

t in various circumstances. It ought to lead to diligence and faithfulness, and if there has been apostasy and sin, it ought to lead to repentance. In all other cases, however, the explanations are much briefer, being as it were only hints in passing. Sometimes these appear to be given by John on his own responsibility, e.g., in chap. iv. 5 John explains the seven lamps before the throne to mean the seven spirits of God. So again in chap. xiv. 4 5 he explains who the 144,000 singing before the throne were. "These are they which were not defiled with women, for they are virgins. These are they which follow the Lamb whithersoever He goeth. These were redeemed from among men, being the first fruits unto God and to the Lamb." But more frequently some one comes to John to show him the interpretation, either Christ or some angel, e.g., in chap. v. 5, where John was weeping because no one was found worthy to open the seven-sealed scroll, it is said. And one of the elders saith unto me, Weep not, behold the Lion of the tribe of Juda, the root of David, hath prevailed to open the book." In the vision itself Christ appears not as a lion but as a lamb. There are at least twenty such passages giving explanations of symbols in the whole book.

4. This number will be considerably increased if we assume, as I believe we must, that for the most part the words which are heard uttered even during the course of the visions are not symbolical, but are intended to furnish us with the key to the explanation of the visions. Take for example the cry of the souls of the martyrs from beneath the altar under the fifth seal, "How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth?" This is plainly and literally a cry for the execution of righteous judgment and vengeance. Those who utter it in the vision are of course only symbols, but the cry is the real cry which is ever ascending to God, for vengeance, from the blood of the martyrs. So again after the sounding of the fourth trumpet, an angel flies through the midst of heaven saying with a loud voice, "Woe, woe, woe to the inhabitants of the earth by reason of the other voices of the trumpet which are yet to sound." This voice is plainly intended simply as a statement of the fact that the consequences of the last three trumpets would be more terrific than the first four.

5. That in cases where the symbols are adopted from the Old Testament, as many of them are, they must be explained consistently with their usage there. John draws very largely in his imagery from Daniel, Ezekiel, and Zechariah, and his angelic machinery is of the same general nature, and he naturally uses it in the same way. It is no valid objection to say that in these visions John is not creative, but only receptive, for so were the older prophets, and the visions in both cases come from the same spirit. Or taking the principle that the supernatural always adapts itself to what is already natural, we may suppose John's mind and imagination to have been already imbued with the symbolism of the older prophets, and that these new revelations grew out of, or rather fitted themselves to it. This gives us some considerable advantage in the explanation of the Apocalypse. It gives us a wider field from which to draw out information as to its sense.

Beyond these five we can hardly lay down any principle that will be of much practical service. We must only use common sense and carefully avoid any undue forcing of them in any particular shape in order to fit into our general plan. One of the best practical tests of the correctness of any scheme will be the ease and the naturalness with which it will explain these symbols and fit them into one another. Whatever scheme requires us to do violence to this general rule must stand self-condemned.

Coming now to the other and more difficult aspect of the book as prophetic, we lay down the following principles as best fitted to guide us to wise and safe conclusions:

1. That the practical object which the book has in view may be for the most part attained without being able to explain it in detail. We have already seen that the book is strictly speaking an epistle, which was addressed to the seven churches of Asia, and through them to the Church generally; and we may well believe that they were as much puzzled to comprehend all its meaning as the Church has been ever since. In all probability even John himself only partially understood it, and like the prophets of former time "searched what or what manner of time the

spirit of Christ that was in him did signify." But just as the prophets of old in all their prophecies had an immediate practical object in view, so we may assume that John had also. Hitherto this practical object has been for the most part left out of account, and in fact many seem to be of the opinion that it has no practical object, or at any rate that the practical object is so completely obscured and overshadowed by the strangeness and mystery of its symbolism that it may be left out of account. But we must not allow ourselves to forget that "all Scripture is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness." And we must firmly lay down the principle that no prophecy is ever given merely for the sake of prophesying or of displaying the divine foreknowledge, just as no miracle has ever been wrought simply for the sake of displaying divine power. The book must have been intended to meet some spiritual want in the seven churches and in the church generally.

Not do we need to go very far in order to find out the practical object it had in view. We get the key to it in the special epistles to the seven churches, where we have warnings to evil doers and encouragement to those who patiently continue in well-doing. They contain threats of punishment to the wicked and promises of rewards to the righteous, along with exhortations to repentance and faithfulness based upon these, and all backed up by the declaration of the speedy coming of Christ. And these two parallel lines of warning and encouragement run on through the whole book, always associated more or less directly with that coming. We can readily see why, for what does that coming mean? Plainly it means first of all victory for the righteous and for the cause of righteousness. It means the complete and final triumph of truth. It means that all the trials and difficulties of the righteous shall cease, and they shall enter into their reward. And what more fitted to fill the hearts of the people of God with hope and joy than to dwell on such a prospect? What more fitted to give them the grace of perseverance in persecution, than to be assured that their Lord will most certainly come to bring forth judgment and victory? And it is a remarkable fact that in every age of the Church, more especially in days of persecution, this book has been turned to for hope and encouragement. However various their theories of explanation, and however widely they may have differed in details of interpretation, all the people of God have agreed in seeing ground of hope and encouragement in the second coming of the Lord and the full establishment of the kingdom of heaven on the earth.

But of course that which brings hope to the people of God must at the same time bring dread to the wicked. Victory for the one side means defeat for the other, and the prediction of the coming of the Lord speedily to judgment is to them a solemn warning to repentance. Now this is a point on which all classes of commentators may be said to be agreed who advert to it at all, and it is one on which all may continue to agree, whatever their theories of interpretation. And it is one of the very greatest importance. For even supposing it were the case that there was nothing else that we could be sure about in the explanation of it, this much alone would give it a very living interest for the Church at all times. And it is well worth while to read the book through without seeking to explain the details of the various visions with this idea in the mind, that it is the prediction of a conflict which is to end in victory for the cause of righteousness with the coming of Christ a prediction given for the encouragement of the Church in distress.

It may be asked, If this were the main object in view, why was it put in such a form? Might not this have been stated simply in so many words and have done with it? In answer to this we have to say, that this is actually done elsewhere in more passages than one, for the benefit of those who feel this to be a more effective way of revealing the truth. But apart from the fact that God must be allowed to make revelations in such a way as may seem most fitting to Him, we may easily divine why some such form is chosen as this which we find in the book of Revelation. It was needful that the second coming of Christ should be placed before the Church in such a way as to lay a strong hold on their imagination, that it might become vivid before their eyes. It was to be throughout its future history the one great hope in the minds of God's people, and in order that it might become so, it must be clothed in such form as would command their at-

tention. And we may safely say that the attempt has not been unsuccessful, for though it has called forth an immense deal of vain curiosity, it has also begotten a large measure of genuine interest in the minds of truly pious people. This fact, that the practical object of the book may be attained without being able fully to interpret the book, may seem in some degree to rescue it from the general neglect into which it has fallen, and may also serve to teach us to be contented with such further results as we may be able to attain with some measure of certainty even though they fall far short of satisfying our curiosity.

2. Our second principle is this that the book was not intended to reveal to us the future in any such way as to enable us to forecast the details of history. This is also a principle of very great importance, and if it be true, renders utterly vain and useless all attempts to make out from the prophecies of this book what is likely to be the course of events in the future, and obliges us to rest content with knowing only in the most general way what is going to be the issue of the world-long struggle between good and evil, without knowing how or when. It also explains why it is that all the attempts which have hitherto been made in that direction have been falsified by the event. That very fact, indeed, supplies us with strong evidence of its truth, for it is hardly to be conceived as likely that had there been sufficient data to go upon, all these efforts would have proved failures.

It is further confirmed also by the fact that similar efforts to predict the future from the prophecies of the Old Testament had failed in like manner. There were abundant predictions concerning the first coming of Christ, and yet, though they were carefully studied by the Jews, no one for a moment ever suspected that Christ would come in the form in which He actually appeared. It was only after the fulfilment took place that they could understand their full meaning, even in the case of the most spiritually-minded. So in the apocalypse, the visions which apparently are full in detail are not of such a character as to enable us to say definitely what will be the form of the second coming or the circumstances by which it will be attended. That which is essential in it is clearly revealed, that which is formal in it is not, and it would be but folly for us to pretend that we can explain the visions of the apocalypse fully until they are fully accomplished, or foretell when and how they are to be accomplished.

But altogether apart from this argument drawn from the unsatisfactory nature of all attempts to forecast the future, there are other and more cogent reasons drawn from the very nature of prophecy itself why we are not entitled to expect any other result. It is evident to any one on a moment's reflection that in order to be able to determine beforehand what the details of the future are to be, the following data must be given.—descriptions or names of persons and places, and also the order and time of events. Unless we have all of these, then our conclusions must all be vague. If any be wanting, any view that may be held will be only one out of many possible variations, and so be entirely uncertain. Now, it will be found on reading the book of Revelation that there is not one single instance in which all of these data are present. We have, frequently enough, descriptions of persons and places, but very rarely, if at all, the order of events plainly indicated, and, as will presently be shown, we never have any definite indication of time. With respect to order and time, in the words of an old writer, "the prophets, by the divine light which illuminated them, for the most part beheld things to come much as we look upon a stormy sky. For while we see the stars above us, we are incapable of rightly discerning at how great a distance they are from us, or which are nearer or which more remote." Hence in the book of Revelation we are not in a position to determine when or in what order the fulfilment is to take place. The data are not there; we cannot supply them, and therefore must leave the future to unfold itself. We may be able to foresee that certain important events are going to happen sometime, but the when lies beyond our knowledge, and Revelation gives us no help here.

These statements as to the absence of all clear indications of order and time in the book of Revelation will no doubt appear novel and startling to many who have not carefully inquired into the subject, for it is the commonly received opinion that the order at any rate is given, and that there are some hints as to time which if only read aright would open up the whole secret of the future, and it is upon this commonly received opinion that all the various attempts to do so have been based. But we propose to show that this opinion is almost entirely without foundation.

(Concluded next week.)