

The Synopsis

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1 THE REVELATION

1.1 Chapter 1

The Revelation is one belonging to Jesus Christ, which God gave Him, and He signifies it to John. Though God over all blessed for ever, He is here seen as Son of man, the rejected Messiah or Lamb, and so Head over all things. This fact, that the revelation is one confided to Him, is important, because it at once makes it the testimony of Jesus and the word of God, being communicated by Jesus, and given to Him by God. This testimony of Jesus and word of God comes as a vision to John, who bare record of all he saw. All of it is prophetic in character, not the Spirit of God the messenger of the Father and of the Son's grace to the assembly in its own place-a direct inspired communication to the assembly itself for itself as in its own right place-but a prophetic revelation to John about it as in the world, and about the world itself.

The assembly being already in decay and to be removed, whatever the delay of grace, the time was at hand, and the rejection of the assembly on earth to be taken as a starting-point. Another system was to be set up. The apostle had not his face turned towards the assemblies at all, but his back. The mind of the Spirit is towards Christ's taking the kingdom. Still Christ was yet amongst them, but as Son of man, the character in which He judges and inherits the world. The apostle turns and sees Him. Still it behoved, if he was recounting the coming dealing with the world in judgment, to notice by the bye " the things that are." By giving them in seven contemporary churches, no time was necessary; it left the final results as at the door, for they were in the last days, yet it gave, if there was delay, opportunity for a full moral picture of the whole of the assembly's history. I see in this only the wisdom of the Spirit, and exactly the character of John's ministry. "If I will that he tarry till I come."

I cannot doubt then for a moment that (while professedly of universal application for everyone that had an ear, not an address to the general conscience of the assembly) the seven assemblies represent the history of Christendom, the assembly as under man's responsibility, the fact of the judgment of the world coming afterwards on its close (the assemblies being " the things that are ") and the character of events, beginning with the assembly leaving its first love, and ending with holding fast till He comes, and with being spued out of Christ's

mouth. The adoption of the number seven, which cannot mean completeness at the same time because the states are different; the reference to Christ's coming; the reference to the great tribulation to come on all the earth in the letter to Philadelphia; the clear object of warning the assembly till Christ came, the world being then in scene for judgment: all leave no cloud upon the conclusion that the seven churches are successive phases of the professing assembly's history, though not exactly consecutive (the fourth going on to the end; new phases then commencing, and going on to the end collaterally also).¹

But though the assembly be thus spoken of, God Himself appears here as the administrator of the world, even when addressing the assembly; and Christ as man coming under Him to this purpose, the Holy Ghost being noticed as the direct agent of power in the sevenfold perfection in which it is exercised. It is not the Father and the Son, but God who is, yet who embraces past and future in His being, and is never inconsistent with Himself, making good in time all in which He has announced Himself in the past. The form of this however is peculiar here. It is not merely the abstract idea of Jehovah, who was, and is, and is to come. He is first announced by His present absolute existence, "from him who is," the "I am," God Himself; and then to connect Himself with previous dealings (not present relationships) declares that He is the One who was (had revealed Himself in previous ages to the earth or to men, to the Abrahams and Moses's of old time), and at the same time was the coming One who would make good everything revealed of and by Himself. Jesus Christ (who comes last as the Man in immediate connection with God's witness to, and government of, the earth) is presented as the faithful witness-as He was personally on earth-of God; as risen from the dead (but no ascension or headship of the assembly), taking all in this character, not after the flesh; and lastly, in government not yet made good, the Prince of the kings of the earth.

The saints then express their own consciousness of what He has done for them, yet still in reference to the kingdom, not as the body or bride, or their own heavenly joys, but the highest possible as regards the given glory and place. This is the necessary consequence of the consciousness of a near and blessed relationship. Whatever the glory of the One we are in relationship with, it is what He is for oneself, one's own nearness to Him, that comes to the mind when the glory is declared. Were a general to march in triumph into a town. the feeling of a child or wife would be, , That is my father,'- 'That is my husband.' Here the feeling, though of this character, is more unselfish. "To him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in his own blood." It is His love to us which is celebrated, still with the personal feeling "us." The saints know what He has done for them, and further what He has made them. His love is perfect. King and Priest are His highest characters here: nearest to God in power downwards, and in approaching Him upwards. He has made us kings and priests to God and His Father: to Him be glory! Such is the saints' thought when He is spoken of. He loved us, has cleansed us, and given us a place with Himself. This flows

¹There are moral reasons from the contents. We shall see, farther on. that the structure of the book fully confirms this.

out the instant He is named. It is the answer of heart when He is announced, before any communication takes place. His having done this is not announced; it is the saints' own consciousness.²

As to others, all must be told. The next point, the first announced, is His appearing to the world. No direct communication to the assembly for its own sake-the book is not that. Here the assembly has that in its own consciousness only, as we have seen. Behold! He cometh with clouds; every eye shall see Him, the Jews too who pierced Him, and all kindreds of the earth shall wail because of Him. His appearing is in judgment.

We then find, what is so remarkable in John, the mixing up in expression of God and Christ. Verse 8 cannot be said to be one or the other. It is Christ; but it is Christ Jehovah, Almighty, the Lord; who is, and who was, and who is to come; the first and the last (compare chap. 22: 12, 13).

Thus, we have the saints of these days; Christ's appearing to judgment; He is God, the first and the last, Alpha and Omega; the complete circle of position from John's day to the end. The practical position which John takes with all the saints, is "the kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ." He belongs to the kingdom, but must wait while Christ waits, expecting till His enemies be made His footstool. The generic name given to testimony applies to all his ministry as well as to the prophecy-the word of God and the testimony of Jesus: only one might have thought that prophecy was not this last, as it was not to the assembly about itself from its Head; but the Spirit of prophecy is the testimony of Jesus.

Such is the introduction to this book. We now enter on its contents. John was in the Spirit on the Lord's day. It is his place and privilege however then, as a Christian, which is spoken of, not the prophetic period into which he entered. In the day of resurrection-his own place-the day on which Christians meet, the apostle, removed from the society of Christians, still enjoyed the special elevating power of the Holy Ghost, though alone; and is thus used of God, allowed to be banished for the purpose, for what He could not, in an ordinary way, have communicated to the assembly for its edification. The persecuting emperor little thought what he was giving to us when he banished the apostle; no more than Augustus, in his political plans as to the census of the empire, knew he was sending a poor carpenter to Bethlehem, with his espoused wife, that Christ might be born there; or the Jews and Pilate's soldiers, that they were sending the thief to heaven, when they broke his legs in heartless respect for their own superstitions or ordinances. God's ways are behind the scenes; but He moves all the scenes which He is behind. We have to learn this, and let Him work, and not think much of man's busy movements: they will accomplish God's. The rest of them all perish and disappear. We have only peacefully to do His will.

The same voice that afterwards called John up to heaven, he now hears behind him on earth-the voice of the Son of man. It summons his attention

²We shall find the same thing at the close when the prophecy is ended. Here what He has been to the saints and has done: there what He is for the future. See chapter 22 : 17.

with power; and turning to see the voice, as Moses towards the bush, he sees, not the image of God's presence in Israel, but the vessels of God's light in the earth, and a complete summary of it all, and, in the midst of them, Christ as Son of man. We find, thus, in the Revelation, God's whole history of the world, or of what is of Him in it, from the first decay of the assembly to the new heavens and new earth. But it was impossible for God to set aside the present expectation of Christ, or to justify the assembly in its careless but sinful thought, "My Lord delayeth His coming." Hence, as always, this history, and especially that of the assembly, is given in a way which leaves time out altogether. The moral progress of the assembly is given in pictures of the state of the existing assemblies selected for that purpose, beginning with its first decline, and ending with its entire rejection. Being taken up as assemblies, the general principle of responsibility is in view, and the assembly viewed, not as the infallibly blessed body of Christ, but such as that it may be rejected and set aside on earth; for a local assembly and the external visible assembly clearly can.

These assemblies are seen as distinct light-bearers; that is, in their place of service, or rather position of witness in the world. They are viewed in their own proper character as of God; as set by Him in the world, they are of gold. He may take them away because they give a dim, or no true light or witness for God; but the thing taken away was founded in divine righteousness, and founded originally by a divine hand.

But the Spirit first occupies itself with the character of Him who stood amongst them. First, we get His actual position, before stating what He was. He stood as Son of man. We have not Him here as Head of the one body, nor even as heavenly Intercessor; nor have we the Christ, of course (that is, the Jewish character of the Lord). It will be found that these are just the characters of Christ omitted also in the first chapter of John's Gospel. John sees Him in the wide character in which He is set over all the works of God's hand, and Heir of all promises and purposes of God to man according to divine righteousness. He is not the Son of man in service. His garment is down to His feet, and He has the girdle of divine righteousness about His breasts. This is His character.

We have then His qualities or attributes. First, He is the Ancient of days. In Daniel the same truth comes out. The Son of man is brought to the Ancient of days; but, farther on in the chapter, it is the Ancient of days who comes. The Son of man is Jehovah. This characterises all the testimony. The King of kings and Lord of lords shews Him : ³ but, when He comes, we find that He is King of kings and Lord of lords.^t But in this glory He has the attributes of judgment-eyes of fire-that which pierces into everything, and fire is ever the sign of judgment. This was its piercing, searching character: His feet, the firmness with which sin was met; for brass is righteousness, viewed, not as intrinsically in God to be approached, but as dealing with man, in his responsibility as man. The mercy-seat was gold, the altar and laver brass; but there it was as an altar, that is, dealing with sin for man, a sacrifice, though fire was there, but here the burning furnace of judgment. The voice was the sign of power and majesty.

³I Timothy 6 : 15. ^t Revelation 19 : 16.

Next, we have official supremacy. He held all that was subordinate authority in light and order, here spoken of as regards the assembly, in His right hand, in His power. He had the power of judgment by the word, and supreme authority the sun-in the fulness of its highest character. We have His personal glory as Jehovah; His qualities as divine Judge; and His supreme official position.

But, He was not less the Redeemer, the gracious securer in blessing of them that were His. John (as ever in prophetic vision of Jehovah, for it is not the Spirit of adoption here) falls at His feet as one dead. So Daniel; so in spirit Isaiah (chap. 6); but His power sustains the saint, does not destroy him. He lays His right hand on John himself, declares Himself the first and the last, Jehovah Himself, but withal the same that died in love and has complete power over death and hades; the deliverer from it, not the subjecter to it. He has risen out of death and hades, and has the keys-full power over them -divine power or support; and He who died and rose again, and lives for ever even as man, does so, not simply in the power of divine life in man, but of victory over all that man was subject to by sin and infirmity.

This is the position He here takes with John His servant, and with the assemblies respectively. We shall see that the state of the latter assemblies brings out other characters known only to the opened eye of faith. These were what John had seen, and which he was to write. Then as regards prophetic facts, he was to write the things that were, the state of these various assemblies as the setting forth historically of the assembly's various state-a history; and the things which should be after them (that is, when the assembly's history has close don earth). The whole assembly therefore, is thus, to the Spirit, the present time-the "things that are." The future was what came after it, God's dealings with the world. This, while it left the coming of the Lord, or preparatory prophetic events in immediate expectation, left, if there was delay (and there was to be), the period undefined, and the expectation, though prolonged, still a present one. We may remark that we have the personal glory of Christ here, the position as to the assemblies accompanying it. He is not personally revealed as Son of man, that is, as taking the Son of man's place: only He who is Ancient of days is so seen as to make us understand that it was one who had that place-was Son of man. Subsequently, in the Apocalypse, it is not His intrinsic personal character, but some relative character or place He takes. Only we have something analogous to this, when the account of future things comes in. As regards the world, He is seen as the Lamb, one whom the world has rejected, but who has redemption right over it. There He is seen with the seven horns and seven eyes-His power over the world, as with the seven stars here as Son of man. These are the things John had seen.

We now pass to "the things that are." The stars are in Christ's hand; He speaks of them first; He walks in the midst of the assemblies. The latter are light-bearers, the assemblies or assembly as set in a given position, and viewed as such before God; not what the people became, but what the assembly is in His sight; just as Israel was His people whatever the Israelites became. The stars are that which is held by Christ to give light and have authority, what He holds responsible to this end before Him. It is, in a certain sense, all composing

the assembly therefore, and so it is often said in the addresses to the assemblies; but more especially those who stand in responsibility through their connection with Himself, the stars in His hand. They should shine, and influence, and represent Him, each in its place during the night. That the clergy gradually took this place, and in this sense are responsible in it, is quite true; but that is their affair to answer for themselves before the Lord. The Spirit does not so take it here. They assume it as honour; they have it as responsibility. If ever they were called "angels," it was evidently just this assumption, and taken from this place. Again, it cannot be doubted that leaders, elders, or others, were in a special place of responsibility, supposing them to be rightly such. In Acts 20 they are so treated; but the Spirit does not so own them here. Christ does not address Himself to elders, nor to the modern notion of a bishop, which did not indeed exist then. Nor is a diocese ⁴ thought of in these addresses. You have not the authorities (elders) spoken of in scripture, of which there were always several; and this passage of scripture cannot be applied to human arrangements as now existing.

What then is the angel? It is not a symbol, properly speaking. The star is the symbol, and it is here seen in Christ's hand. It is (as angel is always used where it is not actually a heavenly or earthly messenger) the mystical representative of one not actually seen. It is so used of Jehovah, so used of a child, so spoken of Peter. Elders may have practically been specially responsible from their position; but the angel represents the assembly, and especially those to whom, from nearness to Christ and communion with Him, or responsibility for it through the operation of His Spirit in them for His service, He looks for the state of His assembly in His sight. No doubt the whole assembly is responsible, and therefore the candlestick is removed when unfaithfulness is brought home to it; but Christ is in immediate communication with these in respect of it—a solemn thought for all who have the good of the assembly at heart.

The way in which the angels and the assemblies are identified, and any distinction in the degree or manner of it, requires a little more detailed attention. That the assemblies are addressed in their general responsibility, in the addresses to the angels, is evident. For it is said, "What the Spirit saith to the churches." It is not a private communication to an authority for his direction, as to a Titus or a Timothy, but said to the assemblies; that is, the angel represents their responsibility. So we find distinct parts of them noticed. "The devil shall cast some of you into prison"; "fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer": "but I have a few things against thee, that thou hast there": "My faithful martyr who was slain among you": "But unto you I say, the rest in Thyatira" (so it is to be read). Yet the angel and assembly or candlestick are distinguished: "I will remove thy candlestick out of its place." "Thou sufferest that woman Jezebel."

But this separation between the angel and the assembly does not take place in the last three assemblies. The angel is addressed throughout. As to them too it is only said, Christ has the seven stars, not that He holds them in His

⁴Except in some parts of the world, those called bishops are always bishops of a city, shewing historically that dioceses are a subsequent arrangement. Angels were not chief officers of the synagogue.

right hand. In Smyrna and Philadelphia there is no judgment; they were tried, as faithful, and encouraged. As to judgments, or rather warning threats :-in the case of Ephesus, which presents the general fact of the assembly's first decline, the warning is given that the candlestick would be taken away unless they repented: that the assembly did not, we know from scripture and fact, and these assemblies looked at as a successive history. In Pergamos and Thyatira the offenders are those specifically judged; in the case of Thyatira fearful judgments on Jezebel and those connected with her: she had had time to repent and did not; but here the change of everything is looked for at the Lord's coming. All this shews the angels to be the representatives of the assemblies, but morally such; Christ's warning to be addressed to them (as we can easily understand to be the case in any who had the interest of the assembly at heart), whom Christ trusted with this; but to be so far identified with the assemblies that it concerned all who composed them, while particular judgments were denounced on guilty parties.