

CHAPTER TEN

DISTRIBUTION OF TIMES AND EVENTS

IN connection with the chronology of prophecy, a question occurs with reference to the length of the periods, and the distribution of events over them. As the first coming was the termination of a long series of predictions, so, as we have seen, is the second. It is in the midst of this latter series that we are placed, and it becomes a question of much importance, How are these predictions to be distributed over the intervening space? Are they to be spread out continuously over the whole interval, or reserved in one dense mass, for its close?

In apostolic days, when faith was simple and love was fresh, men could brook no delay. They could hardly admit of any time intervening between them and the object of their hope. In the fervency of their new affection, they would have the coming of the Lord to be immediate, without any interposing period or event. An apostle had to restrain them, by showing them that that day should not come, unless there came "a falling away first, and that Man of Sin be revealed, the son of perdition." As time went on, men began to see that God had intended a greater interval than they had imagined, and that many things were designed to take place which they had overlooked. There was no attempt indefinitely to postpone the Advent, nor was there any idea entertained of placing a whole millennium, and that a millennium of glory, between them and that day; still there was the belief that the intervening space was longer than at first they had conceived or were willing to allow.

Seeing this, they naturally began to reason, that if God had purposed that His Church

should tarry so long for the day of Christ's appearing, He would not have left them without the "sure word of prophecy" as a light to them, shining in a dark place; and that therefore they must carry it along with them at every step, and spread it out over the whole period of the Church's tribulation, and the Bridegroom's delay. This we believe to have been the feeling in early times; and this we believe to be also the feeling in our own day. It is this, we doubt not, which, along with other reasons, has led the majority of interpreters to distribute over large periods the events and characters described in the prophetic word, and to spread out the "times" over ages and centuries.

In order to assist us in settling this point, we naturally enquire, What was God's method of procedure in former dispensations? How were the foretold events arranged? How were the prophetic times laid out in other ages of the Church? This seems to me a matter of some importance, and an element of some weight in helping us to settle the question; a question doubtless attended with considerable difficulties, and not to be rashly and dogmatically pronounced upon, or hastily dismissed.

In former dispensations we find that the prophecies were not confined to the point immediately before the crisis, but stretched over a much larger field, generally taking up the most striking and pregnant events along the whole line. The times are not limited to a few years before the catastrophe, but range over a long period of years, sometimes of centuries. The Jewish Church was to be for a long period under Egyptian bondage, and

prophecy foretold the whole of that time,—her four hundred and thirty years of oppression and sorrow. Her captivity in Babylon was to be for many years, and prophecy gave notice of the *whole* period of her exile, her seventy years of loneliness and absence from the beloved Jerusalem. The time intervening between her return from captivity and the coming of Messiah was to be a long one, and prophecy made known the whole of that interval, the seventy weeks that were “determined to finish the transgression and to make an end of sins, to seal up the vision and prophecy, and to anoint the Most Holy.”

Judging from such analogies, we should be led to expect that the interval between the first and second comings of the Lord should, to a certain extent, be *filled up* with the events and times of prophecy. Here is a strong presumption in favor of the more protracted scheme of interpretation. It cannot but appear strange and inconsistent that the prophetic page, which in all other ages of the world had been *at length written over* with the Church’s history, should all at once, for eighteen hundred years, become utterly blank, and that during a dispensation the most momentous which has yet evolved. These considerations would lead us to enter on New Testament prophecies with the expectation of finding them, like preceding ones, spread out over a considerable period, not crushed together in a point, and expending themselves exclusively upon the last few years of the Church’s history before or at the Advent.

Besides, does it not appear as if the Apocalypse had been expressly written in order to fill up the interval between the First and Second Advents, which the Old Testament had left untouched or barely alluded to? Is it likely that the book given to the Church for the day of her tribulation, should yet bear no reference at all to by far the largest portion of that day? Are the visions and dates of that book not to commence till at least eighteen hundred years after it was put into the hands of the Church, as the “sure word” to which she was to give heed as unto “a light shining in a dark place?” I by no means say that even in such a case it would have been useless. It

would be hazardous to affirm and difficult to maintain this. But we may at least say that it is not easy to see how it could be “the light in a dark place,” if it had no reference at all to so long a period of the Church’s history. And is not this confirmed by the words of Christ himself in the commencement of the book—“Write the things which thou hast seen, and the things which are, and the things which are to be hereafter?” (Rev. 1:19) “The things which thou hast seen” refer evidently to the vision of the heavenly glory just described. The “things which are” as evidently refer to the state of the seven Asiatic Churches as then existing. The “things which shall be hereafter,” that is, after these others, refer to the state of things in the Church and world *following upon* the decay and ruin of these Churches. And with these last the remainder of the Apocalypse is occupied. If that verse, then, does give us the three divisions of the whole book, it seems difficult to conceive how the last of the three should take up only the few concluding years of the Church. If “the things that are” have passed into the “things that were,” the “things that shall be after these” should commence; and it is rather incongruous to interpose eighteen hundred years between the one and the other.¹

Further, there are some things foretold as taking place during the well-known period of twelve hundred and sixty days, which scarcely admit of being compressed within the space of so many days. The “wearing out” of the saints of the Most High is something which cannot be accomplished within three years and a half. It denotes a long period of trial, a gradual, continuous oppression of the Church, not the sharp and sudden infliction of calamity upon one generation of saints. It is true this expression occurs in Daniel, not in the Apocalypse, but the periods are the same, and the expressions made use of in the latter are of the very same import. Again, we read

¹ Here, and in the comments that follow, Bonar argues for a historicist rather than a futurist interpretation of Revelation, though as is subsequently confessed, he does so cautiously and certainly without unqualified dogmatism. B.E.H.

that the dead bodies of the witnesses are to lie unburied for three days and a half, (Rev. 11: 8-10,) that is, three and a half literal days, if the abridged scheme be correct. And then it is added, that “they of the people, and kindreds, and tongues, and nations, shall see their dead bodies, and shall not suffer them to be put in graves.” Now, is it *possible*, that within three days and a half, people of the different nations even of the *prophetic* earth should be able to come together to the street of the great city, and see these bodies lying? Or is it possible, that within that short space the intelligence of their death should be so universally diffused, that men should have time to congratulate each other, and send gifts one to the other in token of their common joy? We can hardly conceive this possible.²

In answer to all this, it is said, the word “day,” which is used in several of these chronological prophecies, seems to favor the abbreviated system, if not expressly to establish it. I admit that there is force in this. But still it does not amount to proof. Nay, it falls considerably short of it. For it comes merely to this, that seeing the word “day” is used, it is likely that the literal day is meant. It cannot be said that it *must* be meant; for, even had we no example at all of a day being representative of a year, who would say that it might not be so with perfect propriety, especially in a symbolical prophecy? It is to be noted that these periods occur in the symbolical prophecies, and in them alone, where great things are throughout set forth by small. The expressions also themselves would almost indicate that there was some mystery under them, requiring wisdom to discover it. For the words “time” and “times” are employed, not “year” and “years;” and, instead of “half a year,” the prophet speaks of the “dividing of a time.” The term “years,” both in Daniel and the Apocalypse, seems carefully avoided, as if on purpose to prevent us from understanding the words in their literal sense; while in the more literal

prophecies the word “year” is employed. It is no refutation of this to say that “day” and “days,” which are the words used in the Revelation, preclude the idea of a lengthened period. For the term “day” is often used very indefinitely; and if Daniel’s expression “time” be a symbolical one, the other must also be so, for they refer to the same periods.

I do not take up the position that “day *must* be symbolical. All I can speak of is the likelihood of its being so in these visions. Nor shall I enter at length upon a consideration of those passages which are generally adduced to prove this. For they only prove that the word is used elsewhere as the representative of a year, and therefore *may be* so in the Apocalypse. I think, however, that the two passages, Numbers 14: 33-34, and Ezekiel 4:4-6, do give much countenance to the interpretation. But the three which weigh most with me are Hosea 4:2—“After two *days* will he revive us; in the third *day* he will raise us up;” where I do not see it possible to understand “days” literally: Revelation 2:10—“Ye shall have tribulation *tend days*;” where the term seems to point to something more extended than the literal word implies: and Daniel 9:24—“seventy weeks are determined,” &c; where the expression is admitted by all to mean 490 years. In answer to the argument drawn from the last of these passages, it is said that the words “seventy weeks” are literally “seventy sevens,” which may therefore be seven either of days or of years. But in reply to this it may be confidently affirmed, that wherever the word stands alone, it signifies a week or weeks of days, and in no case whatever a week of years. Lexicographers always give it as a separate noun denoting a week, and Michaelis asserts that it can mean nothing but simple weeks.³

Still, this proves nothing directly or positively. It does not settle the point before us, by showing that in Daniel and the Revelation the word day is symbolical for a year. It gives us scriptural authority for thus

² See also Revelation 17:12,—“They receive power as kings one HOUR with the beast.” Does this mean literally an hour, and no more?

³ Letters on the Seventy Weeks, pp. 32-33.

interpreting it, if the passage itself or the context demand it, but it does nothing more.

In proof of the literal meaning of days, it is affirmed and strongly argued, that the fact of their commencement being still an uncertain and disputed point, is sufficient to show that they cannot yet have commenced. It is supposed, that had they begun, and, still more, had they terminated, and the events comprised in them been fulfilled, there would be no longer any room for doubt. The fulfillment would be so evident as to declare itself. That this is plausible, and not altogether void of weight, I concede; but that it settles the matter I cannot admit. I point to the *fulfilled* prophetic times as a proof that this is a statement to be received with much caution. The commencement and termination of many periods, which have been long since fulfilled, are to this day uncertain. The time of the commencement of the Babylonish empire is uncertain; and so of some of the others. The precise date of the captivity and the return from it, are also uncertain. Even the commencement of the Egyptian bondage is surrounded with difficulties. It is certainly not the commencement which we should have expected. With reference to it one might easily argue, "It was predicted that Israel was to be oppressed in Egypt four hundred years; but Israel was not oppressed there for much above half that period; and to date the beginning of this from Abraham's going down into Egypt, however unlike in some respects this may appear to the words of the prophecy. This is, I think, a sufficient answer to many of the arguments regarding the Apocalyptic times and events. When it is maintained that these must be so evident by the fulfillment that they cannot be mistaken, I ask, was it so in regard to former times which are allowed to be fulfilled? Is it not still a matter of most earnest discussion, when the seventy weeks of Daniel commenced and concluded? Have there not been greater differences of opinion among commentators with regard to these than even with regard to later prophetic numbers? Yet who doubts that they are fulfilled? These remarks will, I think, tend to show the weakness of some of the reasons

commonly urged by a certain class of more recent interpreters who contend for the literal periods. At least they help to moderate the precipitancy with which some are rushing to their conclusion respecting an unfulfilled Apocalypse. There are one or two other thoughts that suggest themselves in the way of objection to this system.

1. It maintains that Antichrist is *entirely Infidel* in his character and doings. This seems at variance with many passages, in which he is set forth as nominally a Christian, or at least an ecclesiastical power. I refer especially to the Apocalyptic predictions regarding him, which do not set him forth as avowedly and entirely Infidel, but under figures descriptive of an ecclesiastical apostasy. The harlot character so darkly painted in the Revelation, corresponds very fully to the similar character given of the apostasy of the Jewish Church in Ezekiel and Hosea. The Old Testament apostasy was not an entirely Infidel one, however much of thorough Infidelity might be mingled with it; so the New Testament apostasy will not be totally and exclusively Infidel, however much of Infidelity there may be mingled with it. The worst feature of the last days is having a "form of godliness, but denying the power thereof" [II Tim. 3:5]; and if this be the general characteristic of the times, it will, I believe, be exemplified more or less in Antichrist himself. To maintain from I John 2:22, that he must be a bold and open denier of both the Father and the Son, is to overlook what immediately follows,— "Whoso denieth the Son, the same hath not the Father."

2. It maintains that Popery cannot be Antichrist. Now, I shall not assert that the present form of Popery is the ultimate Antichristian apostasy. I believe it is to wax worse, and be pervaded more with a hellish mixture of Infidelity, which will immeasurably increase the deformity of its horrid features; but still I believe that Popery is *the Antichrist of the day*. Every age has had, and will have, its peculiar form of Antichrist; and I believe that Popery is that form just now. It is no answer to this to say that it is lacking in some of the predicted features of Antichrist.

That may be true, and yet it may be no less true that he is the Antichrist of our age. The full-grown Antichrist of the last day will alone exhibit *every* feature in terrible minuteness; but still many of the essential features of Antichrist, Popery has; and every succeeding year, I may say, will continue to add to them. As Baxter remarks, "If the Pope be not Antichrist, he has ill luck to be so like him."

3. It maintains that the Antichrist of the last day is a power rising up, unconnected with previous apostasies,—a power *per se*,—a lurid star kindled up in a moment, and placed in the firmament by the Prince of hell. Now, the Apostle John tells us that in his day there were many Antichrists. Paul tells us that the mystery of iniquity was already working. Each age was to develop more and more of the Antichristian element, till it reached its maturity in the last days. The last Antichrist is thoroughly identified with all his predecessors, not isolated from them. He and they are viewed as one mighty power of evil,—one gigantic apostasy, which has been gathering strength and size from age to age, till it has reached its perfect stature, and realized every feature of the full-grown man. For is it not said that "in her was found the blood of the prophets, and of saints, and of all that have been slain upon the earth?"

Having offered these remarks, I would at the same time say, that I feel very strongly the difficulties connected with a *fulfilled Apocalypse*. I am by no means satisfied with any of those schemes that have been of late propounded. Nay, some of the most recent and most applauded will, I am persuaded, be found wanting. I stand still in doubt, waiting earnestly for further light. The scheme of an *unfulfilled Apocalypse* has many plausibilities, but many difficulties. Its expounders have as yet, at least, most evidently failed. It is now evident that they are divided among themselves, even more widely than those whom they condemn.

But the subject is worthy of our calmest thought and most protracted study. The mine is deep and rich; let us not abandon it in despair. It will abundantly repay us for all our toil and cost. Each new exposition is contributing something to the work, either in exploding old errors or turning up new truth. And the day is advancing when God himself shall lift the veil, and pour light down into the deepest recesses of that book of mystery, till every verse shall not only sparkle like a new-polished gem, but give forth its radiance like a new-lighted star.

Jesus, let thy kingdom come,
 (Inspired by thee we pray),
Previous to the general doom,
 The everlasting day.

Resolved to toil and suffer on,
 Till thou the second time appear,
Ascend thy bright Millennial throne,
 And reign the King of glory here.

*Charles Wesley
on Revelation 1:5*