

The Seventh Vial Chapter II.

Apocalyptic symbols



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THE key of the Apocalypse is to be sought for in the Old Testament Scriptures. This is the briefest, and perhaps the best, rule that can be laid down for the interpretation of this book. We do not know that there is a really new symbol made use of in it from beginning to end. There is not a single figure or character admitted whose use had not been already sanctioned, and its meaning determined, in the law, the Psalms, and the prophets. The Apocalypse differs from them only in being symbolical throughout. It resembles those monuments and temples of Egypt which, wholly written over with hieroglyphics, were illegible till the accidental discovery of the Rosetta stone. This furnished the key; and instantly the graven monuments of that ancient land stood forth, fraught with the secrets of past ages.

In some one chapter of Isaiah, or in a Psalm, we find the Rosetta stone of the Apocalypse: we mean that we there find this or the other symbol used in such a way that it is impossible to miss its meaning. Thus we make out an alphabet, by the aid of which we come to read the whole of this symbolic writing. In the prophets the heavenly bodies uniformly symbolise the rulers of kingdoms. We find this symbol employed particularly in the denunciations against Egypt and Babylon. Of Egypt, Ezekiel 5 chap. xxxii. 7, 8, says :--“I will cover the sun with a cloud, and the moon shall not give her light. All the bright lights of heaven will I make dark over thee.”

From the Psalms we learn that a vine is the symbol of the true Church--“Thou hast brought a vine out of Egypt.”

In Ezekiel and other books of Scripture we find the false Church exhibited under the symbol of an harlot.

In Daniel we are told that a wild beast is the symbol of a conquering and despotic power, and that a horn denotes a kingdom.

Thus, by diligent search in the Scriptures, we discover the symbols here employed in such connection that their meaning is obvious; and when we meet the same symbol in the Apocalypse, we have only to transfer its ascertained meaning to the prediction under review; and, without more ado, we translate it into plain language. Thus we come to read of the Apocalyptic prophecies

much as we would any ordinary writing.

As an example of the way in which an alphabet of the Apocalypse might be made out, we may instance a few of its more prominent symbols :— Earth symbolises society in a settled state. Sea, society in a state of convulsion. Rivers, nations. A flood, nations in motion. Mountains and islands, great and small kingdoms. Air, the political atmosphere. Heaven, the civil or ecclesiastical firmament. Sun, the monarch. Stars, inferior rulers. Hail and thunder, wars. Earthquake, revolution. Head, form of government. Horn, king or kingdom. Bow, war. Crown, victory. Altar, martyrdom. Coals, severe judgments. Vine, a church. Wilderness, a state of affliction. Rainbow, a covenant. Key, ecclesiastical authority. Angel, a minister of God's purposes. This may suffice as a sample.

Having determined the import of the individual symbols, it becomes easy to interpret them when found in combination. Thus, when we are shown in the Apocalyptic drama, *coals* of fire taken from the *altar* and cast upon the *earth*, we understand that the action indicated is the infliction of terrible *judgments*, on account of the *martyrdom of the saints*, on the inhabitants of the *Roman world*. Again, when we read, Rev. xiii. I,

"And I stood upon the sand of the sea, and saw a beast rise up out of the sea, having seven heads and ten horns, and upon his horns ten crowns, and upon his heads the name of blasphemy,"

all that is necessary to the right interpretation of the prophecy is to give to each of its component symbols its appropriate meaning. Dealt with on this principle, the passage reads as follows:—

I was shown (sea) society in a state of convulsion, and out of these convulsions emerged a (*beast*) powerful despotic monarchy, having, i.e. having had, seven (*heads*) distinct forms of government, but broken up at the time of its emergence into ten (*horns*) separate kingdoms, with their (*crowns upon the horns*) kings; each of its seven forms of government possessing an impious and idolatrous character, as intimated by the name of blasphemy upon its seven heads.

Amid the closing scenes of the Apocalypse there occurs the following (Rev. xiv. 17, 18)—

"And another angel came out of the temple which is in heaven, he also having a sharp sickle. And another angel came out from the altar, which had power over fire; and cried with a loud cry to him that had the sharp sickle, saying, Thrust in thy sharp sickle, and gather the clusters of the vine of the earth, for her grapes are fully ripe."

What a picture of the final doom of the Papacy! No description could convey, in ten times the space, what these few symbols disclose respecting the manner and severity of Babylon's destruction. A vine is before us—the symbol of a Church; but it is the vine of the earth—a false Church. The vine is ripe, and is to be cut down. The idolatrous faith of Rome has landed her adherents in downright infidelity and atheism—the natural fruit of superstition. Men who

believe in no God can be governed by no law; and so an end is now come.

Accordingly, an angel—an executioner of God's vengeance—appears upon the scene, having the instrument of destruction—a sickle, emphatically said to be sharp. The command to thrust in the sickle and begin the work of reaping comes from the altar, and is given by the angel who has power over fire, and to whose ministry, consequently, appertained the work of destruction. To Rome, at such an hour, the altar was a symbol of terrific import; it reminded her of the blood she had shed. From the altar ascended the cry, "How long, O Lord?" And now from the altar comes the command, "Thrust in thy sharp sickle;" and from the altar, too, is taken the fire in which Rome is burned.

The symbols of the Apocalypse are not arbitrary signs, as are the letters of the alphabet and the hieroglyphics of the Egyptian tablets. There must be a law that governs symbolic representation; and the knowledge of that law is essential to the right interpretation of the Apocalypse. That law, we are persuaded, is founded on the analogy existing between the symbol and the thing symbolised—constituting a natural fitness in the one to represent the other. Numerous opportunities of expounding this law will present themselves as we proceed; but it may not be unnecessary here to adduce an instance.

Expositors generally hold that the seven heads of the beast from the abyss symbolise the seven forms of government of the Roman empire. Now, if this interpretation is correct, there ought to be an analogy which may be traced, *first*, between a wild animal and a despotic empire; *second*, between the beast from the abyss and the empire that emerged from the Gothic flood; and, *third*, between the heads of the beast and the successive forms of the Roman government—that is, we must be able to show that the *place* and *functions* of the head in an organic body are analogous to the *place* and *functions* of a government in the body politic. So with regard to every symbol in the Apocalypse. The symbol, in its *nature* and *uses*, must be *analogous* to the thing symbolised. It follows that *agents* must always be held as symbolising an analogous body of *agents*, and *agencies* as symbolising an analogous class of *agencies*. The reverse of this can never be true. We ought never to make an agent the symbol of an agency. An angel, for instance, ought never to be viewed as the symbol of an event or epoch, for there is no analogy between the two; there is no natural fitness in the one to represent the other; and the interpretation that would link them together would violate the very first law of symbolization.

There are two additional rules which must be rigidly adhered to, otherwise our interpretations of the Apocalypse can possess neither certainty nor consistency. First, we must always treat its symbols as such. We must not regard them as figures in one place, and literal descriptions in another. The earth can never mean literally the earth, but some other thing—society in a particular state. Second, we must always give the same interpretation of the same symbol. Just as we attribute the same power to the same alphabetic character, and as we attach one meaning to the same hieroglyphic, wherever we find it on the Egyptian monuments, so we must preserve uniformity in our interpretations of the Apocalyptic symbols. A slight variety of interpretation may be admitted; but that variety must never be inconsistent with, but always embody, the *radical* meaning of the symbol. If we find that

the meaning which we have given to a certain symbol does not carry us from beginning to end of the Apocalypse, and that it is not in all places perfectly natural and easy, and that its interpretation does not piece in with that of the other symbols with which it stands in combination, we may be sure that we have not yet discovered its true import.

There are some who decry the study of the Apocalypse. And why? Because it is symbolical, and so many various readings have been given of its symbols. Do such persons depreciate the value and reject the authenticity of other symbolical writings? Would they not account the labours of a lifetime well spent in successfully deciphering the Egyptian tablets, and in bringing to light the secrets which lie hid under the mysterious characters which cover the Sinaitic Mountains? Why, then, should such take offence at this book, because it is written in symbolic characters which it is not easy to read? And why should that which stimulates ingenuity and excites to labour in other cases, be held as a sufficient reason for declining all inquiry and investigation in this? If the graven pillar that rises amid the sands of the Nile awakens within us so engrossing an interest, and is regarded with awe, because it still holds forth, to those who can read its record, those great transactions of the past which gave to Egypt her glory and renown, would it not be strange if we should regard without either awe or interest this venerable monument, which God himself has set up in the field of revelation?

The Apocalypse presents us with a magnificent train of prophecies, which, as time goes on, are being converted into providences; and which, when completed, will remain through all the ages of the future, the chief monument of God's being, the grandest vindication of His government, and the clearest proof of His Word, - and which, forming the grand EXODUS of the Church, of which the ancient EXODUS was but the type, will constitute the "new song" which the Church will sing through all coming time.

The Apocalypse, moreover, meets one important class of our instincts and cravings. We wish to know the future: here it is already come. We wish to know how the world's drama shall end: here it is already wound up. The past, the present, and the future, here meet. Let us turn aside, then, and see this great sight. By the help of these heaven-engraven hieroglyphics, we can survey the whole history of the Christian Church at a single glance. We can trace her path from the Mount of Olives to the gates of that holy city, New Jerusalem, which John saw coming down from God out of heaven. She is seen in all the variety of her earthly condition. We behold her in the wilderness, where for twelve hundred and sixty years she was clothed in sackcloth—engaged in war with the beast, while her blood flows like water;—on Mount Zion, with the Lamb in white, ascribing salvation, and glory, and honour, and power, unto God, as the smoke of Babylon's torment ascends into the sky; living and reigning with Christ a thousand years; delivered from a dreadful combination of foes formed against her at the close of time; redeemed at last from the grave itself; and, after all her toils, entering in, and made to dwell through ages that have no end, amid the living waters of the paradise of God.

Brought thus into one view, we are the better able to trace the admirable order and progression that reign among these events, and especially among those more immediately under our review, and which fill up the long and

momentous period extending from the white horse of the First Seal, to the lightnings, and thunders, and earthquake of the Seventh Vial.

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