

# The Great Text Commentary.

## THE GREAT TEXTS OF REVELATION.

### REVELATION XXI. I.

#### I.

#### A NEW HEAVEN AND A NEW EARTH.

'And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth are passed away.'—R. V.

1. These words open the description of the last great vision of the Apocalypse. It is a vision of the 'Bride' of Christ, and it is in two parts. First there is a vision of the New World (21<sup>1-8</sup>), and next of the New City (21<sup>9-22</sup>). The New World is the place where the redeemed are to dwell. The redeemed of God are new men in Christ Jesus, and they need a new Heaven and a new Earth to dwell in.

2. 'I am very fond,' says Dr. Rendel Harris, 'of tracing out the history—what we call the evolution—of a doctrine, because doctrines do not always just drop down into the world ready-made. It means that God has been unfolding His thought to men, and they, with their lesser thoughts, have been trying to apprehend it, perhaps first from one side and then from another side, until at last they arrive at some definite and approximately final statement, and call it "a Christian doctrine."<sup>1</sup> The doctrine of a new Heaven and a new Earth is found in Isaiah (65<sup>17</sup> 66<sup>22</sup>). It is found in the Apocrypha (Enoch 45<sup>46</sup>, 'I will transform the heaven, and make it an eternal blessing and light. And I will transform the earth and make it a blessing'). And it is found again in the New Testament (2 P 3<sup>13</sup>). It is the counterpart of man's personal salvation from sin, that his life shall be spent under new circumstances and in a new world.

3. Where is the New World to be found? Is it on the other side of the grave, or on this side? The question probably did not occur to St. John; it is certainly not considered by him. In our modern thinking about the future we have disarranged the centre of gravity. We draw a sharp distinction between the life that we are now living and the life after death. That distinction was quite subordinate in St. John's mind. With him the great distinction was between the life lived to

the flesh and the life lived to the Spirit. The dividing line was not physical death, but the acceptance of Christ. The new heaven and the new earth is the abode of the redeemed in Christ, whether they have passed through death or not. And there is no doubt that to the Seer's mind it is the very heaven above us and the very earth beneath us that are made new.

Let us have done with 'postponed heavens.' We want to understand how much of God is to be known in this life, and how much of the joy of God is to be known in this world. Such an understanding and such an experience is the only reasonable preparation for the life and blessedness of the world to come. I would be a Secularist on the non-Christian plan, if it were not that, happily, I am a Secularist already on the Christian plan. I understand that a great many of those people who say that this life is the right stage on which to see recovered good and banished evil are preaching the true Gospel, and that it is the Gospel of the New Testament. Now, of course, we apply this first of all to the individual, and we begin with the individual because we understand that that is God's way of dealing with the world. There is no gospel which does not proclaim the regeneration of the individual. But he tells us also that there is going to be a restored social order. It is called 'New Jerusalem.'<sup>2</sup>

4. For the word 'new' does not mean something that has not been before. It means something that has a new appearance, a new character. There are two chief Greek words translated 'new.' The one (*neos*) refers to time, 'recent'; the other (*kainos*) refers to quality, or fitness for use, 'fresh.' In Lk 5<sup>38</sup> ('new wine must be put into new wine-skins') we find both words. The wine is of recent vintage; but the wine-skins may have been made some time ago, only they have not yet been used. The new tomb in which our Lord was laid may not have been recently hewn, but it had never yet been occupied. So the new heaven and the new earth may be new in the sense of never being before in existence, but that is not what is stated; it is that they are new in character, fit for the use to which they are now to be put.

5. And so we have not to wait until the first heaven and the first earth are passed away before we find ourselves in the new heaven and the new earth. It is the coming of the new that causes the passing of the old. Although it is a trans-

<sup>1</sup> *Union with God*, 26.

<sup>2</sup> J. Rendel Harris, *Union with God*, 20.

formation, and possibly nearly imperceptible, the transformation does not take place by the progress of the old world in civilization, but by the introduction of a new world which causes the old to give place. The sloughing of the serpent's skin is due to the growth of the new skin beneath. Our great teacher, Robert Browning, in the poem named after Cleon, in whom he pictures the perfection of civilized man, makes him speak of this world's culture as a watch-tower, a treasure fortress, which the soul has built to overlook the flats of natural life. Yet, alas!

The soul now climbs it, just to perish there,

—to perish at the sight of a world of capability for joy, spread round it, meant for it, inviting it; and the soul craves it all; and still it may not taste of that wide enjoyment one jot more than it could when it knew so much less of it, ere it built its tower, and climbed up to look abroad. Therefore

Man sees the wider, but to sigh the more:  
Most progress is most failure.<sup>1</sup>

6. How may the new heaven and the new earth be recognized? Not so much by alteration in matter as in spirit; not so much by a change in them as in us. Life will be lived, (1) upon new conditions, (2) with a new dignity, (3) under a new character, (4) in a new liberty.

1. *New Conditions.*—A man's life is much affected by his environment, by the nature of the world he lives in. The present world may be perfect as a place for the training and discipline of life. But the discipline involves much pain and suffering. In the new world, even if the moral tests remain, there will be no more pain; sorrow and sighing shall flee away.<sup>2</sup> It will be a reformed world, a world of social reformation—work and work for all, but no drudgery. And all this will come from within, not from without.

The people who talk to us about reform do not strike down as deep into the nature of things as this. I hope I am a good reformer, in the right sense of the word. I want to see everything wrong put right—'strikes,' and all the rest of it. But the worst strike in the world is the strike against the will of God; the most terrible lock-out is when we resist blessedness and find presently that the Master of the house hath shut to the door. Our defect lies in our want of submission to God's law within.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> H. S. Holland, *Christ or Ecclesiastes*, 121.

<sup>2</sup> R. Vaughan, *Stones from the Quarry*, 149.

<sup>3</sup> J. Rendel Harris, *Union with God*, 31.

2. *New Dignity.*—Man was made for a little while lower than the angels, but God's ultimate purpose for him was that he should take princely rank. 'Henceforth,' says Jesus, 'I call you not servants, but I have called you friends.' It is a recovery of the lost fellowship which Adam had in the first Paradise. And the recovery being through the Son, it confers sonship and joint heirship with Christ. Working by way of mere civilization, we claim that 'A man's a man for a' that.' Working by way of the cross, we claim fellowship with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ.

Ever since I can recollect scientific men have been looking for what they call the missing link. What is the missing link that they look for? They say that they think there is somewhere an organism that will link you with the beast, with the newt, with the worm. Now, it is not for us to say whether they will find that link or not. They may find it. It is not the business of the Church to pronounce in such a question; it is for intellectual men to solve that according to the facts that they discover; and I neither know nor care whether they will find the link that binds us to the under world. I am not concerned about that, but why don't you lift your eyes and look at the other end of the chain and see the glorified Jesus? You cannot find the link although you are groping for it in the dirt that binds you to the world of dust and darkness, but at the other end of the chain there is a golden link that binds you to God, to immortality, to heaven, to eternity. Lift your eyes, lift your hearts. Whether you spring out of the dirt or no, you need not trouble, but here you see your kinship with God and know that you are heirs of immortality.<sup>4</sup>

3. *New Character.*—In the first Paradise Adam is spoken of as perfect in his innocence, the innocence of an untried child. Into the new Paradise one has entered, who has been made perfect *through suffering*. And with Him have entered those who have come out of the great tribulation and have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. There is a grandeur about these men in the new Paradise that does not belong to the men in the garden of Eden. The garden of Gethsemane has done more for men than the garden of Eden did.

Some time ago there was a flower show in London, and the singularity was that all the flowers were grown in London. It is not much for you to grow flowers in the country. With your blue skies, your sweet air, your bright light, and your silver dew, it is nothing to you to rear magnificent blossoms and perfect forms of elegance and of colour. But think of growing prize lilies and roses and orchids and palms on narrow window-sills, and in dingy cellars, and in dusty attics, and amongst chimney-pots.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> W. L. Watkinson, in *Christian World Pulpit*, liii. 394.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* liii. 395.

4. *New Liberty*.—There was only partial liberty in Eden; for untried innocence must always be faced with a 'Thou shalt not.' And the trial always ends in disobedience and expulsion. Then follows the long struggle in which the seed of the serpent bruises the heel of the seed of the woman. But at last the victory is won through Christ. Into the new Paradise there enters nothing that 'maketh a lie.' And the redeemed have the right to enjoy the fruit of every tree that the garden contains.

If you are free in Christ your world shall leap to help you. And freedom comes by faith. Believe in Christ, and let Him lead you to His Father, and nothing can hold you prisoner or keep you from being all that His Father and your Father made you to be.

Ah, so may all be free!

Then shall the world grow sweet at core and sound,  
And; moved in blest and ordered circuit, see

The bright millennial sun rise fair and round,  
Heaven's day begin, and Christ, whose service is  
Freedom all perfect, rule the world as His.<sup>1</sup>

7. Is it only a vision? It is a vision, but 'only' is out of place. For everything that we know of God is staked upon the reality and the fulfilment of it. St. John says, 'I saw.' How did he see? First, he had his own heart's need. Next, he had the promises of Scripture that his need would be met. Then he had Christ, the historical fact and all that faith found in Him. And last of all, he had, as the gift of Christ, the spirit of revelation. All these things went together, and were bound into one grand conviction by the Seer's knowledge of the Name of God. And when he said he saw, it was no venture, but the final and full assurance.

Is it slow in coming? It may be nearer than we think.

Say not the struggle nought availeth,  
The labour and the wounds are vain,  
The enemy faints not, nor faileth,  
And as things have been they remain.

If hopes were dupes, fears may be liars;  
It may be, in yon smoke concealed,  
Your comrades chase e'en now the fliers,  
And, but for you, possess the field.

For while the tired waves, vainly breaking,  
Seem here no painful inch to gain,  
Far back, through creeks and inlets making,  
Come silent, flooding in, the main.

<sup>1</sup> P. Brooks, *The More Abundant Life*, 86.

And not by eastern windows only,  
When daylight comes, comes in the light,  
In front, the sun climbs slow, how slowly,  
But westward, look, the land is bright.<sup>2</sup>

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#### II.

#### NO MORE SEA.

'And the sea is no more.'—R.V.

I. We love the sea. A preacher who spent his holiday in Braemar, writes enthusiastically of its frowning mountains, the silver streak of its beautiful river, the inspiration of its bracing air. But it lacked one thing. There was no glimpse to be had of the sea.<sup>3</sup>

A little girl friend of mine, whose home was by one of the great sea-lochs of the West Highlands, was being taught about heaven by her mother, and was told that there would be no sea. 'Then,' she said, 'I shall not like it.' All the child's pleasures nearly were associated with the sea—bathing, fishing, boating. On that changeful coast what is one hour mist and dulness and gloom, grey rock and wan water, is the next a fairyland of lights and colours most strange and beautiful, on which to look is enough delight. All island and peninsular nations are lovers of the sea. When Xenophon's Greeks, retreating after the battle of Cunaxa, came, after long desert marches and conflicts, in sight of the Black Sea, they burst out into joyous cries—'Thalassa! Thalassa!' A modern poet has expressed the strange fascination that the sea has for the men of these isles, in spite of all its fickleness and changes, thus:

'Ye that bore us, O restore us!  
She is kinder than ye;  
For the call is on our heart-strings,  
Said the men of the sea.'

<sup>2</sup> Clough, *Poems* (ed. 1888), 452.

<sup>3</sup> W. Hay, *God's Looking-Glass*, 116.

'Ye that love us, can ye move us?  
She is dearer than ye;  
And your sleep will be the sweeter,'  
Said the men of the sea.

'Oh, our fathers in the churchyard,  
She is older than ye;  
And our graves will be the greener,'  
Said the men of the sea.

In England there is too much of the blood of the old Northmen, the Sea King's followers, for men to dread the sea. It has been the means of winning empire, the path of adventure, the rough foster-mother of all manly qualities, and the defence of our freedom.<sup>1</sup>

2. But the sea did not appeal in this way to the Israelites. They never were sailors. In the only period of their history in which they did much voyaging their ships were manned by Phœnicians—'shipmen that had knowledge of the sea.' And St. John had special reasons for disliking it. We know that he took no merely material interest in the future, and that when he says 'the sea was no more,' he was drawing no map of the geography of the new heaven and the new earth. But he had his reasons for choosing the symbol of the sea, for using it as a figure of the things which were to be absent from the world of the redeemed.

One of the things which fascinated the mind of St. John respecting the new city, was the singular *absence* of many things which characterize the cities of earth. His description of the New World is as remarkable for its omissions as for its possessions. The familiar chapter which embodies our text illustrates this truth, and shows that there is a benediction in every negation.<sup>2</sup>

3. What, then, does the sea stand for?

1. *Mystery*.—It is largely a mystery still. It is largely unfathomed and unknown. It is our great undiscovered continent.

Full many a gem of purest ray serene  
The dark unfathomed caves of ocean bear.

It is itself a mystery. Says Jefferies, 'There is an infinite possibility about the sea; it may do what it is not recorded to have done. It is not to be ordered. It may overleap the bounds human observation has fixed for it. It has a potency unfathomable. There is still something in it not quite grasped and understood—something still to be discovered—a mystery.'

<sup>1</sup> J. T. Forbes, *God's Measure*, 77.

<sup>2</sup> See H. S. Seekings, in *Christian World Pulpit*, lxxviii. 195.

This aspect of the sea impressed itself upon the Israelites. 'Thy way,' says the Psalmist, 'was in the sea, and thy paths in the great waters, and thy footsteps were not known.' And so Cowper:

God moves in a mysterious way,  
His wonders to perform;  
He plants His footsteps in the sea,  
And rides upon the storm.

The mystery of the sea is a figure of the mystery of life. It is an aspect of life that appeals to every one. 'This world,' said Charles Dickens, 'is a world of sacred and solemn mystery; let no man despise it or take it lightly.' Christina Rossetti sings:

The mystery of Life, the mystery  
Of Death I see  
Darkly, as in a glass;  
Their shadows pass,  
And talk with me.<sup>3</sup>

Emerson tells of two members of the United States Senate who used every opportunity of leisure to discuss speculative subjects. After a time one of them retired, and the two did not meet for twenty-five years. Then one of them asked, 'Any light, Albert?' 'None,' was the reply. After a pause the other inquired, 'Any light, Lewis?' and again the answer was 'None.'<sup>4</sup>

The prophets have felt the mystery of life more than all others, and St. John was a prophet. Often had he prayed with Job, 'Oh that I knew where I might find him!' Then Jesus came and called him. The mystery of the past, of the present, of the future—all the mystery of life was dispelled. He knew that in the redeemed world there would be no baffling questions remaining. 'I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in the darkness, but shall have the light of life.'

Heaven overarches earth and sea,  
Earth-sadness and sea-bitterness.  
Heaven overarches you and me:  
A little while and we shall be—  
Please God—where there is no more sea  
Nor barren wilderness.

Heaven overarches you and me,  
And all earth's gardens and her graves.  
Look up with me, until we see  
The day break and the shadows flee.  
What though to-night wrecks you and me  
If so to-morrow saves?<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> See R. J. Campbell, *City Temple Sermons*, 235.

<sup>4</sup> H. S. Seekings, in *Christian World Pulpit*, lxxviii. 196.

<sup>5</sup> Christina G. Rossetti, *Works*, 1904, p. 286.

2. *Treachery*.—The Israelites were struck with the restlessness of the sea. But its restlessness suggested purpose. It was uncertain. It could not be counted upon. There was something akin to treachery in its moods. 'It is the scene,' says Dr. Macmillan, 'alternately of the softest dalliance, and the fiercest rage of the elements. Now it lies calm and motionless as an inland lake—without a ripple on its bosom—blue as the sapphire sky above—golden with the reflexion of sunset clouds—silvery with the pale mystic light of moon and stars; and now it tosses its wild billows mountains high, and riots in the fury of the storm. One day it steals softly up the shore, kissing the shells and pebbles with a gentle sigh as though they were gifts of love; the next it dashes its white-crested waves, laden with wrecks and corpses, against the iron rocks. Treacherous and deceitful it lures the mariner on by its beauty, until completely in its power; and then it rises up suddenly in fury, and with an overflowing flood carries him away.'<sup>1</sup>

'You can domesticate mountains,' says Oliver Wendell Holmes, 'but the sea is *ferae naturae*. It is feline. It licks your feet—its huge flanks purr very pleasantly for you, but it will crack your bones and eat you, for all that, and wipe the crimsoned foam from its jaws as if nothing had happened.'<sup>2</sup>

St. John had had experience of the treachery of the sea in the early days of his manhood on the Sea of Galilee. And now as he looked back upon his life, what had the outward circumstances of it been but a sea of uncertainty, and even treachery? But the redeemed have sought and found a kingdom that cannot be moved. They have come to a city that hath foundations. In the New Earth the wicked cease from troubling and the weary are at rest.

I have desired to go  
Where Springs not fail,  
To fields where flies no sharp and sided hail,  
And a few lilies blow.

And I have asked to be  
Where no storms come,  
Where the green swell is in the havens dumb,  
And out of the swing of the sea.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Bible Teachings in Nature*, 303.

<sup>2</sup> *Autocrat of the Breakfast-Table*.

<sup>3</sup> Gerard Hopkins, S.J.

3. *Separation*.—This, we may be sure, was the chief thought in the mind of St. John as he stood on some rock in the little lonely isle of Patmos and looked out across the sea. His eye was toward Jerusalem. For he was an Israelite with an Israelite's love of Mount Zion, the place where God delights to dwell.

When the Covenanters were shut up on the Bass Rock, it would not be with ideas of the freedom and beauty of the sea that their minds would be filled. They would pace the rocky height, feeling that the briny belt of water round them was their most effectual prison guard. Beyond there lay the sunny Lothians, with their rich corn lands, their breezy promontories, their wild moors; and at their feet the waves spent themselves against the cliff's foot with moans like the dirge of their captivity.<sup>4</sup>

St. John was an Israelite, and therefore the sea had in itself few of the attractions which it possesses for an island people like ourselves. But besides that it was the symbol of separation and exile. In Christ he had learned the meaning of the word *philadelphia*, 'brotherly love.' He loved the brethren, fulfilling the New Commandment, 'that ye should love one another as I have loved you.' And the sea now separated him from them. In the New World there will be no sea of separation. All will be one, and all will be together.

Yes, in the sea of life enisled,  
With echoing straits between us thrown,  
Dotting the shoreless watery wild,  
We mortal millions live alone.  
The islands feel the enclasping flow,  
And thus their endless bounds they know.

But when the moon their hollows lights,  
And they are swept by balms of spring,  
And in their glens on starry nights  
The nightingales divinely sing,  
And lovely notes from shore to shore  
Across the sounds and channels pour—

Oh, then a longing like despair  
Is to their farthest caverns sent;  
For surely once, they feel, we were  
Parts of a single continent.  
Now round us spreads the watery plain;  
Oh, might our marges meet again!

Who ordered that their longing's fire  
Should be, as soon as kindled, cooled?  
Who renders vain their deep desire?  
A God, a God their severance ruled,  
And bade betwixt their shores to be  
The unplumbed, salt, estranging sea.

<sup>4</sup> J. T. Forbes, *God's Measure*, 78.

## LITERATURE.

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*Evening*, 356; D. Burns, *Sayings in Symbol*, 85; W. Hay, *God's Looking-Glass*, 116; G. Matheson, *Moments on the Mount*, 32; A. Moody Stuart, *The Path of the Redeemed*, 178; C. H. Parkhurst, *The Blind Man's Creed*, 219; H. Bushnell, *Moral Uses of Dark Things*, 402; *Christian World Pulpit*, lii. 374 (Burkitt), lxxviii. 195 (Seekings).

## Taoism, its Christian Affinities and its Defects.

BY THE REV. P. J. MACLAGAN, M.A., D.PHIL., SWATOW.

### III.

#### Lao-tsze's Ethical and Political Teaching.

FROM the description of Lao-tsze's Golden Age we can already see what his ethical and political teaching must be.

His ethical principle is the paradoxical 'Act non-action.' By this we are to understand abstinence from all effort of will, the abnegation of self-determination in favour of spontaneity. Action of some kind, of course, there must be. Let it be natural, the expression of your innermost being, not of your will. Let Tao, immanent in you, act through you. Lao-tsze thus calls us back to the unity of our true life from the distractions of the senses. 'The five colours make man's eyes blind: the five tones make his ears deaf: the five flavours make his mouth dull; galloping and hunting make his heart mad: goods difficult of acquisition make his conduct hurtful. Therefore the sage acts for the belly (*i.e.* for the inner man) and not for the eye (the outwardly directed senses). He puts away that and grasps this.' It must not be thought that Lao-tsze is here merely reiterating the commonplace though very necessary warning against allowing ourselves to be seduced by the variegated world of sense, or merely pointing out the baleful effects of passion on the inner life. His doctrine is more thoroughgoing than that. He would withdraw us from any deliberate following of impulse, higher as well as lower. And to enforce his lesson he appeals to what seems to him the majestic indifference of nature. 'Heaven and earth are not benevolent: they look on all things as straw-dogs. The sage is not benevolent: he looks on the people as straw-dogs.' The straw-dogs, Legge explains, were made of straw tied up

in the shape of dogs, and used in praying for rain. When the sacrifice was over they were thrown aside. 'The illustration,' Legge goes on to say, 'does not seem a happy one.' It is not so much the illustration that I would object to as the doctrine illustrated. The doctrine, however, is stated too clearly to be mistaken. Tao, blind spontaneity, gives rise to this world of things, and acts in all, and would act in us if only we did not cross and thwart it by our willings and desires, benevolent as well as malevolent.

When we find Lao-tsze adducing Heaven and Earth as the exemplars of the serene indifference he preaches, we are reminded of the lesson which M. Arnold drew from 'the intense clear star-sown vault of Heaven,' and from the sea's expanse:

And with joy the stars perform their shining  
And the sea its long moon-silvered roll;  
For self-poised they live, nor pine with noting  
All the fever of some differing soul.  
Bounded by themselves and unregardful,  
In what state God's other works may be,  
In their own tasks all their powers pouring,  
These attain the mighty life you see.

To the poet's yearning that his soul might become 'vast' like these, there comes the answer, 'Wouldst thou be as these are? Live as they.'

Only one might claim for the Chinese thinker the superiority—perhaps the inconsistent superiority—of still having an outlook on the troubled world, in the doctrine which we shall find Lao-tsze preaching, that the 'self-poised' sage will by his influence allay 'the fever' of the distracted world.

This 'Act non-action,' then, is Lao-tsze's fundamental ethical doctrine, and it is, of course, in its