, who apply its predictions to the events to precede or follow the Second Advent of Christ.

Looking at the Book, we find that it arose out of an historical situation, the need of the seven Asian Churches for consolation and advice in a time of peril. The word *tribulation* (θλίψις) occurs four times in it. John is their companion in *tribulation*. He consoles them by giving them the hope of final victory and approaching glory. The whole work might thus be taken to be a sermon in pictures on the text of Paul and Barnabas, "we must through many tribulations enter the Kingdom of God" (Acts xiv. 22). See vii. 14: "these are they who come out of the great tribulation and have washed their robes," etc. Any doubts of God's power or will to save, he removes by making them fall back upon God, *The All-ruler* (παντοκράτωρ). The question of Divine Omnipotence, which some raised during the War, was raised then and answered,

in a manner that suits every age and every circumstance and place, and Church, and soul. Nine times the writer used this word, only once elsewhere in the New Testament, though found in Amos and Hosea, with deliberate intent. The word is rendered "Almighty," but means Ruler of all things. Here, then, is the answer to the question, "Why God permits such things to be." Because He is the Universal Ruler, things must move, if not presently, at least finally, according to His will. Good must eventually triumph over Evil, and after the destruction of the evil the Kingdom of His righteousness must be ultimately established. The same idea of Divine omnipotence is safeguarded by the use of the expression "it was given (ἐδόθη) to him" or "to them," i.e., Divine permission was given, e.g., to "the fallen star" to have the key of the Abyss (ix. 1), also to the "locusts" and "scorpions" (ix. 3) to do hurt, and on the other hand "it was given" to the Bride the Lamb's wife to adorn herself (xix. 8). This formula "it was given," one of the keynotes of the Book, used some twenty times in *cc.* vi.–xx., safeguards the Omnipotence of God. If the Churches of every age would but take this great thought to heart, they would discern His coming in every trial of the Father. For He is "He who is, and who was and *who is coming*" (ἐρχόμενος), another of John's peculiar formulæ (i. 3, 8). The last participle being timeless, expresses the fact that He comes in the great upheavals and revolutions of Church and State as well as in the orderly progress and development of the Church and the world.

To interpret the drama aright we must begin with the historical background of the nascent Church in its incipient struggle with imperial Rome which it was destined to conquer under God. Then we note in the Book many timeless expressions, timeless because they can apply to every time, e.g., vii. 14, "These are they who *come*" (ἐρχόμενοι), i.e., those who in every age come out of the great conflict, for in every age there are critical times for the faith; and xiv. 13, "Blessed are the dead who die (ἀποθνήσκοντες), (*i.e.*, in every age) in the Lord." The tense is timeless for the sense is continuous. The epistles are addressed to the Churches of every locality and generation. They are seven, a number that signifies completeness, universality, catholicity. They comprehend every variety of Christian life and religious experience, the humble and the proud, the devoted and the selfish, the spiritual and the worldly, the feeble and the strong. And they blend admonitions with encouragements, warnings and conditions which shall be to every Church of every age and place, that is to be. The application of the lessons of the Book is accordingly continuous, and catholic. Every age and every Church must receive these words as addressed to them. This universal feature of the Apocalypse distinguishes it from the purely national apocalypses of the Jewish Church, and is the seal of its inspiration. And finally, we must look for the complete and spiritual fulfilment of the words and scenes of this mystic roll in the future.

In our exegesis of the work we must not overlook the writer's

predominant line of thought, the spiritual. It was from above that he beheld the things on earth. His was the same eternal problem of suffering and sorrow that we have, while the current affairs of his time gave him his background. He is dealing with the various vicissitudes of Christian folk in the world, and because he regards them from the vantage-ground of heaven, he is enabled to discover in them the real principles that are embodied in the progress of human life and the process of the suns. If he contemplates the heaven from the side of the earth, he regards the earth from the side of heaven. Thus he was enabled to see with an intensified insight into human affairs as they appeared to God, and into heavenly matters as they appeared to an inspired man, to see the heavenly beauty of goodness and the earthly ugliness of sin.

In his symbolical visions he describes in concrete images the spiritual wickedness in high places which St. Paul mentioned, and also the glory of the Christ, which all Christians desired and desire to behold. And behind the fleeting episodes of human life, the floating opinions of men, the changes and chances of time, he, looking from above, saw—as with the rays of an intense penetrating and prophetic light—the spiritual and eternal principles of God's righteousness and love contending with the spiritual but non-eternal principles of evil and hate. And thus to the apocalyptic or unveiling vision of the seer, the inner working, the secret meaning of the universe were disclosed by the Spirit of God.

This is the clue that we are to follow as we endeavour to thread our way through the mazes of this mystic scroll. And as we keep the standpoint of the writer before us we shall see a new light upon the dark page. The prophecy of the Beast is applicable to the Neros and Domitians of every age ; while every period of spiritual progress and light may be identified with the thousand years (an indefinite period) of saintly rule. We shall also be able to see the Lord's reason for giving such an unveiling of the inner principles and motives and tendencies to his disciple, to be communicated through him to the faithful of all time. Man has many desires, many yearnings which all mean something and must in some way be satisfied. One of these yearnings is for light on the future. How was God to satisfy such a yearning without forestalling the regular development of events ; or discouraging his own faithful servants by what would bring them sadness or sorrow ; or encouraging them so greatly by the prospect of future glory and victory as to induce present inactivity and a dangerous sense of security ? He moved aside the veil for his servant to have a fleeting glimpse of the Divine power and purpose that have been working and worked out in the universe and the life of man from the beginning, but in enigmatical forms and mysterious images which baffle curiosity, but satisfy the believing who cannot but derive help and comfort from its pages in all earthly vicissitudes and troubles. For here is God's response to man's desire for light on the future. Sufficient has been said to give an impression of the

real and spiritual unity of this great drama and to show that it is not the least interesting and edifying of the books of the New Testament.

Following this line of interpretation we cannot regard the allegorical figures of the first and second Beasts and others (*c.* xiii.), as exhausted by any concrete examples of hideous cruelty, immorality and godlessness in the past. No doubt they were the Beasts of the Apocalypse for their own age. But the type has reappeared in every successive age, just as the contrasted types of goodness and godliness have. The Beast, whose number is enigmatical, 666, and surely not intended to serve as a puzzle for the ingenious, is the particular world-power of any particular age which identifies itself most thoroughly with that movement against God, virtue and religion, which has been engineered in every successive age by the hostile spirit, the enemy of God and man. In these days Soviet Russia best answers to this description, and Communism which supports it and heals its deadly wound is the second beast (xiii. 11). The very methods of both the beasts have unfortunately for many helpless sections of humanity been permitted to be put into force in the last couple of years. The peculiarity of the strange number 666, is, that it can be made to correspond with most names, and so it supports the contention that there are such Beasts in every age and all fall short of completeness, the success they aim at, the number six denoting incompleteness, and here it is three times repeated for emphasis. And in connection with the first Beast is another terrible allegorical figure—the great Impure one, the Mystery-city of Babylon, undoubtedly the capital city of the world-power represented by the first Beast, for she is seated on a *scarlet*-coloured beast, doubtless to be identified with the wild beast from the sea (xiii. 1, 14; cf. xix. 20); i.e., the world-power regarded as an enemy of Christ and the Church, and ruling by brute force (Swete).

And this figure recalls various terrible happenings in Petrograd, Moscow, and other cities as well as in pagan Rome. The consolation offered by the prophet to every age is that the power to hurt of such a state must be finally overcome.

Another much-discussed figure is the Rider of the White Horse (vi. 2), who carries a bow and receives a conqueror's crown. He is not to be identified with the Rider of the White Horse in xix. 11 ff. whose name is the Word of God. As Dr. Swete said, "the two riders have nothing in common beyond the white horse; the details are distinct," and a vision of the victorious Christ would be inappropriate at the opening of a series which symbolises bloodshed, famine and pestilence. Rather we have here a picture of triumphant militarism. This was made clear to everyone in the world-famous film of the Four Horsemen.[1] It was Conquest or the Lust of Conquest attended by his servants, war, death and famine that was answerable for the Great War.

Under the allegorical form of armed "locusts" and "scorpions"

[1] Directed by Rex Ingram, son of the writer.

(*c.* ix.), other hostile forces are represented who were permitted to harass the human race for a time. The Parthians, the Huns, Vandals, Goths, and various swarms of ruthless invaders might be brought under this category. Of the present era the conduct of the Turks in Armenia would place them in it. The allegorical figure with which the second portion of the Book opens in *c.* xii. —the woman clothed with the sun and crowned with the stars attacked in her travail by the *red* dragon, and delivered eventually of a male child is another problem. What the writer thought it meant we cannot say. Many suggestions have been offered such as, the Blessed Virgin and the Christ, and the Church and Christ, inasmuch as "the Church is always bearing." An early commentator said that the woman was the Ancient Church of the prophets and apostles, which was always in a state of unhappy eagerness and restless desire until it saw that the Christ had taken His humanity from her nation. But as this woman was afterwards persecuted for her faith in Christ (v. 13), she is not to be identified with the Jewish Church which rejected Christ, but with the Church of the prophets and apostles who believed in Christ who were Jews indeed, but were rejected by the Jewish Church. It is more likely the "City of God," as Augustine saw, that is here represented, which safeguards the truth of the Incarnation, and which produces sons of Christ and so to use St. Paul's figure, begets men "in Christ." Another symbolical figure of the Church is the *Bride* (xix. 7) arrayed simply in a robe of fine linen, representing the righteousness of the saints; and in xxi. 2, the New City Jerusalem, also called His Bride, representing a holy city and a pure woman as finally triumphant over the wicked woman and the evil city of Babylon. These, and the four living creatures of *c.* vi., and greatest of all, the Lamb-like figure of Christ in v. 6. with seven horns denoting the completion of his power, and with seven eyes expressing the fullness of his illumination, are the most striking symbolical figures of this wonderful work, in which every detail has a hidden meaning, e.g., the numbers, the stars, stones, colours, horns, eyes, linen—all are intended to suggest a moral or spiritual equivalent. The mystic number "three" is the signature of the Divine, "four" is the signature of the creation, four angels, four living creatures, four winds; seven of perfection, seven spirits, seven churches, seven angels, seven lamps, etc. Twelve is the signature of the people of God, His elect; ten means a perfect whole, e.g., ten commandments; five, a relative imperfection; and six, failure to reach completion, also a symbol of human power (Gen. i. 25).

The Book opens with a prologue (*cc.* i.–iii.) containing the Vision of Christ and the seven letters to the seven churches. This is followed by seven chief visions:

1. The Seven Seals and Trumpets (*cc.* iv.–xi.).
2. The Woman and her Child (*cc.* xii.–xiv.). The dragon and the beast.
3. The seven vials containing the seven last plagues (*cc.* xv.–xviii.).

4. The warrior and the two beasts (*c.* xix.).
5. The thousand years' reign followed by the overthrow of the dragon (*c.* xx.).
6. The New City (*c.* xxi.).
7. The New Life (*c.* xxii. 1–5).

These visions are followed by an epilogue (*c.* xxii. 6–21). There seems to be an orderly progress and a dramatic development in the stages and scenes of this work which gives it the appearance of an organic whole.

Mr. Albert Mitchell is recognised as one of the leaders of the Evangelical members in the Church Assembly, and has won for himself a position of influence by his intimate knowledge of the history and doctrine of our Church. In a short account of *The Faith of an English Churchman* (Longmans, Green & Co., 2*s.* 6*d.* net), he has given an outline of doctrine specially designed for the instruction of the younger generation. In simple form he explains some of the fundamental teaching of our Faith, and deals with some deep problems in language that has the merit of the lucidity which is produced by clarity of thought. Illustrated by ample Scriptural references taken chiefly from the American Standard Version of the Bible, he commences with the Fatherhood of God, and proceeds by well-ordered gradation to the Trinity, the Incarnation, the Holy Spirit, the Divine Sovereignty, the Flock of God, the Word and Sacraments, the New Birth—and Baptism, the Lord's Supper, Personal Religion, the Ministry, the Mission of the Church, Forgiveness—and Some Results, the Unseen World, and the Returning Lord. Although each chapter is brief it goes to the heart of its subject, and especially in those portions on which division of opinion is greatest, leaves no doubt of the author's position and the strong Scriptural foundation on which it is based. It is essentially an Evangelical book and will be welcomed by Evangelical Churchpeople as a clear exposition of Evangelical teaching.