

THE GREAT TRIBULATION.

BY

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"These are they which came out of great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb."—REV. vii. 14.

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THE GREAT TRIBULATION.

AMONG those students of Divine Prophecy who have adopted the futurist scheme of interpretation, there exists a warmly maintained controversy, whether or not "The Church shall be in the Tribulation." But on either side it is agreed that by "The Tribulation" is to be understood something not yet inaugurated,—a brief period of persecution under a personal Anti-christ who is yet to be revealed. This is generally *assumed* in the controversy, as if it were self-evident; and this assumption forms one of the strongholds of the futurist school, which, if it could be proved to be true, would go a long way towards the establishment of that scheme of prophetic interpretation. The object of the following essay is to examine those passages of Holy Scripture in which this period is announced; and thence to determine, if possible, its application, its chronological position, and its limits.

Much weight is attached to the statement that the great multitude of Rev. vii. came out of "the tribulation, the great one" (ἐκ τῆς θλίψεως τῆς μεγάλης).

For this is, rightly as I judge, identified with the "great tribulation" (*θλίψις μεγάλη*) of Matt. xxiv. 21; and this again with the "time of trouble" (*καιρὸς θλίψεως*) of Dan. xii. 1. Now, this last seems incontrovertibly to be allocated at "the time of the end" (xi. 40); and to be in close connection with the standing up of Michael, with the deliverance of Daniel's people, and with the resurrection to "everlasting life" (xii. 1, 2). Hence it is assumed that the "multitude" will have been gathered during the very brief period of persecution which a personal Antichrist is expected to exercise towards Israel; a period extending over only three and a half natural years, at the very close of this age.

But the gathering of "a great multitude which no man can number, out of all nations, and kindreds, and peoples, and tongues," would seem to require a very lengthened period, and a very abundant and energetic ministry of the word; for nothing is hinted of any miraculous agency. There is nothing Jewish in the character of their faith; they "washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb;" a character eminently applicable to saints of the present dispensation, who, having not seen, yet have believed. But this innumerable multitude out of all nations are said to have come out of "the great tribulation," which yet is assumed to be that three and a half years' reign of Antichrist in Jerusalem. Will this terrible one, then, be cruelly persecuting all over the entire world, far away at Kamtschatka, at Cape Horn, in Japan, at the Antipodes, in the thousand

isles of the Pacific? And will there be, in spite of him, so vast a gathering of souls to the blood of the Lamb, that the result shall be this great multitude which no man can number? And the whole wrought within three and a half years, when the entire Church is taken away from the earth, and when all the Jews (but a "remnant" at most) are sorely besieged in Jerusalem? *Quis credat?* Yet such are the conditions of the hypothesis.

Is there, however, any necessity for limiting this Great Tribulation, whose fruits are so vast, to a period so brief? The passages cited from Dan. xii. and Matt. xxiv. do, without controversy, connect it immediately with the coming of the Son of Man, of whom "Michael" is, I presume, a synonym. This glorious event is the *terminus ad quem* the Tribulation is to be reckoned; but what is the *terminus à quo*? Daniel xii. does not decisively answer *this* question; though *if we had no other light* on the point, I should certainly presume the trouble was not to be initiated very long before the events just mentioned. Nothing can be pressed from the order of succession in which the diverse facts are enumerated; else we should be entangled in this absurdity: 1. The Lord Christ comes on behalf of Israel. 2. Then this unprecedented trouble comes. 3. Then Daniel's people shall be delivered. 4. Then the righteous dead shall be raised. I do not think any school of prophetic interpretation would assent to *this* order of accomplishment. All, then, that we can certainly gather on the point from this passage is, that Israel shall have been for some un-

mentioned period (whether a day or ten thousand years) in great trouble, when the deliverance comes.

Let us now look at the Prophecy on Olivet. And, in deciding a point so disputed, and on which so much depends, I must insist on concentrating into one focus the rays of light, all equally Divine, which are given in all the three editions of this grand utterance, those of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, particularly the first and third. I suppose no one denies that the calamities announced by Luke,—“And they shall fall by the edge of the sword, and shall be led away captive into all nations, and Jerusalem shall be trodden down of the Gentiles, until—” received their accomplishment in the Roman desolations under Titus. Now, the correspondent place in Matthew’s and Mark’s accounts is occupied by an enumeration of calamities, in which occurs this statement,—“For there shall be great tribulation, such as was not since the beginning of the world to this time; no, nor ever shall be.” To determine the synchronism of these calamities is to determine our question. Weigh, then, these parallelisms:—

1. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke they concern Jerusalem.

2. In each of the three, desolation is intimated.

3. In Matthew “the abomination of desolation” is spoken of as standing in “a holy place” (a place that is holy, not *necessarily* within the Sanctuary)*;

* The noun being anarthrous after a preposition would not indeed determine it to an indefinite sense; but we must not rule it as definite. When the Sanctuary itself is in question, the inspired writers do (I

in Mark, "where it ought not." In Luke we read, "When ye shall see Jerusalem compassed with armies." For the present, let this be considered as a difference.

4. Each of these events is given as a warning to the disciples.

5. On the occurrence of each they are exhorted to flee to the mountains, the terms used being identical in each of the three evangelists.

6. The sorrows of those who are with child, and of those who give suck, at the period spoken of, are foretold in precisely the same words in each of the three.

7. The warning and exhortation are grounded on the extraordinary character of the calamity in all three: Matthew and Mark alluding to it as tribulation without an equal before or after, and using words almost identical; Luke saying instead, "For these are days of vengeance, of the fulfilling of all things that are written." These words surely correspond with those of the other evangelists, (1) in that right-

think, generally) insert the article after a preposition; as Paul, *εις τα αγια* (Heb. ix. 12, 25; xiii. 11); and the LXX., *εν τῷ ἁγίῳ τῶν ἁγίων* (Exod. xxvi. 34), *εις τὸ ἅγιον* (Lev. xvi. 2, 3, and throughout); and I think in all places. It is observable that Aaron's washing of his flesh, which our translators have made "*in the holy place*" (Lev. xvi. 24), is by the LXX. made to be *εν τόπῳ ἁγίῳ*; the identical phrase used in Matt. xxiv. 15. The washing, of course, was not within the Sanctuary itself, but probably in the court. And thus we see the discriminate way in which the LXX. either used or omitted the definite article after a preposition, when the Sanctuary was in question. If this rule is absolute (and I do not know of any exception), the phrase in Matt. xxiv. 15, cannot possibly refer to the Sanctuary; if it is not absolute, not necessarily.

eous vengeance, or *ἐκδίκησις*, is tantamount to tribulation; and (2) that, since "all things written" are to be thus accomplished, nothing of judgment can be left to be inflicted on the same people after these are exhausted; which is tantamount to "no, nor ever shall be." Luke does, in addition, use the terms "distress" and "wrath," with reference to the same calamities, the former of which (*ἀνάγκη*) comes near to "tribulation" (*θλίψις*); the latter to his own word just above, "vengeance."

If we were reading any three profane authors professing to give a speech uttered by one person, on one given day, at one and the same place, in reply to the very same questions, and in these three authors found such parallelisms as I have arrayed above, would not all sound criticism, would not manifest truthfulness, would not the simplest common sense, demand that the same events be understood in each passage? And what should we say if a critic were to tell us, "No; in spite of all this resemblance, one of the ~~three~~ writers gives in these words a part of the speech of his authority, which referred to events to take place in the first century; the other two give a part of his speech which referred to events to take place eighteen hundred years after that; yet neither of the writers gives a hint that he has omitted an important section of the speech"? Would this dogma command our confidence? Should we bow, and say, "Yes; it is plain it must be so"? I desire scrupulously to avoid a word that shall grieve beloved brethren; yet I cannot help expressing my wonder, my unfeigned as-

tonishment, that even the exigences of a system should have forced thinking men to such a conclusion as this!

Yet, except on this strange hypothesis, that Matthew and Luke are referring to widely remote events, we must admit that the calamities in question are those attendant upon the Roman desolation in the first century. For Luke makes this indubitable, when he quotes the Lord as closing this very paragraph in the following words: "And they shall fall by the edge of the sword, and shall be led away captive into all nations; and Jerusalem shall be trodden down of the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled." There are, I think, no two opinions on this matter: all agree that this verse covers the whole dispensation, from A.D. 70 to the end.

If this be so, I think we see clearly that the Tribulation is one of eighteen hundred years' duration; and here is one element of its unprecedented greatness. It began with the desolation under Cestius and Titus: it will close with the anticipated confederacy of the Gentiles under the beast and the false prophet. It is true this tribulation has not been of equal intensity throughout; it had an acme at the beginning; it will have an acme at the end; the medial portion of its duration has seen a merciful mitigation, which is possibly what the Lord means by the term "shortened:" but while the Jews have been scattered, exiles in all lands, and Jerusalem down-trodden by Gentiles, *it has never ceased to be tribulation.* The touching scenes described by Oriental travellers as occurring constantly at "the stone of wailing," show that tribula-

tion has ceased not to press heavily on the exiled Jew. "I went to the place," says Robinson, "where the Jews are permitted to *purchase* (!) the right of approaching the site of their temple, and of praying and wailing over its ruins. . . . On Fridays they assemble here in great numbers. . . . Here, bowed in the dust, they may at least weep undisturbed, and bedew with their tears the soil which so many thousands of their forefathers once moistened with their blood." (*Researches*, i. 350.)

It may be replied that there are difficulties in the way of applying Matt. xxiv. 15-21 to the events of the Roman siege. Supposing there are difficulties, they cannot be sufficient to prevent a conclusion so inevitable as the parallelism of the two versions examined above, without impugning the truth of the whole. But it may be worth while to look at the difficulties. I believe, however, that there is but one of any force. This is, that verse 15 speaks of something as to happen, of whose actual occurrence we have no record. It is the standing of the abomination of desolation, spoken of by Daniel the prophet, in a holy place. Considering that our knowledge of what did take place rests exclusively on the narration of a single person, we might surely be excused from absolute confidence that a particular circumstance did not take place, merely because he is silent about it. I believe, however, Josephus has given us a clue to the right application.

First of all, let us look at the original passage quoted here by our Lord Jesus. The actual words τὸ

βδέλυγμα τῆς ἐρημώσεως are found in the Septuagint translation of Dan. xii. 11; but, in ix. 27, they had occurred with the slight variation that "desolations" is plural; while in xi. 31 we have βδέλυγμα ἠφανισμένον, an abomination of utter destruction.* This is, however, rendered of much less value by the fact that, in the original Hebrew, the article is wanting in xii. 11, and in ix. 27; the passage in xi. 31, being the only one of the three which exactly corresponds to the Lord's words, "The abomination of desolation." And his caution, "Whoso readeth, let him understand," implies that in referring to the prophet, there would be some danger of error, some need of discrimination; which may possibly be just this choice among the three so consimilar passages. The absence of the definite article in ix. 27, where the mention occurs *for the first time*, is of course far less significant than in xii. 11, which is the third; so that we may reasonably conclude ix. 27, and xi. 31, to refer to the same event, and our Lord's allusion to be definitely to this.

Now, there seems no good ground to doubt that the Roman destruction of the city and temple is contemplated (for the strange hypothesis of a removal of the last week of the seventy, in chap. ix., is wholly gratuitous and unproved) in both passages; and such application was made by the Jews themselves in Jerome's day, as he distinctly tells us (*in loco*). And since the word "abomination" (יָפֶזֶן) is of frequent use in the Holy Scriptures, and particularly in the pro-

* The construction is difficult; but it appears to mean "an abomination that utterly removes and obliterates."

phesies of Jeremiah and Ezekiel, contemporaries with Daniel, and almost always signifies an idol, so it may be most appropriately used for the standards of the Roman army, some of which (as the eagle, the dragon, &c.) were certainly idolatrous.

It is then only needful to inquire whether the Roman ensigns did stand within a place that might be called "holy," at any period during the last Jewish desolation, under circumstances which permitted the possibility of escape for such as had been forewarned.

It is to the expedition under Cestius Gallus* that we must look for the fulfilment of the prophecy. It was about the middle of October, A.D. 66, that Cestius, having gained possession of the lower parts of Jerusalem, attempted to take Zion; but, finding it too strongly defended, he turned his efforts towards the Temple. After some vain endeavours, the Romans at length approached so nigh as to undermine the wall, and prepared to set fire to the Temple Gates. This seems to have been the very moment of time, and this the identical action, alluded to by the Lord Jesus; for at this moment alone, as yet, had the army, with its idol standards, been brought into actual contact with the Holy House. And it is remarkable that this contact was only momentary; for, at that very crisis, without any perceptible reason, when an hour or two might have made him undisputed lord of the city, Cestius suddenly drew off his army, and retired without the walls. This action of the Roman was so utterly unaccountable, that the Jewish historian who records it

* Josephus : Wars, II. xix.

is lost in wonder at it, and is constrained to acknowledge the immediate interferences of God. To us, however, the retreat of Cestius is not at all unaccountable; and if we are lost in admiration, it is not at the folly of the Roman, but at the gracious and tender care of Him, who had promised to his disciples, in immediate reference to these circumstances:—"There shall not an hair of your head perish;" and at the Divine prescience, which could foresee and predict with minute accuracy the acts of men so long before.

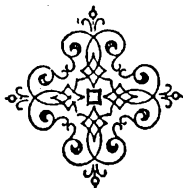
It is recorded by Eusebius that the Christians residing in Jerusalem did avail themselves of the signal of which their Lord had thus forewarned them, by retiring from the city; some of them to the mountains beyond Jordan, and others to the fastnesses of Lebanon. When we consider the large number of Christian Jews, who, as we know from inspired testimony ("many myriads," Acts xxi. 20 *Gr.*), were resident in Jerusalem, and remember the jealousy of the insurgent party within the walls, it is difficult to imagine how they could have effected a retirement at any other time. So vast a host could not have stolen out unperceived, by those within; and so isolated is the position of Jerusalem, so overlooked by a besieging army, that they could not have made good their retreat, in the face of the Romans, even if once outside the walls. But the retreat of Cestius and his army towards the Mediterranean, as Josephus proceeds to narrate, pursued by the whole multitude of the eager and elated warriors of Jerusalem, most marvellously opened a sudden, and unexpected, and brief way of escape *in the opposite*

direction, towards the Jordan, such as in all probability never occurred before or afterwards. The necessity of an instant seizure of the opportunity is strongly enforced in the Divine warning; and this implies that it would be as transient as it would be sudden. While with respect to the other two concurrent circumstances to be desired and prayed for,—the season of the year, and the day of the week,—it appears that the former was about the middle of October, the latter answered to our Wednesday.*

Thus there appears to be nothing in Matt. xxiv. 15–21, which precludes our applying the passage to the Roman desolation. We have already seen, on other grounds, the complete parallel between this and Luke xxi. 20–24. Therefore, the Great Tribulation, without a precedent or equal, began in the first century; and, as it reaches to the Day of the Lord, it has not yet ended. Therefore the multitude who come out of the Great Tribulation must be the saints gathered throughout this dispensation. Therefore any interpretation of the Apocalypse which limits Rev. vii. 9–17 to a crisis not yet inaugurated, is erroneous.

* The day of the week I thus deduce from Josephus. The day of the assault on Cestius at Gibbon was the Sabbath; he was driven to Beth-horon, where he lay three days; that is (in current time, by which the Hebrews computed) till Tuesday morning. On that day he pitched at Scopus, where he lay three days, that is, till Friday morning; on this day, the 30th of Tisri, he took the lower city, and besieged the palace, which siege lasted five days; this brings us to Tuesday evening. Wednesday was the day of the assault on the Temple, and, as I believe, the day foretold by the Lord Jesus. I may add that from Wednesday till the following Saturday, the 8th of Marchesvan, the Jews of Jerusalem were engaged in hot pursuit of the flying foe as far as Antipatris.

I do not see any difficulty in the circumstance, that these are *Gentile* Christians who are gathered ("out of all nations," ver. 9), while in Daniel and Matthew the Tribulation has a *Jewish* aspect. For not only may we consider the *era itself* as legitimately indicated by a phrase already twice devoted to it in the Sacred Word; but the very aspect of tribulation is no less characteristic of the Church's path throughout the same era, than it is of that of the Jews (John xvi. 33; Acts xiv. 22; Rom. viii. 35; 2 Cor. vii. 4; 1 Thess. iii. 4; 2 Tim. iii. 12; Rev. i. 9, &c., &c.).



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