

The Book with the Seven Seals.

AN ESSAY IN INTERPRETATION.

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THE Book of Revelation to the minds of many people is like a great city in a fog. Here and there the outline of some majestic building shows itself. It appears for a moment and then wavers out of sight. This book irritates the matter-of-fact mind which likes a clear and definite presentment of truth. The imagery is foreign and intolerable. The total effect is that of a confused medley of thrones, angels, horses, beasts, crowns, books, seals, and voices. It seems one vast tumultuous discord.

Now and then, however, notes of most limpid clearness are struck, which chime in sweet consonance with the everlasting song of salvation. These have preserved the book in the affection and reverence of Christians. Many can and do dispense with the visions. But there are passages in Revelation in which none who love the Saviour can fail to rejoice.

There is one of these in the fifth chapter: 'And they sung a new song, saying, Thou art worthy to take the book, and to open the seals thereof: for thou wast slain, and hast redeemed us to God by thy blood out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation.' No one can read this without a thrill. The worthiness of Jesus because of His death, because of the redemption of men to God by His blood, because of the universality of His kingdom, is a fit theme for a new song. But why does the writer say worthy to take the book, and to open the seals thereof? To many this adds nothing to what is said, but introduces the element of confusion which clings to an unfamiliar imagery. What book is this that the Lamb is worthy to open?

In the fourth chapter John begins the main theme of his Apocalypse by a description of heaven. The central figure in the scene is that of Him who sits upon the throne—the eternal Creator—for whose pleasure all things are and were created (v.¹¹). In his right hand is this book. There is no man, however, worthy to open it; and the seer goes on to say, 'I wept much because no man was found worthy to open and to read the book, neither to look thereon.'

John had felt the weight of the problem that arises when we think of God as Creator and of the unsatisfactory nature of men's lives. His method of stating the old question as to how anything so imperfect as man's life can be found in a world created by God, is to represent in the hands of the Creator a book which no man can open. In this book lies the secret of life's enigma, the torture of which man can feel but which he cannot solve. One, however, has solved it—'The Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, hath prevailed to open the book, and to loose the seven seals thereof.' The enigma of life has been solved by Jesus Christ. This is the main and central thought of Revelation.

The way in which this thought is worked out is extremely interesting. The starting-point is found in the seven seals by which the book of human destiny is sealed. In chapter six we have the account of the breaking of the first six seals. In this John gives us his philosophy of history, and his view of all the attempts men have made to understand their own destiny and work it out to a successful issue. As each of these attempts failed, another seal was set upon the book.

In connexion with the breaking of the first four seals a new illustration is introduced, namely, that of horses. There can be no doubt that by these horses John means to represent ideas that have ruled men's minds. What is there so swift and so strong as an idea?

Now there is one idea that has always exercised a deep influence on men's minds, and in which many have thought to find a solution of life's perplexities. It is the imperial idea—the thought of a great world empire by which all nations shall be united into one, bound together by a common religion, a common trade, and a common centre of government. Alexander the Great, inspired by this idea, had conquered the whole known world, and used all the resources of his power to consolidate his empire under the influence of the Greek spirit. After him came the Romans with a wider dominion and a more lasting power. Imagine the thoughts of men who believed in and worked for such an

empire. Here at last is the solution of life's problem. War, poverty, lawlessness, crime, all will disappear. Universal prosperity and peace are bound to reign. The golden age will dawn upon the world at last. With the breaking of the first seal, 'Behold, a white horse, and he that sat on him had a bow; and a crown was given unto him: and he went forth conquering, and to conquer.' There is a picture of the imperial idea.

What is the result? Instead of peace, war. Instead of unity, separation. The empire established by the sword perishes by the sword inevitably and infallibly. 'All they that take the sword shall perish with the sword.' It is the word of the ruler of history, and has been proved true again and again. So, with the breaking of the second seal, there goes forth one to whom power is given to take peace from the earth. The imperial idea gives no solution. Its negation is equally discouraging. Thus history places two seals on the book of man's destiny.

There is another idea which has always exercised a deep influence on men's minds. It is that of trade and industry. The true solution of life lies in a pair of balances, abundance of wheat, and barley, and oil, and wine. This is the idea of the political economist who thinks that the problem of life is to be solved, and the woe of the world banished, by material prosperity. With the breaking of the third seal, there goes forth a black horse: 'And he that sat on him had a pair of balances in his hand. And I heard a voice in the midst of the four beasts say, A measure of wheat for a penny, and three measures of barley for a penny; and see thou waste not the oil and the wine.' What is the result? What follows prosperity? What happens when a nation becomes wealthy? Luxury takes the place of toil and industry. Moral fibre becomes relaxed and unstrung. So, with the breaking of the fourth seal, Death is sent forth, and Hell followed with him. This is the fact that mocks the materialistic idea of the political economist. 'Ill fares the land, to hastening ills a prey, where wealth accumulates, and men decay.' Moreover, death always awaits the individual. Though comforts are increased, the years draw nigh when man says I have no pleasure in them.

The materialistic idea of the political economist gives no solution. It is negated by death, as well as by the decay which luxury brings. Nor are death and decay in the least helpful to a solution.

Thus, again, history places two more seals on the book of human destiny.

There is, however, another idea which has influenced the minds of men, and another hope that has always been cherished. It is the idea of a new world through the testimony of those who are faithful to the word of God. In connexion with this John does not use the symbol of a horse. We can see why. There is nothing triumphant and sweeping about the progress of this idea. It has held a place in history beside those of empire and of industry, but in comparison with them it is secret and unobtrusive. It has never ruled as they have. It is not of this world, though in it. Those who have been faithful to it have been slain. The world has rejected them and the word in which they believed. With the breaking of the fifth seal, John 'saw under the altar the souls of them that were slain for the word of God, and for the testimony which they held: and they cried with a loud voice, How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth?' The fate of the saints is, indeed, another seal on the book of man's destiny. 'Help, Lord; for the godly man ceaseth; for the faithful fall from among the children of men.'

There is, however, still another idea that men have cherished. It is that of the pessimist—Vanity of vanities, all is vanity. There is no issue to man's activity but the destruction of himself and all his works.

With the breaking of the sixth seal, John saw this awful destruction, 'When the kings of the earth, and the great men, and the rich men, and the chief captains, and the mighty men, and every bondman and every freeman, hid themselves in the dens and in the rocks of the mountains; and said to the mountains and rocks, Fall on us, and hide us from the face of him that sitteth on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb: for the great day of his wrath is come; and who shall be able to stand?' Wrath and destruction! Are these the end? The thought that they are, is another seal upon the book of man's destiny. But wrath and destruction are not the climax of John's vision. There is another seal, and with its breaking a new ray of light steals into the vision which culminates in that great picture of a new heaven and a new earth in the midst of which is God upon the throne, saying, 'Behold, I make all things new.'

We see thus that John was no hysterical visionary with an unrestrained imagination. He was a clear, far-sighted thinker who understood the great ruling thoughts of the world of mind, and who had come to the conclusion that by none of them could the mystery of human life be made plain. No man was able to open the book, neither to look thereon. His message, however, is not one of despair as is that of so many of the poets and philosophers of the old world. He comes to us with no tale about an inevitable fate to the decrees

of which all must bow. Nor does he teach that men should seize the day and its immediate pleasure because none can be sure of anything beyond. He does not despair in the presence of all the suffering and sorrow of human life. He teaches, rather, that in all the confused tangle of the threads that make up life, a perfect pattern is being woven, and that the key to this pattern is to be found in Jesus Christ who died upon the cross. The Lamb that was slain is worthy to open the book, and into His hands it has been given.

Literature.

PLUMMER'S ST. MATTHEW.

DR. ALFRED PLUMMER, the editor of *St. Luke* in the 'International Critical Commentary,' has published *An Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to St. Matthew* (Elliot Stock; 12s.). There is already a commentary in the 'International Critical' series by Mr. W. C. Allen. Dr. Plummer has written his book as a sequel to that commentary. On the one hand, he wishes deliberately to call attention to Mr. Allen's Commentary, which, he says, has been pronounced by the Central Society of Sacred Study to be 'the best English commentary on the First Gospel.' On the other hand, he desires to supplement Mr. Allen's Commentary, dealing more thoroughly with the historical, theological, and religious sides of the subject.

The Commentary on St. Matthew is to all intents and purposes a counterpart of the Commentary on St. Luke. The Greek text of the Gospel is not so much in evidence, it is true, being for the most part carefully confined to the smaller type. But there is the same accurate interest in the Greek; there is the same sense of the impossibility of building up a true exegesis on any English version whatsoever. The consequence is that while the paragraphs are quite intelligible to the reader of English, it is only the student of Greek who will understand the work that has been thrown into them.

The commentary follows the usual English methods. That is to say, it has an introduction in which are discussed the author, the sources, the

plan, the Christology, and the date of the Gospel. And there is added a most timely and useful section on the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs in relation to the First Gospel. Then follows the commentary. And the book ends with indexes of subjects and Greek words.

It is a rich book. It is full of matter that is most pertinent to its purpose, which is the interpretation of the First Gospel to the modern mind. Henceforth Plummer on St. Matthew is likely to be consulted as often as Plummer on St. Luke, and that is very often indeed. In all questions of interpretation we shall always turn to it, and we shall often turn to it first of all.

The printing has been done by Messrs. Morrison & Gibb of Edinburgh, and that is to say that better printing cannot be. The black sombre binding we do not care quite so much for.

DR. OSWALD DYKES.

A year or two ago four articles were published in succession in THE EXPOSITORY TIMES on the Person of Christ. It is a subject upon which both articles and books are published every month. But we have seen it stated that these four articles break away from modern literature on the subject of the Person of Christ, surpassing all else in insight. We have seen it stated that with them, short as they are, a new era opens in the interpretation of that doctrine which is fundamental for Christian faith.

Soon after the publication of these articles, Dr. Oswald Dykes was appointed Cunningham