

## LECTURE V.

### DESIGN AND SCOPE OF THE APOCALYPSE.

THE previous lectures ought to have prepared us for the next point to which our attention must be directed, the Design and Scope of the Apocalypse. But, in order to understand this better, it will be well to look for a moment at the circumstances in which the Seer was placed.

The time was one of the deepest anxiety and suspense to the Christian Church in general, and more especially, we may well suppose, to the aged apostle who for many years had been the solitary survivor of the apostolic band. Events of the most momentous character had happened, or were happening, to the Jews, among the Gentiles, and in the world. Israel, so long God's favoured people, and the literal glory of whose future seemed to be spoken of in so many passages of the Old Testament, had been extinguished as a nation. Jerusalem had fallen amidst horrors as yet unequalled in the bloody list of sacks and massacres which had stained the history of man. The Jews had been driven from their homes, and the sanctuary, so long revered and

loved with all the ardour of the Jewish heart, had been levelled with the dust. The Gentiles were hardly less involved in every calamity that can fill the breasts of nations with hopelessness and despair. The mighty fabric of the Roman Empire had arisen, a new monster from the sea of the nations, and more terrible than the worst of previous tyrannies—its military despotism degraded in itself and degrading all beneath its sway; its soldiers claiming the right to sell the crown to the highest bidder; its subject nations crushed under the exactions of selfish and greedy procurators; the old freedom of the Republic gone, and a grinding tyranny substituted for it; the throne filled from time to time by profligates or villains, a Nero, a Caligula, a Domitian, men whose names have drawn down upon them the execration of every succeeding age; no security for life or property; no justice; no mercy; but crimes heaped on crimes till, at the very mention of them, the blood runs cold, and we wonder how the earth could longer bear the burden of its misery.

Into this sweltering mass of dissoluteness and lawlessness and vice the Church of Christ had just been sent, like a lamb into the midst of wolves. It is difficult for us to realise the thought as it must have presented itself to St. John. He had been accustomed to think of the kingdom of God as protected within the Jewish fold. Where was that fold now? Its walls were broken down; its hireling shepherds had failed to fulfil their commission and were fled; the timorous sheep were gathering into corners, or were looking round

with startled gaze to see from what quarter the next blow would come. Nor was it long of coming. The followers of Christ were everywhere the objects of the world's scorn. Persecution in all its forms of cruelty raged against them. They were imprisoned, tortured, burned, thrown to the lions in the amphitheatre, treated as if they were abandoned criminals whom no eye should pity and no hand should spare. They that killed them imagined that in doing so they were offering service to God.<sup>1</sup>

Even nature appeared to feel for and to sympathise with the woes of man. The latter half of the first century was marked by an unusual amount of her more terrible phenomena.<sup>2</sup> Earthquakes were numerous and destructive. Asia Minor in particular, the seat of the seven churches, was to such an extent a centre of their action that before the end of the century several of her cities had been overthrown. Famines followed the convulsions of nature, and plagues followed famine. The darkest language of ancient prophecy was hardly too strong to express the terrors with which the earth was visited. And amidst them all St. John was himself a sufferer, an exile "for the word of God and the testimony of Jesus,"<sup>3</sup> torn from his flock, perhaps never to return to it.

In these circumstances what was more natural than that, with his mind penetrated, filled, saturated, with the thought of his Master's life, and with the teaching

<sup>1</sup> John xvi, 2.

Schenkel's *Bibel Lexikon*, i. p.

<sup>2</sup> Comp. Renan, *L'Ant.*, p. 161.

325, and article "Apokalypse" in <sup>3</sup> Chap. i. 9.

in which our Lord had so closely identified His people with Himself, that life should rise before him with renewed vividness and power, and that he should behold it repeated in the fortunes of His Church? Now we know from the fourth Gospel how St. John thought of the life of Jesus. It was the life of One who, though "the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth," had been regarded as an alien by the very persons whom He came to save. "He was in the world, and the world was made by Him, and the world knew Him not:" "He came unto His own home, and they that were His own received Him not."<sup>1</sup> What sadness and sorrow had encompassed Him! What a struggle had that been in which love and tenderness and self-sacrifice were repaid with hatred and cruelty and death! Yet there had been glory too. Ever and again Christ had manifested His glory.<sup>2</sup> He had permitted it to shine through the "flesh" which for the most part veiled it.<sup>3</sup> It had appeared in the confounding of His enemies, in the increasing attachment of His friends, in the wonderful discourses of the upper room at Jerusalem, in the high-priestly prayer, in the rising from the grave.

All this, then, St. John felt was repeated in the history of the Church. Once again, as before, to his eyes, "the light shineth in the darkness, and the darkness overcame it not."<sup>4</sup> That is the thought of the Apocalypse.

It is a vision of the Church as, encompassed by trials

<sup>1</sup> John i. 10, 11.

<sup>2</sup> John ii. 11.

<sup>3</sup> John i. 14.

<sup>4</sup> John i. 5.

similar to those of her Redeemer, she passes on under the same protecting care of a Father in heaven to a similar reward. To the eye of sense all may seem dark and hopeless. But the eye of faith beholds "the Revelation of Jesus Christ," and the eternal principles of God's government working beneath apparent defeat, and coming more and more to victory. The Seer in his Divine inspiration penetrates the darkness. The clouds roll away; and, as the glorious prospect spreads before him, he can only lift up his heart and proclaim, in the visions of this book, his message of encouragement and hope.

The Apocalypse is, accordingly, the revelation, in the case of the members of Christ's body, of the three great ideas which St. John had already beheld exemplified in the history of Christ Himself,—those of conflict, preservation, and triumph. These ideas he does not describe: he *sees* them; and he tells us what he saw.

Let us look at them a little more particularly.

1. In the first place, there is the idea of conflict. It could not be otherwise. From its very nature darkness must be opposed to light, error to truth, sin to holiness, Satan to Christ. These opposites can never be at peace with one another, and the dearest bonds of earth must be broken for the sake of the issues of the struggle between them.<sup>1</sup> The Apocalypse, therefore, is full of the thought of war and suffering for the children of God. We misunderstand it if we think only of its pictures of judgment on the wicked. It contains a

<sup>1</sup> Comp. Matt. x. 35.

thought prior, deeper, more intimately bound up with its whole structure, than even the punishment of sin; and that thought is the cross, which every follower of Christ must bear when he listens to the words "Follow thou Me."<sup>1</sup> It is the idealised expression of what the Christian feels more and more powerfully in proportion as he enters more fully into the spirit of his Master,—that the world, constituted as it is, whatever it may be to others, must be to him, not a place of rest and peace, but of struggle, of suffering, of discipline, of longing for a better. This stamp is impressed upon all its visions. Those to whom it is written are partakers with the writer "in the tribulation and kingdom and patience which are in Jesus."<sup>2</sup> The characteristics of the glorious Person described in the first vision, which are obviously enumerated with a view to the necessities of His people, tell us of victory not yet gained, and of enemies who are yet to be overwhelmed. In each of the Epistles to the seven churches the promises are made to him that "overcometh."<sup>3</sup> Upon the two faithful witnesses the beast makes war, and they are killed.<sup>4</sup> The first great enemy of the Church is overcome by those "who loved not their lives unto the death."<sup>5</sup> The second "makes war with the saints," who are comforted with the assurance that "if any man leadeth into captivity, into captivity he goeth; if any man shall kill with the sword, with the sword must he be killed."<sup>6</sup> The third is able to secure that "as many

<sup>1</sup> John xxi. 22.

<sup>2</sup> Chap. i. 9.

<sup>3</sup> Chaps. ii. iii.

<sup>4</sup> Chap. xi. 7.

<sup>5</sup> Chap. xii. 11.

<sup>6</sup> Chap. xiii. 7, 10.

as should not worship the image of the beast should be killed.”<sup>1</sup> We read of “the war of the great day of God, the Almighty,”<sup>2</sup> of the battle of Har-Magedon,<sup>3</sup> and of the “armies which are in heaven” following Him who is “arrayed in a garment sprinkled with blood,” the blood of His enemies, and “out of whose mouth proceedeth a sharp sword, that with it He should smite the nations.”<sup>4</sup> Before they are finally destroyed “the beast, and the kings of the earth, and their armies, gather together to make war against Him that sat upon the horse, and against His army;”<sup>5</sup> while the very last vision, before the great white throne is set for judgment, tells us of the gathering together of the nations to the war, “the number of whom is as the sand of the sea.”<sup>6</sup> Throughout the whole book in short we deal with conflict, with armies, with battles, with the bow and the sword and the war-horse and blood, with a mighty struggle between good and evil, between light and darkness, between righteousness and unrighteousness, between Christ and the devil, between the Church of God and the synagogue of Satan.

This is not all. It appears to be the idea of St. John that, in the case of every true follower of Christ, conflict leads to martyrdom. Inattention to this fact on the part of commentators has greatly marred the interpretation of the Apocalypse. That book does not speak of a select company of martyrs to be distinguished from the whole number of Christ’s faithful people. It

<sup>1</sup> Chap. xiii. 15.

<sup>2</sup> Chap. xvi. 14.

<sup>3</sup> Chap. xvi. 16.

<sup>4</sup> Chap. xix. 13-16.

<sup>5</sup> Chap. xix. 19.

<sup>6</sup> Chap. xx. 8.

draws no distinction between ordinary believers and those to whom in our use of language the term "martyr" is more properly applied.<sup>1</sup> The Seer of course knew well that many followers of Christ had fallen asleep, that many would still fall asleep, in their own beds, tended by family and friends in their departing hour. But it is another instance of his singular idealism that all such knowledge gives way to the deeper thought, that the essence of Christian life, and the true manner of Christian death, is martyrdom. It had been so under the Old Testament Dispensation. The souls under the altar, described at the loosing of the fifth seal as "slain,"<sup>2</sup> cannot be a select number of these saints; they must be all of them; and if, to the eye of St. John, they all were martyrs, much more may we expect the same style of language to be applied to the saints of the New Testament. This, therefore, appears to be the case. "The great tribulation" mentioned in chap. vii. 14 is no special tribulation at the close of the world's history. It is that of Matt. xxiv. 21, and it refers to the trials experienced by the saints of God throughout the whole period of their pilgrimage, at one time greater than

<sup>1</sup> Comp. Keble, *Christian Year*,  
*St. Stephen's Day*.

"So on the King of Martyrs wait,  
Three chosen bands in royal state,  
And all earth owns of good and great  
Are gathered in that choir."

Keble quotes Wheatly on the "Common Prayer:"—"As there are three kinds of martyrdom, the first both in will and deed, which is the highest; the second in will

but not in deed; the third in deed but not in will; so the Church commemorates these martyrs in the same order: St. Stephen first, who suffered death both in will and deed; St. John the evangelist next, who suffered in will but not in deed; the Holy Innocents last, who suffered in deed but not in will."

<sup>2</sup> Chap. vi. 9-11.



at another, but always great. It is also universal, including both Jewish and Gentile Christians; while the peculiar expression "they that come" (not "came") leads us to think of the appellation, "He that cometh," applied elsewhere to our Lord, and of that identification of believers with Him which is so characteristic of the writings of St. John.<sup>1</sup> As, in one of its aspects, the fourth Gospel may be called the history of the martyrdom of Jesus, so, in one of its aspects, the Apocalypse may in like manner be called the history of the martyrdom of the members of His body. Christ Himself submitted to the inevitable law, "Except a corn of wheat fall into the earth and die, it abideth by itself alone; but if it die, it beareth much fruit."<sup>2</sup> How can His people escape submission to the same law? St. John knew no Christianity that does not, in one way or another, conduct the believer through tears and blood, through suffering and the cross, to the heavenly reward. It is a part of the teaching that came from his inmost soul that an easy prosperous Christian upon whom the world smiles, and who returns its smiles, is no real follower of Christ.<sup>3</sup>

2. In the second place, this idea of the conflict is accompanied by that of the preservation of Christ's people. Whatever may be their trials they are pro-

<sup>1</sup> Comp. *Comm. in loc.*

<sup>2</sup> John xii. 24.

<sup>3</sup> Fairbairn sees clearly to what an absurd length it would lead us were we to think only of actual martyrs in the passage above referred to. He gets over the diffi-

culty by arguing that the description is to be understood of the martyrs "symbolically, as representative of the cause and kingdom of Christ" (*On Prophecy*, p. 461). This is virtually conceding the view contended for in the text.

ted by Him who walks in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks ; and, even if at times apparently defeated or martyred, their defeat is instantly turned to victory. While the judgments of the Seals rage around them they are "the oil and the wine" which the rider upon the black horse of famine is not permitted to hurt.<sup>1</sup> Before the judgments of the Trumpets rush upon the world they are stamped with the seal of the living God, so that the mystic number of 144,000 is complete—not one is lost.<sup>2</sup> The locusts of the fifth Trumpet are permitted to touch none that have the seal of God on their foreheads.<sup>3</sup> All who worship in the sanctuary are measured.<sup>4</sup> The 144,000 appear a second time standing with the Lamb upon Mount Zion, as complete in number as before ;<sup>5</sup> the "book of life" obviously contains a definite number of names ; and, when we come to the reign of the thousand years, the glory of that reign is bestowed upon all such as "worshipped not the beast, neither his image, and received not the mark upon their forehead and upon their hand."<sup>6</sup> The redeemed, even when their blood is shed, are never permitted to forget that, though crushed beneath the world's power, it is only for a time.

On the other hand, as if to bring out into still greater relief this preservation of the saints, there is for the enemies of the Redeemer nothing but judgment. It has indeed been often thought that this is not the

<sup>1</sup> Chap. vi. 6.

<sup>2</sup> Chap. vii. 2, 3.

<sup>3</sup> Chap. ix. 4.

<sup>4</sup> Chap. xi. 1.

<sup>5</sup> Chap. xiv. 1.

<sup>6</sup> Chap. xx. 4.

case, but that the Apocalypse anticipates the conversion of the world, and that its revelations of God's dealings with mankind are of a mixed character, presenting at one time His judgments upon the impenitent, at another His offers of mercy made to them, and the invitations addressed to them in the Gospel of His Grace. This view cannot be sustained. The Apocalypse says nothing of conversion. Its point of view is different from that which would lead to conversion being thought of. It contemplates men as persons whose lot has already been decided, who are already ranged either with Christ or with His enemies. Its business is to reveal the true character and to foreshadow the certain fate of the two opposing ranks. By deliberately adopting the spirit of the devil, the ungodly have confessed the devil to be their father. In the very nature of the case, therefore, they must perish. They may not be saved against their will.<sup>1</sup>

Special passages confirm what has been said. It is only by mistaken interpretation that the prayers of chap. viii. 4 are regarded as prayers for the conversion rather than for the destruction of the world;<sup>2</sup> that other passages are supposed to speak of an extended proclamation of God's grace; and that the prospect set before us for the present dispensation is considered one of advancing progress towards a joyful time when the kingdoms of the world, by acceptance of the Gospel,

<sup>1</sup> It is allowed by Godet (*Biblical Studies*, p. 312) that the Apocalypse does not recognise any conversion of the pagan

world. But in chap. xi. 13 he sees the conversion of the Jews (p. 314).

<sup>2</sup> *Comm. in loc.*

shall become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ.<sup>1</sup> The prayers thus alluded to are no prayers for mercy to the world. They are prayers that God will vindicate His own cause by avenging His people's blood upon their persecutors. The message proclaimed to a guilty world is everywhere one of judgment, not of salvation. Even when Christ is seen with a rainbow round His head, the meaning, so far as the ungodly are concerned, is only that the judgments inflicted upon them by the Lord shall be felt all the more terribly, because committed against One who would so fain have given them peace; and, when the universal reign of Messiah is established, it is not by the submission of the world to His cross, but by the overthrow which, as King of kings and Lord of lords, as "a man of war," He brings upon it. Nothing, in fact, is more strikingly characteristic of the Apocalypse than the manner in which the two great divisions of mankind are from the very first viewed as separate and complete. There is no passing from the one to the other. There is only, here a rising to ever higher victory, there a sinking into ever heavier woe. In no vision of the book is either the extension or the diminution of the number of Christ's chosen people so much as hinted at. There is indeed, as we proceed through the visions, that climax which has been already noticed, because mercy has been despised and sin has grown more ripe for its merited doom. But during all the time embraced by them, a time covering the whole history of the militant

<sup>1</sup> Fairbairn *On Prophecy*, p. 408.

and struggling Church, the field upon which the scourges of God are inflicted neither widens nor contracts its boundaries. There is no change of darkness into light, or of light into darkness. There is brightening light; there is deepening darkness; but the two lines are always distinct, antithetical, opposed.<sup>1</sup> The preservation of the saints amidst all their troubles is secure.

3. The idea of preservation is followed by that of the final triumph and the perfected happiness of Christ's people. Destruction overtakes all by whom they have been persecuted. On them are visited plague after plague, each more terrible than its precursor, and all of them together bringing with them such an intolerable weight of woe that the guilty desire to die, though death flees from them. Babylon drinks of the cup of the wine of the fierceness of God's wrath. The beast is taken, and with him the false prophet that wrought signs in his sight, and both are cast into the lake of fire. The flesh of kings, and of captains, and of mighty men, and of horses, and of them that sat on them, and the flesh of all men, both free and bond, and small and great (who had been upon their side),<sup>2</sup> is made a supper for the devouring birds. The devil that deceived the nations is cast into the lake that burneth with fire and brimstone; and death and Hades, together with all whose names were not found in the book of life, share a similar

<sup>1</sup> This singular line of thought is not less characteristic of the fourth Gospel than of the Apocalypse (see Appendix II.). The same thing may be observed in the First Epistle of St. John, in

which every one belongs either to Christ or Antichrist.

<sup>2</sup> It should hardly be necessary to say that this is implied in the statement.

fate.<sup>1</sup> Nothing is wanting to their overthrow. On the other hand the saints are rewarded with all that may compensate for their past wrongs and sufferings. They are made priests in the heavenly sanctuary. They obtain royal dignity and glory. They are set down upon the same throne with their exalted Lord. As yet, indeed, they lead the hidden life, but that life is in reality a life of glory like their Lord's. They are already essentially possessors of His glory, and they wait only for the time when no eyes shall rest upon them that regard that glory as their shame. Therefore may they be said even now to shine as the sun in the kingdom of their Father; and, amidst the splendours of the new Jerusalem, having followed the Lamb whithersoever He goeth, they hunger no more, neither thirst any more; neither does the sun strike upon them, nor any heat: for the Lamb which is in the midst of the throne is their Shepherd, and He guides them unto fountains of waters of life: and God wipes away every tear from their eyes. Wrong is for ever ideally redressed: right is established in her sole and eternal triumph.

More particularly, this triumph of the righteous is connected with that *manifestation* of the glorified Lord to which we commonly apply the term His "Second Coming." The expression indeed is hardly Biblical. What we read of in the New Testament is rather the "Coming," the "Manifestation," the "Revelation" of the Lord, His "Parousia" or "Presence," His "Epiphany," and the "Epiphany of His presence."<sup>2</sup> Such expres-

<sup>1</sup> Chap. xx. 15.

<sup>2</sup> Comp. Züllig, i. 23.

sions point rather to a *revelation* of One who is come ; who is with us, though unseen ; who has said, " Lo, I am with you alway, even unto the consummation of the age ;" and who needs only to make manifest the glory with which He is even now clothed within the veil.

However this may be, there can be no doubt that the Apocalypse, in speaking of the final triumph of the righteous, connects it with the coming of the Lord, and that in doing so its design corresponds most closely with that of the general teaching of the New Testament. There this coming is continually referred to for instruction and encouragement and warning and comfort ; and there is not a single passage that justifies our substituting for the thought of it the thought of our own death. With it then the Apocalypse, from its beginning to its end, is occupied. Twenty times, it is said, does St. John speak of it throughout his book ; and on many of these occasions with a force and vividness peculiarly his own. It is hardly necessary to say that there is nothing sensuous in the idea. The manifestation of Christ in glory is rather the appropriate and necessary complement of His appearance in the weakness of mortal flesh. We have no more right to resolve it into a mere progress of Christianity than modern Judaism, rejecting the Christ of history, has to resolve its yet unfulfilled hope of a Messiah into the thought of the general advancement of the race. The departure of the King, after having given to His servants their various talents, is naturally followed by His return to see how they have used them. The Christian elevation of humanity is not

completed in the cross ; and, if the agency of the Spirit alone is sufficient to perfect us, it will not be easy to show that the same agency might not have been enough to start us upon the path of progress.

In the manifestation, in the Epiphany of the Presence, of Christ, accordingly, the Apocalypse sees the completion of all God's plans of mercy for His people. Their Lord will then "be manifested" in the glory that belongs to Him, and they also "shall be manifested with Him in glory." "If He goes and prepares a place for them, He comes again, and will receive them unto Himself; that where He is, there they may be also."<sup>1</sup>

The Apocalypse has been described in these lectures as a book which presents in a highly poetic and symbolic form the general principles that mark the Church's history in the world. But this remark has to be qualified by one most important consideration. We must distinguish in the book before us between the whole Church as an organised body and the faithful remnant within the body, the Church within the Church, the "elect" within the "called." The Church as a whole degenerates. She repeats the experience of the old Theocracy, becomes false to the trust reposed in her, yields to the influences of the world, and eventually falls beneath judgments as much greater than those which overtook Israel after the flesh as the position she had occupied was higher, and the privileges she had enjoyed more exalted.

<sup>1</sup> Col. iii. 4 ; John xiv. 3.



Let us look at the facts of the case as they are presented to us by the sacred writer.

In doing so, we turn naturally in the first place to the Epistles to the seven churches in chaps. ii. and iii. All the elements of the future history of the Church are found in one part or another of these two chapters. If the world is ever to prevail within the Church, we may be sure that we shall find traces of such a state of matters there.

Now it seems undeniable that we do so. When we consider the manner in which the Seven Epistles describe the Church in her relation to the world, there is a marked distinction between the first three and the last four. In the former the Church stands over against the world, listening to the voice of a present Lord as He speaks by His faithful apostles, meeting the severest trials without shrinking, and holding fast her Lord's name and faith at a time when persecution rages even unto death. It is true that she is not perfect. Perfection is not reached here below. There are symptoms of decay in the leaving of her first love, and in the existence in her midst of positive sin. Yet, taken as a whole, she is true to her position and to the demands of her great Head. She can remember from whence she is fallen, can repent, and do the first works (chap. ii. 5); and, if transgressors of the Divine precepts of purity are among her members, they are not many in number, they are only "some" (chap. ii. 14). When we pass to the second group of Epistles a striking difference is at once perceptible. With the exception of Philadelphia, the churches in the three other cities

named have yielded to the influences of the world, and those who remain loyal to Christ are but the smaller portion of their members. Thyatira is thus addressed, "But to you I say, to (not as in the Authorised Version 'and to') the rest that are in Thyatira, as many as have not this teaching, which know not the deep things of Satan, as they say; I cast upon you none other burden. Howbeit that which ye have, hold fast till I come" (chap. ii. 24, 25). It is simply "the rest," the remnant, that have here maintained their faith. The bulk of the Church tolerate those who seduce Christ's servants to commit fornication and to eat things sacrificed to idols; nay, even when time has been given them to repent, they will not repent of their fornication (verses 20, 21). In Sardis a similar state of things is still more marked, "Thou hast *a few names* in Sardis which did not defile their garments: and they shall walk with me in white; for they are worthy" (chap. iii. 4). Philadelphia, as we have stated, does not appear to be blamed, although even here it is not certain that there is not at least a gentle intimation that there had been failure, when it is said, "Thou hast a *little* power," and, again, "hold fast that which thou hast," *i.e.* thy little power (verses 8, 11). But there can be no doubt as to the condition of Laodicea. There the victory of the world is almost complete; not indeed wholly so, for she is still able to receive warnings, and "any man" within her who will listen to the Judge standing at the door has addressed to him the most glorious promise made to any of the churches. Notwithstanding this the temptations of

worldly wealth (verse 17) have proved in her case irresistible, and the last picture of the Church is the saddest of all.

To these considerations let us further add the fact that the churches thus yielding to the world are four in number—four being the number of the world,—and it will be impossible to resist the conclusion that the Lord of the Church sees that, in the course of her history, the Church will not be always faithful to Himself. There will come a time when, as a whole, she will be more carnal than spiritual, more worldly than heavenly. The true members of Christ's flock will be fewer in number than the false. Even within the Church the remnant only is expected to overcome. The world will penetrate into the very sanctuary of God, and will not be rooted out until the Judge of all takes to Himself His great power and reigns.

From the Epistles to the seven churches we proceed to another passage which seems to contain a similar lesson. At the beginning of chap. xi. we read, "And there was given me a reed like unto a rod : and one said, Rise, and measure the temple of God, and the altar, and them that worship therein. And the court which is without the temple cast out, and measure it not ; for it hath been given unto the nations : and the holy city shall they tread under foot forty and two months." In these words a distinction is drawn between the "temple," that is, not the whole building, but the *naos*, the innermost sanctuary, the Holy of Holies, and the outer court. Yet both of them were not only within the sacred pre-

cincts ; they were parts into which Israelites alone might enter, and which no Gentile foot might tread without profanation. They cannot, therefore, here represent Israel, the Church of Christ, upon the one hand, and the world upon the other. They can only represent two portions of the Church of Christ, the one that portion which is always true to Him, and in which the light of His presence dwells ; the other that portion which has fallen from truth and purity. The one of these is measured for preservation ; the other is to be cast out. The one continues to be the object of the Redeemer's constant care and love ; the other becomes the object of His righteous indignation.

This conclusion is confirmed by the remarkable use of the word, "cast it out" (*ἐκβαλε*, not "leave it out," as in the Authorised Version). The use of the word is altogether novel in such circumstances as these. No one would dream of saying to another "cast out" a certain large space of ground with all the buildings on it from thy measurement, if all he meant was that these things were not to be measured. He would certainly say, as our translators of A.D. 1611, true to the instinct of the English tongue, make the Seer say, "Leave them out." But another thought is in the mind of the speaker here, He is thinking of excommunication from the synagogue (compare John ix. 34, *καὶ ἐξέβαλον αὐτὸν*), as when it is said of the blind man whom Jesus restored to sight, "they cast him out." This, however, distinctly implies that the persons thus cast out once belonged to the community of Israel, and that they must represent a

portion, which can only be a degenerate and faithless portion, of the Church. Not less clearly than in the Epistles of chaps. ii. and iii. does it appear in the vision of the measuring that the world penetrates the Church, and that within the same outward framework there is the true salt destined for everlasting preservation, and the salt which has lost its savour, and is destined to be trodden under foot of men.

A third passage, the most interesting of all, must still be noticed in its bearing upon this point. It is the history of what in the Apocalypse is called Babylon. For Babylon is no pagan city of the past, no world metropolis of the future. It is only another name for an apostate Church that has forsaken her Betrothed, and broken her covenant relation to Him.

In this picture of Babylon one supreme aim of the Revelation of St. John is reached. To the interpretation of this picture the efforts of every student of the book ought to be chiefly directed. Until we understand it all our labours in other directions will prove vain. There is no scene in the Bible of more dark and terrible sublimity; and none upon which colouring of more inimitable power has been employed. At one moment we behold the city in her brightness, her gaiety, her rich and varied life. We hear the voice of her harpers and minstrels and flute-players and trumpeters. Her craftsmen are busy at their work. Her merchants are the princes of the earth. Her lamps glitter in the darkness; and the cheering voice of the millstone, together with the joyful voice of the bridegroom and the bride, falls

upon our ear. The next moment the proud city is cast down, "as it were a great millstone," into the sea, and the successive companies of chap. xviii. come forth with their pathetic lamentations, crying, "Woe, woe, the great city, for in one hour is she made desolate."<sup>1</sup>

What is the meaning of all this? What does Babylon represent? Only one answer can be given to this question. "The great city" is the emblem of the degenerate Church. As in chap. xii. we have, under the guise of a woman, that true Church of Christ which is the embodiment of all good; as the same picture is repeated in chap. xxi. in which we meet "the bride, the wife of the Lamb," so in Babylon we have, under the guise of a harlot, that false church which has sold her Lord for the sake of the honours, the riches, and the pleasures of this earth. Babylon is a second aspect of the Church. Just as there were two aspects of Jerusalem in the days of Christ, under the one of which that city was the centre of attraction both to God and Israel, under the other the metropolis of a degenerate Judaism, so there are two aspects of the Church of Christ, under the first of which we think of those who within her are faithful to the Lord, under the second of which we think mainly of the great body of merely nominal Christians who in words confess, but in deeds deny, Him. The Church in this latter aspect is before us under the term "Babylon;" and it would appear to be the teaching of

<sup>1</sup> Burns, with his keen poetic instinct, recognised the power of this passage. It is one of the Scripture passages referred to as read at the family worship in the "Cottar's Saturday Night," "And heard great Babylon's doom pronounced by heaven's command."

St. John, as it is certainly that of both Jewish and Christian history, that the longer the Church lasts as a great outward institution in the world, the more does she naturally tend to realise this picture. As her first love fails she abandons the spirit for the letter, makes forms of one kind or another a substitute for love, fixes her affections upon the things of time, as if her portion were to be found in them, allies herself with the world, and by adapting herself to it secures the ease and the wealth which the world will never bestow so heartily upon anything as upon a Church in which the Divine oracles are dumb.

One point of this interpretation requires to be carefully guarded. There are many who will readily accept it if it be allowed that by the degenerate Church now spoken of is meant the Church of Rome. But Babylon is not the Church of Rome in particular. Deeply no doubt that Church has sinned. Not a few of the darkest traits of "Babylon" apply to her with a closeness of application which may not unnaturally lead us to think that the picture of these chapters has been drawn from nothing so much as her. Her idolatries, her outward carnal splendour, her oppression of God's saints, her merciless cruelties with torture, the dungeon, and the stake, the tears and agonies and blood with which she has filled so many centuries,—these and a thousand circumstances of a similar kind may well be our excuse if in "Babylon" we read Christian Rome. Yet the interpretation is false. The harlot is *wholly* what she seems. Christian Rome has never been wholly what on one side

of her character she was so largely. She has maintained the truth of Christ against idolatry and unchristian error, she has preferred poverty to splendour in a way that Protestantism has never done, she has nurtured the noblest types of devotion that the world has seen, and she has thrilled the waves of time as they passed over her with one constant litany of supplication and chant of praise. Above all, it has not been the chief effort of Rome to ally herself with kings. If at times she has done so, there have been other times still more characteristic of her, when she has rather trampled kings beneath her feet; and when, in the interests of the poor and the oppressed, she has taught both proud barons and imperial tyrants to quail before her. For deeds like these her record is not with the beast, but with the Lamb. Babylon cannot be Christian Rome; and nothing has been more injurious to the Protestant churches than the impression that the two were identical, and that by withdrawing from communion with the Pope they wholly freed themselves from alliance with the spiritual harlot. Babylon embraces much more than Rome, and illustrations of what she is lie nearer our own door. Wherever professedly Christian men have thought the world's favour better than its reproach; wherever they have esteemed its honours a more desirable possession than its shame; wherever they have courted ease rather than welcomed suffering, have loved self-indulgence rather than self-sacrifice, and have substituted covetousness in grasping for generosity in distributing what they had,—there the spirit of Babylon has been manifested. In



short, we have in the great harlot-city neither the Christian Church as a whole, nor the Romish Church in particular, but all who anywhere within the Church profess to be Christ's "little flock" and are not,—denying in their lives the main characteristic by which they ought to be distinguished,—that they "follow" Christ.<sup>1</sup>

The considerations now adduced lead us to the thought of one great part of the Design of the Apocalypse which is too frequently lost sight of. That book is written not simply to describe the conflict, the preservation, and the triumph of Christ's true people, but

<sup>1</sup> In Note xi., p. 509, to his work on *The One Mediator*, Canon Medd gives a valuable contribution to the proof that "the 'great city,' the 'Babylon' of the Apocalypse, is Jerusalem." The argument is most forcible and conclusive, but is weakened, as appears to the author of this volume, by one fault. According to it Babylon is "none other than the old, the earthly, the apostate, the doomed Jerusalem of A.D. 30 to 70." The argument of this lecture is not indeed thus invalidated, for the old Jerusalem undoubtedly lies at the bottom of the description given of Babylon. But Babylon is not primarily that city itself. There are features in the picture drawn from those of the old Jerusalem, but the portrait is not her portrait. It is that of her *Gentile successor*, of the Church

when she has become in the midst of the Gentiles what old Jerusalem was in the midst of the Jews. This is a common manner of the prophets, particularly in the Psalms. The Psalmist contemplates David's victories (Ps. ii.) or Solomon's marriage (Ps. xlv.) or peaceful reign (Ps. lxxii.). He has these in the foreground, though it is not them that he describes. His heart is bursting with a goodlier matter. He sings of a greater king, a holier bride, a better sovereign. So St. John took some features of his description of Babylon from Rome, some from Tyre, some from the literal Babylon, some from Jerusalem, but his picture is not of the last-named city *literally*, but of the Gentile Church become, in the mass both of her rulers and members, a Babylon, not a Zion.

to warn against the coming degeneracy of His professing Church. If in no book of Scripture do we find so striking a view of the glory of the Church both here and hereafter, there is also none that sets before us so melancholy a picture of the degree to which, in the course of her history, the world is to prevail in her. Yet, after all, the lesson is not different from that taught us by our Lord when, comparing Himself to the true vine, He adds, "Every branch in Me that beareth not fruit, he taketh it away. If a man abide not in Me, he is cast forth as a branch, and is withered; and they gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned."<sup>1</sup> There are two sets of branches in the "true vine." If we think of it only as it bears the one, it shall be gathered unto life eternal; if, as it bears the other, it is destined to be burned. The two sets of branches must be separated from one another, and the one only can be the "Bride" prepared for marriage to the heavenly Bridegroom.

The truth is that, in this whole delineation of Babylon, we have a fresh illustration of what has been spoken of as the principle lying at the foundation of the structure of the Apocalypse. That principle is that St. John beholds the history of the future mirrored in the events of the life of Christ with which he had been himself familiar. Nothing, as we see in his Gospel, had struck him more than that a Divine theocracy intended to prepare for the First Coming of the Lord had degenerated into a carnal and worldly institution, *out of which* Christ

<sup>1</sup> John xv. 2, 6.

was to be the door.<sup>1</sup> He turns to the Church of Christ, intended to prepare the way for the second manifestation of the Lord, and he beholds the same scenes re-enacted. The world again enters into the Church. Its riches and honours and ease are again welcomed instead of persecution and the cross. The Church ceases to prepare for the future. She lives for the present; she is satisfied with the world as it is, especially when viewed in the light of her efforts to amend it. She consoles herself with the thought, "I sit a queen, and am no widow."<sup>2</sup> The voice which says, "Yea, I come quickly," loses its attractive power, or is resolved into a shadowy amelioration of society. The Pharisee, the Sadducee, the Herodian, the Priest, the Scribe, sweep by upon her stage, all of them citizens of the Holy City, members of the new Divine theocracy. The hearts that sigh and cry for a pure and spiritual righteousness are few in number, and are not heard amidst the disputations of the Sanhedrin or the clash of instruments in the Temple. What can happen but that the Lord of the poor and lowly and meek shall at length say, "Come forth, my people, out of her, that ye have no fellowship with her sins, and that ye receive not of her plagues" ?<sup>3</sup>

Such then are the Design and Scope of the Apocalypse. It contains no continuous history of the Church from the beginning to the end of her historical course. It is *not* a mere revelation of events that are immediately to precede the Second Coming of our Lord. It is no mere prophecy of the early doom of those

<sup>1</sup> See *Comm.* on John ix. 35; x. 3, 4.   <sup>2</sup> Rev. xviii. 7.   <sup>3</sup> Rev. xviii. 4.

enemies of Christian truth whom the Seer beheld around himself. The book is not predictive. It contains no prediction that is not found in the prophecies of Christ. It gives us no knowledge of the future that is not given first by our Lord, and then by others of His inspired Apostles. It is simply the highly idealised expression of the position and fortunes of that "little flock" which, against the world and against the Church in the ordinary sense of that word, listens to the Good Shepherd's voice and follows Him. It is the utterance of one idea, but that the greatest of all ideas, "to assert eternal providence, and justify the ways of God to men."<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps it may seem at first sight to many that to look at the book as we have done is in a great measure to destroy its value. They may miss its application to the special events, whether of the past, the present, or the future. They may even urge that to find in it no predictions except those which are contained in the words of Christ is to reduce it to a monotonous repetition of what we already know. Yet surely to think that the truths of the Apocalypse are monotonous, because they are not absolutely new, is to think that the waves of the sea must be monotonous because they have swelled up from the bosom of the same ocean under the force of every gale that has swept across its surface from the beginning until now. The waves of the sea are never monotonous;—nor the judgments of God. These are

<sup>1</sup> Isaac Williams well says of it, "It is an embodiment not so much of historic incidents as of divine philosophy; descriptive of good

and evil in their influences and progressive results" (*The Apocalypse*, p. 401).

always new to the generation upon which they fall; and the proclamation of them is always new, both to those who have seemed to sin without suffering, and to those who have been the martyrs of truth and goodness without any Divine intervention to avenge their cause.

But this is not all. A little reflection may show us that, viewed as we have viewed it, the Apocalypse presents itself in a far worthier and nobler aspect than if it had told us of the revolutions of earthly empires, of the fall of earthly kingdoms, of the changes of political parties, of wars and famines and pestilences, of earthquakes and cities overwhelmed by them. It will be time enough to know such things when they come. What the Church needs is to learn the true nature of her position in the world, to be directed to her true strength, and to fix her eyes more intently upon her true hope; and these purposes the plain interpretation of the Apocalypse here contended for is best fitted to serve.

1. It teaches the Church that her true position in this world is that of her Lord, of Him who said, "Man, who made Me a judge or a divider over you?"<sup>1</sup> and who lived among men only to labour, to suffer, and to die for them. The Apocalypse has been thought to foment spiritual pride. There is no book of Scripture which, rightly interpreted, is more full of the lessons of humility, self-denial, and self-sacrifice. It identifies, in a thousand ways and to the most remarkable degree, the fortunes and the work of Christ's Church on earth with

<sup>1</sup> Luke xii. 14.

those of Christ Himself. It makes that Church-life, the very name of which so many fear, a service. It makes the universal Christian priesthood a body whose commission in the world is to forget itself for the world's good. The ideas of the Church and of the priesthood are among the fundamental conceptions of the book; and it is because they are so that it teaches us, as no other book of the New Testament does, the wisdom, the power, and the glory of the Cross.

2. It directs the Church to her true source of strength. It has always done so. We should be wrong in thinking that the Church has in past times been strengthened by the Apocalypse as she has been, because she beheld in it predictions applicable to her own days. The general tone and spirit of the book, even when the details were not thoroughly comprehended, have been her strength. As it has pointed out to Christians the glory of their risen and exalted Head, shown them His constant and watchful care over His Church, exhibited to them the true nature of the conflict in which they were engaged, and described for them their final triumph, their souls have been stirred, as by the sound of a trumpet, to feel more powerfully than ever how noble was their calling, and how worthy a thing it was to hold fast "their boldness, and the glorying of their hope, firm unto the end."<sup>1</sup>

More especially in times of trouble, amidst surrounding darkness, when every refuge seemed to fail, and when faith threatened to sink in stormy waters, this book, apart from all predictions supposed to be contained

<sup>1</sup> Heb. iii. 6.

in it, has been often like the hand of the Saviour to the apostle Peter in his hour of need. It has lightened the Christian's gloom. It has presented to him, when perplexed by the many apparent anomalies of God's dealings with His children, a magnificent panorama of the Divine purposes. It has sent forth a cheering voice, nerving him to patient action and persevering steadfastness. It has helped to sustain him when in the prison or at the stake for Christ's cause. It has supplied texts which, age after age, as in the Greyfriars churchyard in Edinburgh, tell us from the martyrs' tomb that these victims of bloody persecution died in hope and rest in peace. If it is sometimes less than this to us, it may be because, in easier days, we have so little experience of outward trials, because we are less acquainted than we ought to be with the outward as well as the inward cross. But let troubles come again; let us realise more fully than we do what it is to follow in the footsteps of One whose whole life on earth was the bearing of a cross; let the soul, let the Church, be in her Patmos "for the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ," and then will the Apocalypse be once more as precious to us as it was to the beloved disciple whose lonely rock of the Ægean was lightened, as he beheld it, with the glory of the New Jerusalem.

3. It calls the Church to fix her eyes more intently upon her true hope. For what is that hope? Is it not the hope of the revelation of her Lord in the glory that belongs to Him? No hope springs so eternal in the Christian breast. It was that of the early Church, as

she believed that He whom she had loved while He was on earth would return to perfect the happiness of His redeemed. It ought not less to be our hope now. "Watching for it, waiting for it, being patient unto it, groaning without it, looking for it, hasting unto it, loving it—these are the phrases which Scripture uses concerning the day of God."<sup>1</sup> And surely it may well use them; for what in comparison with the prospect of such a day is every other anticipation of the future? Shall the fondest expectations of our hearts be then really fulfilled? Little as the faith of Christ has yet prevailed among men, shall a bright day dawn for it, and the period of its full triumph come? Shall sin be yet completely rooted out of our own hearts, and be yet completely banished from the world? And shall that earth, which even now retains so many traces of its primeval beauty, put on in expectation of its Lord "as a maid her jewels and as a bride her attire"? Above all, are we in ignorance of the time when this blessed change shall happen? May it be in a century, in a year, while we ourselves yet live? At all events shall the delay, whatever it be, when looked at in the light of eternity, be brief? Then we may well ask whether the communication of such a prospect, and the stirring us up to dwell on it, do not make the Apocalypse infinitely more precious than if it contained those manifold details of the future progress of this earth which, if known, would be far more likely to overwhelm us with sadness than to elevate us with hope.

<sup>1</sup> *His Appearing and Kingdom*, p. 19.