

PASTOR AND PEOPLE.

THE INTERPRETATION OF THE APOCALYPSE.

A LECTURE DELIVERED AT THE OPENING OF SESSION 1878-79, PRESBYTERIAN COLLEGE, MONTREAL, BY REV. J. SCRIMGER, M.A., LECTURER IN GREEK AND HEBREW EXEGESIS.

Of all Scripture the most difficult part to explain satisfactorily is the prophetic; and of all the prophetic books the most difficult is the Apocalypse or Book of Revelation. It is the one, therefore, about which there is most room for controversy and difference of opinion as to its meaning. It is also for many minds one of the most interesting portions of Scripture on account of the peculiar and mysterious nature of its contents, and has attracted more than the average amount of attention. Hence the literature of this book is more varied and abundant than that of any other part of the sacred volume. It is stated that there are "not less than eighty systematic commentaries on it worthy of note, while the less valuable writings on the subject are unnumbered if not innumerable" and every year is adding to the list.

Yet strange as it may seem, there is no portion of the Scriptures as to which the great body of the Church is more ignorant, hardly any part which is less understood, and hardly any part which is less read, if we except two or three chapters at the beginning and one or two at the end of the book. The people seldom hear it expounded from the pulpit, and even the recognized teachers of the Church, though professedly theologians and exegetes, seem to bestow but a scant measure of attention upon it—indeed practically ignore it.

The reason of this neglect on the part of pastors and people alike is not very far to seek. The voluminousness of the literature may perhaps deter some from entering upon the study of it; but the chief reason has doubtless been the unsatisfactory nature of the results,—the fact that every different thinker and writer seemed to arrive at totally different conclusions and that none of them appeared to be worthy of entire acceptance. In a sort of despair men have turned away from a book that seemed to be but a hopeless riddle defying solution. And they have been all the more confirmed in their neglect by the ridiculous solutions gravely presented by a class of confident soothsayers who were always forecasting the future and regularly fixing certain years as the dates of some terrible catastrophes which as regularly failed to come to pass. Many will still remember the noise that was made some fifteen or twenty years ago by a certain class of would-be teachers, who, from their studies of Revelation, predicted terrible events that were going to happen in or about the year 1866. Antichrist was going to fall, the armies of Gog and Magog were to be gathered for a decisive conflict, Christ was to come and the millennium was to begin. Dr. Cumming, of London, and many others filled the world with warnings of "the coming tribulation." The weak-minded were excited and alarmed; sober, thoughtful believers and scoffing sceptics were alike inclined to wait in silence for the result rather than gainsay them; and all were filled with curiosity to behold the catastrophe. But when the year came and went by and the next and the next again without anything happening but what had happened scores of times before, thoughtful men were disgusted at the quackery of such fallacious attempts to forecast history from the predictions of Revelation, and despairing of all attempts to read this book aright, they turned their thoughts to other subjects; the study of prophecy and of the apocalypse especially fell into neglect, and hence the subject has been quietly ignored in the public ministrations of the pulpit.

But of course such a neglect cannot continue always. The inherent interest of the book must sooner or later attract attention to it again; inquiry must be renewed and the old problems be examined afresh. This is what is now actually beginning to take place. And of course there is no objection to it. It is rather to be encouraged than otherwise, for it is the only way in which any real progress has been made or can be made. But the trouble is that now in this younger generation the interpretation of this book is being largely left to those who are not qualified by their previous training to examine it intelligently. The best educated are still inclined to ignore it. Hence old exploded views are being eagerly embraced with all the enthusiasm of new discovery, are propounded to the public with all the authority of ascertained truth,

and many as ignorant as themselves are being led astray. Both in England and America wild and extravagant views are beginning to gain currency both among ministers and people; and there will soon again be urgent need for sound teaching to prevent the spread of pernicious and unsettling conceits.

Within the limits of the present lecture it will, of course, be impossible to do more than make an enquiry as to the general principles and rules that ought to be observed, and we must omit all matters of detail except for the purpose of illustration. But if we are successful in giving these general principles with any reasonable degree of certainty, it will be comparatively easy for anyone who chooses to do so to work out the details for himself in accordance with them, and, though there will still be room for much difference of opinion, the main object will be gained.

Before proceeding to these principles, however, it will be necessary for us to obtain some idea of the contents of the book.

The Book of Revelation is, strictly speaking, an epistle addressed to the seven churches of Asia Minor, over which the apostle John exercised supervision in his later years. And, as in the case of other epistles addressed to the churches, we may take it for granted that it was called forth by the circumstances in which they were placed, and was intended to meet their special needs. That the whole book and not simply a portion of it is addressed to them, is evident from the fact that a greeting to them by name is placed at the opening before the visions begin at all, and, though there are special messages addressed to each of the churches, it does not change the fact that the whole book is addressed to them collectively.

1. The object which the book has in view in one sense is given to us in the opening verse of the first chapter, "The Revelation of Jesus Christ to show unto his servants things which must shortly come to pass," *i.e.* to give a revelation of that which is in the future. In the command which is given to John in connection with the first vision to write it down for the benefit of the churches, the idea is a little wider—things present as well as things future being included. But this is not radically different.

The special subject or theme of this revelation is also defined for us in the announcement which comes immediately after the greeting to the churches and before the opening of the visions. It is the second coming of Christ and the events connected therewith. "Behold he cometh with clouds, and every eye shall see him, and they also which pierced him, and all kindreds of the earth shall wail because of him." And the contents of the book fully bear out this description. It is the *revelation* by a series of symbolic visions of *things partly present but chiefly future*. And the *great event* which stands out most prominently in the future is the *second coming of Christ*. Everything else may be said to be subordinate to that. That is the great climax towards which everything else tends.

As regards its form, it consists of a series of symbols or rather symbolical visions which appeared to the apostle John, in Patmos, which he recorded, for the most part, just as he saw them, together with any words which he heard in connection with them. Sometimes these visions are like tableaux, stationary representations without action or speech, but more frequently they are rather like dramatic acts, beginning with a scene but immediately developing into action or speech, or both. For example, the very first vision is an example of a tableau. The picture consists of seven golden candlesticks, and in the midst of them one like the Son of man holding seven stars in his right hand. The appearance of the Son of man is minutely described, for every item in that appearance had a symbolical meaning. But while the vision lasts, not a movement is seen and not a word is spoken. Before he sees the vision, John hears a voice saying, "I am Alpha and Omega," and when the sight of the vision sufficiently impresses itself upon John's mind to cause him to fall down and worship, the vision disappears. There seems to be left only a man who lays his hand upon him, and speaking to him, explains to him the vision. For an example of dramatic action, we may take the second vision in the book, that beginning in the fourth chapter. We have here, first a scene—a throne in heaven, and one sitting on the throne, encircled with a halo containing all the colours of the rainbow, and holding in his hand a seven-sealed scroll. Round about the throne are twenty-four elders crowned, four living creatures and seven lamps. The elders and the living creatures

are engaged in worship. This is the scene, and the action arises out of it. An angel calls for some one to open the seven seals of the scroll, and after all others had shrunk from it as impossible, a Lamb appears to undertake it amid great applause. The opening of each seal develops a different scene, or at least some modification of the original one, until all the seals are opened, and the scroll, of course, unrolled. These may be taken to represent the general character of all the visions.

In consequence of this development of the scenes in action, it is very difficult to come to any conclusion as to how many distinct visions there were intended to be in the book. The lines of division will depend, to some extent, upon the scheme of interpretation. But most are agreed that there are at least four such visions or series of scenes: (1) the opening vision of Christ in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks; (2) the vision of the opening of the seven seals; (3) the vision of the blowing of the seven trumpets; and (4) lastly, the vision of the pouring out of the seven vials. It is well, at any rate, to bear this in mind, as there are some who lay very great stress upon it, and appeal to the regular recurrence of the sacred and perfect number seven in proof of its correctness.

But whether few or many, these visions are all, every part of them, confessedly symbolical. The things seen, whether they are objects or actions, stand not for themselves but for something else—the thing symbolized—in all cases. Thus for example in the first vision, the seven candlesticks stand for the seven churches, and the seven stars stand for the angels of the seven churches. The symbols employed are of various classes, symbolical persons, symbolical animals, symbolical objects, symbolical numbers, and symbolical actions. Not counting actions, which are almost too numerous for calculation, upwards of sixty different symbols may be counted in the book.

Such is the general nature of the contents, and from this it will be seen that the problem to be solved is plainly this: to discover the realities for which these symbols stand; to explain their relation to one another and to reveal the truths and facts that are wrapped up in them.

And it must be confessed that the problem thus presented to us for solution is no easy one, as may be judged from the numberless failures of the past. There are, in fact, two problems, each complicating the other. The first is that of fixing, in all cases, the ideas that are meant to be conveyed to us under these symbols, so that they will fit consistently into one another and give us some reasonable meaning. The second is that, common to all prophecy, of discovering what are the historical persons, events, and forces that may correspond with these ideas. In other words, we have here all the difficulties of allegory, and at the same time all the difficulties of prophecy to meet, and that on a larger scale than is to be found anywhere else in Scripture. To the solution of this twofold problem, however, we must now address ourselves, and determine, if we can, what principles must guide us.

With regard to the symbolism of the language, the following may be laid down, and will be accepted without much discussion:—

1. That *every symbol has some meaning*. These visions differ from parables and ordinary allegories in this: that every part of them is significant; nothing is introduced simply to fill in the picture and make it life-like. The whole vision is so far beyond the range of ordinary life, bringing heaven, as it were, down to earth, that there is no need to study naturalness. Every detail is put in with the definite purpose of adding something to the revelation.

2. That the symbols are used consistently, and the meaning in one place must be substantially the same as in another place, unless there is something to indicate the contrary. The book is one and not a mere medley. Any other principle would at once throw us into hopeless confusion.

3. That we must be guided by the numerous hints and explanations that occur in the book itself. These are much more numerous than we commonly imagine, and form no inconsiderable part of the book. For example, the whole of the seven epistles to the churches may be regarded as being merely the detailed explanation of the vision which precedes them. That vision represents the symbolical Son of Man in the midst of the seven candlesticks. The epistles give the moral effect which the presence of such a Christ in the midst of the Church ought to have upon