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A table of contents for *The Expositor* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php

APOCALYPTIC SKETCHES.

III.

THE THRONE OF GOD AND OF THE LAMB.

REV. IV., V.

THE book of the Apocalypse is the result of the instructions given to John as recorded in chapter i. 19, "Write therefore the things which thou sawest, and the things which are, and the things which shall come to pass hereafter." The things he saw on that first day of unveiling are recorded in the first chapter—the vision of the exalted Christ and the ideal Church. "The things which are" appear in the second and third chapters, in which we see the Church as it is in stern reality, in the midst of its conflict with enemies without and within. The great vision which is now to open out before us, extending from the fourth chapter to the end of the book, will set forth "the things which shall come to pass hereafter."

We here enter, therefore, on the main substance of the Apocalypse, the way in which it is introduced indicating that there has been an interval between the former vision and this: "*After these things* I saw, and, behold, a door opened in heaven, and the first voice which I heard, a voice as of a trumpet speaking with me, one saying, Come up hither, and I will shew you the things which must come to pass hereafter." As in the former vision, so here, we are told, "Straightway I was in the Spirit." This introductory phrase is not again repeated throughout the whole book; so we may probably infer that the long series of revelations which occupy the rest of the book was continuous. Think what an ordeal this must have been, more severe by far than that which Daniel underwent, of which he said, "I Daniel alone saw the vision: . . . and

there remained no strength in me"; and again, "O my Lord, by reason of the vision, my sorrows are turned upon me, and I retain no strength." John, we remember, had a similar feeling of prostration when, on the first appearance of the Son of Man, "he fell at His feet as dead"; but from the time his Master's quickening touch had been laid upon him, he seemed to have sufficient strength to carry him through such an ordeal as perhaps no prophet of the Lord had ever undergone before.

"The things which must come to pass hereafter" are to be in the main dreadful. An ominous book or roll is to be unrolled, each of its seven seals when broken revealing some new and nameless horror. Out of the last seal will come seven trumpets, each with an awful blast of woe; later there will be seven thunders, none the less terrible that they are inarticulate; and finally there will be poured out seven vials or bowls of judgment, before the wrath of God can be said to be finished. Such is the awful outlook of the coming years.

Why should the heart of the seer and of the saints be burdened with such an awful disclosure? It is given in mercy, that they may not be taken by surprise, but prepared for what is coming; and that they may know that these tempests of wrath, though they may wrap the earth in gloom and shut out heaven from the sight of men, are after all only like successive wintry storms, which, though they cover the earth with desolation, are preparing it for a glorious spring, and though they may follow each other so closely and so long that winter seems to linger in the lap of May, are all leading up to the great summer of the year of God.

Perhaps the best way to picture to ourselves the situation is to think of the seer on some high promontory of his rocky isle (remember the invitation "Come up hither") looking out across the waste of waters to the nearest land

in sight. For the most part the intervening sea is dark with storm and tempest; but ever and anon the mists clear and the sun shines in full splendour on the hills beyond. The situation would be somewhat like that of Isaac Watts looking across Southampton Water as he wrote :

Sweet fields beyond the swelling flood
Stand dressed in living green ;

only instead of the narrow strip of quiet waters we are to think of a gloomy stretch of angry sea.

If we think of the vision as coming somewhat in this way, we shall understand how it is that he seems again and again to see the end long before we reach the close of the book. This is quite inexplicable on the theory that we have in the Apocalypse a continuous history of the Church and the world ; for why should we reach the great consummation in the 7th chapter, and again in the 11th, and again in the 14th and 15th, and again in the 19th, and when we reach the very end, find that we have been there already as many as five or six times before? The difficulty disappears when we think that just as the Throne of God is always above him, the great consummation is always before him ; and that just as the storm passes, the land beyond is revealed, now in one aspect, now in another, but always the same land ; so when the storm clouds of the seals have cleared, there is the sunny hill of God ; and again when the trumpet blasts are over and when the thunders have uttered their voices, and when the vials have been poured out, the same mountain of the Lord appears, until at last it stands in full and clear sunshine, crowned with the shadowless City of God.

Bear in mind that the great object of the Apocalypse is to train the sorrowing saints to pierce with the eye of faith up through mist and cloud to the Throne of God,

and forward in hope and patience to the great consummation. It was, in short, to teach them in the darkest hour of trial and persecution to maintain the upward look of faith, and the forward look of hope and patience.

From this general view of what is coming we see how appropriate it is that this vision of the future should begin with a glimpse of the Throne of God. "Straightway I was in the Spirit, and, behold, there was a throne set in heaven." It needed a door opened in heaven to show that Throne—the door of faith; for the only throne in sight was that of Cæsar, the Roman Emperor, who then wielded the sovereignty of the world. And the Cæsar on it now is an infuriated beast, a very monster of iniquity, whose delight is to devour the saints of God. And, be it remembered, he had usurped the Throne of God as well; for this monster Nero is worshipped throughout the Empire as "the Divine Augustus"; and to all intents and purposes he seems invested with omnipotence. Like the tyrant of Daniel's vision, "whom he would he slew, and whom he would he kept alive; and whom he would he raised up, and whom he would he put down." Let the question be asked throughout the wide world, Who reigns supreme? A hundred million voices answer, Nero; but one in Patmos cries Nay: "The Lord reigneth; let the earth rejoice; let the multitude of isles be glad. Clouds and darkness are round about Him: righteousness and judgment are the foundation of His throne."

We cannot dwell on the details of this majestic vision. We can only note a few characteristics. Observe, first, the reverent reticence in speaking of God. There is no attempt to describe Him, no indication of form or mien or robe as in the vision of the Son of Man, only the general impression made upon the spirit-sense as of a clear flame-like glory, with perhaps the suggestion, "Our God is a consuming fire." On the other hand, the rain-

bow round about the throne suggests mercy; and the impression is heightened by the prevailing tint of emerald in the many-coloured bow. "And round about the Throne were four and twenty thrones: and upon the thrones four and twenty elders sitting," the full number of the patriarchs of the Old Covenant and the Apostles of the New. What a sight for eyes sore with weeping over the heart-break of the heavy tidings recently received that both Peter and Paul had fallen victims to the fury of the tyrant! Fallen? So it seemed; but look through the door opened in heaven, see them there enthroned. Oh! think not of the headless body, think not of the dishonoured corpse. Look up, look up! No blood-stains there; no signs of weakness or defeat: they are "arrayed in white garments; and on their heads crowns of gold." "Victims of Nero" are they? Say rather, "Kings and priests to God."

In this vision of the Throne there is only a passing hint of the terrible judgments which must intervene before the end. It is this: "Out of the Throne proceed lightnings and voices and thunders" (verse 5). Let the saints only remember this, that whatever seems darkest and most dreadful proceeds from that Throne, and they may "possess their souls in patience." The fires that issue from it are the fires of the Divine Spirit—cleansing, quickening fires; the sea which is before that Throne is no troubled sea whose waters cast up mire and dirt, but "as it were a glassy sea like unto crystal"; and the final result of all will be such as to evoke from the life of universal nature (as typified by the four living creatures, upward evolution suggested by the wings, fully developed intelligence by the innumerable eyes) the song of praise, "Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God, the Almighty, which was and which is, and which is to come," and from the Church of God as represented by the elders a tribute higher still, "And when the living creatures

shall give glory and honour and thanks to Him that sitteth on the throne, to Him that liveth for ever and ever, the four and twenty elders shall fall down before Him that sitteth on the throne and shall worship Him that liveth for ever and ever, and shall cast their crowns before the throne saying, Worthy art Thou, our Lord and our God, to receive the glory and the honour and the power: For Thou didst create all things, and because of Thy will they were, and were created."

So the vision of the Throne recorded in chapter iv. reaches its consummation without dwelling on the dark process by which it is reached. Is there then to be no explanation and no justification of the intervening process? It is to these dark intervening days that our minds are to be chiefly turned in the sequel: is there to be no light from Heaven to fall upon them? Is there nothing for it but blind acceptance of the inevitable, a dumb waiting through indefinite periods for a far-away end? Is there no key to "the riddle of this painful earth?"

"And I saw in the right hand of Him that sat on the throne a book written within and on the back, close sealed with seven seals." There is the riddle, but without a key. "And I saw a strong angel proclaiming with a great voice, Who is worthy to open the book, and to loose the seals thereof? And no one in the heaven, or on the earth, or under the earth was able to open the book or to look thereon." The riddle seems insoluble. No creature mind can fathom the counsels of God. "His way is in the sea, and His path in the great waters, and His footsteps are not known."

"And I wept much because no one was found worthy to open the book, or to look thereon." Who that has a heart at leisure from itself can fail to sympathise? There are those who can sit at ease in their comfortable drawing-rooms, unmoved by Armenian massacres, Stundist perse-

cutions, Jew baitings, Cretan wars, Greek disasters, Cuban atrocities. But this happily is not the mood of our times. Thoughtful people are compelled by the spirit of the age to suffer their share of the *Weltschmerz*, the world's agony; so we can well enter into the feelings of the seer when he wept much because no one could open the book. Is there no key to the dark mystery of Divine Providence?

“And one of the elders saith unto me, Weep not; behold, the Lion that is of the tribe of Judah, the root of David, hath overcome, to open the book and the seven seals thereof.” “Hath *overcome*”—note the word as correctly given in R.V. It is the same word that we have heard ringing through all the messages to the Churches, “To Him that overcometh.” Here then is the great Leader of those who overcome. And how has He overcome? How is it that He and He alone has been able to solve the riddle of the earth, to deal effectually with the dark problem of sin and suffering? Keep your eye upon the Throne and you shall see.

“And I saw in the midst of the throne and of the four living creatures, and in the midst of the elders, a Lamb.” But did we not expect a Lion? A Lion gone up from the prey, having slain his enemies; for so we find it in the ancient prophecy which the elder evidently has in his mind. But when we look unto the Throne, instead of a Lion as it had been slaying, we see “a Lamb as it had been slain”! What meaneth this?

“It is by no breath,
Turn of eye, wave of hand, that salvation joins issue with death!
He who did most, shall bear most; the strongest shall stand the
most weak.”

Not a lion rampant, therefore, but “a lamb as it had been slain.”

Yet the lion-strength is there still, as indicated by the seven horns, and not lion-strength alone, but strength

Divine, for these seven eyes are "the seven spirits of God sent forth into all the earth." It is the strong Son of God, who was dead and is alive again, and is now enthroned, the marks of the Cross the insignia of His crown, all authority given unto Him in Heaven and in earth, sending forth His mighty Spirit in all the variety of His quickening, saving power.

"And he came; and he taketh it out of the right hand of Him that sat on the throne." If the one opener of the book is the slain Lamb, then the key of the mystery of God is sacrifice, and the Cross of Christ is the centre of the Universe. The central position of vicarious sacrifice as a law of universal life is only now in this nineteenth century beginning to be recognised as a great truth of science; but there it is in this ancient book of Revelation set forth with a literary and dramatic power which never has been and never can be surpassed. The book which had been close sealed with seven seals lies open before the Lamb as it had been slain, and this slain Lamb is in the midst of the throne, and abides there, so that henceforward we shall hear of "the throne of God and of the Lamb."

And now there is another burst of praise, louder, higher, grander than the first. The old song was good; the new song is better still. Our hearts were moved and thrilled as we listened to the praise of the great Creator (chapter iv.); they will beat faster and thrill with a deeper emotion as we listen to the chorus in praise of the great Redeemer (chapter v.). It is the same choir as before, but a new song. The old song had been addressed to "God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth": "Worthy art Thou our Lord and our God to receive the glory and the honour and the power; for Thou didst create all things, and because of Thy will they were, and were created." The new song is addressed to "Jesus Christ His only Son": "Worthy art Thou to take the book, and to

open the seals thereof: for Thou wast slain, and didst purchase unto God with Thy blood men of every tribe, and tongue, and people, and nation, and madest them to be unto our God a kingdom and priests; and they reign upon the earth."

And now the choir enlarges, for angels throng around, and still the strain upsoars: "And I saw, and I heard a voice of many angels round about the throne and the living creatures and the elders; and the number of them was ten thousand times ten thousand, and thousands of thousands; saying with a great voice, Worthy is the Lamb that hath been slain to receive the power, and riches, and wisdom, and might, and honour, and glory, and blessing." And now the whole universe is awake, aflame with praise and adoration: "And every created thing which is in heaven, and on the earth, and under the earth, and on the sea, and all things that are in them, heard I saying, Unto Him that sitteth on the throne, and unto the Lamb, be the blessing, and the honour, and the glory, and the dominion, for ever and ever. And the four living creatures said, Amen. And the elders fell down and worshipped."

Could any one have imagined it possible that a passage on a theme so high, beginning in a strain so lofty, should not only be able to sustain itself through two whole chapters, but to rise higher and higher till the whole closes in such a climax of sublimity? Is there anything approaching it in the whole range of literature, ancient or modern? Can any one suggest another passage to put beside this matchless close? Let your imagination take hold of that throne of the universe: in the centre of it the great sacrifice, the Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world. Round about the throne are the four and twenty elders, and the four living creatures. There is the inner choir. Then there is the innumerable throng of angels; and their anthem soars above the other. Then

the universe to its very farthest bounds is stirred, and every created thing strikes in to swell the chorus, and the strain is higher still. Then come the responses from the inner choir, the living creatures answering "Amen"; while the four and twenty elders, ever close beside the Throne, with hearts too full to speak one word, fall down and worship. And the silence of the elders touches us more deeply than even the grand chorus of the universe.

J. MONRO GIBSON.