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# BAPTIST REVIEW AND EXPOSITOR

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## THE MAIN PURPOSE OF THE APOCALYPSE.\*

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The Rigi and Pilatus are the northern sentinels of the Alps. The former is the mountain of the sunshine, the latter of the cloud. Stand on the Rigi Kulm under the blue sky, and though the sunshine sparkles on the Lake and glorifies a hundred peaks westward and southward, there to the northwest stands Pilatus cloud-capped and still—unless indeed, as often happens, he be in the tumult of a storm. For, as outpost of the Alps, he first confronts the storms that march from the north, and on his rugged height they often spend their force. The Apocalypse is the Pilatus of the New Testament.

I. IT IS A BOOK OF CONTROVERSY. About it hover clouds of mystery. Around it rage the storms of disputation.

1. There is controversy as to its *author*. It is not the purpose of this article to discuss that. Enough to avow one's own belief that there is no sufficient reason in language, teaching or spirit to warrant one in refusing the almost unanimous tradition of the early centuries that it is the work of the Apostle John—the Son of Thunder whom Jesus loved.

2. There is controversy also as to *date*. On this I shall not dwell but again content myself with saying that other voices are not strong enough to drown the clear note of the Fathers that it was written in the time of Domitian, say about 95 A. D.

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\* Thankful acknowledgement is made of special indebtedness to the lectures of Dr. Broadus, and "The World Lighted" by Charles Edward Smith.

3. The chief controversy, however, has been about the *interpretation* of the book. What a multitude of theories, what a clash of opinions, there have been!

(1) The *Preterists* tell us it has all been fulfilled. Some of them say it refers on the one hand to the events of the three or four years that close with the destruction of Jerusalem, 70 A. D., and on the other, to the overthrow of heathenism in the death of Nero and the stop thus put to persecution. This view, of course, assumes the early date and has found great favor in Germany. Many like it because it makes so little of the predictive element. Others of this class believe that the book found fulfillment within the first three centuries after the death of Christ in the overthrow of Judaism in the second century and that of Pagan Rome in the first-quarter of the fourth. Yet the fact that Church and State were wed by Constantine, in which these Preterists see the fulfillment of the glorious victories symbolized in the closing chapters, seems to most Baptists, I presume, one of the most calamitous events in all history.

(2) The *Futurists* place all the events referred to in the future. One class refers them to the three and a half years immediately preceding the second advent. Others postpone all until after Christ has come.

(3) The *Historical* schools assert that the series of visions spans the whole period from the Apostle's time until the end. And here again different views appear. One school regards the three series of sevens—the seals, the trumpets, and the bowls—as continuous; another as synchronous. In the former case they are like the successive arches of a single bridge; in the latter, they are like three parallel bridges, each one of which spans the whole period from the first century to the end of the age. Others again feel that these visions may find many fulfillments among many different nations.

(4) Still others, *Idealists*, deny any literal fulfillment and see simply the play of great principles—the struggle and the ultimate triumph of the good. Now in the midst

of this uncertainty as to the proper interpretation of the book what are we to do? When the doctors differ so, what can ordinary mortals do? Many have answered that question by inventing a new view. Many, repelled by what they consider extreme and hurtful notions and dissatisfied with any theory that has been presented, have turned away from the book altogether. There is a better way.

II. THE MAIN PURPOSE OF THE BOOK MAY BE KNOWN. In this respect also it is like Pilatus. For if you will spend the night on the Rigi and rise before the sun, while yet the mists sleep in the valleys and all the world is still, you may, in the gray morning, behold Pilatus with his face unveiled and learn the secret of his high places. So if one will come to this book when the world is still and the voices of controversy are hushed, at the quiet hour of devotion, seeking the hidden manna for the soul's sustenance, he may get the main message that the Master sends us through His servant John.

1. Surely *this is to be expected*. Is it at all likely that the chief blessing of the book should wait until all its mysteries had been solved? Or that only the few capable of recognizing in the broad field of history the events symbolized in it should share in that blessing? That is not the general spirit of Scripture which unfolds itself in its essence to those of child-like heart. Even though one may feel that a day may come when in manifested fulfillment it may vindicate its own inspiration and serve such purpose as prophecies of the Old Testament have served in their fulfillment, yet it is quite unlikely that this last voice from heaven should not have its message for the multitude of believers through the centuries.

2. And is this not *suggested* in the opening verses where blessing is pronounced upon him that readeth and upon them that hear the words of the prophecy and keep the things written therein? That brings before us the picture of the church assembled for worship where one reads and the others hear, and it implies two things,

namely: That ordinary Christians could understand the main teaching of the book and that practical obedience to that teaching was expected.

3. *How can we discover it?* By putting ourselves in their position; or in other words by noting the circumstances under which the message was given.

They are indicated in I. 9, where John refers to their common tribulation. He himself was an exile in Patmos, banished thither because of his fidelity in testifying to Jesus Christ. The ruthless Domitian had set himself to crush out the spreading gospel. The mighty power of Rome, so long a shelter, has now become an enemy. The last Apostle has been singled out, torn from the church he loved, and withdrawn from direct contact with those to whom for a generation his presence had been a benediction. Well might the churches in Asia feel disconsolate. And well might John, encompassed with the infirmities of age and oppressed with a sense of isolation and loneliness, feel the chill of discouragement and begin to wonder what it all meant. The old question might well recur, "Are there few that be saved?" Is sin always to triumph? As the Master Himself was slain, are his people too to be cut off? For there were other reasons for discouragement besides that of outward persecution. There was corruption and degeneracy among the churches themselves. False doctrines were harbored, gross immoralities were tolerated; the spirit of the world was gaining an ascendancy; and the love of many was growing cold. With such weakness within and persecution without, need we wonder if something of gloom should settle down upon the Apostle's spirit?

Nor is John alone in such experiences, John the Baptist had known it as he languished in the fortress of Machaerus. Peter refers to "the fiery trial" in his first letter and in his second has much to say of degeneracy within and opposition without. Jude follows in the same strain. And even Paul, dauntless hero, though he was, shows in his last letter a genuine tinge of sadness. Con-

trast it with the splendid hopefulness of his letter to the Romans or the optimistic outlook of the letters written during his first imprisonment. Something of the sombre shade of the dungeon has darkened the earthly prospect though the heavenward aspect cheers the old warrior's heart and peace reigns within.

Indeed this seems generally characteristic of the later apostolic age. In the early days the gospel went forth conquering and to conquer. Hope ran high and was fed by a succession of signal triumphs. Delightful is the fresh zeal and high courage that breathe through the book of Acts. It is an inspiring history of how the gospel spread from Jerusalem to Rome. But a change came; and the early buoyancy seemed to pass away. It looked as if the early promise was not being fulfilled, and timid questioning began to spring up in many a soul. Were the churches to sink into the weakness and corruption of the world about them? Or if a remnant escaped this contagion, was it to be exterminated by the hostile powers of the world? Such probably were the thoughts of John as in his weary exile, he restlessly turned the matter over in his mind. When Peter was thus distressed his heart was comforted by the promise of the Master's coming, the day of the Lord, and the new heavens and the new earth in which righteousness should have its abiding dwelling place. Jude, too, under like conditions is cheered by the thought of Him who is able to set the believer before the presence of His glory without blemish in exceeding joy. James bids suffering Christians be patient unto the coming of the Lord, and Paul, as the shadows gather about him, stays himself on the Lord who would save him unto His heavenly kingdom and exults in soul as he catches a glimpse of that radiant crown of righteousness which the righteous Judge should give him at that day.

Would it not be strange if to him whom Jesus loved no special word of comfort came amid the weakness of age, the loneliness of exile, and the soul agony he felt for the churches he had served so long? Could anything be

more fitting than that the Master should give His last inspired message through the last of the apostles or more natural than that that message should be comfort to His faithful ones and a warning to the unfaithful, through all the long centuries until He comes again? *That surely is the main purpose of the book—to comfort and to warn.* To say this is not to deny that there is in the visions a general forecast of the general outlines of the struggle between Christ and His enemies, or that these are worthy of study and may yet, when seen to be clearly fulfilled, serve some gracious purposes. But it does imply that these purposes are secondary in God's thought.

4. Note *how thoroughly adapted it is to that purpose.* The opening vision is that of the glorified Christ in the midst of His churches. "His countenance was as the sun shineth in his strength." In the presence of that glory John falls as one dead. But the old-time touch restores him and the familiar voice bids his fear depart. And, if one might venture, in imagination, to fill in the story it would run like this: The Lord might have said to John, "My son, you have been downcast and discouraged, you have been wondering whether my cause was not doomed to failure. But now do you not see that in me there is light enough for the whole world and power enough to vanquish every adversary" and John's reply might be: "Yea Lord; and yet men love the darkness, and still the enemy seem to triumph. And knowest thou, Lord, that thine own people are harboring the evil and turning themselves once more to idols."

Whereupon the Master takes him round the churches and as again and again He says, "I know thy works," John is made to feel that the Master's confidence is not due to ignorance of the conditions, but has good grounds. He proceeds to show the perplexed disciple what those grounds are and at the same time gives him a foreview of the struggle with evil and its final issue.

So in the fourth chapter John is shown a vision of the opened heaven—and there he beholds God Almighty seat-

ed upon His throne, language is beggared to describe His ineffable glory and infinite power. Compared with that the earth must have seemed small; Rome's power contemptible, and the devil's devices unavailing. Surely John's hope must revive and faith take on new strength. There is light enough in heaven to lighten the world, and power enough to vanquish all God's foes. But the victory is not just now. The struggle is to be long and to the churches trying. The panorama of that struggle is unrolled in a series of wonderful visions. It is like the conflict on the plain of Troy. Not earth alone but heaven as well is interested and shares in it. Sometimes the saints of the Almighty are discomfited, their ranks shattered and the surviving remnant driven into the wilderness. Again the enemy are defeated and hallelujahs fill the heavenly regions. So for long long ages the tide of battle ebbs and flows, the slow fierceness of the struggle involves unspeakable suffering and hardship, and calls for and develops the patience of the saints. But the issue is that Christ conquers and reigns. The former things pass away—the sin, the sorrow, and the weariness; the heavens and the earth are made new; the New Jerusalem comes down from heaven resplendent with glory; and the saints enter upon their eternal service with everlasting joy upon their heads.

5. That *these visions brought John comfort* is perfectly evident. Is that not implied in the twentieth verse of the closing chapter? Does the glorified Jesus not virtually say to him "You thought my cause was losing; but lo! I am on the way to victory and the throne; yea and I am coming to it quickly?" And John responds "Amen, keep coming, Lord Jesus." For must not the present imperative which John employs emphasize the thought of progress while not excluding the transcendent event in which that progress finds its culmination? It is quite natural accordingly that when John sits down to pass the message on to the churches he should feel assured of the blessedness of the faithful ones who should receive it (I. 3).

The Apocalypse which comforted him would comfort their hearts also.

And what it did for them it has been doing for God's suffering saints all through the centuries. Has any book of Scripture ministered more strengtheningly in days of persecution than this? Let the heroic Vaudois in Alpine valleys, or the sturdy Covenanters in the glens of Scotland answer. It is equally true of the more common sorrows of life. How the eyes of age to which earth's scenes are growing dim love to linger upon the pages that tell of that new life that never knows weariness, the new city whose inhabitants never grow old. How often the poor sufferer, tossing in pain through weary hours of a slow disease, has called for some loved one to read those glowing chapters that tell of the time when there shall be no more pain or crying, no more dying or mourning, when God Himself shall wipe away all tears from their eyes! How often the book has brought cheer to the poor, the discouraged, the outcast, the oppressed! How often, by its hope of reward, it has nerved to fidelity; braced for self-denial, and made brave to endure the crucifixion of our "members that are upon the earth." Unquestionably its chief ministry has been to our times of sorrow and struggle, perplexity and gloom. This is the obverse of the coin—a message of comfort, an incentive to fidelity.

6. The reverse is that it issues a warning to the churches.

There is warning against false doctrine, which it combats by holding before us in striking ways the fundamental doctrines of the faith. Could the deity of Christ, for example, be more emphatically proclaimed than it is in v. 8-14 where the same worship is paid to the Lamb as unto God Almighty—especially when one contrasts it with xxii. 8, 9 where the mighty angel so promptly refuses the worship John was about to offer and bids him worship God. So the atonement by blood is constantly meeting us. We "are loosed from our sins in His blood" (I. 5). The new song is "Worthy art Thou—for Thou

wast slain and didst purchase unto God with Thy blood men of every tribe and tongue and people and nation.” The ever-recurring title “Lamb” keeps this doctrine ever before us. So the resurrection is everywhere implied, and in the Lord’s first word expressly stated, “I was dead” He says “and behold I am alive for evermore.” Even the mysterious doctrine of the Trinity is implied in I. 4, 5, in each of the last four letters to the churches (e. g. iii. 21, 22) and elsewhere. The everlasting Gospel is the means of conquest, the power of God unto salvation, as unmistakably as in Paul’s letter to the Romans.

There are also the sternest possible warnings against unrighteousness. Conduct is regarded even more than creed. Sin will not go unpunished. It will never pay to do wrong. One feels as he reads that heaven is near with its exhaustless power and ever with the right. His reward is with Him to give to every man according as his work shall be.

Along with this is shown the sin and folly of relying upon any earthly power as against God. The mightiest combinations of evil whether beast or Babylon, opposing State or Apostate church, shall fall. The way of wisdom is to stand true to Jesus and so share in His victory and glory.

III. Finally because this is the purpose of the book it becomes to us *the crowning glory of the Bible* just in proportion as we know and feel what it is to suffer with and for Christ. They who glide smoothly with the currents of worldly thought and practice, and have never felt the pangs of self-crucifixion or the hardships of warfare for the sake of Christ and his truth, are not likely to find anything very attractive about it. It will be to them as the Lord Himself was to many “a root out of a dry ground, without form or comeliness.” But to those who do know what it means to lose and suffer and endure for Christ’s sake, the book with its sure promise of victory and reward becomes like Him “altogether lovely” and perhaps the chiefest book of all. It becomes inspiring in

the highest degree and forms a fitting close to the sacred writings. Though it begins in mystery and gloom, and passes on through struggle and conflict, it ends in light and peace, in gladness and glory. Pilatus still remains its fitting symbol. Some of us remember how in the gray dawn as from the Rigi we gazed upon his cloudless summit a sudden storm came from the northwest, broke in fury upon his brow, swept across the Lake a blinding mist and drove us to our rooms. Fifteen minutes later as I looked out the western window, there appeared a small rift in the clouds through which I caught sight of Finsteraarhorn, fifty miles away, just as his snowy peak began to kindle with the first rays of the rising sun. The rift widened, and there before our eyes peak after peak caught the growing splendor. It seemed as if the glory of heaven were descending upon the earth bathing it in light supernal. By and by we walked out again to the kulm and looked toward Pilatus. There he stood silent, majestic and crowned with a wealth of cloud—not now, however, the sombre cloud of yesterday, nor the storm-cloud of an hour before, but mountain masses of cumulus shot through and through with the many-colored splendors of the morning. He was transfigured. The mountain of mystery had become the mount of glory.