

LECTURE IV.

THE INTERPRETATION OF THE APOCALYPSE.

FROM the structure and plan of the Apocalypse we have now to proceed to the principles to be applied in its interpretation. Upon this point, as upon every other connected with the book, the widest diversity of opinion has prevailed, or still prevails; and some notice of these divergent views it is impossible to omit. They rather claim our first attention, because it would seem that, for the most part at least, they must be set aside; and because, after setting them aside, the field will be cleared for the further prosecution of our task.

I. The first system of interpretation to be noticed is that known as the historical, or the continuously historical. According to it the Apocalypse contains a brief sketch of the Church's progress from her first propagation to her consummation in glory.¹ The most important crises in the history both of the Church and of the world find a place in it; and the book establishes alike its Divine origin and its value by the minuteness of its manifold predictions, and by the

¹ Daubuz, *Prel. Disc.*, p. 16.

wonderful accuracy with which they have been fulfilled. No system of interpretation has exercised so powerful an influence over those who have concerned themselves with the study of this book. From the thirteenth century until recently it may be said to have had undisputed possession of the minds of men.¹ It rallied to it, especially in the different branches of the Reformed Church, the most distinguished expositors. It pervaded largely the writings even of many who did not accept it as a whole.² It not only awakened the interest but secured the enthusiastic submission of thousands upon thousands of pious minds. To this day no belief is more commonly entertained than that in the visions of St. John we may read of the establishment of Christianity under Constantine, of Mohammed, of the Papacy, of the Reformation in the sixteenth century, of the French Revolution, of not a few in short of the greatest movements by which, since the beginning of the Christian era, the Church and the world have been stirred.

The objections to this system are fatal to it.

One alone might suffice. It is impossible to reconcile with it those particulars regarding the conception, the structure, and the plan of the book that

¹ The Abbot Joachim, at Floris in Calabria, is generally recognised as the earliest authoritative interpreter of this school, although he extended the history of the Kingdom of God given in the book as far back as the crea-

tion (Lücke, *Versuch*, p. 1008. Comp. also the history of the school as given in Elliott, *H. A.*, vol. iv. p. 415, etc.).

² Such as Alford, Auberlen, Isaac Williams.

have been noticed in previous lectures. Either these are fanciful, or the Apocalypse is in no sense a continuous history. History does not accommodate itself to such rules as those under the guidance of which it was composed. The dependence of the book upon our Lord's discourse on the last things; its singular parallelism to the fourth Gospel; the selection of its figures to so great an extent from the Old Testament, or their creation out of materials derived from that source; the degree to which its structure is regulated by the numbers of the arithmetical scale; its symmetry; its synchronism; the climactic character of its successive parts; its contrasts; its use of *Prolepsis* or Anticipation; its double pictures; its presentation of subjects in their ideal before it introduces them in their actual form, and its episodes—all these things forbid our regarding it as a history of actual events. The course of human progress from age to age is too free to admit of its steps being scheduled according to the peculiarities of any individual mind. For the sake of illustrating a particular conception of a person or age an historian may select and group events that have already taken place. Predicted events, if the truth of the prediction is to be recognised, must be submitted to us in the order in which they are to occur, and not in that which an ideal view of them may suggest. Here accordingly the external characteristics of the Apocalypse mentioned in the last two lectures find their most important application. If we are satisfied that they are to any considerable extent, even if not wholly, correct, the continuously

historical interpretation of the book must be abandoned, whatever form it may assume.

Another conclusive objection to this system of interpretation is that, were it well founded, the Apocalypse would have been useless, alike to those for whom it was originally written and to the mass of humble Christians in after times. It would have had no connection with its own age; and nothing has been more conclusively established by recent Biblical inquiry than that even a prophetic, to say nothing of an apocalyptic, book must spring out of the circumstances, and must directly address itself to the necessities, of its original readers. Those into whose hands it is first put must feel that they are spoken to. It may be designed for others, but for them it must be designed, or the very idea of revelation is destroyed. Revelation implies not merely an unfolding of the Almighty's will, but such an unfolding of it that those to whom the revelation is given shall be able, if willing, to apprehend it. God always deals with His people in the condition in which they are found at any particular stage of their progress. There is, accordingly, a marked growth of revelation throughout the Bible. The light afforded corresponded with the capacity of the eye to see, and the eye was thus gradually opened to receive the fuller revelations that were to follow. Had another method been adopted, men would have been blinded by the strength of the illuminating force; and, instead of accepting the communication and storing it up for future use, would have been unable even to admit it into their minds. The

whole history of prophecy establishes this truth. To the men of his own day the prophet spoke, and their responsibility to listen would have been removed had he spoken in terms which only future ages could understand. A principle thus applicable to all the other books of the Bible is not less applicable to the Apocalypse, for no book bears upon it stronger marks of having aimed at the immediate instruction and comfort of the then existing Church.

We may indeed admit that the events found in it by the historical interpreter would have been instructive or consolatory to the early Christian, if he could have thoroughly apprehended them. But the real difficulty lies in this, that such apprehension was then impossible. The first generation of Christians could have attached no proper meaning to the establishment of Christianity under Constantine, to the rise of Mahomedanism, to the accoutrements of Turkish Pashas, to the varying fortunes of the Lutheran Reformation, to the seven Dutch united provinces, or to the French Revolution. These things were all to happen in an age so different from their own that details of them, revealed in prophecy, would have been unintelligible. It needed a stage of the world's progress which had not yet come to give them meaning. No good effect therefore could have followed communications of this kind. They would have possessed no present power. They would have failed to make the men of the day either wiser or better. They would have substituted a vain prying into the future for the

study of those Divine principles which, belonging to all time, bring the weight of universal history to enforce the lessons of our own.

While thus useless to the men first addressed by them, the visions of the Apocalypse would, upon this system, have been equally useless to the great body of the Christian Church, even after they had been fulfilled, and their fulfilment recognised by a few competent inquirers. The poor and the unlearned have always known, and will probably always know, little of the historical events supposed to be alluded to. Could it be a part of the Divine plan to make the understanding of a revelation so earnestly commended to us dependent on an acquaintance with the ecclesiastical and political history of the world for many hundred years? The very supposition is absurd. It is inconsistent with the first promise of the book, "Blessed is he that readeth, and they that hear the words of the prophecy."¹

The two objections now taken to the historical method of interpreting the Apocalypse do not stand alone. Various others may be urged; and as no true progress can be made in the interpretation of the book until this system is finally abandoned, it may be proper to allude to them with as much brevity as possible.

1. The selection of historical events made by the system is in a high degree arbitrary, and cannot be said to correspond to the degree of importance which these events have vindicated for themselves in the course of history. All historical interpreters, for ex-

¹ Chap. i. 3. Comp. Todd's *Lectures*, p. 44.

ample, cling with a curious pertinacity to the fortunes of Western Christendom. They make little mention of the Eastern Church, although the latter has in all probability numbered, through successive centuries, as many adherents as the former. Turning even to the West itself, we find no mention of the discovery of the Continent of America, or of the progress of that Christian Church there which has grown up to be so bright a jewel in the Redeemer's crown, and so powerful an instrument for the world's good. Nothing is said of the Reformation in Bohemia, or France, or Spain, or of its disastrous retrogression in these lands after having made in them a start so full of promise. The invention of the printing-press has no place in this scheme of interpretation, although it would be difficult to think of anything more intimately associated with the progress of Christ's Kingdom. The rise of the missionary spirit in the Protestant Church, one of the most remarkable phenomena of her history, is equally unknown to it. Nor are we told of that breaking up of the Church into many different and hostile sections, which has done so much to defeat the purpose of her existence in the world.

It may be replied that these things are not found in the Apocalypse by the historical interpreter simply because they are not there, and that it is his duty to elicit what is in the text, not to impose upon it incidents left unnoticed. Yet, allowing it to be so, the fact that such things as those now spoken of are left unnoticed cannot but throw some measure of suspicion

upon a system inviting us to look for them. A Divine book purposing to deal with the whole history of the Church both in herself and in her relation to the world ought not to pass some of the grandest events in that history without at least recognising them.¹

2. The events in which the historical system of interpretation finds predictions of the Apocalypse fulfilled are not unfrequently of the most puerile and trifling kind. One is pained to speak in this connection of the red stockings of Romish Cardinals, of the horse tails worn by Turkish Pashas, or of Sir Robert Peel's motion, in 1841, of want of confidence in the Whig ministers.² It may be asserted with perfect confidence that the thought of such things would have been at once dismissed by the excellent men who have suggested them, had not attachment to a theory destroyed the soundness of their judgment, and blinded them to the correct proportions of historical fact.

3. Akin to this difficulty is that afforded by the manner in which the historical interpretation so often degrades the sublime language of the book, and brings down its figures to a level upon which they lose their power.

4. Even were these objections less weighty than they are, the continuously historical interpretation

¹ Finding the French Revolution in the earthquake of chap. xi. 19, even Elliott says, "It was a political convulsion and revolution of magnitude such that the apocalyptic prophecy would have

been altogether inconsistent with itself had it not noticed it" (*H. A.*, iii. p. 289).

² See mention of this last in Todd's *Lectures*, p. 217, *note*.

would be discredited by the hopeless disagreements of its advocates. In almost nothing are they at one; and there is hardly a single vision of the book in regard to which the greatest diversity of interpretation does not prevail among them. But prophecy thus interpreted long after its fulfilment must have taken place ceases to deserve the name of prophecy, and becomes no better than an uninstrucive and disappointing riddle.

5. Even these results of the historical system of interpretation are in many instances only gained by mistranslations of the original,¹ by forcing upon words meanings which they will not bear,² by strained and unnatural inferences,³ and by an arbitrary mixing up of literal and figurative renderings in the case of objects that are clearly dependent upon one another.⁴

Finally, it may be added upon this point that it is difficult to estimate the amount of loss which has been sustained by the Church of Christ through the attempts of historical interpreters to limit the passages explained by them to particular events. Even the most plausible interpretation thus offered—that which finds in Babylon Papal Rome—has not only deprived Protestants of some of the most solemn warnings addressed to them

¹ Thus Elliott renders chap. ix. 15, where we read of the angels prepared "for the hour and day and month and year," "at the expiration of these periods of time aggregated together" (*H. A.*, i. p. 489).

² The same author applies "thousands" to provinces after

the manner of the English term "hundreds" (*U. S.*, ii. p. 420).

³ Thus the "hail" of chap. xi. 19 is applied by Elliott first to nations, and then in particular to the nations of the North (*U. S.*, iii. p. 288).

⁴ Comp. Fairbairn *On Prophecy*, p. 141.

in the Bible, but has taught them to use a book not less fitted to humble than to elevate the heart, as a store-house of weapons for every species of partizanship, recrimination, and strife. The system has, indeed, been supported by men whom in every other respect it is alike a duty and a delight to honour; but, however numerous or illustrious its defenders, it may be said without exaggeration that nothing has tended more to diminish the value and to discredit the general acceptance of the Revelation of St. John. The taste, however, for such interpretation is rapidly passing away, probably never to return.

II. A second system of interpretation is proposed. According to this view almost the whole, if not the whole, book belongs to a future which may be even yet distant. It relates exclusively to the Second Coming of the Lord, with its attendant signs and circumstances; "and we are therefore to look for the fulfilment of its predictions neither in the early persecutions and heresies of the Church nor in the long series of centuries from the first preaching of the Gospel until now, but in the events which are immediately to precede, to accompany, and to follow the Second Advent of our Lord and Saviour."¹

This system of interpretation is no more defensible than the last. That it possesses an element of truth it is indeed impossible to deny. The Apocalypse does deal in a most distinct and emphatic manner with the Second Coming of the Lord; and every description

¹ Todd's *Lectures*, p. 68.

which it gives, whether of the destruction of the ungodly or of the protection and blessedness of the Saints, has reference to that event. From the beginning to the end of the whole book the Seer is continually in the presence of the great day, with all in it that is at once so majestic and terrible. The Lord comes : He comes quickly : He is knocking at the door. Such is the attitude in which He is always presenting Himself to the believing and the watchful heart. But it by no means follows from this, that St. John has passed over the events alike of his own time and of all succeeding centuries till the last moment comes, and that he mentions nothing but what is to occur in a few closing years of the Christian Dispensation. Were it really so his prophecy would have been deprived of a large measure of its value for those to whom it was originally addressed. Nor could even the Church of any later age have seen it in the power of present and immediate reality, because it could never have been possible to recognise in their true character the events of which it speaks until Christ were come. Even the Church living on the very eve of the Lord's return would not know that it was the eve, until she looked back upon it from the full light of the following day. The meaning of the prophetic intimations of the book would be uncertain, and the issue could alone interpret them. The Church, therefore, could never, upon this system, apply the lessons of the Apocalypse directly to herself, because she could never know whether her lot had been cast in the days alluded to until the days were over.

The main considerations, however, against this system spring, as in the case of the system already spoken of, from a just interpretation of the book. Let us look at one or two clauses particularly depended on,—“The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show unto His servants, even the things which must shortly come to pass;”¹ “Blessed is he that readeth, and they that hear the words of the prophecy, for the time is at hand;”² “He which testifieth these things saith, Yea: I come quickly.”³ Upon what principle of interpretation, we may well ask, is it possible to find in expressions such as these no more than an intimation that the events which are to precede and accompany the Second Advent of the Lord shall take place in a short and rapid space of time?⁴ On what principle can we imagine that, in thus speaking, the Seer intended to throw himself forward hundreds of years; and to say only that, when the winding up of the drama came, it would be brief? We must start from the circumstances amidst which he was placed when he wrote, and from that point measure the time that was to elapse to the end. When he said “Blessed is he that readeth, and they that hear the words of the prophecy,” he certainly had in view the readers and the hearers of his own age; and when, therefore, he immediately added, “for the time is at hand,” he not less certainly intended that the course of “the time” thus spoken of was to take its beginning from their day. Throughout the whole book the Church

¹ Chap. i. 1.

² Chap. i. 3.

³ Chap. xxii. 20.

⁴ Todd's *Lectures*, p. 65.

is addressed as she was when the Apostle wrote, and is told what was to be done to her and for her at the instant when she first read the prophecy.

Another exegetical difficulty in the way of this system of interpretation, and one hardly less fatal than that now spoken of, arises from the necessity involved in it of applying an extreme literalism to what is said both of the duration and of the events of the closing scenes. The three and a half years, for example, or forty-two months, or twelve hundred and sixty days, frequently mentioned in the latter half of the book, must be understood simply of the space of time which the words express in ordinary language. For otherwise they can only be interpreted according to the usual symbolism of numbers prevailing elsewhere in the Apocalypse; and this, in the light of history, would imply a length of time incompatible with that literal interpretation of the phrases "the time is short" and "I come quickly" upon which the system rests. The same consideration makes it necessary to refer each vision of the book, from the opening of the first seal onward, to events which are either immediately to precede or to accompany the Second Advent. The coming forth of Christ under the first Seal, "conquering and to conquer;" the wars and famines and pestilences of the next three Seals; even the slaughter of Christian martyrs pointed at, upon the supposition with which we are now dealing, under the fifth Seal; the whole subsequent development of the Trumpets and the Bowls, and the fall of Babylon,—every one of these must

belong to Christ's appearance the second time without sin unto salvation. Nay, it ought rather to be said that they *follow* that appearance, for the first Seal must be interpreted of the Second Advent,¹ and no one will deny that, in point of time, it takes precedence of the remaining visions of the Seer. Such an idea, however, cannot be entertained for an instant.

But this literalism is not confined to such things. It connects itself also with views as to the rebuilding of the temple, the restoration of the Jewish polity, the settlement of the Jews in the ancient inheritance of their fathers, and their predominance, alike in dignity and Christian work, among the other nations of the earth, of which it is not too much to say that they are out of keeping both with the general revelation of the New Testament, and with that method of interpreting the prophecies of the Old Testament which is suggested in the New. This second system can no more be accepted than the first.

III. The two systems of interpretation now considered have no longer the weight that they once had in the mind of the Church. Within recent years they may be said to have been in great measure superseded by another which asserts for itself an exclusive possession of the improved methods of modern research.² It demands, therefore, and is entitled to, our

¹ Todd's *Lectures*, p. 99.

² There is something extraordinary in the confidence with which this third system of interpretation is urged upon us. "If,"

says Renan, "the Gospel is the book of Jesus, the Apocalypse is the book of Nero" (*J'Ant.*, p. 477). Archdeacon Farrar describes the Nero-story as the key of the

attention. Upon this third system it is supposed that the Apocalypse is confined to events either surrounding the Seer or immediately to follow—in particular to the overthrow of Judaism and heathenism, of degenerate Jerusalem, and of pagan Rome. These two great enemies of the Christian faith were face to face with the Apostle. His heart was torn by the sufferings which they inflicted upon the flock of Christ; but he knew that the risen and glorified Redeemer was against them; and, in the glowing pictures of a righteous indignation, he prophesied of their fall. The system possesses, like the last, an element of truth. It may be at once allowed that from what he beheld around him, either fully developed or in germ, the Seer did draw those lessons as to the dealings of God with the Church and with the world which he applies to all time. He starts from contemporary history, and it is quite possible that at the bottom of each judgment which he depicts, when he does not rely simply upon the Old Testament, there may be something which his own eyes have seen or his own ears heard. Nor can it be urged that to speak of events of his own day alone would have been unworthy of his inspiration, for the same reasoning would deprive of permanent value much of the teaching of the New Testament. Nay, it is not even a just argument against this method of interpretation that, if it be true, the contents of the book have been falsified in important particulars by

book (*Expositor*, May 1881, p. 335). others attach equal importance to Gebhardt, Hausrath, Bleek, and it.

the issue. Another conclusion might be unavoidable, for the book might be apocryphal, and unworthy of its place in the Canon.

The true objection to the proposal to limit the meaning of the Apocalypse by the events of the writer's own day rests upon exegetical grounds, partly of a general and partly of a more special kind.

As to the former, the book bears distinctly on its face that it is not confined to what the Seer beheld immediately around him. It treats of much that was to happen down to the very end of time, down to the full accomplishment of the Church's struggle, the full winning of her victory, and the full attainment of her rest. The Coming of the Lord so frequently referred to was certainly not exhausted in that destruction of the Jewish polity which we now know was to precede by many centuries the close of the present dispensation; and the enemies of God described continue their opposition to the truth not merely to a point near at hand, when they are checked, but to the last, when they are overthrown finally and for ever. There is a progress in the book which is only stopped by the final advent of the Judge of the whole earth; and no just system of interpretation will permit us to regard the different plagues of the Seals, the Trumpets, and the Bowls as symbolic only of wars which the Seer had beheld in their beginnings, and which he knew would end in the destruction of Jerusalem and Rome. Against the idea that St. John was limited to the events of his own day the tone and spirit of the book are a con-

tinuous protest. Nor can it be pleaded that he combines these with those that were to happen at the last, leaving, for reasons unexplained by him, a long interval of time unnoticed. There is no trace of an interval. The lightnings flash and the thunders roll in close succession from the beginning to the end of the book. Judged even by its general character, the Apocalypse cannot be interpreted upon this modern system.

The special interpretation of particular passages is not less fatal to the theory, for it is invariably, if not inseparably, bound up with two assumptions,—that the beast of chaps. xiii. and xvii. is the Emperor Nero, and that the Babylon which plays so large a part in the later chapters of the book is Rome. The second of these assumptions will meet us in the next lecture for another purpose. We may, therefore, at present confine ourselves to the first, that the beast of chaps. xiii. and xvii. is Nero.

The identification of the two is regarded by not a few leading scholars of the day as the great discovery of modern times in connection with the Apocalypse,¹ and there is a disposition to accept it which may almost be spoken of as general. The main strength of the argument rests upon the words of chap. xiii. 18—“He that hath understanding, let him count the number of the beast; for it is the number of a man; and his number is six hundred sixty and six.” St. John, it is said, is dealing with that ancient and mystic system of

¹ Comp. Reuss, *Hist. of N. T.*, October 1863 and December 1873; p. 156; Réville, *Rev. d. d. Mondes*, Renan, *L'Ant.*, chap. xvii.

numbers by which the letters of a man's name had their numerical value assigned to them, so that, when added together, they supplied a number instead of a name as his designation. The letters of the two words "Neron Cæsar" make up the number 666; and St. John, by thus telling us that the beast is Nero, gives us the key to the principle upon which he wrote his book.

One consideration alone ought to be enough to demonstrate the mistaken character of this interpretation. It puts St. John *in direct conflict* with those particulars of his own day to which he is supposed to be giving expression in his vision. Observe the words of chap. xiii. 3, "and I saw one of his heads as though it had been slaughtered unto death; and his death stroke was healed." This head, according to the theory, is Nero; and the symbolism rests, it is said, upon the fact that when that Emperor was reported to have put an end to his life, he had not really died, but had escaped to the distant land of Parthia, whence he would yet return to take vengeance upon Rome. The passage before us however speaks of something entirely different from flight and return from flight; it speaks distinctly *of death and of resurrection from the dead*. The words of the original are unfortunately translated in our English version, "and I saw one of his heads as it were wounded to death."¹ They are better, but not adequately, translated in the Revised Version, in which for "wounded to death" we read "smitten unto death,"

¹ Chap. xiii. 3.

with the margin "slain" for "smitten." The true translation is "slaughtered unto death," for the Greek word used occurs, in addition to the present instance, seven times in the Apocalypse, in every one of which it must be translated "slain," or "slaughtered," or "killed." How can it be otherwise translated here? Not only so; the statement in the verse before us is the counterpart of that in chap. v. 6, where we read of the "Lamb as though it had been slaughtered." In both cases there is death, not flight. The head of the beast had died as really as the Lamb of God had died on Calvary, and the Seer saw that it had done so. Nay, more, it had experienced a resurrection from the dead. As we read in chap. xiii. 3, its "death-stroke was healed;" still more fully in chap. xvii. 8 it is spoken of as the beast that "was, and is not, and is about to come up out of the abyss;" and again, in the same verse, as the beast that "was, and is not, and shall be present." But these words are the counterpart of those used by Jesus of Himself in chap. i. 18—"I am the first and the last, and the Living one; and I became dead, and behold, I am alive for evermore." Hence, accordingly, we read in chap. xi. 7 of "the beast that cometh up out of the abyss" as that by which the two witnesses are killed. The whole representation, in short, of the beast implies that it had not merely died as Christ had died, but that it had also risen as He had done; and it is not simply as the beast "slaughtered unto death," but as the beast with "its death-stroke healed," that in chap. xiii. 3 it receives the homage of the world.

But all this was wholly different from what either took place in the history of Nero or was ascribed to him by popular rumour. Rumour did not say that he had died, but that he had fled. It did not say that he would rise from the grave, but that he would return from Parthia. We know that he did not rise, that he did not return, that he was not received with the acclamations of his adherents. If St. John means that Nero is the beast, he has founded his representation not upon contemporary occurrences, but upon a wild imagination of his own. By the application of this single test the elaborate structure of the Nero-hypothesis crumbles into dust.

Much more might be urged upon the point. In particular it might be shown that the theory is discredited by the mistake of confounding the heads of the beast with the beast itself ; by its misunderstanding the force of the word " name ;" by its putting that emphasis upon the word Nero which really belongs to the number 666 ; by its misapprehending the relation between numbers and names which the Seer has in his mind ; by its unnatural spelling of Hebrew words in order to accomplish its end ; by its inability to secure that secrecy at which it is supposed to aim ; and by its suggesting a mere puzzle or play with numbers for a Divine mystery, the thought of which, when he alludes to it, fills the Seer's mind with awe.¹ Enough, however, has been said to show that the beast cannot be Nero. If so, the whole system of interpretation so much relied on in recent times falls to the ground.

¹ These points will be noticed more fully in Appendix III.

No doubt the Seer did start from the events of his own day, and likewise spoke to it. But it is impossible to limit his meaning to what was then happening around him. He beheld in that only one manifestation of the deeper principles which, always true, would never fail to exhibit themselves in action until the end came.

The different systems of interpretation now considered must thus be set aside; and it remains for us to mark one or two general principles that may help us both to understand aright the purpose of the Seer, and to appreciate the manner in which that purpose is accomplished.

I. The Apocalypse embraces the whole period from the First to the Second Coming of the Lord, but without positively determining whether it shall be long or short. That the beginning and the end of the Christian Dispensation are before us in the visions of St. John cannot be doubted. It can only be a question whether the intermediate space of time is not omitted. That it is not is clear from this, that there is no pause in the action of the book. From first to last there is continual development and uninterrupted progress. The explanation is, that the Seer has separated the ideas to which he gives expression from all thought of the time needed to embody them in fact. It is true that in not a few passages he speaks as one who felt that the close was at hand; but such language, we shall immediately see, admits of an easy explanation. In the meanwhile it is of more importance to remark that the renouncing on the part of the apostle of any attempt to indicate the number of days or years or centuries which were to pass

before the end is in strict accordance with the teaching of our Lord.

When the disciples of Jesus asked their Master on one occasion regarding the "consummation of the age," He replied, "Of that day and hour knoweth no one, not even the angels of heaven, neither the Son, but the Father only."¹ Again He said to the twelve, immediately before his Ascension into Heaven, "It is not for you to know times or seasons, which the Father hath set within His own authority."² In words like these our Lord distinctly eliminated from what He reveals to us of the end every trace of allusion to either its nearness or its distance. From the Divine point of view, "one day is as a thousand years and a thousand years are as one day;" and it was from the Divine point of view that Jesus spoke. His words, therefore, contain a principle of the utmost importance to the interpretation of what is said by His apostles either in the Apocalypse or in other books of the New Testament. If we introduce into their writings the thought of any definite length of time whatever, we are directly at variance with the principle laid down by Christ. It may indeed be urged that they speak in the language of men, and that by the ordinary laws of such language they must be understood. The remark is just; but these ordinary laws of language require that a Prophet or a Seer shall be understood according to the laws of prophetic or apocalyptic language. As he was filled with the prophetic or apocalyptic spirit, we can only comprehend him when we

¹ Matt. xxiv. 36.

² Acts i. 7.

share that spirit, when we move in the same Divine region of thought as that out of which he speaks.

Two errors, therefore, on the point now spoken of, have to be avoided in the interpretation of the Apocalypse.

In the first place, it may be said that, had we not possessed the visions of that book, we could hardly have imagined that the interval between the beginning and the consummation of the Christian age would have been so great; or that the waves of sin and judgment, of trial and victory, would have been so manifold.¹ But it is precisely of the extent of this interval that the Apocalypse says not one single word. These successive waves of judgment are obviously successive in thought rather than in time. They may come at distant intervals, or they may be crowded wave upon wave. Nothing in the book entitles us to say which of these will be the case. Even such a word as "hereafter," in the statement "The first woe is past: behold, there come yet two woes hereafter,"² does not prove that lapse of time is the main consideration present to the Seer's mind. For anything told us, the drama, with all its varied scenes, may be quickly closed.

In the second place, it may be, as it often has been, said that the expressions, "the things which must shortly come to pass," "the time is at hand," and "I come quickly," necessarily imply only the briefest possible period between the time when they were uttered and the consummation of the age. But, again, we have no right to say so. The style of speech thus adopted

¹ Fairbairn *On Prophecy*, p. 174.

² Chap. ix. 12.

arises out of a method of conception peculiar to early Christianity, and nearly if not altogether strange to the later history of the Church. Owing in all probability simply to the fact that Christian history has already embraced so many centuries of the world's progress, we look at the period between the First and Second Coming of the Lord as simply a part of a regular and continuous course which the world has been running since the creation of man. It is distinguished from the pre-Christian age by having brought with it clearer light, higher privileges, and greater responsibilities. Yet it is to us only a stage in a process that has been always going on, and that, like the morning light, has been shining more and more unto the perfect day. To the early Church, however, the time which began to run with the coming of Christ presented itself in an entirely different aspect. It was separated from the past by a more distinct line of demarcation, by a broader and deeper gulf. It was not merely a more signal period of preparation for the end than any previously given; in one sense *it was the end itself*. Not indeed that there might not be still much to happen before the Lord of glory actually appeared; but, even though it were so, the age was His in an altogether peculiar sense. He was ruling in it in a way in which He could not be said to have ruled before. He had not only died, but risen again, and ascended to the right hand of the Majesty in the heavens. There at that very moment He was carrying out, not the *preparatory*, but the *final* purposes of His wisdom and love. The earth was even now

the stage upon which the *last* act of the world-drama was accomplishing.

Hence, accordingly, that separation between two distinct ages which, appearing first in the Jewish, afterwards appears also in the Christian, Church,—the two ages being known as “this age (or world)” and “the age (or the world) to come.” The former, before Christ came, was the age of preparation, when all things went on in their ordinary course, although in the midst of them God, by His special dealings with men, was bringing about an ever-increasing “fulness of the times.” The latter, after Christ had come, was the age of consummation, when everything which God intended to do for the execution of His covenant had been done, when the scheme of revelation had been completed, when it was no longer needful to add dispensation to dispensation, or age to age, in order to fill up the times, but when their “fulness” had been at length attained.¹ Everything, it is true, of which prophecy had spoken, and which was included in the promises of the covenant, had not yet been realised. So far from this, it seemed as if the state of matters for the Church of God were worse instead of better. She was more oppressed and persecuted than she had ever been, while the world was more godless and wicked. Still it was the Gospel age, the new dispensation, “the world to come.” The

¹ Nothing can show this more clearly than the fact that in Hebrews vi. 5 “the powers of the age to come” are classed with “the heavenly gift,” “the Holy Spirit,” and “the good Word of God,” as things of which those Hebrew Christians who were in danger of falling away had *already* tasted.

Church could not abandon that conviction without abandoning her faith that Jesus was the Messiah, and, along with this, the very basis of her existence. She consoled herself therefore with the thought that the age had not yet been revealed in all its glory, that she had as yet seen only one side of it, that there was another and a brighter behind, and that what she had to wait for was not a new stage of time, but only a manifestation, a revelation, an *Apocalypsis*, of what was really in existence.¹ It will thus be observed that to the early Church glory darted its rays into the midst of shame, heavenly triumph into the midst of earthly defeat. It was not so much that the shame and the defeat were the only things known in this world, but were to be followed in a better world by the glory and the triumph. That is our way of looking at it. The early Church saw the latter already reached in the person of the Redeemer who made over to her all that He Himself possessed. They were not then *to be* won—they *were* won. Nothing more was needed than that Christ, now hidden, should “appear,” and should make the glory, already potentially His people’s, shine out, so that they too might “appear” with Him in glory, and enjoy their Epiphany as He had enjoyed His. The thought of the early Church was thus not, like ours, a double thought

¹ The second chapter of the Epistle to the Hebrews is in this point of view especially instructive. The sacred writer there mourns over the fact that, high as was the destiny of man, it was yet by no means reached. But then he

turns instantly to the Lord within the veil, and sees in the “glory and honour” with which He is crowned the pledge of the “glory” to which God will immediately bring His “many sons.”

—suffering here, glory hereafter. It was a single thought,—glory shining now through suffering, and gradually swallowing that suffering up in perfect victory.

The effect of all this was that the whole history of the Christian Church down to the Second Coming of the Lord in glory was embraced from one point of view and in one thought. It was a framework within which there was set the expression of one great idea. It was from its beginning to its end the final dispensation, the last time, the Lord's day, which was to close God's dealings with man in a present world, and to bring to full light the principles upon which the Church was guided to her eternal rest.

Hence, accordingly, the course of time disappears from view. The one idea to be expressed fills up the scene, and it is not surprising that it should do so. In an ideal representation intended to set forth the inherent tendencies and the ultimate issues of a course of action, events which, in their evolution, will occupy a long time, may with perfect propriety be set forth in one picture from the writer's pen, because the same principle runs through them all. The first contains the last in germ. The last only develops what was implicitly in the first. Time is therefore unthought of. It comes in simply because we cannot think of the accomplishment of an idea except in time. But time so viewed is summary, rapid, short, with the end at hand. Even if the Seer had not believed, as he may have believed, that the Judge was standing at the door, he could hardly, in the circum-

stances, have conceived of the matter in any other way. This alone he knew, that the long-expected King of Israel had come, and that God had begun to judge His people with righteousness and His poor with judgment.

We have no right, therefore, in interpreting the Apocalypse, to interject into it the thought either of a long or a short development of events. It is a representation in which an idea, not the time needed for the expression of the idea, plays the chief part.

II. While the Apocalypse thus embraces the whole period of the Christian Dispensation, it sets before us within this period the action of great principles and not special incidents. In this respect it follows closely the lines of our Lord's last discourse in the three earlier Gospels. In both allusion is made to events of a general character,—to wars, pestilences, famines, false teachers, persecution, defection from the faith, preservation of the faithful, and so on; but this is not the prediction of particular events. Of such prediction there is almost none either in the last discourse of Jesus or in the visions of His disciple. If we except in the former a small portion which seems to refer to the destruction of Jerusalem, we learn from neither one single word of the special history of the future, of the impending revolutions of its kingdoms, of the changes of its parties, of the rise or fall of its statesmen or conquerors or monarchs.¹ Both, too, preserve a similar

¹ Kliefoth (D. O. J. *Einl.*, p. 37, etc.) endeavours at great length to prove that, even in speaking of Jerusalem, our Lord had far greater and more remote events in view than the destruction of that city by the Romans.

silence as to individual misfortunes or triumphs of the Church. No one would even attempt to detect particular events of either kind in our Lord's discourse on the last things, and they are equally absent from the Apocalypse. When the disciples asked Jesus of the future, He uttered with His own lips all that He thought necessary for their encouragement. When He gave His revelation to the Seer in Patmos He gave no more. What distinguishes the revelation from the discourse is not the greater minuteness of its contents but the form in which its truths are clothed. The instant we lose sight of this we begin to look in the Apocalypse for what it does not contain, and we are in danger of becoming the prey of hasty and idle fancies.

In the respect now mentioned the Apocalypse resembles all true prophecy which, whether in the Old Testament or the New, contains mainly the enunciation of great principles of God's government of men, and not the prediction of special events. Even when the latter are predicted it is generally less for their own sake than for the principles they illustrate. A minute correspondence between every minor particular of the prediction and the result is not required to convince us that we are dealing with the insight or the inspiration of a true prophet. It is enough if the prophet connected together, in a way generally conformable to the facts as they occurred, a course of conduct, whether good or evil, with the consequences which followed it.

Thus, then, we are not to look in the Apocalypse for

special events, but for an exhibition of the principles which govern the history both of the world and the Church. These principles may not even be new. They may be those which had appeared more or less clearly in the words of all former prophets, or which fell from the lips of our Lord Himself. They may pervade the whole Old Testament Dispensation. Nay, we may even find yearnings after them, just as we find yearnings after a Messiah, in the poets of heathenism. No circumstances of that kind detract in the slightest degree from either their value or their force. What distinguishes them here is that we are not merely told of them as coming; we see them come. We behold an old and sinful world going down in order that a new and better world may take its place; the hatefulness, the danger, and the punishment of sin, contrasted with the beauty, the security, and the reward of righteousness; and the ever-present though unseen Ruler of the universe watching over His own, making the wrath of man to praise Him, and guiding all things to His own glorious ends. The book thus becomes to us not a history of either early or mediæval or last events written of before they happened, but a spring of elevating encouragement and holy joy to Christians in every age. In this sense it was strictly applicable to St John's own day: but it has been not less applicable to after times, and it will continue to be equally so to the end.

Hence also the easy possibility of the fact already dwelt on, and a clear recognition of which is of the utmost importance for the interpretation of the book,—

that the period of history covered by it extends from the beginning to the close of the Church's pilgrimage upon earth. That possibility is easy because the book deals with principles, and these are always essentially the same. The laws of the Almighty's moral government are as unchangeable and eternal as those by which He regulates the course of nature. They are not less the expression of Him who is the same yesterday, and to-day, and for ever. They may reveal themselves in new applications because the phenomena to which they apply may assume new forms. Their action may be more intense as the ages run on, but they do not really change; and even therefore in a book so short as the Apocalypse they may find, what all the important events of the Church's history could never find, a full and adequate expression.

III. A third principle of interpretation must still be noticed. We are both entitled and required to interpret in a spiritual and universal sense that language of the Apocalypse which appears at first sight to be material and local. The book is full of words and figures taken from Jewish history, and associated with the memories and the anticipations of the Jewish people. The question, therefore, naturally arises, May not the book be Jewish? May it not be occupied throughout with the fortunes of the Jews? What right have we to interpret such words as Israel, Jerusalem, Zion, the temple, the altar, the key of David, the palms of the feast of Tabernacles, the "people" (claimed by Christ as His), and other similar words, in a wider and more spiritual sense than that which they naturally

bear? May we not, in doing so, put into them a meaning unthought of by the author? The answer to these questions depends upon a prior question, What were the views of the author of the Apocalypse in regard to the Christian system as a whole? If we have reason to believe that they were of the widest, most comprehensive, and most spiritual kind, his local words and figures will not necessarily carry with them a local meaning. The spirituality and universality of St. Paul's views are admitted, yet he frequently employs similar language. In Gal. vi. 16 he speaks of the whole Christian community as "the Israel of God." In chap. iii. 7 of the same Epistle he is even more special in his designation of believers, "Know therefore that they which be of faith, the same are the sons of Abraham." In 2 Cor. vi. 16 he says to the Corinthian Christians, who were unquestionably for the most part Gentiles, "for we are a temple of the living God" (R. V.) In Eph. ii. 21 he describes the united Church as "a holy temple in the Lord;" and in Gal. iv. 26 he declares that "the Jerusalem that is above is free, which is our mother." Expressions of the same kind occur in other writers of the New Testament and in the mouth of Christ Himself; but these are chosen from St. Paul, because in that apostle's case the spirituality and universalism of the sentiments conveyed by them are never questioned. What we know of his general views sheds light upon such language, and we should no more think of charging him with judaizing, than of laying that charge at the door of a Christian minister who

should speak of Christians as wanderers in a wilderness, or as pilgrims to a land of promise.

When, in like manner, we turn to the Apocalypse, it is undeniable that its leading ideas are as purely Christian as any ideas of the New Testament. Nothing can be more strikingly so than its conception of Christ. Throughout the book He is the Lamb—the Lamb sacrificed, the Lamb risen and glorified. In other words, He is the Lamb who has passed through death to glory, and who now, at the right hand of the Father, reigns in His spiritual and universal kingdom. Again, there is the same spirituality and universality in St. John's conception of the Church. No language can be a clearer proof of this than the language of chap. vii. 9, where those standing before the throne and before the Lamb are described as “a great multitude, out of every nation, and of all tribes and peoples and tongues;” or that of chap. v. 9, 10, where the four and twenty elders sing their new song, saying, “Worthy art Thou to take the book, and to open the seals thereof: for Thou wast slain, and didst purchase unto God with Thy blood men of every tribe, and tongue, and people, and nation, and madest them to be unto our God a kingdom and priests; and they reign upon the earth.” Once more, nothing can indicate more strongly the spirituality and universality of the writer, or his complete elevation above the limited ideas of Judaism, than the statement of chap. xxi. 22, when, speaking of the New Jerusalem, he says, “And I saw no temple therein.”

Passages like these reveal a width of view on the

part of the author of the Apocalypse, whoever he be, which are wholly inconsistent with a narrow attachment to Judaism and Judaistic hope. It would in fact be far more reasonable to ask whether he recognises the Jewish, than whether he recognises the Gentile, branch of the Church. All the seven cities, the congregations of which represent the Church, belong to a Gentile land. When the Trumpet judgments, those upon the world, are nearly ended, and we are about to deal with judgments on the Church, it is intimated to the Seer that he must "prophesy again over many peoples and nations and tongues and kings;"¹ and there can be no doubt that the struggle with the three great enemies, the devil, the first beast, and the false prophet, is the struggle of the Church after she has gone out into the whole world. We have much more need therefore to ask for traces of the Jewish than the Gentile Christian Church.

But the truth is that the Church in the Apocalypse is one. She has an aspect indeed both to Israel and the Gentiles. Twenty-four elders, twelve for each branch, represent her in her heavenly triumph; and the redeemed sing the song described at once by an Old Testament and a New Testament designation—"the song of Moses the servant of God and of the Lamb." These are only her outward aspects; internally, essentially, she is one. In such circumstances we cannot hesitate to acknowledge both the spirituality and the universalism of the author of this book; and,

¹ Chap. x. 11.

that being so, we must apply to him the same rule that we apply both to the other writers of the New Testament and to our Lord. His Jewish figures are the embodiment of Christian, not of Jewish, thought.

For the three principles now spoken of we shall have immediate need in considering the special object which the author of the Apocalypse had in view.