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The Education of St. John in Patmos.

BY PROFESSOR W. M. RAMSAY, D.C.L., LL.D., LITT.D., ABERDEEN.

IT needs no demonstration that the Book of the Revelation might readily be accepted as a possible work of the person who is depicted in the Synoptic Gospels under the name of John. The character of the writer of the Revelation is just what we could imagine that John to become in the natural process of growth. But it always seemed to me that the greatest difficulty in the New Testament was to comprehend how one of the Sons of Thunder could develop into the author of the Fourth Gospel. The difficulty now appears to me to fade away, when we try to conceive clearly the circumstances in which the Apocalypse was composed.

St. John had been banished to Patmos, an unimportant islet, whose condition in ancient times is little known. In the Imperial period banishment to one of the small rocky islands of the Ægean was a common and recognized penalty, corresponding in some respects (though only in a very rough way and with many serious differences) to the former English punishment of transportation. It carried with it entire loss of civil rights and almost entire loss of property; usually a small allowance was reserved to sustain the exile's life. The penalty was lifelong; it ended only with death. The exile was allowed to live in free intercourse with the people of the island, and to earn money. But he could not inherit money nor bequeath his own, if he saved or earned any: all that he had passed to the State at his death. He was cut off from the outer world, though he was not treated with personal cruelty or constraint within the limits of the islet where he was confined.

But there are serious difficulties forbidding the supposition that St. John was banished to Patmos in this way.

In the first place this punishment was reserved for persons of good standing and some wealth. Now it seems utterly impossible to admit that St. John could have belonged to that class. In Ephesus he was an obscure stranger of Jewish origin; and under the Flavian emperors the Jews of Palestine were specially open to suspicion on

account of the recent rebellion. There is no evidence, and no probability, that he possessed either the birth or the property or the civic rights entitling him to be treated on this more favoured footing. He was one of the common people, whose punishment was more summary and far harsher than simple banishment to an island.

In the second place, even if he had been of sufficiently high standing for that form of punishment, it is impossible to suppose that the crime of Christianity could have been punished so leniently at that period. If it was a crime at all, it belonged to a very serious class; and milder treatment is unknown as a punishment for it. In its first stages, before it was regarded as a crime, some Christians were subjected to comparatively mild penalties, like scourging; but in such cases they were punished, not for the crime of Christianity, not for 'the name,' but for other offences, such as causing disorder in the streets. But St. John was *in Patmos for the word of God and the testimony of Jesus, partaker with you in the tribulation and kingdom and patience which are in Jesus.* His punishment took place at a time when the penalty for Christianity was already fixed as death in the severer form (*i.e.* fire, crucifixion, or as a public spectacle at games and festivals) for persons of humbler position and provincials, and simple execution for Roman citizens. Nor is it possible to suppose that St. John was banished at an early stage in the persecution, before the procedure was fully comprehended and strictly carried out. The tradition that connects his punishment with Domitian is too strong.

The conclusion seems inevitable: St. John was not punished with the recognized Roman penalty of banishment to an island (*deportatio in insulam*): the exile to Patmos must have been some kind of punishment of a more serious character.

There was such a penalty. Banishment combined with hard labour for life was one of the grave penalties. Many Christians were punished in that way. It was a penalty for humbler criminals, provincials, and slaves. It was in its worst forms a terrible fate: like the death penalty it was preceded by scourging, and it was marked by perpetual fetters, scanty clothing, insufficient food, sleep on the bare ground in a dark prison, and work under the lash of military overseers. It is an unavoidable conclusion that this was St. John's punishment. Patmos is not elsewhere mentioned as one of the places where convicts of this class were sent; but we know very little about the details and places of this penalty; and the case of St. John is sufficient proof that such criminals were in some cases sent there. There were no mines in Patmos. Whether any quarries were worked there might be determined by careful exploration of the islet. Here, as everywhere in the New Testament, one is met by the difficulty of insufficient knowledge. In many cases it is impossible to speak confidently where a little exploration by a competent traveller would probably give certainty.

Undoubtedly, there were many forms of hard labour under the Roman rule, and these varied in degree, some being worse than others. We might wish to think that in his exile St. John had a mild type of punishment to undergo, which permitted more leisure and more ease; but would any milder penalty be suitable to the language of 1^9, *your brother and partaker with you in the tribulation?* It is possible perhaps to explain those words as used by an exile, though subjected only to the milder penalty inflicted on persons of rank. But how much more meaning and effect they carry, when the penalties of both parties are of the same severe character. Now it is a safe rule to follow, that the language of the New Testament is rarely, if ever, to be estimated on the lower scale of effectiveness. The interpretation which gives most power and meaning is the right one. St. John wrote to the Churches in those words of 1^9, because he was suffering in the same degree as themselves.

Banished to Patmos, St. John was dead to the world; he could not learn much about what was going on in the empire and in the province Asia. It would be difficult for him to write his Vision in a book, and still more difficult to send it to the Churches when it was written. He could exercise no charge of his Churches. He could only think about them, and see in the heavens the process of their fate. He stood on the sand of the seashore, and saw the Beast rise from the sea and come to the land of Asia; and he saw the battle waged and the victory won. Just as the Roman supreme magistrate or general was competent to read in the sky the signs of the Divine will regarding the city or the army entrusted to his charge, so St. John could read in the heavens the intimation of the fortunes and the history of his Churches.

In passing, a remark on the text must be made here. It is unfortunate that the Revisers departed

from the reading of the Authorized Version in 13^1; and attached the first words to the preceding chapter, understanding that the Dragon 'stood upon the sand of the sea.' Where is the point in saying that *the Dragon waxed wroth with the Woman, and went away to war with the rest of her seed; and he stood upon the sand of the sea?* The history breaks off properly with his going away to war against the saints (the conclusion of that war being related in 19^{19-21}), whereas it halts and comes to a feeble stop, when he is left standing on the seashore. Thus a meaningless and unsuitable amplification is substituted for the bold and effective personal detail, *I stood upon the sand of the shore of Patmos, and saw a Beast rise out of the sea.*

St. John could see all this; and through years of exile, with rare opportunities of hearing what happened to his Churches, he could remain calm, free from apprehension, confident in their steadfastness on the whole and their inevitable victory over the enemy. In that lonely time the thoughts and habits of his youth came back to him, while his recently acquired Hellenist habits were weakened in the want of the nourishment supplied by constant intercourse with Hellenes and Hellenists. His Hellenic development ceased for the time. The head of the Hellenic Churches of Asia was transformed into the Hebrew seer. Nothing but the Oriental power of separating oneself from the world and immersing oneself in the Divine could stand the strain of that long vigil on the shore of Patmos. Nothing but a Vision was possible for him; and the Vision, full of Hebraic imagery and the traces of late Hebrew literature which all can see, yet also often penetrated with a Hellenist and Hellenic spirit so subtle and delicate that few can appreciate it, was slowly written down, and took form as the Revelation of St. John.

Most men succumb to such surroundings, and either die or lose all human nature and sink to the level of the beasts. A few can live through it, sustained by the hope of escape and return to the world. But St. John rose above that life of toil and hopeless misery, because he lived in the Divine nature and had lost all thought of the facts of earth. In that living death he found his true life, like many another martyr of Christ. Who shall tell how far a man may rise above earth, when he can rise superior to an environment like that? Who will set bounds to the growth of the human soul, when it is separated from all worldly relations and trammels, feeding on its own thoughts and the Divine nature, and yet is filled not with anxiety about its poor self, but with care, love and sympathy for those who have been constituted its charge?

When he was thus separated from communication with his Churches, St. John was already dead in some sense to the world. The Apocalypse was to be, as it were, his last testament, transmitted to the Asian Churches from his seclusion when opportunity served, like a voice coming to them from the other world.

Those who can with sure and easy hand mark out the limits beyond which the soul of man can never go, will be able to determine to their own satisfaction how far St. John was mistaken, when he thought he heard the Divine voice and listened to a message transmitted through him to the Churches and to the Church as a whole. But those who have not gauged so accurately and narrowly the range of the human soul will not attempt the task. They will recognize that there is in these letters a tone and a power above the mere human level, and will confess that the ordinary man is unable to keep pace with the movement of this writer. It is admitted that the letters reveal to us the character and the experiences of the writer, and that they spring out of his own nature. But what was his nature? How far can man rise above the human level? How far can man understand the will and judgment of God? We lesser men who have not the omniscient confidence of the critical pedant, do not presume to fix the limits beyond which St. John could not go.

But we know that from the Apocalypse we have this gain, at least. Through the study of it we are able in a vague and dim way to understand how that long-drawn-out living death in Patmos was the necessary training through which he must pass who should write the Fourth Gospel. In no other way could man rise to that superhuman level, on which the Fourth Gospel is pitched, and be able to gaze with steady unwavering eyes on the eternal and the Divine, and to remain so unconscious of the ephemeral world. And they who strive really to understand the education of Patmos will be able to understand the strangest and most apparently incredible fact about the New Testament, how the John who is set before us in the Synoptic Gospels could ever write the Fourth Gospel.

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