

The Book of the Revelation:

Its Message and Meaning

Historical and Futurist Views Considered.

Two very opposite and entirely contradictory expositions of the Book of the Revelation are being set forth at the present time and pressed upon the attention of the Christian public. Both views cannot possibly be correct, and it is well we should know where we stand; for at the moment, in view of world affairs, and the character of the times in which we live, and, too, with the Lord's coming at hand, it is most essential that Christians should have a thorough acquaintance with the teaching set forth in this last book in our Bible. It has much to say to us both about the present and the future which we need to know.

Two publications by different authors have been sent to us, setting forth views which we cannot possibly accept. They completely falsify the teaching of the Revelation, and spread confusion everywhere.

Two reasons account for this. First and foremost, the authors of these tracts have never apprehended the true character and calling of the Church. Secondly, they seem entirely to have lost sight of the special nature of the dispensation in which we are living. Thus they have become completely fog-bound and have lost their way.

The Book of the Revelation is thought of by many as a very abstruse book, and very difficult, if not impossible, to understand, and they not infrequently give it a wide berth. But if rightly approached, and certain prominent features of the book are kept in view, and the truth of the Church and the present dispensation borne in mind, it will be found that the supposed difficulties and obscurities to a large extent vanish. We propose to point out these features, and to do it as briefly and simply as possible.

One of the first things to notice is a threefold division of the book given in verse 19 of chapter i. It is of all importance to notice that this threefold division is given us by the author

of the book under the direction of the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. It is not due to a mere human device. And the translation of the verse cannot be called in question, though some have sought to do it for the sake of trying to bolster up their own mistaken views. Not only has it the support of a number of translations, including the Revised Version, but it will be seen presently how the whole structure of the book is built up upon it. Surely it stands to reason that such a division as we have in chapter i. verse 19, setting before us in the plainest language the various parts of the book and their subject, cannot be disregarded without falling into serious mistakes. And this is just what has happened. Let us consider this threefold division.

1. "Write the things which thou *hast* seen." The apostle is told explicitly what he is to write. A description of what he had seen is contained in the first chapter. He had seen "one like unto the Son of man in the midst of the seven candlesticks." We are further told that the seven candlesticks are the seven churches.

2. In chapters ii. and iii. we come to the things that *are*. This is the second division. Through John, He Who was seen in the midst of the seven candlesticks sends a message to each church. These addresses deal with their state and responsibility, for it is necessary to bear in mind that the Lord, the Head of the Church, appears here in the aspect of a judge. The Church is presented as having a particular relation to Christ, on the one hand, and a responsibility in regard to the world, on the other.

It is not our purpose here to enter in detail into these addresses. One is speaking Who has the right to rebuke or commend. We merely point out that there are two aspects in which the churches must be regarded. In the one case, they were actual churches existing in John's day; and, in the other, they represent different periods of Church history right down to the close of this dispensation. They represent the things which *are*.

Very briefly, this may be set forth as follows: (a) Ephesus, the first and second centuries of this dispensation, and the loss of first love. (b) Smyrna, the time of persecution that followed. (c) Pergamos, when the Church came into alliance with the world in the time of Constantine: thus it is said to dwell where Satan's seat is, and the doctrine of Balaam is referred to. (d) In Thyatira we have the development of the Papacy. We have the woman Jezebel and the depths of Satan spoken of. Fornication and adultery (in the sense

of alliance with the world) characterized the system. (e) In Sardis we come to the Reformation period. (f) Philadelphia represents a spiritual revival which is well known to have taken place in the eighteenth and early part of the nineteenth centuries. While (g) Laodicea brings us to our own day—neither cold nor hot. Here, then, we have the entire Church period—the things which are—brought before us; for we must remember that Revelation is a prophetic book.

3. There follows in chapter iv. and thereafter a most dramatic change, which brings us to “the things which shall be *hereafter*.” John in spirit is transferred from earth to heaven; he is immediately occupied, not with what was transpiring on earth, but with a scene in heaven; and with the *future*, not with the present; and instead of the things that *are* he is told, “I will shew thee things which must be *hereafter*” (or after these, i.e. after what had already engaged his attention).

Now, if these three divisions are carefully considered it will be seen at once what an important bearing they have upon the proper understanding of the rest of the book. In fact, it is not too much to say that unless due weight is attached to them, and their significance properly gauged, any correct interpretation of the Book of the Revelation is utterly impossible. And yet we have recently received a pamphlet professing to be a true interpretation of this book which does not contain even a reference to these matters, much less an explanation of them. Chapter iv. introduces an entirely new section of the book. It is not God’s grace to men that occupies us now, but His government and judgment.

Consequently, in chapter iv. the first thing that we see is a throne, and One sitting upon it, while the ascription rendered to Him by the four living creatures and the four-and-twenty elders is: “Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honour and power; for Thou hast *created* all things, and for Thy pleasure they are and were created” (v. 11).

There follows another scene in the next chapter of a still more striking character. The centre of the picture is not a throne, but a book; and One Who is described as a Lion and a Lamb, not God in His essential character and being as Creator, Lord God Almighty.

Several important questions need to be answered, if we are to understand this chapter and all that follows:

1. Has this scene been already enacted in heaven?

2. What is the nature of the Book and what are its contents?
3. What is the significance of the proclamation: "Who is worthy to open the book?"

Our answer to these questions will determine the interpretation we put upon chapters vi. to xviii.

1. There are some who view Revelation historically, and who speak as if the scene in chapter v. was already history. Do they ever consider what this involves? If what they say is true, then we can only suppose that no sooner did our Lord reach heaven than another dispensation was introduced, and instead of God dealing with men in grace He commenced to deal with them in judgment. For no one can pretend that the solemn words at the end of chapter vi. indicate anything but judgment, and a change of attitude on God's part towards man. Read carefully vv. 15-17. "The great day of His wrath is come; and who shall be able to stand?" We have always thought that the forgiveness and justification offered to men in the Gospel enabled them to stand!

We have often put the question to those who maintain the historical view: "When did this scene described in chapter v. take place?" But we have never received an answer.

2. Now as to the Book. It is a *sealed* book. Is a *sealed* book the same as a book which sets forth the Gospel? No. It indicates that we are on *fresh ground* altogether. A sealed book indicates that the contents have not, so far, been made known. It is a book of judgment. Chapter vi. calls our attention to the opening of the seals, and to the judgments that followed, judgments that became ever more severe until we reach the close of chapter xvi. These judgments all stand connected with the opening of the book and the loosening of the seals. Yet in the pamphlet already referred to the four horses and their riders are compared to four different gospels preached at different times during the Christian dispensation. But the description of the rider of the pale horse is that his name was Death and Hell (or the grave) "and power was given unto him over the fourth part of the earth, to kill with the sword and with hunger, and with death, and with the beasts of the earth." What kind of a *gospel* is this? And at what period in the Christian dispensation was it preached?

3. And now, lastly, what is the significance of the proclamation: "Who is worthy, etc.?" No man was found worthy. And why? Because the book has to do with God's *judgments*

yet to come on the earth. And only One is found worthy even to look on the book. Man as man is not worthy to give effect to God's righteous judgments. Only One Who is designated "the Lion of the tribe of Judah" and "a Lamb as it had been slain" can answer to all that God requires. The question is not, who is *great*? or who is *clever*? but who is *worthy*? God bases everything upon *moral* considerations. The only One worthy to judge men is the One Who was alone worthy to die for them and make atonement for sin. God uses fallible men to proclaim the Gospel, but there is only One in the wide universe who is qualified to judge. "All judgment is committed unto the Son."

Here then, as we have said, we have an entirely new section of the Revelation. Chapters iv. and v. introduce us to "the things which must be hereafter": i.e. to what would happen after the Church period has ended. Consequently, to bring the judgments under the seals, trumpets and vials within the Church dispensation not only falsifies the truth of the Church, but also renders any right interpretation of the Book of the Revelation simply impossible, while it also throws all dispensational truth into hopeless confusion.

Apart from all other considerations, two facts prove the truth of the above assertion. (1) The Church—the Body and Bride of Christ—is not seen on earth any more after chapter iii.: and (2) "the wrath of God" is spoken of again and again. To bring the "wrath of God" into the present dispensation of grace, is nothing short of a fearful blunder.

There is a very false idea of the Church being revived at the present time, which though not new, is being brought afresh to our notice, and believers are invited to accept it. Briefly, its two main features are these. First, it includes in the Church Old Testament believers and even millennial saints. Secondly, it deprives the nation of Israel of any separate place and portion, asserting that all references to the blessing of Israel must not be taken literally but spiritualized and applied to the Church. It is said by those who accept this teaching that nothing *new* was introduced at Pentecost. We ask in amazement, Where do we find the truth of the Body of Christ in the Old Testament? Had believers of that time the gift of the Holy Spirit as we have? Was the Fatherhood of God revealed as we know it? Moreover, how comes it, if Israel has no special place, as such, St. Paul speaks of them as broken off from the Olive Tree, but tells us that "God is able to graff them in again": and that "blindness in *part* is happened to Israel until the

fullness of the Gentiles be come in ? " and then he concludes : " And so *all* Israel shall be saved (Israel as distinct from Gentiles) : There shall come out of Zion the Deliverer and shall turn away ungodliness from Jacob, for this is My covenant unto *them* when I shall take away *their* sins " (Rom. xi.). And as to the Church, some words by the same writer in the epistle to the Ephesians, chapter iii., make it perfectly plain that the Church is a " mystery " " which from the beginning of the world hath been *hid in God* " (not hid in the Old Testament).

Now a few reflections in closing, which give us the only sound basis for any true interpretation of the Book of the Revelation.

1. After chapter iii. the Church, as we have said, is not again seen on earth. Instead, Israel, as a nation, is brought to the front in chapter vii. ; and we have a new company, the " great multitude which no man can number," also spoken of.

It would be impossible to have a more definite reference to Israel than is given us in chapter vii. *vv.* 4-8. To confound this with the Church simply lands us in a quagmire of confused thought. Not only are *tribes* mentioned, but their actual names also are given us. How is it possible to introduce these into the Church ? That would falsify its character altogether. Could there be a clearer proof than this that Israel has a distinct place of its own in God's account —a place that it can never lose ? One object of Christ coming to earth was " to confirm the promises made unto the *fathers* " (Rom. xv. 8).

How are we to think of the " great multitude " ? If these represent the Church, is it reasonable to suppose that John failed to recognize them as such ? And why should it have been necessary for one of the Elders to ask John who they were ? This of itself affords strong presumptive evidence that here we have an entirely new company. And lastly, the description the Elder gives of them supports our contention. " These are they which came out of *the* great Tribulation " (correct translation). This is their special feature—a feature we should hardly be prepared to state was the *special* character of the Church. What distinguishes the Church from all other companies of God's people is that she is the *Body* of Christ. And, moreover, as we shall show, the Church will not be on earth at the time of *the great* Tribulation.

We see then how important is the recognition of the three-fold division given us in chapter i. 19 ; and, secondly, a right

understanding of chapters iv. and v. John is no longer occupied with things on earth, but with a new order of things. He sees four-and-twenty Elders. And these are seated upon thrones and have on their heads crowns of gold. They are the symbolical representatives of the redeemed, including the Church. We cannot think of them as *always* having been in heaven. Then in chapter v. there is the sealed book, and only One is found worthy to open it or to look thereon. All this, as we have said, points to something entirely new.

Now this scene, as we have said before, has never taken place. Thus it is an inevitable consequence that neither have the judgments that follow.

One closing word. A true interpretation of Rev. i.-xviii. must harmonize with the contents of chapter xix. Here is the test. And here is where the historical view entirely breaks down. The plain teaching of this chapter proves beyond question that our Lord does not come out of heaven in judgment until after the Marriage Supper. He does not pick us up on His way to the earth; we come with Him from the start. As we have already said, the true Church, the Bride, is not seen again on earth throughout chapters vi.-xviii.; instead there is the development of evil; Satan brings on the scene the two men who will be energized by him to seek to do his will, and bring the whole earth into subjection to him. These are the two beasts of Revelation xiii. There is also the judgment of the great whore, the mother of harlots, the false bride (chap. xvii.). In chapter xix. this becomes the subject of great rejoicing in heaven, and there follows the marriage of the Lamb, for "His wife hath made herself ready." How did she come to be in heaven before the false Church is destroyed? 1 Thessalonians iv. 13-18 tells us. The Lord descends into the air, the dead are raised and the living changed and caught up together to be forever with the Lord, and they are taken at once to the Father's House and the marriage is celebrated amid the rejoicings of heaven. Then heaven is opened and Christ appears, *accompanied by His saints*, to put down His enemies and reign as King of kings and Lord of lords. He must therefore have come for them first of all. All this is much more in keeping with His desire and ours than to suppose that when He comes we return at once with Him to earth, and that the first time we see Him it will be in the aspect of a judge. In Revelation xix. we have the true order of events.

Finally, the historical school seem to lose sight of the distinction between the Morning Star and the Sun of Right-

eousness. In Revelation xxii. 16 Christ reveals Himself as the Morning Star. It is utterly incongruous to think of the two appearing together. Thus our Lord's Second Coming possesses a double character. As the Morning Star He comes for His Bride and takes her away from the earth. As the Sun of Righteousness He will appear when the "morning without clouds" dawns (2 Sam. xxiii. 4) and Christ will come to the earth with "healing in His wings."

To be obtained from the author, RUSSELL ELLIOTT,
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