

The Apocalypse of John

TERM PAPER

HEBREW SYMBOLISM

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HEBREW SYMBOLISM

"I am a man of the earth," wrote Goethe, "I am a man of the earth, earthy; to me the parables of the unjust steward, the prodigal son, the sower, the pearl, the lost piece of money, etc., are more divine (if aught divine there be about the matter), than the seven messengers, candlesticks, seals, stars, and woes."¹ And in this he spoke for the Western mind in general, for to us the symbolism employed in one case seems simpler than that used in the other. But to the Hebrew mind accustomed to the use of mystical symbols one might be as simple as the other.

Hebrew symbolism differs vastly from our matter-of-fact way of stating things, but it "rises out of local and contemporary circumstances,"² and to the people of that time was no doubt intelligible. It is not surprising that people of this far removed age should differ in their interpretation of many of the complicated and mysterious symbols found scattered throughout Scripture. Archbishop Benson once asked an intelligent and devout reader of Revelation what form the book presented to him. His answer was, "It is chaos."³ No doubt the majority of people to-day would give the same answer. But those who esteem the Bible as the word

1. Bible Commentary, Vol. V. p. 531.

2. Swete, Commentary on the Apocalypse, Introduction, p. 218.

3. Swete, " " " " " 4.

of God must feel that the God of the orderly details of the infinite visible perfections of nature must have for them, expressed in these startling symbols, a definite message, capable of a sane and logical interpretation.

"Schools of Apocalyptic interpretation have arisen,"⁴ says Swete, "varying not only in detail, but in principle." In general these schools may be classified as Praeterist, Futurist, and Historical. "The Historical believes that in the Apocalypse we have a continuous prophecy, exhibiting to us the main features of the world's history: the visions are, therefore, partly fulfilled, partly they are in course of fulfillment, and a portion still remains unfulfilled."⁵ This last named view has had numerous advocates, some of whom are, Wiclif, Bullinger, Bale, Mede, Vitringa, Daubuz, Sir Isaac Newton, Whiston, Bengel, Bishop Newton, Hengstenberg, Ebrard, Auberlen, Elliot and Faber, Bishop Wordsworth, Dean Alford, Barnes, and Glasgow.⁶ Some, like Origen, have been enclined to a mystical exegesis, while others have combined the mystical and the historical. Many approach the study of the symbols of Scripture as though they were a mere collection of riddles to be solved by guessing, and still others search through their accommodating imagery for some basis upon which to build their peculiar and speculative doctrines. To build a doctrine on these mystical symbols is a very dangerous thing

4. Swete, Commentary on the Apoc., Int., p. 207.

5. Bible Commentary, Vol. V. p. 528.

6. Bible Commentary, Vol. V. p. 528.

to do. The doctrines of the New Testament are clearly set forth in its didactic books, and we are safer if we explain the symbols of prophecy in harmony with these.

From the earliest times a great interest has been shown in prophetic visions. This is shown by the interest which the Apocalypse attracted from the Church Fathers. In Darling's Cyclopedia Bibliographica published in 1859, the mere list of works on the Apocalypse occupies 52 columns.⁷ Nor has this interest subsided during later years for material both instructive and amusing may be had upon most any symbol in which a person might be interested.

In this paper the writer is seeking some principles that may serve as a definite basis for the interpretation of Hebrew symbolism. Without such principles many of these visions are "a mass of unintelligible enigmas." If commentators can generally agree in their explanation of certain symbols, is it not possible that this agreement could be extended to all symbols, if they could but discover the laws by which this uniform interpretation was obtained?

Several hundred languages and dialects are used for the communication of thought in the various parts of the world. In all these arbitrary signs and sounds are used. Groups of peoples have agreed that certain signs and sounds should represent definite things, and thus languages have come into

7. Bible Commentary, Vol. V. p. 532.

existence. A number of arbitrary characters and combinations of these characters are used in written language. There is no similarity between the word cat and the animal which we agree that it shall represent. A few years ago the writer had some interesting and amusing experiences with the use of these arbitrary signs while doing evangelistic work in the Scandinavian countries. In English we say that Miss means an unmarried woman, in Sweden the same word means a cat. The word for serpent in Swedish means worm in Danish. Once before taking an offering in Sweden the writer lifted a basket and spoke of its disappointments, saying that he was glad not to be a basket. He was not surprised at the laughter which followed when he learned that he had used the Danish word for basket and the very same word in Swedish means bologna.

Written language is not an organism, growing by its own inherent powers. To comprehend the history of its development, one must study the changes that have been going on within recent years, or that are going on now, for human nature is sufficiently the same to make human speech alike in its essential features, whatever the period or the stage of civilization. The old theory that spoken language was a direct gift from the Creator is far more satisfactory to the writer than the hypotheses that are taking its place. Written language on the other hand is a mere human invention. The earliest writers would not be expected to use an alphabet. Instead of this they used

hieroglyphics or symbols as in the case of the ancient Egyptians. These symbolic representations are not identical with the symbolism of Scripture; but they are not arbitrary, as is spoken language, and can not be arbitrarily applied.⁸

Many of the prophecies of both the Old and New Testaments are composed of this symbolic language. "The eye and not the ear is the organ of the Seer:" says Smith, "visions and not words are revealed to him. His utterance is clothed in a complete and artificial shape, illustrated by symbolic imagery and pointed by a specific purpose."⁹ The dreams of Joseph, of the chief butler, of Pharaoh and Nebuchadnezzar, the visions of Daniel and Ezekiel, and the Apocalypse of John all furnish excellent examples of Hebrew symbolism. The wonderful image which Daniel saw had a head of gold, breast and arms of silver, abdomen and thighs of brass, legs of iron, etc.¹⁰ Was there ever such a literal man on earth? Like the visions of Revelation it symbolizes something -- various earthly nations. In Daniel we read again of a lion with eagle's wings, a leopard with four wings, and still another beast with iron teeth and ten horns. Are there on earth such beasts to-day? In what haunted jungles roam the leopard with four wings and the beast with ten horns?¹¹ These are not literal beasts, they are symbols that represent nations. The four great nations thus

8. Smith, Rev. Explained, p. 19.

9. Smith's Dict. of Bib., Quoted in Parker's People's Bib. Rev. p. 409.

10. Daniel 2nd Chap.

11. Daniel Chap. 2.

symbolized were Babylon, Persia, Greece, and Rome. ^{12.} Many
of the symbols of the Apocalypse are divinely interpreted. ¹³
"The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches" "The
¹⁴
ten horns which thou sawest are ten kings." "The waters
which thou sawest.... are peoples, and multitudes, and nations,
¹⁵
and tongues." "The woman which thou sawest is the great city,
¹⁶
which reigneth over the kings of the earth."

By noticing these interpretations we see that there
is an underlying principle or law upon which the interpreta-
tion of symbolism of the Bible depends. It is the principle
of analogy.

Webster defines symbol as follows: "An object
chosen to typify or represent some idea or quality in some-
thing else, on account of resemblance in one or more of their
characteristics or associations, as, the oak is a symbol of
¹⁷
strength, the sword of war, white of purity." The Ency-
clopedia Britannica says, "Symbol is the term given to a vis-
ible object representing to the mind the semblance of some-
¹⁸
thing which is not shown but realized in association with it."
Another authority says that symbol is "an object, animate or
inanimate, standing for or representing something moral or
intellectual; anything which typifies an idea or a quality;

12. Urquhart, The Wonders of Prophecy, p. 158.

13. Revelation 1:20.

14. Revelation 17:12.

15. " 17:15.

16. 2 17:18.

17. Webster's International Dictionary, Symbol.

18. Encyclopaedia Britannica, Art. Symbol.

a type; as the lion is the symbol of courage, the lamb of meekness or patience, the olive-branch of peace, and the scepter of power."¹⁹ Longfellow sees a deeper meaning in all nature and writes,

"All things are symbols: the external shows
Of Nature have their image in the mind,
As flowers and fruits and falling of the leaves."²⁰

These and other quotations that might be given are sufficient authority to show that symbolic language is based on the law of analogy, and whenever we attach a literal signification to a symbolic object we destroy its use as a symbol. When we apply this law to Hebrew symbolism, whether in Daniel, Ezekiel, or in the Apocalypse, we take the position that every symbol employed stands not for itself but for some other object of analagous character not found in the same department from which the symbol is drawn.

The fantastic imagery of the Apocalypse is best illustrated by the "strange living creatures which figure in so many of the visions -- 'beasts' in which the properties of men, animals, birds, reptiles, or purely imaginary beings²¹ are combined in a way that is startling and often grotesque." Certain mythical or semi-mythical beings which appear in the Old Testament are also made to play a part of importance, as

19. The Century Dict. and Cyclopedia, Art. Symbol.

20. Longfellow's poem, "The Harvest Moon."

21. The Jewish Encyclopedia, Art. Apocalypse, Vol. I.

the beast with ten horns, and Gog and Magog. As might
 be expected, the Hebrews occasionally laid foreign mythol-
 ogies under contribution. "The 'dragon with seven heads'
 seems to have been derived from the Babylonian mythology."

Thus we see that the symbols of the Bible are
 drawn from all departments of animate and inanimate creation
 and some from purely mythical sources, as the beast with seven
 heads and ten horns. Actions are sometimes used as symbols,
 as the rending of garments, casting of shoes, "the Phylacter-
 ies worn on the head typify service of the mind; on the hand,
 service of the body." The washing of hands was a symbol of
 innocence. In Dt. 21:6 the heifer's neck was broken to
 show that the murderer deserved the punishment, whilst the
 elders of the city by washing their hands showed that they were
 free from the guilt. The key of the door was looked upon
 as a symbol of authority, and to place it upon a man's shoul-
 der showed that he was appointed steward. It was a mark of
 reverence to cast off the shoes on approaching a sacred person
 or place. Colors are used as symbols, for example, "white
 denotes purity (white garments), righteousness (a white throne),
 joy (a white cloud), victory (a white horse). Red for blood-
 shed and war. Purple for imperial luxury and pomp. Emerald

22. Revelation chap. 13. 29. Matt. 27:24 .
 23. Revelation 20:8. 30. Isaiah 22:22.
 24. Revelation chap. 12. 31. Jos. 5:15.
 25. Gunkel and Bousset quoted in Jewish Ency. Art. Apocalypse.
 26. 1 Sam. 15:27.
 27. Ps. 60:7; Jos. 5:12; Ruth 4:7.
 28. Hastings, Encyclopedia of Rel. and Ethics, Vol. XII, P. 144.

for patient winning grace. Black for calamity and distress." ³²
 "As black absorbs all colors," says Hastings, "and thus buries ³³
 the light, it symbolized death, humiliation, mourning, Blue, ³⁴
 representing the color of an unclouded sky, symbolized revel-
 ation." "There are symbols in the elements and forces of
 nature. The air, the sphere of life and of intellectual and
 spiritual influence. The earth, the place of nations. An
 earthquake, a sudden shaking of nations. The sea, human so-
 ciety tossed and troubled. A cloud is the chariot of divine
 manifestation. A storm of lightning and hail denotes a great
 crisis or judgment." ³⁵

The writer believes in the historical interpreta-
 tion of Apocalyptic visions. In the Apocalypse we have a
 history of the Christian church from the time of its origin
 till its final triumph, and the history of such forces and
 nations as exerted a significant influence upon the history
 of that church. Its symbolism is drawn from inanimate nature,
 animal life, human life, and angel life. It seems that since
 we have a mixture of ecclesiastical and political history that
 the religious sphere being the higher of the two would be rep-
 resented by symbols drawn from the higher departments, as
 human life and angel life. In the quotation above from
 Butler we note that he says the earth is the place of nations,

32. Butler's Bible Work, Revelation, p. 716.

33. Malachi 3:14; Lamentation 4:8.

34. Exodus 24:10.

35. Butler's Bible Work, Revelation, p. 716.

while the air was the place of intellectual and spiritual influence. Thus says Alford, "Heaven here," in Revelation 12, "is manifestly not only the showplace of the visions as seen by the Seer, but has a substantial place in the vision: for below, v. 7ff., we have the heaven contrasted with the earth, and the dragon cast out of heaven into the earth."³⁶

We would say, therefore, that heaven referred to the sphere of Ecclesiastical history while earth referred to the department of political history. This division between the lower and higher symbols is seen when the church is represented by a woman while a ferocious wild beast represents the Roman Empire. A number of symbols are drawn from the religious service of the O. T. and are therefore used to represent religious things without respect to the department from which they are drawn. They have formerly been associated with sacred things and their meaning could not be other than of religious signification.

If we make the principle of analogy basic we would naturally suppose that agents symbolize agents, actions symbolize actions, and effects symbolize effects. If the contrary is true this book is anything but a revelation.

We dare not press the use of symbolism too far or we may be found trying to give analagous meaning to some things that are not used as symbols. In the Apocalypse we have a number of things appearing with symbols, that are not used as

36. Alford's Greek Testament, Vol.IV., Part 2, p. 667.

symbols. It is easily understood why some things appear along with symbols, that are not symbols themselves; for there are some things which can not be symbolized. There is no object on earth that can symbolize a disembodied spirit and, therefore, we have the souls of the martyrs appearing in their own likeness.³⁷ God is spoken of as "One sitting upon a throne."³⁸ No object in earth or heaven could represent the Almighty. The sacrificial death of Christ is symbolized by a lamb, but otherwise he appears in his own likeness, for he is God and can not be symbolized by an inferior intelligence.³⁹ He appears as "King of Kings and Lord of Lords."

Finally, to emphasize the prophetic value of the symbols used in the Bible and especially in the one prophetic book of the New Testament, we might say that the Apocalypse "is a revelation of mysteries, things which lie beyond the ordinary range of human knowledge. God gives his people definite instruction regarding hidden matters, whether things altogether foreign to human experience or merely events in human history which have not yet come to pass. Some of the secrets of heaven are disclosed, in greater or less detail; the purposes of God; the deeds and characteristics of angels and evil spirits; the explanation of natural phenomena; the end of the world; the final judgment, and the fate of mankind."⁴⁰

37. Revelation 6:9.

38. Revelation 4:2.

39. Revelation 19:16.

40. The Jewish Encyclopedia, art. Apocalypse, Vol. I.,