

Another Solution of Revelation xx.—xxii.

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To Canon R. H. Charles, all students of Eschatology owe an unspeakable debt, especially for his translations of ancient Jewish documents bearing on this interesting topic and forming a link between the teaching of the Old Testament and that of the New. Of these I may mention, among many others, his admirable and most valuable edition of *The Book of Enoch*, which sheds a world of light on Jewish thought about the future in the centuries preceding the appearance of Christ; and his *Eschatology, Hebrew, Jewish, and Christian, a Critical History of the Doctrine of a Future Life*, of which a new and enlarged edition was published some two years ago. In recent numbers of this magazine, Dr. Charles has called attention to certain difficulties in Rev 20–22; and has proposed a solution of them. These difficulties, and this proposed solution, I shall now discuss.

The difficulties mentioned are three. '1. First of all, it is a matter beyond dispute that 22¹⁵ 21²⁷, which state that outside the gates of the New Jerusalem evil in every form exists, but that it can in no wise pass within the gates of the holy city, prove that *the New Jerusalem here referred to was to descend before the disappearance of the first earth and the first heaven and the final judgment* described in 20¹¹⁻¹⁵.'

'2. Verses 22² 21²⁴⁻²⁶ 22^{14, 17} assume that the nations are still upon the earth, that the gospel is preached to them afresh from the New Jerusalem (as was prophesied already in 14⁶ 15⁴), that they are healed thereby of their spiritual evils, their sins washed away, and a right to the tree of life given to them. . . . That the above prophecies can apply only to the New Jerusalem, which was to be the seat of the Millennial Kingdom, is too obvious to dwell on further.'

'3. It is finally to be observed that, since the earthly Jerusalem was in ruins and never in the opinion of the Seer to be rebuilt, a new city was of necessity to take its place as the seat of Christ's kingdom and the abode of the blessed martyrs, who were to come down from heaven to reign for 1000 years with Him.'

For the above reasons, Dr. Charles has come to the conclusion 'that the text in 20–22 is dis-

arranged in an astonishing degree and does not at present stand in the orderly sequence originally designed by our author.' And he suggests, as 'apparently the only hypothesis that can account for the facts of the case,' 'that *John died . . . when he had completed 1–20³ of his work, and that the materials for its completion, which were for the most part ready in a series of independent documents, were put together by a faithful but unintelligent disciple in the order which he thought right.*' He accordingly gives, in his second paper, a 'Rearranged Translation' of Rev 20–22.

This rearrangement breaks up the manifest continuity of Rev 20¹⁻¹⁰, which is dominated by the limited period of a 'thousand years,' a thread binding together ch. 20^{2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7}, and followed by revolt of unnumbered multitudes, who are 'consumed' by fire from heaven. Then follow the final punishment of Satan, the resurrection and judgment of the dead, good and bad, and the second death of all whose names are 'not found written in the book of life.' All this is followed by a vision of the 'New Jerusalem,' described with a dramatic grandeur which has fascinated, comforted, and strengthened untold myriads of the servants of Christ in all ages and Churches.

After a voice from the throne in ch. 21⁵⁻⁸, we have a second vision introduced in v. 9 by words identical with others in ch. 17^{1, 3}, and placing, in conspicuous contrast to 'Babylon, the mother of the harlots,' another figure, 'the Bride, the wife of the Lamb.' This is at once identified with 'the Holy City, Jerusalem,' in ch. 21², which is again described word for word as 'coming down out of heaven from God.' In the preliminary vision in vv. 1-4 we saw a city without tears or sorrow. We now see one in which 'the glory of God' makes needless the sun, and in which there is no night: chs. 21^{23, 25} 22⁵. This implies, as is expressly stated in ch. 20¹¹, that our present solar system has passed away.

This magnificent and harmonious panorama, Dr. Charles breaks up by pushing back chs. 21⁹⁻²² to the beginning of the Millennium; thus replacing the one City depicted in all our ancient MSS. and versions by two cities separated by an

interval of 1000 years, each descending from heaven and supernatural; one of them abiding for ever, the other besieged by unnumbered foes led by Gog and Magog, and passing away with a fugitive universe at the appearance of the Judge of all mankind. Of these two cities, the permanent one, in Rev 21¹⁻⁴, is a feebler copy of the transient, one, and 'the wife of the Lamb' in v.⁹ disappears from the permanent City, to make a way for a mere comparison of the City to 'a bride adorned for her husband.' We now ask, What reasons are given for this marvellous disturbance of the harmonious vision portrayed in all our earliest copies?

The first proof is Rev 22¹⁶: 'Outside are the dogs and the sorcerers and the companions of harlots and the murderers and the idolaters, and every one who loves and makes a lie.' This is in the Epilogue, ch. 22⁶⁻²¹, after the close, in v.⁵ of the vision of the City of God, and practically of the whole book and of the Bible as we possess it. The prophet remembers, with solemn awe, that not all those for whom Christ died will pass through the gates of pearl and walk the streets of gold. Around him are men walking in the broad path leading to destruction. He fears, as is assumed in Dn 12², Mt 25⁴⁶, Jn 5²⁹, 2 Th 1⁸, Rev 20¹⁵, etc., that in this evil path some will continue to the end. He is therefore compelled to place them, as a warning to his readers, 'outside' the City of God.

Moreover, in these chapters we have no hint that those cast into the lake of fire will be at once annihilated. Indeed, the plural form in ch. 20¹⁰ rendered 'shall be tormented' implies that 'the wild beast and the false prophet,' who 1000 years earlier (ch. 19²⁰) were cast into the lake of fire, were still suffering torment. This proves that to be cast into the lake of fire does not necessarily involve immediate extinction. And if the lost still exist, it must be 'outside' the City.

Similar considerations explain ch. 21²⁷: 'There shall in no wise enter into it anything unclean, and he who makes an abomination and a lie.' Nor need we wonder to find in vv.²⁴⁻²⁶ 'the nations . . . and the kings . . . and their glory.' For we can apprehend the unseen only in terms of the seen. The nations and kings are conspicuous in human life everywhere, and therefore colour the prophet's words. So Is 60¹¹, which is probably in his mind: 'Thy gates shall be open

continually day and night: they shall not be shut: that men may bring to thee the wealth of nations, and their kings led captive.' This chapter cannot be literally fulfilled; but it is one of the most precious in the Old Testament.

That in Rev 22², 'the leaves of the tree are for healing of the nations,' is, like the 'river of water of life' and the 'tree of life' on its banks, a beautiful touch in the drapery of the metaphor. They can no more be explained in detail than can the fatted calf in the story of the prodigal son. In all symbolic speech we must distinguish between essential lessons and the rhetorical forms in which they are clothed. This applies to all interpretation of ancient prophecy.

Ch. 22¹⁴ reads, 'Blessed are they who wash their robes, that they may have the right to come to the tree of life, and by the gates may enter into the City'; and v.¹⁷, 'The Spirit and the bride say, Come. And he who hears, let him say, Come. And he who is thirsty, let him come; he who will, let him take the water of life freely.' These belong, like v.¹⁵, to the Epilogue; and are parting words of encouragement to the readers, following the description of the City, and the completion of this Book.

The only other objection, viz. No. 3 quoted above, is altogether imaginary. For in ch. 20¹⁻¹⁰, the only passage in the Bible which speaks of a limited period during which the martyrs are to reign with Christ, to be followed by a tremendous final assault of evil, we have no hint of any visible return of Christ to earth, or of any visible city other than the earthly Jerusalem and earlier than the glorious City described in ch. 21¹⁻⁴. Nor have we here any suggestion of a bodily resurrection of the martyrs. Indeed, the word '*souls* of those beheaded' in ch. 20⁴ suggests disembodied spirits, as in ch. 6⁹, 'I saw underneath the altar the *souls* of those slain because of the word of God.' These impatient souls, crying out for the punishment of their enemies, were certainly not living on earth in bodily forms.

The above objections, which are the only reasons given by Dr. Charles for his revolutionary disarrangement of the text given by all our ancient documents, are of no force against the serious objections mentioned above to the rearrangement he proposes; and are no justification for his introducing into the Book of Revelation two consecutive holy cities, described in similar

terms, one lasting for 1000 years and then besieged by enemies, and the other abiding for ever.

This failure to rearrange the text of the New Testament on internal evidence only warns us not hastily to set aside the abundant documentary evidence on which it rests, when this evidence is nearly unanimous. In the Old Testament, in the Pentateuch and elsewhere, such reconstruction has borne the test of criticism, and has produced results of great value. But the case of the New Testament differs greatly from the Old, in the infinitely greater abundance of the evidence at our disposal, in very early MSS, versions, and quotations in early Christian writers. During the last eighty years this evidence has been collected from many lands and carefully examined. The result is a perceptible change, in many details, of the Sacred Text. In not a few passages, the entire evidence known to us leaves us still in doubt. But these doubtful passages are not very important. Moreover, in the margin of the Revised Version, they are placed within reach of all intelligent readers of the English Bible. The rational certainty thus afforded, within definitely marked limits, touching the words actually written by the writers of the New Testament, has been an immense gain to theology and religion.

To assume that the Sacred Text is corrupt wherever we cannot understand it is a tempting way of escape from a difficult passage, but a dangerous one. For example, in Rev 2²⁶, Dr. Charles, without any documentary evidence, changes the words 'there shall be no night there' into 'shut day or night' as in Is 60¹¹, which seems to be in the writer's thought. The change in Rev 21²⁶ from this earlier prophecy marks an important development in the New Testament as compared with the Old. Same thought repeated in Rev 22⁵.

A wonderful agreement pervades the Eschatology of the various and very different writers of the New Testament. In all four Gospels, in the Book of Acts, in the letters of Paul and others, and in the Book of Revelation, we find a confident expectation of a definite moment in the future when, with a voice from heaven and an appearance of Christ, the present order of Nature will pass away, all the dead, good and bad, will be raised, and all will receive reward or punishment according to their works. So far, all is clear.

We need not wonder that, in view of the

immense and sudden change in the religious outlook of the world caused by the appearance, teaching, death, and resurrection of Christ, His followers looked for His promised return at any early date, probably in the lifetime of some then living. This expectation was disproved by His non-appearance. But, in strange forms, it has lingered to our day.

The case is complicated by the assertion in Rev 20⁵, and nowhere else in the Bible, that the souls of the martyrs, and perhaps of others, 'lived and reigned as kings with Christ 1000 years.' Upon this statement, strange theories have been built, including a premillennial coming of Christ, and His reign on earth for this limited period. This theory is disproved by the revolt of vast multitudes and the siege of the beloved city described in vv. 7-10. For we cannot conceive this siege while Christ was visibly reigning on earth; nor can we conceive Him leaving His servants, to make way for the siege. Moreover, we are not told that the reign of the martyrs with Christ was on earth. In ch. 6⁹, the prophet saw their souls under the altar; apparently in heaven.

The simplest explanation of the Millennium is found in Jn 5²⁴⁻²⁹, where we hear 'the voice of the Son of God' already speaking, and heard by some who, believing it, have 'passed out of death into life.' Then follows 'an hour when all who are in the graves will hear His voice and will go forth' to a 'resurrection of life' or of 'judgment.' This passage by no means removes all the difficulties in Rev 20⁴⁻¹⁰, especially that of the final revolt. But, like the rest of the Book, it encourages the suffering servants of Christ in times of persecution. On the whole subject, I heartily recommend Professor H. B. Swete's admirable commentary on *The Apocalypse of John*; a work which Canon Charles seems to have entirely overlooked.

Interpret it as we may, the harmonious teaching of the New Testament about the Second Coming of Christ involves what is to us an insoluble difficulty, viz., the very long interval between faithful service on earth and the reward promised, not at death, but simultaneously at a definite moment in the future, at the close of the present order of things. This day of judgment and retribution is conspicuous throughout the New Testament; e.g. Mt 13^{30, 41} 25³¹, Jn 5^{28, 29}, Ac 17³¹, 1 Co 15^{52, 53}, Ro 8¹¹, Ph 3^{20, 21}, 2 Ti 4⁸, Rev 20¹¹⁻¹⁵. This difficulty some have endeavoured to lessen by suggesting that the sleep (1 Co 15²⁰) of the

righteous dead will be unconscious. But this is a mere guess; and the immense interval involved is unthinkable. We are glad to take refuge from it in Paul's confident assurance in 2 Co 5⁸, that to be 'away from our home in the body' is to be 'at home with the Lord,' which in Ph 1²⁸ he declares to be 'much better.' But this assured hope cannot set aside the much more abundant teaching quoted above. This difficulty, like so many others, remains unsolved.

Our only certainty, and one absolutely sufficient for all our needs, is the broad principle asserted in Gal 6^{7, 8}: 'Whatever a man sows, this he will also reap. He who sows for his own flesh, from his flesh will reap corruption: and he who sows for the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap life eternal.' This judgment is re-echoed and confirmed by the inborn moral sense of all men, an authority which speaks in the literature of all ages and races, and one from which there is neither escape nor appeal. All else must be left till the morning dawns, and the shadows flee away.

For the above reasons, in spite of my great respect of Canon Charles' most valuable contributions to Eschatology, I cannot accept his proposed rearrangement of Rev 20-22. And I resent his opinion that these chapters were put together in their present form by an 'unintelligent disciple' of the original writer. I cannot conceive a more fitting and glorious conclusion to this wonderful book of prophecy than these chapters as we have them in our Bibles, or a more fitting close to the sacred volume.

These various visions are not consecutive. For already in ch. 6¹⁷ we have 'the Great Day' to which all the New Testament writers look forward, and which is afterwards so graphically described in ch. 20¹¹⁻¹⁵. But the visions are progressive and intelligible. We have seven seals opened, seven trumpets, and seven bowls, each series apparently leading up to the great consummation, but each followed by further conflict. We have then, in chs. 19¹¹⁻²¹⁴, seven visions, each introduced by the words 'and I saw'; and final visions of the

City of God and the peacefully flowing River of the Water of Life.

The Book of Revelation stands, even as to its framework, in close relation to the Book of Ezekiel. The opening visions in Rev 1 and 4 present many points of contact with Ezk 1; e.g. the 'four living creatures,' man, lion, bullock, eagle; and the throne of God surmounted by a rainbow. The names 'Gog and Magog' in Rev 20⁸ recall Ezk 38, 39. This being so, the resurrection of dry bones into a revived nation in Ezk 37 presents points of analogy with 'the first resurrection' in Rev 20^{5, 6}, which is followed in v.⁸ by the revolt of Gog and Magog. The vision of the restored temple in Ezk 40-48 may have suggested the vision of the New Jerusalem in Rev 21; and the river with trees on both banks, bearing fruit every month, with leaves for healing, may have suggested Rev 22¹⁻⁸.

The wild beasts 'coming up from the sea,' one like a leopard, so conspicuous from Rev 13^{2, 11} onwards to ch. 20¹⁰, recall Dn 7⁸; and Rev 21²⁴⁻²⁶ recalls Is 60^{11, 12}. All this reveals a writer steeped in thought and phrase of the Old Testament.

But the whole Book of Revelation rises infinitely above all similar works, in the unique honour which it pays to Christ as an Object of the praises and worship of the brightest in heaven; and in its conspicuous reference to the death of Christ as a means of the salvation which He announced. It depicts faithfully the tremendous conflicts awaiting the servants of Christ, and the infinite triumph which will follow. Anything better fitted to encourage and strengthen them in days of persecution, or in our happier days and circumstances to shed light on the dark path which leads down to the cold river of death, I cannot conceive. Indisputably this book is a most precious gift of the ascended Saviour to His faithful servants in the conflicts of life on earth; and we have good reason to believe that in our English Bible, especially in the Revised Version, we have it, in all essentials, as it was originally written.