

The Approaching End of the Age by H. Grattan Guinness – Part II.

Progressive interpretation. Chapter II.

Continued from [Part II. Progressive interpretation. Chapter I.](#)

CONSIDERATION OF CERTAIN BROAD PRINCIPLES, ON WHICH THE APOCALYPSE IS TO BE INTERPRETED.—IT IS A SYMBOLIC PROPHECY, AND MUST BE TRANSLATED INTO ORDINARY LANGUAGE BEFORE IT CAN BE UNDERSTOOD.

IT is clear that before a student can understand a given work, he must be acquainted with the language in which the book is written; and he must read it as written in that language, not in another. If the work be in French, he will fail to decipher its meaning if he reads the words as Latin or as English.

In what language is the Apocalypse written? Is it to be understood *literally*? If not, on what principle is it to be interpreted?

It is obvious to the most superficial reader, that in its actual texture and construction, the Apocalypse is *a record of visions that are past*. All allow that it is nevertheless, as to its meaning, *a prophecy of events that are future*, or *were future* at the time that the visions were granted to St. John. The angel calls the book a prophecy, “seal not the sayings of the prophecy of this book, for the time is at hand.” Of its prophetic character there can therefore be no more question, than that its *form* is a record of past visions. In the strictest sense then no one understands the book *literally*; for the statement, “I saw a beast rise up out of the sea,” taken literally, is in no sense whatever a prophecy; it is a narrative of a past event, not a prediction of a future one.

Such literalism as this is divinely excluded. John beheld things which were to take place “hereafter,” but the future was signified to the apostle in a series of visions.

The book is “The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God. gave to Him, to show unto his servants things which must shortly come to pass; and He sent and *signified it* by his angel, unto his servant John.”

To “signify” (σημαίνω) is to show by signs, to intimate your meaning, not in plain words, but by signs and symbols.

Now it were clearly folly, *to confound the sign with the thing signified*. In a language of signs, each sign and each combination of signs, has a definite meaning. The first verse of the book therefore answers our first question about it: is it to be understood literally? No! IT IS A BOOK OF SIGNS. Its true meaning is veiled under significant figures, and a process of

translation must take place, ere that true meaning can be reached. Each symbol used, must be separately studied, and its force gathered, from its context, from comparison with other scriptures, from its own nature, and from such explanations as are given in the prophecy itself, before we can expect to discover the mind of the Spirit of God in this book.

If on opening a letter from a friend, the first sentence that met the eye was "I write in Latin in order that my letter may not be understood by all," we should at once be prepared to translate as we read; we should not pore over a certain combination of letters and syllables, trying in vain to make some intelligible English word out of them; we should say the *word* is so and so, but the *meaning* is so and so. In reading the symbolic portion of the Apocalypse, we are bound to do the same; on no other principle can anything like a consistent interpretation be attained. The nature of the case forbids it. And yet an opposite maxim of interpretation is often laid down; it is said, take everything literally unless you are forced by impossibility, in the nature of things, to give a symbolic signification. This is like saying, if you can find any combination of letters or syllables in this Latin letter, that will form any English word, take it as English, but where you cannot possibly make anything out of them as English, then no doubt they are Latin. What a singularly lucid communication would be the result, of such a system of interpretation! And yet, alas! It is in connection with the Apocalypse too common, among some, whose spirituality and intelligence ought to be fruitful of more wisdom. Such interpreters argue in defence of the monstrosities evoked by their hybrid system, somewhat in this way: "The Nile was once literally turned to blood, we doubt not therefore that this prediction, Revelation viii. 8, 'the third part of the sea became blood,' means just what it says; God, who wrought the one miracle, can accomplish the other." Undoubtedly: the question is not what God *can* do, but what He here says He *will* do.

Now Exodus is a literal history; when it says the river became blood *it means it*; Revelation is a symbolic prophecy, when therefore it says "the third part of the sea became blood," *it does not mean it*, but it means something entirely different; and it is needful not only to substitute a future for a past time, but to translate these symbols into plain language, in order to ascertain what the meaning really is.

It would be ludicrous, were it not painful, to contemplate the absurdities and inconsistencies, which have arisen from a neglect of this simple and almost self-evident maxim of interpretation, demanded by the opening verse of the book, as well as by its whole construction. To overlook it is to turn the most majestic and comprehensive prophecy in the Bible, into a chaos of vague monstrosities, unworthy of being attributed to inspiration; it is "to degrade the highest and latest of God's holy revelations, into a grotesque patchwork of unmeaning prodigies."*

* Birks.

Prophecy like science has its own peculiar language; *for understanding the prophecies, therefore, as Sir Isaac Newton justly observes, we are in the first place to acquaint ourselves-with the figurative language of the*

prophets. "In the infancy of society ideas were more copious than words; hence . . . men were obliged to employ the few words which they possessed, not only in their natural and direct sense, but likewise in an artificial and tropical sense. . . . Half civilized nations abound in metaphor and allegory. . . . Why is it that a Cherokee warrior talks of burying the hatchet and of lighting the pipe? . . . His meagre language cannot supply him with the various terms, which the precision of modern diplomacy has rendered familiar to Europeans, and therefore he expresses the making of peace by allusion to certain well known ceremonies attendant upon it. . . . If such then of necessity was the language of defective civilization, such also would be the first rude attempt to express it *in writing*. The earliest manuscripts were neither more nor less than *pictures*, but these pictures closely followed the analogy of spoken language: . . . hence they were partly proper, and partly tropical. A member of a half civilized community, who wished to express to the eye the naked idea of a *man*, would rudely delineate the picture of a man, + + + a brave, and ferocious, and generous man, he was already accustomed to *denominate a lion*, if therefore he wished to express such a man in writing, he would *delineate a lion*. . . . Nation bears to nation, the same relation, that individual bears to individual. Hence, according to their attributed characteristics, this nation would be *the lion*; that would be the bear; and that would be the tiger. . . . The general prevalence of the science of heraldry in all ages, under one modification or another, perpetuated and extended the form of speech to which it owed its origin. Thus the dove was the ancient banner of the Assyrian empire. . . . Such is the principle on which is built the figurative language of prophecy. Like the ancient hieroglyphics, and like those non-alphabetic characters which are derived from them, *it is a language of ideas rather than of words*. It speaks by pictures, quite as much as by sounds . . . Nor is this derogatory to the all-wise spirit of prophecy . . . when God deigns to converse with man, He must use the language of man. The Scriptures were designed for the whole world; hence it was meet, that their predictions should be couched in what may be termed a universal language. But the only universal language in existence, is the language of hieroglyphics. To understand this character, we have not the least occasion to understand the spoken language of the nation who uses it, . . . not being alphabetic it is the representative, not of words but of things. . . . Let the conventional mark be extended to the whole world, and we have forthwith a *written universal language*. Our common numerical cyphers, so far as they extend, form a universal language; for the figures 1 2 or 3 convey the same ideas to each person that uses them, by whatever different names the numbers themselves may be called. In the use of this language there is by no means that obscurity and uncertainty which some pretend. They might just as reasonably throw aside a Chinese inscription as incapable of being deciphered. Without a key neither can be understood, but when the key is procured, the book will very readily be opened. *Now the key to the scriptural hieroglyphics, is furnished by Scripture itself*, and when the import of each hieroglyphic is thus ascertained, there is little difficulty in translating, as it were, a hieroglyphical prophecy, into the unfigured phraseology of modern language. . . . When once it is known that a wild beast is the symbol of an idolatrous and persecuting empire, and when the empire intended, has been satisfactorily ascertained, it matters not whether this deed or that deed be verbally ascribed to the empire, or symbolically ascribed to the wild

beast. Either mode of speech is equally intelligible. . . . In any case the elements of a language must be first learned, but when that has been accomplished, the rest will follow of course, whether the language in question be verbal or hieroglyphical.”*

* Faber’s Sacred Calendar of Prophecy,” vol. 1., chap. i.

It is hardly needful to add that there are exceptions to this rule as to every other. Plain predictive sentences and literal explanatory clauses are interspersed here and there, amid the signs of this book. They stand out from the general text, as distinctly as a few words of English introduced here and there in a page of a Greek book would do; it needs no signpost to say “adopt a literal interpretation here.” They speak for themselves, common sense dispenses with critical canons, and recognises them unaided.

Any system of interpretation that violates this fundamental law of the book is thereby stamped as erroneous. The system that says: “Babylon means Babylon; and the literal ancient Babylon will, we are bound to believe, be revived,” must be false. In the Apocalypse, Babylon does *not* mean Babylon, nor Jerusalem Jerusalem, nor a Jew a Jew, nor the temple the temple; the system therefore that says “all this Jewish imagery proves that the book has reference to the future of the Jewish nation, and not to the future of the church,” must be *false*. All this Jewish imagery is *symbolic*; these things are used as *signs*. Everything connected with Israel was typical of things connected with the church. The *things signified* must therefore be *Christian*, otherwise the sign and the thing signified, would be one and the same. The system that says the New Jerusalem is a literal city, 1500 miles square and 1500 high (!), made of gems and gold, *must be false*; the New Jerusalem is a sign; the thing signified, is the glorified church of Christ, as comparison with other Scripture proves.*

* The application of symbols literally seems to me to be very false in principle, and a very unsuitable mode of interpretation. It is the denial that they are symbols. I believe the language of symbols to be as definite as any other, and always used in the same sense as much as language is,” J. N. DARBY, “Notes on Revelation,” p. 31. (**Note:** Clearly this is the reason why Darby went astray and interpreted Scripture that was meant to be symbolic in a literal way. Darby taught a view of the uniqueness of Israel as *separate from the Church* in God’s program. The fruit of his teaching? Millions of Christians today are deceived to think that Christ rejecting Jews are still nevertheless God’s people, and are guilty of supporting the murderous actions of the government of the state of Israel.

The Divine explanation attached to some of the earliest symbols employed in the book, furnish the key by which much of its sign-language is to be interpreted. They are to the symbology of the Apocalypse, what the Rosetta stone was to the hieroglyphics of Egypt. “The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven candlesticks which thou sawest are the seven churches.” The seven branched candlestick, was one of the most important emblematic vessels in the tabernacle “which was a figure for the time then present” of spiritual realities. John saw seven separate candlesticks, and saw Christ the great High Priest, walking in their midst, like Aaron, trimming his lamps. He tells John what the emblem represents; the seven candlesticks symbolised the seven churches of Asia. This explanation authorizes us whenever we meet the same symbol of a candlestick, to attach to

it the same signification; and it does more. The candlestick was *one* feature of the tabernacle and temple economy, in which every feature was typical of heavenly things; many other symbols borrowed from the same system, appear in the Apocalypse: *this one yey unlocks them all*. We have no right to say that the ark of the covenant, the altar, the sea of glass, the temple of the tabernacle of the testimony, the court, the holy city, the New Jerusalem, the priests and their garments, or the worshippers, are to be taken literally. We are bound on the contrary to interpret them *all* on one harmonious principle. The seven candlesticks mean seven Christian churches, that is, they are a perfect representation of the Christian church. *A Christian and not a Jewish sense, then, must attach to all the rest.*

The seven stars are not a part of the tabernacle system, but they are equally symbols, standing for a reality of an entirely different nature. Whatever the angels of the churches were, they were not *stars*; and whenever we meet with this symbol in the book, we may be sure from the Lord's translation of it here, that it will not mean literal stars, but rulers, governors, chief men, messengers, or something analogous. "The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches." What sort of consistency would there be in the book, if a star in one place meant a ruler, and in the next a literal star? Language used in so indeterminate and inexplicable a way, would cease to answer the purpose of language; no definite meaning could attach to it. The study of the Apocalypse might well be abandoned, as more hopeless than that of the hieroglyphics, or the arrow-headed inscriptions of remotest antiquity; for these we possess keys, for the Apocalypse none, *if our Lord's own explanations are rejected as such.*

There is another indication of the same kind in the twice repeated expression, "which say they are Jews and are not, but do lie." The parties alluded to, clearly were literal Jews, but being unbelievers, our Lord here denies to them the name, thereby taking from "Jew" thenceforth, its old literal meaning and confining it to a higher sense. "He is not a Jew which is one outwardly, neither is that circumcision which is outward in the flesh: but he is a Jew which is one inwardly, and circumcision is that of the heart." These explanations and indications at the commencement of this prophecy, are like a Divine warning against the error of taking these Jewish emblems literally; in the Apocalypse they must uniformly be interpreted as *signs of other things.*

In every part of Scripture it is the spirit, and not the letter, that is life and light giving; how especially must this be the case in a part where the letter, that is the outward form and expression of the truth, is so mysterious, so enigmatical, so unspiritual, as in the Apocalypse? Popery has surely read the church of Christ a lesson, as to the danger of a false literalism; and yet if there be an apparently simple sentence in the Bible it is surely "this is my body." How can they who object to a literal interpretation of these words, consistently claim one for the strange supernatural symbolisms of the Apocalypse? "That literalism is to be renounced which involves a contradiction to the purified reason, or narrows and contracts the messages of God below the instincts of a holy and spiritual mind." *

* Birks, "Elements," p. 252.

Another argument for the symbolic and Christian nature of this book may be drawn from the fact that it is written by *John*. A unity of character and style generally attaches to the different writings of the same author; and, subordinate to the higher unity of inspiration, this may be detected in the writings of the New Testament. One who is familiar with the style of Paul, for instance, would find it hard to believe that any one else was the author of the epistle to the Hebrews; and one who has entered into the peculiar matter and manner and spirit of John's Gospel would, even were they anonymous, assign his three epistles to him.

They are characterized by the same selection of high and deep truth; by the same spirituality and unearthliness; by the same profound simplicity of style; by the same massive divisions, which overlook all minor distinctions; by the same unguarded breadth of statement, which leaves aside qualifying limitations; by the same marked, abrupt, contrasts; by the same ignoring of the Jews, and disowning of everything Jewish, based on the great fact stated at the commencement of the Gospel, "He came unto his own, and his own received Him not"; and by a recurrence of many of the very same ideas and forms of expression. It may safely be asserted that John, is the least Jewish and the least earthly of all the apostles, and of all the writers of the New Testament.

The Apocalypse is written by this same John; not only it claims to be so, and is proved by external evidence to be so, but it bears internal evidence of the fact. Though in very different connections, we meet with too many of the peculiar thoughts and expressions of John, to admit of any doubt as to the authorship of the book. "The Word of God," "the light," "a voice," "the Lamb of God," "the witnesses," the ascending and descending angels, the temple, the temple of his body, the living water, the shepherd leading the sheep; these and many such points of resemblance, recall continually, that the apostle favoured to receive the Revelation of Jesus Christ, was "that disciple whom Jesus loved," and of whom He said, "if I will that he tarry till I come, what is that to thee?"

Now, if we take the Revelation as a symbolic prophecy, predicting the fortunes of the Christian church throughout this dispensation, it is harmonious with all the rest. The strange outward material symbols are only signs; the things signified are mighty spiritual realities; the book is one grand contrast throughout; it traces the long and deadly conflict between the Lamb and the Beast, Ἀρνίον and Θηρίον, and their respective armies, between the Whore associated with the Beast, and the Bride of the Lamb, the false and faithless church, and the true and faithful church. In spite of all the Jewish symbolism, (which is natural from the typical character of the Jewish economy, and the antitypical character of the Christian) the Jews and their fortunes, are scarcely glanced at in the book; which, starting from a period subsequent to the final destruction of Jerusalem, and to the dispersion of the Jews, occupies itself entirely, with the history of that church in which is neither Jew nor Gentile. The whole drama as it is enacted before us, recalls such words of John's earlier writings as, "ye are from beneath, I am from above"; "ye seek to kill Me"; "ye are of your father the devil"; the

time cometh that whosoever killeth you will think that he doeth God service"; "in the world ye shall have tribulation, but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world"; "O righteous Father, *the world* hath not known Thee, but *these* have known Thee"; "art Thou a king then? for this end was I born, and for this cause came I into the world"; "behold your king"; "he is antichrist that denieth the Father and the Son"; "the world passeth away"; "it is the last time"; "when He shall appear we shall be like Him", "for this purpose was the Son of God manifested, that He might destroy the works of the devil"; "boldness in the day of judgment, because as He is so are we in this world"; "this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith"; "he that hath the Son hath life, and he that hath not the Son of God hath not life."

These and many other thoughts, familiar to us from the Gospel and epistles of John, shine out with their old lustre in their new surroundings; reading Revelation as a symbolic prophecy, we feel that it is as characteristic of the soaring, eagle eyed, spiritual apostle, as any of his writings.

But if it be a record of mere material wonders to happen after the Christian church has been removed to heaven, in connection with a future Jewish remnant, how singularly unlike is it, to anything John was ever inspired to write! What a rude and incomprehensible contrast, would exist between this and all his other productions!

And finally the principle of progressive revelation, demands that these visions should not be taken as literal predictions of a coming crisis at the end of the age. Other previous prophecies, had already brought down the chain of events to the destruction and fall of Jerusalem, and our Lord Himself in treating of it, passed on to the final crisis, of which it was a precursor. The one and only period, unilluminated by prophetic light was the church's history on earth, Our Lord had revealed little, save its general character as a time of tribulation; the other apostles had foretold certain events which were to characterize its course; it remained for the Revelation of Jesus Christ which God gave to Him, and which He now sends, as his last gift to the churches, to map it out in detail, and present in a mystic form, all its leading outlines. If the Apocalypse merely went over again, the events of the final crisis, it would not be an advance on all previous revelation, as its place in the canon of Scripture warrants our concluding that it is. To be this, it must be a symbolical history of the Christian dispensation.

(To be continued.)