THE BOOK OF THE REVELATION IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

FROM the earliest ages of the Church it has been universally admitted that the Book of the Revelation of John is the most difficult book of the entire Bible. Yet no Biblical book has been so much studied as this one, but most of the labour and ingenuity that have been expended on it in the past are now derelict and forgotten. It may be claimed, however, that no Book of the Bible has benefited more for its understanding from historical and literary criticism, and my aim in writing is to make clear some lines of advance in interpretation.

I

A modern valuation of the Book is that made by Professor C. H. Dodd, on pp. 89f. of his book, *The Apostolic Preaching and its Developments*, published in 1936. Professor Dodd regards the Revelation of John as the least Christian of all the Books of the New Testament.

> "With all the magnificence of its imagery and the splendour of its visions of the majesty of God and the world to come, we are bound to judge that in its conception of the character of God and His attitude to man the book falls below the level, not only of the teaching of Jesus, but of the best parts of the Old Testament. . . . The God of the Apocalypse can hardly be recognised as the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, nor has the fierce Messiah, whose warriors ride in blood up to their horses' bridles, many traits that could recall Him of whom the primitive *kerygma* proclaimed that He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, because God was with Him."

Professor Dodd goes on to say that the line of development of Apocalypse illustrated in John's Book led into a blind alley. In the second century its stream of thought ran out into the barren sands of millenarianism, which in the end was disavowed by the Church.

But Professor Dodd here does scant justice to the intuition of the Church in including the Apocalypse in the Canon of the sacred scriptures, and has ignored the extraordinary influence which the Book has exercised in the history of the Church,

especially in times of crisis, and the high place that parts at least of the Book have won for themselves in the affection of Christians all down the ages. But he has put his finger on the real difficulty which inheres in the traditional modes of interpretation. Do the magnificent imagery and the splendid visions of the seer possess real authority for the Christian conscience? Recent research has shown that these extensively were not Christian in origin, but Jewish; and that they were used by John merely as clothing in which to enwrap a real Christian message. Indeed he could do no other. For the people among whom he lived and worked, both Jew and Christian, moved in an atmosphere of apocalyptic thought just as much as our modern world moves in an atmosphere of scientific thought.

This apocalyptic thought had a literature of its own. In succession to the prophetic books, and accompanying the development of the legalistic religion of the Pharisee, the apocalyptic type of thought arose through reaction to political pessimism. And it became explicit in a succession of books by various anonymous writers who all possessed a common outlook upon life. They saw all earthly events moving rapidly towards a Divinely caused catastrophe, and pictured this breaking-in of the eternal order in a series of historical events. Their language was the language of symbol. And as time went on this method of Apocalypse developed its own peculiar mode of expression. This was often purposively dark and opaque, and its true meaning had to be learned or guessed at. All the later apocalyptic writers inherited this form of expression, for it was handed on from writer to writer as a legacy of the past. But this not in such a way that the later writer consciously borrowed from his predecessors; for the typical forms of expression became a fashion of his mind, part of his mental furniture. Some of these forms are eminently beautiful—that of the Heavenly City for instance; but others were grotesque and awe-inspiring—like the weird army from Parthia. But we must remember that all these were modes of expression familiar to these writers, and that they made their appropriate and powerful appeal to the popular mind and imagination of their day.

This symbolic writing never pretended to copy real things, but rather aimed at representing or suggesting ideas of things. The symbols are at best conventional thought-forms—beasts

with many heads or horns, or doors into heaven—and they were never intended to be visually realised, indeed most of them could not be, and their appeal was made to the feelings rather than to the intellect.

I quote from *The Apocalypse Explained for Readers of To-day*, by W. J. Ferrar, published in 1936 :

> "We may say then that the furniture on the stage of the Apocalypse is ancestral; it belongs to the apocalyptic form of composition which began with Daniel. The heavenly throne and its surroundings, the four and twenty elders, the 'living creatures', the sea of glass, altars and incense, books sealed and unsealed can be paralleled in earlier writings. Likewise the things that appeared on earth—mysterious animals of monstrous form, an order of convulsion in Nature, standing for revolution, and the breaking-up of law, or the world of death and evil below the crust of earth, or the earthly war conducted by the Messiah in person, the final conflict between good and evil, the new heaven and the new earth, the symbolic city, its marriage union with the King-Messiah —these forms have all been used by the writer's Jewish predecessors in the work of apocalyptic by which he was called to instruct the Church" (p. 3).

The extent to which John was indebted to this ancestral material is truly surprising. No other book in the New Testament quotes from the Old Testament to the extent that he does. He draws from practically every writer, but mainly from those that use apocalyptic forms. He is also very fond of the prophets, using reminiscences of their ideas rather than quoting their exact words. The dependence of the Apocalypse in this manner on the Old Testament is astonishing, but the borrowed material is so closely woven into the web of his own ideas, and is expressed in John's own peculiar style and grammar in such a way that its origin is not always apparent.

But it was not only the Old Testament that was so used. John also incorporated much imagery and even whole blocks of visions from Apocalypses which were written in the three hundred years of the interval between the last prophet and his own day. Nor was it only imagery that was thus imported. New elements in theological belief are to be found in late Jewish thought, which manifestly had been introduced during the close relationship of the Jews with Persian thought in the time of the exile and afterwards. Thus the age-long strife between the powers of good and evil, the stress of a Divine Judgment, the catastrophic destruction of the world by fire, and the rebirth of a new world, the coming Saviour, belief in a multitude of good and bad angels, faith in the mystic meaning of numbers

—these all are ideas whose influence is very evident in our Apocalypse.

A good example of how John used material such as this for Christian ends may be seen in the vision of the sealed book. In it the Messiah is announced in the traditional way as " the Lion that is of the tribe of Judah, the root of David ", and the expectation is of a warrior king. But when He actually appears it is not in the form of a Lion, but of " a Lamb, standing, as though it had been slain ". The central figure of this vision of redemption is Christ crucified.

Two further qualities of apocalyptic writing remain to be mentioned. These apocalyptic seers were very conservative in the use of their symbols. They seldom invented new ones. They preferred to rearrange and modify the old to suit their purpose. Thus Daniel revived the prophecy of Jeremiah to apply to the crisis of his own age; and similarly in 2 Esdras, (as also by John in our Apocalypse) the old prophecy against Greece is taken up and changed into one against Rome.

The other quality of apocalyptic writing that deserves notice is that each writer reacted to some historical manifestation of evil. Each apocalypse, as has been said, was a " tract for bad times ". Thus Daniel and John each fulminate against a tyranny that attacked the conscience. In the face of overwhelming powers of evil each successive seer has the unconquered and unconquerable faith that God will see to it that one day evil will perish and a better world will appear. This unshaken faith in a Divinely ordered course of history is the nerve of the apocalyptic philosophy of history.

II

What then was the historical situation that conditioned the writing of the Christian Apocalypse? There had been an outburst of Jewish Apocalypse in the terrible years of disillusionment that followed the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, some of the visions in which show a similarity to certain visions in John's work. An attempt has been made to find a place for John's Apocalypse within this period, but the historical allusions in some of the other visions require a later date. Throughout the whole book there runs the thought of an impending martyrdom of Christians, and there is a clear reference

to the Nero Redivivus belief in a late form, and there is also a consciousness of danger to Rome from the Parthian hosts on the Empire's eastern borders. It is now practically agreed that the Christian Apocalypse was a reaction to the growing religious claims of the Roman Empire to enslave the conscience of the Christian Church. The danger centre seems to have been the Lycus Valley in the Province of Asia. There the pagan population took up with enthusiasm the movement to pay Divine honours to the Emperor. This cult, indeed, had its beginnings as far back as the times of Julius Caesar, but it was not until the reign of Domitian that it became obligatory on all Roman subjects, and so presented an urgent problem in the life of the Christian population. Whether the cult was strongly pressed from Rome or not, it is evident that towards the close of Domitian's reign it was enthusiastically promoted by the authorities in Asia, where the people themselves were not only ready to accept, but also to see that all accepted, the divinity of the Emperor. John, himself a victim to this intolerance, foresaw that within a short time this persecution would take an extremely active form. He believed that these claims of the Emperor would eventually crush the Christian Church. There would be an universal martyrdom of believers, and this would be the prelude to the final Judgment of God. John's letter (for the Book in form is really a letter), in a succession of visions, claimed to contain a message from Jesus Christ Himself concerning the things that are, and the things that shortly would come to pass. It was a message of reassurance and encouragement. Its essence is contained in these two verses—" The Lord God Omnipotent reigneth ", and " Be thou faithful unto death and I shall give thee the crown of thy life ". But it was also a message of judgment. In the vision of the two Beasts, and the False Prophet, Rome, the civil powers of Asia, and the priestly cult there, were envisaged, and their destruction foretold.

An earlier date for the Book has been suggested by Westcott, Hort, and Lightfoot—the time of the persecution by Nero. But Emperor worship was not enforced by Nero or Vespasian, and the Nero Redivivus idea alluded to by John could not have assumed the daemonic form we find in the Book earlier than A.D. 90. The fact that some allusions seem to refer to an earlier period is sufficiently explained when we realise that John has incorporated fragments of earlier Jewish apocalyptic in his

work without changing the references in them to the earlier day. The almost universal opinion to-day is that the Apocalypse of John was completed about the year A.D. 95.

This view of the Apocalypse is the outcome of the literary criticism to which it has been extensively subjected during the past seventy years. This has thrown light especially on the question of authorship and on the composition and arrangement of the Book.

The earliest forms of this criticism sought to show that an original work had been edited or enlarged by a succession of editors until it attained its present form. This was followed by a succession of theories which had as their hypothesis a varying number of independent sources which were at a later date put together by one or more editors. What proved fatal to all these theories was the demonstration of the essential unity of the work. This unity was established by Bousset, who, however, assumed that the writer used other materials than his own. Certain fragments of these were introduced and recast to suit his purpose. This theory has now been adopted by practically all modern scholars. It is the basis of Anderson Scott, Moffatt, and Swete's expositions in English.

These have, however, retained the traditional arrangement of the text, though they admit that this involves many difficulties in interpretation. At times they are forced to explain obscurities and seeming contradictions by the confusion that is incident in all dreams. It was reserved for Dr. Charles, who put a much higher valuation on John's mentality, to give an explanation of many of the problems which persisted through the work of his predecessors. He brought to the task an unique knowledge of the whole range of Apocalyptic literature, and in particular he subjected the text to a meticulous examination which covered the language, style, and grammar of its author.

Dr. Charles's conclusions may be tabulated as follows:

(1) The writer of the Apocalypse was a Jew who came late in life to Asia from Palestine, and who continued to think in Hebrew while he wrote in his own peculiar form of the Koine. Thus the meaning of some of his obscure phrases can be reached by translating them back into Hebrew. He was not the Apostle John, nor was he the writer of the Gospel or the Epistles. With Dionysius of Alexandria all we can say with certainty is that "he was one of those in Asia, but we do not

know which one". From the Apocalypse itself we gather that he was a prophet, and occupied a position of authority among the Churches in Asia.

(2) He used a linguistic style and diction which were peculiar to himself. His solecisms were not due to mistakes in grammar or syntax, but were unconscious adaptations of the language by one who learned the Koine late in life and never mastered it. Thus Dr. Charles has found it possible to write a Grammar of the language uniformly used by John.

(3) Another feature in John's style was his prevailing use of the poetic parallelism we find in Hebrew poetry. Only four chapters in the twenty-two are completely prose. This fact is important both as a guide to the interpretation of the Apocalypse, and as a help in the critical rearrangement of misplaced texts.

(4) The whole Book has a continuous order of time throughout. Events succeed one another in a logical and temporal succession, which is only broken before events of great crisis, where proleptic visions are introduced, in order to encourage the faithful.

(5) The concluding chapters have become disarranged. This is manifest from the contradictions which inhere in the traditional order. Thus after heaven and earth are represented to have passed away we have a New Jerusalem which is to last for ever, with, however, sinners and unconverted nations still existing. Dr. Charles gets over this difficulty and others which are inherent in the text by means of a simple transference. He distinguishes between two cities: the great City, Holy Jerusalem, which is to be the seat on earth of the Millennial Kingdom, and the Holy City, *New* Jerusalem, adorned as a bride for her husband. The former is seen by the seer from a great and high mountain, but the latter he beholds from some undefined point in space. Dr. Charles transfers the description of the latter city with all its wealth of materialistic symbolism to apply to the former city which is to be the seat on earth from which Christ is to rule the world for a thousand years, and which is to be finally attacked by Gog and Magog before the final judgment. The other city—the Holy City, *New* Jerusalem, then is left to picture in a more fragmentary way the dwellingplace of the blessed after the final judgment, and when all things have been made new.[1]

[1] R. H. Charles, *The Revelation of St. John*, Vol. II, pp. 144ff.

It would not be correct to say that all these conclusions of Dr. Charles have been universally accepted by modern scholars. Thus Anderson Scott and Swete are very reluctant to give up the possibility of Apostolic authorship. And it may well be that Dr. Charles has erred in importing too much of the modern idea of logical succession into the structure of the Apocalypse, but the fact remains that he has succeeded in securing order out of chaos. As W. J. Ferrar says, his commentary on the Apocalypse " stands as one of the most remarkable monuments of English scholarship, and as a landmark in the study of the Apocalypse ".

III

Among the more modern studies of the Book of Revelation most people will probably find most help in Dr. E. F. Scott's volume, *The Book of Revelation* (1939). Its value lies in the fact that this author advances from the study of the many problems connected with the Book which have occupied the attention of most modern scholars, to the one problem of the meaning of the Apocalypse. Probably its meaning for those for whom it was originally written has been largely lost for us, but its meaning for the Church down the ages, and its meaning in particular for us to-day, is a different matter, and it is upon this meaning that Dr. Scott most of all devotes his attention. He acknowledges his debt to the many scholars who have solved for us so many of the riddles of the Book, but he feels that " the meaning of Revelation has too often been overlooked in the effort to solve its problems ". He maintains that all that can be learned about it from apocalyptic and historical studies can serve merely to illustrate its main intention, which is purely Christian. So in this book he has two distinct aims—to explain it as clearly as he can with regard to its immediate purpose, and to discover its religious message.

As regards the first of these aims he lucidly explains, mainly on the lines of Dr. Charles's conclusions, the genesis and nature of Apocalypse, the Apocalypse of John, its date and authorship, the historical situation which drew it forth, and the form and literary structure of the Book. But Dr. Scott leans to the conservative side of criticism. He does not follow Dr. Charles in the more speculative parts of his conclusions. He does not see

the logical and temporal succession that Dr. Charles discovered in the procession of the visions, and he does not commit himself to the rearrangement of the text which Dr. Charles found to be necessary in the interest of consistency in the two concluding chapters. Nor does he find the value of the Book in its immediate reference to the development of the contemporary historical situation, however this may explain its being written.

> "Nevertheless, John was not mistaken when he offered his work as a book of prophecy. He was in the true succession of the great prophets of the Old Testament, who took their stand on moral laws which were certain in their operation, and on this ground foretold, in the name of God, the doom of wicked nations. John could not perceive (and this was also true of the prophets before him) in what precise form the laws of God would fulfil themselves. . . . But in his main perceptions he was splendidly right, and history was to justify him" (p. 55).

In his second chapter Dr. Scott describes the story of the Drama of Revelation. Here is his conclusion after an ordered study of this Drama.

> "The author was himself a man of genius, and in his hand apocalyptic became a new thing. He imposed on it an artistic form of which it seemed incapable. He changed it into a vehicle for great thought and imagination, much as Shakespeare took a dull old play and transformed it into *Hamlet*. . . . Loose and confused as the Book may appear to be, it is the work of a great artist, who knows exactly what he intends to do, and moulds every kind of material to his plan" (pp. 181f.).

The two chapters which will interest most modern readers are those which treat of "Christian Doctrine in Revelation" and "the Permanent Message of Revelation". To give any adequate account of the contents of these chapters would take us too far afield, but one paragraph is so important in suggesting a new line of interpretation that I quote it in full:

> "John was a religious thinker, just as profound, in many ways, as Paul himself. But we have to compare him, not so much with the professed theologians, as with the great poets and painters. They also were religious thinkers, but expressed themselves through images and colours instead of formal doctrines. They set before us some picture that speaks to the imagination, and leave us to interpret it in our own way. In like manner John is content to tell us the things he saw, and from these we must infer what he thought and believed. This does not mean that his book must be understood allegorically, like *The Pilgrim's Progress*, where every character or event has some religious import. . . . In the main the visions are to be taken simply as pictures. They convey spiritual truth not so much to the intellect as to the imagination. . . . The visions as such have no allegorical meaning, but they serve to bring home to us certain spiritual facts. They present to us in forms of sense those cardinal Christian beliefs which other teachers had expressed in doctrine" (pp. 110f.).

Some modern theologians belittle the value of the Book of Revelation because of the paucity of Christian doctrine and ethical teaching found in it. Some even question the value of retaining it within the Christian Canon of Scripture. It is true that we do not find in it any suggestion of such great doctrines as justification by faith, union with Christ, or renewal by the Holy Spirit. There is no call to evangelism in the Book, or even to repentance. Those given over to the powers of evil seem to be fixed in their ways, past repentance. There is, however, a satisfactory answer to all such objections. We must have strict regard to the limitations to which John deliberately bound himself in writing his Book. He never in any sense meant it to be a compendium of Christian truth. First, he of set purpose adopted the style and manner of apocalyptic for adequate reasons. And in thus borrowing the ideas and imagery of earlier Jewish apocalyptic he took over a great deal of its sentiment. He was making a definite appeal to that background of thought and hope which he could count upon in his readers, a background which is utterly foreign to the modern mind. His appeal was not to the intellect, his aim was not teaching, his one purpose was to evoke a spirit of faithfulness in a time of utter trial, and to awaken a spirit of patient endurance and of courage and trust in Christ. His emphasis thus could only be laid on those elements in his own faith that could compass this result. The rest of the body of Christian truth had no relevance to his immediate purpose.

Second, the Book was written for a time of crisis. It is important to keep this fact always in view. He was recommending an interim faith and an interim ethic for a time when Christians must have felt themselves utterly powerless in the presence of overwhelming powers of evil. Not a few Christians to-day find themselves in just such a position. On this point Dr. Scott writes:

> "Our New Testament would be incomplete without this Book of Revelation, to which many have denied all claim to be a Christian book. It is Christian as much as any of the other writings, but the Christianity it offers is meant for an abnormal time. A whole age may pass in which there is no such conflict as that in which the writer found himself, and for this reason the Book has commonly been neglected. There seems to be nothing in it which can help towards ordinary Christian living. Much of its teaching might prove to be dangerous if it were to be understood too literally and put into everyday practice. But at rare intervals, in the life of the Church and the nation and the individual

man, there is a time of crisis; and at such times the Book of Revelation becomes a tower of strength. Men turn to it instinctively and feel as if it were meant directly for their own need. The old cathedrals were so built that on occasion they might be turned into fortresses. Those who had been accustomed to meet in them for quiet devotion could in time of war take refuge behind their strong walls, and defend themselves manfully against the invader until help came. The Book of Revelation gives something of this character to the New Testament. Our Christian faith, as we know it from these writings, has two sides, both of which are necessary. It sustains and comforts us on the common journey of life; and also in the day of trial it is our stronghold, in which we can withstand all foes and wait for the Deliverer. . . .

"John addressed himself to the Church when its cause appeared to be hopeless. The whole might of the world was combined against it. In the face of those material forces which for the moment had overwhelmed it, the Church could not but feel that it was nothing. It lay at the mercy of the beast, and could look forward to no future. Our mood to-day is that of these ancient Christians. The Church maintains itself, but always with greater difficulty. . . . It finds that men are growing deaf to its teaching. It knows that in some lands it is already subject to persecution, and fears a time when it will have vanished from the earth, along with all the hopes and beliefs to which it has witnessed. John speaks with no uncertain voice to our age, as he did to his own. He answers our faint-heartedness, and his answer comes to us with the added weight of nineteen centuries which have proved it true. He bids us put faith in God who is enthroned in heaven and will defend His cause on earth and bring it to victory. This, in its substance, is the message of Revelation" (pp. 153f., 177f.).

IV

All this literary and critical study is preliminary to the enquiry as to how the Book may profitably be used by modern Christians. When we ask why, through the insight of the early Church, the Book of Revelation was included in the Canon of Holy Writ; or, to put the question in another form, in what way does the Holy Spirit through our reading and meditation on this Book take of the things of Jesus and show them to us, our study makes clear that traditional methods of interpretation are no longer valid. The original significance of the multitude of symbols presented to us in the Book has been largely lost, yet still the Book retains its Christian appeal. Let us seek a positive answer to our question by asking whether we can detect in the history of the Church any *permanent* effect on the life of the Church or of individuals through the use of our Book. I have been impressed by the fact that at certain historical crises such as the crisis that led up to the Reformation, and the crisis of the French Revolution, artists have appeared producing notable pictures of the apocalyptic visions through which they

gave their interpretation of the current situation, inspired by the great religious principles which they found embedded in the visions. Notable among these artists was Albrecht Dürer, who was born in 1471, and produced in 1498 an edition of the Book of Revelation, illustrated by fifteen large wood-cut prints. Dürer was the artist who brought to perfection the technique of illustration by wood-cut prints, but beyond this he was a great and true interpreter of his own times. It was said of him that to him dreams were as real and actual as any natural sight; and in the visions of the Book of Revelation he found a perfect vehicle for interpreting in the interest of reform the problems, the abuses, and the hopes of the Church of his day. How the Apocalyptic visions of John found in him a personal and national application may be seen from this quotation from his diary.

> "O ye Christian men, pray God for help, for his judgment draws nigh and his justice shall appear. Then shall we see the innocent blood, which the Popes, Bishops, and Monks have shed, judged and condemned. These are the slain who lie beneath the Altar of God, and cry for vengeance, to whom the voice of God answereth: 'Await the full number of the innocent slain, then will I judge.'"

The whole romance of Dürer's life is well worthy of study, to realise to what extent this use of printing and Biblical illustration in wood-cut prints were used to prepare the way for the great reform in religion which we associate with the name of Martin Luther.

Again the Book of Revelation has given occasion to great and noble poetry. It has inspired two of the greatest efforts of the poetic art, the *Divina Commedia* of Dante, and *Paradise Lost* of our own Milton. Through these poems alone much of the content of the visions of John has lived again in a new form, and has instructed the imagination of countless men and women and built up their lives.

And further, it can be said that the Book of Revelation has inspired great music. Handel found the words for his "Hallelujah Chorus" in this Book, and, it has been suggested, the music also. For it is told of Handel that when he was writing the script of this music he was in a state of rapt religious exaltation, so that he said afterwards, "I did think that I did see all heaven before me, and the great God Himself!"

And is it not true that the whole Book is full of ordered sound, now the sound of song in worship, now the sound of

awe in reverence, sound of trumpets introducing terror, sound of great earthquakes, sound of surging seas, the sad sound of an eloquent dirge over fallen Babylon, sound issuing at last in a paean of peaceful praise, heralding the sublime exaltation of eternal bliss?

The Book of Revelation has accordingly become to me a gallery of impressive pictures, a volume of inspiring poetry, and a theme of music mundane and celestial. And this fact furnishes a clue to the true method of its interpretation.

John makes his appeal, not directly to the intellect, but through the imagination. His aim is never to teach, but to inspire. I stand before a picture, and I am transported in imagination to the actual situation in which the artist found himself when he drew the picture, and which he tried to interpret by it. And my imagination becomes attuned to his, and I see what he wished me to see. The whole picture takes form before me, but not all of it has the same value for its meaning. It has a background, and light and shade. These form the setting for feelings of beauty, or awe, or terror. But only the setting. The central figures and the action are what matter. So with John's visions. It is useless to try to find a significance in every small detail of his imagery. These are but the setting, meant to awaken, to colour, and guide our imagination. But the great central figures are there—it may be God Himself, the Book, and the Lamb in one picture; it may be the dire instruments of judgment and their terror-stricken victims in another; and in still another the Divine Presence in the Holy City. It is around these figures that our imagination plays and is informed. The situation may be one that naturally calls forth feelings of awe or of foreboding or terror, or hatred; but under the inspiration of the artist our natural feelings become purified, and the Christian feelings of reverence and of trust, of courage, and of patient endurance are born within us. And this was the author's, the artist's aim. And the value of this is clear. As a writer in the *Christian News-Letter* has written:

> "A Christian witness which is not penetrating people's minds on the plane of their feeling is going to lose much of its relevance and its effect. It is feelings, after all, which more than anything else determine attitudes and actions."

But this does not rule out intellect. Wordsworth has said that "imagination is reason in her most exalted mood". The

spectator cannot but reflect upon the things he has seen in the picture, and thus reaches the thought of the artist as this applies to his own circumstances. In this way the appeal is made to him in a far stronger and more effective way than by way of direct teaching. John was by profession a prophet, and the ordinary prophet hears a word. But John was not merely a prophet, he was also a seer. The things he had to express were things beyond the power of ordinary language to convey to our minds—ineffable things. And so he had recourse to the language of symbol and poetry. His thought rose before him in pictorial form. It is, of course, the ideas which matter; the symbols and the picture by themselves are always inadequate, nay may even at times prove to be obstructions to the clear apprehension of their real intent. And so we shall never justly appreciate the power and the strength which are inherent in John's message to the Church of his day unless we realise in this way that he does not aim at teaching but at suggestion; and that he does not prove, but inspires. Above all, the poet-prophet succeeds in lifting us up into a new world of experience where our every-day problems and perils are seen in a true perspective *sub specie aeternitatis*. As a consequence new courage and hope are born within us and we are furnished with strength to endure as seeing the eternal. And if at times the queer symbols and repulsive pictures seem to offend, we ought to ask ourselves if we are viewing the picture in the right perspective. The fact that the Church has canonised the Book ought also to remind us that when we read and meditate on it we are not alone. The Spirit will take of the things of Jesus and show them to us.

The value of the Book of Revelation is greatly enhanced for us to-day because we find ourselves to be in a situation very similar to that which faced the Church towards the end of the first century and which led John to write it. The whole world is now being faced by powers of evil which threaten all that we hold sacred, and which in particular have marked out the Christian religion for extinction. The actual situation which John pictured as likely to overtake the Church of his day we have already seen to have been developed in the occupied countries of Europe, in Manchukuo and China and in the islands of the East Indies. The cruel sufferings pictured in John's visions are not exaggerated; they are daily being enacted in the actual experience of many in various lands. And already

there are many slain who lie beneath the altar of God and cry for vengeance. Karl Barth's question is no longer merely a question, but represents the challenge of God which many Christians are facing to-day:

> "It will only be God's grace that can protect us from the evils which threaten us. But are we ready to recognise that grace of His, even if He should not protect us? Are we ready for a situation in which defenceless confession of Jesus Christ is the only thing left to us? Are we ready even then to remain true and rejoice in Him?"

Many Christians are in these days facing a situation where "defenceless confession" seems to be their only resource, if indeed it would not be true to say in many cases that even that resource was being denied them.

It is the glory of the Book of Revelation that it can inspire us with a faith that is master of a situation even as desperate as that. How?

V

We enter a Picture Gallery, over the portals of which we find written: "THE LORD GOD OMNIPOTENT REIGNETH". There are four Halls in this Gallery. The first is the Hall of "The Transfigured Christ and His People". Here we find seven small realistic sketches of seven Asiatic Churches. Christ is represented as holding in His hand seven candlesticks—these seven Churches. To each He sends a message of commendation and of warning. The problem of the whole Book is set forth here. These Churches are about to be subjected to a fiery trial. How can they win through? Only by setting their house in order. They must be sound Christians and faithful Christians if they are to be acknowledged as the people of God, and experience His protection. We get the general impression of these Churches as, in the eyes of Christ, the Light of the World; and of the concern and jealous care of Christ for the welfare of these His folk.

The next Hall contains only one picture, but it fills our whole vision as we enter. Its title is "The Throne, the Book, and the Lamb". Albrecht Dürer builds up his design of this picture from a lovely landscape of woodland, lake, and town; the mid-world of the clouds, upon which the Evangelist kneels

to learn the mystery of the vision; and the majesty of the open Heaven. On the throne of power is seated the Ancient of Days, surrounded by the whole host of heaven, and by the representatives of the glorified Church, all in the attitude of adoration. John is troubled because none seemed to be able to open the Book of Life, which is in the hand of the Majesty seated upon the throne. An Elder reveals to him that to the Lion of the Tribe of Judah, the Root of David (the traditional Messiah) is given this power. But the expected Messiah appears in the form of a Lamb, as it had been slain. To Him straightway is the adoration of the Elders transferred: " Worthy is the Lamb."

The impression we get from this picture is clear. Over against this world of human experience there exists another world, the real world, where God reigns supreme. But the mystery of this reign of His is absolute until Christ appears after His crucifixion and ascension. His Cross—" the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world "—is the explanation of the mystery of life. All power is now given unto Him, and as He breaks seal after seal, the Book opens, and the things that were shortly to come to pass appear in succession. But these are not fresh acts of Christ, for they were written in the Book before it was given unto Him. His kingly act consists in revealing what was determined in eternity. And when they appear they are acts of God's judgment, God's eternal reaction against all forms of evil.

And so we pass to the third Hall, the Hall of Judgment. And here we find picture after picture describing the woes and tragedies that fall on the world because of its wickedness. The number and intensity of these pictures fill us with awe and terror. The punitive note is strong. The wicked are made to feel the wrath of God, and there seems to be little place left for His love and pity. The world seems to have passed the stage where repentance and redemption are possible. Some have felt that this attitude is not consistent with the God of Love and Mercy of the Gospels. But it is not the background of these pictures that is important. What John has given to us in these pictures are just realistic impressions of events that were taking place in the world around him; and, as our own generation well knows, the horrors and tragedies and sufferings of war, pestilence, and famine are no rare or isolated happenings in human history. But what most of all he wants to convey is the

thought of the awfulness and intolerableness of evil in God's sight. There comes a time in human affairs when evil has so got hold of and masters humanity that it brings about its own inevitable punishment. It is no longer a time when the wheat and the tares can grow side by side. The harvest of the earth has become ripe, the time is come to reap. " He that soweth to the flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption." " All they that take the sword shall perish with the sword." John has shown us realistically what the Divine principle behind these words means in action.

But there is also another thought, of a more speculative nature, latent in one of the most striking of the pictures in this Hall. The evil that is wrought by man is not all that calls for the wrath of God. There is also a principle of evil that existed before man was. " There was war in heaven." Satan, ejected from heaven, appears on earth to torment the sons of men. And in John's day he had won to his allegiance the great material world-power of Rome. And so John sees no place for goodness upon the earth, and no peace for God's people until this evil principle is utterly destroyed. The modern equivalent of this speculation of John is the recognition of the organic nature of evil. John's attitude here in calling for the utter destruction of wicked men may seem to be inconsistent with the ethos of the Gospel. But we must remember the times that he was living in.

It was a time of crisis when there appeared to be no place for positive goodness, or for God's people on the earth, so long as the massed forces of materialistic evil reigned supreme in the world. And is it not true that we ourselves are to-day living in exactly another such situation? Do not most good men amongst us see no prospect of peace, justice, mercy, and freedom for the peoples of the world until the evil powers associated with totalitarian governments are utterly destroyed from the map? That is a judgment forced upon us by this time of crisis that has overtaken us. It may indeed be sub-Christian in an absolute sense, but is there any other judgment open to us that would not be farther from the absolute ethic of our faith?

But we must not linger longer in this Hall of gloom, except to note that this sense of darkness is somewhat relieved by two remarkable pictures placed by the side of some of the most severe of the pictures of judgment. In one an angel from God is seen to seal all the faithful people of God, who are

inevitably entangled in these woes that must fall upon the earth; and this sealing is the guarantee that they will not suffer any spiritual loss therein. And facing the actual issue in the second picture John outlines the glorious reward in heaven that awaits the many who as martyrs are doomed to fall in this tragic fate of the world. And this poetic vision, beginning with the words, " These are they who have come out of great tribulation ", has mightily appealed to the imagination of the Church in all ages, and their intuitive truth has brought both courage and consolation to many an anguished heart.

But we must hasten to view the three pictures that are hung in the last Hall of all. These are " The Marriage of Christ to His Church", "The Holy City", and "The Final Judgment".

In these pictures we see the realisation of the Christian hope for this world and for eternity. " The Christian Gospel," says Professor Niebuhr, " contains an element of inestimable value—the hope of a second coming of Christ, when the suffering Messiah will come again as the triumphant judge, when the love which is the norm of history, and which is to-day denied in all historical reality, will be vindicated, and become the basis of a new historical reality." Towards the realisation of this hope many modern men are living with the simple expectation of natural progress in their hearts. And still more to-day are anxiously looking to the period beyond the present time of war, with the hope that a new type of political philosophy, a new system of economics, and a new social order will come out of the struggle to usher in a new era of peace and liberty. These two pictures, however, of " The Marriage of Christ to His Church ", and of the descent from heaven to earth of " the Holy City " fill our imaginations with a very different way to that end. The way to peace, justice, and liberty among men does not lead up from humanity to God, but comes downwards from God to men.

No mere *human* reform of politics, economics, and of the social system will achieve this; but a closer union and co-operation in the spirit of mutual love and trust between men and Christ, and the coming down from God of His Spirit of grace and power alone will avail to transform our human politics, economics, and social system, and to bring in God's Holy City on our earth.

Not that even then in the vision of John will there be an

entire absence of evil. So long as our earthly conditions of life abide, and there is human freedom of will unlinked up in love and service to Christ, there is a possibility of evil. And so without the Holy City there still will lurk an element of wickedness so great and widespread, that Satan, loosed from restraint, can organise it afresh for a final assault on the Holy City of God. Then comes the end. God alone can complete history. The last picture of all is only in dim outline, for it is outside John's purpose of describing things that will shortly come to pass. There is the great white throne, the general resurrection, the judgment, the punishment of the unrepentant wicked, the new heaven and the new earth, and New Jerusalem, the eternal abode of the saints. "And the Lord God shall cause His face to shine on them, and they shall reign for ever and ever." No Christian faith is complete without this hope and vision, even if for this present we can only see it darkly as in a mirror.

These are but a few of the impressions that a hasty visit to this Picture Gallery gives rise to. It only remains to add that the power of these pictures to enlighten and inspire us depends not only on what the artist put into them of meaning; but also on the quality of the faith we bring to them, and the quality of the crisis that drives us to their study. And it is faith, looking forth from times of stress and strain, that has heard the voice of the Spirit taking of the patience and the courage and the endurance of Jesus Christ and made them ours.

For is it not a great thing, "when the floods begin, and the desolation of sorrow comes beating down, to hear the divine Sursum Corda—up with your hearts—for the Lord sits on the flood, and the Lord God omnipotent reigneth"? This is the central message of the Book of Revelation, meant to bring to birth an unconquerable morale, a kind of faith well described in Chesterton's verse:

"Though giant rains put out the sun,
Here stand I for a sign.
Though Earth be filled with waters dark,
My cup is filled with wine.
Tell to the trembling priests that here
Under the deluge rod,
One nameless, tattered, broken man
Stood up, and drank to God."

JAMES MATHERS.

Rosewell, Midlothian.