

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

rather the man than the poet, and the words, with their grave and elevated invective and appeal, have a solemn timeliness for our day :

“ Milton, thou should'st be living at this hour ;
 England hath need of thee ; she is a fen
 Of stagnant waters ; altar, sword, and pen,
 Fireside, the heroic wealth of hall and bower,
 Have forfeited their ancient English dower
 Of inward happiness. We are selfish men ;
 O raise us up, return to us again,
 And give us manners, virtue, freedom, power.
 Thy soul was like a star, and dwelt apart ;
 Thou hadst a voice whose sound was like the sea ;
 Pure as the native heavens, majestic, free :
 So didst thou travel on life's common way
 In cheerful godliness : and yet thy heart
 The lowliest duties on herself did lay.”



Christ's Predictions of His Return.

BY THE REV. CANON GRIERSON, B.D.

AT the present time, when it is very generally felt that the solutions of the various questions that are raised by the Christian faith can best be found by investigating the personality of its Founder, special interest necessarily attaches to the predictive element in the teaching of our Lord ; for in this we are brought face to face at once with the mystery of His being. Prophets before Jesus of Nazareth foretold the future, but to none of them was this mysterious power granted in anything like the degree in which it was possessed by Jesus Christ. If we accept our Gospels as giving a substantially correct account of the events they record, there is no doubt that His statements regarding events long future are as clear and circumstantial as our statements usually are regarding matters within present knowledge.

There are critics who regard some of these prophecies as

written after the event, and others as insertions from Jewish-Christian apocalyptic literature. But such criticisms are really little better than plausible stretches of the imagination, for they are founded on subjective decisions, and are without a vestige of external evidence.

Of the predictions of Jesus, none will repay our study better than those relating to His return, for they are not only numerous, and so give room for fairly safe general conclusions, but also are couched in such peculiarly cryptic language that if deciphered they will reveal more fully the mind of Him that spoke them than if they were more simple of interpretation.

Mark xiii., and parallel passages in Matthew and Luke, contain the longest discourse on the subject, and are intensely difficult of interpretation. As we read it we seem to be drawn backward and forward between Christ's final *Parousia*, ages hence, and the destruction of Jerusalem within a few years. Our puzzle of interpretation seems to reach its greatest complication when we read that all then foretold, apparently including the evangelization of the world, would be fulfilled in that generation, and yet that He who foretold it did not know, within any certain limits, *when* the day of crisis would arrive.

Now, there is one fact that seems to be too much forgotten—namely, that *on every occasion* upon which our Lord spoke of His return He used language that presents the very same difficulties as Mark xiii. The position is not that *some* utterances of His on this subject are enigmatical, but that He *invariably* used language of this kind regarding it. Such a fact should make us pause before we decide that any one of His prophetic discourses, as given to us, is self-contradictory, and should lead us to suspect that the cause of the difficulty is rather due to our own want of understanding. Personally, I believe that a key is to be found in holding that our Lord, looking into the future, recognized His connection with all great coming movements of history; that He saw clearly that throughout the ages He would be the ever-present power, and that at epochs He would intervene forcibly and startlingly in

the world's progress—in a word, that His comings would be many, and that these comings would prepare the way for and rehearse his *Parousia* at the end of the age. It seems to me that this theory of Christ's "historic comings," in so far from being, as some would suggest, a modern invention, artificially devised to remove difficulties, is really *the* teaching that Christ intended to convey. Let us, then, consider each of the five passages in the Synoptics dealing with this matter, with a view to seeing whether we are correct in our assumption that Jesus in every case so spoke as to imply His "historic comings."

As these passages are being considered, it will become apparent that in every case the language of our Lord is invariably enigmatic. And if we ask why He should have invariably used ambiguous language when speaking on this subject, will not the reply be found in realizing that the dulness of spiritual insight of the Apostles rendered such a course necessary? In this connection, as in connection with His death, He was unable, because of the low stage of spiritual education as yet reached by His disciples, to speak openly. All He could do He did—namely, reveal in mysterious language truth that would become more and more clear as history advanced.

First, we will take His reply to the question of Caiaphas whether He were the Christ. His words, according to Mark (xiv. 62) are: "I am: and ye shall see the Son of man sitting at the right hand of power, and coming in the clouds of heaven." In Matthew (xxvi. 64) and Luke (xxii. 69) we find remarkable modifications; for in the former we read: "Henceforth [*ἀπ' ἄρτι*] ye shall see . . ."; and in the latter: "From henceforth [*ἀπὸ τοῦ νῦν*] shall the Son of man be seated at the right hand of the power of God." What did Jesus mean? Did He merely mean that at the last day Caiaphas would realize his sin by seeing Him who was then his captive enthroned in glory?—a meaning that would fairly interpret the words as found in Mark. Evidently the writers of the first and third Gospels thought not, for they both commence their

versions with the word "henceforth." They cannot have added it purposelessly, for it creates a self-evident difficulty. For how could Caiaphas be said from that moment to see Jesus seated at the right hand of God and coming in the clouds of heaven? Both Evangelists must have felt the difficulty. Indeed, it is clear that Luke did, for he modifies the coming of Jesus in the clouds into sitting at the right hand of power. We conclude, then, that Mark and Matthew give correctly the main words spoken, and that Matthew and Luke correctly add the difficult "henceforth." What, then, did Jesus mean? Are not the words a hidden teaching to Caiaphas, that would become plain enough *ex eventu*, that he would speedily feel the presence — the "historic coming" — of the Son of man? It was as if He said: "You ask Me am I the Christ. You from this moment will have opportunity of knowing it. I am apparently in your power now, but I warn you that before long, by an immediate spiritual visitation, I will prove My power over you." Was the prediction fulfilled? Ought not the quaking rocks, the rent veil, the opened tomb, followed as they were by Pentecost and the victories of the Church, to have been felt by Caiaphas as true comings in power of Him whom he thought he had mastered? And if an extreme criticism decides to get rid of all apocalyptic allusions in Mark xiii., by regarding them as excerpts from external apocalyptic literature, it cannot possibly do so in this case, for the reply of Jesus to Caiaphas cannot be thought of, even by critical imagination, as having been derived from an apocalypse.

Let us turn now to the second passage to be considered. In Mark viii. 38 and ix. 1 we read: "Whosoever shall be ashamed of Me and of My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of man shall also be ashamed of him when He cometh in the glory of His Father with the holy angels; and He said unto them, There be some here of them that stand by which shall in no wise taste of death till they see the kingdom of God come with power" (Matthew, "till they see the Son of man coming in His kingdom"; Luke, "till they see the kingdom of God").

It is evident that two comings are here foretold—the first, our Lord's final coming, when He at the Judgment Day will be “ashamed” of those who have been “ashamed” of Him; and the second, the coming of the kingdom with power within the lives of some of those present. Now, Matthew modifies the coming of the kingdom, which was to occur within the lifetime of some present, into “the Son of man coming in His kingdom.” The change is remarkable—the more so as this Gospel reached its present form either soon after or soon before the destruction of Jerusalem. If it was *before*, then the weighty forebodings that oppressed men would lead the Church to regard these words of our Lord as predicting His *final* coming as imminent. But if, on the other hand, they were written in the Gospel *after* the destruction of the city, they would then be interpreted as a foretelling of that judgment of the faithless city which had been witnessed. May we not, then, be certain that the author of the first Gospel, if he compiled his Gospel after A.D. 70, must have come to grasp the truth of Christ's manifold comings?

Let us, thirdly, turn to words recorded in Matt. x. 23: “Ye shall not have gone through the cities of Israel till the Son of man be come.” These words are peculiar to Matthew; that is to say, they are found in that Gospel the author of which, as we have seen, most fully grasped our Lord's eschatological teaching. We may ask what meaning the words had to the Evangelist. Would he have put them there if they conveyed to him no meaning? Would he have left them there if they had been falsified by events? Are they not rather words pregnant with teaching that would afterwards refresh the Church in its crisis, if they teach an “historic return”? As a prediction, we may see their fulfilment in the Resurrection, or at Pentecost, or at the destruction of Jerusalem, or progressively in all these.

If this difficult saying stood alone, we might reasonably regard it as an interpolation or as a badly reported utterance; but when we remember that its difficulties are precisely those

found in the passages already considered, and that it is fittingly interpreted, as those other passages are, by realizing that He darkly taught His manifold comings, then we surely cannot doubt as to what decision we should make.

We must now turn to the *fourth* occasion of our Lord's teaching on the point, given in Luke xvii. 22 and xviii. 8. Having told the Pharisees that the kingdom of God was "within" (or "among") them, He told His disciples that the day would come when they would desire to see "one of the days of the Son of man"; and that there could be no mistaking "His day" when it came, for it would be as a lightning flash. It is here important to distinguish "the days" of the Son of man and "the day" of the Son of man. The distinction is illustrated by His passing on to speak of "the days" of Noah and Lot, and "the day" when Noah entered the ark, and "the day" when Lot left Sodom. "The days" are the period granted as an opportunity for repentance before the irretrievable judgment of "the day" falls.

During "the days" of opportunity men in the time of Noah and Lot ate, drank, and married, neglectful of the impending punishment of their sins. When the judgment fell they longed for "the days" of opportunity, but they longed in vain.

The "days of the Son of man" must, then, be the period of grace that precedes "the day" of Christ's revelation in judgment.

But was our Lord referring to His final *Parousia*, or to His historic coming in the destruction of Jerusalem? The immediate reference is clearly to the latter, as is seen by His directions to those who would have to endure the ordeal, not to enter their house if they happened to be on the house-top; while doubtless a deeper reference can be seen to His final appearance.

Here, then, again we have Jesus distinctly foretelling the destruction of the city, as being a day of manifestation of Himself; in other words, as being an historic coming. And remark how this passage exemplifies our Lord's custom of mysterious language when dealing with His returns. How

mysterious are the words, "In that night there shall be two men on one bed; the one shall be taken, the other left. There shall be two women grinding. . . ." The disciples, mystified, ask, "Where, Lord?" only to receive the still more inexplicable reply, "Where the body is, thither will the eagles also be gathered together."

Could we have clearer proof of our Lord's *intentional* use of enigmatic language when dealing with His returns? And yet when we *do* get hold of His meaning, how exactly does it fit in with what we are urging! For is not the meaning of these last words, "Time will tell. When circumstances are ripe, the event happens"? His statement by its enigmatic form covers *all* His future comings.

Let us now turn our attention to our Lord's long eschatological discourse, found in Mark xiii., Matthew xxiv., and Luke xxi.

The discourse arose from questions of the disciples. They had heard Him foretell the levelling to the dust of the Temple buildings, and they question Him as to (1) *when* it would occur, and (2) what *sign* would foreshadow it.

Matthew enlarges the second of these questions into "what shall be the sign of Thy coming *and of the end of the world?*" Now, all three Gospels record in our Lord's *reply* words dealing not only with the Temple's destruction, but also with His return and the end of the world. Therefore, we may conclude that the fuller form of the disciples' question as found in Matthew was implicit in the shorter forms in Mark and Luke. Further, it is evident that the disciples connected the destruction of the Temple with the return of their Master, and sought instruction as to whether it was not also the end of the world. Indeed, it is hard to see how they could have thought otherwise when we remember that they, in spite of His oft-repeated warnings of His departure through death, still clung to their belief in His Messiahship.

Difficult beyond our thought must it have been for them to maintain their faith in a Messiah who was about to die, and

they could only have done so by resting on the promises of His return. And now, when He added to their difficulties by revealing the coming destruction of His Father's house, they could only surmise that the judgment on the Temple would in some way be connected with His promised return to them.

Clearly, then, on this occasion, as on the other occasions which we have already discussed, He had to speak of more comings than one. He had to prepare His disciples for His imminent coming, when He would destroy the city, and also He had to teach them and His Church of all time regarding that final ingathering when He would return at the consummation of the age. The one would be an historic rehearsal of the other, for His comings synchronize with epochs when human life has reached a point where purging by fire is necessary, and the approach of such epochs is marked in each case in the main lines by similar processes.

There is the strife of men, of nation with nation ; there is the arising of false Christs, false teachers, with their false nostrums ; there is the "beginnings of travail," the first movement of forces about to work the revolution ; there are the labour-pangs of the coming birth of the new age increasing to awful intensity ; there is then, "immediately after" this tribulation, the final throes, the coming of the Son of man in the clouds of heaven. It may at first seem that the reference to the clouds of heaven should necessarily cause us to regard the *final* coming as alone here referred to ; but I do not think so, for such language is but in keeping with the usual theophanic language of the Scriptures, and may well be interpreted metaphorically. No passage of Scripture is more full of this form of symbolic drapery than that in Joel ii., where we read of blood and fire and vapour of smoke, the sun being turned into darkness and the moon into blood ; and yet St. Peter (Acts ii.) saw in the descent of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost the fulfilment of these portents. In fact, we may say that *whenever* Christ comes He comes in the clouds of heaven ; He comes with the forces of

heaven, the majesty of heaven, and does the work of heaven on earth.

Assuming, then, that Jesus foreknew His manifold comings, and recognizing how impossible it was for Him openly to disclose such a truth to His disciples in their then state of mind, is not the discourse exactly what we would expect?—mysterious to them because above them, yet helpful to them as sufficiently educating them to prepare for the coming cataclysm; pregnant in its teaching to them, inasmuch as the full teaching would dawn upon them when they had been educated by the logic of events.

And if at any time the course of human history seems to be reaching one of those crises when mankind or civilization is called upon to pass in its upward march through the fires of some great tribulation, then men turn to these very chapters of the Gospel, and see in them predictions of the events through which they are passing, and can boldly step into the struggle for the maintenance of what they hold to be truth: for the epoch-making crisis is nothing other than a coming of Christ.

It is probable that the interpretation of these passages which we have urged would have been more generally accepted if it were not that it undoubtedly compels us to see in the self-consciousness of Jesus a depth of vision that some find difficulty in allowing. For if what we urge be true, it follows that Christ was not only conscious of future events, but that He was also so far conscious of His cosmic relations as to know that He would Himself rule the world throughout the ages, and be the Central Force of human history.

